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From: Jonathan Eldridge
Sent: Monday, November 14, 2022 3:03 PM
To: Jonathan Eldridge
Subject: Fall 2022 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume XIV
Attachments: What Is the Purpose of Final Exams.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

Since we are at the mid-point of November (!) I thought this piece on the purpose and structure of final exams was timely and thought-provoking.

And if you haven't taken your 20-minute, flex-eligible cybersecurity training yet, please do! Instructions are in last week's edition.

Thank you for all you do.

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What Is the Purpose of Final Exams, Anyway?

By Kevin Gannon

As the calendar flipped to November, the anxiety level for both me and my students ratcheted up a notch as well. For me, the beginning of the semester's penultimate month is a reminder that there is still SO MUCH LEFT TO DO. For my students, though, November means they're that much closer to the dreaded Final Exam Week.

If your campus is anything like mine, there are all sorts of student customs that cluster around finals week. At my university, for example, students call the last week of classes before finals "Dead Week." I've never been able to ascertain the exact meaning of the label. Some students tell me it means professors are not supposed to assign any work that week, while others claim it's simply how they feel going into final exams. Either way, it seems to be generally accepted that everyone is not at their best during that pre-finals week.

We can at least partially dismiss the aura that surrounds finals week as gallows humor, but its well-earned reputation as a period of concentrated, brutal stress makes me wonder if we might be going about the work of ending the semester in the wrong way. When I began my teaching career, every course I taught ended with a comprehensive final exam — in-class, with short-answer and essay questions. I didn't think about why. Indeed, it never occurred to me to not to give a final. That was just how things were done in academe.

As I continued teaching, however — and saw more than a few students do A work all semester only to be derailed by one bad day during finals week — I began to wonder: What is the purpose of final exams, anyway?

Well, duh, you may be tempted to reply: Final exams are to see if our students learned anything in the course. Fair enough, but does one high-stakes assessment really give an accurate picture of that? I can't help but wonder if this argument is the equivalent of declaring that the winner of the Indianapolis 500 is whoever has the best final lap, as it certainly seems more important than the previous 199 circuits around the track.

Sure, a high-stakes summative assessment — one that students complete in the same compressed time frame as three or four other assessments of the same nature — *might* measure student learning. More likely, in my experience, it shows: (a:) which students are tired, stressed, sick, or overwhelmed, and (b) which ones are good at taking tests (and good test takers haven't necessarily mastered the course material).

What does your final exam really show? Put simply, is a traditional final exam the best way to assess if, what, and how much learning has occurred? Or is it a practice that reflects older ways of thinking — which equated student learning with academic performance? Is it sustained more by inertia than pedagogical value?

When I started posing those questions to my colleagues a few years back, I got a wide range of answers:

- Some had stopped giving final exams, and they now used finals week as the culmination of a semester-long project.

- Others gave a final but one similar in both length and grade weight to a normal semester test.
- Most still did what I was doing: giving an exam because … well … because we give exams at the end of the semester. It's what we do!
  Clearly there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for final exams. But my conversations with colleagues also made me realize that not thinking about what I was doing at the end of the semester — and, more important, *why* I was doing it — was a form of pedagogical malpractice.
  In thinking about final examinations, then, perhaps the first question we ought to ask ourselves is: "Do I need to administer this examination — in this specific form, at this particular time — in order to accurately assess student learning in my course?" If the answer is no, there are plenty of alternatives:
- If you have students working on a research project all semester, then a colloquium where they present their work to one another or a poster session (similar to those at academic conferences) might be a more appropriate and meaningful use of this time.
- If your students have been engaged in creative work, a portfolio session or a gallery walk could be an excellent way to not only assess their work but celebrate it and end the course on a meaningful note.
- In his essay for *The Chronicle,* "Final Exams or Epic Finales?," Anthony Crider argued that in "devoting the last few hours of a course to a final exam, instructors waste a valuable opportunity to motivate students to continue thinking about the material outside of the classroom." Instead of a final, he asked, why not offer a finale? "The final exam closes the book on a semester of learning," Crider wrote. "An epic finale primes the students to discuss the topic for weeks (or years) to come and to leave the classroom amid a bit more awesomeness than when they arrived."

  Certainly you won't achieve that by ending your course with a two-hour essay exam.

  Yet sometimes the old way works. In certain contexts, a more traditionally defined final examination is appropriate, and can indeed provide the type of accurate and meaningful assessment of students' work that benefits both them and us. Maybe your course prepares students to take a high-stakes, summative test for credentials in their field. Or perhaps you want to measure how students can use specific course content to frame an original, scholarly argument in response to a particular prompt or assertion.
  But you aren't going to achieve such outcomes unless your exam is aligned with both the course's content and its specific learning objectives. You must, to use a well-known metaphor, decide what your "big rocks" are (i.e., your course goals) and then sort course content into categories (learning objectives) with questions like these:

- What material is absolutely necessary to demonstrate fulfillment of the learning goals you've identified?
- What material is in the "nice to know, but not essential" category?
- What material doesn't bear directly on those outcomes?

  Doing that type of clarifying exercise first, *before* you write the final exam, ensures that you're assessing students' command of the material that matters most for your course.

  Ask your students for ideas. You don't have to write the whole exam yourself. There are alternatives — ones that are rigorous and pedagogically sound. Consider crowdsourcing part (or all) of your exam-writing. It's a way to find out what course content meant the most to students. And helping to choose the topics they'll be writing about on the final may lower their test anxieties (which can preclude students from doing their best work).

  Have your students come up with test questions or frame essay prompts. The resulting discussion is a valuable synthesizing and reflective exercise in and of itself. Particularly in content-heavy courses, this

exercise — besides generating good questions for the final — can also guide students on the structure and focus of their test preparation, by identifying important themes and issues among what might seem like a vast array of material.

You might also consider asking students to provide some sort of summary and reflection as part of the final exam. We know metacognitive reflection is a vital part of learning that lasts beyond the end of the course, so why not include an opportunity to engage in that type of work on the course's final activity? A well-structured prompt can get students thinking about how they learned in the course: What strategies did they use to be successful? What didn't work as well for them, and why? Or ask students to apply what they've learned: Connect the course material to other classes they've had, or to the current social, economic, scientific, or political context. That way, they are actually doing something with the material besides simply reproducing it.

Finally, whatever type of exam, activity, or exercise you use as your course "finale," it's important to assess the assessment. In other words: Is what you've designed coming across to your students in the ways you intended? Will your students be able to successfully complete the exam in the allotted time? Do the exam questions match the course objectives — in terms of the subjects emphasized and the distribution of cognitive activities the course asks students to perform?

One way to answer those questions is to ask a colleague to take your test, or to look over your assignment prompt or your plan for the portfolio exhibit. If you have a teaching center on the campus, its staff would be quite helpful here as well. Given the potentially high-stakes nature of the final exam or class event, it's essential to ensure that it's doing what you intended it to and that it's properly aligned with your course outcomes.

Too often, faculty members create the conditions that make finals exams little more than a stress test. Finals week will always conjure up at least some degree of stress for students. But if you're willing to rethink your approach, you can blunt at least the sharpest edges of that anxiety and turn this end-of-the-semester ritual into something meaningful and worthwhile.

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