

Ricci, C., & Berger, E. (2005, Summer). Exams and the learning environment.
Encounter Education for Meaning and Social Justice, 18(2), 45-47.

ENCOUNTER

EDUCATION FOR MEANING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2 SUMMER 2005

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ENCOUNTER is an independent journal that views education from a holistic perspective and focuses on its role in helping a student develop a sense of personal meaning and social justice. Manuscripts (an original and two copies) should be submitted to the Editor, Bill Crain, Department of Psychology, CCNY, 138th St and Convent Ave., New York, NY 10031, typed double spaced throughout with ample margins. Since a double blind review process is used, no indications of the author's identity should be included within the text after the title page. All manuscripts must be original work not being considered for publication elsewhere and prepared in accordance with the author-date format as described in chapter 16 of the 14th edition (1993) of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

ENCOUNTER (ISSN 1094-3838) is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December by Holistic Education Press, P.O. Box 328, Brandon, VT 05733-0328. 1-800-639-4122. E-mail: <encounter@great-ideas.org> Website: <<http://www.great-ideas.org>>. Annual subscription rates are \$39.95 for individuals and \$95 for libraries and other multi-user environments. (Foreign subscribers, please add \$9 to above rates.) Selected back issues are available. Periodicals postage is paid at Brandon, VT, and at additional offices. This issue of **ENCOUNTER** was produced with Corel Ventura software and printed by Daamen Printing (www.daamenprin@aol.com) in West Rutland, Vermont. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **ENCOUNTER**, P.O. Box 328, Brandon, VT 05733-0328.

Exams and the Learning Environment

Carlo Ricci and Ellie Berger

Examinations are formidable even to the best prepared, for the greatest fool may ask more than the wisest man can answer.

(Charles Caleb Colton [1822])

In recent issues of *Encounter*, several authors (Crain 2004; Prosper 2004; Sacks 2004) have discussed the social policy aspects of standardized tests. In particular, the authors have described how the standardized tests limit the life chances of low-income students and people of color. But to more fully understand the impact of standardized tests, as well as that of course-specific exams, we need to look at their role in the classroom itself.

High School Course Exams

In many high schools, each department creates a common exam for all the classes in a course. For example, the several teachers who teach Grade 9 English might create a common exam for all their students. As a result of this practice, teachers are forced to cover a standardized curriculum, and there is less opportunity for teachers to teach to their own interests and their students' interests. Teachers do not teach students; they teach curricula.

As a former high school English teacher, Ricci's experiences reflect this limitation. Often while teaching a class, he and the students would have liked to do something different, but because there was an exam looming at the end of the course, the choices

that he and the students had available to them were limited. Other teachers we have talked to have expressed similar concerns.

There are ways in which students and teachers gain a bit more individualized control. For instance, teachers sometimes use a common final exam but also include a question that will be answered only by his or her class in order to reflect the learning differences within that particular classroom. However, the instruction and learning is still largely limited by the common exam.

Even when teachers entirely develop their own exams, the exams define what is important. Students might find classroom discussions and projects very engaging — and the greatest learning may occur through these activities — but what really matters is the exam. Since studying for an exam usually involves cramming and memorization rather than deep reflection and creative exploration, the exam sends an unfortunate message about learning itself.

University Courses

Individually, we have both had experience teaching a course that in one semester had an exam but in another semester did not. Overall, we both found that when we did have an exam it overwhelmingly controlled what the class became.

Ricci teaches a course titled, "Curriculum Development, Assessment, and Evaluation" at the Faculty



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of Education at Nipissing University. When there was an exam in the course, the focus for the students was not on how this information would improve my teaching, but on is this information will be included on the exam. Similarly, in a gerontology course, Berger wanted students to focus on the connection between the course material and their everyday lived experience, but when there was an exam, they couldn't do so. They couldn't appreciate any material beyond its testability. Classroom discussions were often peppered with, "Will this be on the exam?" or "Do I need to know this for the exam?" — questions that are all-too-familiar to most of us.

In her gerontology class, Berger invites a dynamic guest lecturer to discuss his research on health and longevity. In the year that she had the exam, students took detailed notes during the lecture, anticipating that the information would be on the exam. Berger's impression, based on discussions with students after the lecture, was that the students were so busy taking notes they could not appreciate the lecturer's experiences. In contrast, when there was no exam, they were far more interested in the lecture itself.

Similarly, when Berger is lecturing, she has found that when there is an exam, students are less focused on discussing the material in class and more focused on facts to be memorized for an exam. In Ricci's dialogical approach to teaching, the students are more willing to discuss issues that they and the instructor find relevant and interesting when there is no exam.

In addition, exams cause students to adopt what is important to the professor as *the* important information, rather than deciding for themselves what is important. Students cannot pursue their own opinions and interests, because these might not appear on the test. As a result, students are marginalized.

We might say that teaching trumps pedagogy. Teaching is pre-established transmission of information from the teacher to the student, whereas pedagogy is a dynamic exchange of information among a community of learners. With exams, the students are not interested in their peers' opinions and thoughts, because in their minds, that information is not testable and is therefore not valuable. The unfortunate result is that an environment of shared knowledge or community of ideas ceases to exist.

Standardized High School Exams

At the extreme, and even more controlling than the course-specific exams, are standardized exams. In Ontario, the government created an organization called the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which is responsible for testing students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. In Grade 10, the students are required to pass the Ontario Secondary School Literary Test (OSSLT) in order to graduate. If the students fail the test twice, they are required to pass the Grade 12 Ontario Secondary Literary Course, which acts as an equivalent to the test. Like all standardized tests, this test has contributed to controlling and narrowing the curriculum. When Ricci interviewed an English department head at a high school, she lamented that everything the students do for well over a year is drill-and-skill preparatory work for the test. When Ricci returned to the high school where he used to teach English, a new teacher shared with him an assignment that they give to the students in the Grade 10 English course. Ricci smiled and said that he introduced that particular assignment to the school when he started teaching there. But upon closer inspection he realized that the assignment had been modified. When he was there, the students had an opportunity to be creative, making their own mini-book based on *Romeo and Juliet*. In the new modified version, the students are asked to write a 100-word summary per chapter (writing 100-word summaries is part of the OSSLT requirement). Then they were asked to write an information paragraph about themselves (another OSSLT requirement), and finally they were asked to write an opinion piece (yet another OSSLT requirement). So, the assignment has gone from a creative and fun experience for the students to an exam preparation. This focus on standardized tests is not limited to English classrooms. All courses are now redesigned to work as slaves for the high stakes standardized master.

Standardized University Exams

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education decided to implement a high stakes entrance-to-the-profession exam. The exam was developed by the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, and the Ontario Principal's Association. As with standardized

tests at the high school level, these exams narrowed the curriculum and poisoned the learning environment. After barely two years, the exam came to be seen for what it was: a waste of money and time. On December 15, 2004, the Minister of Education announced that the teacher test would no longer be administered. This will save the Ministry the \$1.6 million cost of administering the exam. In a news release on the Ministry's website the exam was referred to as being "divisive and ineffective."

Actually, 99% of candidates passed the test. As a result, many students have become suspicious of the test's real purpose. Some professors had been getting students to work hard in their classrooms by telling the students that they need to know the information because it was on the final high-stakes exam they had to pass to be certified as teachers. Students were given the message that the information was valuable because it was on the exam. This is a language that students understand. Now that there is no exam, students are questioning the need to continue with this content.

Concluding Thoughts


Education has always been part of human existence, whereas exams are a relatively recent phenomenon. Clearly we can educate without exams, and if they contribute to such a poisonous environment, why are they so ubiquitous? Exams have the aura of science and promote standardization, characteristics

that have considerable appeal in our society. But we believe these characteristics obstruct good teaching. Teaching is an art in which teachers need the flexibility to work sensitively with individual students.

Educators need to discuss, develop, and adopt alternative methods for assessing students' work. Qualitative or "authentic" assessment, which focuses on students' own meaningful work, holds much promise (Wiggins 1999). As individuals, many of us have already experimented with these approaches. But we also need to do so on a broader scale to improve the quality of learning in our educational systems.



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