

Singing the Mid-Term Blues

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

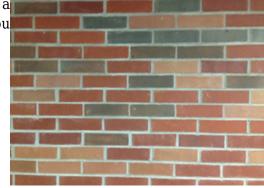
October 21, 2014

Tags: student learning | assessing learning | assessing teaching

Maybe you've been here before.

It's the middle of the semester. Your undergraduate survey class has been rolling along fine.

Students are fairly engaged, and you feel you have a good rapport. Then along comes the mid-term, and you realize that the situation is not what you thought.



In my case, the course is an introduction to 'world religions' (yes, I know it's problematic). So far, we've read a book of easy theory (William Paden's *Religious Worlds*), and we've been introduced to Judaism and Christianity – in each case through a book chapter (Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One*), selections of ancient texts (Genesis and Exodus for Judaism; Mark and Galatians for Christianity), and a modern text (Abraham Heschel; Martin Luther King, Jr.). It is clear to me that, while not all students are reading carefully, a number of them are keeping up. They do a 5-minute essay at the beginning of each class about the day's reading, and I spend most class periods trying to make sure they've gotten something out of it. Other days we do some type of small group activity (such as comparing Genesis 1 and 2 or the

genealogies in Matthew and Luke). When given frequent chances to ask questions, they have none.



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The mid-term this week was a chance for them to show what they've learned. It was worth 50 points: 30 points of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and a timeline, plus 20 points of mini-essays. Even though I was as generous as I could be on the essays, the high score among 40 students was 41.5. The average score was 31 – a low D.

Now comes the soul searching: What am I doing wrong?

If there had been at least a handful of A's, I would have worried less. An extremely high percentage of students in my classes are there to fulfill a humanities requirement; they aren't necessarily interested in religion, and they hope it will be an easy course. These students don't expect to work much and a bad mid-term grade can be a useful wake-up call. But when even the most engaged students can't break a low B, it's clear that something is amiss at my end of things.

A professor I admire says his teaching philosophy is to have high expectations for his students; expect the best of them and they will never fail to give it to you. So I continue to require (what I hear is) "a lot" of reading in my intro courses, because I am trying to set the bar high and let them rise to the occasion. I also don't spoon-feed them information in bullet points; although I occasionally stand and use slides, I usually sit and lead discussions about the readings... in which I often end up doing most of the talking. Most of them sit slack-jawed and take few notes, but some answer questions or make comments. Even so, here I am at mid-term, with students who think Constantine lived BCE and don't know the names of Abraham's two sons.

The question for you, dear readers, is: What do I do now?

Do I "dumb down" the class – tell them exactly what to memorize from each chapter so that they can just Google terms and don't actually have to read? Do I just plow ahead with my current plans, knowing some of them will fail or drop out, while hoping others will be inspired to work harder? I have seven more weeks to get them to *want* to learn something. What would an excellent teacher do?

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2014/10/singing-the-mid-term-blues/