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Taking a Small Step Toward More Assessments

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Taking a Small Step Toward More Assessments
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By Sophie Sparrow, Franklin Pierce Law Center

Experts on learning tell us that the most effective learning environments are “assessment centered.” In those environments, students know what they are expected to learn, understand the criteria used to evaluate their performance, have multiple and varied opportunities to practice meeting performance criteria, and receive feedback on meeting those criteria. They also learn how to use the feedback to improve their learning. While writing and providing feedback on problems, quizzes, essays, and presentations can take time, you can take some small manageable steps towards making your classes more “assessment- and learner-centered.” Here’s one suggestion.

Reuse a question from last year’s final exam as a writing exercise.

1. Modify the question so that it is limited to the topics students have been studying to date.
2. Assign students to write the answer as homework. Have them bring in the assignment in electronic or paper form that they can show to classmates. You might want to suggest a time limit for completing the answer, simulating exam conditions.
3. During class, have them pair up or form groups of 3 or 4 and first read through each other’s answers. Notice similarities and differences. They are often surprised at how differently they respond to the same material.

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4. Give students a checklist - your scoring sheet or list of material you were expecting to see in last year's exams. Have them use the checklist to review another person's answer in greater depth.

5. Walk them through the checklist, e.g. “Find the issue of duty in your neighbor's essay. Identify the standard of care. Compare it to the checklist. Here's what I was looking for and why it is important...”

6. As you do this, you can use the students' writing to give you feedback on their learning - how many of you read essays that included...? A show of hands (or using “clickers”) can give you feedback on areas students are struggling with and areas most seem to grasp.

7. Continue through the essay, taking questions.

8. If you have one available, provide one or more examples of a good answer (if you get permission from your former students, you can use their exam answers).

9. At the end of the session, ask students to complete the prompt at the bottom of the checklist: “What advice would you give yourself to improve your performance?” Give them up to 5 minutes to take the time to reflect on their learning. Invite them to use their advice to improve their learning.

10. Invite students who want to go over the essay to bring their essay to your office during your office hours. Ask them to review the checklist and sample answer and bring those with them when they meet with you.

Time needed: In class: 30-55 minutes, depending on the question and depth of detail. Outside of class: 1-2 hours to prepare the question and checklist, less if you have some from last year you can use.

Office hours: 1-2 hours. My experience, and that of colleagues who use this approach, is that around 10% will actually come to meet with you. And those conversations last about 10 minutes, since the students already have the checklist, feedback from the class discussion, a sample answer, and observing someone else's work. By the time they meet with you, they have pretty focused questions about the assignment.

Value: By preparing the exam answer in advance, students gain practice applying the material in writing. Committing words to the page is very different from “knowing it in your head” or being able to talk through an answer, which tends to be significantly less precise. Reviewing their classmates' work, applying a checklist, and reviewing a sample answer provides students with immediate feedback on how well they are performing in the course. By doing the exercise in class and providing class-wide feedback, you do not need to read and comment upon each student's work — and a lot of learning still happens.

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Note: A previous version of this article inadvertently included text from an article by Professor Barbara Glesner Fines in the Spring 2009 issue of The Law Teacher. The editors apologize to Professors Sparrow and Glesner Fines and to our readers for the error.

Sophie Sparrow

About the Guest Columnist

Professor Sophie Sparrow has been teaching law since 1998. This fall, the Institute proudly announced her appointment as the Institute’s Consultant. She is a Professor of Law at Franklin Pierce Law Center and teaches Torts, Remedies, and Legal Skills. As one of the co-authors of TEACHING LAW BY DESIGN: ENGAGING STUDENTS FROM SYLLABUS TO FINAL EXAM (2009), she is particularly interested in active teaching strategies which help students develop the skills they need for a balanced life practicing law: working with others; writing well; navigating complex legal doctrine and facts; engaging in self-assessment; and practicing professionalism.

Professor Sparrow also has authored several influential law review articles addressing a wide variety of teaching and learning topics, including: Describing the Ball: Improve Teaching by Using Rubrics - Explicit Grading Criteria, 2004 Mich. St. L. REV. 1; What Helps Law Professors Develop as Teachers? — An Empirical Study, 14 WIDENER L. REV. 149 (with Gerald F. Hess, 2008); and Uncovering the Student Perspective - Six Questions to Ask Before Class, 1 AMER. JUST. L. REV. 901 (2008).

Professor Sparrow has conducted more than 50 workshops and presentations on teaching, professionalism, writing, and assessment to professors, judges and lawyers, including conferences hosted by the Institute for Law Teaching and Learning, the American Association of Law Schools, the Legal Writing Institute, and the New Hampshire Judicial College. In January 2004, she won the Inaugural Award for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching Professionalism, sponsored by the American Bar Association and Conference of Chief Justices. In September 2008, she became an approved candidate on the Fulbright Specialists Roster.