Tradition: In-Class or Take-Home Essay Exams

A staple of many college courses, particularly in the liberal arts, humanities, and some sciences, has been essay exams. For the in-class variety, students must compose essays in response to a prompt, while sitting in the classroom. Typically instructors do not allow students to consult notes or sources (books, articles, and more recently the internet generally). With some exceptions, students compose in-class essays with pen or pencil, on paper (often special-purpose products, such as “blue books”). In-class exam essays are often dreaded by students and derided by educational experts as hand-aching drudgery, where students simply recount what they have memorized in preceding hours or days.

Take-home exams can range from essays very similar to their in-class counterparts, to assessments that are essentially research papers. Students have access to source material, which may or may not be limited to assigned course readings or other content. Some instructors prefer these for giving students more time to compose a thoughtful reply (and for freeing instructors from the unpleasantness of proctoring.) But take-home essays can transform an exam into something practically more than an instructor intends them to be, requiring more time and effort from students (composing) and the instructor (grading).

Historian Zachary Schrag points out to students that properly, exam essays oblige students to compose a synthesis of course content, rather than a summary. To the extent that essays are time-limited, they are asking students to create something (often an argument) in timely fashion, reflecting a “real-life” situation where knowledge workers cannot simply take all the time they need to research a topic from scratch, before producing an analysis product. Exam essays in many fields can help students practice preparing to supply insightful, substantial answers to questions they can partly, but not fully anticipate.

Possibilities with Online Assessment Tools

Internet-based exam tools offer several possibilities for exam essays. In order for digital exam essays to be practical, an instructor probably needs to read and grade student writing digitally, on a screen rather than on paper. This takes some getting used to, but has many benefits: no photocopying exam sheets, and lugging around, storing, or losing student work. Making copies of student work for archival and assessment purposes is much easier, too.

In-class essay assignments can be reproduced if all students have devices capable of fully accessing the exam on the internet (which probably means a keyboard for rapid typing, and possible a screen large enough to make such work practical). This makes little change from paper-based procedures, other than dispensing with the logistics of paper, indicated above. If students are denied access to course or other source content, then proctoring is still required.

Similarly, traditional take-home essays can be digitized for some paperless efficiency. Learning Management Systems (LMSes) have file-upload systems that attach to grading tools and the digital gradebook, streamlining assignment collection, grading, and feedback procedures. Desire2Learn’s “Dropbox” tool will even push student work onto a mobile app for an instructor’s iPad, so that a professor need not sit at a keyboard to read or grade student essays. Dropboxes are ideal where students are allowed anywhere from several hours to several days to complete an essay exam, after having read the essay prompt(s). With greater effort put into setting up Dropboxes (such as putting students into groups), such exams can even have somewhat complex delivery processes. For example, different groups of students could receive different prompt questions.
Dedicated online tools can offer even more of a new exam experience, unlike anything paper-based. Exam tools or apps are ideally for essays with much shorter time frames, where students must complete an essay within, for example, a half hour after having read the essay’s prompt question or problem.

Desire2Learn’s Online Exam Tool provides a number of options:

- Essay prompts can be drawn from a larger bank, so that each student receives one or more prompts from a much larger pool of several possible prompts.
- Different kinds of essay questions (short-answer, or longer) can be grouped together in an exam. Essays can be coupled with other question types, such as multiple choice, fill in the blank, or matching.
- Quizzes or exams with essay questions can timelimited (for example, fifteen minutes, or fifty minutes), so that a student must complete all questions within that time frame after having begun the exam.
- Time-limited exams or quizzes can be made available within a larger window. For example, a student might have 48 hours to take an exam. Once she begins the exam, she has forty minutes to complete it.
- Exam prompts can include text, images, or video.

An important caveat with online exam tools is that an instructor should not have any question or set of questions on a single page that takes longer than a half hour to answer. When students advance to a following page, this refreshes the connection between their PC and Desire2Learn, so that Desire2Learn doesn’t abandon the connection to the student’s computer. The longer a student remains on the same page, the more likely D2L will abandon the connection, and the student will lose some or all of what they have typed to that point. Other exam tools are similar. Therefore, do not use D2L’s exam tool (or any other online exam tool, for good measure) for any essay where a student is allowed more than 30 minutes to compose.

Something Altogether New

Why not combine a traditional essay exam with requirements that challenge students to exercise skills in new media? Consider giving students 48 hours to submit a video response to an essay prompt. Here, students must compose an insightful synthesis in reply, and then deliver it in a polished (or semi-polished) audio or video clip that can be submitted as a file, or just shared with you via a secure link. See our Google and Tutorials & Workshops pages for possibilities.