

Assessing Students While Teaching Online



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First Faculty Meeting of the Year

At our first faculty meeting this year, Jason Kirthenback, my San Marino High School principal, said that “the best way to quiz and test students in an online environment is to first put before the students one or more project-based learning activities and then ask the students, periodically and certainly upon completion of the PBL, to orally explain what they have learned.”

My Take-Away from a Recent Trauma Training

My students are feeling that they have lost control over their high school career and they are therefore badly in need of a chance to again find something at school that they can declare as their own and that will cause them to feel empowered . . . as if they have some kind of a meaningful voice and choice, even if that means in terms of their own learning.

My Response to the Trauma Training

- Limit the teaching of content to no more than 60% of the total number of minutes allotted for instruction.
- Allow my students to spend 40% of the total number of minutes allotted for instruction to work on their PBLs.
- Make all MCQ and FRQ exams formative, with the exception of one oral exam per quarter that will be administered only to those students who wish to appeal their quarter and/or semester grade. Students having earned an A or A- will neither be required nor allowed to be so tested.



- Require only some of the assigned work to be completed, making the remainder **optional**. Then digitally praise and recognize the students' completed high-quality optional work in the same manner as a football coach would award and recognize a linebacker's number of good tackles on game day (with the dispensing of **helmet stickers**)

In other words, as much as possible I plan to focus on awarding and recognizing **the positive**, with all but giving a relative pass to those who for whatever reason don't rise up to hopes and expectations

- Follow my school's principal lead, despite our district's always-on camera policy.

*"Be ever more cognizant of the need for all of us, students and teachers included, to **reduce screen time**" and that means "while we have to be on for 50 minutes, that does not mean we have to be locked into our screens." In other words, I will increasingly allow my students to "step away from their screens, close their eyes and do a minute of meditation, take a lap around the house, read a text offline, write on paper away from the screen, etc."*

- Reserve 10% of the total number of instructional minutes per week for class discussion (which means no teaching of content), though topics to be discussed will flow logically from something taught in class in the days leading up. Place no assignment before my students where they don't have at least a week to complete the work. Same true for the scheduling of all tests and quizzes.

An offer of grace and understanding to those in need yet, at the same time to those who want, the providing of many significant, high-end learning opportunities.

With all this designed to:

- Leave students feeling engaged and empowered . . . as if they have some kind of a meaningful voice and choice when it comes to their own learning
- Open wide the eyes of the students parents and/or college admission officers

The Structure of my Oral Exams

At the start of every unit, I provided the students with 10-50 questions, with each of these questions designed to reveal my student's content knowledge (but only in terms of what they NEEDED to know; not what would be nice for them to know.)

Sample Unit I US History Questions (1491-1607)

- What did all Native Americans have in common before 1491?
- What was the Columbian Exchange?
- Why is the colony of Roanoke referred to as the Lost Colony?

- What effect did European contact have on Native Americans and what effect did European contact with the Native American have on Europeans
- What effect did European contact have on Africans and what effect did European contact with Africans have on Europeans?
- What is the Encomienda System?
- What is the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage?
- What does the term New France refer to?

After having received the question and until the day of the unit exam, the students are expected to create a content-rich answer to each question (approximately 3-7 sentences, with each question to be answered directly, accurately, fully.)

On test day, I call upon the students to answer a few of the questions.

Then I ask a number of [LEVEL I Follow-Up Questions](#).

- If a student sounded scripted, I ask the student to answer the question again but in their own words.
- included a multisyllabic word or some complex words, I ask the student to explain to me the meaning of that word.
- If a student didn't include some relevant bit of content that had been taught, I ask the student to describe and/or comment on that bit of content.

Then I ask a number of [LEVEL II Follow-Up Questions](#), all designed to further reveal the students' content knowledge but, at the same time, to display a deeper learning of the content.

- If my first question was what does the term New France refer to . . . I might follow with “In this unit, we looked closely at a map of New France. Describe New France geographically. In other words, what were its north, south, east, and west boundaries, and how would you describe the land contained within New France?”
- If my first question was what was the Columbian Exchange . . . I might follow with “What were some useful aspects of the Native American culture adopted by the Europeans and some useful aspects of European culture adopted by the Native Americans?”
- If my first question was what is the year 1491 known for . . . I might follow up with “why did the British, French, and Spanish come to the New World?”

The entire assessment to take no more than 10-15 minutes.

My Oral Exam Rubric

- Research and script writing skill (10%)
- Oral communication skill (20%)
- Comprehension skill (20%)
- Ability to answers follow-up questions (50%)

Reasons to Test Orally

- **ORAL EXAMS ARE CHEAT PROOF:** No assessment is uncheatable. However, I do believe that of all the forms of assessment I've experimented with in my online classes, oral examinations are the ones that are most "cheat proof." When students are not able to rely on written work, or when they are subjected to questions and probing of their understanding, they must rely on their own work, and their own words, thereby reducing the likelihood of plagiarism.
- **ORAL EXAMS MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO PREPARE THOROUGHLY:** Students who anticipate being asked questions that they cannot predict often conclude that the best way to handle this situation is to develop a thorough understanding of what they are studying.

- **ORAL EXAMS ENSURE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND QUESTIONS:** Unclear or ambiguous questions can be re-expressed or immediately clarified. Written examinations are based on an assumption that the written word is unambiguous and readily understood, in the way it was intended, by all students. This may often not be the case. Oral assessment provides the opportunity to ensure that each student understands the questions being asked.
- **ORAL EXAMS ALLOW REVEAL DEPTH OF CONTENT KNOWLEDGE:** Oral exams allow probing of the depth and extent of students' knowledge. Unlike with a written exam, teachers can ask the student to elaborate on an answer and can use a series of carefully graduated questions until they have reached the limit of what the student knows.

Reasons NOT to Test Orally

- **ORAL EXAMS CAUSE STUDENTS UNDUE ANXIETY:** Some anxiety can be beneficial in oral assessment, but anxiety that interferes with a student's performance will not give a true indication of his or her ability. Anxiety may be a special impediment for students with particular mental health problems. Practising presentations in class and providing rehearsals for vivas may help. Sometimes a student who experiences undue anxiety may need to be accommodated through alternative arrangements for their assessment.
- **ORAL EXAMS CAN'T ELIMINATE THE ISSUE OF BIAS:** Concerns are sometimes expressed that teachers may be influenced by students' classroom behavior, personality, dress, gender, ethnicity or educational background.

- **ORAL EXAMS TAKE TIME TO ADMINISTER:** This especially true, if you test everyone, but I don't.
- **ARTICULATENESS ISN'T NECESSARILY KNOWLEDGE:** Teachers often mistake a student's articulateness for knowledge.

Andrew K Miller and His Edutopia Posts

- [Formative Assessment in Distance Learning](#)
- [Summative Assessment in Distance Learning](#)

A Short Guide to Oral Assessment

- [An excellent 24-page read](#) produced by Gordon Joughin (Leads Metropolitan University)
- Various sections of this guide appearing often, and word for word, in this slideshow.

Other Good Posts

- [Toward Better Assessments in Online Courses](#)
- [Authentic Assessment in the Online Classroom](#)
- [How do I assess student learning online?](#)
- [A New Normal: Assessment and Distance Learning](#) (youtube video)
- [Assessing Students Online](#) (youtube video)
- [Growing Beyond Grading](#) When we offer feedback instead of scores, students begin to embrace a more hopeful view of learning.
- [Quality Over Counting: Mindsets for Grading Reform](#): Change needs to be strategic, purposeful, and focused on incremental shifts.
- [A Roadmap for Equitable Grades](#) A fair system accounts for each student's strengths, preferences, and language.

- **3 Big Shifts for Standards-Based Grades** Try an emphasis on learning over earning when grading student work.
- **Video: Time for Competency-Based Grading?** Pandemic-related learning gaps suggest it may be the right way to go now.
- **A Forgotten Element of Instructional Leadership: Grading** Getting the school team coordinated on grading and reporting policies—and the purpose of grading—is too often overlooked in instructional leadership.
- **Taking the Stress Out of Grading** Now more than ever, we need to take steps to reduce students' anxiety about grading (while improving learning). Will we?
- **Well-Rounded Grading** Schools can take some inequity out of grading by rounding to "the fives."

PBL, Online Teaching, and Titan Talk

Titan Talk is a San Marino High School teacher-hosted, interview formatted, bi-monthly podcast highlighting two kinds of educators . . . those who have something of value to say in regards to teaching, learning, testing, and wellness and those who have a personal story worth sharing. The podcast is normally hosted by SMHS social studies teachers Peter Paccone and Andrew Gayl though other SMUSD teachers will now and then stand in for either Peter or Andrew. This year's focus - PBL and Online Teaching

To listen on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/show/4jA7OxgK3pSkd1CxnZ48p3>