



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
Vol. 2, No. 6

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA
November 1, 1989

To Essay or Not To Essay

It was the end of the semester and Professor Able was busy constructing the final exam for Modern Culture 100. She had an outstanding group of students and she wanted to challenge them with the final. At the same time, she wanted to give them the opportunity to pull together all they had learned. After a great deal of thought, she developed the following exam:

Final Exam: Modern Culture 100

Drawing on the topics we have covered in class, write a well-organized essay about
Santa Claus

You have 1 1/2 hours to complete your essay. Use your time wisely.

Professor Able felt that students needed to address the following key issues:

- a. interpretation of the cultural significance of the Santa tradition in modern day America
- b. the economic significance of the Santa tradition
- c. examples of efforts to establish Santa-type traditions at times other than Christmas
- d. speculations about the cultural and economic difference if there were no Santa tradition

When the exam was distributed, one-third of the class started writing immediately, one-third stared blankly out the window, and the other third puzzled over the question. The collective thoughts of this latter group centered upon trying to figure out which issues to address in the essay. Some approaches which crossed students' minds were the following:

- a. trace the development of the concept of Santa Claus from the legend of Saint Nicholas
- b. cross cultural comparison of the concept of Santa Claus in the modern world
- c. economic ramifications of the Santa Claus concept
- d. cultural forces which produced modern variations of the original Santa Claus concept

The general feeling of these students was that any of these four areas was sufficient for a 1 1/2 hour essay. The choice then became one of trying to guess which one Professor Able had in mind or to give "skimpy" coverage to all four topics. Each student made her/his decision and ultimately the A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's were dispensed.

Professor Able was well-intentioned in her efforts to provide an exam question which would challenge the students and offer sufficient flexibility to tap each student's skills, but she failed to recognize that every student would not interpret her question in the manner she desired, even though most had the necessary level of understanding to respond adequately. This oversight

STEERING COMMITTEE: FACULTY CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Jim Addison (7264)	Bill Hyatt (7272)	Anne Rogers (7120)
J.C. Alexander, Jr. (7436)	Mary Anne Nixon (7401)	Carol Stephens (7113)
Judith Claus (7295)	Rita Noel (7401)	Jim Wallace (7244)
Wilburn Hayden (7112)	Jane Perlmutter (7108)	

CENTER STAFF

Ben Ward, Director (7196)
Lee Minor, Faculty Fellow
Terry Nienhuis, Faculty Fellow
Charles Stevens, Faculty Fellow

produced several dilemmas. One student wrote an extremely good essay on the development of the Santa Claus concept but did not mention any of the issues Professor Able was expecting. The next paper was not nearly as well-organized nor well-written but it correctly addressed each of the areas Professor Able wanted the students to cover. In scoring the former paper higher than the latter, Professor Able established either that writing ability was the major academic skill being assessed or that the scope of an acceptable response could be expanded dependent upon the quality of the writing. In either case, the original purpose of the question was modified and the situation then became a variation of the childhood "make up the rules as you go."

To resolve this situation, Professor Able should consider the following points regarding the use and construction of essay exam questions:

1. Use essay questions to address only organizational and analytical skills; compared to objective items, good essay questions limit the breadth of content which can be tested.
2. In constructing essay questions, make certain that the task is adequately structured; after reading an essay question, a student should know exactly which issues are to be addressed.
3. Before presenting the questions to students, write the perfect answer; after doing this, look at the question to determine if it is the proper stimulus for the desired response.
4. If a student's organizational and writing skills are to be reflected in the grade, indicate this in the directions for the question.
5. A point value, time limit, or page limit can be indicated to help students plan responses better.
6. If an essay exam has more than one question to which students are to respond, grade all the answers to one question before scoring the answers to any other questions.

Here is an alternative wording for Professor Able's final exam:

Final Exam: Modern Culture 100

There are many traditions reflected in the practices of the modern day American. One of these is the Santa Claus tradition. Drawing upon the topics we have covered in the course, write a well-organized essay on the Santa Claus tradition in the United States. Your essay may be as expansive as you desire, but it must address the following areas:

1. the cultural significance of the Santa tradition in current America
2. the economic significance of the Santa tradition
3. examples of efforts to establish Santa-type traditions at times other than Christmas
4. speculation about cultural and economic differences if there were no Santa tradition (justification for these must be provided)

Your essay should be more than a long paragraph dedicated to each of the above areas. Rather, it should have some theme or principle which is developed using the above as guides. You have 1 1/2 hours. The essay is worth 60 points. Ten points of your score will be based upon the quality of the organization and presentation of your essay's theme. Forty points will be based upon the development of each of the enumerated areas, and ten points will be dependent upon the quality of the supplemental issues which are incorporated into the essay.

Robbie Pittman: Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction