

ASSESSMENT IN RHETORIC

by Ginny Owens, Petra Academy

As we evaluate our teaching and look for ways to improve what happens in our classrooms, among the many questions that dog us teachers is the rather pesky, “How should I best assess my students?” It is an important question, but one I call pesky because, taking into account all that teaching involves, at times assessment is the last activity to which we want to give our time, yet it persists in demanding our thoughtful time. And of course it deserves that thoughtful time. Assessment is an important question in part because it has within its sights what we should assess, and how that impacts our teaching approach: How much raw information should we expect our students to retain? How much evidence of establishing connections across disciplines are we going to look for? And how do we create opportunity for creativity in assessment, or space for tracking virtue formation? What are we after when we craft assessments?

As a rhetoric teacher, a perennial question for me is, what should a semester final for rhetoric class look like? We study a lot of rhetorical theory in first year rhetoric, which makes creating exams more or less a rather straightforward exercise, but in second year rhetoric, we spend much less time on theory and much more on practice. In this context, I often consider what I hope to assess and what the best way is to go about it.

Not loving the assessments I had given in previous years and so open to trying something different, this

LOGIC AT PETRA ACADEMY

“Yesterday in logic class, students turned in faux Letters to the Editor in which they were to write a letter and try to sneak in 5-12 logical fallacies (an exercise in reverse pedagogy, if you will).

I read the first of the letters aloud, asking students to name the fallacies they heard, and was pleased by their efforts. But this mini-exchange was the icing on the cake:

Student #1: “I can’t watch television anymore without calling out the logical fallacies.”

Student #2: “Television? I can’t even walk through Costco!”

—Craig Dunham, headmaster, Petra Academy
from *The Griffin Gazette*

year I implemented a new first semester final for second year rhetoric, one which was an experiment and an accidental triumph. The idea was planted last school year, when a casual conversation with our guidance counsellor (who had mentioned how timed essay writing could help students prepare for ACT and SAT essay writing) prompted some speed-writing essays as an additional rhetoric exercise. Students received the prompt during class, had a set amount of time to write

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out their arguments, and then they delivered their arguments in front of class. The exercise went well, but it was not an exam.

This year, however, by the time the first semester drew to a close for my second year rhetoric class, we had still not found time to fit in this additional (and beneficial) timed essay and delivery. And so as I pondered how best to evaluate the seniors' first semester rhetorical prowess, I realized that setting a timed essay and grading the delivery of the resulting argument offered one of the best assessments I had put together yet.

Exam day, the students arrived and waited outside the closed classroom door as I wrote five prompts on the board, and when they entered the classroom they had just a few minutes to look at all of the prompts and select which they wanted to tackle. Each of the prompts required little to no research—they included questions such as “are comic books literature?” or “what place does computer science have in classical Christian education?” or “should Petra [our school] have a film class?”—so students could spend all of their time sketching out their answers to the question of their choice, in the six parts of discourse, of course. They had 45 minutes to write and 10 minutes to prepare for delivery; the remaining 60 minutes were spent giving their resulting arguments as speeches, which were then graded for both content and delivery.

Going into the exam, I did not know whether it would be a successful learning experience and assessment opportunity. What if students choked, unable to produce a complete argument in the allotted time? What if the limited amount of time to practice for delivery meant an unfairly low score for their semester final? Was I jeopardizing their grade by trying something new?

As it turned out, I had nothing to worry about. It ended up being a fantastic experience; I was genuinely surprised by the quality of the content and speech-making produced in such a short amount of time. And it was fantastic for the students as well, who did not just

succeed, but exceeded all expectations, both their own and mine. Those 45 minutes of writing time facilitated some of the most intensely focused work I had yet seen the class produce, and their resulting arguments were well arranged, coherent, logical, argumentative, and well supported. They easily crafted an essay in the six parts of discourse and confidently presented their arguments as if they had rehearsed their speeches thoroughly prior to the exam. In short, the exam gave students an opportunity to both display and practice their rhetorical knowledge and abilities. They had to walk through the rather complicated process of answering the question in a way that situated it within a meaningful context, considered alternative viewpoints, offered good reasons and evidence for their own points, and grounded their argument in something that mattered to their audience. Then they had to present this content (which I never read as part of the assessment process) before the class in a polished, controlled, confident delivery which cultivated their ethos, helped their classmates care about their argument, and offered compelling insights into the question at hand.

I wish I could say that this successful assessment was the product of careful thought, but in actuality it came on a whim, the product of a previous idea that earned itself some dressing up because occasion called. And it meant a more efficient grading process for me—who would pass up an opportunity to evaluate students during class time and have little to no final exam grading for a course? But although this final exam came together by happy chance, its value as an assessment was proved secure, if for no other reason than the students left their exam period confident in their abilities to produce a thoughtful, coherent, complete argument in a short amount of time and deliver it convincingly. Perhaps the best assessments are those that grow out of flexibility and reassure students that they are indeed learning and growing through this arduous process called school.