Content-positive humanities assessment,

or, Why exams should have short-answer questions instead of in-class essays

Alexander Maxwell
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“Students need to be aware of the kinds of sources used by historians, and they should become adept at extracting meaning from these sources, comparing their findings with other evidence from the period, formulating conclusions about the issue under study, and testing these ideas against additional evidence and the ideas of other historians. Students should be taught to think historically, to have the opportunity to develop their own historical interpretations.”

(American Historical Association, 1997)

What skills will a History degree from Cambridge give me?

This course is designed to develop a number of important skills in undergraduates. Among these are:

- acquiring a broad range of historical knowledge and understanding, including a sense of development over time, and an appreciation of the culture and attitudes of societies other than our own;
- evaluating critically the significance and utility of a large body of material, including evidence from contemporary sources and the opinions of more recent historians;
- engaging directly with questions and presenting independent opinions about them in arguments that are well-written, clearly expressed, coherently organised and effectively supported by relevant evidence;
- gaining the confidence to undertake self-directed learning, making the most effective use of time and resources, and increasingly defining one's own questions and goals.
“Although objective testing may be useful to prompt students to read assignments, it should never represent the bulk of student evaluation or be the final measure of student success. […] work of the excellent history course revolves around analysis and interpretation, student evaluation must be based on written or other work that allows students to develop and present their own analyses.”

(American Historical Association, 1997)
“Essay questions ... encouraged students to understand and use historical material, rather than just memorize it. In other words, the retention of factual information was linked to the historical reasoning required for the essays.”
Equity issues with essays (after William Coffman, 1971):

(a) different readers tend to assign different grades to the same paper

(b) a single reader tends to assign different grades to the same paper on different occasions.

“Objective testing”: Multiple Choice Tests
A few study guides for the AP European History exam
Which is NOT true of Russian expansion in the period 1500-1800?

A. It was stopped by the Ottoman Empire
B. It included expansion into Siberia.
C. It expanded to the south and west.
D. It added territory by participating in the partition of Poland.
E. It forged a cultural alliance with the Slavic peoples in the Balkans.

The millet system in the Islamic empires

A. was especially effective in India.

B. created cooperation among the ethnic groups of the Ottoman Empire.

C. was a system of slavery.

D. interfered with religious freedom.

E. promoted nationalist sentiment within the Ottoman Empire.

Which peninsula has been the scene of ethnic cleansing?

A. Iberian
B. Balkan
C. Italian
D. Scandinavian
E. Yucatán.

“History was a series of unrelated, unintelligible but — in some way that was never explained to us — important facts … I recall positive orgies of dates, with the keener boys leaping up and down in their places in their eagerness to shout out the right answers, and at the same time not feeling the faintest interest in the meaning of the mysterious events they were naming.”
Historians should assess “student understanding of historical thinking and important, in-depth, contextualized subject matter rather than discrete historical ‘facts’.”

The New York Global History exam is wrong to have “low-level knowledge questions rather than high-order thinking questions.”

The Battle of Bunker Hill occurred during which U.S. war?

- World War II
- The American Revolutionary War
- The Civil War
Which Danish king had the most children?

(Christian IV had 23, Frederick III had 7, Valdemar had 6)
What city was the home of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller?
“Any reference on our part to the British Army unit was absolutely unintentional and no ill-will was ever intended.” (Ben and Jerry’s Company)
“Declare war on the cold front!”
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An exam with “short answer” questions

Your name: ___________________________

Part one: What’s that? Write a paragraph explaining the following person, place, organization or event. For full credit, complete 20 of 25.

1. Millet system

2. Ethnic Cleansing

3. Black and Tans
7. The Karl Marx Hof

8. Friederich Ludwig Jahn

9. The Frankfurt Parliament

10. Treaty of Tilsit

11. The Ausgleich

12. Kraft durch Freude ("Strength through Joy")
Final exam scores (History 118, 2008, Victoria University)

Top and Bottom essay scores
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