

Intellectual Development and the Purpose of Essay Exams

Education researchers over the past few decades have increased our understanding about how students learn. A few robust trends are worth mentioning here, as they help students understand their likely reactions to essay exams. William G. Perry (1970) laid the foundation for how we understand intellectual development.¹ Very simply, he documented the four stages through which young adults developed intellectually through their formal education experiences: dualism; multiplicity; relativism; and commitment in relativism.

Throughout most of their primary and secondary school years (and often into their first few years of college), people are dualist thinkers. Dualists think that there are only right and wrong answers. Professors know the right answers, so dualists perceive learning to be dutifully writing down notes in lecture classes. Peer interaction seems like a waste of time to dualists, since they don't think their classmates know the right answers (or they wouldn't be students in the class!). Dualists often struggle to form their own positions or informed judgments on issues. Dualists are shocked when they see professors disagreeing on issues, as this conflicts with their view that there is a right answer and all others are wrong. When dualist learners see essay questions, they try to systematically regurgitate what they believe to be is the one right answer—not fully understanding that essay questions are designed to assess higher-order learning skills.

Many university students move out of the dualism stage and into the multiplicity stage. Being exposed to challenging topics and open-ended problems leads many attentive students to abandon dualism for the sentiment that there are no wrong answers—anything goes. Because of this mindset, they typically pay insufficient attention to the strength and structure of their arguments and the amount and quality of evidence they use to marshal support for the argument. Unfortunately, those are the very things that professors are evaluating. Since multiplicity learners believe that there really are no wrong answers, they interpret low grades as political tactics or retribution for disagreeing with their professors. They are often unable to understand the differences between a strong essay and a weak essay.

If students put in hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of hard work on their critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical reasoning skills and apply themselves to learning the substantive knowledge and methodologies of their disciplines, then they typically can move into the third stage of intellectual development: relativism. Relativist learners are beginning to cope intellectually with the complexity of the world around them. They understand that smart, reasonable people can disagree for different reasons. They understand that knowledge is contextual. They know that they must learn how to critically analyze arguments and evaluate evidence and reasoning. Relativist learners typically have few or no problems understanding the

¹ Perry's trajectory began with the "dualism" stage, followed by the "multiplicity" stage, the "relativism" stage, and ideally the "commitment in relativism" stage. Because Perry's research was based on male subjects, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) conducted similar research on female subjects. Their female-centered stages of "received knowledge," "subjective knowledge," "procedural knowledge," and "constructed knowledge" largely parallel Perry's male-centered stages. King and Kitchener (1994) similarly distinguished among the "prereflective level," the "quasi-reflective level," and the "reflective thinking level."

purposes of essay exams. They simply want clear evaluation criteria ahead of time, and they can usually handle the assignments well.

Finally, only a few percent of university students (typically those who pursue advanced degrees) make it to the final stage in intellectual development: commitment in relativism. These are the students who typically feel that they thrive during complex decision-making. They can approach a complex issue, make sense of the competing positions, and eventually defend a particular position as their own even in the face of opposition and critique. They realize that theirs is not the only position that has merit, and they are aware of the merit of their position relative to the merit of others' positions. This allows them to make defensible short-term and long-term choices in the face of complexity.

I am sharing all of this with you so that it may prompt you to think reflectively about your own intellectual development. Self-awareness can help you better understand why you thrive in certain situations and why you struggle in others, why you prefer some class activities over others, and why you feel you are better in certain fields than in others.

Higher education is about helping you develop intellectually from lower-level thinking to higher-level thinking. Many of your freshman-level classes used multiple-choice and true-false questions that did not challenge you to abandon the limited efficacy of dualist thinking. You have probably noticed that over the years you have been asked to complete more short answer exams, essay exams, researched essays, and group projects. All of the latter promote and assess more sophisticated intellectual thinking.

In particular, King and Kitchener (1994) demonstrate that individual and group work on “ill-structured problems” helps college students move from lower to higher stages of intellectual development. “Ill-structured problems” are those that are open-ended, ambiguous, controversial, and opaque in their definitions, causes, and solutions. They may be messy, as actual science really is. In this sense, they lead to authentic learning experiences.

The essay prompts on the three exams in this course are “ill-structured problems.” Each question is open-ended and asks that you extend, synthesize, integrate, or apply what you learned in class readings and discussions to some new question a little beyond the scope of what we have already done. This type of authentic learning experience is what you will be asked to do throughout your career in the workforce.

References

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