So, What do You Want, Anyway?

Objective exams are very seductive when we are working our way out of a pile of blue books. Although we know good essay questions prompt valuable insights into what our students actually know or do not know, writing responses to student answers chews up time. Yet, after we scribble in margins to explain weaknesses and point out strengths, after we hack at lumps in grammar/usage, after we do our best to individualize, too often the students will say, "I still don't see what you want!" So, where's the payoff for our efforts? Where's the payoff for students' efforts?

I tried an alternative to margin scribbling: a simple score-by-points system, further supported by one- or two-word comments. The simple score-by-points system was clean, fast, and empirical. But the howl from many remained, "So what do you want, anyway?" Students were rarely satisfied with my responses to that question, and so they usually repeated the same mistakes.

When I added one more step to the score-by-points system, the real payoff emerged. I had learned to scan all the student answers to each question before I assigned number values to help me get a feel for the level of understanding and writing demonstrated by a particular group. This opportunity to rub a "class standard" against my own standard helped the process of evaluation. So one afternoon a few years ago, I placed a fresh test sheet alongside the stack of answers. As I processed answers, I wrote the name(s) of the student(s) who earned the most points beside the appropriate question on the test sheet, creating a list of students who wrote the best answers.

But I still had to decide what to do with my list. I did not like any of the alternatives because they all took time. Then I found a method that took less time than margin scribbling and had a greater payoff for me and the students. I already used the word processor as a tool to record and print out my comments for student projects in speech, acting, and writing classes. Most students respond well to this since there is an ethos of the individual printout that has yet to become ordinary to students. This process also allows me to record the progress of my responses to each student's work. So, this time I opened the essay test document—for ex-

ample, test2.doc—and immediately did a "Save as" with a "k" added to the title (for "key") so test2.doc became test2k.doc. Using a slightly different font, I transcribed the best answer(s) below the question, and added the initials of the author(s) at the end of each. I had created a "Student Written Key" (SWK). Then I made copies for the class. The transcriptions were not edited, so [sic] appeared occasionally.

I discovered the payoffs to the SWK and some flaws which I have since remedied.

- No one asks, "So what do you want?" anymore because at least one successful answer for each question is provided. And a fellow student wrote it.
- When I hear, "Well, I said the same thing!" I ask the student to read her/his answer and let the class respond.
- "What does [sic] mean?" has been a perfect segue into discussing the importance of language usage, spelling, and proofreading outside the English classroom, or "your good ideas deserve better packaging."
- There is often a new respect and pride within the class. The evidence of their own success is in front of them all and is being acknowledged.
- The pressure is toward emulating the successful rather than joining any stubborn and vocal complainers.
- Students sometimes admit surprise that I actually read the answers.
- Others are impressed that I take the time to create the answer "key." (I don't reveal that it takes a lot less time than the old margin scribbling.)
- My impulse to share especially fine answers without putting too much of a shine on particular students is satisfied.
- The next round of essay answers are usually much improved.

By doing this, it appeared I had created a monster of precedence. Was I to create an SWK for every essay exam from now on? No, I would not provide an SWK for every essay exam; students were instructed to learn from the current example and go forward.

Also, I learned to begin testing at the beginning of the term with fewer questions. Creating the SWK for a two- or three-question exam is a relative snap, and the payoff is the same as for longer tests. Later in the term, with the convention established, I again use the SWK:

- to show student examples of how different responses to the same question can be "correct" when the answers are supported with citations, etc.,
- to show that succinct answer can still be a complete answer, and
- to show the value of inventiveness and creative synthesis of ideas.

I can usually use an answer from each student sometime during the quarter. The less probing or challenging questions are good territory in which to find an answer written by a struggling student who can use the lift that acknowledgment provides.

I still scribble in margins. Direct contact with paper is still a personal need. But I have not heard "What do you want, anyway?" for a long time.

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Empowering the Re-Entry Student: The Second Chance Program

The Second Chance program at San Antonio College (TX) seeks to recruit women who can benefit from retraining and help them become self-sufficient, contributing members of society. A significant number of single parents, displaced homemakers, and single, pregnant women reside in housing projects. Few have skills to alter their socioeconomic status.

Affordable, quality child care and housing are major challenges for students from this population. Second Chance reaches out to the housing projects in order to deliver courses in a familiar environment. Selected college courses are taught on location and help students avoid typical transportation problems. Individualized counseling (which includes support services to address these issues) often makes the difference between success and failure for re-entry women. Counselors help students locate child care, textbooks, and transportation.

The program facilitates the collaboration of several academic and service agencies through an informal network of community-based organizations—e.g., the San Antonio Housing Authority Family and Self-Sufficiency Program is an integral part of the recruitment process and provides facilities in the housing projects. Key personnel include a program counselor, part-time mentor/tutor, and two part-time clerks.

Students are offered a tailored curriculum and a comprehensive support system. Students' educational skills are assessed, and Individual Development (ID) plans are created. The ID identifies the primary academic, personal, and student support interventions, as well as any other assistance the participant needs to achieve her academic goals.

College courses are held during a variety of day, evening, and weekend hours. Mandatory weekly self-assessment and tutoring services are unique features of the program; they ensure that students and teachers are well-informed about the rate and quality of academic progress. In this experience-based program, students

- learn about the necessary academic preparation for entry into college,
- learn how to access and apply for college and financial aid,
- experience cultural and self-awareness through role models and lectures which increase motivation and support academic retention,
- have direct contact with counselors and, if recruited through San Antonio Family Self-Sufficiency, receive housing assistance.

The Second Chance program focuses on leaving students better than it found them. Its goal is to transform its students into productive members of their families and their communities.

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