

STORYLINES

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Sociology 100 Newsletter

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Some Issues Surface

Progress and Confusion on Exam Three

When I have given group exams in years past, they have almost always resulted in an improvement in scores. The ability to check your thinking with others, the chance to talk out loud about your reasoning, and the simple principle of “two heads are better than one” have all worked together to improve performances.

That wasn't the case on this exam. In fact, if you take a look at the summary table on page two, you will see an average score of 8.8. That translates into a percentage score of 73, exactly our average on Exam Two. There were fewer low scores (no one scored below 6) but there were no perfect scores, something that is very unusual given how many students (497) took the exam.

What Happened

I'm not really sure how to explain these results but I have a few ideas that I'd like to share with you. First, I do think this exam was more challenging than the previous two. It had more questions and for the first time you were confronted with questions that asked you to think about two ideas

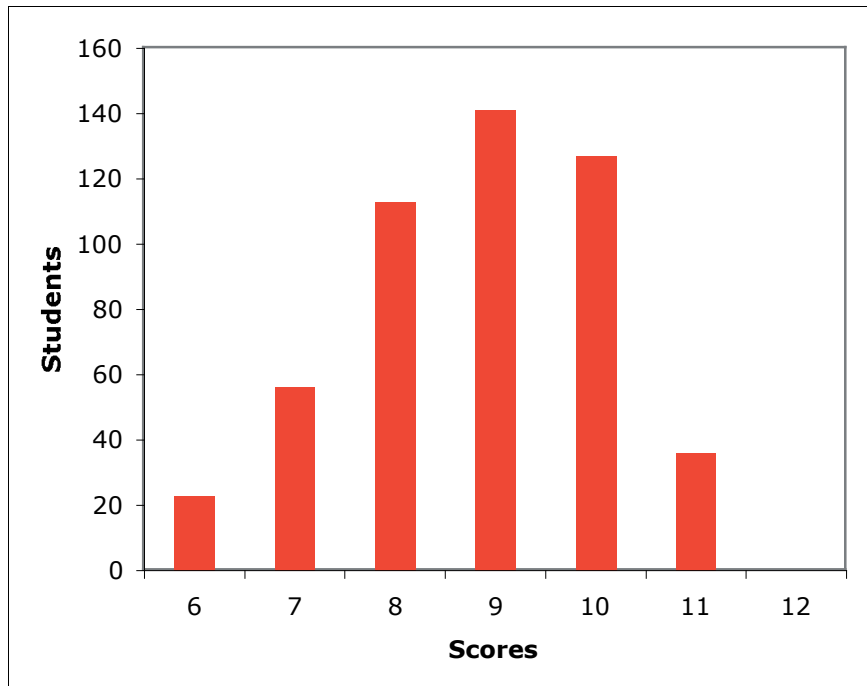


Figure 1. This graph shows the uncorrected scores on Exam Three. They are a bit lower than I expected, but that may reflect problems in a question or two.

simultaneously (those items that asked about “sets” of ideas).

Second, although I think the group work had some benefits for everyone, it also seemed to reveal some widespread fuzzy thinking. Many of you commented that you knew the answers until you had to explain them or until you heard a group mate argue for a different point of view.

Third, I do think many of us have gotten a bit blasé about our in-class activities. The last few sets of cards we have collected seem much less engaged than those we collected earlier in the semester. These activities are designed to give you practice both in talking to each other and in thinking through some of the issues that we confront

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on our exams. Taking them seriously rather than just scratching out a few words and calling it a day will, I think, sharpen your understanding in ways that will show up on our exams.

A Look at the Questions

As I mentioned, whenever we take an exam, I get a printout of the responses to each exam item that shows the percent of student who answered the question correctly. I use this information, along with your e-mail messages, to reflect on our performance and the construction of the exam.

Sometimes, I am happy. For example, the Eric Liu Chinatown question was the easiest item on the exam, everyone answered it correctly. We also did well on the three Farai Chideya questions: 93 percent answered each of them correctly. The Santa Clara Pueblo questions made me smile too. Eighty-four percent managed to solve those problems.

I could view those items as too easy or as give-aways, but I don't. I am please that so many of us could sort our way through her comments to come up with the right answers.

Sometimes, the questions reveal where our thinking could stand a bit

of work. For example, the question about Trudier Harris' "My Mother's Creation" was correctly answered by fewer than two thirds of us.

When fewer than two thirds manage to answer a question correctly, I take a close look at the challenge it posed. Most of the time, it reveals some misunderstanding that is worth talking about. That seems to be the case here. Names are powerful symbols of who we *are*. The inattention of others to what we wish to be called is a clear sign of a lack of recognition. Harris' insistence on the proper use and pronunciation of her name is anything but trivial – it is a demand for recognition as *person*.

Many of you sent e-mails about the Nike question (solved by 60 percent) and the correct answer's reference to power. The fact that the women who is pictured "can't get into clubs" is precisely what Walzer means by lacking power because of the groups to which one belongs. I think this idea should have been clear, but I am sure it will be clearer after we finish our discussion of *Summer Snow*.

Flawed Questions

I don't want to leave the impression that I look at this information and read your e-mails so that I can dream up the rationale for my answers and then lecture you on why you should have know better than to choose the way you did. I *do* think about what you say and I *do* reconsider what sorts of distinctions I can reasonably expect you to make.

The question I have spent the most time rethinking is the Susan Wolf question. Many of you wrote to me about this item, arguing that

choice D was a better selection than A, the answer I regarded as correct. None of those arguments seemed persuasvie to me, however. The "insult" comes from the fact that our cultures are part of who we *are*. That's why she says the insult is to "individuals." What makes culture (an involuntary association) part of who we are is the fact that it is the backdrop against which our lives take on meaning.

Making A Correction

I thought that was pretty clear, but I may have been the only one. Fewer than 10 percent of you answered this question correctly. That made me think that what seemed clear to me wasn't clear to you. What I thought was a well-crafted question wasn't so well done after all.

I am going to throw out the effects of the Susan Wolf question by adding one point to everyone's score for Exam Three. That will make things better across the board, but it won't completely erase the consequences of the fuzzy thinking that showed up on this exam. I know we can do better.

We are entering a critical period in our course. We have three more exams before the final worth the same number of points as the exams we have taken. We are going to turn away from Walzer for a bit and then return to him just before Thanksgiving. There will be some changes coming up (see page 3) that promise to be very engaging.

It is has been a long haul already and we are only at the half-way point. This is the time to get your second wind, to come to class rested and ready to think, and to read and talk to each other between classes. Let's make this next month one to remember!

Exam III Summary Statistics

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Number Taking | 497 |
| Average Score | 8.8 |
| Most Common Score | 9 |
| Highest Score | 11 |

Problem-Based Learning on Our Horizon

If you have looked at your syllabus lately, you have probably glanced at the section on Problem-Based Assessment. We are going to start that portion of the course immediately after our next exam (coming up on October 28). I want to take just a couple of moments to give you an idea of how we'll proceed and at least some sense of why we are going to do things this way.

The idea behind problem based learning is pretty simple: working together to solve a problem provides the opportunity to develop a much deeper and more thorough understanding of the issues at stake than does the more standard approach in which an instructor explains both the problem and its solution(s). I think this is especially true for the sorts of problems we confront in our course.

Forming Groups

Here's how we are going to proceed. Beginning October 31, and lasting through our fifth exam on November 11, all our course work, both in and outside class will be done in groups. The most challenging part of this project is to establish groups that will persist throughout the two week period.

I know that many of you have already been working in groups and that others of you are in "learning community" sections of URI 101. Nevertheless, many others of you have not really formed a group with other students except the relatively transitory group that you made for our last exam. That will need to change.

I want each of you to be in a group no smaller than three and no larger than six. Those numbers may seem arbitrary, but I think they will

foster group work and still require some contribution from each member. Much of what we'll be doing will be graded on the basis of how your group performs, so each of you will need to be willing to take some responsibility for creating and sustaining the group you ultimately settle into.

If you have a study group that is smaller than six, you might think about asking some of your classmates to join it so that it reaches six. If you have a group that's larger than six, you'll need to divide up. Once you do, look for your classmates who have yet to become affiliated and ask them to join until each of the new groups reach six members.

There is a group sign up sheet available on the course web site. You will need to download one and submit it to me with the names and active e-mail addresses of all group members. *One sign-up sheet per group must be submitted by Monday, October 31.*

How Class Will Work

Each class session during the PBL unit will be devoted to group work. I will do very little talking except to outline the nature of what we want you to work on. For the most part, we will ask each group to do some serious thinking and writing during our class time.

What your group writes in class will be collected, read, and recorded as one of the "in-class" or "note-card" activities that constitute a portion of your grade. As always, you must be present to earn those "in-class" points.

At the end of each class, I'll distribute another portion of our problem for you to work on before our next class. You'll need to get together

with your group either in person or by telephone or e-mail to talk about the problem. In addition, as a group, you'll need to write an answer to the questions I pose, type it and come to the next class session ready to turn it in.

These "out-of-class" portions of the problem are especially important. We'll collect them, read them, and record them. Each out-of-class assignment is worth one point toward your score on Examination Five. We will follow this rhythm throughout the unit. You'll work in class, turn in what you have, get an assignment, turn it in at the beginning of the next class, work in class, and so on. By the end of the unit, we will have collected four "out-of-class" assignments so you will have had the opportunity to earn four points toward your Exam Five score.

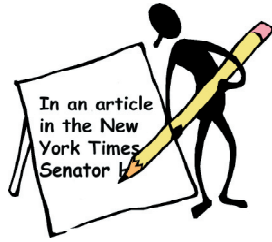
You'll take the rest of the exam on Friday, November 11, working together in your group (each student will have his or her own answer sheet). There will be six questions posed, making Examination Two worth a total of 10 points.

Looking Forward

I am looking forward to this part of our course. The problem we will focus on will help us get a good grip not only on the ideas we have already discussed, but it will also introduce us in an interesting way to Amin Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity*.

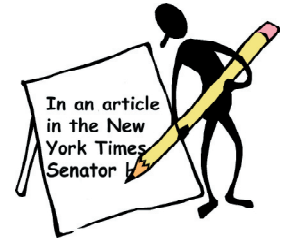
Your thoughtful participation in this part of our course will go along way toward making your semester successful. If you make a good group and make a good plan to work together, you will find this way of conducting class both fun and intellectually rewarding.

The Testing Contest



Write an Exam Question

Earn Two Extra Credit Points



Have you ever wondered where I come up with those wacky quotes that form the basis of most of our test items? Have you ever thought about how I put together answers and quotations to make those brain-teasing puzzles that you enjoyed so much this past Monday? Here's your chance to find out. *The Testing Contest* is just your ticket. The rules are simple and the reward is stupendous.

Here's what you need to do. First, find an excerpt from an essay, a part of a book, a piece of a magazine article, a scene from a play or a movie, the lyrics of a song, something off a web site, anything you think addresses one of the issues we've talked about in class. You'll need to provide a clear reference to whatever you've chosen so that I can track it down. Second, after you've chosen the piece you think deals with an issue we've dealt with in our course, use it as the basis of a test question. Your question should begin with the phrase: *In a [insert a description of the piece you've selected], [insert the author's name] made the following observation...* then you should insert the item you've selected as illustrative of one of the ideas we've talked about. After excerpt you've chosen, your question should conclude with this sentence: *Which of the following ideas is most consistent with [the author's name] remarks?* In other words, your submission should resemble the items that have appeared on our first three examinations.

Now the fun part. After you've written the question, I want you to *write one correct answer as well*. You'll probably want to use the ideas we've employed on our previous exams, but any of the ideas we've used are fair game. *You need to submit only one answer with your question.*

So, what's all this trouble worth? Several things.

- The author of each acceptable question will receive two extra credit point
- The authors of the two questions deemed best will receive nifty Soc 100 T-shirts and hats
- The two best questions will appear on an examination this semester as official test items

All entries must be typewritten (no exceptions) and must be submitted to *Storylines* Headquarters (Chafee 182) by Wednesday, November 2, 2005. This is a great opportunity to contribute to the construction of a real life college examination and to be rewarded for it. Make your plans now! Start casting about for a juicy quote to wow your professor and puzzle your friends.

The Testing Contest

Name: _____ I.D. Number _____

Entries due in Chafee 182 on November 2, 2005. One entry per student.