

REGENTS EXAM REVIEW PANEL
I Global and American History
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Introduction

A panel of historians, both educators and independent scholars, convened to evaluate the Global and American History Regents examinations, instruments that now serve as exit requirements from most public high schools in New York State. Prior to the meeting, each panelist reviewed a packet of sample exams, state curricular guidelines, and sample test essays. Part of the meeting—an especially illustrative part—was devoted to “taking” the “DBQ” (Document-Based Question) portion of the Global History exam. The panel’s discussions, before and after this exercise, were highly critical of the exam itself and questioned the validity of the alignment of the test with the State Learning Standards, which appeared to bear little relationship to the exam.

Additional discussion focused on the crisis-ridden educational environment in which these “high-stakes” tests have come to hold such authority, and on the implications, political and educational, of their increasing power. Finally, the panel examined and discussed the importance of sustaining an alternative to these high-stakes tests.

I. Multiple-Choice Questions: “The Trivial, The Self-Evident, and the Inaccurate”

On first reflection, the panelists agreed that the multiple-choice portion of the Global exam was a peculiar mix of the trivial, the self-evident, and the historically inaccurate. Several panelists pointed out that a number of questions on each exam had either 1) no right answer 2) two “overlapping” right answers or 3) a highly debatable “right” answer. No one was pleased with this state of affairs, especially given the weight of the multiple-choice questions in the student’s final score.

One panelist summed up the multiple-choice portion of the exam as “a good test of irrelevant knowledge.” Panelists did not reject the idea of a multiple-choice test out of hand: one panelist commented that “students need to have a strong base of factual information”: that such a base “is critical for studying history at more sophisticated levels”: and that “multiple-choice tests are the best practical way to test for this.” Members of the panel were not unsympathetic to the difficulty of constructing such tests; several panelists had been involved in the construction of A.P. exams. One of them reflected, “I don’t think we could all come to an agreement about what it is we would like a student who comes into our classroom to understand and know, because we all teach quite differently. Some people emphasize politics and economics, and some people emphasize social history. Some people want to teach concepts and some people want to teach knowledge-based I don’t mean to say this is impossible, but I mean to suggest that when you look at this test, we should all have some sense of the complexity of the process.”

The result, however, creates a sweeping, all-inclusive content base, a curriculum that defies effective, engaging teaching in a reasonable length of time. One panelist argued that “the standards are more at fault than the tests: they force the teachers to attempt too much.” Everyone agreed that attempts to accomplish such coverage will necessarily sacrifice the teaching and practice of any kind of serious interpretive or

critical thinking. While one panelist suggested creative approaches to the content on these exams, the others pointed out that such approaches take far more time than this breadth of content would allow the teacher to spend on any given topic. One panelist summed up the challenge this way: “You’ve got an enormous amount you’re trying to cover, and you’re answering to thirty different masters who are trying to get you to teach a whole series of things that can’t all be taught at once.”

II. Lack of Alignment with State Standards

Several panelists noted the jarring “disconnect” between the exam and the State Learning Standards. The standards typically call for students to be able to make sweeping comparative and thematic judgments about “civilizations,” while the multiple-choice questions required small, “bite-sized” fragments of factual knowledge that ranged from ancient India to pre-Columbian America to post-colonial Africa. Much of this detailed knowledge was at the level of a specialist, not of a high-school sophomore or junior.

We noted that simple reading comprehension would suffice to answer a significant number of the questions correctly. One panelist said later that this portion of the exam was “simply an ineptly drawn test of reading comprehension.” This, in turn, was recognized as a bureaucratic, politically-influenced test-writing strategy designed to lift statewide pass rates. Some on the panel viewed this sympathetically (one panelist called it “good-spirited”), a sort of benevolent attempt to encourage student success, while others condemned it as evidence of a “rigged” examination. One panelist envisioned the designers of the test trying to give students a “fighting chance at passing: skirt the problem of coverage and the problem of detail that students really are not going to have mastered; test things that have to do with basic reasoning skills, and basic ability to group things and read a map.” However, she also observed that “Those don’t mesh with the rather sophisticated standards being set by the State.”

One panelist observed that “the state has the right, and perhaps the duty to set standards for secondary education,” but that “the current standards as interpreted by the current test designers seem overwhelmingly likely to produce failure, and a sort of educational fraud.”

We all agreed that the exam questions did nothing to encourage the pedagogical ambitions articulated in the State Learning Standards (that students learn to “probe ideas and assumptions, ask and answer analytical questions, take a skeptical attitude toward questionable arguments, evaluate evidence, formulate rational conclusions, and develop and refine participatory skills”) which one panelist characterized—in light of the exam itself—as “arid rhetoric.”

III. Document-Based Questions: “A Supreme Level of Vapidity”

The “DBQ” question was next on the panel’s agenda. This portion of the Regents Examination consists of an essay prompt, followed by an exercise in which students are presented with a series of sources, very brief snippets of documents (one of us called them “fragments”) that ostensibly provide evidence for the required essay response. Each source is accompanied by “workbook” or “scaffolding”-type questions designed to elicit a short response that illuminates the mini-document’s contribution to the essay topic.

Panelists “took” the “DBQ” portion of a Global Regents exam. The prompt was as follows: “Compare and contrast the role of women in different societies throughout history. Discuss the impact of social or political factors on the status of women in these societies.” This question, all agreed, was absurdly vague and historically meaningless. As one of us opined, “It’s all societies, over all times, all women, in every social class, every race, religion -- how would you even begin?” (Indeed, what would the question look like if “men” were substituted for “women”?) Another panelist concluded, “Without rising to a supreme level of vapidness, one couldn’t do anything.” After seeing the DBQ, one panelist mused that the “multiple-choice section isn’t really that bad; it beats the hell out of the document section, some of which was truly ludicrous.”

The accompanying sources, all agreed further, cut across a bewildering range of times and places, while their brevity—most were as little as four or five lines of often undated text—precluded any kind of contextual understanding. One participant, who had compiled several sourcebooks of primary documents, said after the discussion, “The study of documents is a wonderful tool that brings to life the ambiguity of history, but what the testers call documents are not documents at all.” Another panelist said that the DBQ “almost ignores chronology. Very few of these documents are dated. Well, there are some dates around. But this essay could be written without any sense of historical change at all.”

One panelist observed that as a teacher, he felt the “point of view of documents” is the “core point” for students to understand. These brief, isolated quotations, which barely qualify as “documents,” completely defeat this critical aspect of historical analysis. Another panelist concurred that a central role of the history teacher is to make students “skeptical about what a document is, in terms of a concretized ideology masquerading as the voice from Sinai.” In fact, this goal is explicit in the State Learning Standards: students should “analyze evidence critically and demonstrate an understanding of how circumstances of time and place influence perspective.” The contextless documents make this well-nigh impossible; the problem was compounded by the fact that several of the “documents” came from literature, and yet the student was expected to rely on them as historical sources without knowing anything about the author’s interpretation of historical events.

We had a number of problems with the specific documents. A chart titled “One Woman’s Day,” from Sierra Leone, was given without any date. “Was it yesterday? Was it a thousand years ago?” one of us asked. We learned that the grading guide from the State Education Department acknowledges the absence of a date, and allows credit for use of the document to support an argument either about ancient or modern Sierra Leone. The panel was generally appalled at this manipulation of material to suit the exam and at the notion of a completely ahistorical historical document.

One panelist pointed out that in one case, the documents showed change over 3,000 years (China); in another, over a century (Latin America), and yet the student was supposed to yoke the two into a single essay. This runs directly counter to our desire for students to understand the difference between ten years, a hundred years, and a thousand years. Similarly, students were expected to rely on single documents to draw conclusions about women in entire continents: a document from Sierra Leone and a document from Zimbabwe represented the whole of Africa. Again, this undermines our efforts as

teachers to get students not to confuse or equate distinct societies and countries in this potentially dangerous way.

The entire exercise, in the words of a women's history specialist on the panel, was "hopelessly confused." Here is the essay she produced, which succinctly outlines the flaws in the question:

"Women's roles have varied throughout time and geographic region. The documents provide no accurate way to assess the social or political factors responsible for this variation. Two documents from the same year, Zimbabwe and China in 1980, contradict each other. Is the poor condition of women in China due to Communism, or to poor conditions from the Han dynasty. Is the good condition of women in Zimbabwe due to the war of independence? If so, is the poor situation of the woman in Sierra Leone due to *not* having a war? Similarly, the supposed improvement of women becoming teachers in WWI Great Britain doesn't seem as positive as the statement of the Latin American woman in 1934. Which nation is she in? Much of Latin America then was ruled by military dictatorship. Should I conclude that dictatorships are better for women than the English quasi-democracy where women could not vote? Based on these documents, I'd rather be the 1934 Latin American woman, and have to assume that war is good for women's status. But I'm hopelessly confused. And my field is as a professor of Women's History."

In the discussion that followed, the gross deficiencies of the question again focused attention on the need for encouraging students' critical faculties. Several panelists—approaching the question, it should be added, from divergent ideological standpoints—concurred that the exam failed utterly to pose any intellectual or analytical task, and that it similarly failed to spark students' innate interest or curiosity and denied them any voice in the response they were expected to produce. Students were neither required nor expected to assume a point of view about history, nor were issues in history presented as fodder for debate. We wondered how the material thus presented would ever engage students.

Having taken this portion of the exam, we examined the sample essays provided by the State Education Department as "anchor papers" for scoring this question. These sample essays reinforced our impression that this style of essay question was antithetical to authentic teaching and learning. All of the anchor papers, even the high-scoring example, were dry, detached, and impersonal "cookbook" essays that mechanically fulfilled the test's requirements without evincing any evidence of interest in the subject. We were also startled to learn that, in contrast to the weight we believe good teaching places on analytic writing, it is possible to pass these exams based on the multiple-choice portion without getting a single point from the essay questions.

Both the exam questions, and the sample essays produced in response to those questions, reflected an assumption that there was a single correct interpretation of individuals and events. This completely contradicted the Learning Standards' expectation that students would become able to "investigate differing and competing theories of history," and "hypothesize about why interpretations change over time." As one panelist expressed it, the exam was "deficient in terms of the critical skills which are part of the Standards but not at all reflected in the test."

Finally, while we applauded the idea that historical documents would become integral to the history curriculum, we feared the impact of these truncated, contextless documents on classroom teaching. One panelist, who has written historical sourcebooks, observed, “after reading the documents on the Regents, there’s a terrible danger that the documents that will be used in teaching will mirror the kinds of documents you get on the Regents. Instead of having a real, 19th century account of working conditions in Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, you get three sentences and that’s considered a document. The student has to try to get something out of that instead of getting the real deal, a contemporary historical document.”

IV. College Preparation and Institutional Realities

What kind of secondary-level education best prepares students for college-level work in history? Should students be expected to absorb vast quantities of factual material and then demonstrate their learning through a series of multiple-choice questions and by constructing sweeping generalizations about cultures based on thin slices of evidence? Or should students be expected to read lengthier works, primary and secondary, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of a much smaller number of subjects, while spending the time necessary to learn how to weigh evidence, evaluate sources, and formulate effective questions for further study? All our discussions led back to this fundamental choice.

Differing institutional experiences and political views produced a range of responses to the test and its policy implications. One panelist, a long-time teacher and administrator in performance-based schools, reported that his graduates return from college telling him there are certain subjects they don’t know, but that they do know how to do research and how to complete extensive reading tasks. This leaves them better prepared, they assert, than students from Regents schools whose high school history classes ostensibly “covered” the state curriculum.

The Regents exams in history had clearly been designed to follow extremely broad survey courses. However, one panelist remarked that at the CUNY college where she teaches, one of the top colleges in the CUNY system, the history department had discovered that students who took introductory survey courses never returned to take another history course; as a result, the history department has completely abandoned this kind of alienating survey course in favor of in-depth thematic courses. Unlike this exam, which demands covering a huge range of content, in these thematic courses, “the content is simply fodder for the skills that we are teaching the kids. . . . You have to persuade trained professionals in a specialized field that their field itself needs to be sacrificed to teaching students how to think critically.”

While the panel generally agreed that inquiry-based research should be the goal for undergraduate historical study, several panelists asserted that serious skills and knowledge deficits sometimes do not permit this kind of work at the college level. Students need to be able to distinguish Martin Luther from Martin Luther King, World War I from World War II, to read a textbook with comprehension, and to write understandable English prose. Another panelist, a faculty member from a CUNY community college, recognized the “scaffolding” questions that accompanied the DBQ exercise as precisely the kind of skills-based work many of his students need before they can ascend to higher-order tasks. However, we also recognized that these exams are

neither designed nor used as diagnostic instruments. They have instead become the determinant of a student's ability to continue his or her education.

V. The Exam in Context—Politics and Education Reform

The question of the Regents Examination's political context, perhaps the most important consideration the panel addressed, emerged early in the discussion and intensified after the group had an opportunity to talk over the content of the exam itself. Several panelists argued that the confusion evident in the structure of the exam and curricular materials—principally the State Learning Standards, which have little or no relationship to the instrument designed to assess them—derives from a semi-permanent crisis in public education, a dysfunctional system in which teacher preparation and student skills are both in critical condition. State education officials, under intense political pressure to fix broken public schools, have instituted new requirements to strengthen “standards” and have at the same time tried to mitigate potentially catastrophic failure rates. Even so, by the time the Regents exam is taken, it was noted, a large proportion of students have already dropped out. For those who remain, and for the teachers and administrators responsible to them, the exams have become the exit visa without which there can be no further progress. A high school diploma is now no more than a start toward the educational credentials needed for entry into 21st century labor markets.

VI. Test-Driven Education

The necessary consequence of placing such importance on these exams is their impact on school culture and classroom practice. One of the panelists said, “A principal's salary, a principal's reputation depends on this test. So to think that you can take a month or two and get them into a big topic, I think that's an illusion, and many good teachers have foundered on that. The schools are now test-driven, that's the tragedy of our educational system.” Another panelist, in correspondence after the meeting, wrote: “For me, what was most disturbing about those tests was the effect they must have on what goes on in the classroom. It's bad enough that valuable time is spent teaching for the test. That can't be avoided. But worse is the very real possibility that what will be taught in those sessions is a very simple-minded notion of what history is.”

The most significant question that emerged from discussion was this: how effective is the examination as a remedy for the crisis? Does the exam represent a fruitful pedagogical direction? The current moment contains great potential for education reform. In New York City, large comprehensive high schools are being broken into smaller, more manageable units. Can the Regents history examinations serve this new educational environment better than any alternatives? While perspectives varied—from a kind of an ambivalent tolerance of the test and its goals to absolute rejection of its educational premises—all agreed that linking high school graduation only to this test is unlikely either to solve the crisis or to produce historical literacy adequate to undergraduate education and an informed citizenry. As one of the panelists put it, “the skill that's missing in the entire exam is critical interpretive thinking.”

We discussed alternative methods of assessing students, such as Performance-Based Assessment, which one panelist described as “teaching the kinds of skills that will prepare kids to come into our classrooms.” We concluded that if schools using these methods show a proven record of producing graduates who go on to successful undergraduate careers, there is no good reason to insist that all public high schools conform to such a severely deficient testing regime.

Signed,

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