

Regents Review Panel
Global History and Geography
Oct. 17, 2001
Hosted by
The Rockefeller Foundation

On Wednesday, October 17th, a group of eight historians and journalists met under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation to discuss the Global History and Geography Regents exam, which is now a graduation requirement for all New York State public school students. After an introduction from Ann Cook giving the context of the proceedings, the panelists shared their impressions of the Global History and Geography Regents test.

1. The Multiple-Choice Questions

Assertion versus argument: One panelist opened the discussion by saying that the largest issue he faces as a professor -- at both the undergraduate and graduate levels -- is that college students are unable to distinguish between an assertion and an argument. He said that an historical background of some sort is necessary for college, but more important, everyone -- college-bound or not -- needs the ability to think. Panelists all agreed, and assertion versus argument became a framing question for the discussion.

The discussion turned to the test's two sections: the multiple-choice questions and the essays. In the light of the "assertion versus argument" question, panelists' initial responses were skeptical about the usefulness of multiple-choice questions as a means to assess a student's historical understanding. One panelist pointed out that even if the student is able to answer all the questions correctly, they are all assertions, and offer no insight into the student's ability to advance and support an argument. One of the historians explained that as a college professor, he has to wean his students off multiple-choice tests. He concentrates instead on teaching students how to articulate their ideas and to think with reasoning. He believed that the Regents multiple-choice section prevents any kind of articulation of ideas.

Breadth versus depth: Panelists were divided about the best curriculum to prepare students for this portion of the test: whether to focus on content or on test-taking skills. Some panelists felt that if you tried to teach content, the enormous range of content necessary for students to answer correctly based on actual knowledge of the subject matter, the curriculum would necessarily sacrifice any depth at all in favor of a whirlwind tour of global history. One of the journalists said that a high score on the Global Regents test, on the surface, would look like a student had gained a good education. However, he believed that preparing students for this test would push a truly good education to the wayside. He expressed concern about the role of the test-making industry (a Prentice-Hall test-prep book was examined) in driving the format and content of tests. Another panelist said that it was pretty plain that the test reflects components of a good curriculum, though he had concerns of the relationship between the enormous breadth of that curriculum and a real classroom. He said that he wanted to endorse the curriculum, but not the Global Regents test. He said that the test is a very poor way of focusing the knowledge, though the knowledge itself is a very good thing.

Knowledge versus test-taking strategies: One panelist volunteered that she had once worked for the Princeton Review, preparing students to take the verbal portion of the SAT. She said that the multiple-choice questions on the Global Regents test could all be approached using Princeton Review test-taking techniques, that a student did not need to know the correct answer to get the question right. Students could be well prepared for the test not by studying content but by learning “test tricks.” She said that this kind of test encourages passive learning. She pointed out that, as in learning vocabulary for the SATs, where there is a difference between a student’s rote absorption of words and any actual understanding, these questions asked students to memorize, not to comprehend, historical events.

Another panelist said that the test-taking psychology was clearly useful for approaching the Global Regents test, e.g., the test taker needs to go for the “quick win.” Another succinctly observed that the questions were dumber than those who are intended to answer them.

2. The Essay Questions

In their discussion of the essay portion of the test, the group returned to the initial framing question of assertion versus argument. Though they initially believed that the essay questions were more substantive and, unlike the multiple-choice section, would require rigorous teaching and give students an opportunity to build an argument, their opinions changed upon a closer examination of the test.

Paltry Documents: One of the historians pointed out that the documents in the January 2001 Regents test essay question on revolution all support a unified view or conclusion. [The instructions for answering the essay question include using evidence from the documents to support your response.] When the group countered that they could not really criticize the question because they had only been given the test, not the supporting documents, one of the session’s organizers pointed out that the excerpts (an average of three to four sentences long) in the boxes on the test pages *were* the documents. The group was shocked that these tiny fragments were considered historical “documents.”

At this point in the meeting, the panelists actually took a section of the August 2001 Global Regents test: the essay question in Part III on the role and status of women in different societies throughout history. (“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.”) After the participants had taken the test, they shared their impressions. Participants had initially felt more optimistic about what a student could demonstrate on the essay portion of the exam, but after they actually took the test, their opinions changed markedly.

Demands a Simplistic Response: One of the historians agreed that the essay question invites a simplistic response, and then summarized what the test is seeking: an

essay on the unidirectional progress of women from repression to opportunity. He observed that this easy answer, and the documents, do not allow for whether the changes brought about by war or revolution persisted, or whether there are notable exceptions to this trajectory. Another historian observed that the essay asserts an historical connection among cultures that is not actually there. She said that a student couldn't make a meaningful comparison among these societies based on the documents provided because the same argument about all of the societies is demanded. Another historian observed that if you tried to argue the converse of the "Historical Context" asserted by the writers of the exam, ("Throughout history, social and political factors have influenced the roles of women in different societies. As a result, the roles of women have varied across time and in different places.") i.e., that the status of women never changes, in spite of political and social upheaval, it would be impossible to do so based on the evidence provided.

The panelists agreed that there was no way, using these documents, to come up with any other hypothesis or argument, and that therefore this was not as open-ended a question as it might at first appear. As one of the historians observed, all of the data are "ostensibly scattered, but in reality all lined up in a single trajectory" Another historian said that while he had initially found the essay question interesting, after taking the test, he felt it was merely a multiple choice question in disguise -- since there is obviously a "right" answer, and no other argument is possible, given the evidence. He was sure that the Princeton Review would have a nice method of how to approach this type of question. Another panelist said that what the essay question demanded of students was training in quickly sizing up some claims and then summarizing them in a few sentences. He said that this would be "rotten" for a college essay, even though someone who could do that would be ready to take "real courses," as is demanded in college. However, he criticized the details of the document questions as "disgraceful," such using a single example from Mexico to argue about all of Latin America.

Problems with the "Documents" Provided: One of the panelists pointed out that one of the document-based questions was inherently flawed: "According to the chart, in which occupation did the number of women in the labor force in Great Britain increase the most between 1914 and 1918." He explained that while the chart shows the absolute numbers of women working, the valuable information about increase was proportional, not absolute, and that without a calculator, or a willingness to do pencil-and-paper calculations of nine categories, the student would not have that information. An historian pointed out that the document "Sierra Leone: One Woman's Day" was unusable because there is no date for it, nor is there any evidence as to the society's value of women's work there. One of the panel organizers pointed out that in the state's grading guidelines, the lack of a date is acknowledged: "Since no year is given for document 5, the information from this document may be used to characterize "traditional" society in rural Sierra Leone *or* it may be used to characterize rural Sierra Leone in "more modern" times. In general, the historians were appalled by this notion of playing fast-and-loose with documents.

Approach to History: The historians felt that exam did not reflect an approach to history that they would use in their own classrooms. One of the historians, a specialist

in women's history, commented that the historian in her was recoiling at the idea of comparing the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. – A.D. 220) with 19th century Mexico. She said that the attempt to be inclusive of many cultures in this essay question works against the Learning Standards because there can be no equivalency among the different societies. Another historian pointed out that the relation of the question to the evidence was problematic: while the question asked students to examine the social and political roles of women, most of the documents addressed their economic roles. A student who took the question seriously would be hard pressed to answer it based on the documents provided.

Alignment with State Learning Standards: The panelists looked again at the State's Learning Standards, which require students to think critically, use information in context, and make hypotheses. One of the panelists observed that there was no time to do all that on the test. Another panelist asked how those standards could even be tested in this form, as they are very broad. One of the journalists disagreed. He said that a student could make some comparisons and inferences, and that one could see through the essay how well a student could make an argument and reason. However, he did acknowledge that the test does not want any analysis or analysis beyond the task.

Evaluating Sources: Panelists were concerned that none of the documents gave enough information about the source for students to evaluate their usefulness, perspective, or credibility. As historians, one of the central lessons they try to impart to students is the importance of considering the source of any information. The way the information is presented on the exam, however, suggests that all the sources are equally reliable and unbiased, and should be given equal weight. Turning to the State's Learning Standards, the historians observed that this directly contradicted Standard 4: "The skills of historical analysis include the ability to investigate differing and competing interpretations about the theories of history Students analyze different interpretations of important events, issues, or developments in world history by studying the social, political, and economic context in which they were developed; by testing the data source for reliability and validity, credibility, authority, authenticity, and completeness; and by detecting bias, distortion of the facts, and propaganda by omission, suppression, or invention of facts. (Taken from *National Standards for World History*)" Given the radically abridged documents on the test, it would be impossible for students to demonstrate the attainment of this standard. In fact, the test itself violates the standard in several ways. The State Learning Standards suggest that students should be "critical" of sources, and examine the time and place and context in which each document was produced. One of the journalists observed that this exam, in fact, required students to be uncritical.

Evaluating Competing Interpretations of Events: Panelists agreed that the essay question did not allow a student to demonstrate an ability to evaluate contradictory sources, since all the sources suggested a single possible answer to the question. One of the historians pointed out that this task would prevent a student from employing the State Learning Standard of analyzing changing and competing interpretations of issues and events. Another panelist concluded that the essay question, which at first had seemed like a substantial and useful evaluation of student work, was really a reading comprehension

question. Another historian commented that this was not a good question because you can only answer it superficially. She commented that what it demanded of students was facile, sweeping statements that suggested a person could make dinner-table conversation about history, not that they actually knew anything about history.

Scoring: Most of the panelists had assumed that, as in their own classes, the essay questions would carry the most weight. Panelists examined the scoring grids for several of the recent tests, and were shocked to discover that the multiple-choice questions and the short, “scaffolding” questions (reading comprehension questions about the “documents”) carried far more weight than the essay. For example, on the January, 2001, exam, if a student answered all the multiple-choice and short-answer questions correctly, she would need only 3 points in the essay section.

3. Conclusions

Usefulness of the Exam: One of the journalists, who has covered education for more than a decade, had concerns about accountability. Though he knows that a test score offers limited information, it does provide something by which to judge a school and drive reform. He said that there is a public need for accountability in order to improve the public schools. Though he is in favor of the alternative assessment movement, he feels information about schools is necessary. Another journalist countered that test scores do not offer the kinds of indicators that are needed.

High-Stakes Consequences: Panelists were very concerned about the high-stakes consequences of using a flawed instrument to measure student achievement. One of the journalists believed that pushing the test on teens who were prime for dropping out was like pushing an apple and an orange together: the results would be monstrous. He also said that students could fail the test if they are teens who “test badly.” He said that he did not question the good intentions of the educational policy makers who support the test. However, he also pointed out that they send their own children to private school.

Usefulness of Regents Exam as Measure of College Readiness: Panelists disagreed about whether a student who passes the Global Regents test would be ready for college-level work. One panelist said that at the least, a student’s failure would raise a red flag. Panelists agreed that they preferred using such tests as diagnostic instruments rather than as exit criteria.

Value of Alternatives: One of the historians said that he suspects there is a role for diagnostic testing in the conventional school, but as far as having a single way to evaluate every school, “this Regents testing is crazy.” Panelists felt that alternative paths to graduation should be acceptable. All the academics agreed that it was crucial for their students to possess research skills, but those were not tested by the exam, nor was there any place for students to demonstrate them. After reading some sample student papers from Consortium schools, the panelists discussed the need for different types of schools with different ways of approaching teaching and learning. One panelist said that in

assessment, one needs to ascertain whether a student has the ability to think. He said that while the Regents test as a single instrument looks as though it asks for both facts and the ability to think critically, it does not work: the multiple-choice requires memorization but thinking is given short shrift.

Signed by:

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Pedro Pedraza, Research Director for Language and Education at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

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Michael M. Thomas, former member of the curatorial staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and columnist on cultural and other subjects for the *New York Observer*.

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