Why I'm Saying Goodbye to In-Class Tests
by David Perry

As I turn in my grades at the close of the spring semester, I am not only bidding farewell to a delightful crop of students and a beloved colleague who is retiring. For the first time, I am also saying goodbye to in-class testing.

I've been inching away from the blue book for years, but it's time to go cold turkey and match my praxis to my principles. Whatever pedagogical gains the in-class test might bring — and I'll argue they are few and increasingly less relevant — I can no longer justify forcing people with disabilities to disclose their conditions in order to receive basic test-related accommodations.

Although protections for disabled students date back to Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act spurred widespread change throughout academe. Compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 — for any institution receiving federal funds (including financial aid) — requires providing reasonable accommodations to students with diagnosed disabilities. It's become routine, rather than rare, for students to begin the semester by presenting their professors with documented requests for accommodation.

That it's become routine is great but far from perfect. Not only do students have to disclose disability to their professors —who are no more immune to ableism than to any other sort of bias — but the most common form of accommodation extends the disclosure to classmates. Many students with invisible disabilities (such as anxiety disorders or ADHD) require quiet rooms and extra time to work on a test. I'm thrilled to provide both. On the other hand, when the whole class gathers to take an exam, with one student conspicuously absent, everyone notices.

Why do we give in-class exams? Psychologists have been arguing for the "testing effect" since at least the 1890s, showing strong evidence that

exams boost retention when students must retrieve information from their memories and produce output, rather than merely studying the same material over and over again. As Jessica Lahey discussed for *The Atlantic*, though, not all tests are created equal and cramming is useless when it comes to long-term retention. The most useful tests, she explains, are "formative assessments" that "are designed to discover what students do and do not know in order to shape teaching during and after the test." It's not at all clear to me that an in-class exam works especially well in such contexts.

I've long since stopped giving tests that evaluate whether students have memorized certain facts and dates. I want to know whether they can quickly sort and assess a lot of information, and craft arguments based on evidence. That's a skill poorly tested in the classroom, and best practiced through a well-crafted take-home exam that requires students to access their notes, books, and even the Internet. Still, I used open-notes or open-book in-class tests, mostly just out of inertia. I had always given tests, especially in intro classes.

Meanwhile, around the country, many colleges and universities are trying to move beyond the era of reasonable accommodation and embrace the principles of "universal design." That term — coined in the 1970s around architecture and public space —advocates that systems be designed to accommodate the widest range of function and ability possible. Universal design asks us to try and build accessibility into the fabric of our institutions and culture, rather than wait until individuals make their needs known.

In-class tests are the antithesis of universal design. They're built to serve only those people who can: (a) hold a writing implement; (b) see written text, and (c) concentrate in a crowded room for an extended period of time. Anyone outside that range of function must seek accommodation, which, as philosopher and ethicist Joe Stramondo writes, ends up medicalizing the whole process. He argues that the operational nature of reasonable accommodation, with its many gatekeepers, turns the ADA from a law based on changing the social structure around disability into a system that conceives of disability as an individual medical problem. We can do better than that.

The great thing about universal design is that it helps people in ways that the designers never considered. Take the curb cut — the most famous basic example of universal design. It's a feature that made it possible for wheelchair users to move through public spaces, but people without mobility disabilities, like me, use curb cuts to push strollers across a street or drag our rolling suitcases into a conference hotel.

The same is true of take-home tests. Those students who have a diagnosis granting them quiet space and extra time will get both without asking. Those who don't, yet whose neurodiversity leads them to struggle with in-class tests, will also benefit. And even people who are pretty good at taking tests in a classroom will benefit from quiet spaces and extra time — if only because, as a professor, I can ask more meaningful questions and push them to do deeper analysis on a take-home test than the in-class format allows. I'll benefit, too. I won't have to use my medieval paleography skills deciphering handwriting in a blue book, and I expect to get better answers.

So this summer, I'm revamping every in-class test remaining on my syllabi, starting with that most basic class: "History 101 — Western Civilization." It won't be a smooth process for me. I expect to encounter resistance, especially from my busy students who often work 20 to 40 hours a week and who may prefer to take quick in-class tests rather than be asked to work on lengthier assignments. I'm making no claim that every teacher, every institution, or every discipline should follow my lead.

I just know that come September, fewer students will feel forced to disclose disability, as together we try to erode the stigma of neurodiversity.

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