

What Are You Doing Here?: Fourth-Quarter Assessments (Hiroshima, All Quiet on the Western Front, and The Alchemist)

That's for you.

It's for me? What is it?

Open it.

Pen and ink. For writing.

It's all done except the last chapter.

I want you to help me.

How?

Finish it.

Finish it.

I don't know how it ends.

You do.

You will.

During the first semester, I assigned my kids three specific kinds of assessments. One was the traditional multiple-choice Scantron test – a bunch of questions to fill out in a single class period, all of which had their “correct answers” included below them. (Those will be going the way of the dodo for you soon, but I have to grade a million things – might as well assign something a computer can grade.) The point of those tests was simple: to conduct an objective analysis of what my students had learned. Could they identify correct information when it was provided to them?

The second was something called a House Quiz, which was meant to be completed within your nine-person (more or less) Gryffindor / Hufflepuff / Ravenclaw / Slytherin groups. I'd hand each group a menu containing specific instructions. Sometimes, the list would include thirty items, and the group would need to address every one. At others, I'd provide fifteen or so choices, eight of which the group could choose to attempt, and they'd allocate, say, twenty-five points between the questions (seven three-pointers and one four-pointer, for example). The questions and topics would range from the strictly factual to the creative, with some being fairly easy/straightforward and others requiring a great deal more work and thought to complete. Each group had to finish within a single class period.

Moreover, each group could use books, electronic devices, and anything else at their disposal. At first, this struck some as bizarre. But in pretty much any situation outside of academia, you're not arbitrarily prevented from using or accessing something that could help you complete your task. (“Do this important and complicated thing, but don't ask anyone for help, and don't you dare double-check actual information before reaching your conclusion!!”) If the goal is to help teach, develop, and reinforce skills and talents you'll need to succeed later (and it is), it seems useful to me to at least try presenting you with situations where you'll be forced to behave realistically.

Collaboration, for example, was key for any House Quiz's completion. You couldn't just sideline everyone you considered dead weight and still get an A. (Trust me – I saw some very valiant four-person efforts, but no dice.) And since I want my students to be able to make use of whatever's at their disposal, that “whatever” extends to the people in their groups as well. Someone who hasn't done the reading can still be turned into a useful asset in a healthy group.

Thus the House Quizzes could be frenetic and stressful. When enough kids in your group read, or simply chose to avoid behaving like parasites, they could also be pretty cool, even fun in a challenging sort of way. You were supposed to feel the same way after finishing one that you feel after vanquishing a boss at the end of a video-game level: jittery, enervated, and proud of what you'd accomplished under pressure.

The final type of assessment was the Student-Driven Lecture, or SDL for short. You've long since grown accustomed to me providing you with a long, detailed lecture every Monday or Tuesday, followed by a bank of questions: these form the threads we post on Under the House. Instead of asking you to reply to my main post, the SDL essentially requires each student to invent a brand new thread – to provide a main post of his/her own, rather than a response to one. The best SDLs even included question banks at the end (indicating what the author wanted you to think about/focus on during and after the reading), and some of them were quite good. In a perfect world, I would've been able to give those who wrote the best lectures the chance to deliver them in class – to throw them into PowerPoints and let the kids share what they'd done with a larger audience. Alas.

As you can see, each first-semester assessment serves its own purpose: the evaluation of objective knowledge; a test of creativity, application and skill; the ability to generate original thought and lines of inquiry without instructor guidance.

The challenge, then, becomes this: What do I do for a follow-up? How can I take those purposes one step further? How can the assessment model evolve in time to present you with a final, distinctive challenge before you leave B2 next month?

One of my primary goals this semester has been to encourage you to feel comfortable in your own skin – to understand what you want and why you want it, to game out processes for achieving what you want, and to seize the initiative to act on those plans. So much of what's ahead of you is difficult-but-doable – the good kind of challenge, basically – and so much of your success depends on your willingness to know just that: how to do what you want, both inside and outside the confines of conventionality. You need to be able to both follow instructions and push beyond them – to have an idea of what you're expected to do, and the creativity and drive to then figure out how to make what you're doing special, unique, and impressive.

That's why my instructions tend to be hyper-specific in some respects, and really open-ended in others – why I can demand that you use perfect fonts and margins, but won't tell you what to write. More often than not, life will provide you with catalysts – you have x number of people and $\$y$ to spend in the next z days, so you'd better achieve a – without providing further direction. You're expected to take those parameters, or resources, or objectives, and figure out how to do something spectacular on your own.

That's what I was faced with when I accepted this assignment. I was told that I would teach World Literature during periods three, four, and five; that I would have a cohort of SDAIE students folded into the mix in fourth and fifth period; that I would teach *these* specific children (you); and that I was expected, as always, to abide by the standards set for my subject by the state. I wasn't told anything else – not which books to include, not which strategies to use to maximize the SDAIE students' experiences in the integrated classroom, nothing.

I have never taught World Literature before. I have never taught SDAIE students before. This semester, as you can therefore imagine, has been incredibly challenging for me. I began the semester knowing which books I wanted to teach (even if I had to move heaven and earth to get them), knowing how I wanted to begin, and knowing where I wanted you to end. But getting there's been the hard part.

At times, I've fallen back on assignments I've done for other classes, adapting them to serve the content I'm teaching for this one. More frequently, I've been driven to invent things on the fly. That takes time, and a great deal of effort; in some respects, this still doesn't come any more easily to me than it does to you. *Doomsday and the Echo*, *From This Soil We'll Grow Together*, and *Sparks Against the Sun* gave me sleepless nights before the ultimate near-all-nighters I'd use to finish each of them.

In some cases, nothing works: I won't be able to finish a presentation, finish a reading, finish preparing, before marching through the class. I'll start something, thinking I have a great concept or idea, only to watch it fizzle as I start to put it into practice. Those are the bad days.

In other cases, I catch lightning in a bottle. I'll look out and see virtually everyone paying attention; I'll watch expressions change during *Harper High School*, or see kids high-fiving each other after finishing *Humming the Day's Small Aches and Pleasures*. Those are the good days.

Now we're almost to the end, and it's time for your assessments. But I've found it easy, as an instructor, to take the wrong approach to a test: to see it as an evaluation of your learning, instead of also realizing that it functions equally as an evaluation of my teaching. In a perfectly-run class, your children excel when faced with a challenging test; if nobody reads and nobody learns the material, is that not somewhat the fault of the teacher who failed to inspire those entrusted to his care?

In no way has the running of the class been perfect. I didn't expect it to be; in my experience, the first year of any course never goes smoothly. But I must admit I'm curious to see exactly what you've not just learned thus far, but what you've found valuable, useful, or worth incorporating into your perspective or worldview – to see whether what I did worked. (This is why we closed the third quarter as we did; I hope you haven't forgotten your responses and connections from back then.)

Since we're in the fourth quarter now, the assignments have to shift. I need to pull myself further and further away from giving you explicit instructions, and you need to push yourself to generate more of your own education – opening your own lines of inquiry, reaching your own conclusions, conducting your own research, learning so much more than anyone could possibly give you in five hours of class time per week (or half that starting next year).

With all of the above considered, your new mission is fairly simple. I've given you three months' worth of raw material and resources – readings, lectures, projects, etc. (You can see it all in the File Repository thread at the top of *Under the House*.) We've gone through the units, maybe proceeding 90% of the way through each.

And there's only one thing left for me to ask you to do with each unit, each batch of material I've used to teach these concepts, each fragment of a larger puzzle:

Finish it.

You've been asked to reunite in your groups for a final time in order to conclude each unit – *Hiroshima*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Alchemist* – in the manner you see fit. That doesn't mean your group will finish one thing and call it a day. I expect your group, filled as it is with people who possess varying talents, to produce what it feels is an appropriate "unit cap" for their class. To that end, when the group's Hive Queen gathers the collection of work and sends it to my inbox by the times listed below, he/she may end up sending me any number of things – both lessons and material similar to my own (lectures/presentations, question banks, poetry, artwork) and different (that which reflects your group's unique character and the unique minds within it).

Because we're short on resources, I can't just turn your groups loose and tell you to finish these at your own pace. We have limited copies of *Hiroshima* and *The Alchemist* at our disposal. As a result, you can only gather information from them at specific times in order to ensure that everyone has equal access to those copies. You'll spend a designated period with each book, during which you and your house can search for evidence, mine quotes, etc. After you spend that period working, your group will finish its work and ship it to me soon after. I'll then take the best parts of your work and present it to your class period. If, say, your lecture is the strongest part of your batch, I'll recite it for you. If you have a great idea for an activity that's academically useful, I'll put your class through the paces. If you created a short film that's worth sharing, it shall be watched. You get the idea.

You have access to these particular people, as well as to the resources I mentioned above, and I've provided you with not only those catalysts, but with the deadlines below to meet. The rest is up to you. How you choose to finish the unit is a deeply personal decision, because it depends entirely on what your group derived from that unit. Did you see the connections I drew, both announced and unannounced? Can you generate your own? Can you identify themes, key moments, points of emphasis that you indeed would have emphasized had you been tasked with teaching your own classmates these same things? Can you surprise me, enlighten me, impress me?

Can you finish them?

That depends on what they meant to you. It depends on what you were doing here.

So come take a walk with me, down these roads to awe; let's see what's at the end.

Due Dates

By Sunday, May 5th at 11:59pm to mferaco-eberle@ausd.net (and to Turnitin where applicable):

- Third Period: *The Alchemist*; Fourth Period: *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Fifth Period: *Hiroshima*

By Wednesday, May 8th at 11:59pm to mferaco-eberle@ausd.net (and to Turnitin where applicable):

- Third Period: *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Fourth Period: *Hiroshima*; Fifth Period: *The Alchemist*

By Friday, May 10th at 11:59pm to mferaco-eberle@ausd.net (and to Turnitin where applicable):

- Third Period: *Hiroshima*; Fourth Period: *The Alchemist*; Fifth Period: *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Readings by Grouping

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| <i>Hiroshima</i> | <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> | <i>The Alchemist</i> | <i>War</i> |
| <i>A Poetics of Hiroshima</i> | <i>A Hanging</i> | <i>Does the Sneaker Have to Matter?</i> | <i>Death of a Racehorse</i> |
| <i>The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb</i> | <i>The Anosognosic's Dilemma</i> | <i>Harper High School</i> | <i>The Cult of Death of a Racehorse</i> |
| <i>Filling In the Blanks</i> | <i>Atonement</i> | <i>Like Magic</i> | <i>Four Nights at Elaine's</i> |
| <i>My Memories of The National</i> | <i>Immigrant Misappropriations</i> | <i>Not There</i> | |
| <i>The Publication of Hiroshima in The New Yorker</i> | <i>Sentenced to Serving the Good Life in Norway</i> | <i>Thoughts on The Fountain</i> | |