**Let’s Eliminate Pop Quizzes!**

Pop quizzes can be a valuable teaching/learning tool in postsecondary education, but they often put many otherwise qualified students with learning disabilities, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, traumatic brain injury and sometimes psychiatric disorders at an extreme disadvantage. These students frequently qualify for the accommodation of extended time on examinations, tests and quizzes, typically one and one-half to double time. Five-minute pop quizzes during class then necessitate a time extension of 2 1/2 to 5 minutes more for the student with the disability, and leave the professor and the rest of the students waiting. But even more problematical, the student with the disability is clearly identified as same, calling undue attention to the disability and also putting this same student under extraordinary stress. Having the student finish the pop quiz in the professor’s office is not always possible because of class schedules.

Pop quizzes are simply not “accessible” and fair to all students and I suggest we find other ways to obtain the information we need from the students which is presumably: (1) Did students read and comprehend the assignment? (2) Is the student keeping up with daily reading assignments? (3) How well are students internalizing the readings? (4) Do I need to reiterate salient points and provide more examples? and (5) Can the student apply the principles to practical application situations?

The classes that I have taught meet once a week, in the evening, for three hours. When a class meets only 16 times during the semester, I feel it is necessary for me to track student progress weekly. Here is what I have done in my graduate-level, special education theory and methods classes for teacher training in the School of Education at the University of Colorado:

1. Put pop quiz-type questions on the course or department website or on a class e-mail list at a certain time, to be e-mailed back or turned in (hard copy) by the next class time;

2. Present these types of questions as a hand-out at the end of class to be turned in at the beginning of the next class;

3. Put all pop quiz-type questions on the syllabus reading list, following each assigned reading; vary the response mode requirement each week such as to be posted on a special website, e-mailed to the professor, or handed in at the beginning of the next class.

4. Vary how I obtain this pop quiz-information from students so it does not become boring and mundane:

   a. I might do an all-class pop quiz on the overhead one day, and each class member is asked/expected to add to the discussion (best for classes with less than 15 students) and then discuss the answers with the entire class. Such a technique has proven to be a good learning experience for everyone in that students whose cognitive abilities are different are allowed the opportunity to
observe how their peers think, problem solve, and internalize course elements.

b. A short take-home pop quiz, due at the beginning of the next class is another option. I put the question on a standard-sized sheet of paper and specify that the answer should not take up more than half the page.

c. Occasionally I assign an in-class, small-group question and have students derive the answer with one student from each group reporting the collective answer. Depending on the size of the class and the amount of material to be covered, I might assign each small group a different question, asking that the answers be turned in to me at the end of class so that I can put them on a website, in an e-mail memo or put them on the word processor as a hand-out for the next class meeting. For such an exercise, I allow about 15 minutes (of a three-hour class period) for their discussion and answer. Then I allow another 15 minutes for reporting to the class, and clarifying any misunderstandings.

d. I might ask students to devise a pop quiz-question which they think is relevant to the assigned readings and ask me to answer it! (This surprises them! And one thing I’ve learned is that some students with learning disabilities have a great deal of difficulty with this task. I always need to know my students fairly well before I do this so it doesn’t catch certain students being required to demonstrate their weakness or disability in front of the class.) I emphasize there are no stupid questions. A few times I have been caught not knowing the answer, but this allows me to simply say that I don’t know, and that I will find the answer by the next class period.

e. About twice a semester, when students have demonstrated that they are keeping up with the class work and readings, or when a particularly long project is due, I surprise them by stating I will not be checking on their readings this particular class period, but any questions they have are invited and answered.

f. If there are less than 12 students in the class, I schedule a 15-20 minute one-on-one discussion with each student during the semester, during the last 15 minutes of the three-hour class period (in addition to office hours and other appointments as requested). While I spend a couple minutes of this time on personal rapport and support, I always have pop quiz-type questions to discuss with them such as, “Tell me your understanding of the differences between internalizing and externalizing disorders for students in your (grade level) classroom.” This allows the others to leave early and allows me important personal support opportunities to all students, disabled and nondisabled, and no student is singled out for any reason.
I emphasize at the beginning of the semester that much of the content of each class that I teach is not only for their learning and required by the State Department of Education, but also for the purpose of internalizing information as they write their comprehensive exams prior to the awarding of their graduate degree. I also emphasize to this end, the questions that I pose (or they pose!) are to assist them in reaching this goal in a situation that causes them the least amount of stress possible, and accommodates diverse backgrounds, abilities, and experiences—but in the form of no timed pop quizzes!

It should be understood that I am not advocating that students with disabilities do not need extended time on quizzes. Rather, I try to determine a way to eliminate the need for extended time by obtaining a quick perusal of students’ progress in a venue other than a timed pop quiz-situation.

Student feedback has been very positive in that both students with and without disabilities have expressed appreciation for taking the “terror” out of pop quizzes, and having the opportunity to learn at their own rate and within their own learning style, while being gently pushed to keep up with the readings. One very bright student with ADHD sent an e-mail to me at the conclusion of the course expressing that my class was the first one he had ever completed on time! One or two students (most are active teachers) each semester realize that I am also “modeling” inclusive teaching and testing techniques and have indicated that they were now much more sensitive to learning differences among their own K-12 students and put extra thought into finding creative ways to minimize these differences in their own classrooms.

------------------------------------------
Adapted from an e-mail to Disabled Student Services in Higher Education (DSSHE)Listserv in February, 2001; also posted on the Brown University Website at http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/uid/html/what_popquiz.shtml

Submitted by: Ruth J. Fink, Ph.D.
Professor Adjunct (retired)
Disability Services Director (retired)
University of Colorado at Boulder
643 Furman Way
Boulder, CO 80305
Phone: (303) 494-8958
Fax: (303) 494-2375
E-mail: finkr@spot.colorado.edu