Introduction

The Ph.D. Program in French aims to develop entering students’ critical skills as well as their language mastery over the first year of studies and, incidentally, to identify any students who might have weaknesses that will not allow them to complete the degree in a timely fashion. For this very reason students take the First Examination during their first year of studies at the Graduate Center.

Background Information

From 2006 onward the First Exam in the Ph.D. program in French is directly linked to the three first year mandatory courses: Techniques of Literary Research I, Techniques of Literary Research II, and Problems of the Novel in French. All first-year students take the first examination as the outcome of the three first year required courses. The First Exam in the French Program is thus composed of three final exams given at the end of the three mandatory courses.

First Exam Design and Learning Goals

The First Exam measures the same things the three mandatory courses are designed to teach. Final exams in the two courses on Techniques of Literary Research (semesters 1 and 2) assess students’ understanding of some of the theoretical texts important to doctoral candidates in the Humanities in general, and in French in particular. They test students’ knowledge of principal issues raised by the theoretical texts studied in mandatory courses and test students’ ability to discuss these theoretical texts in relation to other widely defined texts (e.g. literature, film, fine arts). The final exam in the mandatory course on the Problems of the Novel in French is designed to 1) test students’ knowledge of a series of novels that are considered essential in the development of the novel in French and 2) assess students’ understanding of the novel as a literary genre 3) measure students’ ability to apply various critical perspectives to the interpretation of those novels.

The three exams are designed to test first year students’ capacity to grapple with and discuss important theoretical texts, an ability they must hone as they work toward the writing of the dissertation, where this skill needs to be at a high level for them to make an original contribution to scholarship. The Ph.D. Program in French believes that the First Exam constitutes a crucial learning opportunity and shows students that they can indeed "talk" about theory in a cogent and insightful way.

It should be added that the French Program follows a careful pedagogy with respect to examinations and does not believe that “surprise questions” are pedagogically or intellectually justified. As a result, in Techniques of Literary Research I and II, a number of questions from which the actual questions are chosen by the instructors on the day of the exams are given in advance of the test so students can ponder them before answering.
Grading of First Examination

Being given in a course, the three exams are graded by the instructor who taught the course. Students must have a grade of B or better in each exam to qualify as having passed that section of the First Exam. In addition to considering the appropriateness of the response students are graded for their ability to organize the essay answer into a coherent argument and for their ability to express themselves in French. In the event of failure on the examination, the candidate must contact the grading instructor to discuss the results, as well as the Executive Officer, and must retake the examination before the next semester begins. Students can take any exam twice; after that, their request must be reviewed by the Executive Committee which has the latitude to grant or not grant the request. The rate of passing the First exam is excellent. Over the last 8 years two students repeatedly failed a section of the First Exam and left the program.

First Examination Outcome

The quality of the exams is on the whole high and shows the intellectual maturation of the first-year students over the course of the year. Over the years these three required first year courses have been taught by several Professors who might not always share exactly the same views about what all students of French and Francophone literature need to know. Despite somehow varying syllabi all instructors discuss with students the many ways in which one can think, talk, and write about widely defined texts (e.g. literature, film, fine arts, performance).

Assessment Process

Students volunteered to be in charge of the First Examination assessing process. Student representatives designed a questionnaire that was sent to all students in the Ph.D. Program in French. Nearly half of the student body (22 students) responded to the questionnaire, some providing additional comments about exams they took.

Assessment Results and Discussion

With the exception of two questions (3 and 7), students’ assessment of the first examination experience is overall positive and in some instances very positive (Question N0. 1 “How fair an assessment was the First Exam in terms of the material covered in the first-year courses?” and Question N0. 4 “After the two Techniques of Literary research sections of the First Exam, did you feel you had a strong grounding in the field of literary research, criticism, and theory?”).

Question N0. 3 “After the Problems in Literary History: The Novel” section of the First Exam, did you feel you had a strong understanding of the history of the novel in French?” reveals the differences between the course’s goals and students’ expectations. The course is not a comprehensive history of the novel in French but has been designed to alert and sensitize students to the problems that arise when we think of the novel as a literary
genre. This discrepancy between teaching goals and students’ expectations needs to be discussed within the program.

Responses to question N0. 7 reveal an issue that should be discussed within the French Program as a whole. Question N0. 7 reads as follows: “Overall, please rate your experience with the First Exam with respect to your academic training. If you have completed both the Second and First Exams, please characterize the relationship between the two with respect to your academic training (e.g. The First and Second Exams are equally beneficial. The Second Exam is more beneficial than the First. Neither is beneficial, etc.). Please elaborate where you can.” This question solicited more comments than other questions of the survey. One comment in particular seems to grasp problems that students are facing in our program: “The jump for (sic) First to Second exam is big. The first examination process do not prepare for this. We pass from total dependency to total independence with a reading list that professors probably do not check every semester.” The Ph.D. Program in French is aware of the need to review and update, with the input from students, of our reading list and is currently putting in place a mechanism specifically designed to do it. We also need to think about the ways to make the “jump” from First Exam to Second Exam more manageable and academically sound.