Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #42:
Assessing student learning – making sure students are answering the questions you think you are asking

It is still relatively early in the semester, but it is a good time to think through how you plan to check in with your students to assess whether they are gleaning from your course(s) what you are hoping you are teaching. This applies equally to formal and informal assessments, and to assessments that are small, medium or large in scope or point-value. Consider, for a moment, the item pasted below:

Although this student’s “answer” is not likely to be what the question’s author had in mind, it is nevertheless, easy to see how they might have come up with it. While this example is probably quite different from the sorts of questions you ask your students, the issues it raises may well be relevant to your teaching. For this FMTT, ponder the following:

- As you CREATE your discussion questions, your quizzes, your exams, your graded assignments and your rubrics, (how) do you consider whether students might interpret what you are asking for differently than you intend? Might a second “pair of eyes” catch instances where the items are less transparent that you assume they are?
- Once the items have been ADMINISTERED or GRADED, if students’ performance suggests they may have interpreted the question differently than you had intended, do you adhere to your initial grading criteria? Do you provide a process for addressing such differences? Do you, for example,
  - toss the question out?
  - clarify your intent, and permit students to re-answer the question?
  - give credit if the student(s) in question can explain the logic that led them to their answer?

This may sound like a relatively rare and inconsequential problem, but thinking through how you might respond, should it arise, may well serve you well. **One of the factors that dampens student participation most is the feeling that no one is really interested in what (or how) they think.** One of the most common concerns students raise when they are critical of a course is that the instructor was unfair or arbitrary in their grading practices. **Anticipating how you could respond to this kind of problem may well enable you to create a learning community where you feel that your authority remains intact while your students feel their voices are welcome and their opinions given due consideration.**

You can read all previous tips on the Faculty Matter Tips page of the CFD website. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions for additional FMTT topics!