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Study Great Ideas, but Teach to the Test

by Michael Winerip

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In Michigan, there is added pressure. If students pass the state tests, they receive \$2,500 college scholarships, and in Ms. Karnes's middle-class district, families need that money. "I can't see myself fighting against MEAP," she said. "It would hurt my students too much. It's a dilemma. It may not be the best writing, but it gets them the money."

In this fashion, the five-paragraph essay has become the law of the land: introductory paragraph: three supporting paragraphs, each with its own topic sentence as well as three supporting ideas; and summary paragraph.

Students lose points for writing a one-sentence paragraph.

Many English teachers have developed a standard five-paragraph form with blanks to fill in.

Topic sentence:

Literary example:

Historical example:

Current event:

Concluding sentence:

The National Council of Teachers of English has warned that standardized tests mandated

by the federal No Child Left Behind law, as well as the College Board's new SAT writing sample, are actually hurting the teaching of writing in this country. For their part, the makers of these tests emphasize that they don't mandate a writing formula, and they, too, say it would be a mistake if schools taught only by the formula.

But Nancy Patterson, the Grand Valley professor who offers the popular course for teachers here, says in the face of those tests, teachers cling to the formula and it spreads like kudzu. "A lot, particularly the younger ones, have been raised on the five-paragraph formula, and are insecure about their own writing," she said. "They drink up what we do here, but then go back to teach to the test. It shut them down. It narrows the curriculum."

If you give kids the formula to write an essay, you're taking away the very thinking that a writer engages in," she said. "Kids are

Becky Karnes, a high school English teacher, recently completed a graduate-level writing course that she loved at Grand Valley State University.

"The course taught us better ways to teach writing to kids," said Ms. Karnes, a 16-year veteran who is finishing up her master's degree. "It showed you ways to stretch kids' minds. I learned so much, I had my eyes opened about how to teach writing."

Ms. Karnes learned all sorts of exercises to get children excited about writing, get them writing daily about what they care about and then show them how they can take one of those short, personal pieces and use it as the nucleus for a sophisticated, researched essay.

"We learned how to develop good writing from the inside, starting with calling the child's voice out," said Ms. Karnes, who got an A in the university course. "One of the major points was, good writing is good thinking. That's why writing formulas don't

work. Formulas don't let kids think; they kill a lot of creativity in writing."

And so, when Ms. Karnes returns to Allendale High School to teach English this fall, she will use the new writing techniques she learned and abandon the standard five-paragraph essay formula. Right?

"Oh, no," said Ms. Karnes. "There's no time to do creative writing and develop authentic voice. That would take weeks and weeks. There are three essays on the state test and we start prepping right at the start of the year. We have to teach to the state test" (the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, known as the MEAP).

"MEAP is not what writing is about, but it's what testing is about," Ms. Karnes said. "And we know if we teach them the five-paragraph essay formula, they'll pass that test. There's a lot of pressure to do well on MEAP. It makes the district seem good, helps real estate values."

ACCREDITATION

less apt to develop a writer's thinking skills." And it is spreading downward. In preparation for the fourth-grade state writing test, she said, she sees third-grade teachers pressed to use the five-paragraph formula. A teacher in Dr. Patterson's class described her frustration over a practice essay test in her district asking third graders to "defend or refute from a patriotic standpoint" whether a friend should go to a Memorial Day parade. "For nine-year-olds?" said Dr. Patterson. "Defend or refute?"

Dr. Patterson has her teachers write in every class – something she did with her students during 29 years in the public schools. They draw maps of their neighborhoods, then write a story of something that happened there. They envision a character they'd like to create, make a paper doll of it, then pair up with another student and together write a story with the two characters interacting.

"You're teaching them narrative – how to tell stories that are dear to them," she said. She has them read good essays that start a hundred different ways – with a quote; a question; a simple declaration of a problem; a run-on sentence; a word or two. There are lessons on how a writer blows up an important moment and how to turn a personal piece of writing into a researched essay.

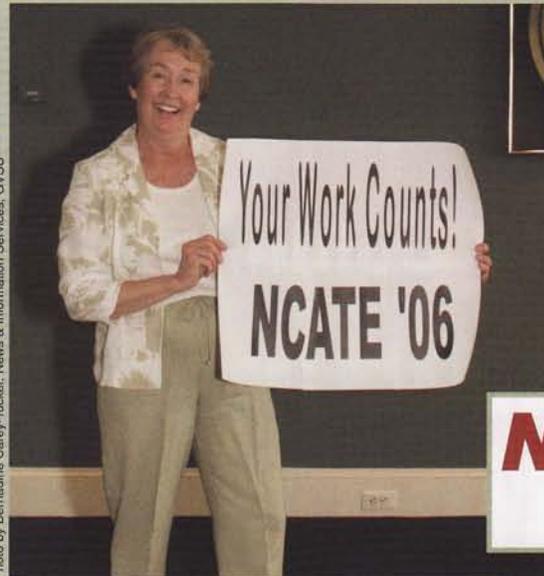
Recently, Kristen Covelle, 24, has been going on interviews for English teaching jobs. She mentions exciting things she's learned from Dr. Patterson. "The interview will be going great," Ms. Covelle said, "and then MEAP will come up. They want to know will I teach to the test, that's what they're looking for. They asked how I feel about using "I" in writing. Would there ever be a case when "I" is appropriate in an essay. I knew the answer they want – you're not supposed to use it. But I couldn't say that. I said there could be times, you just can't close the door. They didn't say anything but it was definitely the low point of the interview."

Ms. Karnes isn't totally against the formula. "For kids struggling, if you can give them a formula and they fill in the blanks, some will pass the MEAP test who wouldn't otherwise," she said. "But it turns into a prison. It stops you from finding a kid's potential."

She loves the last month of school, when state tests are over, she said. Last spring she did lessons on poetry and writing short stories. "I found interests and talents in those kids I didn't know were there," she said. "It would have been nice to have a whole year to build on those things." ☺

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Photo by Bernadine Carey-Tucker, News & Information Services, GVSU



Left: Barbara Fournier

NCATE

The Standard of Excellence
in Teacher Preparation

Critical Accreditation Visit this February

by Barbara Fournier

The College of Education at GVSU has been accredited since 1987 by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Every 5–7 years the College of Education is evaluated for renewal of this accreditation. From February 4–8, 2006 an On-Site Board of Examiners will be conducting the review.

NCATE sets high standards for university and colleges to ensure the training of quality educators. Currently NCATE accredits approximately 500 teaching institutions that graduate two thirds of the nation's new teachers each year. Established in 1954 and recognized by the US Department of Education, NCATE is a non-profit coalition of 33 national educational organizations.

Over the past several years, the College of Education has been preparing for the February review. Barbara Fournier, Director of the Administrative Services said, "The review has meant that both the faculty and staff have devoted a great deal of time to reviewing, revising and improving not only the education courses, but all internal administration systems as well. This collective effort is sure to make the College of Education shine during the culminating February visit."

The college has been contacting students, staff, alumni, and employers for the past year to analyze the impact of its programs. Fournier added, "We are anxious to show

off to NCATE our revised curriculum, our enhanced Eberhard Center facilities, including the Student Information and Services Center, and the progress we have made in enhancing programs for our students since becoming a 'College' of Education in 2004."

The NCATE stamp of approval assures the public that the new professional teacher who graduates from an NCATE accredited institution:

- Is trained to assume classroom responsibilities on day one—not through on-the-job-training.
- Knows the subject matter and a variety of ways to teach it to ensure student learning.
- Is able to manage a classroom with students from widely divergent backgrounds.
- Has a broad liberal arts education.
- Is able to explain why he or she uses a particular strategy based on research and best practices.
- Reflects on practices and makes changes when appropriate.
- Is able to apply effective methods of teaching to students of different backgrounds.
- Has a number of diverse clinical experiences in P-12 schools.
- Nurtures the growth and development of each student in his or her class. ☺