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Point of View

Greg Shafer

Responding to the Proficiency Test

At Lakeview High School in Battle Creek, the social science department is in the process of a major overhaul of its curriculum. Instead of offering American History in the eleventh grade—a tradition that teachers and the community have long advocated—they are now scrambling to teach it a full year earlier. The reason? Because much of the new High School Proficiency Test which is administered in the

eleventh grade demands a knowledge of American history and teachers are afraid their students will not be ready unless they are drilled a year earlier.

In the English Department at Lakeview, where I teach eleventh grade English, the rumbling of the Proficiency Test is creating a similar panic. Already our department has held several meetings to deal specifically with the implications of the test. Because it demands that students follow a prescribed regimen and produce prose in set time limits, we are now considering a two-week preparation period to deal with the contrived, artificial demands that seem always to be part of standardized tests. Of course, any time that is reserved for such “test preparation” will only detract from the various student-centered activities that were planned in individual courses—the student magazine that was being done in one grade, the literary videos that I was planning to do with my classes. Indeed, it seems clear that even the most innocuous test has a dramatic impact upon our schools.

In the last year, much has been written about the philosophy, design, and implications of the High School Proficiency Test. While many English teachers applaud its essay-based approach, they also agree that the test is decidedly worse than simply leaving practitioners to teach language in a process-oriented, student-centered method that eschews competition and pressure and promotes

exploration. If, perhaps, we could agree that the test is inimical to basic paradigms of process and student empowerment—and I think we can—then perhaps we can join in opposing it rather than defending it as the best of a necessary evil, as Ron Sudol seems to do in his Spring 1996 *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* essay.

Process is Essential

From the works of Mina Shaughnessy to Donald Murray we have read about the importance of process for the teaching of composition. When we teach and nurture a process approach to writing, we foster discovery, invention, and investment. Rather than dictating a recipe for five-paragraph platitudes, we create a context in which students use their own imaginations and generative abilities to create and refine a written work of art. As Donald Gallo argued in his 1994 *English Journal* essay about professional writing: “What we can learn from professional writers is that we don’t need to restrict students to only one way of developing their writing”(59).

Unfortunately, the Michigan Proficiency Test relegates all students to a rather rigid and contrived writing process—one that has little to do with the idiosyncratic and forever evolving process that is a part of good writing. At its most egregious, the Proficiency Test perverts invention by asking students to generate prose responses in

as little as twenty minutes. At its best, it pushes writers through a contrived, uniform process that dictates a single way to compose for all students. Is this a scenario that we as a profession are ready to support? While I am happy that we have progressed from the days of measuring language through multiple-choice tests, I feel it is our duty to be the voice of theory and responsibility. Language is best measured in a holistic fashion that includes portfolios, student reflections, process, and negotiated topics. To justify this test simply because the public demands accountability, is to lie to our community in the name of political expediency. As Ann Berthoff so eloquently said in discussing the composition process: "The composing process is not like sorting the laundry or plowing a field; it cannot be represented by a step or stage model, such as prewriting, writing, and rewriting, because it is not linear"(20).

Writing is Social

How many of us complete any type of writing in a vacuum, removed from any rhythms of life, the voices of our colleagues, and the din of political controversy? The truth is, only when we force our students to complete standardized tests do we return to this top down method of measuring writing. In reality, composition is immersed in social interaction and is, in fact, a result of our desire to engage in discourse. Perhaps the best, most trenchant research to support this is Denny Taylor's *Family Literacy*, in which she studied the unconscious way in which literacy emanated from the social currents of everyday life. For many of the children in her study, literacy was a natural extension of their relationships with other children, with their siblings, and with their parents. To use language is to respond to an intrinsic need to touch others, to shape our world, to be part of the dynamic exchange of ideas.

In short, then, reading and writing are social activities that begin with the reader or writer and are immersed in public dynamics. That is, until one confronts the High School Proficiency Test. Despite its attempt to ask students questions that are germane to their lives, the test is driven by forces that have little to do with the real-life concerns. As one colleague argued, it is a top-

down test that is imposed upon students for their own good. As a result, it has little to do with the reasons why people write in a natural context.

Solutions?

Recent articles in the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* suggest that the High School Proficiency Test is the brainchild of Governor Engler, who wants to use the exam as a way to lure new businesses to Michigan. According to published reports, Engler thought the test would demonstrate genuine concern for excellence and accountability. What the Governor fails to recognize is the despotic, machine-like effect that the test seems to have on our schools. As I tried to illustrate in my opening paragraphs, the test has caused many schools to redesign much of their curriculum. Because its results have also caused a litany of rash judgments from newspapers across the state, many educational leaders are in a panic as to how to handle this new bureaucratic monster. It seems inevitable that such tests will undermine more imaginative assignments so that students can be inculcated in the state's latest prescription for success.

It also seems clear to me that unless we begin to make our voices heard through written and verbal communication we will be compelled to accept this test and the tyrannical effect it has on our schools. While many teachers feel that it represents the best of an inevitable situation, I wonder what would happen if our profession united in protest, signing petitions, writing letters, and speaking to state congress people. I suspect that most people would feel a little troubled to know that the ideas and imagination of their community's students were being subordinated for a test that is designed for business and revenue growth. I know I am.

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About the Author

Gregory Shafer teaches English at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek. He is a frequent conference presenter and recently wrote an article for the Detroit Free Press on the weaknesses of the High School Proficiency Test.