1996

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Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Sheila (1996) "Facing Up to the New MEAP Writing Assessments," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 17.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1492>

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Facing Up to the New MEAP Writing Assessments

Sheila Fitzgerald

This year, for the first time, Michigan students in grades five, eight, and eleven are tested in writing (Communication Arts Information Packet 1995). The tests, which are segmented across forty-five minute periods for three days (more time during the high school test), require students to draft ideas about a prompt that is given to them, share their thoughts orally with a group of peers, and then independently write a coherent piece of prose that is relatively free of errors. High school students also are expected to submit two previously written pieces and a reflection statement on qualities in those selections that seem to make the pieces effective. The testing at all three grade levels appears to honor some instructional methods in what is labeled "process writing," which includes an approach to writing instruction in recursive stages: planning, drafting, consulting, revising, and editing. Process writing is the term most frequently used by teachers who focus more on the learning that students do as they write than on the product they finally produce, although the product often informs the process and guides instruction (McLeod 948-9).

The first process-oriented writing goals approved by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and developed by members of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English were published in 1985. Before that, the goals statements issued by the MDE listed discrete writing skills to be mastered for minimal performance, such as:

By the end of the third grade, learners will recognize appropriate uses of capitalization, as measured by minimum criteria on an objective referenced test (ORT) (Michigan Performance Objectives for Communication Skills 1974).

By 1980, the MDE guidelines noted that writing is learned primarily by writing, but still put stress on the polished product students were expected to produce:

By the end of ninth grade, the student will be able to write a selection of which twenty percent of the sentences will contain clauses, phrases, parenthetical expressions, dialogue, and so on. (Minimal Performance Objectives for Communication Skills 1980).

The 1985 MDE guidelines, as well as subsequent MDE documents on writing, encouraged teachers to place emphasis on the process in which students participate, as well as on the product:

Writing is the process of selecting, developing, and arranging ideas effectively. The process requires students to write in a variety of forms (e.g. letters, stories, journals, essays), for a variety of purposes (e.g. to inform, to persuade, to describe) and for a variety of audiences (e.g. peers, teachers, self). Students need to write to see how writing influences their thinking and stimulates their ideas. (Michigan Essential Goals and Objectives for Writing 1985).

Grade level expectations for particular guidelines which appeared in the 1985 published version were not approved by the original writing committee. The writing team, of which I was a member, not only hoped, however, that the new guidelines would promote much better writing instruction but that the document would encourage the MDE and individual school districts to provide teachers with inservice on writing; college preparation programs rarely taught English teachers and elementary teachers how to teach writing. The team also hoped that the guidelines would prevent the State Department from testing every pupil in writing as it was doing in reading and math. At that time, the complexities of judging writing on a large scale and the excessive funds needed to develop, distribute, protect, and score a writing test for all Michigan students at certain grade levels seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. How wrong we were to underestimate the political power that every-pupil test scores are able to generate!

Effects of Tests

In the 1988 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Critical Issues in Curriculum, George Madaus examines "The Influence of Testing on the Curriculum" and illuminates seven principles (83-121):

1. *"The power of tests and examinations to affect individuals, institutions, curriculum, or instruction is a perceptual phenomenon: if students, teachers, or administrators believe that the results of an examination are important, it matters very little whether this is really true or false—the effect is produced by what individuals perceive to be the case."*

Through conferences, mandates, and test results that will be widely published, Michigan educators are expected to perceive that the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) Writing Assessments are important.

2. *"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more likely it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor."*

The rubrics defined for scoring MEAP writing assessments are numerical, and the school and school district results reported to the public are quantitative. Later in this article, I will examine the distortions this reaps on writing instruction in schools.

3. *"If important decisions are presumed to be related to test results, then teachers will teach to the test."*

Schools are threatened by public witness of low test results, and high school graduates fear the denial of a state endorsement on their diploma if they do not pass the MEAP tests. Therefore, teachers are teaching to the tests in the most direct ways possible.

4. *"In every setting where a high-stakes test operates, a tradition of past exams develops, which eventually de facto defines the curriculum."*

Although it is too soon for a tradition to have developed related to the MEAP Writing Assessments, the MDE recently described stringent safeguards for this year's tests to insure that teachers will not be able to retain test copies for future use.

5. *"Teachers pay particular attention to the form of the questions on a high-stakes test (for example, short answer, essay, multiple-choice) and adjust their instruction accordingly."*

Teachers are expecting the essay format to be required in the tests, and many are focusing writing instruction on the essay.

6. *"When test results are the sole or even partial arbiter of future educational or life choices, society tends to treat test results as the major goal of schooling rather than as a useful but fallible indicator of achievement."*

This is most evident in the plan to withhold state endorsement from the certificate of high school graduates if they fail to receive satisfactory results on the MEAP exams. Society perceives this to mean that job opportunities and admission to college may be limited if students fail to earn the state endorsement.

7. *"A high-stakes test transfers control over the curriculum to the agency which sets or controls the exam."*

Who can doubt it—or that this is a major part of the tests' purpose.

Positive and Negatives of High-Stakes Testing

In spite of Madaus' viable cautions, many would argue that the MEAP Writing tests have value. Writing has been neglected in schools. A test that requires students to write extended prose will get the attention of educators and the public and may even alter the limited focus on spelling and grammar study in many schools. For more than thirty years, in elementary programs, reading consumed most of the instructional time; writing, other than handwriting and spelling, received very little attention. High school teachers, trained as teachers of literature, not as teachers of composition, taught literature in English classes and avoided assigning much writing that had to be corrected. To assess learnings in reading, both in classroom and in standardized tests, short-answer workbook pages and multiple choice tests were used, again preventing students from developing complex thoughts and crafting them on paper. Certainly the MEAP Writing Assessments, and the writing required now in subject matter MEAP exams, focus attention on writing which has been neglected in school instruction.

Many exams given in the past merely tested the mechanics of writing in isolation from context, e.g. punctuation or spelling, or they asked students to identify the errors in a paragraph (written by the test maker) by marking in a bubble on a computer-scored sheet. A distinct advantage of the new exam is that students are expected to put their own thoughts on paper in coherent form and use the appropriate mechanics of writing to support their meaning.

The emphasis on writing across subject areas, supported by the MEAP exams, highlights the power of writing for developing and expressing thinking about subject matter. It helps all teachers and students recognize that writing contributes to learning in all fields. It emphasizes the need for instruction in writing clearly and powerfully in science, math, and other subjects, as well as in English language arts classes, to understand the content of those subjects. It may help all teachers realize that language in its receptive forms (listening and reading) and in its expressive forms (speaking and writing) are inter-

dependent, that all forms of language need to be taught.

Many also would argue that testing all students in Michigan in writing gives the public and policy makers information they need to make decisions that will support writing instruction, e.g. small class sizes, writers' reference books, libraries that encourage reading habits, etc. Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), through stratified random sampling of students across the nation, has given a glum national and regional picture of students' writing competencies. Yet, the information generated by NAEP has failed to cause a major change in writing instruction for most students. Those who support writing assessments in Michigan claim that every-pupil testing at the state level has the clout needed to get writing taught in Michigan schools. Tests, however, take on a significance far beyond their real value. Once tests are central in the minds of teachers, students, and their parents, few examine the flaws and limitations of the test design and the generalities of the reported test results. For example, a common practice is to compare MEAP scores for a grade level in a school with the scores earned at that grade level—the year before—to despair that the scores have dropped or cheer that the scores are up - yet the groups tested are different students; they may have wide discrepancies in abilities or backgrounds.

Although the DOE guidelines for the eleventh grade test include a list of cautions about possible misguided preparation for the writing test, teachers are not apt to heed them. Concerned about probable results, they may drill on test-taking strategies or focus on subskills such as spelling and grammar, using up valuable time that should be devoted to broad experiences in writing. Because they have so little time for teaching writing, teachers may limit the range of writing opportunities that children should have, e.g. narratives, poetry, letters etc. to concentrate on the essay format that the tests require. Schools may further discourage poor test takers by segregating them into remedial classes. Yet, districts whose children do well on the tests are just as trapped by the results; they may feel they need to hunker down

to protect their advantage, one that is oh-so-prominent in the newspapers of the state.

What Students Need to be Competent Writers

I favor intuition as the means by which writers learn to discover and develop meaning which is latent in their writing. Spoken language is largely learned intuitively as children go about the business of making sense of their environments. Written language, too, can be learned intuitively as writers and readers go about the business of making sense of print. In a "normal" course of development, familiarity with the semantics of written language is gained unconsciously as a product of reading, writing, and increasingly formal speaking practice. (Collins 206)

We need to consider what Collins says as it relates to the MEAP Writing Assessments for fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders. His primary point is the interdependence of oral and written language development. It seems reasonable to ask if the state should be judging students' writing abilities when their speaking abilities have been ignored in school programs. Most Michigan children lack opportunities for the development of oral language competencies through guided practice. Speaking instruction and reinforcement in small group discussion, dramatic activities, and more formal oral presentations are sporadic in most schools; rarely is instruction in oral language a matter of curriculum expectation and assessment in schools. On a daily basis, because teachers face large classes, they often value quiet more than purposeful speaking. Unless children come from homes where oral language, particularly standard English, is modeled and nurtured, they bring fractured oral language competencies to the writing test experience, and the test results reflect oral deficiencies as much as they reflect writing problems.

Little of the fault for neglecting of oral language lies with teachers. Although tests now have unprecedented power, they have had growing influence over instruction in this century. Because testing companies have not found a way to adequately measure speaking competencies of all students, speaking instruction has been neglected

in curriculum design, in teaching materials, and in grading. Until recently, reading and math were the areas tested; judgments were made on true/false or multiple-choice answers that were computer scored. It wasn't surprising that as tests, including MEAP, began to drive the curriculum, the materials developed by commercial publishers and used by teachers emphasized reading and math, such as basal readers with stories written in controlled vocabulary and reading workbooks with fill-in-the blank exercises, math textbooks and workbooks, high school anthologies of short reading selections all of which looked remarkably like the format and often the content of the powerful tests. Moreover, it isn't surprising that areas of the curriculum not tested at the time, such as writing and speaking, were minimized in the crowded school day.

Collins stresses that most of the writing process cannot be systematized, spoon-fed, and crammed in, that teachers and parents must broaden and deepen speaking, reading, and writing experiences for students—and wait.

There is another point in the Collins's quote that warrants examination in relation to the new MEAP writing tests. He stresses that learning to write is an intuitive process, drawing not only on one's ability to speak but also on perceptions gleaned from extensive reading and writing. Some of these perceptions students gain through direct instruction, but probably many more come through osmosis. Collins stresses that most of the writing process cannot be systematized, spoon-fed, and crammed in, that teachers and parents must broaden and deepen speaking, reading, and writing experiences for students—and wait. Yet, the MEAP Writing Assessments are now—few teachers think there is time for such waiting; they are hurrying to prepare students for the test, further diminishing chances that students will become competent writers.

Differences Between Process Writing and Prescribed Writing

In many ways, what I am calling "prescribed writing," writing that follows the requirements of a timed test and the writing instruction that prepares students for the test, is the antithesis of process writing. There is a danger that prescribed writing may diminish much of the real progress that has been made in teachers' thinking and methods of instruction in many process-writing classrooms over the past ten to twenty years. Few if any teachers who lack knowledge of good writing instruction and practice in implementing it will be inspired or educated into it by the mandates of prescribed writing.

A key feature of process-writing instruction, even for very young children, is convincing students that they have a wealth of personal topics for their writing, that what they are interested in, what they can talk about, often is a fine choice for writing, that the quality of their writing probably has a direct relation to their commitment to the topic. In process-writing classrooms, students of any age often choose their own topics for writing and the format in which they want to express their ideas: a poem, story, memoir, letter, essay, report, etc. Their purpose is personal, their audience usually their peers and teacher. Just like adult, published writers, they work hardest on their efforts that come to mean the most to them, leaving other pieces in draft form, or discarding

them. They write in the time constraints of the writing period but often work on a piece over many writing periods or put a piece away in their portfolio to let it "simmer" while they start on another. Students are in control of their writing in a process writing classroom, and the results reflect only on themselves. The teacher acts as a model writer and as a coach throughout the process, often writing as the students write, teaching a mini-lesson as the class or a group of students needs new understandings, conferencing with writers, pushing students to do quality work, encouraging the sharing of efforts in process, providing opportunities for publishing.

Contrast prescribed writing. To insure the validity of the test, the prompt, (the topic), must be dictated by the test, as is the format, usually a personal or persuasive essay. It is a matter of chance whether the students have a commitment to the topic or to the form in which they are expected to express ideas they can generate. There are strict time limits to insure that no one has the advantage of extra time. The teacher cannot help during the test; he/she monitors, judges. The audience for the writing is unknown; papers will be retained by the testing company, but the student, whether he/she understands or not, is contributing to perceptions that the public will have of the class, the teacher, the school, and the school district. Personally, older students may be determining which doors will be opening

Table 1

Differences Between PROCESS Writing and PRESCRIBED Writing

<i>Process Writing</i>	vs.	<i>Prescribed Writing</i>
•self selecting a topic		•responding to a prompt
•self-selecting a format		•responding in a required form (essay)
•few time constraints		•strict time limits
•personal purpose for writing		•purpose is for testing/comparing results
•audience of peers and teacher		•unknown adult audience
•variable levels of expectation		•set levels of expectation
•papers retained by the writer		•papers retained by the testing agency
•results reflect only on self		•results affect the perceptions of the class, teacher, school, and school district
•teacher as model writer/coach		•teacher as monitor/judge

in their lives. As students become more savvy about the significance of tests, they may be motivated to do their best, but many will be stymied by the constraints on their writing and their fear of not doing well, particularly if they have histories of difficulties with writing. A summary of the differences between process and prescribed is presented in Table 1.

Close examination of the rubrics to be used to judge the prescribed writing results of the MEAP writing assessments show skills that often are taught and learned in process writing (Table 2). In process writing, some are learned more through intuiting their power as they appear in literature, in the students' own writing, and in that of peers than by direct instruction. Teachers may find it necessary to give these skills more attention as they prepare students for the MEAP, but I caution them to avoid rushing into textbook exercises and commercial test preparation materials, to instead use examples from the literature their students love and examples from the writings of their students and students they have had in previous years. The latter materials maintain students' enthusiasm and commitment to writing, while the former usually make learning to write a chore that has little direct connection to students' own writing.

Students who write enthusiastically in a process-centered classroom often have a leg up on prescribed writing. Their comfort and interest in writing, however, may work against many of them as they face constraints on their choice of topic and the time limits. Some practice in prescribed writing—but only some—and explanations on how and why prescribed writing differs from regular process writing routines are only fair to competent and less competent students. Immature or less competent writers are apt to be most damaged by prescribed writing; tears, tantrums, or lackadaisical commitment to the required test won't excuse them from participating. Teachers need to prepare these students in special ways, particularly by convincing them that their writing progress day by day across the school year, as demonstrated in their writing portfolio collection and in the observations the teacher, is much more important evidence of growth in writing than any test. I believe practice sessions should not begin before the fall of fifth grade for the Writing MEAP the following spring. There are more important attitudes, interests, and skills for writing that need to be developed in the earlier grades.

Table 2

Skills Needed to Meet the Rubrics for MEAP Prescribed Writing

- Brainstorming about given prompts
- Selecting a focus and supporting information
- Organizing
- Selecting a topic sentence
- Providing interesting details
- Using voice
- Varying sentence patterns
- Paragraphing/indenting
- Enriching vocabulary (particularly nouns and verbs)
- Providing a satisfactory conclusion
- Conversing with peers about revision
- Determining revision needs
- Editing for errors
- Meeting time restrictions

Accepting the MEAP and Defending Process Writing

Perhaps we can cheer that the MEAP Writing Test is refocusing attention on writing and giving students chances to write, something that teacher preparation programs, commercial teaching materials, DOE priorities, school district requirements, and standardized tests have neglected until the NAEP Writing Test spawned state tests like the MEAP Writing Assessments. For schools that have neglected it, writing instruction is coming in the back door and coming for the wrong reasons, but it is coming. Furthermore, it will be around for a while, supported by the political power that test scores generate. Each school faculty, however, must discuss the dangers that test-driven curriculum can have on the motivation of students to learn to write, the potential for warping recognized methods of writing instruction to find shortcuts, and the pressures on teachers who have little preparation for teaching writing well. The following questions could contribute to those faculty discussions:

- How can we use the new state-mandated writing test to bring quality writing instruction into focus in all areas of the curriculum?
- How can we use the test to educate teachers, parents, administrators, and students about meaning-focused writing, keeping the mechanics of writing in their subordinate and supportive relationship to meaning?
- How can we keep primary the process-writing goals of interest, confidence, flexibility, and risktaking as we try to meet test-taking goals of responding to a prompt, time constraints, and accuracy?
- How can we educate the public and government officials about the dollars, time, and energy that state-mandated tests take from important learning needs of students and dedication of teachers?
- How can we educate the public about the meaning of test comparisons between/among classrooms, schools, and school districts, minimizing the destructive aspects of such comparisons?
- How can we maintain control of this school's curriculum that strives to meet the unique needs of our students as tests pull control from the local to the state level?

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