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The High School Writing Proficiency: Token Process?

Faye Kuzma, Brenda Vasicek and Lynn Chrenka

During the 1995-96 school year, Michigan students in their junior year will take the reading and writing portions of the Michigan High School Proficiency Test for Communication Arts (HSPT). The Michigan Department of Education consulted the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and advice of teachers is evident in the Assessment Framework for Communication Arts. Having aligned testing more closely with teaching by leaving the multiple-choice test behind in favor of an essay test, the writing portion of the HSPT represents an improvement. The fault, however, lies in the fact that the HSPT does not go far enough, given its purpose. As a high-stakes test to determine whether or not a student should receive an endorsed diploma—and whether or not a school earns accreditation—the HSPT essay scores need to be combined with scoring of portfolio pieces or other forms of assessment. Further, the test should assess the writing process as that is where the skills are applied and evident.

Process Elements of the HSPT

How various process elements get condensed into the HSPT has raised concern among teachers seeking to prepare students to meet the demands of the test. A look at the actual testing procedure shows the reasons for this concern. By comparison with students taking the exam in eleventh grade, students in grades five and eight are

generally provided more structured time for completion of individual writing tasks including prewriting, writing, and revising. The 45-minute testing sessions for the lower grades occur over the span of three days. The first day of testing is devoted to developing ideas as well as actual writing. The second day of testing is given over to revising—application of skills learned—and peer response, which provides a context for revising. On the third day, students are given a checklist that guides them toward focused revising and editing.

In contrast, the HSPT (High School Proficiency Test) does not provide as much support for revision and editing. For instance, time for peer discussion is reduced from 37 minutes at grades five and eight to 15 minutes at grade eleven. This difference in time seems contrary to the intent of the Frameworks that "Assessment in integrated English language arts classrooms involves careful study of authentic student products and performances in context over time" (State Board Approved Communication Arts Framework-HSPT 4). While the portfolio Strand I and II (Day 1), attempts to bring in "authentic student product and performance," the student's 35-minute reflection on the portfolio pieces collected prior to the test day does not seem genuinely connected to the following day's test activities. Moreover, under the present scheme, the plan to evaluate

student's reflections on the portfolio pieces rather than the portfolio pieces themselves is problematic. Evaluating reflective writing using the same scoring criteria that is used for an essay may be misguided, since students writing reflectively do not typically organize their writing in the same way they would for a more formal essay. Thus, while the reflective writing is valuable, it should not be scored but perhaps looked at in relation to the evidence of drafting and revising that could be obtained from portfolio pieces (so long as all the drafts and preliminary notes toward drafts were included with the finished portfolio pieces submitted for evaluation).

Encouraging Versus Structuring In Revision

In order to teach and assess writing, we need to realize that students must receive more than "encouragement" to revise. They need classroom and test structures that define reasons to revise and that structure the work of drafting and revising. Structured peer group work can provide students with feedback to improve writing. Unfortunately, the HSPT departs from the MEAP format of scheduled-in peer review of drafts. At grades five and eight, students work together both to generate ideas and to critique drafts; whereas, at grade eleven, students work collaboratively only to generate material in response to a predetermined theme.

The question is whether the scaffolding provided by peer review of drafts — structured into the test schedule at the earlier grade levels — needs to be incorporated into the test schedule of the HSPT. Currently, the second testing day of the HSPT resembles Day 1 of the MEAP, except that peer discussion is limited to activities for generating ideas in response to a theme (45 minutes). Missing from the schedule for Day 3 is time allotted for group work to solicit response to and comment on drafts, a crucial part of the writing process according to current critical theory (as noted in the Frameworks).

Without peer response, students may not see a reason to revise. Comments from peer readers provide a writer with an immediate sense of an audience and as such contextualize the writing,

lending a more authentic (and perhaps less intimidating) impetus for revising than comments from a single reader—the teacher as grader. Language arts teachers across grade levels agree that in addition to needing time to develop ideas and review their writing (as well as having a sense of ownership in their writing), students need frequent response to their writing in order to make gains as writers (Broode, Mirtz, and Evans 14). Yet, the key component of a peer response to actual drafts is missing from the High School Proficiency Test.

Teachers, recognizing that it is not enough simply to encourage revision and hoping to prepare students for the HSPT, can incorporate, on a regular basis, peer response groups as a way to help students internalize the kinds of questions readers will ask in responding to their writing. Teachers not schooled in a process approach will be unfamiliar with this workshop method and may find mixed results at first. To be productive, group work needs to be carefully guided (a useful way to do this is to provide a peer inquiry sheet asking readers to locate and underline certain features in the text). Teachers will need to spell out the level of response they expect from students. It is essential that teachers also model an appropriate response to a draft (using a paper submitted in a previous term). Students need to see that a critical response can still be courteous and positive. If students aren't familiar with the writing process, they may not immediately recognize the usefulness of peer review of drafts or may not have anything to say. Especially at first, students will need help to pose peer-response questions, but the regular practice of raising questions and commenting on the writing of their peers can help students to appreciate community expectations and apply them to their own writing.

Peer response facilitates the writing process in a number of ways. With practice, students learn to recognize writing that fulfills expectations by adhering to the conventions of a particular discourse community. As students regularly review peer writing, they create a dialogue about effective and ineffective writing, they troubleshoot ways to solve problems readers and writers en-

counter, and they provide a context in which revising and editing make sense.

One-Shot Validity

Teachers at one school involved in the Pilot of the MEAP (Reed City High School) found students were very reluctant to select papers for the portfolio strand. Having been told the 1994 MEAP scores don't count, students find the whole testing procedure suspect and confusing. While these may be the problems inherent in any initial phase-in of a new assessment, Geoff Hewill, an assessment specialist in Vermont, notes: "Teachers have a responsibility to themselves and their profession to ensure that state-and nationally-mandated systems are reasonable and fair in all senses, and that students see the performance they purport to measure as valid" (166).

How valid is the sequencing of timed process activities found in the HSPT? The HSPT, as it is currently designed, incorporates limited time for prewriting, drafting, peer response, and revision in an attempt to allow students to fully process the writing it will assess. It enables students to practice invention techniques, to work in peer response groups, and to reflect on previous writing (in the portfolio strand) to repeat successful strategies recognizing that such activities are important if not essential to the writing process. Examining these products, two separate "single-draft writings" (From Pilot Assessment Plan, MEAP Office), raters will assess students' proficiency as writers. Our concern is that evaluating products alone may privilege academically astute students, and further, that this focus reflects a lack of concern for writing as learning. Evaluating products in the HSPT—while telling students they should employ parts of the writing process—does not adequately support student efforts to process whole pieces of writing from their conception to final, polished drafts for assessment, where application of writing skills learned is evident.

Validity, as Ed White tells us, has to do with measuring what we say we are going to measure. Can we really say the HSPT measures student learning in writing? If we are not concerned with assessing how students handle the writing process, how and whether they are able to gain

control over their thinking—habits of mind—and their texts as they move through the process, and if we are only interested in what they produce, how does such an assessment represent a valid measurement of student learning in writing? And then, what does time have to do with students' writing proficiency? Are students who produce competent writing in two hours better writers than those who take four hours? We suggest that few "experienced" writers would be satisfied with writing they were expected to produce in 110 minutes which they were nominally "encouraged to revise and edit" in that amount of time and which would be "scored as a more polished piece of writing" (From Pilot Assessment Plan, MEAP Office). In fact, according to a study comparing and contrasting the revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers by Nancy Sommers, experienced writers said that their drafts are not "determined by time." They regarded their first drafts as "scattered attempts to define their territory" and their second drafts as beginning to see "general patterns of development" and the relationship of "all the various sub-arguments" beneath the surface of the sentences they had written (384). Experienced writers imagine a reader (reading their product) whose existence and whose expectations influence their revision process" (385). For experienced writers, rewriting and revising is a "constant process" to discover what they know and what they have to express. Writing for them is not a linear process at all; it is an ongoing negotiation between them, what they see in their own texts, and their readers. Revision is their pivotal behavior. What we may need to be measuring in the HSPT is whether students are acquiring the habits of mind practiced by experienced writers which will help them to develop their writing over their lifetime.

Timed Writing Versus Sustained Engagement With a Topic

Although the various strands of the HSPT are "linked," this linkage is artificial and does not grow out of the students' desire to discover what they know about the topic at hand or to learn more about it. The process of the HSPT does not really support writing that explores ideas or takes

risks which may result in learning and in the creation of knowledge—the most important reasons for writing.

If we say that writing demands sustained engagement with a topic, then the effort to achieve validity means we should assess writing in a way that reflects the inherent demands of the process. Why couldn't the HSPT, for instance, require students to write sustained, organic pieces of writing over a more extended period of time on a particular topic, one of their own choosing or one from a variety of listed topics, allowing them to engage in their own, perhaps non-linear processes? Teachers could share with students the Holistic Scorepoint Descriptions as the standard by which their "final" drafts would be assessed. Students could share early drafts with their peers and receive feedback on what worked and what didn't with regard to the meanings expressed and also with regard to the standards by which they will be judged. Teachers could encourage students to revise and rethink their writings as they write toward final, more polished pieces of writing. Finally, raters could examine not only the final drafts but all the drafts students had produced throughout the process to measure the degree to which students are developing writerly habits and becoming proficient writers. We suggest that if the state is going to attempt to measure student learning in writing, we need to develop an assessment that does more than evaluate "single draft writing." (From Pilot Assessment Plan MEAP Office).

Assessing Growth in Writing

Assessing growth in writing is infinitely more difficult, although not impossible, and much more complex because we have to decide what constitutes growth in writing. Current research shows, in fact, that growth is often more internal and less visible in ways we would like it to be, so it is difficult to recognize and quantify (Onore). Gains in one aspect of writing performance may actually engender losses in another. However, if our goal as language arts teachers is to improve student learning and competency in writing, assessing growth may be both more interesting and more

useful to us and our students than simply assessing pieces of writing.

Unfortunately, testing programs like the HSPT typically want to obtain "evidence" of learning that is easily quantified and reported so that state legislators and others can hold schools and teachers accountable, but such evidence may be—as in this case—separated unnecessarily from students' learning processes and linguistic histories and fail to be a measure of the writing skills students are in the process of developing. Standards are important, but they should be used responsibly to elicit excellent performances that can be repeated consistently, and they must truly measure the degree to which students exhibit application of writing skills.

Structuring in Revision Through Classroom Assessment

Cultivating habits of mind and excellent performance through classroom assessment is ultimately the teacher's best approach to preparing students for the HSPT, for the reality is that the state will assess writing, and students who are able to utilize a process and especially those who feel comfortable with revising and peer response may do better just because they are on familiar ground. Although the HSPT assesses product rather than process or improvement in writing proficiency, teachers can encourage effective use of drafting and revising strategies through classroom assessment

Before a teacher can solicit true re-vision of the content and ideas in their students' essays, they need to help students understand revision and editing as two separate components of the writing process; in doing so, teachers may need to curtail the practice, as Ed White notes, of giving "a single grade for a finished (or not-so-finished) product" (108). Teachers can delay assigning a grade until a draft has been revised as needed. Assigning a process grade that over the course contributes 10 percent or more to the final grade is another way for teachers to recognize the critical thinking that occurs in making appropriate revisions. Accepting post-grade revisions is also valuable as a way for the application of writing skills to be assessed.

As part of regular classroom practice, teachers can assist students in learning to revise by reserving the term “revision” for describing the recursive process that enables students to improve their writing content and organization. This distinction is made in the wording in the Framework and the grade five and eight Pilot Assessment Plan stipulates time periods for revising and the activities listed are clearly differentiated from the following day’s proofreading activities to complete a “polished” draft. Because the portfolio strand takes up Day 1 of the HSPT, high school students don’t begin their response to a theme until Day 2, and their writing is primarily exploratory. Time for revising and editing is thus given over to Day 3 (110 minutes), during which students are “encouraged” to revise and edit in one sitting. So, whereas the activities of revising and editing are separated by the cooling off period of a day at the fifth and eighth grade levels, these two very distinct processes—requiring a different reading of one’s text—are compressed in with the drafting activities of Day 3 of the HSPT.

When confronted with the fixed, unseen topic and writing-on-demand scenario of the HSPT, students are likely to make only surface error changes in their drafts if they have not been exposed repeatedly to revision strategies that can quickly be utilized under pressure. Students take on a writer’s habit of mind when they anticipate a reader’s questions, comments and objections, and to help them to do this teachers can give students practice in applying the reporter’s questions. While reading over the draft of their essays, students can gloss the features of a text (a means of isolating parts of the text for revision). For instance, students can be asked to gloss—or mark—a text by circling key words and phrases or providing marginal notes to detail changes made. In order to consider all options for revising—never an end in itself—students can utilize a revision menu (asking students to consider whether they need to cut, paste, reorder, reword, etc.). To help students exercise judgment in revising, teachers can assign a revision log. In it, students write reflectively about their drafting process: why they revised as they did and to what extent they feel their writing content and organization changed.

Revision for the sake of revising will not in itself increase students’ scores on the HSPT; even so, students will need to at least consider how revision might improve their drafts and to do so they will need to have practiced revising often enough that they acquire the reviser’s habit of mind.

While generating ideas is especially critical in responding to a restricted topic on the HSPT, students should also gain practice in revision as part of the normal context of much writing and as a way to improve text before subjecting it to editing. Rather than finishing before the end of a testing session, students need to utilize the time to reread their drafts, rethinking content and organization in terms of reaching an audience and accomplishing a purpose. Internalizing revision is the resource teachers would like their students to fall back on when testing; for this to happen, students need to develop a kind of “muscle memory” that makes considering possible revision strategies as automatic as a reflex action.

Revision’s Pivotal Role

We are increasingly aware of the pivotal role of revising in a writer’s development. In “Patterns of Child Control of the Writing Process,” Donald Graves writes that revision is “one of the best indices of how children change as writers” (108). Graves observes that children in the lower primary grades are often unable to conceptualize revision tasks because of the need to control the formidable demands of writing itself. Other issues that come into play include egocentricity and vulnerability, inability to discern where new text might be inserted or “spliced” into the interior of a draft, and aesthetic barriers to changing a draft once it’s completed (109-10).

Graves cites the work of Lucy McCormick Calkins, who studied the revising habits of students in upper primary grade levels. The types of writing behaviors she details suggest increasingly sustained attention to earlier drafts during revision. While not all students exhibit behaviors that fall into the categories she identifies, it is clear that the willingness and ability to revise is a crucial turning point in the development of a writer.

Revision signals a later stage of development as a writer for teachers at Bainbridge Island Intermediate School district in Washington (Hill and Ruptic 233-53). On the continuum they produced to describe a writer's growth, revision is a development in the work of mature writers. Bainbridge Island teachers label the stage in which students are able to internalize writing behaviors such as revision strategies as independent. However, we cannot assume high school students know how to revise effectively or independently. Because the HSPT demands that students operate at an independent level to revise, teachers will need to guide students through focused revision assignments to help them apply various revision strategies to their own writing.

Teachers of underprepared writers at Ferris State University utilize revision assignment sheets, detailing expectations and suggesting strategies for improving a paper. Just as an initial assignment sheet for a writing project will typically provide guidelines for topic selection, purpose, and audience, these revision assignment sheets make explicit the kinds of issues students will face in revising texts for certain assignments. In preparing students for the HSPT, teachers could utilize such revision assignment sheets to remind students of the features of academic discourse, such as thesis statements, so that students are aware of reader expectations established by the genre of essay writing. Using revision assignment sheets gives teachers an opportunity to focus attention on process at a key moment in the drafting of a paper.

Assessing Revision

One implication of the study of revising behaviors is that the more teachers request revision and the more students practice revision—regardless of learning level—the more autonomous as writers students become. Revision allows students to take an active role in their writing development and exposes the thinking of students as they write. To increase understanding of how judgment comes into play when revising, teachers can show students particular changes in successive drafts of their own writing and discuss why the changes were made. The task of a teacher

as guide to structure, model, and focus revision is not easy or uncomplicated. Revision is a complex behavior; in fact, some attempts to revise, as Cynthia Onore's study points out, may actually result in a net loss for the written product. Yet, a student whose risks result in such a loss may actually have learned more about writing in the process than a student who does not risk revision.

Perhaps there is an analogy in Mina Shaughnessy's research with basic writers and error. Shaughnessy observed that students may make more errors as they risk more complex sentence structures. Our testing procedures need to recognize that all students do not achieve mastery at the same time but that learning may, still be taking place. Improvement of students' writing needs to be valued and addressed. Similarly, we need to recognize that just as the ninth grade composition course is not responsible for remediating all error from students' writing, the process of improved development and organization of students' texts is continual and nonlinear.

Teachers must teach students to revise and value the revision process; likewise, the MEAP and HSPT need to value—and score—the writing process and student writing improvement, not just the product. In doing so, we recognize that each student is at a different stage in his or her writing development, and since revision is a sign of growth as a writer, the use of revision strategies needs to be part not just of teaching but of the assessment. Then, perhaps, standardized testing can begin to measure process and learning leading to proficiency.

Just as not all problems will be solved in one or two classes, developing skill and improvement may not show up in one product. Students must be supported in the task of revision and take ownership of it in their journey toward what teachers and communities call proficiency. We hope that legislators and test developers will consider the need to expand the process element of the MEAP and extend the portfolio strand of the HSPT to the inclusion of all drafts of a piece of writing.

Notes: For the ongoing dialogue about the complexity of revising behavior, the place of revision in writing instruction and assessment, and strategies to solicit revision— we would like to thank our colleagues at Ferris, especially Robert von der Osten, Doug Haneline, and Roxanne Cullen.

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