1992

Alternative Ways of Assessing What They Know

Ray H. Lawson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Lawson, Ray H. (1992) "Alternative Ways of Assessing What They Know," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1613>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF ASSESSING WHAT THEY KNOW

Ray H. Lawson

For too long, teachers have relied upon testing as the only trustworthy method of knowing whether they have been successful in covering the assigned material. Too frequently in survey courses of literature, for example, teachers require students to keep copious notes from their reading in a chronologically-arranged anthology. Having covered the anthology, the teacher determines how well he or she has done by the scores on the objective test. From this perspective, successful teaching also means having students rank in the highest percentile when comparing them nationally, with other districts, or with students in other schools within the district. Many administrators and politicians encourage this distorted view of assessment because it makes the school look good even though the scores may fail to indicate a mastery of skills.

Similarly, for too many students, the mark of learning is a high grade-point average gained through the memorization of facts— or by more devious means— in order to graduate with “honors.” They have become indoctrinated with the need to cover quantities of information in preparation for additional courses or to be ready for college. Getting through a course and competing with peers through high scores on objective tests seem to be more important than learning how to think critically or mastering skills. Students have become masters at the game of making points - as if making points is learning. In a competitive society where high scores are so important, parents and teachers should not be appalled that the students have learned to play the game. The game is easier than thinking beyond the memorization of information as evidence of the “mastery” of important concepts and skills.

Too often at the beginning of my classes, the first question will be, “What kind of tests do you give?” or more specifically, “Do you give objective tests like the other teachers so we can get quick scores through the Scan Tron

machine?" As a teacher of English, a common inquiry I receive is, "If you don't give a test on the assigned novels, how will you know that we read them?" Through all the questions, the important inference is that the students' major concern is passing a test to get a grade, to move on to the next level of course, or to graduate. Thinking critically and mastering skills that will help them become life-long learners seem not to be essential goals.

Instead of spending so much time preparing to disseminate information or trying to find several ways to "beat the game," which students have learned to play so well, teachers must become more concerned with finding alternative ways of student evaluation. Students should demonstrate a mastery of learning rather than reiterate a body of isolated information. Current research will justify a teacher's risking change to eliminate the traditional test as a way of knowing what the students have mastered.

Although the research is copious, the current work of Grant Wiggins serves as a guide for promoting change for the improvement of student assessment. Wiggins' research on assessment closely echoes my own concerns about how we assess what students have learned and corroborates my limited investigation of the kinds of examinations teachers use:

Recent studies confirm my own observations in high schools over the last four years: "Many teachers lack a clear sense of their expectations about student performance and lean on nonexistent or vague criteria inadequately communicated to students. . . The grading policies of many teachers are deeply flawed." Even on short-answer tests, few teachers emphasize what thoughtful observers would regard as the essential traits of high-quality performance. Too few teachers are familiar with performance-based assessment: tasks that go to the heart of a discipline's activities and the student's control over them, requiring not thoughtless recall but knowledge in use. Many grades reflect arbitrary and ultimately unhelpful over-attention to the superficial aspects of work such as vocabulary, recall of formulas, or simple identifications. Instead of authentic performance, the 'tests' amount to drill— isolated, hence easily-scored 'knowledge' out of context. (3)

Checking the English Department files for examples of final examinations, I have discovered an emphasis on objective tests that force the simple recall of isolated information. Literature courses too often require students to match the author or a character to a piece of literature. In specific courses,

finding questions that require the identification of a quotation and a character is not unusual. Through a series of objective questions, the teacher can quickly cover several pieces of literature—even an entire literary period. For the student who memorizes facts easily, the high scores indicate, unfortunately, that the teacher appears to have been successful. This type of testing leaves no question about how expeditiously the teacher can report the results to the students in order to move quickly on to another unit of study.

Although these objective tests will cover the requirements of a course, they do not give a student an opportunity to draw inferences to demonstrate an understanding of the value of literature as a mirror of society and the evolution of the major issues through the centuries. Rather than accumulating information to pass a test or to gain a high score, the students should have opportunities in a literature class—or any other class—to develop a better understanding of themselves and their relationship to others. Through the study of literature, they need to become aware of the importance and appropriateness of language to communicate ideas. Answering objective questions has very little to do with the development of skills in higher-level thinking and, hence, becoming better critical thinkers and more skilled in problem solving.

It would be unfair to suggest that all teachers primarily resort to objective tests as a way of evaluating the students. Many examinations have evidence of essay questions. An analysis of these questions, however, too often indicates that the student must include teacher-expected information. Instead of the students having an opportunity to draw logical conclusions, they face time limits in which to provide “right answers.” A typical question, for example, asks students to discuss Wordsworth’s contribution to literature as the “high priest of nature.” After students finish reading a novel, the central focus is too often merely an analysis of an author’s technique or the main theme, particularly when the teacher has decided the single theme for all readers.

Throughout his research, Wiggins stresses the importance of “self-assessment” and the development of “performance-based” assessment. Although much more time-consuming, this kind of assessment provides the teacher and the students an opportunity to arrive at a mutual understanding of expectations for the course. At the beginning of a course, the teacher and the students discuss what the outcomes should be and the criteria for

reaching these desired outcomes. If they are aware of the criteria for achieving good content or voice in writing, for example, they are in a better position to assess their own work because of knowing the expectations for the performance.

In teaching a composition class for high school seniors, I have found that self-assessment, rather than the traditional test on the mechanics of writing, is a much more effective determination of whether a student can express an idea in language that is appropriate to the audience, the mode of writing, and the purpose of the piece. But in order to enable students to effectively assess their own writing, we must first find, as Richard Stiggins and Vicki Spandel point out, "the components of good writing and to talk intelligently about them in a language that student writers can understand and use in revision" (7). They further stress that "we must attempt to define the main traits or characteristics of writing (e.g., ideas, organization) and to specify criteria that describe each of these traits in terms of the relevant strengths and weaknesses that we are likely to see in real samples of student writing" (7).

This kind of student assessment has many learning advantages over the traditional test. The students can develop greater self-esteem because they are able to monitor their own progress toward meeting the criteria for writing; they can concentrate on critical thinking and problem-solving skills instead of being overly concerned about passing a test based on the memorization of facts; they demonstrate in their writing what they have learned, and hence spend more time experimenting with appropriate language to express their ideas; and they are able to spend more valuable time mastering writing skills because of the availability of time to spend on the desired outcomes.

This change in teaching strategies has a very positive effect on both the student and the teacher. As a teacher of writing, one of my most frequently-asked questions is, "What must I do to receive an 'A' on a paper?" Too frequently, the answer to this question may imply a paper free of mechanical errors and trial-and-error attempts until the student produces something the teacher considers acceptable or something better than what any other student produces. Has the paper demonstrated a mastery of skills? No. Has it illustrated ways of improvement through specific criteria? Probably not. With more emphasis on meeting criteria for good writing, however, and opportunities for students to assess their own writing, I have found the

pleasant change to papers that express the real thoughts of the student rather than something they think might bring them a high grade.

To help the students evaluate their own writing, teachers must clarify what characteristics they value: clarity, order, fresh language, surprise twists, voice, fluency, and correctness. Through their effective self-assessment and the assessment of appropriate writing models, students must understand qualities of clear development—focus, theme, selected details, insight, and wholeness. Again, they must see the importance of organization through an inviting introduction—one that avoids the traditional inverted pyramid and thesis—logical sequencing, smooth transitions, good pacing, the high point, and a resolution, and, above all, the avoidance of the five-paragraph pattern. In addition, they must be aware of the importance of voice, word choice, fluency, and the conventions. None of these major criteria will bring about a mastery in writing skills unless the students and teacher can model them through their own examples of writing. This modeling serves as a source for self-evaluation.

In their *Creating Writers*, Stiggins and Spandel model the evaluation of papers according to their “six traits” of good writing. Their comments for papers of varying levels of proficiency provide excellent models of comments for teacher evaluations as well as providing criteria to help students assess their own writing and, thereby, improve it. In the development of their “Analytical Scoring Guide,” Stiggins and Spandel suggest that students score papers from 1 to 5. For a score of 1, 3, or 5, they have included specific criteria, respectively. About a level-3 paper, for example, they say, “The paper is clear and focused, even though the overall result may not be especially captivating. Support is attempted, but it may be limited or obvious, insubstantial, too general, or out of balance with the main ideas” (30).

To give further assistance for improvement through self-evaluation, Stiggins and Spandel include these statements about ideas and content in a level-5 paper:

“This paper is clear, focused, and interesting. It holds the reader’s attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme or story line.

"The writer seems to be writing from experience and shows insight: a good sense of how events unfold, how people respond to life and to each other, and how ideas relate.

"Supporting relevant, telling details give the reader important information that he or she could not personally bring to the text. This writer seems to notice what others might overlook.

"The writing has balance: Main ideas stand out; secondary ideas do not usurp too much attention.

"The writer seems in control and orchestrates development of the topic in an enlightening, entertaining way.

"The writer works with and shapes ideas, making connections and sharing insights that reflect his or her own thinking." (29-30)

Although Stiggins includes models for various grade levels to illustrate these criteria, applying them to the student's own writing is a more effective way of helping the students develop self-assessment skills.

In my own classroom, I have found these criteria to be very effective as a means of improving student writing. At the beginning of the course, each student receives a copy of Stiggins's "Analytical Scoring Guide." Using their papers as models, we discuss the application of the criteria; then I give them time to practice scoring one another's papers.

My Composition IV seniors at Rochester High School work in cooperative groups throughout the semester and do all their compositions through the writing process. At the end of the process, all students in a group of four read their papers. Using the criteria, the group agrees on a score of 1 to 5 for each paper, justifying a particular score. By the end of a semester, the students have become familiar with the criteria and become very comfortable in applying them to a paper. Through this kind of evaluation, the students gain a better understanding of ways to improve their writing and to master certain skills. They soon learn to identify their strengths and weaknesses. As a result, in subsequent essays they can emphasize particular traits that need strengthening, such as voice, content, or organization.

Throughout my Composition IV course, students have opportunities to produce various kinds of writing each week and to score them. At the end

of the semester, as part of the final grade, they choose the one paper they would like to revise based on the student evaluations—and mine upon request. Because one of my goals is to develop independent writers, I stress the importance of their depending upon their evaluations rather than mine. The place for this latter kind of assessment comes during the conferencing with each student.

For the final evaluation of the course, each student does a self-evaluation, including the rationale. Based on this self-evaluation and on my suggested evaluation, the student and the teacher conference about the final grade. Although differences may occur at the beginning of the semester, by the end of the course, much greater unanimity exists because, I think, the students have gained confidence in judging their own writing. They are aware of the desired outcomes and can strive toward those ends rather than being so much concerned about a grade through a traditional means of testing.

Is this kind of evaluation worth the time—and more time—the process takes? Without question. Could the same grade have been achieved though a writing sample or a standardized test on the mechanics of writing? No. What is more important, however, is that the students do much more writing—not all of which the teacher must read. Through peer evaluation and self-evaluation, the student has evidence of improvement and demonstrates greater self-esteem because of feeling good about creating a readable piece of writing.

In addition to using self-evaluation instead of the traditional kind of testing technique in composition, I use an alternative system for assessing the seniors' reading for this Composition IV course. Instead of having the students write papers on each novel, I ask them to choose one of two novels—Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* or Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*—to be used as a model for studying a particular aspect of the nature of man. During our study of the chosen novel, the students have opportunities to apply their reading and discussions to themes in classical literature, contemporary literature, and personal experience. During this process, I try to develop a model with them that they can use to advantage for their group work in the last weeks of the course.

Each of five groups chooses a topic about the nature of man or a current issue of interest to the group. These topics include themes such as "Man's Search for a Better Society," "Problems of Growing Up," or "Art's

Expression of the Culture.” Once the group has made its choice, the students find several novels through which to explore the theme. Among the novels, they can choose one to be read by all members of the group. In addition, each student selects a separate novel to support the theme. From this point, the students research contemporary writing on the topic as a basis of comparison with similar ideas of the more classical authors.

Through a period of approximately six weeks, the students read and discuss their books as well as write about and reflect upon the ideas they discovered through sharing with the other students in the group. At this point, they have an opportunity to determine how the novel read in common as well as the individual novels relate not only to the chosen theme but also to contemporary materials and their personal experiences. In the past, the students chose five novels pertinent to a particular theme and showed their understanding by each one’s writing a paper, using the novels as supporting evidence. The results were superficial, manufactured in order to meet the requirements of the assignment and receive a grade.

To evaluate the students’ understanding of the chosen topic, I now ask that they determine a method of presenting what they learned about their topic to the entire class. They soon learn that teaching the others about a particular concept requires a great deal of understanding on their own parts. These presentations may take the form of music, art, videos or any other creative means. Again, the method to demonstrate the students’ understanding is the choice of the group, not a technique I have stipulated.

Using this kind of evaluation through a demonstration incorporates reading skills, speaking skills, and a study of vocabulary as it pertains to the topic, not to a list of words in isolation. What is important to the student is the opportunity to share information with others, to improve skills for working cooperatively to solve a problem, and to gain a better understanding of the nature of man. In the preparation of my evaluation at this point, I have had a chance to observe each group demonstrate what the students learned from their reading and discussions. I have seen them interact with the class as a whole not only in their speaking but also in their writing. The highlight of the experience is that they have developed a greater sense of independence in their reflections about their reading and writing. Instead of limiting their reading to five novels, they now have become acquainted with at least thirty through the presentations of the other groups.

In a section of a survey course of American Literature for 10th graders taken by students with varying levels of ability, I found the elimination of the traditional test to be especially successful. On the first day, students were shocked to learn that I was not going to give a test at the end of every piece of assigned reading. The general attitude was that there was a trick involved. At the beginning of the course, cooperatively, all of us worked on the outcomes we wanted to achieve and how we would like to achieve them. After discussing various objectives, including a chronological approach to the selections, the students agreed that the major value of the course would be to discover something about themselves and their relation to others. With all the possibilities laid out, the students had an opportunity to make a choice about the literary themes we would try to complete rather than to covering all the literature chronologically from that of the native Americans to contemporary authors. Showing ownership in the plan, they could spend their time individually or in a group discovering ideas about themselves or the American way of life. Not having to memorize facts to match author with title or facts about a particular piece of literature gave them a sense of freedom to learn, one of the fundamental concepts behind an alternative way to knowing what students know. The course had something to offer all students, from the student with a learning disability to those who could cope with greater challenges. Many students pointed out in their final evaluations about the course that they had never realized that this kind of literature could be fun.

At the end of each week, the students have a choice of special problems or topics to write about—a way of helping them draw inferences from their reading and discussion. In their group discussions, they determine how the literary selections support the particular theme either in their writing or as the objective of the course. Throughout these activities, listening to their fellow students allude to particular pieces of literature was far more meaningful for them than trying to remember myriad details about plots or characters to pass the test. Their arguing about the meaning of the literature made them more aware of important details that supported their own interpretation, not mine—an important step in self-evaluation. They soon learned that they did not have to depend on me to give them the “right” answers.

Throughout the American Literature course, many of the groups would demonstrate their understanding of the relationship of the literary selections to what was happening in the daily news—a more natural way of

showing how literature is a mirror of what is happening in society. At this point, music and art took on more meaning because the students could understand how these media depicted the various issues they met in literature. Are these concepts that could have been accomplished by traditional testing or teacher lecture? Probably not. This flexible non-statistical concept of assessment can free us from the rigid pedagogical patterns of past teaching strategies and free us from the paradigm of "covering" the text or "teaching to the test" phenomenon.

At the end of the course, the students probably would not have done so well on a standardized test to measure their factual information about American writers. On the other hand, conferencing with the students individually and in groups; listening to their discussions and presentations; and observing their attitudes about themselves and the course, I found their scores were high because every student achieved, at his or her particular level, the outcomes set forth at the beginning of the course. Failing the students was unnecessary. Everyone succeeded.

Many teachers are hesitant to risk changing from the traditional test because they believe such a test serves as an "incentive" for students to complete assigned tasks. Once students are aware of the essentials and the outcomes of the course, however, they will have their own incentives for doing well and will, therefore, complete the work. Instead of worrying about remembering information that will help them achieve a high score, cooperatively they can concentrate on tasks to increase their problem-solving abilities.

If one of the objectives of education is to improve learning strategies, then finding other ways of knowing how well students have mastered the essential skills of a course will make a difference in our emphasis on the importance of learning. It will help students take responsibility for producing and assessing quality work based on mutually accepted criteria. By putting stress on the mastery of essential skills at the students' level of ability rather than on a test score, the students can more easily maintain their dignity and, hence, develop a higher self-esteem.

In our process of finding other ways of evaluating our students, we must not be content with just finding something different. We must be confident that our assessment measures the essential skills of the course and brings about a mastery of these skills through student demonstration.

Works Cited

Stiggins, Richard J., and Vicki Spandel. *Creating Writers*. New York: Longman, 1990.

Wiggins, Grant. "Rational Numbers: Toward Grading & Scoring That Helps Rather than Harms Learning." Unpublished paper.

Ray Lawson teaches English at Rochester High School in Rochester, MI, and is Secretary-Treasurer of MCTE.