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Testing, Assessment, and the Teaching of Writing

GREGORY SHAFER

“As standardized testing has swallowed up public education in the U.S. in the twenty-first century, its ravenous hunger intensifying yearly since the federal mandate inaugurated by President Bush’s No Child Left Behind and perpetuated by President Obama’s Race to the Top, students have largely become test takers.”

—Robert Hatch

Somewhere in our journey to elevate the progress and educational achievement of our most challenged students, many of us who teach composition have watched with consternation as our most revered theories of writing have melted away into yet another reason for testing and excessive accountability. With all of the good intentions that accompany the social worker or moral crusader, politicians and school administrators have tried to convince us that rigid testing and placement help students to achieve more and become successful.

And so, instead of portfolios and process we have Race to the Top, Common Core, and No Child Left Behind. By the time they reach college, writers have been fully acculturated into a system that measures skills and prescribes form, placing political games and academic literacy above self-actualizing communication. Perhaps it is grounded in the frustration of seeing so little concrete progress among developmental or beginning writers, but in many classrooms across our country—including my own department at Mott Community College—testing and placement have usurped student freedom and transformed many writing classes into prescriptive places where teachers teach grammar, use standardized books, and are expected to follow uniform rubrics for success. It is a lamentable result of best practice being supplanted by a confused political expediency.

How could this have happened? Where did it all begin? How did all of those lofty discussions in graduate school about a process approach that would liberate the student become a battery of tests that we somehow find not only palatable but preferable? It is tempting to suggest that it has never left—that testing and a top-down approach to writing have always been present in our classrooms, either lingering in the periphery or standing at the head of the class. Such a theory would not be unreasonable, considering the fact that while composition programs have spent the last five decades advocating a process and post-process approach to the teaching of writing, most political and educational bureaucrats have pushed a curriculum that places numbers and skills as the goal of a successful education. It is a historical and ideological tug-of-war that has left many of us filled with consternation.

A Quick History of the Fight for Composition Classrooms

In the 1980s, when I was in college and learning to teach English, the goal was to transcend narrow tests, to move beyond the constricting pedagogy that centered on numbers and multiple choice exams. It was a time of exciting research, much of it galvanized by a movement away from prescriptive, teacher-driven writing. Macrorie spoke of new, more personal ways to do research, Bruner emphasized learning through discovery, and books like Banesh Hoffman’s *Tyranny of Testing* exhorted instructors to avoid the limitations of testing and its tendency to usurp the language experience from classrooms. Above all, there was a call for cultivating a writing program that focused on the process, on the journey, on the self-actualization that occurred when one wrote in a progressive classroom.

One of the most prominent voices in the 1980s was Stephen Tchudi, whose books focused on the inimical effect of the Back to Basics Movement and the pressure placed on teachers to standardize their classrooms. In his 1980 book, *The ABCs of Literacy*, Tchudi provides a list of thirteen reasons why tests do not work, suggesting that we distinguish between testing and evaluation and reminding readers that “the question is not whether teachers will evaluate

growth in literacy, but how” (p. 150). In other words, nobody is against assessment, but that does not mean we have to test, that does not mean that we con-tort literacy evaluation into a regime that alienates students and makes them into robotic test takers.

That was 1980. Two years earlier, Peter Elbow had galvanized many in the writing world with his book *Writing without Teachers* (1978), a small, simply-written book that celebrated composition as discovery, as imagination, as a personal exploration. Elbow had been influenced by Donald Murray and the entire Expressivist position, which argued that writing was about personal empowerment and artistic vision. When Murray (1978) wrote that “the most accurate definition of writing, I believe, is that it is the process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it,” (1978 p. 122) he was suggesting that writing was a personal act of creation and self-discovery. It was not, in contrast, about test scores, impersonal school objectives, or standardized versions of literacy.

Later Elbow would be joined by the social constructivists, who argued that writing could not be removed from the social and political winds that forever imbued it with meaning. Paulo Freire (1988), Henry Giroux (2006), and Ira Shor (1999) would contend that writing—and education in general—had to militate against a “banking system” that inexorably removed it from its democratic and egalitarian moorings.

The 1980s was an incredibly exciting time to be a graduate student in composition studies. Just a decade removed from John Dixon’s *Growth through English* and the Dartmouth Conference, we were immersed in the optimism of a more humanistic approach to teaching writing. Now there was a chance to

focus on the writers, their growth through language, and the general notion that writing could become a part of their existential linguistic experience. Donald Graves was studying the acumen of young language users, and Denny Taylor was celebrating her book *Family Literacy*—a work that evinced the natural and totally social aspects of language acquisition and growth. For perhaps the first time, teachers were being told that language pedagogy was best taught from a bottom-up approach, one that focused on writers and the inherent abilities they brought to the classroom.

Politics and Language Instruction: Now You’re in Real Trouble

In the midst of the linguistic and pedagogical euphoria—one that suggested a paradigm shift—came Ronald Reagan’s *A Nation at Risk* (1984). For some reason unknown to any of us in graduate school, the writers of this highly political and oftentimes incendiary document had not gotten the memo about process and humanistic learning. Indeed, *A Nation at Risk* was written in military terms, arguing that not only was our educational system feckless and irresponsible but was also endangering our entire country. One needs only to read the opening lines to feel the punitive and paternalistic tone of the document:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. (as cited in Long, p. 10).

The response to *A Nation at Risk* could hardly be predicted. Dozens of articles were written arguing in scathing

terms that teachers were not doing their jobs and that schools must do more to secure the nation’s security. Of course, the main efficacy of the document was its political and international theme. This was not simply another attack on schools but on their failure to protect the country by producing enough smart people to win the Cold War. It was clearly no accident that the conservative report couched everything in terms that related to Cold War rhetoric:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it happens, we have allowed it to happen to ourselves (as cited in Long, p. 11).

As a teacher in 1984, I was witness to the impact of *A Nation at Risk* and the transformative influence on all that I had learned and come to understand in graduate school about language learning. Suddenly, there was little room or patience for creative writing or portfolios. Tests were again being stressed, and the new word around the high school where I taught was *accountability*.

When I submitted lesson plans, my department chair examined them for skills being covered and the attention paid to tests that would later be given. For someone who had just left a graduate program at Michigan State University—where my advisor had been editor of *English Journal*—the transition was nothing short of apoplectic. Like Dorothy, who realizes she is not in Kansas anymore, I learned within months of my first high school teaching job that countervailing winds were blowing through the language arts classroom. One was the voice of research and scholarship. It had dominated in graduate school and had celebrated the

incredible acumen that students bring to class, urging me to build on that ability with process-oriented assignments that transcended skills exercises and five-paragraph themes.

The other, a more powerful wind, was blowing from outside the school and was concerned with using fear to move the population to embrace test scores and a general narrative that damned public schools so it could generate more interest in vouchers. Despite what we had learned in graduate school, the message was clear: It was time to get back to basics through drill, memorization, and core values from the past. What was perhaps most upsetting was how shrill and complete the political voice was, and how decisively it had won and had taken over the curriculum. Mary Hatwood Futrell, then president of the National Education Association, explains the impact of *A Nation at Risk* this way:

As I was saying to my students not long ago, I can remember when it came out and it didn't matter if you were looking at the morning news, the afternoon news, magazines, newspapers, it was everywhere. And no one anticipated that it was going to have that kind of impact (as cited in Graham, 2015).

Why do we have standardized tests? Why do tests and skills-based pedagogy consume much of our time? Consider that just a few years after *A Nation at Risk* had staggered the country with worries about the future of our republic, conservative professor E.D. Hirsch published *Cultural Literacy* (1987). In it, Hirsch rode the wave of skills-driven pedagogy in arguing that schools should teach a specific body of knowledge, a very focused, classical education, so students could become better readers by sharing a common culture. As with

all conservative works, Hirsch suggested that students needed to be acculturated, to be given and drilled in a common core of knowledge, so they could be prepared for the literacy of the culture in which they lived. "At the heart of modern nationhood," writes Hirsch (1987), "is the teaching of literacy and a common culture through a national system of education." Later, he adds, "What is needed is a general education in a common culture" (p. 73).

The response to *Cultural Literacy* could not be anticipated and again represented a tidal wave of support for a skills-based curriculum that was antithetical to the cultural diversity education being espoused in university composition programs. More impor-

How could one question the greatness of Andrew Jackson and his genocide of the Cherokee Indians if there was already an accepted version of his record? How could one question the owning of slaves by Jefferson and Washington when the common core of important knowledge had already been established?

tantly, *Cultural Literacy's* main premise was based on the idea that there was a specific body of knowledge that should be taught and tested. As with *A Nation at Risk*, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* suggested that schools needed more control over students and the content they learned. And so, African Americans should be taught the common culture so they could be successful in a white world.

Of course, as Hirsch was loathe to admit, in learning this common culture—which was anything but common—minority students were being

forced to adopt the culture of those who had been their historical oppressors. In essence, Hirsch was calling for an end to complex thought and culturally diverse teaching methods. Indeed, how could one question the greatness of Andrew Jackson and his genocide of the Cherokee Indians if there was already an accepted version of his record? How could one question the owning of slaves by Jefferson and Washington when the common core of important knowledge had already been established?

Perhaps most revealing about the lost battle for our composition classrooms is the fact that within a year of the publication of *Cultural Literacy* came the publication of Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1988). In examining the two books, one recognizes the antithetical theories they advance. While Hirsch suggests that learning is about acquiring a fixed and static body of knowledge, Heath contends that teaching successfully requires embracing the many literacies that permeate our classrooms. In her study of Trackton and Roadville—two communities populated by predominantly black or white students—Heath came to appreciate the unique and rich literacies each community practiced and valued. Equally important, she argued that teachers were unsuccessful in teaching both communities because there was a distinct chasm separating the school literacy from the ways with words embraced at home.

For Heath (1988), the solution was to become ethnographers—to learn about the lives and literacies of students and to incorporate them into the classroom. Teachers became learners so they could make connections between the demands of the school and the worlds of their students. "Within class work," writes Heath, "the stress was on making linkages between how the students

learned information in their daily lives and ways they could talk about these ways on a meta level” (p. 339).

In other words, while Hirsch was urging teachers to impose a standard and very testable literacy on students from various cultures, Heath was exulting the experience of sharing cultures and making them part of the academic setting. Unfortunately, while *Ways with Words* was celebrated in graduate classes, Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* became a best-seller, landing the author on Sunday talk shows. In the end, it is not hard to guess which work became more prominent when educational bureaucrats argued for certain pedagogical policies.

The Lost Battle for Information

The fact is, through much of our history as teachers of English, we have seen political and media-driven documents undermine virtually any sound research on language pedagogy. Combine this with the disconcerting lack of background in composition and literacy studies that many writing teachers have, and we see why tests and prescriptive assignments and policies are so often embraced.

Indeed, when I was getting my doctorate degree in English at the University of Michigan in the 1990s, virtually no one in the department was specializing in composition theory, despite their appointment to teach freshmen composition. Many taught writing without any scholarly background because they thought that common sense and handbooks would guide them. Today, most of my colleagues are trained as literature teachers and have learned what little they know about composition theory from their peers or former teachers—all of whom had even less theoretical

background. I suspect that if a survey were given to teachers in my English department, more would know about *Cultural Literacy* than about *Ways with Words*. More would be able to tell me about Common Core than the work of James Paul Gee or James Berlin.

Put simply, the war to win the hearts and minds of not only the public but also many of our teachers has been won by those who know little about best practice, and it is reflected in our present policy to test both our students and teachers. Even many teachers accept the efficacy of tests, despite the very real questions about them in language pedagogy.

Tests, five-paragraph themes, prescribed thesis and clincher sentences, and other teacher-driven assignments are part of a broader system of teaching that has come to be called Current Traditional Rhetoric. Despite the fact that it was introduced in the late nineteenth century, the CTR continues to dominate the teaching of English and works in concert with the theory that writing can be reduced to discreet skills that need to be tested. According to Sharon Crowley (1996), “current traditional rhetoric maintains its hold on writing instruction because it’s fully consonant with academic assumptions about the appropriate hierarchy of authority” (p. 66).

In other words, despite the revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, culminating with the works of Murray, Elbow, Judy, and Freire, most writing classes maintain or stay loyal to the current traditional paradigm that has been heralded by people outside of composition programs.

As we explore the prominence of testing in language studies, we must first appreciate that it is part of a philosophy, an approach to writing that treats student writers as rather passive, vacuous

beings. At the heart of the CTR—and the testing that often works congruently with it—is the premise that “children are not capable of original thought” and “have little need to discover new ideas through writing” (Dornan, Rosen & Wilson, 2003, p. 223). More importantly, CTR removes the ideological or social aspects of writing from its instruction, assuming that all writing is done the same way and for a monolithic audience.

In the CTR classroom, essays are taught in uniform ways, without the consideration of diverse audiences or the adjustments to register that certain circumstances require. The writing process is also treated as a rather static system, and teachers often demand that the process—which is supposed to be there to liberate the writer to explore—be done in prescribed and predictable ways. According to Crowley (1998), “Current traditional textbooks display no interest in suiting discourses to the occasion for which they are composed. Rather, they collapse every composing occasion into an ideal in which authors, readers and messages are alike undistinguished” (p. 94).

Writing then, is not about composing in a dynamic and living social context—which reflects real life prose—but forcing “students to repeatedly display their use of institutionally sanctioned forms” (p. 95). This, of course, justifies the monolithic thinking and tests that can treat all writing as simplistic.

The five-paragraph theme is perhaps the most notorious of the CTR, and one can see how it fits into a test-laden, teacher-centered curriculum. First, if writing does not offer students a place for social interaction and idea invention—engaging in a process that is both linguistic and personal—then there is no need to involve the writer

beyond the prescription of rules and rubrics. Typical of CTR is a classroom where students languish through teacher-directed lessons with very specific rules that need to be followed and mastered. Such papers are easy to grade and test since the specific expectations are uniform and impervious to the real world of writing. Paragraphs are often a certain length, the style is formal, and introductions are always a funnel that culminates with a thesis. In essence, the academic writing class has created its own standard that does not reflect the diversity and dynamics of writing for real audiences.

Thus, we see the popularity of thesis statements, topic sentences, clincher sentences, and “proper grammar.” Eliminated from this static and anti-social pedagogy is the complexity of authentic communication, the incredible dynamics that decide how language is used and what makes it effective. Writing becomes monolithic and testing becomes as easy as multiple choice questions. “A frequent criticism of the current traditional approach,” writes James D. Williams (2014), “is that it seems disconnected from the social aspects of writing” (p. 53).

Tests and Language Arts Education

Which brings us back to the lamentable proliferation of tests through the years. Despite several decades of research that suggest a process approach is most effective in teaching students about an authentic language experience, Current Traditional Rhetoric has dominated most language arts pedagogy. In the words of Constance Weaver (1990), writing has embraced a “transmission model” of teaching rather than a “transactional” one. In the transmission

model, students are given facts and rules and asked to apply them to their writing in a methodical and orderly way. The process is linear and objective, and the basis for a successful paper is decided well before the writing ever begins. Standard English is right and other deviations are wrong. Thesis statements must be put in certain places, and paragraphs are expected to have a certain number of sentences. The audience and the language to be used for that audience tends to be monolithic as well.

In transactional writing, students become immersed in a more dynamic process of considering the specific audience and goals for a paper and the language that must be used. The word *transactional* suggests an open and lively interaction with the many complex aspects of authoring a paper. Is the audience liberal or conservative? Black, white, Hispanic, or from another culture, race, or ethnicity? Is the context for the writing formal or more relaxed, and how does that influence the style of the writing? Most importantly, the transactional writing model respects the many dialects, the many Englishes that pulse through and breathe life into our diverse communities. In responding to the continued battle between these ways of teaching, Patrick Shannon (2001) argues the following:

rather than an established curriculum designed to lead students through a set of pre-ordained skill exercises, advocates suggest schools and classrooms as sites of inquiry in which students investigate their own questions, simultaneously learning language, learning about language, and learning through language. (p. 21)

Testing and CTR as Signs of Success

Even a cursory examination of college programs reveals the incredible frenzy to test and measure students. At my college, we have totally abandoned any notion of student-initiative and replaced it with a test for virtually any class the student seeks to take. Want to go into a literature class? Before doing so, one must take a reading test, which claims to be able to measure the ability of the student to succeed in the next class. Developmental students are subjected to tests before they can advance into college-level writing, and programmed grammar tests have been mandated for all adjunct instructors. With the help of administration, which seeks to push students to graduation so as to advertise their high success rate, our department has initiated a program that requires students to complete grammar exams as part of their placement.

Our department has, with protests only from a select few of us who did graduate work in composition programs, become test-driven and a part of the Current Traditional model of teaching. Indeed, many teachers proudly assign papers that mandated five paragraphs and that require specific “skills” in each paragraph. We are in a long way from the euphoria that gripped us in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

How then, do we combat this test mentality and the desire of so many teachers to embrace the testing, prescriptive approach? The answer to the first question lies in a concerted effort among teachers and administration to embrace current theory, to promulgate the latest research, and to inform interested community members about how language is actually learned. A nice place to start is with workshops and

presentations, where the politics of testing are confronted and plans can be made to offer alternatives. In an effort to better educate my own staff and colleagues about the limitations of placement tests at our college, I gave a workshop on the writing exam and the reductive characteristics it contains. Tests, as a rule, are preferred by people outside of the classroom because of their easily accessible number, which purports to tell us all about the writer. In fact, I suggest, one writing episode only tells us about the limitations of the tests and should be supplanted with a portfolio or some kind of holistic evaluation. According to Ann Del Principe and Janine Graziano-King (2008):

The direct assessment of writing ability by means of timed writing tests remains a commonplace method of assessing student ability at the programmatic level despite the fact that much classroom assessment practice has adopted portfolios as the method of choice (p.297).

To better understand the limitations and challenges of the timed writing exam, I asked fellow instructors to take one. In being placed in the position of the student, teachers quickly come to terms with the way the writing exam distorts the act of writing and severely truncates any process for planning and discovery. Equally significant, it removes any aspect of the poetic from an act that should be artistic as well as functional. And finally, they see how uncomfortable minority students can be in trying to write in Standard White English with very challenging time constraints.

“I didn’t like the fact that I was rushed to do something that meant nothing to me—that I was doing a paper for someone or something else,” argued one instructor. Added a second

teacher, “As an African American, I felt extra pressure to make sure I was writing in the dialect of the academic community, and that takes more time—time that is more of an imposition for minorities who do not practice this language as regularly as white students.”

The writing exam, as with any test, measures the most minimal skills and reduces writing to a formula that must be quickly cobbled together in an attempt to satisfy a reader who rarely has any connection with the writer. At the same time, the holistic ability of authors—their overall, long-term portfolio—is completely ignored.

Alternatives to Writing Exams

As part of my workshop, I ask teachers to consider ways to combat the test mentality and to examine how we, as teachers, can continue to engage students in dynamic and complex writing assignments while also preparing them for the challenges of a one-size-fits-all writing exam. Above all, it is essential that we continue to teach writing as an artistic act, as a personal journey, as an experiment in knowing more about a subject in an intimate and aesthetic way—none of which can or should be contorted into an exam. Those in the post-process camp suggest that composing cannot be codified in a set of steps that become universal.

In my presentation, I broach this issue and examine the myriad writing tasks that make up composing. In the real world, we write to business people, to lovers, to friends, and for the aesthetic pleasure it brings us. In short, it is a social, evanescent activity. It is not, in contrast “content to be mastered” (Kastman Breuch, 2003, p. 113). It can never be taught as a set “of codified phrases” (p. 97).

To transcend the limitations of the exam—whether it is multiple choice or a timed essay—is to appreciate the complex nature of communication. Once we come to terms with this, we can begin moving toward a college-wide system that reconfigures writing as a heuristic act that is forever determined by a unique context. With this in mind, we can at least improve the exam if that is what our institutions demand.

One of the solutions comes in the work of Moore, O’Neil, and Huot (2009), whose essay on writing exams suggests that the ideological and social aspects of writing must be incorporated into any writing assessment:

Developing writing assessment procedures upon an epistemological basis that honors local standards, includes a specific context for both the composing and reading of student writing, and allows for the communal interpretation of written communication is an important first step in furnishing a new theoretical umbrella for assessing student writing. (p. 561)

Of special interest in examining their response is the significance placed on the complexities of the writing act and the local production of writing assessment. While conventional writing exams have seen the context as monolithic, the authors rightly contend that assessment designers must consider writing in certain rhetorical situations—that acknowledges the socially dynamic aspects of language. Further, it is suggested that writing assessment be a community project—not something that is imported from the outside. According to Moore, O’Neil, and Huot:

When we begin to base writing evaluation on the context of a

specific rhetorical situation adjudged by experts from within a particular area, we can eliminate the guessing students now go through in preparing for such examinations as well as the abstract debates and considerations about the best procedures for a wide variety of assessment purposes. (p. 560)

Central to the quotation above is the idea that writing can no longer be seen as it is in the Current Traditional model, where there is a uniform and static vision of literacy. Such approaches do not represent writing but academic obedience within a limited framework. They replace creation with coerced performance.

Exams That Allow for Time and Multiple Literacies

The first step in transcending the limitations of the standardized test is to make it less standardized—to imbue it with some of the realities of authentic discourse and to allow for multiple literacies in its production. In doing this, we present students with a better setting for what real writing looks like and expand the notions of correctness and acceptability beyond the narrow parameters of the Current Traditional model.

In this article, I have argued that tests are poor representations of a student's ability to write—that they are part of the legacy of the Current Traditional Rhetoric that has dominated composition pedagogy. In providing an alternative to the test—which might be mandated in many institutions—we would be wise to replicate the complicated and recursive aspects of the author at work.

In addition, students would benefit if the actual topics had more connection to discourses beyond the academy. If a test is mandated, one that is locally

produced and that respects the varied contexts of writing is best.

One way to tailor an exam would be to create scenarios that give rise to specific kinds of authentic writing. For instance, an exam could ask a test taker to write a review of a popular rap or rock song, giving specifics from the work and providing commentary on its merits. In doing this, students would not be limited by the ideas of Standard White English and would be given license to use non-standard expressions and words as they are deemed appropriate. Secondly, the test would not require the typical five-paragraph theme that students have been conditioned to produce like assembly-line workers.

In many ways, this would expand their literacy and challenge them in personal ways. Equally important, this exam would allow students to work throughout the day and perhaps return the next day to continue work. In allowing this, test takers are given the freedom that is often a part of real-world composing and have the latitude to engage in revision and rethinking of their topic. Not only would this provide for better papers, but it would also give students some much needed practice in writing and rewriting as professionals do. The political and personal advantages are best expressed by Henry Giroux (2006):

At issue here is the development of a pedagogy that replaces the authoritarian language of recitation with an approach that allows students to speak from their own histories, collective memories and voices, while simultaneously challenging the grounds on which knowledge and power are constructed and legitimated. (pp. 60-61)

But to do this, we must first, as teachers at any level, understand the

political and administrative currents that have gotten us here. We must appreciate the historic inertia of the Current Traditional model, the metrics that drive educational debate, and the need to base our pedagogy on what is known about writing as an act of recursive stages—stages that require time and consideration of context. While many of my colleagues still believe in a numbers-driven assessment procedure, others are fighting to maintain the integrity of the decades of research that has shown writing to be an act that engages those who do it in a dynamic and inexorably personal experiment in communication—one that can never be reduced to a formula and a number.

Our struggle at my college is typical of the consternation many feel as they see tests usurping decades of exciting research about composition pedagogy. Part of the problem lies in the convenience of tests and the satisfaction of the instant number. Another problem lies in the disconcerting paucity of teachers with composition backgrounds. No matter what the particular challenges, we must forge on, demanding more for our students and their writing experiences.

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