In January of 1978, University of Michigan faculty in the
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts adopted a
new writing requirement for all students entering the
College after Summer Term, 1978. This new program,
administered by the College's English Composition Board
(ECB), requires that students successfully complete an
Introductory Composition course, exempted from it, or, for those
whose writing skills warrant intensive training, placed into
Writing Tutorials. Tutorial courses are seven weeks long
with a maximum enrollment of sixteen students in a
section. During the course, each student receives up to
28 hours of classroom instruction and an additional five to
seven hours of individual help through scheduled weekly
conferences.

At the end of each seven-week course, Tutorial
students write another assessment essay on a new topic.
As before, their essays are evaluated by two raters, and
on the basis of their performance, they are either placed into
Introductory Composition, exempted from it, or required to enroll in another seven-week Writing Tutorial.
Assessment essays are evaluated by faculty members
who teach Writing Tutorials; teachers are not, however, required to defend the placement of their own
students. One of the successes of the program has been
the rate at which Tutorial students progress. Nearly 85%
are able to go on to Introductory Composition after one
seven-week course; virtually all students are able to do
so after two courses.

Because the University's new writing requirement
is founded on the conviction that students learn more
effectively when their skills are matched with appropriate
modes of instruction, the ECB's assessment procedure is
the cornerstone of the entire program. As a result, a great
deal of energy has been devoted to ensuring that the
procedure is a valid estimate of student writing ability. In
addition, the program seeks to monitor the quality of the
maintenance of detailed computer records for every
essay (c. 26,000) that the Board has evaluated. Beginning
with our experimental year in 1978, we have collected and
reviewed information pertaining to that situation—including scores and placements for each
essay, the topic on which the student wrote, and the
readers who evaluated the essay. This information is routinely combined with other indicators of the student's
academic performance, including grade point average in
high school and scores on such national tests as SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement. These records have
enabled us, for example, to identify and retrieve any
essay on which raters disagreed and has proved to be
invaluable for ongoing training of ECB evaluators.

Comparing other academic data with our own results has
also been helpful in answering questions about the
consistency (and predictive value) of various topics.
Since the program began, we have continuously
monitored the reliability of our raters' judgments. We have
discovered, by examination of the data, that very few
rater discrepancies result from error on the part of either
evaluator. In fact, weekly training sessions in which
problem essays are read and discussed by the raters are
characterized by almost unanimous agreement about the
features and qualities of each essay. When raters do
differ, it is nearly always about which placement will best
serve a student's needs and what type of instruction will
best foster the writer's present skills.

Thus, most of our time at the ECB is spent in the
attempt to articulate for ourselves and our colleagues
the kinds of instruction that will best serve a particular
student. Although we have many questions to which we
have only parts of answers or none at all, we are
confident that engaging such questions is exactly the
way we should be spending our time and the surest way
to provide a profitable curriculum for our students.

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BROWN (continued)

emphasizing the acquisition of low-level skills. As public debate about how to reorder them grows, there are some
obvious steps to take that need not wait for general consensus. Higher-level skills are not widely distributed because
they are not widely taught. If the percentage of time devoted to writing in the high schools—3% as given by
Arthur Applebee's study 2—were raised to 5% or even 6%, we could see some important changes. If the emphasis in testing
shifted just a little away from summative and more toward formative evaluation, a little away from norm-referenced and
more toward criterion-referenced tests, a little away from indirect and more toward direct measures, we could develop a
more accurate gauge of what is going on and tests could be more helpful to students than they are today. Policy can
nudge us in those directions without seriously upsetting the delicate balance of powers that defines our current
educational possibilities.

You need not agree with my interpretations of assessment findings in order to accept the simple point I want to make
here. The point is that if you systematically collect and analyze writing samples and background information about
writers, you can develop something more broadly useful than a "testing program." In the long run, the unit cost of such a
program—the cost per unit of information for a variety of audiences—is lower than the cost of a series of one-shot, one-
use tests.

2 Arthur Applebee, Writing in The Secondary School: English and The Content Areas (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of

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