

## CORE CURRICULUM AND THE WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAM RECONSIDERED

In 1979, when the College of Arts and Sciences at U Mass/Boston began giving its required Writing Proficiency Exam, we knew we would not have to ask students their opinions about the exam. No matter how we explained the exam, its aims, its design, they argued against it and denounced it. Even though students did not have to pass the exam before the beginning of the junior year, and although the Core Curriculum provided instruction in writing in most of the Core courses and in freshman English, students thought the exam unfair and resented it. They resented the penalties: the fact that first-term juniors who had not passed the exam could not take a full load of courses and had to enroll in a special non-credit writing course. Even more, they resented the fact that after the first half of the junior year they could not take any courses until they passed the exam. Student sentiment most emphatically showed itself a year after the exam was first given, when students occupied a University building. The students at first presented three demands: reversal of two faculty tenure decisions, rehiring of a Student Affairs staff member, and a 51% student voice on all University committees. But when the protesters needed wider support, they got it by expanding their list of demands. The fourth was "End the Proficiency Exam," well ahead of No. 9, "Repeal of the 43% tuition increase!"

The exam is designed to test the students' ability to write about a specific topic discussed in a set of readings. Four or five times a year the examiners distribute packets of readings; each packet contains three sets, each set provides about fifteen pages of essays and articles on a specific topic, like U.S. Immigration Policy, The Recombinant DNA Controversy, or The Films of Alfred Hitchcock. A month before the exam students pick up the packets and look them over, choose to study one set of readings carefully, and in the

exam room ask for the questions on that set. In June, 1981, after three years of assembling packets of readings on challenging yet manageable topics, the examiners fell back on the topic of Liberal Education to round out a packet that already contained sets of readings on The Brain and Social Science Fiction. The Liberal Education set had essays by J.M. Cameron, Mickey Friedman, Peter Engel and Russell Baker. The examiners gave the students a choice of two questions. The first asked them to evaluate the extent to which various college curricula described in the essays met the goal of liberal education which one of the essayists said was "to awaken innocent minds to a suspicion of information." The second question, the one that provided some insight into student opinion of the exam itself, was:

You are now taking the UM/B College of Arts and Sciences Writing Proficiency Examination. To what extent is this examination consistent with the views of education contained in the assigned readings? (You may take any position you wish, as long as your answer is supported by specific references to the readings.)

Fifteen students wrote on the "suspicion of information" question, twenty on the educational value of the exam itself. Out of the 150 students at that sitting of the exam, twenty (8%) hardly constitute a sample; but their bluebooks offer some interesting comments and confirm a general college-wide impression that students have come to accept the exam. First of all, the bluebooks show that the college catalogue and brochures, the orientation meetings, the advising system, and classroom instruction have combined to establish the Proficiency Exam in the students' minds as a coherent part of the college's response to student problems in writing. Like the rest of us, students have been reading and hearing that our schools have failed to teach writing. Hence, whatever their appraisal of the exam, most bluebooks focused attention on how effectively the college helped improve student writing rather than on whether we should have an exam at all. And it was gratifying to find so many explicit comments that the faculty in introductory courses

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were in fact teaching writing.

In saying this, I should also add that these students said nothing about some materials specially designed to help them. When students pick up the packets of reading a month before the exam, they also get a Fact Sheet, a Sample Proficiency Exam, and a twenty-two page manual, *Nine Elements of Proficiency in Writing*, which explains the criteria used in grading the exam. I remember that in 1979 the manual was highly praised by students preparing for the first exam even though the exam was, as I have said, generally resented. Ironically, now that the exam itself has become almost routine and the manual is cited in many Core courses, no student even mentioned it. More about that later.

In any case, the twenty bluebooks showed something else, that students did not view the exam as testing a special skill or talent. "The exam requires thought," said one who was thankful for the month allowed for "study and consideration" of the readings. Another found that a main theme in the readings on Liberal Education was a complaint about students' inability to "think critically," their "inability to reason;" she decided that the exam provided a valid way of testing that ability to think critically. Just so, the manual stresses thought; the first five of its admonitions are: "1. Answer the question directly; 2. Support your answer with clear, developed arguments; 3. Show that you have read the source materials accurately; 4. Define key terms where necessary; 5. Focus on the intellectual issues in the questions and avoid irrelevant digression into personal reminiscence and anecdote." Only the last four of the manual's admonitions deal with language, paragraphs, sentences, grammar, and spelling. All of the bluebooks showed that the students had learned that the exam was designed to test their ability to think in writing.

The few students who expressed their disapproval of the exam also trimmed their opinions. One who frankly said, "I am not crazy about it; so I don't want it," also said that "the impulse to get rid of it" might be an unthinking, "bureaucratic" response to a bureaucratic requirement. Another student saw the exam as part of an attempt to make the University "selective and elitist;" for him and for other students the exam was a "psychological obstacle" to "our pursuit of a liberal education." He wanted to eliminate all courses and grades in favor of tutorials and senior exams; but he expressed, too, his worry about students' need to compete in an increasingly technological society. All in all, the criticism of the exam in the bluebooks was limited and, allowing for the fact that bluebooks inhibit protest, comments were thoughtful—certainly a long way from the formulaic sit-in claim that it was discriminatory, elitist, and punitive.

Thus, while the June bluebooks showed some scepticism about the exam, students overwhelmingly accepted it as a part of a sensible and desirable college-wide emphasis on writing. Of that elaborate, overlapping, and, to use my son's basketball term, "massive" effort to provide instruction in writing, the students were conscious and properly appreciative. But they were indifferent, naturally enough I suppose, to the design of the testing program. They ignored its commitment to a "subject matter" that minimized cultural and social disadvantages of some students, that is, the test's commitment to a topic adequately presented in readings distributed to everyone who planned to take the test. The

students did not mention, as I have said, the manual's explicit criteria for judging proficiency in writing, nor the easy access to Fact Sheets and Sample Exams. Only a few noted the provision of a month to study the readings and none commented on the provision of three hours to write an essay of at least seven paragraphs. Only implicitly did students show awareness of the exam's emphasis on argument, analysis, and criticism. In short, we would have liked more students to acknowledge what we had wrought.

Indifferent or not to some aspects of the exam, about a thousand students a year have taken the exam, some for the fourth time, since there is no limit on retakes. At any sitting about 30 to 35% fail, but in three years only 71 students have been academically dismissed, and of these, 14 have won reinstatement by passing the exam. In this context, the June 1981 exam books gave us encouraging signs that after three years our Core Curriculum and its Writing Proficiency Exam, which were adopted by a narrow margin and opposed by students, are now accepted, and are working. If we cannot yet say how well they are working, how much the massive effort at teaching writing and administering the Proficiency Exam have in fact improved student writing, we look forward with some confidence to our first full-scale evaluation of the Core Curriculum, the Proficiency Exam, and student writing in the coming year.

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