

SOME CURRICULAR IMPLICATIONS OF THE CUNY WRITING ASSESSMENT TEST

It seems axiomatic that the way we test our students determines in part what and how we teach them. To some degree, we all "teach to the test." Or, to put it in a way that may be easier for all of us to accept, when we teach we have in mind the goals we hope our students will reach. And more often than not, we try to discover the degree to which our students reach those goals with some sort of test. Hence our tests reflect the goals we set both for our students and for ourselves.

This was one of several assumptions made consciously by the CUNY Chancellor's Task Force on Writing during our first few preliminary meetings and sustained throughout our effort to design the CUNY Writing Assessment Test. Our mandate was to devise a test that would demonstrate the "minimal readiness" of students entering The City University to work effectively and survive in an average entry-level freshman composition course anywhere in the University. The purpose of the test was not to screen students for entrance into the University itself. They were to take it after they had already matriculated. The purpose of the test was, in effect, to put a floor under freshman English, so that all students would begin at least this one important course with more or less the same level of preparation.

Inevitably, therefore, the CUNY Writing Assessment Test had curricular implications. It would suggest where every freshman composition course in the University ought to begin and also where every remedial or basic writing course in the University ought to end as well as the direction it should take. And since the vast majority of CUNY students are graduates of New York City high schools, the test would suggest the most effective direction for writing courses designed to prepare students for college.

This awareness of the broad impact of our decisions led the Writing Task Force to discuss the test from the very beginning in terms of rhetoric as well as revelation. Certainly the test had to reveal students' writing ability in a way that could be demonstrated both valid and reliable. Just as certainly the test we put into effect, and the accompanying materials we published about it, would either tell students, parents, and teachers that the University meant business when it said students' writing had to improve, or it would tell students, parents, and teachers that the "writing crisis" was a bluff.

Mina Shaughnessy, then the Dean of the Instructional Resource Center and the chairperson of CUNY's Task Force on Writing, insisted that the people whom the University appointed to the Task Force all be writing teachers. All of us had read our quota of three or four hundred student essays a semester, semester after semester for years. To us the writing crisis was no hoax. From our point of view, the only way students could show whether or not they could write was to write, and the only way the University could tell whether students could write was to read what they had written. And from our point of view the most important message we could send to the city's students, parents, and teachers was that from now on students entering CUNY would be held to a clear standard of minimum competence in writing.

Establishing a clear standard involved, of course, much debate and many compromises. What we agreed on

finally was that upon entering the University's freshman composition courses students should already understand the basic form of academic, professional, and business discourse: they should be able to formulate and state a position on a familiar topic and defend or explain that position in a reasonably coherent way in reasonably correct standard written English.

The curricular implications of this decision quite simply were that in the city high schools' college preparatory classes and in the University's remedial or basic writing classes, whatever else teachers chose to teach their students about the uses of language and about the "language arts," in the end students had to be able at least to write a simple argumentative/explanatory essay.

Writing Task Force members were aware of the dangers inherent in this decision. Some teachers might try to help their students reach the goal set by the test by unimaginative, presumably easy and direct, formulaic routes. In fact, evidence turned up eventually suggesting that some teachers had done just that. During one testing period at Brooklyn College, for example, readers found a whole set of papers in which coherence had been attempted by repeating the same set of adverbial connectors in the same order, paragraph by paragraph: "however," "accordingly," "therefore;" "however," "accordingly," "therefore;" "however," "accordingly," "therefor"—paper after paper.

Having foreseen just such formulaic teaching, the Task Force had set out to forestall it, with obviously—and perhaps inevitably—limited results. A curriculum model based on the test's criteria circulated twice through the whole University system, collecting revisions and emendations. Writing program administrators from all the CUNY colleges convened to discuss the curriculum model and the test's impact on teaching. And high school English department chairs were invited to discuss the test's implications with their teachers and with us.

The curriculum model that resulted (carefully labelled a curriculum model, not a model curriculum) stressed gradual preparation, attention to the process of writing, and the importance of effective reading in effective writing. Its goal was to help students learn to respond to issues discoverable in first-hand experience (defined as reading as well as everyday occurrences), formulate a generalization based on such an issue, and explain or defend that generalization in a rudimentarily unified and coherent essay. Part of the curriculum's goal was also to help students express both generalization and defense or explanation in language conforming generally to the conventions of standard written English. In short, the curriculum aimed at giving students a foundation for the kind of writing demanded in most academic, business, and professional situations, and a foundation also for learning the more sophisticated conceptual forms and rhetorical devices and practices normally taught in college-level composition.

The model supposed a two-phase basic writing sequence. Phase one was designed for students who had not yet demonstrated an understanding of the basic conceptual process demanded by college-level writing. It suggested that teachers might give such students

practice in arriving at and asserting their own opinions about incidents of which they had had first-hand experience, and about current events; lead students toward formulating their opinions in general terms and in standard written English; and accustom them to explaining why they hold those opinions. The Task Force was aware, however, that the lowest scores on the tests, gained by students who would begin the curriculum in phase one, are caused by a greater diversity of writing problems than scores in the other ranges, and that as a result, teachers of students writing at this level would have to devise an especially large repertoire of teaching approaches.

Phase two of the model was designed for students who had begun to understand that they must express a view of their own in general terms, but who could not yet coherently develop such a generalization once stated. The model suggested that teachers might give such students practice in discussing "issues" as they appear in written material (both published work and work of the students themselves), practice perceiving questions generated by these generalizations, and practice developing thorough, well-expressed answers to these questions in rudimentary expository forms.

The model also suggested in both phases that teachers give students practice in finding information in written form (the most basic library work) and in making it their own (the most basic reading techniques relevant to argumentative/explanatory writing, and simple precis writing), both integrated with practice in writing. This suggestion was made not because these skills were required by the CUNY Writing Assessment Test in any direct or literal sense. They were not. It was made because these skills are part of the necessary conceptual and practical context of the kind of writing required by the CUNY test. But the suggestion to teach some basic reading and study skills along with writing in phase one was of course made with the realization that many students also need more extensive work in both reading and study skills than could possibly be integrated into a writing course of the sort described in phase one.

Both phase one and phase two of the model suggested that teachers give students practice in appropriate aspects of standard written English. Phase one stressed fluency and the most basic elements of sentence structure. Phase two stressed other structural elements, as well as careful proofreading of final copy.

Studies of curricular changes in the seventeen CUNY colleges during the past several years seem to show that the test has had considerable impact on the writing curriculum. The first effect of the test on curriculum was to make teaching freshman composition easier by making the population of freshman English classes more homogeneous. Teachers now know where to begin because they can be more confident where most of their students have left off. Sample basic writing syllabi show that these courses are also considerably better focused than heretofore. Teachers can plan their work more confidently as a result of the test because they know the goal their students must reach. It is hoped that with the help of the curriculum model, the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, even with its limited goals, has helped to free writers as well as to discipline them.

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