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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 speak or write 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 enrolled. 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's 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," "therefore"—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 in 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 or even very brief experience), formulate a generalization based on such an issue, and explain—generalize or define 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
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THE JUNIOR LEVEL EXIT EXAMINATION: AN INOCULATION THAT DID NOT TAKE!

In the Fall of 1980, our Vice President—concerned about the 20% failure rate on a locally designed "basic skills" test in English—organized a committee from the College of Science, Engineering, Business, Nursing, Education, and three representatives from the English Department to make recommendations about designing and implementing a writing competency test as a requirement for graduation from the University of Texas at El Paso, a branch campus of the UT system with a student population of 15,500. Allocated money on a weekly basis for four months, the committee made proposals for developing the examination, establishing criteria for holistic scoring, planning training sessions for graders, overseeing the evaluation of the graders, and identifying cut-off scores. Yet after all the work was completed, we decided, "You know, this isn't the way, a test tells little too little. There must be a better way to encourage students to recognize the importance of writing than merely devising a test for them to pass."

Before any participant in the National Testing Network in Writing endorses a junior or senior level exit examination, two important issues not initially apparent to us should be addressed: cost and politics. The first, cost, involves several problems. Who pays for designing the examination? Can it be designed locally, or should ETS, ACT, or SRA be commissioned to create it? How valid would a locally designed test be? Would faculty trust the results? What provision for validation would be available? How much would "test run" costs? Who pays for graders? Would they be teaching assistants, volunteers from departments across the campus, or the overly burdened English majors?

Second, what are the political considerations of such an examination, particularly for a university with a significant Hispanic population (40%)? What happens when foreign students sit for the test? Should they be "certified" as knowing the language by having passed courses in English for speakers of other languages? How would the university administration handle the litany of complaints from students who had successfully passed their freshman composition courses, and who perhaps had even taken a literature or advanced composition course in a content area, but failed to write an acceptable response?

The UTEP committee addressed these and other issues. We decided it would be prohibitively expensive to have a specially designed test created by one of the nationally known testmakers. We proposed, instead, that during a trial period of two years either juniors or graduating seniors be given a writing assignment on a general topic that included instructions to elicit a four-page essay. During the trial period, we would establish a reasonable time to be allotted for future administrations of the test by adding thirty minutes to the average time it took students to complete the assignment. Since few people write public documents without the aid of a dictionary, we recommended that students be allowed to use a dictionary (bilingual, if preferred) during the test.

We also recommended that a Guidebook be created for students to explain the format of the test, discuss the subject matter of questions, provide sample topics, establish time restraints for the test, and elaborate other relevant matters. Student participation would be essential in preparing this Guidebook; some members regretted