J. Scott Drakulich

BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF AN ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST

Amidst all the controversy about testing, surprisingly little attention has been given to student opinions of testing. In 1980, I developed a questionnaire to assess the reaction of junior college students to the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test (NJCBSPT), a test required of all entering freshmen at two and four year schools in the state. The questionnaire was administered to 429 students—reflecting the range in the population in the lowest level basic skills English courses at four urban and four suburban two-year colleges in New Jersey.

The NJCBSPT is a three-and-one-half hour test which includes a brief writing sample, three multiple-choice sections measuring verbal skills (reading comprehension, logical relationships and sentence structure), and two multiple choice mathematics sections (computation and elementary algebra). The reading and writing tests contain three multiple choice sections and an essay. The reading test consists of short reading passages about which the student answers questions. The other sections are designed to measure the students' ability to write standard English sentences, to use coordination and subordination correctly, as well as to measure the students' ability to see relationships among words, among sentences and among ideas.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' opinions of the NJCBSPT; the use of the test in advisement; the appropriateness of that advice; and the English course they took as a result of the test. The questionnaire contained 45 statements with which students were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. (An undecided category was also provided.) The student responses I will discuss are:

- "The 20 minute essay was a good measure of my ability to write."
- "The NJCBSPT provided important information for my adviser to use in selecting appropriate courses for me."
- "The NJCBSPT results made me realize I needed this English course."
- "If I had my choice, I would have taken a more difficult English course."
- "This English course is exactly the English course I needed."
- "I should have been placed in a more difficult English course."

Examining each of the response distributions yielded the following information:

- Approximately 60% of the students indicated they thought the essay test was a good measure of their ability to write; over one-quarter of the students did not believe the test was a good measure of their ability to write.
- A large majority (71.7%) of the students indicated they thought the placement test provided important placement information.
- Slightly over three-quarters of the students reported that the NJCBSPT results made them realize they needed their basic skills English course.
- Almost one-third of the students reported that they would have taken a more difficult English course.

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William Lutz

WHAT WE KNOW AND DON'T KNOW ABOUT USING MULTIPLE-CHOICE TESTS TO ASSESS WRITING

Since Godshalk's classic study, 1 the amount of substantive research on the relationship between essay tests and multiple-choice tests to assess writing ability has been scarce. We continue to accept or reject the use of multiple-choice tests for reasons other than informed judgment based on solid research data. Indeed, if we were to attempt to decide whether we wanted to use either a multiple-choice test or a writing sample, we would not have all that much research data on which to base our decision. Too often, those selecting tests to assess writing base their selection on factors other than the best method of assessment consistent with the purpose of the testing program. Factors which influence the selection of a writing test include cost (essays cost a lot of money to read), reliability (multiple-choice tests offer high reliability, validity (essay tests offer high face validity while multiple-choice tests offer mixed face validity), time (essays take longer to read while multiple-choice tests can be quickly, even machine, scored), and politics (which group has the most power to influence the selection of the test). Rarely is a decision to select a test based upon the best and most recent research in test theory.

If we were to select a method of assessing writing based on research data, we would be hard pressed to make our selection. Of course, everyone knows that multiple-choice tests cannot assess writing as well as a writing sample, but then everyone also knows it is almost impossible to assess writing samples reliably. And everyone knows that a writing sample must be at least forty-five minutes long because twenty minutes simply is not enough time for a student to produce enough writing for proper assessment. Then, too, everyone knows that weaker students do poorly on multiple-choice tests because they are bad test takers, and besides, reading ability interferes with their performance. I would point out that all of these preceding statements on testing have little if any basis in research data.

Progress has been made in some ways since Godshalk's study. If nothing else, we have clarified the issues involved in multiple-choice testing. A key finding of the Godshalk study was that different item types produced significantly different results, thus his caution to use "well-designed" multiple-choice tests. We also know that multiple-choice tests can be designed to tap similar skills as those tapped by essay tests, instead of simply testing editing or proofreading skills. We know also that multiple-choice tests tend to assess more reliably the skills of weak writers while not assessing as reliably the skills of better writers. We know, too, that testing must have a purpose, and that the purpose of the test will mandate the design of the test. Thus, a test to identify students who need developmental assistance in writing will be significantly different from a test designed to identify those students exempt from a required writing

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By responding to the question with an essay, you should be able to generate your own controlling idea and produce illustrations and/or explanations to support it. Your questions will be similar to:

Is it true that "...lying is an inevitable part of society"?

You will be expected to write an essay of about 500 words. Bring the reading to the exam.

English 190 Final Exam

Answer the following question with an essay.

Is using euphemisms "...lying or a sign of good manners"?

Be sure that your essay is about 500 words and use references from the reading and your experience.

The results of the study 3 were astounding:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English 120</th>
<th></th>
<th>English 190</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Hints Test</td>
<td>Hints Test</td>
<td>Hints Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flaws Per Essay</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Flaws</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a decrease of 9 flaws per essay in English 120 and 5 flaws per essay in English 190. That is a 50% difference in flaws in English 120 and a 39% difference in flaws in English 190. The students could not have improved, in the case of Sample A, or fallen apart, in the case of Sample B, that much in a week. And, even more important, the hints seemed to make a more critical difference for the less skilled students.

With these results backing our initial assumption, we publish, before each exam, some hints:

For English 095: two sample questions and their rhetorical formats.
For English 120: three topic areas with sample questions.
For English 190: the exam reading plus a sample question.

This publishing of hints before the test is not unique to Cal State-LA. I know it is done at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, Chicago State University, 4 and Anderson College in Anderson, Indiana, to name a few. This system, along with being humane, is as statistically reliable 5 and certainly more efficient than the cumbersome and time-consuming pretesting of test topics—a method used frequently in many testing situations.

Obviously, if writers do demonstrate their writing skill better when they are—or even think they are—familiar with a test's topic, then why not provide them with that comfort and success margin?

1 The reported data represent only two of the courses in the program because these were the only samples tested. The hint procedure does, however, operate in the other course.
2 Readers will notice that the instructions of the sample tests are very abbreviated. This form—contrary to the many testing instruments which incorporate very detailed information ranging from instructions for the format for the response to instructions on the content to be incorporated into the response—is deliberate. Our goal is to test whether the student has the ability to construct the finished essay as he develops his own content, not whether he can follow detailed directions.
3 The English 120 results are significant at x 2 level of .02. The English 190 results are significant at x 2 level of .05.
4 For further information see Rosemary Hake, "With No Apology Teaching To the Test," Basic Writing, 1:4 (1978) 39-62.
5 In no instance in nine years at Chicago State University, which includes 18,000 samples, and three years at California State University—Los Angeles, which includes 10,500 samples, has there been a significant difference between Credit/No credit performances of students on particular tests or topics.
6 Rosemary Hake, Professor of English, is Coordinator of the Writing Program at California State University—Los Angeles; presently she is conducting a three year progression study, which should be completed by January, 1994, dealing with the interior and exterior validity of that program.

DRAKULICH (continued)

- Slightly more than two-thirds of the students indicated they were placed in the exact English course they needed. Only one-quarter of the students indicated they should have been placed in a more difficult English course.

From these findings, it may be inferred that an essay test is viewed as an acceptable placement instrument by three-quarters of the students tested. The fact that one-quarter of the students do not believe an essay test measured their ability to write may suggest that these students "choke up" when asked to write under time constraints.

Indeed, it appears that the NUCBSPRT helped students realize that they were properly placed in a basic skills course. The fact that one-quarter of the students do not believe that they should be placed in a basic skills course on the basis of their scores on a single essay test may suggest that these students "choke up" when asked to write an essay under time constraints. For those students who indicated that they should have been placed in a more advanced English course, teachers should be advised to offer students a second opportunity to demonstrate their writing ability during the first week of class. Finally, it may be inferred from the questionnaire that the majority of students view the essay test as an acceptable instrument for placing students into the appropriate English course.


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