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, 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.

(Continued on page 11)

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 (Continued on page 14)
students who take the test each year. Several factors may account for this:

- students must meet the competency requirements in order to graduate;
- high schools, in order to be registered by the Education Department, must meet a number of criteria, one of which is that 85% of the graduating students must have met competency requirements;
- the Education Department reviews every test paper which receives a grade of 60% or above (approximately 170,000 papers) in order confirm the grade given at the local level. It is the Education Department which certifies whether or not a student has met the competency requirement in writing. Rates are hired by the Department on a per diem basis but must meet a number of prerequisites before being hired, including; a college degree with a major or minor in English, teaching experience, satisfactory performance on a six hour test used to determine reliability as a member of the complete range of the evaluation scale, ability to rank-order papers consistently over time; and availability for work.

The State's overall testing program identifies students whose writing ability is weak as early as grade 8, and instructional help must be provided to overcome weaknesses. Beginning in May of 1983, a writing test will be administered to all fifth grade students. A remedial instruction will be mandated at that level for all students who have problems in writing. Guidelines for elementary school remediation in writing are being developed and certainly will mandate instruction in all aspects of the writing process. These will be included in the manual which accompanies the test and will be available to schools throughout the State.

The writing test has caused a flurry of activity related to writing programs in the schools. Even the most "die-hard" critic of the statewide competency program must admit that the English teacher has more clout now than he has been true in the recent past. Given the concerns of educational institutions, business organizations, college admissions offices, parents, and the community at large, the focus on writing is long overdue.

The test—and the materials which accompany it—focus on the process of writing. Many schools have responded by adopting the NCTE statement on writing programs in developing their classroom instruction. With the development of new programs and the revamping of existing ones, and with the advent of a writing assessment at the elementary school level, a new concern with and a clearer direction for an articulated K-12 program in writing have emerged. In addition, administrators and teachers have recognized the need for professional in-service training for writing instruction—a need for better teacher preparation now also recognized nationally. In-service programs now abound in our state.

The testing also created the impetus for curriculum review both at the local and state level. Work began nearly a year ago at the state level to revise the English/Language Arts curriculum. A draft of the writing portion of this curriculum was completed during the summer of 1982, but work on this project will continue for the next two years. Plans call for a K-12 writing curriculum, a supervisor's manual, and a publication for writing instruction in disciplines other than English.

Readers may be interested in my perceptions gained from the Competency Test in Writing. The following is only a sampling:

- A statewide testing program can be put in place and can create a positive instructional thrust within the schools.
- Much more needs to be learned about the writing process and the interaction students produce in a testing situation.
- More information is needed about handicapped students (hearing and visually impaired, learning disabled) and the writing competency requirements.
- Schools must develop a K-12 writing program which includes all disciplines.
- Development of the student as writer needs to begin early in the student's school experience.
- Schools must establish ways to monitor students' progress in writing on a K-12 basis.
- Teachers can be trained to evaluate papers using a particular procedure, and they can become reliable at using it.
- A system can be established to review massive numbers of written compositions.
- Tests, to some degree, can narrow the perception of what a writing program is or can be.

Charles R. Chew is Chief of the Bureau of English Education for the New York State Education Department, Albany, New York; his responsibilities include development of competency tests in writing and the Comprehensive Examination in English (thorough, supervision and assessment of English/Language Arts Programs K-12, and the development of a state curriculum).

LUTZ (continued)

We need to know as precisely as possible what multiple-choice testing can contribute to specific kinds of tests. I am presently conducting research to determine whether carefully designed multiple-choice tests will identify students needing developmental writing assistance as effectively as a writing sample. Preliminary results indicate that certain kinds of item types will identify such students as accurately as a writing sample. The preliminary results also indicate that the same multiple-choice item types do not identify as well as the writing sample students who write at an acceptable level of competence.

We need to know much more about the use of multiple-choice tests to assess writing. Can multiple-choice tests assess the full range of student writing ability? That is, can multiple-choice tests identify the student in need of developmental assistance as well as the student who should receive course credit? What kinds of item types do and do not work? To what extent does reading ability affect multiple-choice test results? Do certain item types work better with poor writers, and, conversely, do certain item types work better with good writers? Can item types be developed which would give some picture of the student's writing process? What new or different kinds of item types can be developed to assess the writing process as we now understand it?

Most of the problems with the design and use of multiple-choice tests can be traced to the lack of involvement in the design and development of such tests by writing teachers. We need now to become actively involved in research that will lead to a better understanding of multiple-choice tests, as well as lead to better tests and better use of test results.

William Lutz is Chair of the English Department at Rutgers University-Camden and former Director of The New Jersey Basic Skills Assessment Program, a state-wide program designed to assess the reading, writing, and mathematics skills of all freshmen entering public colleges in New Jersey.