

THE IMPACT OF TESTING ON CURRICULA

Speaker: Carol Hartzog, *University of California, Los Angeles*
Betty Bamberg, *University of Southern California*
Introducer/Recorder: Cynthia Bates, *University of California, Davis*

Carol Hartzog said that she would not talk about the hypothetical case, the ideal world in which testing influences curriculum in a predictable and important way—because her colleagues in education have explained that there is no better way to exert control over curriculum than through carefully devised exams. That control, of course, is exerted not in a vacuum, but in a particular political, historical, and intellectual context. And it is that force field—that combination of influences, relationships, aims, and assumptions—that Hartzog asked the conferees to consider. She based her discussion on her experience at the University of California and in the California educational system.

Approximately five years ago, the entire freshman writing program at UCLA was reviewed and modified. Among the changes that took place was the redesigning of the Subject A (entrance level) essay examination. Originally consisting of a brief prompt that required a personal narrative in response, the exam was modified to include a reading passage followed by a choice of two questions, one based closely on the text and the other allowing for personal experience and observation. This revamping of the exam reflected changes in the curriculum of UCLA's writing program. In reviewing their writing program, Hartzog and other faculty members agreed that their English 1 (Subject A) course, a four-unit workload course carrying two units of baccalaureate credits, should receive full credit since the redesigned course involved university-level reading and writing and had been well integrated into the freshman program. The University of California's Academic Senate, however, ruled that courses satisfying the Subject A requirement were remedial in nature and therefore should receive no credit. In the end, the matter was decided on the floor of UCLA's Legislative Assembly: English 1 would no longer receive baccalaureate credit.

Moving to the next wider circle—the University of California system—Hartzog noted that changes were also occurring in the writing programs on other campuses, changes reflecting current research, theory, and practices in composition. When the no-credit ruling on Subject A courses was handed down to these writing programs, several campuses challenged the ruling. At this time the directors of the various writing programs formed the University Council of Writing Programs. Composed of writing directors and faculty members from all undergraduate campuses, the Council has created a network for communication and collaboration and reinforced ties with the faculty senate and the UC President's Office. Council members are now drawn into discussions about curricula before decisions are made about their programs. One of the Council's first areas of concern was the Subject A examination, which varied in format from campus to campus. Acting on the request of a university-wide faculty committee, the Council recently completed a proposal for a statewide Subject A examination. The Council advocates that the exam be closely related to

curricula on both university and high school campuses.

Finally, in examining the widest circle of influence, the California educational system, Hartzog described the testing programs many UC campuses have initiated for 11th-grade high school students, programs in which student take model Subject A exams and receive scores and comments on their work. This kind of testing informs high school teachers and students of the University of California's expectations. Add to this the effective testing network within the California State University system, and the possibility arises for a collaborative effort for assessing high school students' skills. Two such programs now exist. The Council hopes that such an exam will inform high school curricula. When high school teachers can see the kind of work the University expects and when they have information on the courses and programs at each campus, they can estimate the effectiveness of their own college-preparatory courses.

Having come full circle, Hartzog said, curricula that have been revised have led to revised exams. Exams that are described, administered, and placed within a full academic context in turn influence curricula. What the UC writing directors must now do, Hartzog believes, is to make certain that their own courses and exams continue developing and changing. To do so, they must continue examining their own practices, habits, and expectations and take advantage of the networks that have now been developed. Hartzog observed that what is remarkable is the pattern of connections that has been established, the possibility of developing a structure that allows for collaboration. And collaboration, she added, depends on agreement and disagreement, assertion and negotiation, in varying measures over a long period of time.

Betty Bamberg, Director of Freshman Writing at USC, focused her discussion on the evolution of USC's essay examination in the Freshman Writing Program. The program currently has a variable writing requirement: on the basis of a uniform exam, students can be held for 0 to 3 semesters of writing (most take 2 semesters). Within the non-sequential year-long course, instructors individualize their teaching to best meet the needs of their students. They do not use a set syllabus; the common single element is the uniform final exam. To avoid penalizing the weaker writers, the final grade is deferred until the last semester of enrollment in the course. Thus the exam has a dual function: to provide a final assessment of writing skills and to provide a means of waiving part or all of the writing requirement. The original proposal for establishing the writing program listed three purposes for the exam: to encourage consistency of grading, to provide a focus on content, and to give the course validation. For the first years of the program, the exam consisted of three parts: a 35-minute multiple-choice test emphasizing sentence structure, a 20-minute personal essay, and a 45-minute expository essay. Today, the exam consists of a single question. Students have 1 hour and 45 minutes to write an expository/argumentative essay based on a small group of readings. The students are told the topic, but not the question, in advance, and they can participate in group discussions with their instructors and fellow students to better comprehend the reading and topic.

The exam's change in format was the result of

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inherent conflicts between different kinds of test validity and of the competing purposes of the exam. The resulting tension between the course and the exam affected instructor-student relationships adversely, and these, in turn, resulted in demands from both instructors and students to change the exam. Initial objections to the exam focused on the validity of the measure. The instructors complained that the multiple-choice section of the original exam measured editing skills rather than writing and composing skills. In response to this argument and to the knowledge that research has been unable to demonstrate a relationship between awareness of formal grammar and improved writing skills, the program director eliminated the multiple-choice section and increased the amount of time students were given to write. Students were allowed 35 rather than 20 minutes for the personal essay and 1 hour and 15 minutes rather than 45 minutes for the expository essay.

The instructors, however, continued to object to the exam, arguing that an impromptu writing task was an invalid measure of the writing skills that students developed in a process-oriented course emphasizing prewriting, planning, and revision. Students objected to the exam for another reason; the exam grade ($\frac{1}{3}$ of their final grade) often resulted in their receiving a lower final grade than they expected. Because of the deferred grading system, this grade affected two courses (8 units) rather than one.

Some prior research by Sanders and Littlefield and Rosemary Hake had indicated that an impromptu writing task underestimates a student's writing ability. In the spring of 1984, Michael Holzman, the previous USC Director of Freshman Writing, and Betty Bamberg conducted a study to compare the effect of giving students prior knowledge of the exam topic. They found that the average holistic score improved significantly when the students knew the topic and could discuss it before writing the essay. In the fall of 1984, the exam was changed to its present form. Bamberg has found that by gathering a small group of readings and announcing the exam topic ahead of time, the exam writers are able to develop more interesting and challenging questions. Not only are exam scores better, but also the responses are more interesting for graders to read. In addition, Bamberg believes the exam now more closely approximates out-of-class writing assignments and course objectives and, therefore, emphasizes the most important function of the exam: to provide a focus on course content and objectives.

In conclusion, Bamberg explained that the USC Freshman Writing Program will be restructured in 1986-1987 to eliminate the deferred grade and to create two separate courses. Bamberg hopes to keep the exam as part of USC's writing program because she believes its original purposes remain valid. However, its form must be carefully designed to maximize the beneficial aspects and to minimize conflicting purposes.