

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

A recent slice of history in the teaching of college writing reflects our profession's evolving sophistication about tests of writing. A series of "Resolutions" brought during the 1970's to the Annual Meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a major affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), reveals an intriguing sense of our emerging consciousness of the issues involved in the testing of writing abilities. As Immediate Past (1981) Chair of CCCC, I would like to examine these motions so that I might trace the evolution of our awareness of the uses and abuses of writing tests. Then I would like to conclude by offering some suggestions for our continued self-education:

- **The early 1970's:** "That we condemn the CEEB tests."

Commentary: Although the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), today called The College Board, has always published far more than one test of writing skills, few people were bothered by the use of the singular "test." The motion passed easily. If not precise in its language, it was clear nevertheless in its basic message: Teachers of college writing did not like multiple-choice tests of writing. Still, the motion itself gave us little to do beyond "condemn."

- **The mid-1970's:** 1. "That CCCC protest the inclusion of an objective usage test in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)" and 2. "That CCCC encourage its members to resist the use of usage scores in admission and placement of students."

Commentary: Although the first part of this motion was targeted again at only one test publisher, CEEB, the content was specific and informed: An aptitude battery should not contain a subtest on the conventions of English usage. The second part of the motion was more significant because it applied to all test publishers and to all colleges that required tests. Usage tests, whether developed commercially or locally, were not acceptable indices of writing abilities. The two-part motion passed, but only after lengthy discussion and proposals of amendments aimed at expanding the focus in the second part from an original version that again mentioned only CEEB to the version shown. This motion led to official letters of position being sent to test publishers. It also set the stage for what happened next.

- **1978:** An ad hoc Testing Committee appointed by the CCCC officers met in special sessions during 1977 and developed this eight-part "Resolution," worth reading in its entirety:

1. No student shall be given credit for a writing course, placed in a remedial writing course, exempted from a required writing course, or certified for competency without submitting a piece of written discourse.
2. Responsibility for giving credit, exemption, or accreditation shall rest, not with local administrators or state officials, but with the composition faculty in each institution.
3. Tests of writing shall be selected and administered under the primary control and supervision of representatives of the composition faculty in each institution.
4. Before multiple-choice or so-called objective tests are used, the complexities involved in such testing shall be carefully considered. Most important, these tests shall be examined to determine whether they are appropriate to the intended purpose.

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5. Before essay tests are used, the complexities of such tests shall be carefully considered. Most important, topics shall be designed with great care. Also, readers of the essay tests shall be trained according to principles of statistically reliable holistic and/or analytic reading.
6. The nature and purpose of the test and the various uses of the results shall be clearly explained to all instructors and students in each institution prior to the administration of the test.
7. All possible steps shall be taken to educate the universities and colleges, the public and the legislature, that, though composition faculties have principal responsibility for helping students develop writing skills, maintenance of these skills is a responsibility shared by the entire faculty, administration, and the public.
8. The officers and executive committee of CCCC shall make testing a major concern in the immediate future in order to provide information and assistance to composition instructors affected by a testing situation.

Commentary: We came of age.

A CCCC Committee on Testing now actively facilitates the self-education of our profession. At CCCC conventions, it sponsors day-long workshops on essay scoring and other practices, sessions for sharing information about local experiences, and seminars on testing theories and applications. This committee has published an annotated bibliography on testing (*College Composition and Communication*, December 1979); it has other projects in progress.

Thus, we have moved from condemning to informing. But more is needed. In the 1970's, our profession was reacting. When commercial test publishers with their narrowly focused multiple-choice writing tests grossly distorted the universe of knowledge that defines an educated writer, we criticized. When college administrators decided on local testing programs without actively engaging teaching faculty in all decisions, we protested. In the 1980's, we are ready to act. The National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW) is a fine demonstration of our profession's potential. The teacher-designed and teacher-supervised Writing Skills Assessment Test at the City University of New York, a writing test that requires students to write, is another example of what we can do.

Undergirding this new spirit of action are, I think, four realities. So that our self-education can continue, I propose that faculty who teach college writing examine these realities and consider what sorts of action are implied by each.

- Writing tests in college are here to stay. Placement tests are almost universal now. Proficiency tests to certify students' writing abilities before graduation, are becoming increasingly common.
- We must learn the technology of testing. Humanists traditionally distrust numbers, especially any number that purports to summarize a person's knowledge. Yet, once we learn the vocabulary and operations of testing, we can combine the best of the technology with our comprehensive concepts of both process and product in writing.
- The fact that tests influence curriculum puts us in a double bind. On the one hand, we prefer writing tests that ask students to write. On the other hand, we worry about "teaching to the test," which might restrict instruction to only the mode(s) of discourse required by the test. This bind can cripple us. But it is a thin bind, upon analysis. Curriculum is better off when tests ask for writing than when tests ask for error-hunting or rearranging the prose of others. Curriculum is better off when students have to demonstrate their proficiency by generating language, controlling sentence structure, handling cohesion, and sustaining written

discussion — all of which is learned best when instruction provides students with opportunities to write frequently in the various modes of discourse.

- A college education is no longer an interaction between students and teachers only. New partners have arrived on the scene. Parents, college administrators and trustees, business people, and legislators are setting expectations that influence budget decisions on the local, state, and federal level. We who are experts in communication have to communicate with these various publics. In our modern, information-based society, literacy for all is a matter of survival, not egalitarian idealism. We need the partnerships of these publics if we are to succeed. We need to be heard at public forums, not just at professional meetings; we need to write for the popular press, not just for professional journals; we need to listen carefully to our critics, not only our colleagues.

The 1978 CCCC “Resolution” can help faculty begin to set goals for their active participation in the testing of writing abilities. The information gathered and disseminated by NTNW can help all who participate learn much of value from one another. But the rest is up to each teacher of college writing on each campus. A look back over the past ten years tells us that we have come far. The decade ahead holds much potential for our continued growth, especially as we become active leaders in shaping the future quality of all tests that seek to assess writing abilities.

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