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AUTHOR Walling, W.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the problems posed by external testing, including the social and racial complexities and the serious intellectual issues raised by the nature of a "standardized" examination. It is argued that these and other problems are likely to intensify to an unprecedented degree during the next several years as a result of budgetary concerns now threatening to dominate virtually all educational issues. The concept of an admissions test is irrelevant and is potentially a serious injustice to a significant portion of students entering college. Educators must learn to use the various options for external testing, including a battery of less crucial placement examinations. (TS)

W. Walling
University College
English Department
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903

W. Walling

Hasty Puddings: External Testing and the English Department

If some of you--as I did--spent part of your years of graduate study reading through the minor figures of the eighteenth century, you may still be able to recall the pleasure Chesterfield took in quoting to his son an epigram of Lord Shaftesbury's: "that ridicule is the best test of truth."[1] It's a remark that's occurred to me more than once since I learned I was to be on a panel which would be confronting some of the issues raised by the very large question of testing. But I also have to admit that each time I've thought about it, the epigram has insisted on rewording itself into something quite different--"that a test may be a ridicule of the best truth."

That, at any rate, is what I now regard as our most legitimate fear concerning the challenge of external testing: that in our willingness to act as accomplices in the imposition of standardized tests of "English," we may be guilty of a serious injustice to the much larger truth about verbal skills which already resides in the divergent personalities of our students. Indeed, as I'm sure a good many of you will remember, the resolution regarding the "Students' Right to their Own Language" which was passed during the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication addressed itself in part to this very problem: "Not only are almost all standardized tests written in test jargon and focused on /Edited American English/," ran one section of the resolution, "they also incorporate social, cultural and racial biases

which cannot hold for all students."[2] Even worse, at least in the extreme of its ridicule of the kind of truth most of us try to achieve in our classrooms (if not in its mockery of social and moral complexities), is the really disturbing possibility touched upon by David Goslin some years ago, in an article he published quite appropriately in the College Board Review. Writing for the Winter 1967-68 issue, Goslin considered the possibility that a primary reason for the continuing decline in the writing abilities of entering college freshmen might well be their persistent immersion, from grade school onward, in a series of depressingly reductive "objective" tests.[3] For although Goslin concluded that there was no hard and fast evidence to confirm such a suspicion, he did remind us of how truly specialized is the learning experience promoted by "objective" testing. Thus, within the context of pseudo-scientific exactitude wherein the student is expected to locate one "correct" answer again and again from among a multiple of choices, the undesired side-effect ~~might~~ may well be a concomitant stunting of the larger skills so necessary for writing well--of the ability, for instance, to originate on one's own a persuasive relationship between seemingly disparate ideas, or of the habit of reacting to an intellectual problem in a fashion which would attempt to integrate one's overall response to it rather than to single out isolated aspects for the sake of a superficial clarity.

Obviously, then, the problems posed by external testing are large ones--even if we confine ourselves merely to those areas I've touched upon so briefly just now. For not only is the entire question of external testing clouded by the social and racial complexities of which we've become increasingly aware over the past decade, serious intellectual issues also remain unresolved by reason of the very nature of the kind of examination we generally mean when we use the term "standardized."

In short, one might expect that the prospect of standardized examinations would induce in us, as professional teachers of English, a pronounced degree of caution.

Nevertheless, as I suspect most of us would concede, the general attitude of English departments towards the question of standardized testing has been almost precisely the opposite of cautious. Seduced (at least some of us) by the awareness that standardized testing is a routinely accepted fact in American education, attracted (at least some of us) by the promise of results a good deal less ambiguous than those available from writing samples, hopeful (at least some of us) that the testing of "English" might allow us to concentrate more thoroughly on the teaching of literature, English departments have typically acceded to the authority of some version or other of a standardized test without really exploring the full implications of their decision.

The point of my title, then, with its reference to the kind of haste with which we've often behaved in helping to complete a rather messy concoction, is to remind us of how uncharacteristic of English departments such precipitate behavior actually is. For I don't think there can be much question that departments of English, by the mere evidence of their size alone, have been the most conspicuous examples in the academic community for more than half a century of an unfashionable adherence to humanistic complexities--not to mention of a sometimes quixotic resistance to scientistic impulses in administrators and state legislatures. And the almost casual manner in which so many of us have acted as participants in the imposition of judgments derived from standardized tests--"casual," at any rate, in terms of our usual behavior when confronting the complex issue of assessing language

skills--serves as a suggestive indication of how powerful certain forces really are in the structure of our society.

Yet none of what I've said so far should strike us as particularly novel. On the contrary, as Richard Hofstadter pointed out in his Anti-Intellectualism in American Life of more than a decade ago, "The misuse of tests seems to be a recurrent factor in American education."[4] And the explanation Hofstadter offered for this dismal reality was that "the American mind seems extremely vulnerable to the belief that any alleged knowledge which can be expressed in figures is in fact as final and exact as the figures in which it is expressed."[5]

What is truly different about our current situation, however, is the extent to which economic considerations are clearly going to play a larger and larger role in determining the kinds of challenges we'll have to continue to face in the area of testing. To put it simply, the particular problems which standardized tests have always posed for English departments--problems, I'm afraid, to which many of us haven't really been sufficiently alert--are quite likely to be intensified to an unprecedented degree during the next several years by the budgetary concerns now threatening to dominate virtually every educational issue before us. Hence, it may not be enough to point, as Edward M. White did a few years ago, to the unavoidable truth that "testing of all sorts will continue," whether we approve of it or not, "because the economic pressures to do so are immense."[6] Rather, what I think deserves to be stressed perhaps even more is the extent to which one of the related consequences of the economic crisis we seem to be mired in--the increasing reliance of administrators and public officials on the notion of a

statistical "accountability"--is a development that can't help but determine the kind of standardized tests we'll be asked to approve. To quote Edward White again, in relation to the specific subject of equivalency testing, "The potentially enormous savings in instructional costs for both institutions and individuals are a great incentive for using cheap and easy tests to huddle students through credits in order to save cash. The prospect of reduced budgetary requirements is a serious administrative temptation to use very low cutoff scores, inappropriate elementary skills tests, and wholly commercial concept of education."[7]

In a word, then, the very philosophy implicit in the current emphasis on "accountability" seems to me to promise a dangerously powerful encouragement to precisely the kind of facile "exactitude" in standardized testing we should most fear--regardless of how defensible and even praiseworthy the abstract concept of accountability may actually be. Indeed, against the backdrop of our present economic difficulties and the increasing insistence from administrators and legislators that we be held "accountable" even in the most complicated of educational areas, it might appear that my opening cautionary remarks regarding testing were little more than the disgruntled rhetoric of the powerless. For that reason, I'd like to look a little more closely for the remainder of this paper at what I take to be the chief implications of our specified topic for discussion: the possible changes or deletions to be made in admissions testing.

Within that framework, then, it's probably best to begin with a simple assertion: that for the college where I teach and where I more or less maintain the illusion of running a large English department,

University College of Rutgers, the concept of what is ordinarily meant by an admissions test seems to me to be at best irrelevant, at worst a potentially serious injustice to a significant portion of our entering students. And although the peculiar nature of University College has undoubtedly played a part in my adverse judgment on admissions tests--for the overwhelming bulk of our student body is adult and part-time--I also suspect that the obvious inappropriateness of an admissions test for University College is merely an indication, in heightened form, of some of the significant shortcomings of admissions testing for many colleges much more traditional than my own.

Let me be more specific. If it could be argued--as indeed it was, almost a decade ago, in a fashionably polemical essay of the 1960's--that the only certain knowledge our children ever acquire in school is the necessity of pleasing their teachers,[8] then I think an even stronger argument might be made for an equally cynical conclusion concerning testing: that the only skill we can be certain of in a candidate who does well on an objective test is that he possesses skill in taking an objective test. It's a conclusion of such depressing implications, of course, that very few of us would want to sustain it in any totally serious way. Yet as the kind of students who enter my college particularly suggests, there often can exist a striking discrepancy between innate intellectual ability and the sort of specific experience with testing which is usually required before a student can do reasonably well. And, if this lack of experience with a specific kind of testing situation is, in the case of our own students, commonly due to the marked discontinuity of their educational history, I also find it easy to imagine the

same disabilities operating in a younger student because of significant differences of class or race. Indeed, as Basil Bernstein argued in his provocative Class, Codes, and Control of a few years ago, the very syntactical flexibility which we can see reflected most reductively in multiple choice questions on standard usage tests may be antithetical to the deeper socialization of lower-class children, "Thus," Bernstein writes,

> the relative backwardness of many working-class children who live in areas of high population density or in rural areas may well be a culturally induced backwardness transmitted by the linguistic process [of a rather rigid code of communal expression]. Such children's low performance on verbal IQ tests, their difficulty with "abstract" concepts, their failures within the language area, their general inability to profit from the school, all may result from the limitations of [this] restricted code. For these children the school induces a change of code and with this a change in the way the children relate to their kin and community. At the same time we often offer these children grossly inadequate schools with less than able teachers. No wonder they often fail--for the "more" tend to receive more and become more, while the socially defined "less," receive less and become less.[9]

But whether we'd want to agree with Bernstein or not in terms of the magnitude of the challenge he ultimately suggests is facing us as teachers of "English," I hope I've said enough to indicate why I believe

admissions tests should be replaced wherever possible by batteries of much less crucial placement examinations. For it seems to me that a generous entrance policy is much more in keeping with one of the central ideals of American education than a policy of exclusion based on an external exam of quite probably compromised validity. And if a rigorous exit policy must also be established in order to assure that graduates have a competence in "standard English"--as, in fact, I suspect more and more colleges are going to establish as a policy during the next few years--then at least such a critical decision involving so complex an issue as language skills can be evolved within the specific context of a committed faculty responding to an individualized student body.

What I'm suggesting, in short, is that we make use of our various options for external testing with as much cautionary discretion as we can. In the case of a program like Advanced Placement, of course, this should present no problem, at all, so long as we continue to recognize Advanced Placement as a uniquely proven test for the granting of equivalency credit rather than as a guide to admissions. But with virtually every other examination on the market--and most especially with those which are designed to assess language skills wholly in terms of a series of "objective" questions--the possible unreliability and even injustice of their predictions mandate a much heavier reliance for any admissions decision on other non-test-related criteria. And since I do feel this way, I was especially pleased to see that the new Test of Standard Written English for the College Board is emphatically defined as "a placement test," one whose results are meant "to be used /only/ after students are admitted, not during the admissions process."[10] From such

a healthy lack of rigidity on the part of the Educational Testing Service perhaps some of us can begin perceiving Standard English in perspective again, not as a diabolic tool of the lackey capitalists, but just possibly as a tool per se, potentially useful to almost all of our students.

Notes

[1] Feb. 6, 1752, The Letters of Lord Chesterfield, ed. Bonamy Dobree, V (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1932), p. 1826.

[2] "Students' Right to Their Own Language": A Proposed Position Statement, Conference on College Composition and Communication (Spring, 1974), p. 12.

[3] David A. Goslin, "What's Wrong with Tests and Testing--Part II," College Board Review, No. 66 (Winter 1967-68), p. 33.

[4] New York: Random House, 1963 (Vintage reprint), p. 339.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Equivalency Testing in English," Bulletin of the Association of Departments of English, No. 36 (March, 1973), p. 12.

[7] Ibid., p. 13.

[8] In Jerry Farber's "The Student as Nigger," rep't New York: Pocket Books, 1970.

[9] Class, Codes, and Control (London: Routledge & Paul, 1971), p. 151.

[10] From the first page of the brief handout distributed by the Educational Testing Service with this title: "The Test of Standard Written English in the College Board Admissions Testing Program" (no date, but probably first issued in 1974).