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ABSTRACT

Many states have adopted minimal competency testing in reading or writing, assuming that goals of basic education are measurable and that testing for such goals is technologically feasible. It is not clear that such testing comes at a time in history when the quality of education is demonstrably lower than at other times in American education. The competency tests themselves may or may not reflect the ability to use skills in the real world. The evaluation of writing tests especially is open to question when that testing does not require writing and when the results, even when writing is required, are quite mixed. Where there is evidence that the quality of writing has declined, there is indication that basic skills have not declined but that complex skills need attention. A group called together by the College of Education at the University of Illinois in 1977 produced guidelines which suggest what skills should be considered minimum; they also suggest ways of testing for such skills. The cost of producing and scoring tests which follow these suggestions would be high but if students and teachers are going to be evaluated, it should be done in terms of a comprehensive experience with language and not a focus or a narrow band of skills. (TJ)

MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS

The Issues From A National Perspective

Rexford Brown

The minimal competency movement appears to rest upon at least nine propositions:

1. That education is worse than it has ever been.
2. That educators are not trying as hard as they can to educate America's children.
3. That education is like an industry and is susceptible to the same efficiency programs as industry is.
4. That experts and outsiders can solve the schools' problems.
5. That laws will make lazy teachers try harder.
6. That America has a sophisticated, scientific educational technology at its disposal.
7. That multiple choice tests will identify specific educational weaknesses.
8. That these weaknesses will be remediable.
9. That schools exist in a social vacuum and do not reflect the culture at large.

There is no evidence that our schools are any worse than they have ever been or that education is serving its clients any worse than is any other American institution. I know of no evidence that educators are, as a group, any less committed, any less responsible, than any other group of professionals in this society. I think I could produce evidence that "outsiders" cannot solve problems which insiders have found unsurmountable, and I think I can safely assert that minimal competency legislation will have no impact upon what slackers or incompetents there may be in the teaching profession.

I do not know why anyone has concluded that the educational enterprise resembles a profit-making corporation and either needs or could benefit from management and efficiency programs which do not even work well in the business world.

Whatever their early, rash promises might have been, I think the "scientific" educational technologists are more humble than their naive followers and will readily admit that our knowledge about the nature of learning is modest indeed. We do not have and never have had a sophisticated or scientific educational technology at our disposal.

There is overwhelming evidence that even the best of multiple choice tests assess very few skills knowledges and attitudes, and that their diagnostic utility is very low. To the extent that such tests identify general areas for remediation, I know of no evidence that they facilitate remediation or in any way make suddenly possible learning outcomes that have been impossible to achieve for fifty years.

Finally, I cannot fathom the assumption that the schools are so isolated from the culture at large that they do not mirror both its strengths and its follies. The Dow-Jones "score" has lately been going down faster than any test score ever could; absenteeism at work, blue- and white-collar crime and industrial violence dwarf whatever problems the schools may manifest. The institution of politics has not exactly covered itself with glory lately, either. A look around suffices to establish that a high school diploma is not the only thing that "doesn't mean what it used to."

According to supporters of minimal competency programs, if every student is sent into the world with a certificate that says he or she is at least a borderline incompetent, society will somehow feel better about the schools and back off . . .

("I'd like a job."

"Are you a borderline incompetent?"

"At least!"

"You're hired.")

Apparently, the schools have a quality control function and cannot manufacture parts for the social machine that fail to meet certain specifications. Someone wants to be able to say to society "Here are some rivets and we guarantee that they are all of at least borderline strength."

Many supporters of minimal competency also believe that students who do not meet minimal standards will not "SURVIVE." In other words, failure on a minimal competency examination is tantamount to a sentence of death. How those few students who flunk such tests manage to be alive at all must puzzle the survival skills test makers. Theoretically, they are supposed to drop dead in their seats as soon as they miss the fifteenth item. Instead they not only make it out of the classroom but have life enough left to hire a lawyer and sue hell out of the school! (Don't tell me they can't survive.)

A third group of supporters assert more modestly that the schools only want to know "how they are doing." This betrays a certain amount of insecurity. It is probably the case in education, as in sex, that if you have to ask the question you have already answered it.

Furthermore, a school assessing its success through minimal competency examination is like a doctor assessing his success only by checking to see how many of his patients he hasn't killed.

Nevertheless, much is going on, full steam ahead. With this paper I would like to give you an overview of minimal competency activity across the nation. Having done so, and having discussed two types of testing and their implications, I want to examine the evidence upon which the call for minimal competency in reading and writing rests. Finally, I want to concentrate upon writing and propose minimal specifications for any tests of competence in written expression.

About 42 states have either enacted minimal competency legislation or have studied it or are about to study it. All of these programs involve reading, about two-thirds involve some aspect of writing. Several involve something

called Basic Literacy, several involve spelling, and a few involve speaking and listening skills. These programs are varied in purpose. Twelve states that I know of have enacted minimal competency programs as conditions of high school graduation; sixteen other programs -- not tied to graduation -- are active today, either by legislative mandate, state department of education rulings, or state board of educator resolutions. Some minimal competency programs are tied to remedial programs, some are not; a few permit early exit from school. Many are loosely tied to grade promotion, but the test is usually only one of several factors that figure in promotion policy; some are tied to a superintendent's prerogative to direct funding to disadvantaged schools.

The language enacting minimal competency testing programs is usually vague and usually sensible -- in a vague sort of way. It is difficult for a reasonable person to object to such propostions as (for instance) that "a fundamental goal of education in Virginia is to enable each student to achieve ... certain basic skills;" or that every shcool district in Washington "shall develop a program identifying student learning objectives." The language dealing with actual assessment of basic literacy often sounds like this: "such learning objectives shall be measurable as to the actual student attainment ..." Thus, the goals of basic education tend to become the measurable goals. The language specifying actual assessment methods is unspecific and assumes the technology for development of tests is readily available.

The audiences for the results of these tests vary state-to-state and range from no one in particular to everyone, regardless of interest in the matter. Some tests are diagnostic and teacher-oriented, some are pass-fail and board-of-education oriented.

To the extent one can generalize about these various programs, they can be very roughly divided into two categories, each of which suggests certain problems.

Category 1 contains all programs that define minimal competency in terms of survival skills or skills necessary to function adequately as a citizen, and so on. These programs rest upon shaky philosophical grounds, as no one can prove any specific educational level is more related to survival than any other, or that education itself is a necessary condition for a satisfactory life. Endless and irresolvable debates about the level of mathematics or reading or writing skills necessary in our electronic culture enliven the meetings of all people concerned with these kinds of programs. Furthermore, the survival programs tend to generate objectives that are expressed as narrow tasks ("The student will fill out a job application," for instance), and these narrow tasks tend to imply that education exists only to prepare people for the world of work. Standards are very low; should teachers begin teaching to the test, educational quality would suffer greatly.

Category 2 programs would define minimal competency as the essence of a solid, well-rounded education. Objectives for these programs stress general abilities ("the student will be able to compute in a variety of situations," and so on) and imply that education exists to provide a variety of experiences and general skills. These programs are better than the others but run into trouble at two points. There is little agreement about what the "core" of a good basic education includes; and no single test can embrace even the most modest of these cores. Given limited resources, which general skills do you test? In which situations? With what sophisticated instruments? With how detailed an analysis of results and with what remedial resources to help the many students who will display weaknesses in various areas or will flunk the test? Few states have the resources to tackle these complex questions and emerge with a fair test that can be taken in a reasonable period of time and integrated with a responsive remedial program, to boot.

What Do We Know About Literacy in America?

One who wishes to make any responsible generalizations about the quality of literacy in America encounters a plethora of opinions but little in the way of hard information. Who is to be believed? Students? Teachers? Parents? The media? The test makers?

The parents who complain about literacy cannot be believed with much confidence, because they do not appear to do much reading or writing themselves, if they can help it; and they came to the issue rather tardily. Their "back to basics" cry usually urges us back to grammar, middle class usage, phonics and a number of curricular dinosaurs with no proven relation to literacy.

With the test makers, you may say, we draw closer to so-called objective evidence of declines in writing and reading achievement; but you will be disappointed. Few testers have tested actual writing nationally on samples that are not self-selecting and, of those, few have been at it long enough to turn up definitive trends. What do we really know from the testers? We know that to varying degrees, "verbal" or "English" or "language" scores (whatever those are) have declined since the mid 1960's on the SAT, ACT, MSAT, ITBS, CTBS and ITED tests taken by large numbers of students either nationally or at the state level. These are multiple choice tests which center around usage, punctuation, vocabulary, spelling and organization items, i.e., those aspects of writing most readily tested in machine-scorable ways and most often stressed in the traditional English curriculum. Various other tests, such as the PSAT or the ITED test for expression show little or no change.

National Assessment results in two general reading assessment and two "functional literacy" assessments carried out for Right to Read, do not show declines in reading. In fact, they suggest a slight increase in the proportion of literate Americans. Results in a number of nationally used reading tests are so mixed that one cannot make responsible generalizations.

The most we can say about the verbal test score declines is that language use is changing (which is not surprising) away from a standard implicit in existing multiple choice tests. We know that enrollment in English courses has seriously declinedover the last few years, so we can speculate that writing, language use and English enrollment may all be changing under the influence of some other, more important cultural factor. Whether the changes have really brought about a drastic drop in the quality of writing or reading, it is hard to say. In 1957, the California Association of Teachers of English established a scale for evaluation of high school student essays using a representative sample of papers from throughout that state. When the quality scale was established, they asked a panel of experts to speculate about the writing futures of those who wrote the best and the average papers. Here is what the panel said in 1957:

> First, although some of the "best writing of seniors in California high schools is of good quality, most of it is definitely mediocre in terms of the criteria established by the Subcommittee. Second, "average" writing, taken as a whole, does not represent satisfactory achievmenet for seniors in high school composition, when "satisfactory" is thought of in relation to probable success in college writing courses.[1]

More specifically, the panel said that one-fourth of the best writers and two-thirds of the average writers would probably have to take remedial writing courses in college. These percentages sound very like those one hears today.

There is one other major source of testing evidence about writing: The National Assessment of Educational Progress findings in two national writing assessments. Based not upon vocabulary, spelling, usage tests, or the like,

[1]California Association of Teachers of English, A Scale for Evaluation of High School Student Essays, Urbana, Illinois, 1960.

NAEP writing results rest upon analysis of actual writing by 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds throughout the country. The writing is done under Assessment conditions -- somewhat freer and less threatening than standardized testing conditions, but constrained nevertheless -- so it is of limited length and of a particular nature. However, it is real writing, in response to a wide variety of demands that range through persuasive, explanatory, descriptive and expressive modes, and a variety of rhetorical registers. This comprehensiveness is at once the strength of the Assessment data base and its weakness. The weakness lies in the difficulty of comparing some of the results to others in a way that would permit even medium level generalization. To illustrate, let me cite some NAEP statistics:

> Fifty-four percent of America's 9-year-olds write competent thank you notes of a certain kind, 56 percent write competent expressive essays of a certain kind and 90 percent write acceptable get well cards; however only 11 percent seem able to organize a report competently, only 10 percent appear able to elaborate upon an imaginary role with consistent point of view, 14 percent respond to music with a minimally integrated piece of writing, and 14 percent appear able to order a kite through the mail in a way that might insure receiving it.
>
> Results for 13-year-olds are equally mixed and must be equally qualified: Seventy-five percent appear able to write a certain kind of letter correcting a misunderstanding; 61 percent appear able to write an acceptable letter to an organization and 34 percent can respond to music with a somewhat integrated expressive piece of writing. On other expressive, persuasive and descriptive writing tasks, the proportion of competent papers was about one in three.
>
> Seventeen-year-olds write somewhat better than 13-year-olds, but the unevenness of results -- ranging from 5 percent who appear able to write a

good job application letter to 54 percent who are able to role-play imaginatively -- defy compression. The most we can say about all these figures is that the more sophisticated the writing assignment, the fewer the students who can do it well.

One wants to add these various things together and come up with a magic, global Writing figure, but it is impossible. The criteria for competence in each task vary with the nature of the task. A bright graduate student could probably find a way to put the hundreds of thousands of NAEP essays onto a single scale but it has not been done yet; until it is, we have only atomized statements about particular aspects of writing to offer. They are suggestive, of course. And as someone who has absorbed them and read, in addition, thousands of essays from national samples, I'm willing to hazard "about 50-55 percent" as the proportion of 17-year-olds in America who write "competently." But if you challenge me with my own data and urge a figure much closer to 30 percent, there is little I can do to controvert you with concrete evidence. I would probably agree with you if you wanted "competent" to embrace such things as "interesting," "lively" or "intelligent,"besides.

Fortunately, there is another kind of NAEP information about writing achievement that, although modest in its scope, is more suggestive. In 1975 we mixed essays written by students in 1969 with those written on the same topic in 1973-74 and we had the lot of the scored holistically by experienced English teachers. The scorers had no way of knowing in which year a particular paper was written, so they applied the same quality criteria to all of them. When they were done, we found that they perceived, in their holistic judgments, a difference in the quality of the writing in the two different years. Specifically, at ages 17 and 13, the more recently written descriptive essays were, as a group, inferior to those written in 1969. The mean holistic score for the recent papers was a fifth of a point lower at age 17 and a third of a point at age 13 -- statistically

significant shifts over a very short period of time. Nine-year-olds, however, were writing somewhat better.

Since holistic scorers do not express specific reasons for their judgments, we went back to the papers to analyze differences in quality from another point of view. We had each paper coded with respect to such factors as number of words, sentences, paragraphs, and so on; number of compound sentences, complex sentences, run-ons, fragments, and son on; and types of errors, such as spelling, phonetic misspelling, word choice, and so on. We keypunched the papers and computer analyzed them. We found that at age 17 the more recent papers contained, as a group, more run-on sentences, more awkwardness, and more incoherent paragraphs than the 1969 papers. At age 13 the essays were shorter, the vocabulary was simpler, the amount of embedding was on the decrease and wordiness within the sentence was on the increase, especially among males. These factors were undoubtedly among the most influential in leading the holistic scorers to prefer, unconsciously, the 1969 papers.

It appears, from this information and from the statements of student and teachers themselves around the country, that there may be a problem with coherence, with the readability of the things people are writing. There <u>is not</u>, as far as I can tell, a problem with usage -- that is, whether people should or should not say ain't, whether they should say lay instead of lie, who instead of whom, and so on. The writing problem does not seem to involve a massive flaunting of the conventions of standard written English; nor does it involve spelling much, either. Many people cannot spell particularly well these days when you give them words to spell; but when they write, they tend not to use words they can't spell (for obvious reasons) so the percentage of misspelled words in their essays is not very great. The problem does not seem to involve punctuation, either. The vast majority of writers use perfectly the few punctuation marks they employ: the comma, the period and the question mark. They have no trouble with the dash, the

semi-colon or the colon because they do nto use them; and my guess is that if they did, we could reasonably expect more incoherence because they would be trying mroe difficult constructions. Granted, a paper punctuated only by mispellings, barbarisms and grammatical errors could be a difficult peper to read and could well be incoherent. But these things are not necessarily causes of incoherence, they are not problem areas as far as our essay analysis could tell, and they happen to be the aspects of writing most often and thoroughly taught in our schools. The problem includes, but goes beyond, aspects of writing that can be addressed by a traditional grammar and usage oriented approach to instruction.

Let me sum up what I think is known concretely about the writing situation: there is very little accurate, unbiased, concrete information about writing achievement (per se) in America. What little there is suggests that language use is changing; that there is a decline in whatever skills "verbal" tests assess; that skill in actual writing varies widely with the nature and sophistication of the writing task; and that skill in writing descriptive essays is less widely distributed than it used to be among 17- and 13-year-olds. The evidence of a test score decline, the feeling of a decline in the writing skill of incoming freshmen at many universities, and the indications of declines from NAEP -- all taken together -- contribute strongly to an impression that writing is an endangered art in America. My personal feeling is that the evidence, examined closely, is skimpy. As for reading, we see the low-level reading skills well in hand, but problems with high-inference material. NAEP data suggest that complex skills need attention, not basic skills.

In response to growing concern about minimum competency standards of instruction and testing, the College of Education at the University of Illinois called a group of people together last year to discuss the problem and recommend specifications for a minimal competency test in writing. As one of the participants in that discussion, I would like to share our recommendations with you.

It is possible to establish a preliminary specification of competence in English with an emphasis on writing. This emphasis was decided upon by the Conference, in part because other groups have been dealing with reading and in part because writing has generally been underemphasized as a result of measurement problems and a lack of research. The members of the group believe that these problems must be dealt with.

Beginning with its initial assumptions about competence, the group believes that it is reasonable to expect schools to provide students with the capability:

1. To follow a set of written instructions which require students to write (e.g., to fill in a form);
2. To produce written communication that can inform a reader;
3. To produce written communication that might persuade a reasonable person;
4. To produce written communication that adheres to the conventions of spelling, punctuation, and usage;
5. To demonstrate the ability to discern, if not to produce, some of the major persuasive uses of language (e.g., innuendo, flattery, sarcasm).

Having established these as definitions of reasonable expectation, one must set forth certain other parameters of competence:

1. Competence in writing should be demonstrated through actual writing performance. Although there is some research to suggest that multiple-choice tests of editing skill are valid indices of writing ability, such research is marred by problems of reliability. Until the validity of such tests is firmly established, the case is not made, and it may very well be that a student who can perform adequately on a multiple-choice test cannot produce an acceptable piece of writing. Although writing samples are not inexpensive, it may prove far more costly to assert writing competence - or deny it - with invlaid measures.

2. Competence in writing should be demonstrated in a variety of contexts. The situations of writing vary: At times one writes under pressure, at times at length; at times one writes to a restricted audience, at times to a general one; at times one writes about social matters, at times about personal or professional ones. The variety of situations places a variety of demands on the writer. Although one cannot assert that performance in all of these contexts must be viewed in order to assert an individual's competence, one can question the limitation of assessment to a single context - e.g., business writing under rigid constraints of time: To effect such a limitation would violate the principle of range which the conference had set forth.

3. The conventions of writing vary from situation to situation so that competence in adhering to conventions must be viewed as situational. Such a parameter speaks to problems like the following: The conventions of a business letter - placement of return address, signature block, punctuation, and style, to name a few - differ from business to business. Competence in adhering to conventions should not depend on knowing a particular set of conventions, but in following general ones or in following a specific set if those conventions are presented as an example to the writer. A measure of competence should avoid the picayune.

Test Recommendations

To follow this set of principles the Urbana Conference recommends as possible specifications for a test of competence in writing in English:

1. *A measure of the ability to follow a set of written directions for writing.*
2. *A measure of the ability to produce a written report (e.g., a set of directions or an order with data supplied the student) to an unfamiliar audience (e.g., an order clerk).*
3. *A measure of the ability to produce a written generalization supported by evidence (with data provided the student) to a familiar but distant audience (e.g., a group of teachers or townspeople).*
4. *A measure of the ability to produce written persuasion to a familiar audience (e.g., a school principal).*
5. *A measure of editing skills with particular emphasis on sentence completeness; agreement of tenses, pronouns, subject and object; punctuation, and capitalization.*
6. *A measure of spelling based on the oral presentation of words.*
7. *A measure of the ability to determine the purpose, audience, and constraints of a writing situation and then to determine the appropriate uses of language, particularly irony, connotation, and metaphor.*

Proponents of low-budget minimal competency tests of writing will be dismayed at these specifications. However, they would probably be equally dismayed by specifications for a good, solid education. We cannot be discouraged by this attitude. Our professional and personal commitment to literacy requires honesty about the complexity of language and the importance of programs that expose students to the fullest range of reading and writing experiences. We should insist that if we and our students are to be evaluated it should be in terms of our success in offering them that comprehnsive experience with language instead of a stultifying program that focuses only upon a narrow band of reading and writing skills.