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ABSTRACT

This criticism of writing competency tests questions both the efficacy of a test developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the reliance of individual states on the products of private test-makers. The paper suggests that a hidden curriculum is being developed by independent and semi-independent organizations that reflects some of the worst current practices in the teaching of writing--triviality, inadequate time allotment, a confused notion of "creative writing," and a poor choice of writing topics. Sample exercises taken from the NAEP writing test and examples of student writing elicited by those exercises are included. (AEA)

How Competent are the Writing Competency Tests?

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When I taught English at Boston Trade High School, I dreaded days when I had to administer standardized tests. Normally cheerful students would become sullen, and normally sullen students would become belligerent. But one day, due to one test, I almost had a real insurrection on my hands.

The test day was a winter Monday. The building temperature was edging toward 60. There was broken glass on the first floor of my home room, the result of weekend vandalism. I handed out the tests, and my welders and cabinet makers reluctantly went to work. I glanced through the test and immediately spotted trouble. Halfway through, the students would have to explicate a poem that, it would seem, had been written by someone from the Hallmark Card Company. "Go lovely O Rose" it began.

As I expected, when the leader of the welders reached "Go lovely O Rose" he slammed his number 2 pencil down and said "I quit." Whereupon the rest of the welders did the same thing whereupon the cabinet makers slammed their pencils down and stopped work. I made a half-hearted attempt to explain why they should go on--something about the invaluable diagnostic information the test would provide--but there was no response. Finally I did the only thing I could think of -- I made it a group project and I helped.

I'm not sure if what I did was a crime. If so the statute of limitations has expired and I can confess. At the very least I fouled up some statistics. But what I retain from that Monday is not guilt but anger, anger that such an inappropriate test could be chosen fro my students. It has also caused me to look with a skeptical eye at standardized tests, so if the following examination of writing tests may seem unduly negative it is because I see unfair testing as a form of child abuse.

Put yourself in the place of a student. You are to take a competency test that is to determine whether you repeat eighth grade. You joke with your friends before the bell, but you're scared. You walk into the classroom and are handed the test, the first part of which asks you to write a report. The teacher reads the instructions:

In the box below are some facts about the moon which you

> can use in your report. You may add other facts that you can remember about the moon from your reading and classwork, from television, and from listening to people.
>
> ...Be sure to report the facts in an order that will make sense to your classmates.
>
> Facts about the Moon
>
> Made of rock
> Mountainous, contains craters
> Covered with dust
> No air or water
> No plant or animal life[1]

You stare at the list and try to remember what you know about the moon. Never did like astronomy anyway. Some words flit through your head -- Apollo, lunar, Armstrong -- but you can't seem to fit them into a pattern. You connect the facts into three choppy sentences and stop. Well, you think, I do have some friends in seventh grade.

I submit that this is not a far-fetched possibility. The "writing" test is not fabricated by me, but is one developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and, if the present trend continues, it will find its way into some state competency test of writing. Students, given no opportunity to choose their subjects or gather information, will be evaluated on their ability to write reports.

I have recently examined a number of writing tests that are being constructed or used by states. To my mind most are seriously deficient. I find equally disturbing the reluctance of individual states to develop their own tests and their reliance on the NAEP or on private testmakers such as the Educational Testing Service. A hidden curriculum is being developed by independent and semi-independent organizations. Not only is it a hidden curriculum, but it is one that reflects some of the worst current practices in the teaching of writing -- triviality, inadequate time allotment, a confused notion of "creative writing," and the poor choice of writing topics.

Triviality. According to Gary Hart, author of the California Pupil Proficiency Bill, one of the purposes of competency testing is to restore meaning to the high school diploma and thus improve the public's attitude toward their schools.[2] This rationale is echoed by most proponents of competency testing. Yet many of the tests devised are either so simple, or so marginal to the basic skills of writing, that they would hardly meet Mr. Hart's objective.

Tennessee, for example, will assess competence in spelling and grammar,

but not in writing. On one of the items devised for an early version of New York State Competency Tests, students were asked to use "will eat" in a sentence. According to the rules for scoring, all students must do is to write the sentence with no mechanical errors. So presumably, "I will eat" would receive full credit.[3]

One of the proficiency tests that is generally taken as a model was developed by the Denver, Colorado school system. Students have to do no writing on these exams, but are given what is called "Language Proficiency Exam" which requires the student to proofread 50 lines that "might have been written by a student."[4] "Language Proficiency" becomes synonymous with "proofreading." Another proficiency test, proclaimed by its developers as a success, is used in the Westlake, Nebraska school system. The writing section requires the student to write three related paragraphs on a topic agreed on with the teacher and that the writing contain no more than five grammatical errors.[5]

Such attempts at measuring writing competency are inadequate, not because the mechanics of writing are unimportant, but because "proficient" writing is more than "correct" writing. Imagine the student navigating his way through the three required paragraphs at Westlake, aware that his primary task is to avoid errors. He may avoid syntactic errors by using short sentences; he avoids spelling errors by using simple words or circumlocations; he avoids contractions, and, in general, tries to be as timid and safe as possible.

Such tests reinforce the negative image many Americans have about writing. Donald Graves has described this attitude:

> In America, writing is basically a form of etiquette in which words are put on paper, not necessarily with clarity, but free of mechanical errors. The American extract does not belong in writing. He is similar to the person who has been reluctantly invited to a party of distinguished guests. Being a person of modest station he attends with great discomfort. He has but one thing on his mind -- to be properly attired, demonstrate the finest manners, say nothing, and leave quickly.[6]

Inadequate Time Allotment. Most of the tests that do require student writing limit the time allowed. The Educational Testing Service, for example, is currently marketing a test of basic skills which includes in the writing section a number of multiple choice questions and a 20-minute writing sample on an assigned topic. The ETS claims[7], in its manuel for the test, that their exercises were developed "after a comprehensive review of the (relevant) research" and after consultation with professional organizations.

The research that supports such a test was primarily conducted by the ETS itself; the most thorough study was reported by Godshalk, Swineford, and Coffman in 1966. In essence, the researchers gave a large group of students[4] impromptu essay tests on assigned topics and used the average score as the base against which they measured the effectiveness of their hour-long composition test. This test consisted of a number of multiple choice questions on sentence structure, some editing exercises, and a 20-minute essay on an assigned topic. They found that there was a high correlation between the average score on the four essays and the scores on the hour-long test.[8]

Yet despite the sophistication and scope of the Godshalk study, it fails to demonstrate the validity of the timed impromptu essay as a measure of writing competence. The researchers took as their definitive measure of writing ability scores on four impromptu essays. Never did the researchers look at writing done under looser time constraints where the student had some choice of topic. The Godshalk study does not prove the validity of impromptu essay tests; it assumes their validity.

Recent research has raised questions about the use of the impromptu essay. Sanders and Littlefield found that the impromptu essay can fail to reveal the skills students have mastered, particularly if a course emphasizes the writing process -- pre-writing, writing, revising, editing. They unequivocally reject the use of the impromptu essay as a measure of writing competence:

> ...the rigidly controlled essay test surely represents the ultimate in an artificial writing situation; as such it is shunned in many modern composition courses. While the test essay is precisely timed, in many courses the student is

extract

> encouraged to think, research, write, rewrite, perhaps solicit advice and reactions, and rewrite again and again. The student has no chance to go through this process in writing an impromptu essay.[9]

The 20-minute essay also sends a curious educational message. Research on the composing processes of good and poor secondary-school or college-freshmen writers is beginning to reveal consistent differences.[10] The poorer writer generally spends little time pre-writing, writes in a burst, and then spends no time revising. Better writers spend far more time planning and pausing to reread what they have written. It is this time spent contemplating and planning that distinguishes the good from the poor writers. So what does the 20-minute essay do? It forces the good writer to modify his composing process to put it more in line with that of the poor writers. Good writing habits must be discarded. Competency tests then require the more competent to imitate the less competent.

As for the claim that the ETS has consulted national organizations, this seems unlikely in the case of the writing section. The most respected guide for the conduct of research, the NCTE monograph Research in Written Composition, argues that "twenty to thirty minutes seems ridiculously brief for a high school or college student to write anything thoughtful." The authors recommend that high school students be given 70-90 minutes to write.[11] John Mellon, a researcher assigned by the NCTE to evaluate the NAEP results, claims that a fair sample of a student's work would consist of 800-1000 words drawn from four or five essays.[12]

At its root the issue is ethical and not purely experimental. And the ethical question is simple. If states are to assess the writing competence of students, are they not under the ethical obligation to allow them to write under the best possible conditions? If so, is not one of these conditions adequate time to plan, write, and revise?

Creative Writing. One of the early criticisms of the NAEP exercises was their functional orientation. Unfortunately, the exercises developed to meet this objection illustrate the current confusion about "creative writing." Too often creative writing translates into fictional writing where students must imagine themselves in situations far removed from

their own experiences. Creativity becomes fantasizing, and frequently these fantastical creations are curiously impersonal, stereotypical imitations of the fantasies students watch on TV. Another type of creative writing exercise is to ask students to "write what they feel," an exercise in formlessness. Both types of writing are called for on some state tests.

The following exercise, developed by the NAEP, was adopted by the Ohio Department of Education for its eighth grade writing test. The purpose of the exercise, according to the Ohio manual, was for the student to "demonstrate ability in writing to reveal personal feelings and ideas through free expression."

> Sometimes people write just for the fun of it. This is a chance for you to have fun writing.
>
> Pretend you are a pair of tennis shoes. You've done all kinds of things in all kinds of weather. Now you are picked up again by your owner. Tell what you, as a pair of tennis shoes, think about what is going to happen to you. Tell how you feel about your owner.[13]

Surely there are better ways to assess personal writing than this. To my mind, the most convincing expression of personal feeling came from a student who wrote "I don't know." The response was classified as "other."

In another NAEP exercise students were shown a picture of five children playing on an overturned dory. The dory is on a dock which reaches out to a small inlet where sailboats are moored. The instructions were:

> These kids are having fun jumping on the overturned boat. Imagine you are one of the children in the picture. Or if you wish, imagine you are someone standing nearby watching the children. Tell what is going on as he or she would tell it. Write as if you are telling this to a good friend, in a way that expresses strong feelings. Help your friend feel the experience too.[14]

Such an exercise violates the most basic rules for writing assignments. In the first place, the children in the picture seem to be about eight years old and few 13 or 17 year-olds (who were given the test by the NAEP) would enjoy writing about children so much younger than they are. And

although I distrust the automatic criticism of socio-economic bias, it does seem likely that the setting would be unfamiliar to students who have spent no time at seaside or lakeside resorts.

But the biggest problem with the assignment is that it invites a sophisticated phoniness. The following piece was given a top rating by the NAEP judges who determined that it demonstrates an "imaginative entry into experience:"

> Jumping and running on the boat's very enjoyable. Up we jump and down we float. I feel as if I could sail the boat around the world and back. The salty air blows through my nostrils. My body is engulfed in this salty concoction. The wind beats against my cheeks.
>
> The white glistening enamel underside of the boat feels like silk (?) to the touch. The trees are alive, pulsating, watching our childish games.
>
> I feel like I could play forever. No concept of time, no stresses encourage my exhuberance.
>
> My body separated from my spirit. I am no longer encaged in a prison of bones and skin. There are no barriers now. I can do whatever I want, when ever I want. (age 17)[15]

I sense a skilled writer performing an awkward task. The writer has been pushed into a difficult, and I believe dishonest stance by a topic that on one hand asks for strong personal writing and on the other takes the writer away from that which he or she feels strongly about.

Finally, some exercises give so little guidance that it is difficult to see how the writing could be evaluated. Washington state has used the following exercise in its eighth grade writing test:

> Music does different things to different people. Perhaps it makes you feel one way or another. Perhaps it reminds you of some place or something happening.
>
> Now listen to this piece of music and write what things this piece of music does to you. Start writing any time you wish.

Would a student taking this test have any idea of what is expected?

Poor Topics. Writing must be about something. It is not some set of skills that can be assessed apart from the act of communication about a subject. The greatest and most consistent weakness of the NAEP writing exercises is their failure to ask students to write on subjects they know something about. The exercises move the student into areas where his

knowledge is severely limited. He often finds himself in some hypothetical territory where he must be "creative," or he is pushed into what Don Graves has called "extended territory", writing about national and international events and personalities. When the student must write about this extended territory, without a chance to do research, he often writes with limited information. A typical exercise:

> Everyone knows of something that is worth talking about. Maybe you know something about a famous building like the Empire State Building in New York City or something like the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Or you might know a lot about the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City or the new sports stadiums in Atlanta or St. Louis. Or you may be familiar with something from nature like Niagra Falls, a gigantic wheat field, a grove of orange trees, or a part of a wide muddy river like the Mississippi. Choose something you know about. It may be something you have seen while traveling or something you have studied in school. Think about it for a while and then write a description of what it looks like so that it could be recognized by someone who read your description.[17]

extract

While ostensibly this is an open assignment, the implication is that the student should write about something "important," something famous, and not something as insignificant as the student's home or school or favorite park. The writing that such exercises elicit invariably deals with extended territory and illustrates the difficulty students have. The following piece was written for a similar NAEP assignment which required students to write on a person they admired. As might be expected, the possibilities suggested were all (male) national or international figures -- Mickey Mantle, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr. This piece was rated in the 87th percentile of the work done by 17-year-olds:

> Dr. Christian Bernard: I believe he is a person worth looking up to. He has tried to make our life longer for us through research about operations on heart transplants. His determination to help mankind is recognized even though public opinion is very much against the practice of trans-

ferring one person's heart to another person. This determination shows how a true doctor or any kind of scientist would work for the betterment of mankind, both for a longer life and an easier world to live in. Dr. Bernard shows the dedication of a true doctor, to help man when he is sick or dying, as are many of the people on whom he operates. His determination makes him try to show the world that the heart is not a sacred organ of the body, and is just like any other part of the body when it needs to be repaired. His determination to find a better method, new drugs to help after surgery is to be admired. This is one of the reasons I admire him.[18]

extract

I find this writing dismal, what Ken Macrorie has called "Engfish." The student has nothing specific to say about Dr. Bernard and must resort to abstractions and platitudes.

The most confusing NAEP topic asks the student to write a letter of application. The exercise shows a notice of a job opening in a clothing store and gives the following directions:

Chris Jones lives at 3600 Larch Street in New York, New York 10004. Chris has finished the junior year at high school and has been looking for a summer job. Chris spotted the advertisement in the New York Times and decided to apply for the job. Write Chris' letter to Mr. Fried.[19]

extract

The student is put in a curious position. He is to write Chris' letter although he knows nothing about Chris except his address and year in school. What is even more puzzling is the NAEP's method for evaluating the letter. To be awarded the higher marks the letter must include references, a statement of qualifications, and a way to be contacted. While these are valid criteria for a letter of application, the instructions do not make clear the necessity of the student inventing such information.

The fact that most states are looking for minimal competencies does not lessen the need for good topics. When a student must write without information, not only does content suffer, but everything else suffers. A student cannot develop a paragraph if he has nothing to put into it. A student will have trouble with transitions if he has no

information to transit from and to. He will have trouble maintaining a thesis on a topic he cares little about. Unfortunately, the NAEP topics have failed to motivate extensive writing. In the second round writing assessment, for example, the average length of writing for 17-year-olds was 137 words, with a sizable minority writing only one paragraph.[20] I would question any conclusions, even on writing mechanics, that might be drawn from such obviously unmotivated writing.

Motivation will become an increasingly serious problem if states and local districts move toward the primary trait scoring system developed in connection with the NAEP Exercises. Briefly, primary trait scoring is an alternative to holistic scoring where general qualities such as organization, ideas, and style are evaluated in different types of writing. Rather it is argued that each type of writing has specific traits and therefore the criteria for evaluation should change as the writing task changes. Primary trait scoring, then, is more that a system of evaluation; it involves the construction of writing tasks in such a narrow way that specific skills or primary traits can be evaluated.

Richard Lloyd-Jones, a proponent of primary trait scoring, acknowledges that narrowly defined writing tasks may fail to motivate students, but he offers no solutions:

> The more one restricts the situation in order to define a purpose and stimulate performance of a particular kind, the greater the chances that the exercise will fall outside of the respondents' experiences. The testmaker must deal with the problem directly.[21]

The testmaker faces conflicting pressures. He must develop a test that truly tests writing -- he must develop a valid test. And he must develop a test that will be evaluated consistently by raters -- he must develop a reliable test. As I see it these goals cannot be reconciled; they can only be balanced. Primary trait scoring creates an imbalance with its preoccupation with reliability. Unless a student is motivated to produce his best work, of what value is a precise evaluation instrument? Is precise evaluation so important that students should be given no choice in topics? The British, for example, in their writing tests given to students not going

on to college, may give as many as 10 options, sacrificing reliability on the chance that the student will find a topic that works. A balance must be struck, and the nature of this balance is a matter of human judgment and not some immutable psuchometric law.

Those who advocate the primary trait system are, in reality, advocating a return to the skills model, to a view of writing as a set of discrete skills that can be tested by exercises (I think it is significant that the NAEP calls them "exercises"). This model has been under steady, and to my mind, successful attack by teachers and rhetoricians. James Kinneavy, in his influential Theory of Discourse, writes:

> Sounds, morphemes, syntactic patterns, meanings of all kinds, skills in speaking, and the other arts of discourse, narration and the other modes of discourse -- all these exist so that humans may achieve certain purposes in their use of language with each other.[22]

extract

The NAEP makes superficial attempts to prescribe aims ("Write in a way that expresses strong feelings") but these exhortations can only be ineffectual -- like ordering your heart to double its beat. These aren't aims but pseudo-aims. The paradox of using the NAEP exercises to measure writing competence is that a student's capacity for meaningful communication is evaluated on the basis of a meaningless piece of writing -- writing with no real purpose, no real audience.

Any writing competency test must begin with a definition. What is "writing." I would argue that the tightly specific exercises that the NAEP is using do not test writing because the assignments themselves make decisions that the writer should make. Decisions about purpose, content, point of view, focus, and language, are at the heart of the writing process -- they are the writing process. Assignments that "present" the student with a subject, with a role, with information, with an organization are calling for a lobotomized activity.

I use the term "lobotomized" in a literal sense The great Russian psychologist Alexander Luria studied many cases of frontal brain damage and has observed that a person so injured, loses the capacity to form lasting intentions, to plan for the future, or determine the course of behavior.[23] Nevertheless, when presented with a delimited task such as

a standard test of intelligence, the patient can perform quite well on it. Is it not possible that we are defining writing competency is such a way that someone with frontal brain damage might be proclaimed competent? Is it not possible that such delimited exercises do not measure that capacity which, according to Luria, make us truly human, the capacity to form and carry out intentions? And is not this intentionality at the heart of what we call the writing process?

I spent one morning going through a set of NAEP exercises. The more I read, the more depressed I became. There seemed to be something limiting in setting any task and then devising specific criteria that would apply to all the writing produced. I began to feel like I was in an airless room.

I would wander to the kitchen to fix coffee and listen to my nine-month-old daughter make "b" sounds -- "bbbbbbBBBBBB," she would increase volume and smile. I came back to my study, to minimal competencies and primary trait scoring, reluctantly. I began to read some student work and came to a piece that dispelled the gloom, not because it was superbly written, but because there was in it a sense of delight and humor that made it stand out like a flower pushing through a sidewalk crack. It was written in response to one of the more interesting NAEP topics:

> Imagine you are taking care of a neighbor's child for an afternoon. You send one of the children to the corner store to buy some peaches for a snack.
>
> The store owner, Mr. Jones, whom you have known and liked for several years, apparently took advantage of the child. The peaches are rotten. You want to send the child back with the peaches and a note to clear up the situation. Write a note to the grocer that expresses your displeasure and proposes what Mr. Jones should do about the situation.[24]

extract

After exercises requiring the writing of phone messages and letters of request, here we finally had something -- melodrama. The following piece clearly baffled the evaluators who classified it as "generally factual" and "not personally abusive". I like to think of the writer as someone who, as an infant, delighted in making sounds:

Dear Mr. Jones:

I am writing you in regard to the peaches that were purchased by a child I was keeping. I wanted some peaches for a snack but as I bit into one I found to my horror and disgust that they were rotten. Fortunately I kept cool. I tried so hard to forgive and forget, but the child I was keeping obviously couldn't. After eating 12 of you rotten peaches she regurgitated all over the carpet but I tried to endure it because I had a brainstorm. I could feed the remaining peaches to the dog. But as luck would have it upon eating the peaches the dog's hair fell out. However, Mr. Jones, even though these terrible things happened to me I am not mad. I am merely writing to tell you I realized something about you and extend you all my sympathy. Because after this event I now realize why you have no teeth or hair, because you've eaten your own rotten peaches.

extract

Your friend,
Lee Smith

Footnotes

1. "Writing: Released Exercises from the 1973-74 Assessment," #203008-NT, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Denver), 1976, pp. 180-181.

2. Gary Hart, "The California Pupil Proficiency Law as Viewed by Its Author," Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 59, no. 9 (May, 1978), pp. 592-595.

3. "The New York State Basic Competency Testing Program: A Brief Overview," The New York State Bureau of Pupil Testing and Advisory Services, 1977, p. 9.

4. Donald Henderson, "Denver, Colorado: A 17-Year-Old Minimum Competency Testing Program," Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 59, no. 9 (May, 1978), pp. 610-611.

5. Jim Findley, "Westlake's Minimum Competency Graduation Requirements: A Program That Works," Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 59, no. 9 (May, 1978), pp. 614-618.

6. Donald Graves, "Balance the Basics: Let Them Write," An Information Paper for the Ford Foundation, 1977, pp. 10-11.

7. "Basic Skills Assessment Technical Manual," Fall, 1977, Educational Testing Service (Princeton), pp. 38-39.

8. Fred I. Godshalk, Frances Swineford, and William Coffman, The Measurement of Writing Abilities (New York: College Entrance, Examination Board, 1966).

9. Sara Sanders and John Littlefield, "Perhaps Test Essays Can Reflect Significant Improvement in Freshman English," Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 9, no. 2 (Fall, 1975), pp. 147.

10. Charles Stallard "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Writers," Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 8, no. 2 (Fall, 1974), pp. 206-218.

11. Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 9.

12. John Mellon, "Round Two of the National Writing Assessment -- Interpreting the Apparent Decline in Writing Ability," Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring, 1976), p. 67.

13. NAEP Released Exercise #101013-N, p. 23

14. Ibid., p. 33.

15. "Expressive Writing: Selected Results from the Second National Assessment of Writing," National Assessment of Educational Progress (Denver), ERIC no. ED 130-312.

16. "Mathematics/ Writing," Washington Statewide Educational Assessment, Eighth Grade Test administered in the fall of 1976.

17. NAEP Released Exercise # R 203012 - NT, p. 197.

18. "Group Results A, Science and Writing; Report 5 of the 1969-1970 Assessment," National Assessment of Educational Progress (Denver), 1971, p. B-46.

19. NAEP Released Exercise #203008-NT, pp. 180-181.

20. See footnote 12.

21. Richard Lloyd-Jones, "Primary Trait Scoring," in Evaluating Writing Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, editors (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. 42.

22. James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 37-38.

23. A.L. Luria, The Man with a Shattered World (New York: Basic Books,1972) p. 34.

24. NAEP Released Exercise # R 201008-S, p. 89.