

## ASSESSMENT FINDINGS AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

A long term, rhetorically-oriented essay-based writing assessment has many virtues, not the least of which is the gold mine of information it provides for different audiences. For example, here are a few findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress' three writing assessments and their implications for teachers, testers and educational policy makers.

**Findings:** *During the seventies the proportion of teenagers who could write expressive essays and narratives increased. However, the proportion of teenagers who could write acceptable persuasive and descriptive pieces declined. There was no change in the average number of mechanics errors students committed (e.g., sentence fragments, run-ons, agreement, punctuation, etc.) nor in their spelling, nor in their syntax (e.g., embedding rates, subordination, and the like).*

**Implications:** The results show that two-thirds of the students have mechanics in hand and that error rates are remarkably stable across thousands of papers and a span of 10 years. This almost immutable quality to error rates suggests that error is a natural, inevitable aspect of writing and that a concentrated effort to "stamp it out" will do nothing to improve the quality of student writing. Indeed, teachers might do well to devote time to more serious matters of coherence and rhetorical skill.

As in other areas assessed nationally (e.g., reading, mathematics, science), the declines in writing achievement during the seventies, however slight, are worrisome because they are in areas calling for relatively complex clusters of skills. For teachers, this means that students should be writing in all discourse modes and should be getting experience with extended, rather than short, writing tasks. Sentence-level instruction will not sufficiently enable students to think things through.

The implications of these findings for testers are also important. There is no unitary thing called "writing" to be tested. There are many kinds of writing under many different circumstances for different purposes, and students are not equally proficient at all of them. Furthermore, since mechanics problems remained stable over the decade while rhetorical skills changed, a test of mechanics is not likely to capture changes in writing skill. Nor do assessment results indicate that tests based on syntactic analyses are likely to reveal much about students' developing skills.

**Findings:** *At ages 9, 13, and 17, one-fifth to one-fourth of the students reveal such serious problems with writing that it appears to be like another language to them. This proportion holds throughout the seventies and appears in all discourse modes and all kinds of analyses. Similar proportions of students are fearful about writing, have a sense of doom about it, and avoid it whenever they can. These are probably the same students. Additional survey findings tell us that two-thirds of America's 17-year-olds are doing little or no writing in school; 80% spend a third or less of their English class time studying writing; 60% get neither written nor oral feedback from their teachers about their writing; and only 7% appear to be getting exposure to a comprehensive writing program.*

**Implications:** Every teacher is dealing with students who have widely varying attitudes toward writing and toward themselves as writers. This means that teachers need a range of strategies for motivating and instructing students and great flexibility in responding to writers and their materials even in the same classroom.

Another implication of these findings is that very little real writing or responding to writing is taking place in the schools. There is great room for improvement, not only in the English classroom, but across the entire school.

Test makers should consider broadening their tests to include attitudinal surveys and student histories, useful for diagnosing problems and making recommendations. Those who support multiple-choice tests on the grounds that they correlate with actual writing should reconsider the utility of a number that correlates with an activity which is not taking place in the schools.

**Findings:** *When asked to respond to literary works and explain their responses in writing by analyzing the works, only 5-10% of the teenagers showed strong analytic skills. And through the seventies, the percentage of students displaying these systematic inquiry skills declined. Only 8-13% showed skill at supporting an evaluation of a work of literature. Most teenagers can make a quick, accurate, but superficial written response to what they have read. But few can go beyond that to extend and deepen their understanding.*

**Implications:** Most structured responses to reading materials take the form of classroom discussion in which no one speaks for very long, and there are few opportunities for students to think carefully—especially over an extended period of time. Only by reexamining the text in writing can students challenge their preliminary interpretations and move toward more sophisticated understandings of what they read. Most teenagers respond to literary texts with plot summaries, as if the important thing is to get the facts straight. Although this is a start, it is hardly enough. They need practice in Wayne Booth's "rhetoric of inquiry,"<sup>1</sup> practice in critical, social, committed exchange of ideas, practice in appraising the warrants for assent to the propositions that assault them from every direction.

Tests of students' comprehension or their analytic, evaluation, and synthesizing skills should force them to use those skills. The enormous difference between teenagers' skills as measured by multiple-choice tests and the skills they demonstrate in writing suggests that traditional testing approaches have misled us. When we want to know whether students have mastered complex thinking skills, there is nothing that "correlates" sufficiently, nothing that can substitute for making them do it. Let's make them write.

For policy makers, the implications of just these few findings should be clear. Assessment results of complex higher-order skills are low and getting lower, an unacceptable situation in a nation more in need than ever of citizens who can think their way through complex technical and moral issues. The "information age" is here, but who can sort the trivial information from the critical? We can no longer support social priorities that have led to an educational system

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emphasizing the acquisition of low-level skills. As public debate about how to reorder them grows, there are some obvious steps to take that need not wait for general consensus. Higher-level skills are not widely distributed because they are not widely taught. If the percentage of time devoted to writing in the high schools—3%, according to Arthur Applebee's study<sup>2</sup>—were doubled to a measly 6%, we could see some important changes. If the emphasis in testing shifted just a little away from summative and more toward formative evaluation, a little away from norm-referenced and more toward criterion-referenced tests, a little away from indirect and more toward direct measures, we could develop a more accurate gauge of what is going on and tests could be more helpful to students than they are today. Policy can nudge us in those directions without seriously upsetting the delicate balance of powers that defines our current educational possibilities.

You need not agree with my interpretations of assessment findings in order to accept the simple point I want to make here. The point is that if you systematically collect and analyze writing samples and background information about writers, you can develop something more broadly useful than a "testing program." In the long run, the unit cost of such a program—the cost per unit of information for a variety of audiences—is lower than the cost of a series of one-shot, one-use tests.

<sup>1</sup> Wayne C. Booth, "Mere Rhetoric, Rhetoric, and The Search for Common Learning," in *Common Learning* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Foundation for The Advancement of Teaching, 1981) pp. 23-55.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Applebee, *Writing in The Secondary School: English and The Content Areas* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981).

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