

VALUES AND EVALUATION

I write this piece as a teacher of writing who has also done time as an administrator responsible for directing both a college-wide writing competency exam, instituted as a graduation requirement, and a state-mandated basic skills testing program, instituted as a placement and exit exam for a basic skills program. I became involved in both programs because I was concerned about the tremendous power mandated testing has over students and the curriculum. I felt then, and feel now, that those of us most involved with the business of teaching and learning should be the ones to shape these tests.

As a means of evaluation, these tests are, in essence, a way of placing value on certain knowledge and skills and enforcing those values. That is, by judging success according to certain skills and not others, we implicitly say we value those tested skills over others. Consider, for example, the skills we might test to judge successful completion of a basic skills program. If students have to show they can discriminate grammatical from ungrammatical sentences on a multiple choice test, then ability to recognize errors becomes the valued skill. On the other hand, if students have to write a persuasive paragraph or essay, then ability to create a certain kind of discourse becomes the valued skill. If we had to choose between these simple alternatives, I suspect that many of us would choose the latter. Unfortunately, many administrators, who want inexpensive and easily quantifiable tests, would choose the former.

Not only do tests enforce values, they also influence what we teach. If we judge success in a basic skills program on ability to recognize errors, then it is only fair that error recognition be emphasized in basic skills writing courses. The same is true if a writing test is instituted as a graduation requirement. The knowledge and skills tested should be those taught in composition courses and reinforced throughout the curriculum.

This point may seem obvious, but it is often the source of many problems. Tests and curricula may be unrelated, and consequently, courses do little to prepare students for the testing hurdles they face. Even worse, a test of trivial skills may influence the curriculum too strongly. Then, teachers are asked to design their course around skills they do not value. It is our responsibility as teachers to see that neither situation results. Yes, tests should be related to the curriculum, but the curriculum should determine the tests, not vice versa.

How then do we become involved? What kinds of concerns should we have as teachers? Let me present some of these concerns to you in the form of questions you should ask of any testing program.

First, what is the purpose of the test? Is it simply a means of measuring achievement or responding to demands for accountability? Or does it serve an educational purpose? Clearly, I am implying that you should urge that the test should serve some broad instructional purpose for students. Keep asking and trying to articulate a response to the questions "What end will this test serve?" and "Who will it serve?" Even if a test is primarily an achievement test, it can also serve a formative function, identifying strengths and weaknesses prior to and throughout instruction. To do so, students should have multiple opportunities to take the test and to review results with a teacher, tutor, or advisor. Implicitly then, the testing program should be linked not only to the writing program, but also to the advising program.

Second, how does the test relate to some overall writing or basic skills program? While a test may help define problems and enforce values, it does not in itself constitute an instructional program. In fact, it should be

viewed as subordinate to and in the service of an instructional program. Consequently, we should ask, is the test based on what we value teaching our students? Do we have a coherent writing program upon which to base a test? How does that program help prepare students for the test?

Third, what can a test tell us about writing? I would argue that it can give us a partial notion of an individual's writing skills judged relative to a certain community's values. It does not measure some universal skill of "good writing." Consequently, it is our responsibility as teachers of writing to keep testing in a reasonable perspective: as one indicator of *certain* writing skills based on an artificial writing situation, it is a useful, but not sufficient, indicator and a relative, but not universal, judgment of value.

Last, what is the test testing and *how*? As teachers of writing, we know that the way we constrain the process does as much to define what we value as does the standard we set for the product. For instance, will we test writing using a multiple-choice test or writing sample? If we choose a writing sample, will the testing situation we structure allow for and encourage planning and revision?

In presenting these questions, I have already begun to indicate what you can do. Let me close by stating my advice more directly.

First, become informed if you are not already. Read all you can of theory, research, and practice. Participate in networks such as NTNW, get bibliographies, and read.

Second, become involved in testing programs at your school. Help design the test. Make certain that in designing it you consider more than just the makeup of the test. Consider also its purpose, relation to the curriculum, and the overall testing procedures.

Third, stay involved. Help develop the scoring guide if a writing sample is used. Serve as a reader. Offer to review tests with students and advise them. Examine overall results and use them to plan the writing curriculum.

Fourth, and most important, evaluate the test. As a teacher and tester ask, do the results fit what I know of my students? As teachers and writers, we are the ones most sensitive to the process of writing, the developing skills of our students, and the unusual demands of an artificial testing situation. Consequently, we are the ones most qualified to judge whether a test gives students a fair opportunity to demonstrate their writing abilities. If it seems not to, then we should examine the test situation itself. While it by nature is an artificial environment, we can still minimize distortions of the writing process by, for example, encouraging advance planning, allowing time for revision, and removing unrealistic time pressures and large lecture hall testing sessions. Further, we can minimize distortions of the written product by posing questions and setting evaluation standards that encourage students to engage their imaginations and intellects, not just display their grammar skills.

My assumption throughout this piece has been that we, as teachers, are the ones most likely to make a test of writing serve a valid instructional purpose. Recognizing that a test is often imposed as a means of gate-keeping, we can still keep that test in perspective, as just one, but not a sufficient indicator of a person's abilities and as subordinate to a writing program. In this way, we can use the test to serve our purposes: we can see that it reflects what we know about the writing process and more important that it reinforces the knowledge and skills we value as writers for ourselves and our students.

Anne J. Herrington is completing doctoral studies in Rhetoric and Writing at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York; previously, she was Director of Developmental Skills and the Writing Competency Program at Johnson State College, Johnson, Vermont.