

Teaching  
English  
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# Standardized Testing and the College Composition Instructor

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Can we expect students to craft papers that exude energy and insight when they have been subjected to twelve years of carefully orchestrated official writing?

Thirty years ago, Peter Elbow wrote *Writing without Teachers* and ushered in the process, heuristic approach to language pedagogy. Most distinctive about Elbow's book—and the plethora of others that would follow—was the invitation to allow writing to evolve, to develop, and to grow as a living organism. Suddenly, teachers were supplanting grammar books with exercises in brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting. Elbow's admonition that writers must give their words time to “cook and grow” captured the notion that composition—like reading—is an active, dynamic set of stages that are forever tied to the artist's psycholinguistic endeavors.

Today, as the movement begins its fourth decade, it seems to be threatened by the looming presence of political agendas that, while seeming innocuous, could undermine the concept of writing as a student-centered, poetically driven endeavor. Terms like “accountability” and “objective assessment” are being reprised by many educators as they respond to President Bush's call for national testing at the K–12 levels. And as these test-driven movements begin to take shape and become ensconced in the curriculum of high school writing classes, student writing becomes more teacher-centered, more constrained, and less rooted in personal

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discovery and process. For those of us at the college level, who will one day teach these students and expect them to compose with the autonomy and freedom of the creative artist, the movement to test and reduce composition to quantitative terms becomes more disquieting and deleterious. Can we expect students to craft papers that exude energy and insight when they have been subjected to twelve years of carefully orchestrated official writing? If the answer is no, then perhaps it is time that we become more cognizant of writing and testing in high schools and offer our voices—and protests—when they are needed.

## Writing outside the Lines

Billy's first day in Composition 101 was carefully designed to be an auspicious experience. The boyish-looking eighteen-year-old had donned a neat-looking shirt with casual pants and sneakers. With his short brown hair and callow demeanor he sat down, studied the syllabus, and listened dutifully as I enumerated the goals and objectives of introductory composition.

Occasionally, when I mentioned creative license or writing process, I could spot a smile and nod of approbation. Despite our thorough review of the syllabus—which chronicled the essence of the class—Billy wrote copious notes, and when it came time for students to complete the mandatory writing sample, he set to work like a man who had fifty minutes to compose a philosophical treatise. While other students wrote and then spent intervals gazing at the sporadic display of snowflakes that danced outside the window, Billy's eyes remained on his paper. By the end of class, his final draft revealed much about the effects of writing tests and prescriptive curricula on students who have the acumen and desire to be writers.

I think it would be fun if composition were like poetry and musical lyrics—if writers had the chance to write “outside of the lines” once in a while. I like the singer/composer John Mayer. In his song “No Such Thing,” he says, “They love to tell you to stay inside the lines / But something's better on the other side.” If there is one thing I hope for in this class, it is the opportunity to write outside the lines once in a while.

Billy's request is perhaps the most striking illustration of a system that has become mired in assessment obsession. In Michigan, where Billy attended high school, much of the curriculum has become paralyzed by the ubiquitous presence of a state writing exam. With the eleventh grade the focal point of this test, English departments scramble to prepare students for an assessment experience that reduces writing creativity and process to a tense, state-mandated composing exercise. What suffers when process writing is negated is the voice and investment of the author. Instead of learning to become an inventive artist of words—someone who knows that writing is a series of explorations into one's experiences and values—one reverts to recipe-writing, usually coming in direct response to the test. This is perhaps the most stark and disconcerting result of having a state exam. Because process and voice are no longer generated by student topics—and by student initiative—many students have lost any sense of ownership over their essays. Wrote another student later in the day, “I think it would be cool if we had more choice over what we wrote. I think it would be nice if creativity were valued.”

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## Peter Elbow's Lingering Legacy

Thirty years ago, Peter Elbow militated against instant prose and the simplistic mentality that spawned it. When Elbow discussed an evolutionary procedure—comparing composition to other organic acts of growth—he was calling for an end to writing that was prepackaged and artificial. At the same time, Elbow argued that writing was about the intellectual and personal development of a writer. Only when composition came from the writer, moreover, was real growth possible. “Think of writing,” writes Elbow, “as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning—before you know your meaning at all—and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve” (*Writing* 15).

In Michigan, the writing test is hardly draconian, but its demand that students compose an essay in one sitting—and that this single essay be used as an illustration of their total competence as writers—has subverted much of what Elbow and others advocated. Students are no longer writing for themselves and using the episodic character of writing to develop an essay and create prose that is uniquely their own. Rather, writing has become an endeavor to appease the invisible reader who will be recruited to evaluate the essay. Process, audience, and the personal investment that is inherent to writing have been expunged.

As a college composition teacher, I find the effects of this test to have been dramatic as well as disquieting. Much like Billy, other students come to class hoping to employ a genuine writing process—one that incorporates multiple revisions, conferences, and the holistic use of portfolios to assess their entire body of work. Each semester I do an informal poll of my students, asking them if they have engaged in portfolio evaluation and multiple revisions of a paper. I question them as to their impressions and memories of composition in high school. Invariably, what I discover in increasing numbers is a sense of disaffection and consternation. Students write of their school's obsession with the test and the inability of teachers to make writing meaningful or enjoyable.

One student, in particular, suggested that composition changed dramatically in the eight years that he and his brother attended their local high school. “In the beginning of my high school life,” he wrote, “we did a lot of writing and I thought it was pretty fun. Then, in 1997, the state test was introduced in a new format and the whole mood of the school changed. By the time my younger brother graduated in 2002, the school was basing most of its writing classes around success on the test. We didn't do revisions and portfolios at all. They weren't going to be on the test.”

A second student was even more emphatic. “It's all about the MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] and getting a high score, so that they don't close down the school or something. We began talking about the writing test more than a year before we took it, and we never focused on anything else because the

test requires students to write fast. Everything we wrote was aimed at the test and being more efficient.”

In fact, the writing exam in Michigan—since its inception in 1996—has been an incredibly frenetic and unfair experience for any student of composition. For the first test, which was implemented in 1996, students were given a meager thirty minutes to do a reflective essay on two pieces of writing they had previously written. Incredibly, in thirty minutes they were expected to use specific details to clearly illustrate and support a point about the quality of their past writing. A second writing assignment demanded that these same eleventh graders compose, revise, and polish a complete essay and do so in twenty minutes. A third and final assignment demanded that writers craft a longer piece of prose and be done in ninety minutes. In responding to the exam in 1996, I suggested in a newspaper editorial that “the High School Proficiency Test leaves little room for process and even less for critical thought. Where good writers universally agree that high quality writing requires stages, the proficiency test hurries students through rigidly timed essays based on contrived topics” (Shafer 13A).

### **Effects of the Test**

In this high-stakes and decidedly daunting environment, students abandon certain ideas about writing and embrace more reductive and less active approaches. If schools value linear, product-based steps, then students are going to see writing as an act that is quick, devoid of stages, impersonal, and predicated upon the values of a single authority. They are going to cease to see it as a social activity that is read by an authentic audience, and they are going to stop seeing writing as an act of artistic creation.

“Our students carry with them many of the negative, critical, correctness-centered notions of evaluation that are so prevalent in society and among us, their writing instructors,” (170) writes Brian Huot in a recent essay in *College English*. Adds Peter Elbow in his book *Everyone Can Write*, “when students do high-stakes writing, they often struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose” (353).

In the classroom, such negative and regressive notions of writing are increasingly evident. Where students knew about and were often experienced in reading and critiquing a peer’s paper, I see evidence that this ability is waning and even disappearing. In a recent class, I reviewed the syllabus with students until I noticed two students who had their hands raised in consternation. When I called on each student and invited his question, each asked me to explain what I meant by “peer critique.”

Other examples also point to the changing landscape of our writing programs and the disconcerting emphasis on testing. While most students still have an idea of what a peer review or critique is, only a paltry few have any knowledge about the concept of portfolio evaluation. In a survey of my classes for two semesters, I found that less than half of the students knew what a writing portfolio was

used for or why one would have one as part of assessment beyond a test. And while it wasn't difficult to explain the general components of ungraded essays and portfolio work, one wonders about the deleterious effects of prescriptive writing and the testing culture that propagates it. If students are not being given the opportunity to engage in peer reading, in holistic assessment, and in revision that is devoid of terminal grades, how negatively is this affecting them as college writers and as people who see composition as suddenly removed from personal or social relevance?

Clearly, before we offer another castigation of the deficiencies of the high school writing curriculum, we need to ponder the impact of testing, the way it truncates and supplants genuine, holistic writing and undermines progress. College writing instructors have never been insulated from what happens—or doesn't happen—in high school writing classes, but we are only beginning to appreciate the damage done to students we will someday teach.

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Today virtually every state in the union either has a state exam or is in the process of developing one. Of these myriad exams, not one engages students in an authentic writing process. Some reduce language to a frenetic sprint through an essay while others make no pretense at real writing and ask students to label parts of speech. "According to a 50-state study by Andrea Martin of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, very few states allow more than one session per prompt on their tests," argues Edgar Schuster in a recent *Phi Delta Kappan* essay (375). And yet, when one reviews the volumes of research on writing and assessment, there is simply no call for more testing how one composes in this truncated way. Indeed, the trend since the time that Elbow first wrote *Writing without Teachers* has been to distance oneself from teacher-dominated composition. "But how much do national and state tests support the writing process?" asks Schuster. "In fact, as I shall demonstrate, most national and state tests support only one of the six stages in the writing process: drafting" (375). In his study, Schuster proceeds to examine state and national exams and the various ways they abridge the writing process. "We certainly do not honor the importance of revising when we give tests with severe time limits," he laments (376). But in virtually every instance, he finds that tests do not consider the time needed to craft a quality piece of prose or the autonomy of the author in making such decisions.

### Composition Scholarship vs. Testing

Indeed, the movement that began with *Writing without Teachers* four decades ago was predicated upon the notion that writing pedagogy was ineffective because it offered no ownership to authors—that it was controlled by prescriptive mandates and cosmetic concerns that obfuscated the more critical components of an essay. In 1967, John Dixon wrote *Growth through English* and based his work on the British paradigm of linguistic growth through engagement and experience rather than a

prescribed curriculum. Composition was not something that was done to students but a series of acts that led to the growth of the writers and their work. Students were seen as productive, active language makers and Dixon contended that students would care more about their work when it emanated from their interests and values. In speaking of the English class Dixon articulated the need for students to have a voice, to be active. “An English classroom,” he suggested, “is a place where pupils meet to share experience of some importance, to talk about people and situations in the world as they know it, gathering experience into new wholes and enjoying the satisfaction and power that this gives. But in so doing, each individual takes what he can from the shared store of experience and builds it into a world of his own” (12).

From this seminal work came a trove of process books that trumpeted a student-centered, generative approach to writing. Before *Writing without Teachers*, which was published in 1973, there was Donald Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1968), where the focus was again placed on revision and the participation of an author in constructing a piece of writing. Throughout his work, Murray writes of what authors do rather than enumerating the steps or rules they must master. As with other theorists of his time, Murray saw the composer as an artist, as someone who devises a piece of art from visions and dreams. “The craftsman writes by rewriting and he rewrites by reseeing and rethinking. He seeks the inspiration of the writing desk. He understands that writing is a way of perceiving, a method of discovery and refinement and synthesis and clarification” (13). And finally, adds Murray, “the writer dreams of art, but he works at craft” (13).

Two years after *Writing without Teachers*, James Britton and his colleagues at the University of London examined composition by reflecting on the kinds of writing students typically did. For what purposes were students asked to compose and for what kinds of audience were two questions they sought to answer. In the end, their work, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)* suggested that too much writing was removed from the personal and “expressive” aspects of composing, relying instead on writing to please one’s teachers and perceiving them as the audience. Without “Expressive Writing,” the researchers suggested, students were not engaging in the kinds of writing that nurtured composition growth and development.

Taken together, these works represent a strong rebuke to the testing frenzy that is gripping students and transforming the composer’s landscape. With students writing more and more for tests—with the goal being only to meet the prescriptive demands of the particular state—the values of the process movement are being vitiated and distorted by the desire to make learning an objectively measured endeavor. Today students complete exams that are inimical to all that we learned about composition theory and particularly detrimental to minority and marginalized students. Because tests require that one process language at an accelerated pace, they represent a decided disadvantage to those who process language through non-standard dialects. Indeed, in the same way that the students of Trackton and Roadville were alienated by the foreign values and expectations of the town school in Shirley

Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, many writers are stymied by the elaborate requirements and stringent demands of timed compositions and high-stakes writing.

"Test scores stratify largely along race, class, and even gender lines, whether it's an IQ test of young children or the SAT for college admission," writes Peter Sacks in *Standardized Minds*. "Pick a multiple-choice test, and one finds that whites tend to score better than blacks; men typically score better than women; and those from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds are apt to fare considerably better than people from families of low or moderate socioeconomic circumstances," he reflects (201).

Longtime test critic Alfie Kohn agrees, arguing that discrimination is hidden under the guise of accountability and that testing perpetuates racial division and inequity. Besides being unfair and inaccurate, Kohn suggests that tests undermine goals of educational equity.

Don't let anyone tell you that standardized tests are not accurate measures. The truth of the matter is that they offer a remarkably precise method for gauging the size of the houses near the school where the test was administered. Every empirical investigation of this question has found that socioeconomic status in all its particulars accounts for an overwhelming proportion of the variance in test scores when different schools, towns, or states are compared. (348)

Another recent essay in *Phi Delta Kappan* discussed the discontent and consternation of Ohio teachers, who feel their professional autonomy and expertise are being negated by testing. What is particularly striking about these teachers is that they are board certified nationally. Of this select group, 88 percent said they believe that high-stakes tests have lessened teacher autonomy in the classroom, and "88 percent said they believe (61 percent of them strongly) that Ohio education policy discourages the arts in the classroom. In addition, 98 percent believe that 'students spend too much time preparing for tests and that high-stakes tests do not support developmentally appropriate practices for students'" (Rapp 216).

Similar results were revealed in Texas when Linda McNeil interviewed teachers for her book *Contradictions of School Reform*. As a whole, teachers saw the anti-theoretical thrust of the testing movement and the regressive practices it tended to revive. For many whom McNeil interviewed, testing required the abandonment of more aesthetically demanding assignments. In other cases, cultural explorations were eliminated so that the test preparation could be given more time. "As the controls were imposed, and the regulations increasingly standardized, the quality of teaching and learning at even these exemplary schools began to suffer," writes McNeil. "Teaching, curriculum, and students' roles in classrooms were transformed by the standardizations and by the categories of compliance they imposed" (5).

And so, when college writing instructors question their role and relevance in the recent frenzy to test all students, they must ponder the pedagogical as well as political reasons. They must ruminate on not only the regressive approaches to composition theory implied but also the ethical dilemma of perpetuating an unfair system. Clearly, the testing of students affects us in myriad ways and demands our attention and voice.

## What to Do

Beyond crafting essays and letters for local publications and newspapers, there are other important activities that college composition instructors can engage in to ameliorate the testing problem. First, it seems logical that community colleges and universities make an effort to meet with teachers and administrators from local schools and articulate the problems with teaching to the test and ascribing too much weight to these exams. Even in situations where the tests have a major impact on the evaluation of the school, there are ways to deal with tests and still maintain a process-first writing classroom. In many instances, the goal should be simply to tell teachers that they have support and that tests, while seeming to be the panacea, are often unfortunate manifestations of a political—not educational—agenda. In workshops, college faculty can express their disdain for tests and tell high school faculty that they understand that these do not reflect their teaching. Indeed, the best way to create a facade of educational accountability is to give a test and use its simplistic results as a measure of success. Nothing succeeds like a simplistic, definitive number.

In Michigan, I spent much of my tenure as president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English discussing the exam and the productive activities teachers could engage in at all levels to mitigate its impact and preserve the

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writing process. At our annual convention, I invited speakers who had written on state exams to offer suggestions for combating their effects and sponsored a forum on the impact of and solutions to issues surrounding testing and writing. Ideas were exchanged as to how to bolster the student and the composing process, despite their embattled status. In the end, our state at least felt more empowered and unified in its ability to continue best practice in a world that is increasingly embracing the test as an easy but fallacious answer for educational uncertainty.

In the classroom it is critical that we acknowledge the nationwide fever to test and truncate the writing process. When working with new students, it is a good idea to spend class sessions reviewing the notion of a writing process and the episodic, organic aspects of writing. In my classes, we spend the first weeks of class talking about writing and its personal and cultural aspects. Writing, I urge students to remember, begins with their experiences and the belief systems they have developed over the years. It is at its best when it is a social and visceral experience, when it probes the verities of their own lives. The first chapter of the book we use focuses on the natural ability we all bring to writing and the connections that tie writing to speaking and communication in general. It is natural for us to write. It is a natural outgrowth of the poet, but we must pull students away from the tick-tock of tests before their poetic sides can reemerge.

Most important, college writing instructors must understand that they are not impervious to the problems caused by testing. Area high school students will

someday be in our classrooms and their inability to engage in a rich, personal writing process affects their ability to think, compose, and develop into democratic citizens. In the end, we all feel the results of diminishing hope and a depleted understanding of writing process and its efficacy to empower. Students should feel empowered to write “outside of the lines,” but this is only possible if we acknowledge and confront the dilemma of testing in the high school. ◀

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