

IV. The CUNY Writing Assessment Test and the teaching of writing

Allan Brick

The CUNY Writing Assessment Test, mandated for the undergraduate colleges of the City University of New York, has had largely positive effects on the teaching of writing at Hunter College. This test, together with tests in mathematics and reading, is taken by approximately 2,700 entering Hunter freshmen (1979-80 figures) and taken again as a remediation exit retest by 58 percent who failed to meet the CUNY standard.

As former coordinator of basic English and present coordinator of the entire CUNY Freshman Skills Assessment Program at Hunter, I see the writing test as a significant step forward in a strategy of ensuring our students not only literacy in writing but the opportunity for valid learning throughout the college curriculum. Precisely because it is not a multiple-choice test counting errors in mechanics and grammar, but an essay in which students express themselves and argue for their personal opinions, the CUNY Writing Assessment Test demonstrates that CUNY faculty are concerned about the student as a whole person—as a thinking, experimenting, expressive individual. Thus the writing test balances the reading and math portions of the CUNY Skills Assessment Program which, in their predilection for quick, quantified, "objectively" statistical assessment, tend to deny individual differences and to undercut the desire of open admissions-level students to attend college and to remain there.

In mandating skills assessment, the CUNY Board of Trustees was seeking—I think quite justifiably—to strengthen CUNY's public image. Traditionally, CUNY's mission is to make quality education available to large numbers of students who are the first in their families to go to college. CUNY is not, nor has it ever been, a haven for students whose interests and abilities are wholly inappropriate to higher learning. It was the board's desire to tighten up on basic standards and, in order to survive as a university in the budget-slashing atmosphere of the latter 1970s, to prove that CUNY offers opportunity yet demands skills and discipline in students who would continue beyond the sophomore year. No wonder then that problems as well as strengths have emerged from a testing system that, somewhat ambivalently, would ensure remedial education for all the upward-bound students who need it and yet would also enforce a two-year limit on their acquisition of minimum proficiency. In examining both sides of this system as it affects the teaching of writing, we may consider the challenges involved. Can we make a standardized, compulsory testing program work toward our goals as educators? Have our curriculum and methods been taken out of our control by a uniformity legislated from on high?

Effects of the test on faculty attitudes and curriculum. These are the questions

that arose in our minds at Hunter when, in the fall of 1977, we were shocked to discover that we had to implement the new CUNY Skills Assessment Program immediately. In four months, by April, 1978, we had to begin testing our incoming fall, 1978, freshmen with a whole battery of new tests. Fortunately, for some years we had had our own placement test program for entering freshmen. But now it was necessary to dovetail the newly required CUNY "minimal readiness" tests with the existing Hunter tests. Worse still, in a number of cases our old tests set higher levels for required remediation than the new CUNY tests. In addition to new tests and scoring procedures, we had to organize ourselves for reading, second-reading, and, potentially, third-reading all of the essays for the writing test according to an unfamiliar "holistic" procedure and by new criteria. This was a tremendous increase in workload. In our previous system, we relied on a multiple-choice test to eliminate some 40 percent of the essays from being read at all and then relied on a single reading for most of the essays remaining. All of this placement reading had been done by the six full-time members of the remedial writing staff. Now, with no supplemental budget in sight for training and paying readers, we had to involve the entire English Department and all of the writing teachers in the (separate) Department of Academic Skills.

Getting the English Department's literary scholars, its composition and remedial writing instructors, and the writing instructors from Academic Skills all in the same room at the same time one day in April, 1978, for the first test reading marked a major social and educational event at Hunter College. These groups had had almost no contact with each other before this day. Suddenly, there they all were, some 100 English teachers together on common ground, waiting skeptically for the chief readers (myself and a colleague) to show them how to score holistically an entering freshman's essay. And we actually were all there, with only one exception, I think—someone who had a family emergency. Even dental appointments had been cancelled. Senior department members no one could remember having seen for years—at least not at a department meeting—showed up, somehow compelled or cajoled, perhaps just not wanting to miss the democratic event.

We were there for a training session in holistic reading according to the CUNY Writing Assessment Test six-point evaluation scale. We began the session by passing out a copy of the scale. Hands shot up immediately to query the language and intention of the scale's definitions. Deaf to all questions, we then passed out sample student essays previously agreed upon as easily rateable, and asked our colleagues to read several essays quickly, recording their score for each. Then we asked for shows of hands to see how many had given the same scores to the same essays.

This request led to the major, and crucial, surprise of the day. Agreement right from the start, although not universal, was astoundingly close. The many hands in the air at the same time, revealing the common scoring of each essay marked the beginning of an afternoon of unprecedented good feeling and professional pride. Even when we got to the more problematic, borderline samples, most people agreed; if they did differ, it was rarely by more than one point. Thus we provided the necessary large base of readers for the CUNY Writing Assessment Test that first spring. More important, we demonstrated a professional approach to

student writing that, for the majority of the English faculty-the literature teachers-offered a new way of looking at their own teaching and at their colleagues who teach writing.

I only wish I could report that we now get all of those same people into a room together every term to repeat the process and continue the demystification. But one coup of such dimensions is all you get. Since that time, we have relied upon similar grading sessions for the English remedial writing and Academic Skills writing teachers, and much of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test reading is now handled by (and budgeted for) teaching adjuncts. Still, the fact that all of the writing teachers in Academic Skills and remedial English are now meeting together regularly is a result of major importance.

Practical effects of the test. One effect of these joint sessions has been communication and clarification between the English and Academic Skills departments as to the exit criteria for moving a student out of the top-level remedial writing course into freshman English. Under the CUNY skills assessment rulings, each individual college still has the right to determine these criteria if they are above the CUNY standard of minimal readiness. In Hunter's case, when it came to implementing the writing test, we saw no way to have two cutoffs -one for CUNY and one for Hunter. Administratively it seemed impossible--on the ground of costs for readings alone-to have a remedial course exit requirement that differed from the CUNY writing test. Thus we made the CUNY Writing Assessment Test the final exam in Hunter's highest-level remedial course in both Academic Skills and English.

Most teachers have welcomed the standardization and clarity the test has brought even though they do have to "teach to the test," or, more specifically, to the skills emphasized by the test criteria. Some teachers, however, have objected that to require students to pass a standard 50-minute test in order to prove they are ready for freshman English undermines and is unfair to open admissions students who need more latitude at this stage of their development. These teachers maintain that many students--bidialectical and bilingual students in particular-need more time to develop discipline, work habits, and study skills, and to acclimatize themselves to an entirely new cultural milieu. These students should not, therefore, be subjected so soon in their college careers to a 50-minute exam that so heavily emphasizes editing and grammar. These teachers prefer our old two-hour essay test, because they feel that to give these students a fair chance we must give them time to demonstrate the skills they have learned. Hunter has compounded this problem, these teachers say, by requiring students to pass the test before they can register beyond 36 credits (the university limit is 60).

I agree with these complaints. We should find a way to modify a too rigid program. At the same time, I also agree with the view that the test makes good sense for the *majority* of students entering CUNY with poor writing skills. The CUNY test requires students to demonstrate "command" over an idea and the vocabulary and syntax in which the idea is expressed. Unquestionably, students must have this ability if they are to do even minimally proficient college-level work. Thus all writing teachers-remedial and freshman level-now have a clear picture of the goals and emphases of their respective courses. Appropriate syntax and

sentence-to-sentence coherence are the main objectives in remedial courses at Hunter. Skill in organization and use of rhetorical modes are the main objective in the regular freshman course.

Associated with this curricular clarification effected by the test is a certain increased academic stringency. We are demonstrably unfair to many students if we take too relaxed an attitude toward their "getting themselves together" for college work. As coordinator of basic English courses, I have seen the injustice done to many students who are permitted to take remedial courses over and over again, sometimes with gaps of a term or more, while going on with the rest of their college courses, sometimes right up to the point of graduation in certain majors. These students are then forbidden to graduate, their chronic mistake patterns now having become so deep that for them (at least at this stage of their lives) the appropriate remedial course is impossible to pass. Contributing to this situation is the fact that many departmental majors and many upper-level courses do not require-much less teach-writing. This deep problem is characteristic of colleges generally. Only now, at Hunter and elsewhere, is there some movement toward confronting it.

For the majority of students, it is a godsend also that both a time limit on remediation and the criteria of minimal readiness for college work have been so clearly established. If students cannot make it in college at this point in their lives, they deserve an early warning that they would do better to face reality and drop out, at least for the time being, rather than go on taking courses-postponing maturity in the illusion that they are "making it," when in reality they are not.

Social and philosophical issues raised by the test. Stringency and standardization, which may be as bitter a pill for teachers as for students, are finally acceptable from the point of view of democratic and humanistic principles because the benefits of a sound writing test, even one dictated from above, accrue to students through the ability to *write*, the principal medium of humanistic study and exchange of ideas among free people.

Still, certain disadvantages of a standardized test are worth considering because they reflect what may be a serious flaw in the whole concept of asking university students in a diverse, urban setting-or perhaps any American setting-to write extemporaneously on topics defined for them by university faculty, however well intentioned. This flaw lies in the nature and wording of the topics. Test topics may condition students both directly and indirectly before they even enter college. Because in the CUNY system students must be retested if they do not meet the standard, remedial writing courses throughout the university must now to a considerable degree be "taught to" the CUNY writing test. Given this fact, some teachers have pointed out certain sociological and rhetorical biases in some of the topics offered as options on the test.

Take, for example, the following topic:

In a world of telephones, television, and tape recorders, it is no wonder that many young people do not write well. They do not have to, because writing is no longer an essential skill for a person in modern society.

Do you agree or disagree with what this passage says? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading.

Several of my colleagues have pointed out that a topic like this is more a trap than a position the student feels free to "agree or disagree" with according to his or her own inclinations. What entering freshman would actually dare disagree with this assertion, these colleagues argue, when writing to a bunch of English teachers? Consider also the students' consciousness of themselves (as compared with their consciousness of the teachers who framed the topic and to whom the students are writing) as relatively unable to offer data and analysis that would legitimately refute, confirm, or qualify the proposition.

Other colleagues of mine make a still more serious charge about the topics on the CUNY writing test, and perhaps on all similar tests which require students to write essays to prescribed topics. I quote here from a memo sent to me by Lewis Meyers, who was writing as a representative of the full-time developmental English instructors:

In most of the topics we find a strong sociological bias. That is, the topics ask students for a response to social relations as a system. Doubtless an underlying assumption here is that the ability to respond well to social issues is a measure of intellectual maturity. This is debatable. Undebatable is the fact that students are asked to write within a framework defined by the largely middle-class identity of teachers. So one topic states that "success is measured to a very large extent in terms of money," and asks students if they agree or not with the validity of that measurement. We submit that only people who are not financially desperate can respond to that question in good faith, and their response is a foregone conclusion. Students do not, for the most part, have money. They want to make it. Who can blame them? And yet, by the very phrasing of the topic, they know they are being asked to "overcome" themselves. Other topics, such as one on changing ideas of culture heroes, similarly invite piety or cynicism by implicitly requiring students to deny their own customary allegiances and values, or give up all hope of salvation by confirming them. This prejudicial trend within the topics cannot help but stiffen the test-taker into unreal verbal attitudes that must hurt his or her efforts to write well.

This critique continues by expanding its point that the "middle-class" topics, in their apparent attempt to "get as close to the students' own shared experiences and knowledge as possible without provoking subjectivity," actually tend to remove students from their experiences and knowledge:

The topics are abstractions (not just abstract); and these abstractions are so blank, inert and lifeless that almost no one can write about them without his or her own writing assuming these qualities. This, we feel, cuts the students' tie to their own "experience and knowledge" and makes writing harder, not easier. We suspect also

that as a result many students-particularly borderline ones-write worse than they might.

This is heavy criticism, and if applicable to most of the CUNY writing test topics (and I don't believe that it is-not to most of them) it would be devastating. But the fact is that at present we simply do not know whether this criticism of test topics is valid or not.

Finally, on philosophical and logical grounds, still other colleagues point out that the topics used in the CUNY writing test involve statements that appear to be the same in character but actually are not. Some of the passages make argumentative value assertions; others are apparent statements of fact; and quite a few are neither clearly one or the other. The quite possible result is the students' confusion as to the point with which they are to "agree or disagree." Such a confusion may be seen in the following set of topics (which constitutes one test in its entirety):

A. Job security is more important than the opportunity to change the kind of work one does. I would rather be guaranteed a steady job for the rest of my working life, even if the daily routine never changed, than have the freedom of changing jobs along with the risk of having no job at all.

Do you agree or disagree with what this passage says? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, or your reading.

B. Recent laws make it possible to punish young teenagers as if they were adults. This is unfair, because teenagers are often unaware of the seriousness of the crimes they commit. They should not be condemned to spend years of their lives in jail.

Do you agree or disagree...?

The initial statement in A, concerning job security, is a matter of opinion, where the initial statement in B (since no information to check it by is provided) must be taken as a matter of fact. The result of such juxtaposition may very well give an unsettlingly factual tone to the statement in A, obscuring its nature as a statement of subjective value. This tone is enhanced by the personal assertion in the second sentence of A. In B, the second sentence is quasi-factual, while the third sentence is entirely an assertion of moral belief.

While some kind of mixing of value with fact in the topic statements of essay exams seems inevitable, the potential for confusion could be diminished by allowing the students alternative, more open, rhetorical modes for their essays. Thus some Hunter College instructors are pressing for alternatives to the currently exclusive "agree or disagree" format used by the CUNY writing test:

The nature of students' response is adversely affected also by the varying instructions in the topics to agree or disagree with the issue raised. Argumentation, as the sole way to discuss viewing television, living in sin or making money, seems to us a rather narrow and constricting focus for the writer. The topics, therefore, do not

create opportunities for students to have something to say, when having something to say is largely dependent on being given an opening to do so. Rather, the instructions for writing eliminate the idea of a variety of approaches-both in the interpretation of meaning and in the rhetorical extension of meaning. The result is to discourage optimum performance by those students who have more in mind than argument allows, or who have no side to take and thus must fake it,

These instructors are thus calling for research into the psychological effect on students of essay test topics such as those used by the CUNY writing test. This research has yet to be done, although one instructor at Hunter is now beginning to study the effects on student test writing of variations in topic language and content.

At the same time, even most critics of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test acknowledge that the CUNY Task Force on Writing in general responded appropriately to the assessment mandate of the CUNY Board of Trustees. The task force had to respond quickly under intense pressure to create a test and yet, at the same time, resist equally intense pressure to adopt a multiple-choice instrument. Under these conditions, the "agree or disagree" format the task force adopted provided an educationally sound as well as relatively simple and manageable way of meeting the testing needs of an enormous university system. While the holistic scoring methods by which we score the test have been demonstrated reliable, however, the reliability of the test itself has not yet been satisfactorily examined with regard to its structure and its topics. There is some irony now in the lack of objectivity that can be claimed in this particular unresearched area. Still, there should be no doubt that going ahead despite language and format problems was far better than deferring to the alternative of multiple-choice testing that would have deeply undermined both the teaching of writing and the entire atmosphere of learning and growth in a liberal university.

If writing teachers-as researchers, administrators, and activists in the academy-can now move to consolidate the potential gains of this kind of holistic approach to required skills assessment, it is entirely possible that our larger goals can be realized. One such goal is a significant degree of integration of writing and reading-the sophisticated critical reading of literature-so that literature courses will involve more writing, and writing courses will make practical use of literature, including student writing shared and analyzed as literature. Another goal is the understanding and practical use of "writing as learning" by teachers throughout the college curriculum. We must challenge the definition of writing both as merely a skill and as merely a barrier for restricting or excluding students. We must demonstrate instead that writing is the basis for an integrated education throughout college and beyond.