

*Editor's note:* The following set of articles by Judith Fishman and Lynn Quitman Troyka presents two views of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, a large-scale assessment tool which has interest for writing program administrators nationally. Professor Troyka's article appears at the Editor's request.

## **Do You Agree or Disagree: The Epistemology of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test**

Judith Fishman

May I ask you, readers, to do the following exercise? Take out a few minutes to read and react to the statements below, by checking the blank next to each assertion--do you agree or disagree?

**Agree      Disagree**

- |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Everyone should be religious.                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Kids shouldn't watch television.               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Handguns should be forbidden.                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. The death penalty should be used more often.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Automobiles should be eliminated.              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Nobody should be allowed to have a big family. |

These are the kinds of topics used for the City University of New York Writing Assessment Test--or as we within the system call it--the "WAT."<sup>1</sup> Every entering freshman and all transfer students within the 17 branches of CUNY take a version of the WAT; students are asked to respond to one or two topics (like those listed above) by writing an "essay"; they are asked to "express your thoughts clearly and organize your ideas so that they will make sense to a reader." They *are* told that "correct grammar and sentence structure are important," and instructed *to* "agree or disagree" with the assertion and to "explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading."<sup>2</sup>

Since the inception of the WAT in 1976, national attention has focused on CUNY's attempt to institutionalize a means of testing writing abilities by asking for a writing sample of all its students. The University has been applauded for not resorting to multiple-choice testing and for having allowed teachers of writing to design the test:<sup>3</sup> "Chief Readers" representing each branch of CUNY meet yearly to review proposed exam topics to fit the existing model. Tests are generally read holistically within each college, and rates of agreement between college and "audit" readers generally exceed 80% each year. The WAT is used in all branches of CUNY for placement (students who fail the test are placed in basic writing courses) and in many branches for "exit" (students who do not pass the test--re-tests are permitted--by the time they earn 61 credits may not be permitted to continue in college). All incoming freshmen (more than 33,000 each year) and transfer students take a version of the same test. In short, the system "works."

For college administrators and writing program administrators considering the implementation of college-wide testing, the CUNY system, along with the ETS and the California Placement Test, has become a model for its efficiency, its packaging, and its high reliability in placing native students in appropriate level courses. And yet, it seems to me, and to many of my colleagues within CUNY, that the system is in need of reevaluation and repair. My purpose here is to examine some of the concerns and questions explored within the program at Queens College and at meetings of other colleagues within CUNY, so that those who do look to CUNY as a model may reflect on these observations, as they consider implementing or modifying a college-wide testing program. My concerns are these:

- that the test does not enable students to write at their best (even considering the constraints of testing)
- that the test shapes, misshapes, and dominates basic writing programs
- that it imparts a set of values about living (particularly in New York City) that many students, particularly foreign students, cannot relate to
- that the test promotes a model of mind that does not reflect what we should be reaching for in institutions of higher learning.

"It seems axiomatic," says Kenneth Bruffee of Brooklyn College, "that the way we test our students determines in part what and how we teach them. To some degree, we all 'teach the test.' Or to put it in a way that may be easier for all of us to accept, when we teach we have in mind

the goals we hope our students will reach." (4-5). Bruffee is right: gather together a group of basic writing teachers from CUNY, and a guaranteed topic of conversation is "how to teach to the test" so that students in basic writing courses will pass a "re-test." And teaching to the test often boils down to this: teach students how "to make up their minds" on the spot, take a position, defend it, invent support if necessary, "lie" if you need to. Many of my colleagues are distressed that this kind of teaching to the test sabotages a writing course, that they end up drilling students on how to pass this test. More important, they are concerned that the test promotes a set of values--as all tests do--that does not reflect "goals we hope our students will reach," the model of mind we wish to promote. Consider for a moment the exercise you have just completed; consider that you have been asked to make serious, responsible, fundamental judgments about religion, the educational system, the death penalty, teen-age crime, and mass transportation; consider that you have been asked to make up your mind within a very short time. "Do you agree or disagree?"

From my vantage point as Assistant Chair for Composition over the past three years, I have had an opportunity to work in the field--to speak with nearly 200 students about the CUNY/WAT: one of my administrative responsibilities has been to hear problems, complaints, worries about the test--from students, their teachers, parents, counselors, even principals, of high schools. Whenever I hear a complaint, I retrieve the student's test booklet, re-read it, and confer with the Director of Composition. As numbers of complaints mounted, Director of Composition Nancy Conley<sup>4</sup> began to observe--as I did--as unsettling number of anomalies and contradictions between poor performance on the WAT and apparent strengths of mind, intellectual talents, and verbal skills evidenced in our talks with students and our review of additional samples of these students' writings; we began to pool our resources and engage in informal research by interviewing students about their perceptions, their memories, of taking the test. We heard, regularly, students exclaim that they had "had a bad day," that they "weren't feeling well," that they had "forgotten how to write over the summer," that they didn't have enough time." Then we began to stumble on cases such as this one: Student X informed me that she was a transfer student from Radcliffe; she had failed the WAT and was advised to take a basic writing course. She had not realized, however, until mid-semester that she was required to take a basic course and was now enrolled in a Romantic literature course, where she was earning an "A." Now she was sitting in my office, distraught, bewildered. She was to be put on probation for failing to comply with regulations.

I asked her about her recollections of the test and she said that she had had difficulty, that she had attempted to answer a question on religion, about people leading more "meaningful" lives if they were religious. But

she had sat there watching the time tick away; she had sat there pondering. I read her text and, indeed, it was ponderous, indecisive. Four months after she had taken the test, she still could not make up her mind, she said, and perhaps she will never make up her mind about religion and a meaningful life. I found her to be one of those serious, thoughtful, contemplative, reflective people--an ideal student, we might say, if she appeared in our classes, a student who weighs pros and cons; a student who can accept ambiguity and uncertainty about issues that cannot be settled within a 50-minute writing session.

In interviewing students, I also noted that many were convinced they had not chosen a "right" answer, that which they believed was endorsed by the institution; they had spent a good amount of time--before they even began to write--trying to determine which point of view would be the acceptable one: if they answered "wrongly" they were certain they would fail. In speaking with basic writing teachers who speak with their students repeatedly about the WAT, I found this view to be widespread, that students admit to trying to please the test-designer by agreeing with "his" values, with the "voice" behind the test. In reviewing all formats of the CUNY/WAT, I found this voice to be problematic--at times it is

neutrally submerged; at other times it surfaces as a mysterious "me" or "I":

it always strikes me as a terrible shame to see young people spending so much of their time staring at television. If we could unplug all the TV sets in America, our children would grow up to be healthier, better educated and independent human beings.

Not surprisingly, responses to this question often evoke a 'voice' that

says "Yes, television is bad for young adults. We should unplug all the TV sets in America!" The party line?

I have also observed a curious shift in the WAT format: early versions of the test asked students to agree or disagree with this statement, rather than to agree or disagree. Perhaps the test designers attempted here to separate the 'voice' of the test designer from the 'voice' of the question.

Faculty were also concerned that students didn't know what to do with some of the questions: we looked, for example, at the subway question where it was suggested that New Yorkers "complain" too much about the system, and should, instead, "appreciate" it. Our concern is that *appreciate* is an elusive, intangible, odd handle; if we speculate on what one does to appreciate something, we might come up with absurd, slightly ridiculous options: initiate a subway appreciate day; decorate a subway station with flowers; start a subway fan club. What does a writer *do* with the verb *appreciate*? (Perhaps if Henry James was right, riders should take them over, for James argued that to appreciate something is to make *it one's own*).

Faculty were worried, too, that the disagree-or-agree-format promotes an essay, not of argument, but of opinion, where students may, initially, choose a side: I agree that the automobile must be replaced by mass transportation, and then discover they have little of substance to say. Their limited experience, their relative paucity of information, insists that they write from a "sense of ignorance,"<sup>5</sup> and we find, as readers, tautological, abstract, indefinite responses, as students discover themselves plunged into supporting an economic or social issue that they, finally, know little about.

Faculty teaching basic writing courses at Queens were in agreement that "something" was amiss; in a 1983 survey of 40 basic writing teachers we found nearly total agreement that the test worked well as an "agitator," a "motivator," within the course itself: students seemed to take the course seriously because they had to pass the re-test. But faculty were concerned that it was the "wrong" test; they found themselves apologizing for it, particularly when they urged students to make up their minds on fundamental questions. Charles O'Neil, an adjunct lecturer, noted a "strange paranoia" whenever the test was mentioned in class; students refused to discuss the test because they were convinced that their values, their beliefs, their views--on politics, religion, styles of living--were being tested. On a questionnaire he gave to his classes, students repeatedly expressed their concerns that they had held the wrong views--and that was why they were relegated to a basic writing course. Here are three students' comments:

- When writing about any one of these topics, you use your own opinion. If you write about your opinion and its controversial, you might fail just because the person who's marking it doesn't agree with you.
- I feel that these questions are too ambiguous. This leaves the student wondering which way would be best to answer the question in order to impress the reader. I feel that the questions should be more specific. This would then lessen the possibilities of different ways to approach the question, enabling the student to concentrate on the actual technique of the written argument. After all, that is what is being judged, not the subject or opinion the student chooses.
- Should not ask questions dealing with religion. Religion is a private matter and should not be written on to see if you can pass an assessment test.

Informal interviews with students, conversations with faculty, a close reading of the test topics, our growing unease--all led to our conducting, at Queens, a small pilot study (working as Karen Greenberg did, within the formal constraints of the WAT) to try to determine whether students preferred a question that could be attributed to a "real" voice, and that could be answered more flexibly. In the Spring 1984 semester, five

instructors each with two classes (totalling 250 students) were invited to try out a first-day-of-class writing exercise, wherein students (who had passed the WAT) would be given an opportunity to choose between a "WAT" question and a similar question that was (1) attributed to a real voice and (2) open to varied responses:

*(Question #1 is the CUNY/WAT format; question #2 is the alternative, "attributed," format).*

1. Older people bring to their work a lifetime of knowledge and experience. They should not be forced to retire, even if keeping them on the job cuts down on the opportunities for young people to find work.

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

2. "We have isolated old people and we've cut off the children, the young people from their grandparents. One of the reasons we have as bad a generation gap today as we do is that grandparents have copped out. Young people are being deprived of the thing they need most—perspective, to know why their parents behave so peculiarly and why their grandparents say the things they do."

### Margaret Mead

What do you think of Margaret Mead's statement? Write an essay where you discuss your response to Mead. Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, and/or your reading.

After students wrote for thirty minutes on one of the questions, they were asked to reflect, in writing, upon their choice. Although students' choices (over 80% chose the WAT format) did not support our hypothesis that the attributed, more flexible question would be the one chosen, we found students' comments exceedingly interesting. Many students said that they were used to the WAT format; we concluded that in our next study, we must work with a naive group. Several students said that they always answer the first question asked (we had mixed the order on the test forms.) Several students said that our "attributed" question was too long. Several said that the Mead observation was too complicated, that they had learned not to think in exams. Those who chose the attributed question claimed that this form offered them more room to think; here is one response:

I chose question 2 because that question is a more open question. It is more open to a variety of different answers, whereas question 1 leaves you with only two choices: agreement or disagreement. Also, I have not as yet made up my mind as to a solution for the problem in question 1; both sides have their good points and their bad points, and I have not yet made up my mind as to which, if either, is the right course.

As we plan for our next round of research, we will build on these informal studies, and try out a variety of formats, prompts, and topics, and reach for means of discovering how students are reading the test.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, we will explore more fully a situational format, where the writer's role and purpose, audience, and context are clear, following Richard L. Larson's useful suggestions for reshaping the WAT: "Stipulate an audience for the students to address, and if possible a reason for addressing that audience. Ask students to play a role just as they will need to play a role in any writing done for any audience" (8-9). Many colleges at Queens have found students responding enthusiastically to in-class exercises such as this one:

You have learned that the world will end in one year. Your Uncle Harold has suddenly left you \$1,000,000 to spend in any way you like. You must now write him a letter informing him of your plans.

We create here a situation where the context or frame, the role of the writer, and the nature of the audience are all clearly specified, and where the enterprise or act prompted by the writing assignment corresponds to the conditions of the test: when a situation is dire, as our examinees may assume it to be when they write the test, then the response required of the student should not be the expression of a reflective, detached, contemplative state of mind, but rather a statement of a plan of action.

The rhetorical context—or the fictive context—as James Hoetker insists in his review, "Essay Examination Topics and Students' Writing," (338) must not be elaborately specified or unduly complex. At Queens, we found the attributed question too long, too complex, too complicated—and our students were not in a test situation. Surely, however, we can devise topics and formats that allow for variety of mind, variety of response.

What can those who administer writing programs glean from these observations, probings, reflections? First, the ramifications of institutional choices are far-reaching: I am concerned at CUNY about our students, our teachers, our courses, and our program: about students who take the test repeatedly and lose confidence; about teachers who feel bound by the pressure of the test on their students and find themselves turning their basic courses into a series of tension-filled practice sessions

on the three-point essay on typical WAT topics; about the integrity of courses and programs; about pressing students, teachers, and programs into institutional constraints that inhibit rather than facilitate.

Test shapes program: in designing a test, one must consider the model of mind that is promoted. The assessment test, for thousands of undergraduates, is not a 50-minute session, quickly taken and then forgotten. Because the re-test is identical to the placement exam, the test hovers over the lives of undergraduates for a semester, a year, even two or three years. The agree or disagree format represents in their minds the sanctioned shape of an essay, of writing.

What is in the minds of the test examiners is not necessarily in the minds of the examinees or in the minds of the readers of those examinations. Careful, scrupulous research needs to be conducted into the ways students respond, as readers and writers, to such matters as topics, prompts, format, modes, time-limits, and explicit or implicit statements of values, inherent within tests. Our preliminary, provisional excursions into research at Queens convince us of the need for such studies so that we can be certain that the test is the best instrument we can construct for our students. As a profession, our research techniques, as they venture more and more into a case study and ethnomethodology, offer us the means for such explorations, but as Hoetker says, we must be prepared for "all sorts of perplexing difficulties" (389).

Even though a system is in place, even though it "works," it must be continually reassessed, reevaluated, reexamined, studied, and probed, questioned and requestioned. One of CUNY's strengths, says Robert Lyons of Queens College, is that the administration has been willing to "turn over most aspects of the testing program-to faculty control" and has provided "a strong base for continuing faculty involvement." So it has, but the WAT, comments Lyons, "now seems as solid and immovable as the filing cabinets in which the test results are stored." He worries that the system has become stagnant; he worries about a "silence of acquiescence" (7). So do I.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Because the CUNY/WAT questions are considered "secure," that is, they may not be reproduced, WPA is not permitted to quote passages verbatim. The "television" question and the "old age" question are in the public domain; they are used to explain the evaluation scale in "The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test: Student Essays Evaluated and Annotated by the CUNY Task Force on Writing," CUNY Task Force on Writing, April 1979.

<sup>2</sup>CUNY Task Force on Writing, *The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test* (New York: CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>For articles on the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, see Robert Lyons, "The City University of New York Writing Assessment Test: A faculty-generated model," and Allan Brick, "The CUNY Writing Assessment Test and the teaching of writing," *WPA*, 4 (Fall, 1980):23-34. And Karen Greenberg, "Competency Testing: What Role Should Teachers of Composition Play?" *CCC*, 33 (December, 1982):366-376.

<sup>4</sup>The informal interviewing, rereading of CUNY Writing Assessment Tests, reviewing of student writings; conversations held with English faculty, individually, and in faculty workshops; attendance at CAWS (CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors) meetings were all done in collaboration with Nancy R. Comley, Director of Composition, Queens College.

<sup>5</sup>The term "sense of ignorance" is borrowed from Leslie Stratta and John Dixon, *Teaching and Assessing Argument* (Southampton, England: Southern Regional Examinations Board, 1982), 23, to describe the effects of "topics of social and economic importance ... beyond the competence of the average 17+ candidate to discuss with more than the shallowest argument," cited in James Hoetker, "Essay Examination Topics and Students' Writing," *CCC*, 33 (December, 1982):372-392.

<sup>6</sup>James Hoetker notes: "Since there are no studies of how students read essay topics, we know little about how the structure or the rhetoric or the vocabulary of a topic affects students' interpretations of it or their affective responses to it," "Essay Examination Topics and Student Writing" *College Composition and Communication* 33 (December 1982): 380.

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