

The Role of AP and the Composition Program

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A few years ago, our department was prompted by a note from the university's admission office to review our policy of granting six hours of credit for a grade of 3 or better on the Advanced Placement (AP) English exam. Our review of the AP program and of the history of the department's acceptance of AP credit led us to a few surprises. The note asked that the department consider the review in light of the change in the AP's English exam from one test to two: the Language and Composition test and the Literature and Composition test. The admissions officer recommended that the department consider awarding up to twelve hours to students who had taken both exams and had received a 3 or better. His expressed concern was not that the department would fail to review this recommendation favorably but rather exactly how the department would choose to award the twelve hours.

The major surprise was how little members of the English Department knew about the AP test and the credit we granted for it. No one, for example, had known about the separation of the AP English exam into two distinct parts. It follows that no one knew either the content recommended by the College Board (CB) or tested by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) for the two AP courses.¹ In fact, for some time even the admissions office had been granting six credits in composition, no matter which test was reported. We also discovered that there was no university policy for a regular review of any of the tests that the university accepts for credit. In other words, the departments that accept credit-by-examination had virtually conceded the responsibility to grant certain university credit to various national testing agencies.

This realization led to some major questions that arose in our discussion and that are pertinent to writing program administrators and department chairs across the country. Do the exams that lead to the granting of credit reflect mastery of the same knowledge, the same critical thinking abilities, and the same academic competencies as the courses for which they substitute? In accepting credit for these tests, what conceptions of the discipline of English—that is, of composition, language, and literature—are we implicitly endorsing? What constitutes acceptable evaluation of the

knowledge and competencies for which we would wish to grant six or even twelve hours of college credit?

The authors believe that acceptance of AP credit should be based on principled answers to such questions. Clearly, WPAs have an important role to inform colleagues about AP programs in arriving at such answers, since the tests frequently provide the basis for exemption or credit for writing courses. If our experience is any guide, however, most departments have not based their acceptance of AP credit on reasoned endorsement of the views of language, literature, and rhetoric that, as we will show, AP exams represent. By sharply criticizing the views implicit in the AP program and by showing how they conflict with the goals of our own program, we do not primarily wish to argue on behalf of our own curricula or theory of "English" but to enable departments to base their AP policies on the same sorts of deliberations about language, literature, and rhetoric that attend other decisions about programs, teaching, and research. Unfortunately, the economic and political forces we describe in this paper are likely to continue to shape the development of AP programs and policy more than departmental debate unless WPAs and other well-positioned educators do more to inform colleagues about AP.

We have found, for instance, that many WPAs are startled to learn that *more than 67%* of the 134,000 students taking the 1991 Language and Composition or Literature and Composition exams received the CB/ETS's rating of "qualified" or better. These students, who have received a grade of 3, 4, or 5 on either exam, are led to expect college credit for their scores. Of the remaining third of test-takers, 29% were "possibly qualified" (with a score of 2), and less than 4% received "No recommendation" (1991 *AP English: Free Response Scoring Guide* 40-1). Moreover, as James Vopat has reported, these grade distributions are determined *in advance* of the actual essay grading. Thus, as Vopat comments, the success rate of 96% remains consistent from year to year and marks "a decided shift of emphasis from the original intent of the AP program and test. What began in the late 1950s as a 'concern for the academic progress of the gifted student' (Jameson 1) has become a reward system that validates mediocrity" (Vopat 58-9). Vopat, following David Owen, goes on to note that colleges are content to validate this arrangement because "it enables them to give the equivalent of scholarships without spending any money" (Owen qtd in Vopat 62). The economics are clear. As long as AP can make good on its claim that "[n]early all the 2,200 colleges that most AP students attend give credit or advanced placement or both" (Student Guide 2), exams should be easy to sell. For \$65, students shoot for 3-6 college credits with two to one odds in their favor; and for \$130, the prize is 6-12 credits.

If these figures are surprising, educators should consider pressures favoring expansion of the AP and other standardized exams. For instance, this year the Coordinating Board for Higher Education in our own state (CBHE) began lobbying for AP courses in all Missouri high schools. Already, the CB claims that 1,200 institutions award a full year's credit to students with "satisfactory grades" on the AP exams, and if competition for student enrollments heats up, we can expect the number to grow. Finally, a host of pressures have been building nationwide that favor long-term expansion of AP testing: mandates for standardized assessment, escalating college costs, and growing student anxiety about incurring debt in an economy where college degrees don't necessarily translate into jobs.

The most obvious objection to accepting these tests as substitutes for coursework is that they emphasize multiple-choice questions far more than most college teachers do in their own classrooms. For many teachers, the nature of these multiple-choice questions, whether challenging or not, is not the issue; they are simply an inappropriate way to assign college credit. Moreover, the multiple-choice section in both exams is weighted more heavily than the essay section. Thus, even though students ordinarily spend two of three hours on the essay section (67% of total exam time), the essays count for only 55% of the score. Forty-five percent of the score is ordinarily based on the one-hour, multiple-choice section (*Advanced Placement Course Description* (May 1993) 9; also *Student Guide* 16, 52). For those who believe that the measure of education should be the ability to deal with complex ideas in speech and writing, this extra weighting of the multiple-choice section delivers a harmful message to students; in the overall scheme of things, writing is not worth the time it takes.

Nevertheless, 55% of each test is essay. Typically (as on the 1991 exams), students write three essays, with an average time of forty minutes for each. On such short essays, however, it is questionable whether the test measures the writing competencies most emphasized in modern composition classes. In our English I and English II composition courses, for example, students write multiple essays in which they learn through practice the importance of rethinking, revising, and editing. These courses stress an epistemic rhetoric in which students learn not only the ways in which writing communicates the known, but also how writing can discover new connections and new knowledge. Students taking these courses receive credit for each class based on our evaluation of an entire semester's work.

The AP students who receive three hours college credit for either the Language and Composition exam or the Literature and Composition exam are typically evaluated on three in-class essays; yet in the past, students receiving at least a 3 on either of these tests received credit for six hours,

three credits each for our required English I and English II classes. In the exam setting, they might be expected to do surface editing but not substantive revision. As many composition scholars have noted, in fact, the kind of writing such an exam calls for is inimical to the emphasis of modern literature and composition pedagogy on the epistemic functions of language and the development of complex ideas. As Bartholomae and Petrosky put it, "highly complicated ideas, which frequently call for highly complex and therefore easily mistaken syntax, are perhaps too risky for this [exam] situation. A writer's thoughtfulness might be valued as much, but probably not more than his ability to control error" (Bartholomae and Petrosky 100-01). Plainly, in our case, the AP essays did not validly represent the kinds of writing emphasized in our curriculum.

So what view of English as a discipline does the AP English program represent? The most salient fact about the AP English programs is that more exams are given in English than any other subject. Although 29 AP exams are now offered in 16 disciplines, more than 37% of the 360,000 students who took the 1991 AP exams took one of the English exams. Clearly, students are understanding undergraduate "English" as one of the easiest subjects to "test out of" in the university. The *Student Guide* acknowledges that "compared with your regular high school English courses, the AP courses will *probably* be more demanding" [emphasis ours], but it also dangles the bait of tuition savings and the 67% success rate before the students' eyes (*Student Guide* 2,5,7).

This understanding, of course, dovetails nicely with the popular understanding that English inculcates "basic skills" preliminary to the intellectual work of the university. This argument was also given by our registrar for accepting AP credit. "Superior" students (his designation) should not be required to take something as basic as freshman composition if they have already mastered the skill. Moreover, this trivialized view of writing is encouraged by the structure of the AP English program and its promotional literature. The *Student Guide*, for instance, tells students that they "might expect" six credits for the Literature and Composition exam, but only three credits for the Language and Composition exam (83). Clearly, this is one reason students are taking the Literature and Composition exam by a margin of more than 3 to 1. This exam structure reproduces the split between rhetoric and literature so often lamented in English departments. Significantly, both exam titles feature the word "composition" in the secondary position, implying that one studies "literature," or (with less profit) "language," but "composition" only as a means to those higher ends. Indeed, the *Student Guide* represents writing as an activity that requires no practice or scrutiny but merely as a passive by-product of literary consumption: "It is probably true that if you sat down and read the complete three-

volume edition of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and then wrote a paper about it, you would find that your writing style would reflect Gibbon's great classical style with long periodic and balanced sentences, great series of elegant phrases and clauses, and an elevated, lofty tone. Therefore, read omnivorously and you won't even have to be taught how to write" (10). Such arguments may have seemed credible when universities served an elite who sought a veneer of gentlemanly culture. As most literary and composition scholars agree, though, such romantic aestheticism hardly serves the interests of students struggling to gain a critical foothold amid the myriad textual manipulations with which mass media surround them (Scholes 15).

Moreover, educators who might take comfort in the thought that students receiving AP credit will have assuredly studied and written about some challenging texts may be surprised to learn that *students need not take any AP course at all to receive credit through the exams*. Grades received in AP courses are generally not considered in the granting of credit; indeed, students can expect that little or nothing of the material studied in their AP courses will actually appear on the exam. To be sure, the wide range of sample syllabi that the CB distributes as examples of the AP Literature and Composition curriculum represent much of the challenge and diversity of "English."² These syllabi show the possibility of studying texts as divergent as the *Iliad*, *The Assistant*, or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as the possibilities of organizing AP courses according to the instructor's choice of formal, thematic, or historical approaches; however, these syllabi can be very deceiving to educators who suppose that these syllabi represent a reliable picture of what "qualified" students have studied. To say the least, the optional nature of the AP course casts some doubt on AP's claim that "the examination may be the heart of the AP Program, but it is not the lifeblood or the spirit" (McQuade 3).

On the Language and Composition exam, multiple-choice questions focus on rhetorical analysis of passages presented within the exam. Students are not responsible for bringing any of the material from their AP classes to the exam; they are expected, however, to be able to apply certain things they may have learned in the class. They choose stylistic preferences, grammatically correct answers, name styles, or answers that demonstrate reading comprehension, interpret figurative language, perform rhetorical analysis. The texts presented for analysis are challenging and interesting.

The presumptions about language and rhetoric implicit in the exam are in many ways fundamentally at odds with those of our English I and II courses. Mainly, the exam tests students' ability to recast sentences or carry out analysis of passages in these terms. For instance, one type of question

expects students to choose, with no discursive context whatsoever, the best "revised" sentence "in terms of conciseness, idiom, logic, and other qualities found in well-written sentences" (1987 *AP English Language and Composition Examination* 5). While such questions may test a student's facility with sentence transformations, they also further what many rhetoricians would consider an arhetorical view of language; sentences are presumed atoms of meaning about which stylistic decisions can be made in isolation from a writer's communicative intentions.³ Similarly, another typical question demands analysis of short passages in terms of "rhetorical devices," "elements" and "modes" that are presumed to be universal ingredients of arrangement or style: "The first and second paragraphs of the passage both present A) elaborate metaphors B) series of parallel constructions C) extended definitions D) concessions to opposing viewpoints E) cause and effect relationships" (1987 *AP English Language and Composition Examination* 8). By sharply focusing on the form of passages in isolation from content, questions like these reduce rhetoric to a repository of preconceived formal patterns that are mechanically analysed by readers and, presumably, applied by writers. In fact, assumptions of questions like these can be placed within contemporary rhetorical traditions. They derive from positivist rhetorics, described by Berlin and others, that see language mainly as a passive medium secondary to the generation of ideas, a mechanical tool for transmission of messages (see, for instance, Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality* 7-11; *Writing Instruction* 62-76; Fish 474-78; Knoblauch and Brannon 58-61).

On the essay questions, the exam gives credence to the assumption frequently made in such rhetorics: that "the writing process" is a universal set of cognitive operations that does not change significantly even in radically different rhetorical contexts. Learning "the process" of writing simply creates improvement in all circumstances. Of course, the *AP Teacher's Guide* does acknowledge that writing processes vary among writers and even for any single writer. It also notes objections of teachers who "have pointed out that the AP examination is oriented to product" (McQuade 19). In the end, however, differences between timed writing on surprise topics and writing to probe, develop, and revise formulations of a self-generated idea don't amount to much: "Should AP students learn the process of writing? Absolutely Conditions during the examination may not favor the production of a student's best writing, but that is no reason to withhold instruction that might help the student to produce better writing when conditions are favorable If the class has established a routine of peer coaching and editing in small groups, students can use all they know about the process of writing to help one another improve the first drafts they write in the classroom" (McQuade 20; see also Gadda et al. 6).

How can the student "use" peer feedback, discussion, brainstorming, revision, and other composing strategies when the timed writing situation doesn't permit it? The CB doesn't say, but it does keep grades high by ensuring that readers "take all these [exam] circumstances into account when judging the merits of each essay" (*The 1991 AP Examination in English Literature and Composition* 24; see also Jensen 18). Because AP exams are scored holistically, revision and editing are not a part of the evaluation. Indeed, the CB advises students (with good reason) to avoid "the need to revise your thinking in mid-paper" (*Student Guide* 13).⁴

A popular format for the essay sections is to provide a reading, then ask the students to write an essay analysing rhetorical devices (ETS, 1991 *English Language and Composition Exam*, question 1) or authorial tone and attitude (question 2). In these types of questions, students are expected to have a ready catalogue of "elements," "components," and "devices" of expression that they can apply to analysis. Other questions might ask students to support an opinion with personal experience or references to some unspecified reading; to choose a piece of writing, film, or television and write an essay about a given topic; or simply to agree or disagree with ideas presented in a selection (usually excerpted). Typically, these questions provide more latitude for students. Still, in this context it is understandable that the "average essays" that the CB lists as samples for the 1991 exam are rough, undeveloped, and only 200-400 words long (1991 *AP English: Free Response* 6-7, 12, 16-17). One of the three "average" samples for the 1991 exam (keep in mind average in this context means "qualified") is only a paragraph long.

The assumptions about writing underlying such questions are at odds with our writing program's curriculum. In our English I and II courses, emphasis is not on formal analysis of completed passages, mechanical manipulation of isolated sentences, or timed writing but on the student's struggle to discover and articulate meaning. We assume that writing processes that make the search for meaning possible are not necessarily available on demand and are not always even available to conscious control. To resist premature closure of thought and to cultivate a tolerance for generative ambiguity and uncertainty, we often deliberately subvert student attempts to circumvent thought through imposition of formulas, the "elements," "modes," and "devices" tested by the exam.⁵ Of course, we expect students to work toward formal coherence in their writing, and we expect them to master a variety of conventions of discourse; however, the fullest sense of form that we wish students to master—that is, form as an organic outgrowth of a real communicative intention in a real rhetorical situation—derives more from epistemic rhetorics described by Berlin ("*Rhetoric and Ideology*" 488-493) than from positivist rhetorics assumed by the exam.

Questions used on the Literature and Composition exam, too, can readily be placed in contemporary debates about literary theory. The types of questions are, in fact, very similar to the ones described above (excluding the "revisions" of atomic sentences). More emphasis is placed on "close reading" of selected passages. Generally, a mechanical, arhetorical view of language prevails, typically associated in literary contexts with long-outmoded "scientific" versions of New Criticism. As on the Language and Composition Exam, meaning is presumed to exist in the "text itself," not in terms of the text's relationship with its contexts of production or reception. For instance, the *Teacher's Guide* acknowledges that "[t]he territory occupied by facts seems to be shrinking in current critical theory as theorists recognize the power, even the right, of each reader to determine the meaning of a text [However], the AP Examination assumes the distinction between objective and subjective. . . . the unstable boundary between objective and subjective is conceded in the direction to choose the 'best' answer to the multiple choice questions, not the 'right' answer" (McQuade 11), even though only the right answer receives credit. Clearly, the very format of the exam demands that meaning must be located in snippets of texts and that experts are authorized to determine without argument the "best" meanings. The format demands that meaning have a reality *in the text as pure object*. Hence, the *Teacher's Guide* emphasizes teaching "close reading" and annotating texts to identify formal devices: "Something has to *be* there in order to circle it [in annotation]; some pattern has to be *seen* before one can draw a series of boxes around words or phrases and connect them with arrows" (McQuade 12).

No doubt, many teachers of writing and literature would ascribe to the theories we have been criticizing. In programs where such a theory holds programmatic sway, using this exam to grant credit might be appropriate; however, we suspect that in most programs, decisions to accept AP credit are not consciously intended to endorse such an approach to literary texts. Yet universities have widely ceded the right to construct such a vision of English to the CB/ETS.

Putting aside for a moment these objections what would the appropriate credit be for this exam in our program, again, assuming that the decision had been made to grant credit at all. Our English I class is an introduction to critical inquiry, to the symbolic processes through which men and women probe the nature and relationship of humanity and its world. We have no freshman or sophomore class in stylistics, reading comprehension, or grammar. Granted that the description of the recommended readings in the AP brochure is impressive—Addison, Eiseley, Morrison, Carlyle, Mencken, et al. On the other hand, knowledge of and familiarity with these writers don't find their way into the test; therefore,

humanities credit for a class on the expository essay would be inappropriate. Our English II class focuses on cultural studies. This course requires extended documented essays from students, thus making it outside the range of the AP exam. Consequently, the exam does not measure knowledge and experience equivalent to that offered in our courses.

The primary issue is one which, from the size of the list of universities that accept AP credit, most universities are ignoring. Simply stated, should America's colleges and universities grant college credit through tests given by agencies outside education? Should we instead waive lower level requirements while maintaining the same number of hours for graduation?

We welcome the opportunity to make advanced courses that support our curriculum available to high school students for credit. Our university has accepted the premise stated in the *AP Teacher's Guide*: "that college-level material can be taught successfully to able and well-prepared secondary school students" (McQuade 1). Indeed, our college runs an extensive high school/college credit collaborative program. In this program, however, the university takes its own class to the high school campus. We collaborate with able high school teachers and invite them to discussions that affect the evolution of our curriculum. As part of the AP program, the CB sends "practical descriptions of college-level courses" to the schools. Who should be offering such practical descriptions?

As we have argued, the AP exam's assumptions about rhetoric, language, and literature are contrary to our program's assumptions; however, programs founded on different assumptions may discover a compromise in the name under the initials. AP stands for "Advanced Placement," not Credit by Examination. In this sense the name is clever because it implies that the exam is a placement exam, not an exam that measures work completed or knowledge acquired. Obviously it is to the CB/ETS's financial benefit to encourage universities to offer credit; many fewer students would pay to take the exam if it were only a placement exam.

Finally, our department resisted the registrar's request that the department grant twelve credits for the two AP exams. Most of the composition faculty resisted granting composition credit for either test, but not everyone in the department agreed. In the end, we compromised; we raised the score necessary to receive credit from 3 to 4. Students who scored 4 or better on the Language and Composition exam would receive 3 credits for our English I composition course, and students who scored 4 or better on the Literature and Composition exam would receive 3 general humanities credits plus credit for a one-credit course called "Writing About Literature." The registrar responded to these changes with dire warnings about the potential damage that raising the acceptable AP score from 3 would have on potential scholarship students from high schools with active

AP programs. He didn't want the university to lose potential scholarship students because they might not receive credit for their AP work. Such is the power of the College Board and Educational Testing Service.

It is not necessary to accept our curriculum or our vision of English to be disturbed by the growing power of the CB/ETS. Whatever philosophical commitments we as WPAs and teachers hold, we neither control the content of AP courses nor supervise the teachers. If we grant credit for these tests, it is our responsibility to *choose* to do so and to inform our colleagues about the tests accordingly. We must reconcile our beliefs about what our programs are *for* with what is tested by the CB/ETS. We must know what's on the tests. Judging by our own experience, it is a responsibility we have been too often failing.

Notes

1. We often refer to the College Board and ETS together by the acronym CB/ETS because it is often difficult to distinguish where power and responsibility resides between the two organizations. Relationships between the two organizations are thoroughly interdependent, although somewhat obscure. The College Board was one of the founders of ETS in 1947. Today, ETS is quick to emphasize its continued servitude and accountability to the College Board, which it describes as a "non-profit membership organization" of "more than 2,700 colleges, schools, school systems, and education associations" (*Information for Coordinators* 3). A number of critical studies in the last fifteen years, however, have documented how ETS has, since 1947, "dwarfed its parent" both in revenues and power (Owen 6). Nairn quotes an anonymous interview with a College Board professional that the CB/ETS relationship is "like the Greek myth of the parent consumed by the child" (310). According to Owen, the "confidential contract" between ETS and the Board gives ETS "'authority and primary responsibility' not only for 'design, prototype development, and operation of programs and services' but also for 'the monitoring of ETS performance in the field'" (Owen 6). In other words, ETS writes, administers, and retains legal ownership of the tests, as well as supervises its own fulfillment of contractual obligations with the Board. Owen reports that the Board could, if it gave ETS a contractually specified three and a half years notice, "take its business elsewhere," but he quotes a former Board president that this possibility is "so hypothetical and improbable that it's not worth discussing" (6). These contractual arrangements became public only after ETS failed to win a protective order covering the court record of a lawsuit (*Denburg vs. ETS*, Superior Court of New Jersey), which forms, according to Owen, "a treasure trove of information about ETS that is available nowhere else" (296).

In addition, the two organizations are economically interdependent to an extraordinary degree; for instance, almost half of ETS's \$133 million in revenues in fiscal 1983 were from College Board programs (Owen 7). In 1980, Nairn reported the Board received 90% of its income from ETS programs and less than 1% from dues from member institutions (310). For further accounts of the historical interdependence of the CB and ETS, see Crouse and Trusheim 25-39, Nairn 306-31,

Owen 6-17, Vopat 52-54, 62-64. For the CB's account of its role in founding ETS and the early inter-organizational relationship, see Fuess 176-207.

2. Obviously, the issue of "diversity" of works represented in the AP exam and curriculum would receive lively debate in many English departments. While writers like Tillie Olsen, Zora Neal Hurston, and Toni Morrison have found their way into the AP canon, some secondary teachers report strong reservations about teaching novels not well known or established in the canon, since the Literature and Composition exam's open question requires students to cite only works "of acknowledged literary merit." For examples, see McGee, and Spender.

3. For a full critique of this presumption, see Dillon, *Constructing Texts* 6-20. Dillon refutes what he calls, following James Moffett, the "particle view of language." In Dillon's terms, this view mistakenly supposes that reading proceeds from "bottom to top," that is, from words to sentences to paragraphs to discourses: "Normally, the discourse context gives top-down guidance in the perception of sentences: it enables readers to project expectations about where the sentence is going and to look for words and phrases that refer to things under discussion and are likely to be coming next. This point is widely recognized today, though its consequences have not been fully digested." Using multiple examples, Dillon shows that stylistic improvements of decontextualized snippets of discourse often turn out not to be improvements at all when a "motivating context" for the original construction is provided (8). Such motivating contexts can easily be constructed for the AP test sentences that complicate the test-makers' choice of a "best" (i.e., stylistically superior) sentence.

4. David Foster sums up an abundance of research (Flower, Sommers, Faigley, and Witte) demonstrating that "the major difference between skilled and unskilled writers is the latter's tendency to limit revision to changing words and sentences and editing mechanical errors" (6-7). Foster shows in detail how the AP essay questions "subvert the importance of [the revision] process" and how the multiple-choice sentence-revising questions on the Language and Composition exam "encourage exactly that kind of revising behavior identified with inexperienced freshman writers" (10-11).

5. In addition to the formulaic view of writing, several researchers have observed a disturbing degree of self-closure towards writing and learning among former AP students. In a small-sample developmental study of former AP students, for instance, Karen Spear and Gretchen Flesher report that AP students they studied who did not take freshman writing "manifest a sense of closure toward writing—that what is to be known about writing is limited to mastery of skills, and they have mastered them." Spear and Flesher's interviews with these students lead them to conclude that the attitudes and writing practices they learned in AP were harmful to their development. "[These students] make . . . intellectual gains only by overcoming much of what they have learned, at least about writing, in AP. All needed to overcome the message of the AP course that they were finished developing as writers—a message that the decisiveness of the AP exam and subsequent waivers for college writing requirements unfortunately reinforce" (Spear and Flesher 40, 47; for a similar account of self-closure among AP students in first-year composition, see Henderson).

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