

# 3

## Letters from the (Cutting) Edge: Promoting Writing Across the Curriculum Through Assessment

Lois E. Easton and Roger Shanley

“Hi. Neither Roger, Lisa, or Max can come to the phone but we want to hear from you. Please leave a message at the tone.”

“Roger, this is Lois. It’s been a long time! Have you been hearing anything about the ASAP? How are your writing across the curriculum programs going? Give me a call.”

“Hello, you have reached 555-9289. Please leave a message and Mike or Lois will get back to you. Wait for the tone. Thanks.”

“Lois, geez you’re busy. To answer your question—this is Roger—to answer your question, I’ve heard bits and pieces about the ASAP and want to know much more. I’ve been struggling to find better ways to assess in our writing across the curriculum programs. Do you think ASAP will help? Give me a ca . . .”

“Hi. Neither Roger, Lisa, or Max can come to the phone but we want to hear from you. Please leave a message at the tone.”

“Roger, this is Lois. Forget this phone stuff. I think I’ll try it the old-fashioned way—pen and paper.”

Note: Lois Easton was working as director of curriculum and assessment planning at the Arizona Department of Education and Roger Shanley as English teacher at Rincon High School in Tucson, Arizona, during the time of these exchanges.

**January 6, 1991**

Dear Roger,

I *hate* those machines . . . of course I have one too, as you've discovered, and I wouldn't be without it. I thought of you the other day when I first called because of what I remember you were doing with writing across the curriculum (WAC). I was talking with some graduate students in English education at Northern Arizona University (NAU) about the anticipated benefits of the ASAP (the state's assessment reform program), and they asked me if I thought the ASAP would support WAC. I told them I hoped it would, and then I decided I'd better talk to someone who would know: You!

I don't know how much you know about the ASAP in general, so let me give you a quick run-through. You know that we've been testing kids—every kid, every year, in the spring—with norm-referenced tests for eleven long years. Madaus (1988) could have used us as his prime example of “high stakes” testing!

Then came the GEE. Have you heard about the GEE? It is what really started Arizona down the road of education reform through changes in assessment. The acronym stands for Goals for Educational Excellence, and GEE was Arizona's response to the call for reform that began with *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The legislature's first move with the GEE was to set K–12 curriculum goals in the traditional subject areas. The Department of Education convinced the legislature to look at the state's curriculum framework documents, including the *Language Arts Essential Skills* (1986). When they saw the strengths of these documents, they dropped their own plans for curriculum. Whew!

Then they said, “How can we measure these goals?” and that's when the window opened for changing testing in Arizona. We responded, “You cannot measure these goals with a norm-referenced standardized test. You need to build assessments that match the curricula. Furthermore, you cannot just add a layer of testing in Arizona schools; you have to reduce current testing.”

They agreed with all of this, so that's how we ended up with the Arizona Student Assessment Program (ASAP). We like that acronym, by the way, given our testing history. The ASAP reduces the impact of norm-referenced testing by moving it to the fall where it does less curricular damage. The ASAP also limits the testing to grades four, seven, and eleven, making it possible for us to consider a more authentic way to be accountable for public dollars.

So, have you seen the new assessments yet? You may have noticed that whatever is in the *Language Arts Essential Skills* (LAES) is in the assessments. So, you'll find both processes and whole products or outcomes on the assessments. The LAES requires kids to write personal

experience narratives, among other genres, so there are assessments for writing personal experience narratives, and other genres, incorporating the writing processes we value. The new assessments have parallel state and district forms so that students using the district forms, or otherwise prepared according to the curriculum framework document, are ready for the final performance on the state form. Isn't that cheating or teaching to the test? you might ask, but is it bad if we are really teaching towards the standards we value in Arizona?

You probably gathered that these are performance-based tests. On the writing assessments students take three days to write, sometimes working collaboratively with other students, sometimes alone. On the reading assessments students preread and then read a single, intact piece of real literature or quality nonfiction (not something prefab for the test) and respond to it in different ways—by writing in a variety of forms, sketching, creating a diagram or model, etc.

The mathematics assessments are the most unusual. Students engage in a scenario, as lifelike as it can be, like working in a design studio with an architect. They work with real-life data and use the data to solve problems related to the scenario. Along the way, they write in a variety of forms: their own answers (instead of choosing from answers), short explanations, longer analyses, and sometimes even longer evaluations of what they have done mathematically.

Here's where I think the link to WAC occurs. Sure, the direct writing assessments will help students (and teachers) value real writing. But if writing is still valued only in English classes, we won't have made much progress.

And here's where you can help me frame an answer for the NAU graduate students. I remember your presentation in Flagstaff about five years ago. You described a grant you had received to support WAC. Refresh my memory: how did you get the grant? How did you use it? What's happening now with the WAC program you established with it? I'd like to explore what you think will happen with WAC when the ASAP hits the streets.

With pen in hand,  
Lois

**January 18, 1991**

Dear Lois,

It was great to get your letter—it got me focused on the ASAP. Your letter also brought back a menagerie of memories (nice alliteration, eh?) about the week-long conference we attended five years ago in Flagstaff: “Improving Writing in Our Schools and Universities.” I remember presenting with Marvin Diogenes from the University of Arizona about our FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary

Education) grant work on WAC. Also this was the first time I heard about and saw the Language Arts Essential Skills document. Little did I know that FIPSE and the LAES would play a major role in my life for the next half decade.

The grant, devised by Stan Witt of Pima Community College, was multidimensional. Stan's proposal was to fund a three-year project of writing and speaking across the curriculum programs at three levels—four-year college, community college, and secondary school levels. As coordinator of the writing programs for five high schools in the project, I knew we would all have many challenges in the following years.

About two hundred volunteer teachers received small stipends to attend workshops and assessment sessions, and to develop units for the classroom. The workshops ranged from informal gatherings at my house to more formal meetings at which experienced and new teachers gathered. During these meetings we discussed the types of writing students were currently doing in their programs, issues such as writing as thinking, and evaluation of writing. I was amazed at the teachers' range of views, preconceptions, and most importantly, their fears and concerns.

As the discussions continued, some interesting attitudes developed. Teachers arrived at more of an agreement about the qualities of good writing. Also, they began to describe traits that would be found in student writing for their individual content areas. Soon, we were arranging informal rubrics based on student samples and class discussions. Confidence grew as these educators realized that their own skills and intuition would enable them to work with student writing in their classrooms. (By the way, I think the same intuition will help teachers feel comfortable about the LAES and ASAP, but more on that later.) Still, they were concerned about how to grade the student writing.

Twice each semester we held holistic grading sessions. After developing prompts that we thought were fair and would encourage expressive, personal responses, we scored the samples. I was delighted to see the ease with which the teachers verbalized the strengths and weaknesses of student writing as we chose anchor papers in order to establish the one through six scores. I was equally impressed at the few papers we had to read a third time as tiebreakers. Best of all, though, were the discussions following each grading session. Teachers of physical education and industrial arts, counselors and algebra teachers elaborated on consistent traits found in the ranges of scores. We were talking standards based on performance assessments!

One challenge was asking teachers to view writing differently— not just as an alternative to multiple choice. The P.E. coach helped me on this one. He said he hated it when coaches made kids run as punishment because they hated to run after that moment. He got us thinking about

a concept later captured in the phrase “writing to learn”—if only I’d thought of those words! Luckily, I came across some fine material to help me articulate the concept. One of the best was *Roots in the Sawdust*, edited by Anne Ruggles Gere (1985). Almost any teacher could read this and get ideas for writing in the classroom. More importantly though, they could also get the philosophy of WAC as a process of knowing through interactive composition. Another helpful source was the work of Stephen Tchudi (1983, 1986), both his book *Teaching Writing in the Content Areas: Senior High School* (and one for junior high/middle school) and his article in *English Journal* called “The Hidden Agendas in Writing Across the Curriculum.” I used his article with teachers near the end of their official rotation in the program to help them examine changes in their teaching styles. Change they did!

Most agreed that working with writing to illustrate thinking forced them to examine the processes of their disciplines rather than to reemphasize the products. Tchudi’s line, “It’s time for interdisciplinary English to become a reality,” forces not only content-area teachers but also English teachers to change their focus and use writing to promote learning across the curriculum.

While the high schools were struggling with their structure for the project, similar work was being done at Pima Community College and the University of Arizona. In addition, teachers at all three levels came to one another’s sites to assist with holistic scoring sessions and observe class activities. I believe the contacts we all made during these collaborative efforts were the greatest benefits of the project.

Well, time to read a bedtime story to Max. Write me more about how the LAES and the ASAP will connect.

Sincerely,  
Roger

**February 3, 1991**

Dear Roger,

Your letter brought back memories for me, too. I remember your exciting presentation and our intense thinking about both vertical (K–16) and horizontal (across the curriculum) articulation. Thanks for refreshing my memory on the FIPSE grant. I think there’s great strength in what you’ve done.

You asked me to reflect on the relationship between the LAES and the ASAP. I think the LAES is the heart of the ASAP. The Flagstaff conference was the first time I presented on the LAES. The state board-appointed committee had just finished it, and it was so different from the old document’s lists of discrete, isolated skills. We

wish we could have gotten rid of the word “skills” in the title, as a matter of fact. But to suggest something so different—integrated processes and whole products or outcomes, connections within and across the curriculum—suggested criteria for evaluating outcomes! I had no idea what reaction we’d get.

If we had done the LAES any differently, I do not think we could have justified performance-based assessments. Because we asked kids to really read and really write, we had to test real reading and real writing. Also, because the State Board of Education liked the LAES, it declared that all other state curricula should emulate it (thus the mathematics assessments based on the Essential Skills in Mathematics or ESM are performance-based). And, finally, because the legislature liked the LAES, legislators abandoned their own curriculum-writing efforts and asked us to invent assessments to match the LAES and ESM. *Voilà!* The ASAP.

What did you think, back then, about the LAES?

Not About to Get Writer’s Cramp This Time,  
Lois

## February 12, 1991

Dear Lois,

Your letter explaining the details of the LAES definitely got my mind working. Now I get the bigger picture: assessment based on curriculum that is based on sound theory and good practice. I remember wondering in Flagstaff whether there would be an integrated K–12 curriculum of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking occurring in all classes if teachers followed the intent of the LAES. Imagine what this would mean! Then came the next question.

What would the LAES do to or for WAC programs? Yikes! Nearly all teachers would emphasize a more process-based approach to writing and learning. Math, social studies, science, art, and physical education teachers would examine how their content linked with the general concepts and constructs of the communication skills. Imagine the dialogue that would result when we all realized the similarity of concepts and processes among the disciplines! I was sure the result would be a collaboration of teachers, a community of communicators, all working together to integrate all skills for all students for the finest results.

Of course what also came to mind was how this vision would fit with our yearly albatross, the norm-referenced standardized tests!

You referred earlier to our standardized tests as “high stakes” testing. I’ll add another description: ludicrous. As much as teachers try to defend or explain the standardized tests, students see through them.

“How come they call this section ‘Usage’ when we aren’t using anything?” was one of the more pointed questions I have been asked. I feel like Jekyll and Hyde during the testing period because I’m teaching one way and the students are tested another way. Talk about losing credibility! That’s why I hope that the ASAP mirrors what and how we’re teaching (and it does if it’s really based on the LAES). It seems to me that if we teach to that kind of test, we’re creating some mighty fine lesson plans for any and all classrooms.

Here are a few gems for you to ponder and some questions to answer. How do you actually assess the many processes and modes of writing contained in the LAES? After stumbling through holistic grading with participants in the WAC project—and scoring papers from only three hundred students—I wonder how in the world you can score papers for the entire state or the selected populations? Do the mathematics and science teachers know enough about the process approach to prepare students for the ASAP? Can they set up a cadre of communicators in their fields to develop activities, lessons, and curriculum to enable students to do well on the ASAP?

Write when you get that rare free moment, so we can keep this “letterlogue” alive.

Sincerely,  
Roger

**March 3, 1991**

Dear Roger,

Wow! That’s some reaction to a state curriculum framework document. Usually we state folk are a reviled breed!

What was most frustrating, of course, in presenting the LAES around the state, was how paralyzed the state was because of testing. No matter how excited teachers would get during staff development on the LAES, someone would always ask the giant-killer question: “But, is this on the test?” And, I would have to answer, “No, it’s not,” and participant enthusiasm would dwindle to nothing. “We’ll do writing process on Friday,” they said.

That’s why the ASAP means so much. I think it will allow teachers to teach what they value. It will support them. I’ve had many whole language teachers tell me that the LAES and the related ASAP assessments look like what they teach, as much as any curriculum document and assessments can look like good classroom instruction.

Now for your questions. You asked about the processes. The processes of writing are embedded into the writing assessments but not evaluated. As much as possible, they are also embedded into the

reading and mathematics assessments and will be embedded in the science and social studies performance assessments that are in the first year of their design phase. I think teachers will notice the processes and incorporate them into their own instruction. Lauren and Daniel Resnick's (1989) famous statement, "What you test is what you get," deserves a sequitur: How you test is how you get it.

You also asked about how we'll test the various genres of writing. As you know, the LAES mandates writing proficiency in nine genres by the time students graduate from high school. Districts will have several versions of all nine genres to use as they please—or not at all—in grades nine through twelve. When the state administers the state form of the assessments, each student will be tested on one of the nine genres but will not know which one until the assessment sequence begins. Students will have to be prepared to take any of the nine.

You also asked about scoring the assessments. The district forms will be scored by districts according to how formal and reliable districts want the scoring to be. Districts can let individual teachers score their own assessments or arrange a formal scoring procedure.

The state form will be scored formally. Districts will send assessments to a central clearinghouse that will send entire sets of assessments to regional scoring sites. At the regional scoring sites, teachers (who will be paid a small stipend or have a substitute provided for them by the state) will be trained in holistic scoring, certified, and monitored as they score papers.

I think the trick is to get teachers from all content areas involved in scoring—anyone can score assessments. As you observed in your WAC program, teachers scoring the assessments determine what quality looks like and translate that to their own classroom activities. Doesn't the fighting and arguing about what a "4" is and which papers exemplify a "4" really help teachers in their own classrooms? I think the scoring procedure also gives teachers confidence that they *can* score something thought to be subjective.

So, Roger, what should I say to the NAU teachers who initiated this sequence of letters? What will be the effect of the ASAP on WAC? Do teachers in other content areas incorporate writing the way the LAES and their own state curriculum frameworks suggest? If so, their classrooms should already reflect a writing emphasis, and the ASAP will not frighten them. Perhaps it will even support them as both the LAES and the ASAP have supported whole language and process teachers.

However, if content-area teachers have not already begun to incorporate writing to learn in their subjects, the ASAP may be upsetting and intimidating. In fact, it may make them angry: "Who are these



state folks anyway, telling me that I have to do writing in my math class?" Will legislated writing activities ruin the progress you have made in terms of WAC? In short, will you curse or bless the ASAP?

Courting Writer's Cramp,  
Lois

**March 24, 1991**

Dear Lois,

Your last letter was stuffed with ASAP information, and I am swirling with comments and questions. Where to begin?

Your mention of the threat to teachers who examine the new assessments is a possibility. However, I prefer to believe that these folks will eventually see the benefits inherent in the assessments. As they use the LAES and the ASAP performance assessments, they'll discover natural crosshairs (with the vertical axis being the LAES and the horizontal axis being the ASAP) that will help them "sight in" on the target—improved and integrated curriculum and assessment for Arizona's students. (Sorry about the gun metaphor, but it seemed to work.)

I also believe all teachers will see that the ASAP is most concerned with thinking skills and showing thought through performance. Employers require thoughtful performance, and many lament the deficits they see in the thinking of current high school graduates. In fact, I predict that some of the greatest fans of the ASAP will be business and community leaders who realize that assessments stressing manipulation of real-life situations will benefit everyone.

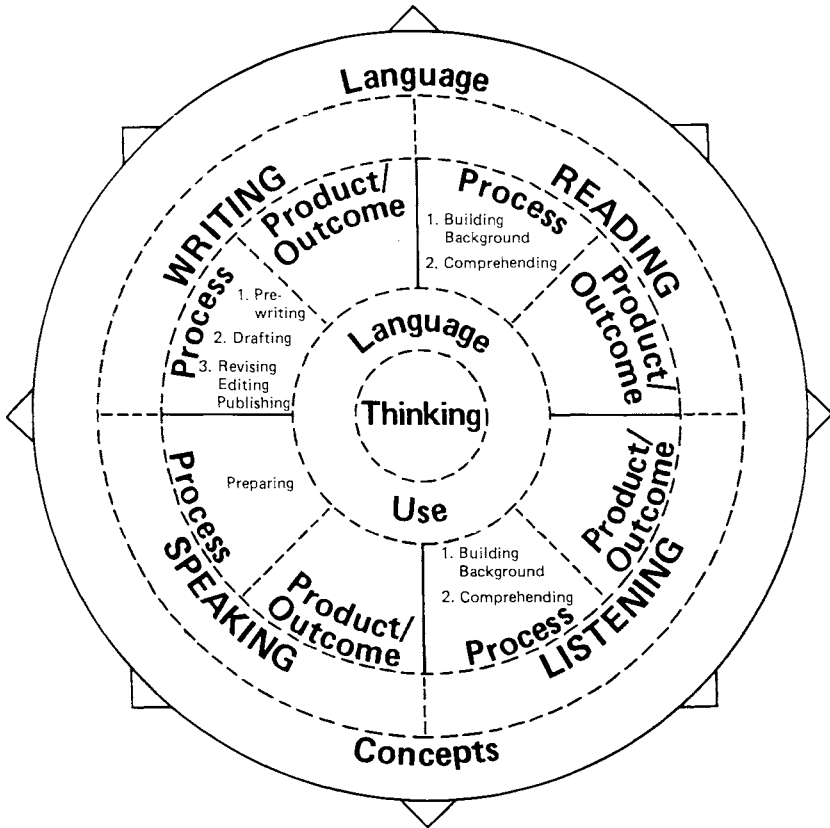
Finally, you ask about how the new assessments will change or support WAC programs. Those who became involved are still immersed in writing in their classrooms and schools. An industrial arts teacher shows how he uses writing in his classrooms at conferences, and a P.E. teacher and I have a running conversation about writing in his classes and in his own life. A former social studies teacher, now an assistant principal, is steadily implementing a WAC program at his school.

These educators believe that both the LAES and the ASAP will be positive forces in integrating writing in all classrooms. In our ongoing discussions, we make a distinction, in fact, about this new reality of writing. The early converts to WAC needed some degree of persuasion. Current and future inductees do not seem to need the same degree of enticement. They seem more aware that students of the 1990s will need stronger communication skills.

Still, I know there are teachers out there who have not had the benefit of the learning provided by a grant. For these teachers, the ASAP may provide a miniworkshop. I can imagine them gathered in a

**Figure 3–1**  
Language Arts Essential Skills

## LANGUAGE ARTS



## ESSENTIAL SKILLS

math department meeting, for example, speculating on how the writing on the mathematics assessments will help students learn and demonstrate one of the seven standards promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics—communication about math (1989). I can even imagine them using one of the assessments as an instructional unit, just to try out the writing and to see how students react. I can envision them developing their own units that match the assessments.

I remember the schematic that accompanied the LAES (Figure 3–1). It was a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle was

labeled “thinking.” Other circles were subdivided into processes and whole products or outcomes. Points radiated from the outermost circle. The text explained that these points symbolized the cogs in the communication wheel that connected with circles representing all the other content areas. The communication wheel activated all the other subjects. I think that’s true of the ASAP also.

I know, I know. This is just the rambling of an overzealous believer in performance-based assessments, but I get plenty psyched when I think of an integration of the many skills found in written communication, the collaboration of colleagues in achieving this integration, the celebration of the result by parents and community members, and the application of these new skills by today’s students and tomorrow’s citizens.

Sincerely,  
Roger

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