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# BASIC WRITING CURRICULA AND GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES: WHENE'ER SHALL THE TWAIN MEET?

*ABSTRACT: The construct of basic writing initially led to new and better instructional strategies. But in practice, basic writers move in a world that is often determined by inappropriate assessments. Guides to better practices are found in the recent national Elementary and Secondary Education Act and in the new CCCC Position Statement on assessment. Together, these point educators in the direction of enlightening assessment practices that will be particularly useful to basic writers and their teachers. This essay summarizes the implications of these guidelines for basic writing instruction and assessment.*

How do basic writers come to be? Consider this tale, recently told me by one of my graduate students about her daughter:

Except for the visibility Gwendolyn gained by acting in three high-school productions, she was a typical high-school student. Her freshman grades weren't high for the college-bound track, and Gwen admits that she cruised through four years of health education, math, English,

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and history. Because theater grabbed her attention during her last two years, she never gave much thought to what she would do after graduation. When she discovered that many of her classmates would be going to a local community college, she decided she should go too. So in late August, after a summer of work with the local Theater for Youth, she headed to the college to register for her classes. There, she spent more than half a day taking so many different tests that by day's end she couldn't remember what she had been tested for. When she returned to register the next day, she was told she'd have to register for English 11. "What's that?" she asked. "Basic writing," they told her. "Why?" she asked. "You had a 10.4 on your Nelson-Denny," they told her. "What's that?" she asked them. "The reading test. You've got to get at least 11 on this test to take English 100."

From Gwen's perspective, assignment to English 11 had less to do with invisible societal forces than it did with the "Nelson-Denny." Gwen, and thousands like her, become "basic writers" through the agency of a midwife called "The Test." Most unfortunately, the assessment midwife is often the cheapest attendant available, and the midwife's certification is in something other than midwifery. The incubatory curriculum into which the basic writer is placed is usually designed to improve students' scores on the test that put the student into the curriculum in the first place. Rebirth as a "regular writer" is often possible only through using the same midwife (in Gwen's case, the Nelson-Denny reading test) again.

It is my belief that bad assessment is what gets most students labeled as "basic writers." Bad assessment drives the curriculum and the evaluation of most basic writing courses; and bad assessment keeps educators from devising paths of learning that will increase the likelihood of success for all student writers. Essentially, bad assessment is the use of scores from a test such as the SAT, ACT, or Nelson-Denny for purposes other than those for which the test scores were designed. Bad assessment is also the use of unvalidated indicators or of only some of many indicators, or of indicators with the wrong weights attached. Bad assessment can also be the use of indicators that are culturally and economically biased.

Do good assessment practices exist? Ironically, some of the best ones are found in the work that defined the construct of

basic writing—Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy's process of identifying problems that seemed "basic" involved an incredibly elaborate assessment strategy, grounded in relevant theory and research. She studied the syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and organizational strategies of individual writers via the products of multiple tasks designed not to evaluate them, but to reveal the patterns that reflected the rules and decision-making processes their authors had followed. I have used *Errors and Expectations* several times in my teaching to illustrate effective assessment practices. My graduate students' typical reaction is: "You mean we have to go through all of that if we are going to help people become better writers and if we're going to evaluate their writing more effectively?" I never had the privilege of meeting Mina Shaughnessy, but I can imagine her reply: "Well, isn't the task important? Of course you'll need to learn how to do all that."

Why is "all that" so seldom learned or done? Gwen's assessment is far more common than assessment designed to discover a student's "basic" needs. It was cheap and easy (even though it was only marginally relevant to her writing): an almost cost-free, brief, easy-to-administer-and-score test. Many colleges don't even have placement tests; students are placed into writing courses on the basis of their scores on the SAT or the ACT. These tests are usually little more than updates of the IQ tests taken by students' parents or grandparents, with all of the gender, cultural, and socioeconomic biases associated with "intelligence" tests.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, most colleges do not require a student's writing sample as part of their placement procedures: Brian Huot found that 49% of American colleges and universities use something other than samples of student writing to place students into English courses, including basic writing. If such inadequate instruments are used to do something as consequential as placement, it is doubtful that decisions about the content of basic writing courses in these schools are guided by the needs of individual students in the courses.

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on two endeavors that can improve basic writing instruction. The first is the statement on the assessment of writing recently adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The CCCC Position Statement on assessment of writing describes practices that research and experience have shown to have a positive impact on learning. The Position Statement should

become the basis for constructive discussion among all professionals who deal with writing instruction. Since the Position Statement appears in *College Composition and Communication*, I will not summarize it here. Instead, I draw attention to two points of particular relevance for those who deal with basic writers: (1) valid, comprehensive assessment should guide decision making and (2) assessment should be used only for the purposes for which it was designed. Here is what the authors of the Position Statement have to say about these points:

Any individual's writing "ability" is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high-stakes decisions. Ideally, writing ability must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences and evaluated by multiple readers. (432)

Placement in a basic writing course or sequence is indeed a high-stakes decision with potentially far-reaching consequences. If it is to have positive consequences—if it is to increase a student's likelihood for academic and professional success—the decision must be based on a representative sample of what a writer can do, not on some presumed indirect indicator or on a "written-on-demand" unrevised sample. There is simply no way around this.

The CCCC Position Statement accepts that "assessment tends to drive pedagogy." Further, the statement notes that "assessment is defensible primarily as a means of improvement of learning": assessment and instruction are inextricably linked. For these reasons, composition professionals must make assessment an ally in helping students to discover effective ways of learning:

Assessment...must demonstrate "systemic validity": it must encourage classroom practices that harmonize with what practice and research have demonstrated to be effective ways of teaching writing and of becoming a writer. What is easiest to measure—often by means of a multiple-choice test—often corresponds least to good writing, and that in part is the point: choosing the correct response from a set of possible answers provided to one is not

composing. As important, just because students are asked to write does not mean that the “test” is a “good” one. Essay tests that ask students to form and articulate opinions about some important issue, for instance, without time to reflect, to talk to others, to read on the subject, to revise and so forth—that is, without allowing for what good writers need—encourage distorted notions of what writing is. They also encourage poor teaching and little learning. (432-33)

Tens of thousands of college-bound students are “placed” into writing classes on the basis of an assessment of something other than writing. Even those schools that use direct measures of writing typically employ 30- to 40-minute samples of impromptu writing. The Position Statement indicts most of these current practices. It must make us rethink our placement practices. It has already been a force for change at my school, The University of Hawai`i, where incoming students draft and revise two essays during five hours. The CCCC Statement has made us consider the inclusion of writing samples created under different circumstances and for different audiences (Hilgers & Marsella; Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella; Despain & Hilgers).

The Position Statement should be read as a guide to how prevailing—even frightening—practices for the assessment of writing can be transformed into enlightening practices. And assessment can be enlightening. In the process of growing up and staying alive, for example, all of us experience moments of enlightenment when we engage in self-assessment—when we look at how we have behaved because we wanted to change our behavior to improve our skills and better our lives. As professionals, we are enlightened when research demonstrates the value of pedagogical strategies that we use in our classrooms.

The CCCC Position Statement gives us grounds for hope that we are on the way to adopting modes of enlightening assessment. Our best hope, however, would be the discussions that will result from the Position Statement and the efforts to reform practice that should result from such discussions. The same is true of the second endeavor that will greatly affect basic writing instruction and assessment: the reauthorization of Chapter I funds of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to support educational remediation (“Legislative Update”). The basic outlines of the reauthorization represent a refreshing change in emphasis. Where current practice is to set different lower standards for students covered by Chapter I, the

new authorization under Title I calls for the same high standards for all students. Where current practice provides separate remedial instruction for children in need, the new legislation provides for enriched instruction within regular classrooms (although there is still debate about whether programs that pull students out of their regular classrooms will or will not still be allowed). Where current practice provides monies for student instruction but not for faculty training, the new legislation invests in professional training programs for currently employed instructors. And where current practice requires multiple forms of accountability for expenditures, the new legislation emphasizes assessment of and accountability for educational results.

I have been a teacher now for twenty-five years, and I know better than to get too excited over prospects. But I believe that the CCCC Position Statement and the revised ESEA Title I emphasis can guide effective reform. Enlightened assessment and “education for excellence” can improve educational delivery and opportunity. The effects of the new Title I legislation and of new assessment practices will have major ramifications for the labeling of “basic writers” in college and for how *all* future writing instruction will be provided. The CCCC Position Statement and the Title I reauthorization are evidence that the language of enlightened practitioners is more powerful than the language of those who would turn us back to a vision of America made idyllic by denial both of what was “back then” and what has happened since. Who would have ever predicted that the language of teachers who see assessment as a tool for empowerment would overpower the language of those who use assessment as a vehicle for punishment and privileging? Who could have predicted that the metaphors of holistic education might one day overpower images of education as component delivery?

By no means am I suggesting that we do not need careful investigation of how our society of “equal opportunity” creates adults who in great numbers need remedial instruction. I applaud those who bring questions of ethics, canonical assumptions, and colonialism into the discussion. But I also know that assessment practices, especially those that remain unquestioned, can keep basic writing from mediating effective action. We must examine prevailing assessment practices in all arenas that involve writing. If we question, study, and change them, we may improve writing instruction for all students.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> There may be something beyond placement officers' dreams behind the reliance on such tests. In an article for *Knight-Ridder Newspapers*, read while I was writing this article, Joanne Jacobs points out that the notion that multiple-choice questions are "objective and hard" while open-ended questions are "subjective and soft" is peculiarly American. European countries typically use "essay" questions—intended to test mastery of a subject rather than accumulation of facts—exclusively, and in large numbers, when student performance is to have important consequences. ("Upgrading test standards," *Honolulu Advertiser*, 4 July 1994: A-6.)

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