
THE GRAIN OF SAND IN THE OYSTER:
COMPETENCY TESTING AS A CATALYST FOR
ATTITUDINAL CHANGE AT THE UNIVERSITY

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In their preface to *Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies* (1986), Karen Greenberg, Harvey Wiener, and Richard Donovan observe that "Often only the reality of an imminent test has been able to force dialogues that ultimately produce a consensus on goals and standards on a particular campus." Laurentian University instituted an Arts graduation competency test in September of 1985, and over the past three and a half years faculty have engaged in dialogues, sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, and a consensus is emerging. They have moved from a largely ad hoc and departmentally localized testing situation prior to 1985 to the present environment, which includes the Arts graduation competency requirement mentioned above; a thriving Language Centre; a Senate Committee on Writing Competency; a Writing Across the Curriculum Programme; competency requirements in the schools of Translation, Social Work, Physical Education; plans to introduce requirements in Nursing, and in Science and Engineering; writing competency given a university priority two years running by the Academic Planning Committee; and fruitful and on-going dialogue with the Sudbury Board of Education and its secondary school English heads.

The consequences of our stringent competency requirement have cast a wide net. We have been brought face-to-face with the administrative and pedagogical, and on a higher plane, the political and moral implications of our policy of accessibility into Arts. The issue has become one of educational responsibility—ours as well as the student's. At each widening of the net of

consequences, we have made and are making decisions which involve ethics and responsibility: to test or not to test; to use multiple choice or writing sample tests; entrance versus graduation requirements; how much writing across the curriculum emphasis; how much remediation; and how to establish effective dialogue with the lower schools.

The process is heuristic—and we are still in it. We who profess the value of heuristic learning need to lobby hard for shared responsibility rather than monolithic decision-making. Writing problems cannot be adequately addressed by the English Department or the Writing Centre alone; only a recognition that all faculty at all levels share the responsibility for improving student writing will enable that to occur.