

THINKING ABOUT OBJECTIVE TESTS

In the perfect world of writing instruction, there is never, never an objective test. But few of us live there. We inhabit imperfect educational institutions supported by public funds and affected by political realities. Our commitment to teaching the composing process or our belief in writing as a path to self-discovery is often at odds with those realities. I discovered one such reality when I became Director of Freshman English at a large state university and inherited responsibility for an existing exit exam. It was inaccurately known as the "Grammar Test" and unanimously despised by teachers and students. Not only was I required to defend the test, I also had to administer it—with the enforced and dour assistance of T.A.'s. One year of that was enough, and I began to wonder what the political consequences of simply eliminating the test would be. With the characteristic cowardice of an untenured assistant professor I concluded that the better part of valor would be a better test. Now as I go to meetings and talk to colleagues and share my experience as a test designer, I discover that more and more writing teachers are being subjected to outside pressures and are being required to initiate competency tests or exit exams—usually objective—in their writing programs. The issues raised by such tests are complex and what follows are some thoughts about them.

As teachers of writing we must resist oversimplified and reductive tests as short-term solutions. We all know that objective tests, especially commercially prepared ones, tend to distort the composing process, generally encourage the mastery of right answers rather than the mastery of intellectual processes, and are usually based upon distant and arbitrary standards of usage. On the other hand a carefully designed objective test can offer certain advantages. It can make explicit and public the standards of the department. It can insure consistency of course content and of instruction in many-sectioned courses. It can be quickly and easily scored, it can diagnose students' weaknesses very precisely, and it can provide useful information about teaching effectiveness. Objective testing should probably be resisted as a means of setting standards and gathering information in small writing programs. But in large programs, in which students are counted by the thousands, the consistency and control provided by an objective test may be worth the energy required to design one.

Certainly an objective test should never, never be used for placement even if such an instrument is extremely reliable—as some are. Why? Because tests send messages to test takers about what writing is and about what the philosophy of instruction is at the institution. Surely the message that any college should want to send to students, to their high school teachers and to their parents is that writing proficiency can only be evaluated by a writing sample. Or, as I reply to the students who complain about our placement essay: "How would you find out whether or not students can swim? Wouldn't you put them in the water?" Objective tests for purposes of placement are probably a little bit worse than no placement procedures at all. They confuse reading and writing in a way that is *not* useful.

Objective tests, therefore, should be considered as useful, I think, only *within* a writing program. They should be constructed so that they are embedded in a course of instruction, informed by a philosophy of writing, and affirmed by the teachers who administer them. They should be content-valid for the course or courses they are designed for, although they cannot test all of the composing process, they should at least not distort that

process; they should ask students to respond to writing beyond the level of the sentence and in a full rhetorical context; they should correlate roughly with other measures of writing ability; they should be useful to teach to, rather than around or against; they should provide information; they should be based on local standards; they should not be culturally biased.

Designing a test that fulfills all of these requirements is not easy. But, if an objective test is agreed upon, it is work that cannot be subcontracted. Our colleagues in education can give us excellent and essential advice about designing and evaluating tests, but their advice is very abstract. We must finally do the real work ourselves, painstakingly and laboriously, because we are the writing teachers and only we know what we want tested.

Elsewhere I have outlined the process I went through (with much help) to design an objective exit exam which I believe meets the above requirements.¹ But the essential steps may be outlined briefly here. The first step is to determine what should or can be tested. Only certain skills or certain parts of the composing process are amenable to objective assessment. The ability to invent or generate ideas probably cannot be measured objectively; but the skills required to revise for coherence and rhetorical effectiveness and to edit for correctness and readability probably can. Testing these skills requires test questions that are based on a real piece of writing, and thus such testing does test both reading and writing skills, but in this case the confusion or integration of those skills is useful. Writers must turn into readers as they revise for other readers.

The faculty doing the teaching should, of course, determine the precise and specific skills to be tested, and the usage decisions, i.e., the answers should be determined by them too, not by handbooks on usage. Therefore, a survey of faculty usage, correlated with sociolinguistic data (the respondent's age, experience, education, etc.), is essential. The faculty survey should also include questions about common writing problems and the degree of their seriousness. Each teacher must decide what matters most, next, and so on. From all this information a test can be designed which is based on local standards and concerns and which meets local needs. When students ask, "Who says this is right?" the answer can be, "We say so."

A testing consultant can assist in constructing a format for the test and in testing reliability, and a computer programmer can design an answer printout. But only writing teachers can write the questions. If they work hard, however, they can write good ones—questions that ask students to discover thesis and topic sentences; to make judgments about level of language, voice, coherence, logic, and diction; to discern methods of development, errors of logic, unstated assumptions, sentence variety, and patterns of error. At the sentence level, questions can ask how best to combine or revise or punctuate or correct or reword. Students, in short, can be asked to demonstrate all of the skills that constitute revision and editing. Furthermore, because decisions in writing are seldom simply right or wrong, the multiple answers from which the students select can be constructed so that they are of varying degrees of correctness or effectiveness. Thus, the test itself can make the point that good writers consistently make the best choices, not the right ones.

After test questions are written, they must be reviewed and criticized by teachers—many teachers—and then revised according to their responses. The test should then be pretested on a sample population of students, ideally a population at three different levels of instruction: the group for whom the test is designed, a group for whom

(Continued on page 15)