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COMPETENCY TESTING AND WRITING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Four years ago Anderson College began testing freshmen to place them into appropriate writing courses and to assess their competency when writing courses were completed. One-half of our faculty members, representing seventeen academic departments, have served as readers for the entrance and exit essays our students write. Although we initiated testing to evaluate students, we found that test results demanded a re-evaluation of course designs and teaching strategies. In fact, group testing can have serendipitous effects on curricular reform and faculty development.

Because we hoped to establish a standard of writing competency that would reflect the consensus of our faculty, we adopted a test designed by Rosemary Hake and David Andrich. [1] This method is uniquely suited for use by a diverse group of readers. Preparing for the test requires all readers to evaluate a common set of essays selected from the group; responses to these essays are the basis for computer-assisted analysis of reader differences. First, readers identify flaws in organization, syntax, usage, and mechanics. Next, they make an independent holistic judgment about the essay's overall competence. The test design predicts that even when using common criteria, readers will differ in their assessment of a writing sample. Computer programs provide data to compensate for such differences.

An analysis of the differences among readers prompted changes in curricular design. First, we found that English faculty do not demonstrate standards of competency that differ from those of faculty in other disciplines. However, the extremes of "harsh" and "lenient" evaluation occurred among writing teachers: students were more likely to encounter divergent standards within the writing program than across the curriculum. Therefore, writing faculty now work together to articulate course objectives and evaluation criteria. Further, a student's writing is evaluated by a reader other than his or her teacher twice during each term. These measures have tempered extremes and promoted greater consistency in the program.

Second, learning that faculty from many disciplines expressed similar values about writing relieved stress within the writing program. Recognizing our colleagues' demonstrated ability to contribute to students' development as writers, we no longer view freshman writing courses as the last bastion in a war against illiteracy. For example, students of beginning French can earn an "A" without mastering Voltaire, as students of golf can earn an "A" without breaking ninety, but students of writing often find that the "A" is earned for nothing short of a feature for *The New Yorker*. As a result of a group testing, our curriculum now reflects stages of progress built upon achievable goals.

Finally, group testing helped to determine what those goals should be and how they should be ordered. We learned that as readers we define competency in terms of careful organization and logical development of ideas, not in terms of absence of error. Our introductory writing course now reflects this insight. No longer a grammar drill and usage review, the course teaches students how to impose order on their ideas and how to support with specific examples. When students reach this goal, they turn their attention to surface features as the next stage of their development.

Even more significant than curricular reform has been growth among faculty as teachers of writing. First, the testing system required us to describe the features of an essay as well as to judge its overall effectiveness. But although we could approach consensus in holistic

judgments, we could not agree on the characteristics of particular essays. Now our discussions focus on describing: What is required of an introduction? How much detail is enough? What does "well-organized" mean? As a result, we learn to provide useful formative evaluation in the classroom.

An important finding was that readers diligently sought out errors in poorly-developed essays but glossed over errors in well-developed essays. We had to confront what this practice implied about our teaching. Whereas the weaker writer is overwhelmed by overzealous marking of mistakes, the better writer cannot achieve mastery if teachers settle for minimal competency. We are learning to vary our formative evaluations to meet students' needs at different stages in their development as writers.

The objective data from each testing situation, often contrasting with our testimony, provide a solid basis for discussing what we mean by competency, how best to help our students achieve it, and to what extent it depends on audience, context, and purpose. Such discussions highlight features of good writing that do not lend themselves to measurement — forcing us not to take our "test" too seriously.

As a result of competency testing, our faculty share a common knowledge of our students' writing skills, a common understanding of the problems students face in writing for diverse audiences, and a common vocabulary in which to discuss writing. However, we have not reached consensus about competency. The project is time-consuming; our inconsistencies are embarrassing. Participation as readers demands that we accommodate new information and other points of view. But although competency testing may not be the best way to evaluate our students, it can promote a rational curriculum and insightful teaching.

[1] Rosemary Hake and Jesse D. Green, "A Test To Teach To: Composition at Chicago State University, *ADE Bulletin* (February, 1977), 31-37.

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