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Writing Assessment and Writing Center Assessment: Collision, Collusion, Conversation

Fall 2010 / Focus

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The benefits and risks of evaluating how writing centers effect students' performance on exit exams.



Madeleine Picciotto

Sophia makes her first visit to the writing center in a state of desperation[1]. Although she's earning adequate grades in the Basic Writing class she's currently taking (for the third time), she has twice failed the institutionally-mandated exit exam that will enable her to enter a college composition course focusing on academic argumentation. If she doesn't pass the exam on her third try, she'll be dismissed from the university. During the exam she'll have two hours to read a short passage she's never seen before and craft a response, supporting her position with appropriate examples. She has only a few weeks before the exam date — just enough time for a

handful of individual consultations with a peer tutor and participation in a group workshop for Basic Writing students.

We're hopeful that we can help Sophia, and the many other students in similar positions who come to the writing center for assistance, in spite of the fact that this is not a constituency our center was originally intended to serve. The Warren College Writing Center at the University of California — San Diego was created to assist three groups: students enrolled in college composition courses, students taking a mandatory ethics course, and students writing papers for general-education and upper-division courses. At UCSD, Basic Writing is outsourced to a local community college (taught on the UCSD campus, but by community college instructors who have no contact with the college composition program or other UCSD instructional units). Basic Writing support therefore was not initially seen as being within our writing center's purview. However, as students begged for help, the center received administrative permission to assist with Basic Writing assignments and the exit exam.

Basic Writing students have now become a significant constituency for our writing center: approximately 15% of our one-on-one consultations in the 2009-2010 academic year involved students enrolled in Basic Writing classes. To assess the center's effectiveness in working with this group, we have begun to compare the exit exam pass rates of students who utilize center services with those of the student body as a whole, and we have discovered that the pass rates of students served by the center have been noticeably higher. This

particular form of assessment is relatively new for us — our first examination of exam pass rates was in Fall 2009 — and we're continuing to review the process. Although we've encountered some ethical concerns as we've undertaken this project, it is yielding important benefits; most significantly, it is beginning to stimulate a deeper institutional understanding of issues concerning writing.

In our center, we've always gathered the data that most writing centers record: the number of students seen for particular writing tasks, the number of repeat visits per student, and so on. We've also moved beyond usage counts to explore whether other goals and expected outcomes are being met. A concentration on outcomes can raise questions and concerns. For instance, Nancy Sommers, the former director of Harvard's Expository Writing Program and the author of a detailed longitudinal study of undergraduate writing experiences, resists the notion of an "endpoint" that may be implicit in outcomes-oriented assessment — the tacit assumption that once a particular outcome has been reached, the learning process is complete (162). We've generally tried to conceive of our writing center's goals not in terms of specific results that imply the end of learning, but rather in terms of an ongoing process of development. Many of our goals are attitudinal (for example, our mission statement includes the goal of "promoting long-term confidence in writing abilities"); we use methods such as post-session questionnaires to discover whether student attitudes may in fact be changing as a result of writing center visits.

At the same time, we've begun to appreciate the need to tackle assessment of specific learning outcomes as well as attitudinal changes. Like most writing centers, ours has two different assessment audiences: internal (our own staff, for self-reflection and improvement) and external (faculty and administrators responsible for funding our center and evaluating its institutional viability). Neal Lerner, who teaches in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies and who has written extensively on the complexities of writing center assessment, wryly comments that quantitative data regarding student-learning outcomes can be "perfect for bullet items, PowerPoint presentations, and short attention spans — in other words, perfect for appeals to administrators and accrediting bodies" (59). This may be a somewhat crass aspect of assessment; but given budget realities, it's an aspect we can't ignore. So we're now exploring ways to undertake quantitative studies adhering to a process-oriented view of ongoing student development: for example, examining differences between first and revised paper drafts (inspired by Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson's research model). Focusing on exam pass rates, on the other hand, seems to reflect the endpoint-oriented approach that Sommers decries — a concern we've grappled with since we began this aspect of our assessment program.

When we first decided to examine the exit exam pass rates, we weren't thinking in terms of the "bullet items" Lerner describes. Rather, we were addressing internal concerns about our tutors' effectiveness in working with a constituency that hadn't been within the center's original scope. How effective was our assistance? How would we even define "effectiveness" in this context? These have turned out to be complicated questions.

Preparing for formulaic essay tests is not generally seen as writing center business. Indeed, the ethos of most writing centers — dialogic, developmental — is in direct collision with the values implicit in a routine assessment such as the Basic Writing exit exam, and with the goals of a remedial course that concentrates on timed writing exercises and "tried-and-true" formulas (i.e. the

five-paragraph essay) as the exam's presence looms. Critics of impromptu essay exams as assessment instruments are plentiful. Chris M. Anson notes that such exams conflict with a view of writing as an open system requiring flexibility; many others have pointed to a misalignment between essay exams and the writing called for in first-year composition and beyond (e.g. Elbow and Belanoff; O'Neill, Moore, and Huot; White). Nonetheless, the Basic Writing exit exam is a hard-and-fast reality at UCSD. The decision to work with the high-stakes nature of the exam and the high anxiety of those who face it grew out of our center's fundamental commitment to student service. Dennis Paoli, coordinator of the Hunter College Reading/Writing Center, asks, "When we think we have the remedy for our students' suffering, how can we withhold it?" As he points out, there is a "moral imperative to relieve the students' often visible distress" (173).

We've tried to accommodate the collision of values by providing Basic Writing students with assistance that can serve them in all contexts. For instance, students sometimes tell us that they feel daunted by the blank pages of the exit exam booklet, but blank-page-paralysis is a common problem faced by students at all levels. We're accustomed to offering a variety of invention strategies, and we proceed with Basic Writing students much the same way that we would with any of the students we see regarding this issue. Sometimes, however, when working with Basic Writing students, we find ourselves becoming more directive and less open-ended than we'd like. Many in the writing center community have discussed the tension between student desire for direction and a center's commitment to a non-directive approach. Paoli observes, "No enterprise a center undertakes stresses its principles more than remediation" (171). In our center's case — faced with a remedial model, student demands, the pressure of limited time, and the potentially dire consequences of failure — we worry about becoming so concerned with the immediate obstacle of the exam that we lose sight of long-term writing development. We worry that we're acting more like test-prep instructors than writing consultants.

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So we walk a tightrope, in part colluding in test preparation and in part attempting to move beyond it. We give advice geared towards exam survival; at the same time we try to do what Paoli identifies as effective process-oriented tutoring in a Basic Writing context, inviting a struggling student to "reread the prompt, rethink her response, reorganize her paragraphs, and add examples and explanations.... The student revises the essay, maybe twice, to make, and understand what it takes to make, a full, successful response to the prompt" (176). We often suggest to students who are anxious about quickly generating supporting examples during the exit exam that they read a good newspaper to keep abreast of current events which can provide essay-writing material. Some ask, "If I just read the front page of the paper for a week before the exam, will that be enough?" We sigh and shrug our shoulders, hoping that a few days of reading may develop an appetite for more. We convince ourselves that we're promoting civic literacy, and that perusal of *The New York Times* — while it can have immediate benefits for exam performance — can also help to build reading comprehension and other skills that go beyond the exigencies of the exit exam. As a student proceeds through multiple drafts of an essay in response to an exam-style prompt, we help her learn how to select appropriate evidence from the news articles she may be reading, and how to effectively

incorporate source material into an argument — strategies that will help her on the exam, but that will also benefit her in subsequent academic writing situations.

We don't always feel confident about the balancing act. Are we leaning too far towards collusion with the exam by offering specific test-preparation tips, or too far away from our students' requests for direction when we resist providing a single formula for success? Are we helping our students with the immediate hurdle they're facing, as well as helping them build a foundation for their academic futures? These questions brought us to our analysis of the exam pass rates for the Basic Writing students we serve — and also to a recently-launched project of tracking the same Basic Writing students when they move into college composition classes.

We were encouraged when our first look at the numbers seemed to demonstrate our center's effectiveness vis-à-vis the exit exam, with a moderate yet significant increase in pass rates for students we assisted through individual consultations and/or group workshops. In Fall 2009 we found that 81% of students enrolled in the standard Basic Writing course who worked with the writing center passed the exam on their first try, as compared to the first-time pass rate of 74% for all Basic Writing students in our undergraduate college (one of six colleges within the university). For students enrolled in specially-designated ESL sections of Basic Writing, the difference was even greater: the first-time pass rate for those who received writing center support was 67%, as compared to a college-wide pass rate of 45%.

Of course, there may be problems with this data. For one, we're working with a small sample; the number of Basic Writing students we assisted in the writing center during the Fall 2009 term was only 33, whose pass rate we compared to that of 140 Basic Writing students from our college. Moreover, students who chose to come to the center may have been particularly motivated, and it might have been their motivation — not writing center assistance — that led to improved exam performance. There are ways to address these problems and adjust for them, as Neal Lerner suggests; we haven't yet undertaken such corrections in our assessment program, though we plan to do so in the future.

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In the meantime, we've succumbed to the temptation to highlight our apparent success rate with the exit exam as we make a case to external audiences. An assessment project that was initially undertaken to address internal concerns has now indeed become a "bullet item" in reports to administrators. Although we qualify the evidence with the requisite cautions, it has in fact proved to be a persuasive item in our arsenal, convincing those who control budgets and facilities that we are in fact having concrete effects on student performance and therefore deserve continued support. We now worry that this very persuasiveness may affect our tutorial practices, driving us further down the road of "tutoring to the test."

Does using this data in our reports and presentations to faculty and administrators pose more risks than benefits? Given that the values implicit in the exam may be at odds with our center's view of writing development, is it ethical for us to use exam pass rates as evidence of our effectiveness? When

we see significant problems with the exam as a method of **writing** assessment, should we be using it in **writing center** assessment? We've reached the somewhat uneasy conclusion that we can legitimately present our exam pass rates as long as we simultaneously discuss our qualms and questions. In fact, we see the potential for such discussion to promote greater awareness of issues involving writing instruction and support at UCSD. Conversations may, at some point, lead to change.

And we are having many conversations. To begin with, we engage with the Basic Writing students themselves, particularly in group workshops. We tell them about our center's positive track record with the exam, but with caveats attached. We explore the values implicit in the scoring rubric, we consider how these values may conflict with other perspectives, and we encourage students to develop their own conceptions of what constitutes good writing. We talk about writing for an audience, and about how the expectations of Basic Writing exam scorers may differ from those of UCSD's college composition instructors or biology lab report readers. We try to bring students to a deeper understanding of the position the exit exam holds in their ongoing development as writers.

Conversations among writing center staff have furthered our own growth and understanding. As we've confronted the challenge of tutoring in the context of a remedial instructional model and contemplated the ethics of using exam pass rates as evidence of effectiveness, we've had to reexamine our philosophy and rethink our practices. Several of our peer tutors delivered a panel presentation on related issues ("Tutoring to the Test: Negotiating a Basic Writing Exit Exam") for a regional conference, and in the process they gained a deeper awareness of the complexities of their roles as writing mentors.

We also hope that conversations we're having with university faculty and administrators may lead to a more coherent approach to the teaching of writing at UCSD. When we raise our ethical concerns about using exit exam pass rates as a measure of writing center effectiveness, or when we discuss the disjunction between the skills called for to pass the exam and those called for in college composition classes, we find that some faculty haven't given much thought to how the various components of writing instruction on our campus work — or don't work — together. Clarifying our concerns, and using them as a way to raise awareness of problems that might otherwise go unrecognized, has been an unexpected benefit of the assessment process. We are creating an opening for further conversation about writing, about good writing, and about good writing instruction. Any opportunity for such conversation is welcome indeed.

Notes

[1] Name changed to protect student privacy

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