

II. The impact of testing on one California university campus: What the EPT has done to us and for us

Alice Brekke

When I was elected composition coordinator for the English Department at California State University, Long Beach, in January of 1977, little did I know what the position involved. The job description read;

The Composition Coordinator of the English Department supervises the composition program. He counsels students regarding composition requirements, administers and evaluates examinations for credit in composition, meets with the Composition Committee to help formulate policy relating to composition, works with the Chairman and the Assistant Chairman in the selection and assignment of part-time faculty in the composition program, coordinates the Teaching Master of Arts Candidate Program, assists the Test Office and state-wide directors for the English Placement Test in pretesting new examinations, and acts as the spokesman for the English Department on all matters of composition.

These were mere words. I had no real sense of what the job entailed at all. Very quickly, however, the words became responsibilities and the responsibilities grew. To perform these tasks, I was released from one of my four scheduled classes.

My duties as composition coordinator encompass a large and diverse program of composition courses. During the fall semester of 1979 we offered four sections of English 001, Basic Skills; sixty-one sections of English 1017, Freshman Composition; six sections of English 101, Composition (Research Writing); twelve sections of English 300, Advanced Composition; ten sections of English 303, Communication for Accounting and Finance Majors; two sections of English 310, Applied Composition (a course for teacher candidates); and eleven sections of English 317, Technical Writing. During the 1979-80 academic year we hope to add courses at the upper division and graduate levels to make possible special certificate programs in technical writing and the teaching of composition. In addition, the English Department will decide this year whether to recommend that the university requirement in composition be doubled; at the present time only one semester of Freshman Composition is required for graduation.

Placement in this program is governed by the English Placement Test (EPT), a California State University and Colleges placement test designed to provide placement information for entering freshmen in the appropriate composition course. The first EPT was administered in August of 1977. Anticipating the EPT and recognizing the need for remediation for many of our students, the English Department had developed a pilot Basic Skills Program, English 001, that began

in the fall of 1976. Class size averaged twenty rather than the twenty-five for Freshmen Composition. The course was offered on a credit/no credit basis, and course credit, not graduation credit, was given. Because special funding was not provided for this remedial program, we were able to offer only four sections each semester. Thus, when the first EPT results were available to us in 1977, we had limited space in Basic Skills for students identified by the test as needing special help in composition. Those students who could not or would not enroll in Basic Skills enrolled in Freshman Composition.

Although faculty teaching Freshman Composition were informed about the English Placement Test, they at first seemed oblivious to it, unconcerned, unaffected. No doubt there were several reasons for their lack of response. Mass testing of writing and reading skills was new to the campus and to the university system. No one knew for sure what the test scores meant. Test scores were not available for all students because not all entering freshmen enrolled in Freshman Composition had taken the test, nor were test results available at the beginning of the semester. How long the administration of the test would be funded by the state legislature was also unknown. Finally, although money for remediation had been requested by the board of trustees, the governor had cut funds for any special remediation from the state budget, and the English Department was wisely unwilling to sacrifice large numbers of literature courses to add Basic Skills courses. Thus, for the first semester following the implementation of the EPT, there were few perceptible changes in the composition program.

Within the year, however, changes began to occur, first in the freshman composition part of the program. In an effort to provide a statement of scope and sequence for all faculty teaching the course, the composition committee revised the outdated course description. Once the course revision was completed, the composition committee drew up a Grading Standards Statement for all students in Freshman Composition and for their instructors. For many years we have all heard horror stories from students, some of them justified, about the unreliability of grading. We had, in fact, conducted an investigation during the previous school year asking instructors to evaluate several student papers. The results of the study were disappointing—standards varied widely; evaluations were not reliable.

A common, agreed-upon Course description for Freshman Composition and a Grading Standards Statement did not, however, suffice. On an experimental basis in the spring of 1978, the English Department agreed to give a common end-of-semester objective and essay test to all students enrolled in Freshman Composition. Two members of the department and I designed the forty-five-minute objective test. We followed the format of the English Placement Test and included items on sentence structure and logic and organization. To keep some of our colleagues happy, we added a section on mechanics and usage. The composition committee designed the forty-five-minute essay examination following prescribed test development procedures. We wrote twenty possible topics, chose six for pretesting at a local community college, and following the reading of all pretest papers, selected two topics for the test [one was needed for classes that met on Monday-Wednesday-Friday and one for Tuesday-Thursday classes]. During the final week of the semester, the test was given. The objective tests were scored through the Test Office. The essays were scored holistically by a group of twenty

faculty who agreed to be trained in holistic scoring and to read papers at a Saturday session. Each essay was read by two readers and scored on a 1-6 scale. Of all papers read, only 4 percent required a third reading because of a 2-point or more difference between the scores of the first two readers. The two scores were added to give a total score. If a third reading was needed, that score was doubled. The mean for individual classes ranged from 6.6 to 8.8. The mean for all Freshman English classes was 7.6. Faculty were given a score interpretation chart that converted the numbers to letter grades. These grades were used by faculty as final examination grades.

Since the early days of indifference, the impact of the English Placement Test on the English Department at Long Beach has grown considerably. This experiment in using a common examination for students in Freshman Composition, for example, has been, for the most part, accepted by the faculty. We have now, in fact, voted to adopt a permanent policy calling for an end-of-semester essay examination. More and more faculty are analyzing EPT scores to determine specific deficiencies of their students. Writing assignments given during the semester are more carefully constructed than before and use the detailed instructions of the EPT essay format. In short, the EPT and the residual effects of the test have helped instructors who were trained in literature, not composition, to do a better job of helping students develop writing skills.

Another thing that continues to grow because of the EPT is my job as composition coordinator, and because of these added responsibilities, the dean of the School of Humanities has doubled my assigned time as composition coordinator. One of my new tasks is to interpret test scores for students requesting interpretation. During the past year alone I talked with more than 3537 students about their test scores. In addition, I coordinate the pretesting of new objective and essay test questions for further tests. I serve on the six-member state test development committee. I am the liaison officer for the EPT on our campus, a position which requires that I speak to various campus groups about the test and prepare information handouts for faculty and students.

That the English Placement Test has focused campus attention on the needs of entering freshmen is obvious. It has also prepared us for the Graduation Writing Proficiency Examination, mandated in 1976 by the Board of Trustees of the California State University and Colleges, which became effective in the fall of 1979.

At the beginning of the fall, 1979, semester, first-semester juniors took the Graduation Writing Proficiency Examination [GWPE]. This test was designed by faculty representing the entire university, not just faculty from the English Department. I serve as chair of the Test Development Committee. The test consists of a sixty-item objective test, a twenty-minute writing task, and a forty-minute writing task. It is a criterion-referenced test, not norm-referenced, and students who want to earn a baccalaureate degree must pass the test before graduation. Students who fail it have several ways to improve their writing skills before retaking it: they may enroll in composition courses offered at nearby community colleges, in their own departments, or in the English Department; they may get tutorial help available through student organizations, the Learning Assistance Center, or the Writing Center.

During the 1960s our campus had a writing clinic staffed by full-time and part-

time faculty that provided extensive tutorial help for students with writing problems, but when the state legislature cut off funds for remediation, the clinic was closed. Now that state funding for remediation has become available once more, we have reactivated the Writing Center. The director of the center, a member of the English Department faculty, is helped by graduate assistant tutors. Available in the center are many self-help, self-paced individualized learning materials. As word about the center has spread across campus, faculty have begun to refer students for help and students themselves have sought assistance.

Since the advent of the new California State University and Colleges test programs, many changes have occurred on the Long Beach campus. Evident in the English Department is the growing support for the status of teaching writing and for the contributions of testing. Evident in other departments is increased attention to writing. From all administrative levels, including the president's office, has come recognition of the place of writing in the university curriculum.

That these have been exciting and challenging times on our campus should be evident. How long the excitement will continue is uncertain, but that the challenge to improve literacy will remain seems apparent.