

Competency Testing and the Writing Center

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Competency testing as part of a writing program makes many writing-center personnel uneasy. Used to helping with work-in-progress, they dislike the idea of having to work with students whose main reason for visiting the writing center is that they have failed an exam. I want to argue that writing centers need not be concerned that an exam will "contaminate" the center's work. The liability can easily be turned into an asset.

During the freshman English sequence at Boise State University, students must complete two competency exams. The first, given in E-101, is a six-part, 60-question multiple-choice exam, scored by computer, covering matters of sentence structure and usage. Its main purpose is to test for editing and proofreading skills connected with grammar and usage. The second exam, given in E-102, is an essay, scored holistically by the English faculty and representatives from other departments. Both exams are limited to 50 minutes.

On the first attempt, given in class, roughly half the students fail one or more parts of the 101 exam, and about a third fail the 102 exam. Students in 101 get two chances at retesting on the sections they have not yet passed, and 102 students get one chance. All students must retest on their own time during scheduled test dates. By the end of the semester about 70% have passed the 101 and about 80% have passed the 102. Students who have not completed the competency exam by the end of the semester are given incompletes until they do pass. The university has now made the exams mandatory for everyone graduating from BSU, even transfer students and students returning after several years. These students pay a \$10 exam fee for each attempt. They are examined separately during the in-class exams in a room set aside for the purpose.

ESL students take the same exams. On the essay they are given 2½ hours. They have relatively little trouble with the 101 exam, but the 102 exam often requires multiple retests before they pass.

The job of preparing students for these exams, particularly the retests, falls to the Writing Center.

Some writing center directors I've talked with are appalled that we spend a large part of our time helping students prepare for the exams. Others have been approving, even enthusiastic: "What a great idea! We need that at our school." And I can tell them, yes, competency testing does do a certain amount of good as a screening and teaching instrument, and it has certainly brought material benefits to our writing center.¹

Indeed, we owe our very beginnings to the exam. Because the administration approved of the tests so strongly, we have a decent space and hard money to pay writing assistants. I was given one course of release time per semester as director. And, since the writing center has in a sense grown up with the exams, we have faced most of the possible tensions and contradictions implicit in being a support center for them. My writing assistants and I have learned to take old ideas about testing and apply modern approaches to the writing and editing processes. In doing so, we have learned to do a better job in all our tutoring.

The E-101 exam and the Writing Center

The E-101 MCE tests for "minimal competency" in recognizing errors in sentence boundaries (fragments and run-ons), subject-verb agreement, verb form and tense, pronoun reference, words that sound alike (homophones), and conventions of commas and apostrophes.

When helping students with these six sections, we avoid whenever possible teaching by means of traditional, prescriptive grammar. To pick a painfully familiar example, but the one we deal with far more than any other, we learned early on that telling students a complete sentence has a subject and a verb is so abstract, it gives rise to a whole branching tree of subsequent definitions. And the old saw that a sentence is a complete thought, still perpetuated in the handbooks on our shelves, just doesn't wash when a tutor is working one-to-one trying to help a client recognize fragments and complete sentences.

Our experience has led us to understand the wisdom of scholars such as Patrick Hartwell and Glynda Hull, both of whom argue forcefully against formal grammar instruction. Hull advocates replacing the traditional taxonomies of error with a taxonomy based on "what happens when a writer, acting as an editor, perceives an error in a text" (234). On this

principle, we start by giving our clients a chance to see how they function as editors. This is in keeping with our goal of helping students become more independent as writers.

Our strategy is to give clients practice tests on the sections of the 101 exam they have trouble passing, which they score for themselves with an answer key. We encourage them to figure out what they did wrong on the questions they missed. Usually they figure out at least half their mistakes on their own. We then can move on to the items they truly don't understand. The instructions we do give are based on the client's intuitive sense of how the language works. For example, in the section on sentence boundaries, we begin by saying, "Look at the sentence. Say it to yourself. *Gut sense*, now -- does it have a sense of completion, like a sentence? Or does it sound as if the audiotape broke before the sentence was finished? If it is a sentence, can it be split into two sentences?" (King 269-271). And so on. The "gut sense" approach still disturbs the more traditional among our composition faculty, but most of the time it works. (The material for this approach is taken from a book being developed by my colleague, Jay King. Jay kindly assented to let us use sections from the book in our MCE study packets.) For clients who insist on rules, we get out the handbooks and help them with rules. It is often more productive not to fight the client's wishes, but to offer both approaches and let the client choose.

If it weren't for the MCE, we might not have focused on the non-grammatical approach to errors as much as we have. It has taught us to deal with grammatical aspects of drafts-in-progress in a more sensible way, a way that helps clients learn to proofread their own writing more proficiently.

The 102 exam and the Writing Center

The 102 test, the essay, is a 50-minute exam which is holistically scored by faculty, mostly from English but also from other departments. In this exam, students respond to a simple prompt which allows them to draw upon personal experience.

Ten years ago, when the Writing Center started helping students prepare for the 102 essay, we would read a failing paper on the spot and compose an instant diagnosis, while the client sat watching and waiting. That proved unsatisfactory, not so much because we felt the diagnosis was

inadequate (though that was sometimes true) but because the clients were not taking the process seriously enough. They seemed uninterested in going over their papers to figure out how the writing might have been improved. They also tended to blame the prompt; many of them ended their tutoring sessions -- sometimes before the writing assistants were ready to end -- with the offhand remark, "Well, next time maybe I'll get a better topic." For the most part, they weren't interested in learning the strategies for writing a timed essay.

In response to the problem, we made three procedural changes. First, we consulted with the Director of Writing about cutting the number of 102 retests each semester from two to one, to encourage students to take the preparation more seriously. He readily agreed, because three tests and three scoring sessions per semester were becoming an administrative nightmare for him. Second, we began requiring all clients wishing diagnoses of their 102 essays to make appointments a day or two ahead, rather than taking them as drop-ins. We sign them up (with appointment slips, an idea I borrowed from my dentist) for the following day or later. This gave us time to pull the failing essays from the file and read them beforehand (see Appendix A for the complete procedure). Third, we developed an analysis form to use on the failing essays as an aid to the tutoring sessions (see Appendix B).

These changes have improved the situation considerably. Our clients, on the whole, have been taking exam preparation much more seriously. The analysis form has since gone through many revisions, becoming more concise and better tailored to the exam. An important addition was the set of blank lines at the end. Writing assistants are repeatedly reminded to write a paragraph of comments as well as circle strengths and weaknesses.

The form is organized to help a writing assistant set the agenda for a conference. As the discussion moves from column to column, it also moves from larger to smaller matters, which is the same procedure we use with drafts-in-progress. Our scheme is based on Reigstad and McAndrew's higher-order/lower-order concerns: Focus/Ideas, Development/Organization, Style, Correctness (115-119). Thus the client is made aware of the order of priorities scorers have in mind when reading the paper -- and of the priorities that should be set in other writing tasks as well.

Another purpose for requiring appointments is to "cool down" writers who expect to come in for a quick fix of their exam-writing skills -

- to be shown "everything I did wrong." We explain that it will take us time to do a careful analysis of both the strengths and weaknesses in their writing, and it may take time and practice to work through the problems they encountered while writing the previous exam. We also explain that if there are multiple problems, the client should return for more visits and probably write more than one practice exam before attempting the real exam again.

We try to bring to 102 tutoring many of the same principles we use on the writing our clients are doing for class assignments. The differences aside, we can do much the same kind of questioning:

How did you go about writing the essay?

What do you see in it that you think is good?

What potential do you see for making the essay better?

We aim to get writers to talk about the writing they did on the exam and find problems on their own with a minimum of instruction from us. It might seem that such talk would be difficult, with the analysis form lying right there all filled out. I worried about this at first, but it simply hasn't been a problem. We explain that the weaknesses identified on the analysis sheet are the ones the scorers probably found when they failed the paper. They saw the paper as a product. We distinguish between that and the process by which the paper was written and help the client make changes in the process that will lead to a higher-scoring product.

Our procedures on the 102 exam have given the 102-exam tutoring almost as much substance as the "regular" tutoring sessions in which we work on drafts in progress. Our clients benefit because their exam papers are treated as writing that matters, not just an empty exercise. When we teach them the process of writing to an exam prompt, we're also teaching them something of how to write essay exams and how to apply a process approach to other writing they do. The writing assistants benefit because they can perceive their exam work as part of the same web of skills and strategies they use in all their tutoring.

The procedures have also relieved considerable stress on the writing assistants, who now have time to look at the writing before meeting the writer. They can consult with each other over problem essays before writing responses on the diagnostic form -- which provides a valuable bit

of collegiality among the staff. They can sketch out strategies for the upcoming tutoring session. The “space” they gain from the procedure helps them form an overview of the patterns of problems students encounter in the essay exam, which further helps them develop strategies for the tutoring sessions.

We try to limit 102-exam appointments to about five a day, out of about twenty-five 50-minute appointment slots. This keeps the appointment schedule open for drafts in progress, which always have the time priority. Students preparing for the exam can afford to wait a bit, because testing dates are two months apart, whereas class assignments typically have one- or two-day deadlines. Besides, too much work with failed exams tends to get the WA’s down. They need the tonic of working with developing drafts, successes in the making, rather than a steady stream of clients who have failed an exam -- no matter how upbeat they manage to keep the sessions.

Since our first big revision in procedure, we have made one more important change. To help the writing assistants feel more comfortable working with the 102 exam, we began to involve them in the behind-scenes process, from prompt design to scoring. At some of our weekly staff meetings they examine and discuss sets of rangefinders to get a feel for how the papers are scored. They try writing essays to new trial prompts. They even brainstorm for new prompts; some of those they have thought up have become actual exam prompts. They analyze papers at all levels, from 5 to 1, to understand how different kinds of problems affect scorers. After a semester of experience in the writing center, some writing assistants take part in the scoring sessions, as their class schedules allow.

When the writing assistants turn from exam scoring to tutoring, they find the 102 exam a perfect opportunity to hone their coaching skills. At least once a week, a client complains, “I’m getting A’s on all my class papers, and I can’t get a passing score on this dumb exam! I freeze up under the pressure.” In the face of test anxiety, the writing assistants have to be even more supportive than usual. I overhear some of them rallying their clients like athletic coaches before the big gymnastics or swimming match. One of them, Tina, recorded a session in which she was attempting to buck up a client whose main problem was test anxiety. (All writing assistants are required to audiotape tutoring sessions periodically and confer with me about them.) The client had brought in a practice essay, which she did not feel good about. For the practice topic for which she had to describe “a possession of yours that owns you,” she picked smoking, even though she

didn’t smoke. She kept making negative statements like “I couldn’t think of a possession. I tried an outline, but there’s no way I can write 350 words on it. The paper is really stupid.” Tina pointed out what good things the client had done in the essay, then demonstrated (drawing a scheme on paper as she talked) a strategy for writing the exam. The following dialog can’t capture Tina’s wonderful English accent, but I hope it conveys her upbeat tone.

Tina: Let me show you my little quick way to pass the MCE 102 for nervous people. You have a whole hour, and you’re going to spend the whole hour advantageously. For the first two minutes you’re going to read the questions, and you’re going to underline and number the parts to the answer. Then for eight whole minutes you’re going to write your outline. And when you’re stuck, you can try clustering, listing, questioning . . . and next thing you know you have 350 words. Isn’t that magic how it works? I can’t believe God made it that way, but he did!

Client: You make it sound so easy.

Tina: It is easy. Look, you can take this sentence in your paper and turn it into a whole paragraph by . . .

Tina went on to demonstrate, then asked the client to try the same with another sentence in her paper. She then said, “You explain to me what you’re going to do.” The client repeated the strategy.

This is only one small part of the extended coaching Tina gave this client. Throughout, she maintained a “you can do it” tone, until the client herself was saying, “It shouldn’t take that long to write.” The athletic-coach analogy is appropriate, because the writers are preparing for a performance event, and they need just this kind of pep talk. The role of coach is one of the many that writing assistants must play; it is seen nowhere else in such a pure and enthusiastic form as when some of my writing assistants are preparing clients to go in and write the essay exam.

Some reflections: The up side and the down side

Even though we have worked out these *modi vivendi* for dealing with the competency exams, every now and then we still have to pause and consider

whether we're doing the right thing. Our inner critics ask, "Are we just teaching to the test?" I can't deny this is true, to an extent. Our study materials for the 101 exam deal only with the sound-alike words on the test and none of the others that are commonly confused. So we include, for instance, *its/it's* but not *lose/loose*. In tutoring sessions we tell clients not to worry about some kinds of error which in other circumstances they have good reason to worry about. In coaching for the 102 essay, we sometimes teach a formulaic structure rather like the five-paragraph theme, which we try to steer clients away from in their other writing. Thus we live rather ambivalently with Richard Lloyd-Jones's observation that "a writing sample is not real writing" (3). On one hand this is truth in packaging. We avoid giving the impression that there are more things being tested for than there really are. On the other, we worry about giving the impression that once one has mastered the formula for the test, there is nothing more to learn about timed writing. This is a tension we have learned to live with.

Still, we don't apologize for teaching to the test. For the 101 test, it helps students learn certain points about sentence boundaries, etc., that they need to know and hopefully will learn to apply to editing their own writing. For the 102 exam, teaching to the test does help prepare students for essay-exam situations. And it does give some students the confidence they need, knowing that a timed writing task need not be intimidating if they will just break it down into a series of steps, most of which they already know. Nor do we apologize for teaching a formulaic essay to clients who need a formula in order to feel at all competent. And the writing assistants, while teaching strategies for envisioning the overall essay in a timed writing situation, enhance their own ability to see the overall focus and structure of drafts-in-progress. We find support in the words of Daniel Fader: "Unlike the process of directing one's teaching to an SAT or ACT, the only way to teach to a writing test is to teach -- assign, evaluate, discuss, revise -- more writing" (80).

We take pleasure, moreover, in being a bit subversive. Certainly both tests are designed so that students must read directions carefully and follow them -- so that, in a minor way, the exams also test reading. We try to teach our clients how to beat the system by learning how to read the tests. For the 102, we tell them, "Look for these parts: 'Read and think about the following' and 'Your essay should . . .'" The first part just sets the scene, but the second part is the actual assignment. The assignment in turn always has two parts; the first part usually asks you to describe, and the second part usually asks you to explain."

To beat the system on the 101 exam, we teach some specific strategies for the most troublesome sections. The sentence boundaries section, for instance, is a paragraph made up of ten sentences. Students are asked to distinguish sentences that are correct from those that are incorrect (fragments or run-ons). The paragraph form is intended to make the test more difficult; students have to be careful not to be distracted by the content. We tell our clients to get around that by simply doing question 10 first, then proceeding backward to question 1. That destroys the flow of the paragraph and helps them see the sentences as structures. On other parts of the exam, we teach clients how to recognize obviously wrong answers. By being slightly subversive, we are teaching some essential test-taking strategies. As we saw with Tina's client, anxiety and lack of test-taking strategy are impediments for some students.

By painting this positive picture of our Writing Center's involvement in competency testing, I don't mean to imply there aren't some problems we haven't solved. Even these problems, however, do bring us some indirect benefits. Some ESL students have to retest four or five times before passing the essay exam, even though raters tend to be more lenient with them. From helping these students we learn about dealing with clients' frustrations, to say nothing of the experience we gain helping ESL students with English grammar. Another problem is that we are caught up in administrative details concerning the exam. Matters have improved somewhat now that there is a part-time secretary in the Composition Office who manages the records. Still, when people want to find out exam dates, rules and regulations, and scores -- or when they want to complain -- they call us first. Usually one writing assistant handles the front desk, but that person also takes drop-in clients and must interrupt tutoring sessions to answer exam inquiries. Still, these students are making some direct contact with the Writing Center, and a friendly greeting (even over the phone) is one more PR opportunity for us. We make sure anyone who comes in person with an inquiry leaves with one of our brochures.

A third problem is that the exam bestows on us the image of a first-aid station for wounded exam-takers. Even many English faculty, who should know better, only recommend the writing center to their students for help with the exam. One consequence of this is that we have dropped all mention of the exam from our publicity, and instead vigorously promote our work with writing-in-progress. Enough MCE business comes our way without our advertising for it. The one exception is that we do offer workshops before each exam. The image problem is nothing new to writing centers; to judge from articles in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and numerous

conference presentations, the majority of writing centers are perennially misunderstood as grammar fix-it shops anyway (North 433-435). Being linked with the exam doesn't make matters that much worse, and it does, as I mentioned, bring students in so that we can encourage them to come back under happier circumstances.

In ten years we have managed not just to put up with the problems inherent in competency testing, but to do much more. We're convinced that some real learning takes place -- both for clients and writing assistants -- as we prepare people for the exam. And we see many of them again with drafts of papers for many different classes. Most important, from our standpoint, is that by tutoring for the exams we continue to enhance our general tutoring knowledge and skill. These are compelling reasons for us to be gracious hosts to the MCE. I believe any writing center similarly involved in competency testing can make assets out of most of the liabilities.²

Notes

1. Readers may wonder what I *really* think of our competency exams, and I don't mind saying. I'd like to see the 101 multiple-choice exam eliminated, because its relatively small benefits are not worth the hassle and anxiety it causes. It also is based on the premise that students will carry the recognition of correct forms over into their own writing, which is a dubious premise at best. I'd like to see the 102 essay exam, if we keep it at all, changed from "minimal competency" to a more grown-up test of writing proficiency, either a junior-level essay exam or some form of portfolio assessment (see Belanoff). Plans are under way to re-examine BSU's core curriculum; perhaps exam reform can ride the coattails of curriculum reform.

2. I wish to thank Susan Hudson, Jay King, and Susan McLeod for their generous responses to various early versions of this article.

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Appendix A

Tutoring to the 102 Exam

The 102 exam is an essay of about 350 words, which is scored holistically by faculty. WAs are also included in the scoring when possible. This is beneficial for you as a WA because it gives you a sense of perspective on what scorers look for.

At certain times each semester, a large part of what we do is help clients prepare to pass the E 102 Competency Exam. There is a great deal

to know about the exam, too much for this introductory handbook. You will learn it gradually from experience and from observing and talking with the other WAs. This section will deal with the basics of our procedure.

1. When someone makes an appointment to go over a failed 102 paper, write 102 (be sure to circle it) on the appointment chart under the client's name. We try to do all our 102 exam work by appointment, so that we'll have time for a proper diagnosis of each paper before meeting with the client.
2. Pull the paper from the file -- preferably before the client leaves -- and write the appointment date and time on the back.
3. If you have time right then, read the paper and fill out a Diagnostic Chart (found in one of the handout pigeon holes). If another WA is also free, both of you should read and discuss the paper.
4. On the diagnostic chart, be sure to check off strengths as well as weaknesses. Add your own comments in the space on page 2 and sign the comments. Don't mark on the paper itself. Attach the chart to the paper and place it in the top tray on the desk.
5. When you have spare time, check the top tray for unread papers. WAs working evenings and early mornings should be especially careful to make sure all papers have been read for upcoming appointments.
6. If you have an appointment to go over a 102 paper, read it before the client arrives, along with the diagnostic sheet that has been filled out.
7. In tutoring clients on the 102 papers, it's helpful to start by asking how they went about writing the essays. Their responses might tell you a lot about what they did wrong and give you important clues for proceeding with the tutoring session. Another important thing to look for is whether the writer actually followed the assignment. It's always a good idea to pull a copy of the assignment from the file during the session.
8. When the session is over, refile the paper in the alphabetical file. Also refile papers of no-shows. Students are not allowed to take their papers out of the Writing Center. The only exception is when an instructor has specifically requested to borrow the student's paper for a private conference. Xerox copying of 102 papers is *never* allowed except for training purposes.

9. If you just can't figure out why a paper failed, ask another WA for help on it. If you have serious doubts that a paper should have failed at all, give it to the Writing Center Director or the Director of Writing.

Appendix B

E-102 Competency Exam - Analysis Chart

BSU Writing Center

1. Focus/Ideas

Strengths

The essay follows the assignment and answers both parts.

The essay really says something. It gives the impression that the writer is going somewhere with the ideas.

The main idea is carried forward by a succession of relevant supporting ideas.

The writing shows an unusual or surprising perspective on the subject.

Weaknesses

The essay does not clearly address the assigned topic.

The essay does not answer both parts of the assignment.

The essay (or part of it) seems to be mainly filling paper rather than really saying something.

The reader must get past the introduction before knowing where the essay is going.

Lack of supporting ideas creates a bare-bones, unsatisfying effect.

2. Development/Organization

Strengths

Details and examples are appropriate and clearly related to the ideas they support.

The idea in each paragraph is finished out before the paper goes on to the next paragraph.

The essay has a clear order that is easy to follow.

Paragraph divisions clearly indicate changes in topic.

Weaknesses

The development is inconsistent; parts of the paper are fully developed while other parts are skimpy.

Details and examples are not clearly related to the ideas they support. The paper may lapse into a mere narrative that is not clearly focused on an idea.

Details and examples are not really specific.

Some paragraphs end before their ideas have been finished out.

Haphazard organization makes the essay hard to follow.

Too many paragraph divisions

-or-

too few paragraph divisions make the supporting parts of the essay hard to distinguish from one another.

3. Style

Strengths

Sentences are varied in length and structure.

Important words and ideas get clear emphasis.

Word choices are accurate.

Word choices are appropriate to the context, not too casual and not pompous or too formal.

Weaknesses

All sentences tend to have the same length and pattern.

Sentences tend to be short and choppy.

Sentences tend to be long and stringy, with parts not clearly related to each other.

Some word choices are unclear or inaccurate.

Some word choices are too casual or too formal for the context.

4. Correctness

Strengths

Instructions have been followed (write in ink, skip every other line, etc.)

There are no errors (or very few) to distract the reader.

The handwriting is easy to read.

Weaknesses

Instructions have not been followed (write in ink, skip every other line, etc.)

The reader is distracted by:

Sentence-level errors (fragments, run-ons, comma splices, subject-verb agreement, confused sentence structures, etc.)

Punctuation errors

Spelling errors

The handwriting is illegible or hard to read.

SUGGESTIONS _____

Analysis by _____

