English Teaching: Practice and Critique December 2004, Volume 3, Number 3
http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/2004v3n3ed.pdf pp. 1-7

Editorial: Conditions of work in the English/Language Arts classroom

ANTHONY PETROSKY
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

LOUANN REID
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado

My colleague John McMillan and I (Tony) have just returned from a two-day professional development seminar in Texas with sixty teachers on the use of difficult texts in middle-school, language arts classrooms. It's the second last meeting in a series of six two-day sessions in which we work with teachers and literacy coaches to design curriculum architectures centered on inquiry instruction with difficult texts. We engage ourselves with such work with difficult texts, then we step back from it to imagine how it might be implemented in middle schools. Right now we are sorting through texts and focusing on big ideas around which the texts can be sequenced and scaffolded. As we talked about implementation, the teachers turned the conversation to the constraints they believed would limit it. Testing, of course, took center stage. In one district, students are tested quarterly on district instruments with both multiple-choice and essay questions to determine where they need remediation. In addition to this, they are tested twice a year on federally mandated, state, multiple-choice tests.

It was a disheartening conversation. Typically the teachers spend weeks sorting through the student test scores to compile student profiles that indicate, based on the scores, what students know and can do. If a student misses the questions on mood in a reading paragraph, for instance, then the teacher must design individual or whole-class remediation to teach mood. Each teacher meets with the assistant principal quarterly to go over the test scores of his or her students and to present action plans for remediation. Such plans must indicate the students who missed questions and the plans to get each on track. You can imagine the paperwork and attention such planning involves. You can also imagine what instruction looks like in these teachers' classes. They teach almost exclusively to the test because there's little time left to do anything else. And because they are held so tightly accountable for each student's performance on these tests, they are reluctant to take risks with curricular changes that do anything but teach to the tests.

As we talked through the issue of change, they all felt that the tests were a given and they had to teach to them. They also talked about how limited they felt their instruction is. Do we teach, they asked, anything other than how to take tests? Certainly, they are not able to engage students in interpretive work with difficult texts, and the instruction that they do in reading is, from their perspectives, superficial. They work with short passages and reading selections that allow them to cover the elements of reading being tested – main ideas, characterization, symbols, mood, voice, conclusions, and so on – so they teach these over and over with different selections in order to have their students get good scores.

This obsession in the United States with achievement tests hinges on a set of assumptions that have radically reshaped teaching here. The first, of course, is that assessment drives instruction. Not many educators and fewer politicians question

Copyright © 2004, ISSN 1175 8708

whether it should or shouldn't. At one time, educators believed that performance on tests was an artifact of instruction. Good instruction would lead to acceptable achievement on tests. This is an important distinction that's been lost or ignored with our federally mandated testing twice a year at all grades in all core subjects as a part of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation that situates this testing as high stakes. If teachers and schools continually show inadequate gain scores for students on these tests, then they are designated as at-risk schools and subject to takeover by the state. In this environment, teachers and parents (and administrators and politicians) think teaching to the test is a good thing, because it ensures that students will learn basic skills in all subjects. We no longer believe that performance on tests is an artifact of instruction. Instruction has become an artifact of testing.

The second principal assumption at work in this testing environment has to do with the belief that these tests actually provide us with meaningful information about students' abilities. Everyone assumes that gain scores on these multiple-choice tests indicate that students are learning when, in fact, it is likely that just the opposite is true. These multiple-choice tests assess low-level, discrete or fragmented skills. In English language arts and reading, they turn reading into a guessing game to get the right answer, when in fact reasonable adults would disagree with each other on the bulk of questions dealing with such things as main ideas, mood, and voice even in thin, paragraph-length readings. And, of course, they don't tell us anything about students' critical thinking and interpretive abilities. Yet, as a nation, we continue to believe that these tests actually tell us if students are learning.

The curricula that generate class work in the shadow of such testing will necessarily be superficial in the sense that a lot of discrete skills must be covered with reading materials that look similar to those used on the tests. Students, consequently, have little if any experience reading, discussing, or writing about substantial texts. They have considerable experience, though, with test-like learning activities. In schools that employ ability-tracking, students who do well on these tests do get to experience slightly more sophisticated curricula, even though they still must take weeks or months to prepare for the tests. Those students who do poorly, though, get to practice more and more test-like activities. These bore them. The students disengage and continue to do poorly. Caught in this cycle, reading and mathematics and science become meaningless to them. The decontextualized skills that they are tested on are in fact meaningless.

It's a case, then, of those who need the most getting the least. Substantial learning experiences resulting from engaging texts in good English language arts inquiry or project-based curricula at the very least offer students opportunities to engage with real texts (as opposed to test-item texts) in an environment that promotes learning through discussion and writing. Such an environment is quite different from the test preparation that marches students through fragmented, disconnected, individual lessons keyed to standards that are keyed to individual test items.

The third principal assumption at work in this testing environment is that instruction and learning can be changed by testing rather than by extended, long-term professional development. Millions of dollars have been spent on these tests, on the standards with which they align, on the textbooks and curricula that are keyed to them, and on the reporting and uses of them; but in states like Texas, districts receive little if any money for professional development of teachers. Why haven't we wondered in the US why this emphasis on testing, which has a documented history of failure in promoting change in teaching and learning, is being promoted instead of professional development?

In 2005 in the US, the shape of the English classroom has been determined by our national obsession with accountability and testing. It is practically impossible to imagine education differently from this teach-test reciprocal. If a skill, such as the ability to understand a text from multiple different perspectives, can't be tested with multiple-choice items or simple three- and five-paragraph essays, then it won't be taught. And what of learning that isn't immediately visible? Or learning that is complex, that needs to be sequenced and scaffolded over many texts and learning activities over months? Can we even imagine that there is such a possibility in the current environment?

The US obsession with testing has created a siege environment in schools, where administrators, teachers, and parents believe that teaching must occur principally so that students pass these high-stakes tests. This sort of pressure has marginalized all notions of knowledge except for what Paulo Freire (1968) refers to as "banking," so that teachers and students are situated as consumers rather than inquirers. In the service of efficiency, the principal technique deployed to maintain the reciprocal of teach-test has been direct instruction. Few people, including teachers, know or believe in anything other than this technique.

Inquiry, to place it in the context of schooling, is very different from our long established traditions of direct instruction and rote learning. Rote learning emphasizes the identification and recognition of information and correct solutions to problems, primarily through memorization and recognition of such things as correct inferences or through the use of algorithms which guarantee correct solutions if properly applied to problems. Multiple-choice tests and most workbook exercises are, of course, good examples of this kind of learning. Inquiry tasks, on the other hand, are "ill-structured," to use Herbert Simon's term (Simon, 1973). That is, they present meaningful problems for which there are no clear solutions or algorithms to discipline-grounded tasks, as opposed to contrived tasks, that have more than one plausible solution.

In his important study of schools in the US, John Goodlad (1984) found that students in all disciplines spend hugely disproportionate amounts of time in lectures, workbooks, and test-like activities that emphasize rote learning and short-answer tasks aimed primarily at the acquisition or regurgitation of information. In the 385 schools they studied, and in the over 1,000 classes his researchers observed, they found less than 1% of class time in all subjects directed to "open response" to address problems or questions "involving reasoning." A more recent study by Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) involving thousands of students in eighth- and ninth-grade English and Social Studies classes found that 85% of all instruction involved various combinations of lecture, recitation, and seatwork. Nystrand (1997) in another study found that 95% of all English classes had no discussion. There are few opportunities in any subject for the development of accountable talk, reflective thinking, or the habits of mind associated with inquiry learning, because there is very little emphasis on and practice in problem-solving, discussion, and interpretive activities, where the learning stems from students' intellectual work with open-ended inquiry tasks rather than from the pressures to get students to pass multiple-choice tests.

In 2005 in the US, we are closer to disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of students than we ever have been in our history of public education. Test scores, derived from a testing technology that has not changed since the 1930s, matter more than learning, more than professional development, and more than the desire to have students leave our classrooms wanting to read and write.

Thousands of teachers are simultaneously being disenfranchised. Scripted literacy programs, national mandates that ignore local conditions, and a widespread emphasis on limiting knowledge to only what is tested demonstrate a lack of respect for teachers' knowledge and expertise. It is no wonder that large numbers of teachers leave the profession before retirement. About one-third leave in the first five years, according to Linda Darling-Hammond (2003). One of the top three reasons for leaving is working conditions, including dissatisfaction with "input into decision making" (p. 9). Programs and policies that position teachers as technicians discourage them from exercising the kinds of knowledge and judgment about teaching, learning, and human development that they value. (See Starr Sackstein in this issue.)

Policies regarding teacher licensure reflect this narrowing, also. While all states issue teaching licenses, more than three-fourths of the states in the US have some form of alternative licensure program, ranging from "graduate level teacher education programs, to short-term alternative entry programs that reduce the requirements for a state licence, to traditional emergency hiring practices . . . that fill vacancies in any way possible" (Alternative Certification, 2001, p. 1). The programs that reduce the requirements for a licence concern us most.

Although there are local variations, most short-term alternative entry programs require a baccalaureate degree in one's proposed teaching subject (English, for example), passing the state's multiple-choice test in the subject matter, and teaching successfully for one year. Given the teaching conditions described above, it is reasonable to assume that much of the on-the-job training in some schools will consist of test preparation. Teachers without an understanding of materials, instructional strategies, and the developmental needs of children and adolescents – topics not addressed in an undergraduate course on Shakespeare, for example – will be subject to the curricular directives that come from district, state, and national leaders.

But it need not be this way, as the authors in this issue point out. While all but one point to the limiting and destructive effects of the obsession with accountability and testing, they are not prepared to be completely marginalized in their teaching. Writing from different countries in different situations, they offer us reports and stories on alternatives to test-driven curricula and direct instruction, to what Paulo Freire refers to as "banking education."

In "Can literacy be environmental: Saving the world, one verb at a time", Jeri Pollock, writing from the US, offers us a description of a project-based course of study designed to position students to confront "the planets environmental problems and their own responsibility in helping to solve them…so that they are better able to articulate their own beliefs, to understand where these come form and what the consequences of those beliefs are in environmental terms." Pollock positions this work in opposition to the "I lecture; you take notes and regurgitate on the tests mode," so that we can see how project-based inquiry differs dramatically from test-driven direct instruction.

Andrew Goodwyn, writing from the UK, in his "A framework for English? Or a vehicle for literacy?: English teaching in England in the age of The Strategy", reviews the British national Framework for English, now entering its fourth year, and points to its successes, failures, and the possibilities of change it offers for teaching and for itself as a set of policies directed at teachers. "Currently," he writes, "the primary testing regime is being reduced and there is a 'new' emphasis on 'creativity' and the 'enriched curriculum'." He believes that the changes afoot will give teachers more ownership of their subjects and endorse an "increase in professional autonomy."

In "Heteroglossia: A space for developing critical language awareness?", Brenton Doecke, Alex Kostogriz and Claire Charles, writing from Australia, begin by questioning "the regime of neo-liberal accountability in teacher education" and its casting of the curriculum in terms of competencies and "highly specific graduate attributes." Their report on two students' writing to understand the way "that language has shaped their lives" and their educational experiences stands in dramatic contrast to the treatment of language and literacy "as a set of basic skills that can somehow be conceptualised apart from the contexts and practices in which they are applied."

Aaron Koh, in "Newspaper Literacy: An investigation of how Singaporean students read the *Straits Times*", enters into dialogue with the topic of III, I (May, 2004) – "The challenge of teaching English in a multilingual or monolingual context". In this report on the initial stages of an action research project in a Singaporean junior college, the author asks questions about what constitutes newspaper literacy, investigates what it means for a group of Singaporean students to "read" the newspaper and explores the possibilities for a different kind of teaching/learning that encourages students to engage critically with what they read.

Several teachers' narratives provide detailed portraits of classrooms and the roles that high-stakes testing and professional development have played in the development of teaching practice. June Mitchell's "Caught in the crossfire: Conditions of work in the English classroom in Scotland" offers us a teacher's reflective journal on the support she received from "participating in after-school" professional development courses, so that she could "keep the doors open" for her students, so that their "short-term failure in school assessments" did not prevent them from participating in their education. In "Ten years of change in English teaching in South Africa", Adele Piccolo presents us with a counter-example of Outcomes-Based Educational Policy (OBE) at work in a Johannesburg, Grade 8, private church school that hasn't led to a testing frenzy or to a reliance on direct instruction. Her narrative allows us to see how the positioning of teachers in OBE "has allowed for pedagogical changes as teaching has shifted from the 'chalk and teach' method of the past where educators controlled learning…" to a "learner-centered, activity-based approach to education."

Bella Ilesca, writing from Australia, in her "Teachers' work, identity and professionalism", recounts her experiences teaching the government-mandated, *Restart* Literacy Intervention Program in a Victoria school. Her experiences with this program for underachieving students and its managers led her to see that she has been positioned as a technician as Restart mediates her relationships with students, so that it comes near-to-impossible for her and others to establish "worthwhile social relationships with them, characterised by mutual respect." She concludes by raising an important question that deserves repeating: "Is it the teaching profession itself, which is becoming more compliant, as professionalism becomes more and more identified with the achievement of outcomes narrowly defined and mandated…? Or are the causes more deeply embedded in changes occurring in Australian society at large?"

John Lovell's "Lost possibilities: Reflecting on New Zealand's NCEA qualifications experiment" paints a disheartening picture of what has happened in New Zealand as a result of its new assessment-focused system. "What makes me sad," he writes, "is that the development of the new assessment regime has so dominated teaching over the recent years that they very culture of our teaching profession has been severely damaged." He sees little hope for change as "teachers have become the conscientious deliverers of assessment modules designed in the capital city." Starr Sackstein paints an equally disturbing picture from the US in "Drinking to Educate: The frustrations, expectations, misconceptions and successes of secondary teaching in New York City" as she walks us through the city's novel "initiative to 'Ramp-Up' freshman classes" with the standards, tools, and assessments developed by an outside contractor, The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). "We are following scripts," she writes, "that are disjointed and confusing. We have multiple components to one lesson and not enough time to nurture the understanding of any of them." In this environment, teachers are expected to "teach the same skill of the week at the same time so that the students theoretically get literacy skills in all of their classes." After several years of this institutionalized curriculum, "the situation hasn't improved," she concludes, "but has unfortunately worsened."

In the final essay, "Battleships", Lionel Warner, writing from England, characterizes the effects of the UK curriculum as "a giant game of battleships…where targets are being hit by lessons aimed like programmed cruise missiles." His account of "the centralised attempt to codify and fix the English curriculum" speaks directly to the problems of the UK Framework experiment that Andy Goodwyn touches on. Warner asks us to wonder along with him about whose interests it serves "to fix, nail down, set in concrete all the possible outcomes of learning, especially in English." "Not the interests of our students, he writes, "that's for sure."

REFERENCES

Alternative certification. (2001, May). *Teaching Quality in the Southeast: Best Practices and policies, 1,* 1-2. Retrieved 20 December, 2004 from http://www.teachingquality.org./BestTQ/issues/v01/issue01navigator.htm.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do. *Educational Leadership, 60*(8), 6-13.

Freire, P. (1968). The pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Seabury Press.

Goodlad, J. (2004, 1984). A place called school: Twentieth Anniversary Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (1991). Instructional discourse, student engagement, and literature achievement. *Research in the Teaching of English, 25,* 261-290.

Nystrand, M., Gamoran, A., Kachur, R., & Prendergast, C. (1997). *Open dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Simon, H. (1973). The structure of ill-structured problems. *Artificial Intelligence, 4,* 181-202.