

Making Space for Authentic Writing

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Making Space for Authentic Writing
In a High Stakes Testing Environment

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Since the mid 1960's students have been getting drilled with activities to help them improve scores in a high-stakes testing environment. Such activities include picture prompts, timed writing assignments, poetry analysis, and practice tests. Lessons on sentence structure, paragraph form, and word usage were also being executed in the classroom. However, in a real world writing scenario many of the aforementioned applications would not be useful. "Unfortunately, standardized tests stress conformity, ruin love for learning, and suppress individuality and creativity" (Fu, Lamme, 2002). Students love having flexibility to choose their own writing assignments, and they love to be creative in the process. In order to create space for authentic writing in a high-stakes testing environment, teachers should implement a writing workshop approach; a space where students have the choice of choosing topics, the chance to be creative, to write for a specific audience, and to take risks and learn from mistakes.

In a perfect world, testing would be non-existent. Students would become writers who understand themselves and their worlds better through their writing in a casual relaxed environment, as opposed to a drill-testing environment. One aspect students love is freedom of choice in their writing. Writing for a specific audience gives students direction and focus. Testing, often times, requires the student to write for an out of reach audience. Students also like to share their writing with their peers. They enjoy having other students engaged in their work and talk about the stories they write. In order to achieve an ideal learning community, all students must be involved in the writing process and must be gaining understanding and knowledge in the process.

In reality, we do not live in a perfect world, and with funding being correlated with high test scores, it is inevitable. Most politicians view high-stakes testing as the savior for schools and as a means to ensure accountability for teaching and learning. What many politicians do not understand, however, is that scores and numbers do not portray real ability in the classroom. Some students get extreme anxiety over timed tests and the product of their writing is skewed. Other students have trouble writing in such a formatted way that the standard beginning, middle, end arrangement doesn't work to their advantage. A test driven curriculum dominates instruction and leaves little space for authenticity and individuality.

School is supposed to be a place where students feel motivated to learn and are encouraged to do their best work in a comfortable environment. Research shows high-stake testing actually decreases student motivation. "They [students] become less intrinsically motivated to learn and less likely to engage in critical thinking" (Amrein, Berliner, 2003). Throughout the time in the classroom where teachers are drilling students on formatted writing, some students described themselves as anxious, angry, bored, pessimistic, and withdrawn from high-stakes tests. Another concern about the testing environment is that students' daily experience of learning is harmed. Usually the classroom is a stress free place where students share learning and knowledge among their peers. When the time for testing comes, energy shifts and students are no longer encouraged to share ideas and work. Instead, writing prompts are implemented, and all

aspects that were supported the first have the year disappears to a gloomy haze of students sitting at individual desks in rows with expressionless faces.

Students are not the only ones under pressure. Research indicates that contemporary teaching is focused mostly on success in testing and meeting imposed standards, rather than developing critical thinking and problem solving skills. Since real world issues are primarily based on these exact aspects, critical thinking and problem solving, should schools rely so heavily on meeting specified standards? Within the testing environment, ordinary instruction is reduced in place of external testing. Since demands by schools, in terms of test scores, must be met, teachers are often forced to participate “in the very practices they attempt to criticize” (Pignatelli, 1995). Another detrimental aspect is teachers resorting to “teaching to the test.” They can not afford to risk a possible drop in test scores, and therefore, succumb to the old-fashion drill sergeant way of strict formatted writing techniques.

Testing influences teaching because it becomes ingrained in the curriculum so that all activities promote increasing scores in all sections of the test. Many times, the “less important” subjects like Social Studies and Geography are taken out of the curriculum during months of testing because they are not seen on the test. Now, students who enjoyed Social Studies the most out of every subject do not have motivation to learn. Testing affects the way students learn because it creates intense dislike for subjects they do not excel in. Imagine the way a student would feel under these conditions. What was once a comfortable learning environment has turned into a

place where subjects get cut from the curriculum and children are forced to do well on tests despite lack of motivation.

Even though nearly all research shows how detrimental high-stakes testing is in the classroom, I was determined to find another point of view. According to research done in the 1970's and 1980's some teachers responded positively to testing. Shepard, Dougherty, and Boulder's article *Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Instruction* revealed teachers who think tests set instructional goals and ensure coverage and pacing. By knowing the scope and extent of the information being tested allowed the teacher an opportunity to insure that specified areas were taught and familiar by the time of the test. Another positive of high-stakes testing is the ability to identify student weaknesses so instruction can be refocused to cater to needs of the students. One teacher said, "Testing allows me to determine which areas of my curriculum need improvement." Test results indicate the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Knowing what students are weak in can help the teacher work on specific areas. According to research, testing improves achievement and motivates students. "The state test improved reading skills for all my children as well as improving reading stamina and learning more vocabulary words." Also, children look at testing as a form of goal, or incentive, to learn and do their best. Since children love competition, testing is looked at as a challenge to follow up instruction. Tests give children goals and make them strive to reach them. Some teachers found testing positive because it enforced more intense teaching. The writing portion of the test improves writing skills. The emphasis on writing results in constant

writing efforts in all subjects and it develops diversity in writing formats. Lastly, testing improves student self-confidence. “It raises self-esteem tremendously in a *couple* of students who passed the test much to their surprise.”

In the same study, negative results were found by other teachers. One negative response was that high-stakes testing require too much teaching to test content and test format. Teachers feel pressured to avoid higher level thinking and resort to only items presented on the test. Science and Social Studies are often forgotten about due to increased time in other subjects. Critical thinking skills are nearly non-existent because of drill and practice techniques. Even though students love hands-on learning, it is often left behind in the curriculum due to specific drills teaching. Instead of having a well rounded curriculum, only test objectives are being taught. Teachers feel their creativity is being restrained in place of tests that require so much structure. Test preparation is boring to students. Day after day practicing drilled techniques becomes repetitive and children lose interest quickly. Not only does the testing environment put stress on students, teachers suffer as well. The pressure, in general, makes the classroom setting uptight. Too much structure takes the fun out of learning and being creative and showing individuality. Teachers feel the scores are representative of their teaching in the classroom. They think the test measures their effectiveness as an instructor and the pressure added from administration does not help ease the stress. Another extremely important negative aspect of testing, it is and inaccurate measure of teachers, students,

and curriculum. One teacher noted, “A student may have good knowledge of information but when it comes to testing, they can not demonstrate it as well as everyday classroom learning.” Another negative aspect, slow learners are penalized. Standardized tests are used to display students’ performances in a negative way rather than a positive manner, like they should be. Finally, high-stakes testing is culturally biased. Even though many students do not speak English as their first language, they are still forced to take the test because the district demands it.

Linda Rief, a renowned author and teacher expressed her thoughts in an email to me about how teaching to the test affects students.

I think kids who are immersed in real writing for real reasons for a real audience do just as well on these high stakes tests as those who spend months preparing. I think test prep is a waste of time. Testing, and test preparation, for the sole reason of test prep, does not equal learning. Testing is a different kind of writing, for a particular audience, and should be taught sparingly as a genre unto itself. Otherwise, teach the kids to write for real reasons for a real audience.

Her information correlated exactly with what Fu and Lamme say in their article *Assessment Through Conversation*. “Their [the students’] audience provided a powerful motivation for them to write and to improve their writing.” Since high-stakes testing does not give students a precise audience to write for, the chances of them being motivated to write are less and they are less likely to have focus. As students struggle

with a more direct writing instruction, and practiced writing with controlled formats, their work becomes dry and boring.

Clearly, there are several valid reasons for teachers and students to be opposed to high-stakes testing preparation. Not only do kids become distant writers, they lose all hope and love for the activity. Schools are supposed to be teaching and motivating students to have passion for writing. They are supposed to encourage them to take risks, explore, write for different genres and different audiences, change voice, use different tones, and much more. With test preparation, all of these elements are eliminated out of student writing, and instead, a strict prompted format is adopted. So, like Linda Rief stated, we should teach kids to write for real audiences for real circumstances. This can be accomplished by implementing a writing workshop approach into the classroom. Weeks and months of test preparation should be eradicated and students should, instead, be encouraged to continue with the writing they know and love. Once writing develops, students will be able to write across genres for specific audiences and circumstances, including high-stakes testing.

It's quite obvious that high-stakes testing is not going to be eliminated anytime soon, so there must be a compromise between rote test preparation and no preparation at all. According to the *Excellent Education for Everyone* Magazine, Timothy Peters, director of assessment for the state Department of Education, said the department believed that after a decade, it was time for change. "The goal is not to have them [teachers] teaching picture prompts; that is not a skill in itself. We were using it to get

at writing skills students can use in many situations.” So, instead of having teachers prepare with boring picture prompts, the test this year is incorporating a more imaginative thinking theme. Some questions have students use problem solving and critical thinking skills. “Growth comes when problems are solved by children” (Graves, 1983). The goal of this new format is part of a long-term plan to add variety in writing so kids can stop writing dull, lifeless stories, and instead, be more imaginative. A problem of the old writing prompts was that they were not familiar to many children which made it hard for them to develop a story. The new format wants to change this so every child is capable of designing a story. Now, teachers will not have to “teach to the test” as much as they did in the past. A more heavy reliance will be on good teaching, and whether or not students will, “be able to respond to a range of prompts in different contexts” (Peters, 2008).

Now the pressure is on for students to be able to write and write well. With there still being an enormous amount of pressure to raise test scores, teachers could resort back to old techniques, even though picture prompts are clearly not the best way to prepare children. A better way is the writing workshop approach. With this, students have the ability to choose their own topic, have a sustained writing theme, work with teachers and peers in conferences, and set aside time for author’s chair. The first step in executing a writer’s workshop is to create a learning community within the classroom. In order to do this, the most important aspect children must do is, “learn to trust themselves and each other as writers rather than wait passively for the teacher to

guide them through the writing process” (Shelton, Fu, 2004). Reading and writing are intricately linked. Students need to read a lot and write a lot in order to feel comfortable in successful learning community. Writing alone, with peers, and with parents and teachers is a must. Introducing different genres is also quite important. Through modeling, teachers need to demonstrate to students how to write engaging leads, structure a story, add dialogue, develop plot, and build suspense. Learning logs should be kept to serve as content assessment and progress throughout the writing process. Students should also share their writing with peers, whether it is in small groups or a whole class setting. This is the basis of an author’s chair. When engaged in writing workshops, students feel motivated to write. They feel a sense of passion, not like they do with direct writing instruction. They have the chance to take risks and evolve as writers. Most of all, they like to write and share their experiences with the class and help others reach the next step in the writing process.

Overall, a compromise must be made. It is not fair to prepare students for high-stakes testing with formatted and direct writing instruction when it produces problems or difficulties instead of helping achieve goals. Many times, students become turned off and withdrawn from repetitiveness of test preparation, when in reality, they should be motivated and excited to explore and engage in new ideas. Instead of producing a classroom filled with anxiety and negative emotions from the stress and pressure of testing, the classroom should be a learning community where children feel comfortable sharing ideas and writing whatever is on their mind. A world that was once filled with

nothing but excessive test preparation and negative attitudes should be replaced with a writing workshop approach, and therefore, a happy and content classroom setting.