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Teaching to the Test Means 'Dumbing Down' the Curriculum

by UNH Professor Thomas Newkirk

By *Tracy Manforte*

UNH News Bureau

Editors and News Directors: The following opinion piece on student writing and standardized testing in New Hampshire was written by UNH English Professor Thomas Newkirk. For further information, you may contact Professor Newkirk at 862-3981 or email: trn@christa.unh.edu. You may also contact Tracy Manforte in the UNH News Bureau at 862-1567.

When students come into my Freshman English class at the University of New Hampshire, I ask about their literacy histories. Most admit they aren't good writers. They admit they don't like to write. It's as if they are telling me not to expect too much.

A few have happier stories to tell. They write about teachers who reached them, who helped them discover topics that engaged them. They tell about the 30-page fiction story they wrote in fifth grade, or the paper on *To Kill A Mockingbird* that they had to revise several times before it was acceptable.

The teachers they describe are eccentric, passionate, in love with their subject. They may, at times, stand on their desks and recite Shakespeare. And they are the ones unwilling to settle for mediocre writing.

I worry what our state tests are doing to these teachers--and their students.

Recently I asked to visit the class of a teacher known for her excellent writing program. She told me that, yes, I could visit, but because of the state assessment she had abandoned her writing program and was instead having students do a series of test-like prompts. Hers is a common story across the state, as pressure to boost test scores increases. "Teaching to the test" narrows a writing program. It encourages teachers to abandon the more complex writing projects that may take days, or even weeks, to complete. It focuses attention on quick first-draft writing. It results in the "dumbing down" of instruction.

Now, more than ever, school administrators, particularly principals, need to be educational leaders. They need to keep the focus on the state standards and not simply the tests. These standards stress thoughtful writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. The standards also ask that students engage in writing processes that involve discovery, drafting, revision and editing. These are goals we can all endorse.

The state tests provide one limited measure of student writing performance, and we can learn something from the results. They show that students need more help in developing their topics--using detail, citing examples, using description. Most of the critical comments from the test evaluators dealt with the lack of elaboration. These are skills we can agree to work on.

But there must be other forms of assessment--portfolios of writing, self-assessments of the students, public readings. In one school I visited, students must present their work to a panel of community leaders and take questions from that panel. This forum is more demanding (and scary) than traditional testing, and much closer to the way adults must use their literacy in real life.

This teaching for depth takes time, and some claim that there is too much to "cover" for it to be realistic. Here we can take guidance from a recent international comparison in mathematics. The TIMS study found that Japanese students outperformed U.S. students not because teachers "covered" more concepts, but because they covered fewer. Each was treated more deliberately, with more applications, more collaborative work and more alternative approaches to problems. The same principle should apply to all subjects.

But the emphasis seems to be moving the other way in this country. The blatant pressure to raise test scores--to teach to the test--will result in a rush to "cover" material, and in mediocre writing. It is crippling the work of our best teachers. All in the name of standards.

(Thomas Newkirk is a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and director of the Freshman English Program.)

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