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Working within the System: The Effects of Standardized Testing on Education Outreach and Community Writing

Elizabeth Parfitt and Stephen Shane

This snapshot describes and reflects upon two case studies of community writing projects between Emerson College and Boston Public Schools. Emerson College students were asked to tutor 10th grade BPS students for the English Language Arts portion of the state standardized assessment. Through both quantitative results and qualitative reflection, this paper suggests that approaching such standardized tests as a distinct genre of writing can not only help students to gain awareness for multiple genres, but also to recognize their own writing as an empowered and meaningful political form of social action.

Keywords: community writing, public education, tutoring, standardized tests, genre

Community writing projects often expose tensions through philosophical, social and political differences that arise between partners (Higgins, et al. 11). When disparate communities come together for shared goals, “multiple and diverse stakeholders” must have opportunities to voice their knowledge in an effort to generate “dialogue that promotes change” (Higgins, et al. 11). Engaging in these diverse perspectives and approaches is a necessary component for students and teachers alike in understanding the community spaces that we occupy in service learning and community literacy projects (Flower 158). While these differences may reveal problems rooted in underlying systems, they also create the potential for “transformed understanding” and “informed action” (Flower 159). In acknowledging stakeholder differences, partners are able to move forward with tactics for a productive exchange.

In this “snapshot” we will explore two community writing projects that engage with the public education system, and the tensions these partnerships exposed. Both projects involved Emerson College students partnering with Boston Public Schools (BPS) during the 2014-2015 academic year. These projects took place at East Boston High School (EBHS) and Charlestown High School (CHS), and involved First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) students and trained graduate students. The trained graduate students tutored high school students in English Language Arts and writing as they prepared for the 10th grade state standardized test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). There are many

differences between these case studies, but both projects relied on Emerson students tutoring BPS students in writing as an engagement point with the public education system. While Emerson's expertise in teaching writing provided access to the schools, it also exposed an epistemological schism between partner needs—to teach students to pass government-mandated assessments and secure funding—and Emerson's writing program philosophy, which focuses heavily on genre-specific responses to rhetorical situations. The tension of teaching writing within a closed system (Anson 114-115) became a central focus in our writing classes at Emerson and in training student tutors. Acknowledging that one semester of tutoring would never solve an issue of national education, we applied a “tactical orientation” toward redefining the limits and goals of the projects (Mathieu 112). We trained the tutors to teach the standardized test as a genre, which gave the MCAS a social value and positioned high school students as stakeholders in an open system. By applying a “working theory”¹ for teaching the standardized test as a genre, our projects aimed to provide students with the knowledge and rhetorical agency necessary to navigate the standardized system.

Project Description

Throughout the semester, our community writing courses at Emerson focused on two themes: how to teach the test as a genre, and the implications of entering another community space as representatives of a privileged institution. In addition, the tutors focused on using genre-based lesson plans to teach the writing necessary to complete the ELA components. Raising test scores and teaching genre awareness were key goals, but equally important was providing opportunities for tutors to develop relationships and shared understanding with the high school teachers and students.

The EBHS project was viewed as a “high stakes” call to action to raise MCAS² scores and prevent state-sanctioned intervention. When EBHS administrators approached Emerson, the district had already ranked them a “Level 3” school, the final level before state action is taken. While EBHS teachers were already addressing MCAS preparation in their classrooms, the partnership with Emerson College was conceived as a supplementary effort to prevent a state takeover, which could result in teacher layoffs and mandatory trainings. The basic components of the partnership paired four graduate students with small groups of 10th grade students for weekly tutoring sessions. EBHS students were selected for the program based on previous scores and predicted projections for improvement on the MCAS. Theoretically, a dramatic improvement in targeted scores on the MCAS could earn EBHS more points on the state evaluations than a higher overall student-body passing rate. This strategy relied on the premise that if scores went up, *all* students would benefit from the school's higher ranking and its implications. The downside of targeting these students was that the Emerson tutors weren't always working with the students that needed tutoring the most, but the students who could make the biggest jump as measured against their academic peers.³ Despite such a drawback, we hoped, through

applying the pedagogy of genre awareness, there was potential for these students to learn more no matter what their previous scores were.

Once students were selected, EBHS elected to pull students from History classes for tutorials (as there is no MCAS history component). In the one-on-one and small group tutorials, Emerson graduate students focused on strategies for the short answer questions on the Reading Comprehension portion of the MCAS. The project ran from January 2015 until the MCAS tests at the end of March 2015. Tutors met with students in roughly 6-8 sessions. At Emerson, the graduate students participated in a directed study during which they read community writing theory, engaged in collaborative lesson planning, and wrote reflective responses to their tutoring experiences.

For Emerson College, the EBHS project signaled an investment in a predominantly Latino neighborhood school where 76% of students are low income and 65% don't identify English as a first language. In a city heavy with a history of public school bussing, and a competitive lottery system that places students in schools based on luck and their parents' top choices, East Boston remains one of the few neighborhood schools where local students are guaranteed a spot ("East Boston High (00350530)").

The second community writing project between Emerson and BPS took place at Charlestown High School and was formed in collaboration with teachers in CHS's Sheltered English Immersion Department. In this partnership, first-year Emerson students in two "Research Writing" courses traveled to CHS and worked as tutors and teaching assistants in 10th grade ELL classrooms. CHS has an enrollment of 935 students, 365 (39%) of whom are ELL students ("Charlestown High (00350515)"). Many of these ELL students are recent immigrants from China, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, and while working to learn English, they must also pass the MCAS ELA test in order to graduate high school. Emerson undergraduates visited CHS both during class time and after school to work with the 10th grade students as they planned, wrote, and revised responses to sample essay prompts and short-answer questions. On campus at Emerson, the research writing students engaged in discussions and writing projects about the American education system and the related socio-economic disparities in opportunity across the country. Their final assignment in the community writing class was to use their tutoring experience at CHS to develop a well-organized five-day lesson plan on a topic of their choice.

At CHS, 88% of the students are low income, and the student body is incredibly diverse: 42% African American/Black, 30% Latino, 20% Asian ("Charlestown High (00350515)"). Meanwhile, less than three miles away in downtown Boston, Emerson College's campus frames the historic Boston Common with an enrollment ticket of \$40,320 ("Undergraduate Admission and Fees") and an undergraduate student body that is over 70% white ("Freshman Admission Profile").

Results

The quantitative results of the EBHS tutoring were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 55 EBHS students who participated in tutoring, 52 students (95%) scored proficient or advanced on the Spring 2015 MCAS, as compared to 24 (45%) from the same cohort in Spring 2013. In addition, 34 students (63%) increased their performance level on the ELA MCAS test by one or more performance levels. Most importantly, EBHS scored well enough overall that they are out of immediate danger from becoming a “turnaround” school. While these numbers are encouraging, Emerson would like to continue assessing future iterations of this project both quantitatively and qualitatively with genre analysis and student writing samples.⁴

In contrast, at CHS our results relied more on qualitative assessments in the form of student reflections in class and the structural aim of creating reciprocal exchanges throughout the term. For example, the partnership was celebrated at the end of the term when the CHS students traveled to Emerson College to tour the campus, participate in first-year writing courses, and give presentations to Emerson students on topics ranging from Chinese culture to immigrant life in the United States to their own hopes and dreams. A minor yet important accomplishment was that not only did the Emerson and BPS students collaborate when working through test-prep material, but that the CHS students, many of whom live in Chinatown, an area of Boston barely three blocks from Emerson College, were able to visit the campus when normally these two communities rarely interact. At the very least, we hope these two student groups were not only able to form positive relationships, but also that they might see past some of the differences between their communities.

While Emerson teachers did their best to create a narrative arc for their courses relative to the goals of the respective partnerships, some of our most impactful lessons were unplanned. For example, on the first day that Emerson undergraduate students visited Charlestown High School, there was a tremendous snow storm which delayed the public transit system and ended with an icy uphill walk to the school. But then when our journey was put into the context that they would only make this trip a handful of times over the course of the semester, while CHS students travelled twice as far from across the city five days a week—often waking up before five AM to do so—the result was humbling, and led to multiple days of discussing Boston Public School’s busing policies and the failures of the nation’s desegregation processes.

Theory and Practice

For these projects to have any chance of success, however modest, the high school students needed to acquire an awareness for the MCAS as a particular genre of writing, a form inextricably linked to its context within the education system. We also recognized the many pressures these students and teachers were under, and knew that any strategy we designed could never fully account for the nuances and constraints of a public school system or individual learning needs. In theory, we imagined that if the

students could understand how the test worked and what it looked like, maybe then they would develop the genre awareness necessary to improve. Hopefully, over time, this awareness would build confidence and knowledge to succeed within the system. Likewise, exploring how the standardized test genre worked within the public school system could help our tutors understand its social significance and repercussions. In *Writing Genres* Amy Devitt explains that “As students begin to understand the rhetorical nature of form, they can move to considering alternative ways of serving those purposes. Considering alternatives helps make visible both the choices possible within a genre and the ideology behind the expected form” (Devitt 199). Building this awareness for form and choice was an ideal goal, but we had no way of predicting how long that might take and how it would translate to the immediate social act of test taking.

In working with BPS students, our tutors put the test in perspective, comparing it to the expectations of other genres of writing. For example, at EBHS, a tutor and a student might work through a close reading of an academic article, a piece of journalism, or poetry (all genres commonly found on standardized tests), and discuss how the author employs the genre’s conventions to convey a rhetorical stance. From there they might discuss how the writing shapes an audience’s emotional response, similar to novels or song lyrics or other genres that students proactively engage with yet often think of as completely removed from academic writing. Moving beyond “modeling” to discussions of antecedent genres and those the students were already interested in pushed them to consider the choices that various genres afforded them as writers. More explicit lessons might ask students to examine their own practice MCAS essays and evaluate their effectiveness based on a series of conventions generated with the tutor.

At CHS, students would draft essays responding to MCAS prompts throughout the week, and then meet with Emerson students to help refine their structure and content as dictated by the expectations of the form. There were also days planned strictly for students to converse and even debate topics from current events to the efficacy of standardized tests. Through such discussions, tutors and CHS teachers aimed to socially contextualize the MCAS by connecting the test’s expectations of student writing practices to the greater education system and its disparities, from the funding of public schools to student access to resources to the failures of desegregation. These conversations about the systemically prejudiced practices informing the deployment of standardized tests and the performance rates of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds aimed to frame test-taking as a skill rather than a true metric of their aptitude or intelligence. At EBHS, tutors raised these issues more casually through one-on-one conversation as a motivational tactic for completing the program. More than anything EBHS tutors struggled with student engagement. Attempting to break down these social walls, EBHS tutors aimed to give students a transparent glimpse at the pedagogical goals of the program. For multiple reasons, including the long timetable for scoring the exams, students did not always see the immediate urgency of the program. By encouraging students to see the test as

a genre they could exploit, there was at least the potential to subvert the oppression of an unfair assessment and for students to see their writing as not only empowered but political.

However, the student's performance of the genre was inherently tied to a pass/fail component. It was impossible to ignore the very real outcomes associated with this writing task and how it affected the people who were forced to participate in order to potentially move forward with their education in Boston and beyond. The MCAS both guaranteed nothing and also held the keys to everything. No matter our ideological views, pedagogically we had a responsibility to help BPS teachers empower their students with the knowledge to navigate this genre. In some ways, we felt the very real pressure of "teaching to the test," but attempted to move beyond modeling the genre through repetitive drills, toward writing exercises that required reflection, comparison to other genres, and metacognitive awareness for the test's structure and purpose. Both Emerson and BPS students needed to not only know how the test worked—they also needed to understand how the system operated and the socio-political implications of participating in it. Thus, analyzing the test through the lens of genre became a form of a social action.

Future Implications

In October of 2015, the Obama administration finally conceded that the push for high-stakes standardized testing in schools across the country has gone too far. In a *New York Times* article, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is quoted as saying, "I can't tell you how many conversations I'm in with educators who are understandably stressed and concerned about an overemphasis on testing in some places and how much time testing and test prep are taking from instruction" (Zernike). Of course, many of the questions and challenges we've addressed here are the same as those that primary and secondary educators across the country have been dealing with for two decades now. What's ironic is that while we might have the luxury of questioning the standardized testing system through an academic lens, the very institutions we represent are the same that often require exceptional standardized-testing results for admission. Thus, we must ask ourselves not only how do we work within a system we don't agree with, but what can we do to ensure that our tactical projects are used to open the doors towards more systemic change? And at the same time, how do we celebrate two communities learning together and empowering each other through writing?

Knowledge of a genre can give a student access to power and opportunity in an imbalanced educational system. As Lisa Delpit wrote, "Tell [students] that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful but that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play" (292). In our community writing projects, we've seen students begin to recognize the social and political games at play. For now, we can continue to subvert the power of the MCAS by partnering with institutions

like EBHS and CHS with whom we have common goals—educators who understand that these assessments are not representative of a student’s aptitude or intelligence, and that because of such barriers, students are often never given the chance to rise to the intellectual and social heights we all know them to be capable of. If there is any comfort to take in these tests, perhaps it’s that because they’re standardized they’re also often static and predictable, and we will only get better at preparing students to succeed in taking them. For now though, the genre remains intact.

Notes

1. As explained by Flower, “Working theories attempt to negotiate competing voices. They try to acknowledge, articulate, honor, and respond to competing images of the good as well as constraints and conflicts. They also guide, even call for, action” (139).

2. Like many similar state assessments, the MCAS involves math, science and English language arts sections, and is administered in the 8th and 10th grades. In addition, local school funding is linked to MCAS performance.

3. It should also be noted that the MCAS has tangible consequences and benefits: Students who do not pass are not eligible to graduate high school. However, students who score either *Proficient* or *Advanced* are eligible for the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship which provides a tuition waiver for up to eight semesters of undergraduate education at a Massachusetts state college or university. Point being, these tests scores can have very real effects on the future of not only these BPS schools, but also the students.

4. It should be noted that EBHS teachers were also preparing students for the MCAS during ELA classes, and the Emerson effort concentrated on a specific cohort as a complementary supplement.

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