

High Stakes and No Takers: The Impact of Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Writing on Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Writing

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Abstract: This ethnographic case study of ten students and their teachers concludes that the state writing test had a negative impact on students' and teachers' perceptions of writing in four categories: strengths and weaknesses in student writing, self-assessment of writing skills, factors impacting test scores, and motivation and attitudes toward writing.

The current wave of national reform initiatives and drive for accountability has resulted in state- or district-level testing standards. In many states, high stakes or consequences hold teachers, schools and districts accountable for meeting the standards, and assessments to test these standards cover reading, writing, and mathematics. In Florida, this assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), is used to test elementary and secondary school students and to evaluate individual schools. Although the reading and writing portions of the FCAT are widely seen as improvements over purely multiple-choice formats, the nature and format of writing tests remain highly problematic.

The current notion of assessment holds that formal tests can measure student achievement. A method more suitable to math or science evaluation reduces the multi-faceted dynamics inherent in written communication to a quantifiable score. Students must produce a multi-paragraph theme from a prompt for which there are no ownership opportunities or personal relevance--at cross purposes with the aims of education and successful language learning: involvement and immersion in meaningful reading and writing experiences (Apple & Bean, 1994).

This method is also at odds with current writing theory and pedagogy. Writing assessment is characterized as a technical activity with objective outcomes, contrary to the constructivist theory that shapes current writing practice (Lacoste, 1997). The timed, single-sample constraints of the test are incompatible with current writing theories that privilege process and context (Durst, 1990). Writing is ideally a "rich, multifaceted, meaning-making activity" occurring over time and involving socially constructed meaning (Camp, 1996, p. 135). Students are taught that writing is time-intensive, requiring drafting, planning, and editing/ revising. However, assessment time limits make this impossible, resulting in a safe, muted reply (Tepper & Costa, 1994). Writers assume a simplistic approach, working only with familiar experiences and ideas, sticking to writing formulas, and using only words they can spell correctly; they essentially revert to a default position and produce a "familiar, standardized, and voiceless product" (Albertson & Marwitz, 2001, p. 148). Good writing involves passion and risk (Romano, 1995), but both are minimized in testing conditions, as "students' risk of failure overrides any impulse for discovery that writing invites" (Albertson & Marwitz, 2001, p. 150). Any risk-taking for the sake of learning is viewed as a mistake (Emig, 1983). Thus, the process of inquiry or discovery becomes limited; completing the task overrides all other operational goals.

Further studies have connected current instructional practices and attitudes with state writing assessments. These writing tests have a negative influence on students' attitudes and motivation (Fine, 1998; Ketter & Pool, 2001; Lumley, 2000). Pedagogical methods are aligned

to what is tested, so “teaching to the test” is pervasive (Hillocks, 2002; Lumley, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). Teachers doubt the impact of the writing exam on students’ overall ability and question its relevance to students’ experiences (Ketter & Pool, 2001; Lumley, 2000). Tests not only drive schools’ writing curricula, but also influence what is valued in writing instruction and encouraged in student writing and thinking: “organized blether” (Hillocks, 2002, p. 80). Tests in three states teach students that supporting evidence doesn’t warrant further examination for consistency, impact or relevance, imposing a way of thinking that removes the necessity of critical thought (Hillocks, 2002). Many classroom hours are spent preparing for the writing test (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001), leaving little time for critical literacy required in higher education and the workplace.

These tests are in many states politically driven evaluative tools, an indication of how little research has informed practice. Past research studies, however, lack inquiry into teachers’ perceptions of student writing skills, factors accounting for the negative influence of writing assessments, and the impact of the FCAT. To this end, this study focused specifically explored the following: (a) students’ and teachers’ perceptions of student writing skills, (b) students’ self-assessment of writing skills, (c) students’ and teachers’ perceptions of influences and factors accounting for FCAT writing scores, and (d) student perceptions of the FCAT’s influence on attitudes and motivation about writing.

Method

An ethnographic case study is designed to take into account the community at large and its cultural context (Merriam, 1988). This method was suitable for the present study to explore the social and cultural forces that shape perceptions of writing among ten students and their English teachers in two high schools, a community college, and a university. To establish balance and ethnic plurality, seven females and three males representing the four large ethnic groups in South Florida—African American, Haitian American, European American and Latino—participated. During one four-month term, data from samples of students’ writing, interviews, a focus group, field notes, classroom observations, and a “think-aloud” protocol were collected.

This research began as an investigation of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of writing, including writing philosophy and processes. The influence of the state writing test was an ancillary concern, the assumption being that students might dislike the test, but this dislike would not affect attitudes about writing in general. This assumption was proven incorrect during and after data collection. From the first interview and throughout subsequent observations of participants and their schools, conversations with most participants included some aspect of the test—their attitudes, experiences, and strategies—and the negativity that resulted from it.

Data analysis following Patton (2002) began with the unit of analysis, or multiple cases of ten students and their four teachers, and variations among them focused the analysis. Using explanation building (Yin, 1994), I interpreted each case and then took explanations that could be generalized to all individual cases to reach possible similarities or themes (Patton, 2002). Triangulation was met through cross-checking of previous assumptions against the data. Four themes emerged, and were divided into four or five categories for each theme. Discussed below are the first and most important theme, the impact of the FCAT on students’ and teachers’ perceptions of writing, and its four categories: (a) strengths and weaknesses in student writing, (b) self-assessment of writing skills, (c) influences and factors impacting test scores, and (d) motivation and attitudes toward writing.

Research Findings and Discussion

Florida's writing assessment test has a negative influence on students' perceptions of writing. Throughout their responses, students consistently refer to essay writing less as discovery and artistry and more as what I term "recital writing." Just as musicians rehearse the same score robotically and *ad nauseam* in training for a single recital, so too do students practice the same type of writing mindlessly and interminably in preparation for a timed test. Writing related to thinking, language development and fluency is supplanted (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). Students become skilled in working through the monotony of repetition by concentrating on the desired pay-off: a superior evaluation. If a perfect score is not attained, however, then attitudes, motivation, and self-efficacy are affected. Lost in all the time and effort is the valuing of the art—of music or of writing—that makes it all worthwhile.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Student Writing

Students and teachers perceive student writing strengths as creativity/ imagination and communicating ideas; students perceive their weakness was vocabulary and grammar, while teachers perceived students' weakness was grammar. Students generally had short lists for their strengths, either because they believed they had so little or because they set high standards and wanted to improve in multiple areas. For strengths, five of the ten students (50%) and two teachers (67%) cited creativity or imagination; students also cited communication, development of ideas, grammar, versatility, and "nothing." Thus, students are confident in their ability to write creatively or imaginatively and teachers cite this as a strength, but in later interviews, students do not report this as a value of writing in general or future classes or careers in particular. One student remarked that writing is not important to her overall academic success; English classes emphasize writing but generally, "writing is not a big thing." Importantly, only what is assessed on state tests is viewed as important or worthy of value. Also, students are learning to view writing in terms of their deficits; this is reinforced on the FCAT writing assessment, which does not test imagination or creativity.

Most students and teachers cite longer lists of weaknesses than strengths. Six (60%) mention an inadequate or faulty vocabulary or choice of words when writing; spelling and grammar are cited by two students (20%) and two teachers (67%). Other weaknesses include little time spent writing, not following the school's formula, slow reading, poor style, uninteresting writing, focus, support, voice, style, and revising skills. Because both vocabulary and grammar are considered in a holistic evaluation of the essay, participants internalize—even foreground—its importance in writing, spending a disproportionate amount of time attending to vocabulary and grammar while drafting and revising. This supports research that because grammar is found on most testing rubrics, writing instruction privileges grammar as well, even though teaching grammar exclusive of connection to writing has no impact on writing quality (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Shoer, 1963; Hillocks, 1986). Two teachers who also feel that grammar is a student weakness both consider many other aspects of writing when determining students' grades. Thus, students are not basing their perception of their weaknesses entirely on these English teachers; other teachers, the state exam, or both are influencing this perception.

Self-Assessment of Writing Skills

Most student writers have not improved or remain unchanged in their self-assessment throughout their academic careers. Although common sense dictates that over time, students improve their writing skills and believe that they are stronger writers, this research study concluded that almost the opposite is true. Only three students (30%) believe they have improved their writing throughout their academic careers thus far—two high school students and

college student. The rest (70%) believe that they either have not changed or have actually become worse in writing. Most students cite being out of practice or lacking confidence in their current writing skills; the type of writing they were engaged in and the absence of pressure for state tests accounts for confidence during these early years. One student should bottle and sell his cure for what he sees as widespread student negativity and lack of confidence: “writing Viagra.” Research similarly supports the finding that students trace their dislike of writing to middle or high school, when rigidity and structure in five-paragraph essays replaced creative assignments of elementary school (Autrey, 1989). In this study, those with negative attitudes about the FCAT were more likely to feel less confident in their skills as writers; conversely, the three who believed they have improved as writers all had positive attitudes about the FCAT.

Influences and Factors Impacting Test Scores

Students perceive that strong essay writers practice, prepare, and use writing formulas and essay conventions, but teachers perceive that learning essay conventions and meeting evaluators’ expectations account for strong essay writing; both agree that teachers can impact writing test scores. All eight students who took the writing portion of the FCAT scored average (3.0 on a 0.0 to 6.0 scale) or above average. Without exception, these students cited practice, including writing essays similar to actual test essays, and preparation, including honing grammar skills, as positive factors that accounted for their high scores. These perceptions stand in sharp contrast to teachers’ perceptions. All three teachers (100%) agree that those who perform well on essay tests are not necessarily the strongest writers or the strongest thinkers; they have simply learned to master the conventions of the five-paragraph essay and to structure an essay to meet or exceed evaluators’ expectations. Though a high number of students (5 of 8) did cite following essay formulas or conventions as reasons for their scores, the fact that no teacher mentioned practice or preparation indicates that they believe consistent practice of five-paragraph essays is not so important. Thus, teachers believe the learning curve for essay writing—in following a structure or formula—is steep, not the time-intensive process that students believe it to be. Importantly, teachers suggest that the FCAT is less a measure of deeper, more ambiguous facets of writing such as strong ideas and creative or analytical thinking than it is of easily definable aspects such as essay structure.

The next highest factor accounting for high FCAT scores was the use of some form of writing formula or following essay conventions, cited by five (63%); other factors included level of seriousness, good style and word choice. A writing formula endorsed at one school helps students: they are given a “structure and all they had to do is fill in the blanks with the information.” FCAT practice at another school did not require much thinking, just “writing by the numbers.” Consistently, they cited time on task and hard work in their practice and preparation for the test in making a difference in their scores. This suggests a widespread belief that essay writing improves with time and experience; writing skill as measured in essays written for the state is a function of nurture, not nature.

Teachers believe that all of the factors—from writing context and race/ethnicity to socioeconomic class and peers—make up who students are, and who they are is reflected to some degree in their writing. Students, in contrast, focus on their teachers as their major influence: six students (75%) believe teachers positively impact scores the most, followed by peers, cited by three (38%); writing context, mentioned by two (25%); and schools, singled out by two (25%). For students, everyone is on a level playing field; everything else is of little consequence. Thus, students are not writing about who they are and where they are coming from; their writing is not saturated with experiences and understandings that reflect or reveal

anything about themselves other than the teacher who taught them. If writing is worthy or authentic, then it must come from the writer's lived experiences, not a contrived series of sentences assembled for the scrutiny of evaluators who are more concerned with how the writing is structured, developed and focused. But this is not necessarily students' fault; they have been trained to think this way about essays: writers' unique voices must be silent; their pages should be colorless. Is this what the state believes real writing is—cookie-cutter writing and fill-in-the-blank thinking?

Motivation and Attitudes Toward Writing

The FCAT writing assessment impacted the motivation and attitudes of some students toward writing. Students as well as teachers were divided in their responses as to whether the state writing test changed their motivation and attitudes. Becoming more motivated was cited by four (50%), having no change in motivation was cited by two (25%) and having less motivation was cited by two (25%). However, this change in motivation, either positive or negative, was short-term or fluctuated. Writing attitudes were affected by the exam: five students (63%) cited a positive change in attitude, but some also added that their attitudes were affected only short-term or became positive only about “real” writing. One student remarked, “My education really picked up after I got through the FCAT, writing-wise.” One high school promised incentives for good performance, but essentially undermined intrinsic motivation by tying achievement to extrinsic rewards; a teacher at this school remarked that the FCAT preparation and testing reinforce the notion that writing is “a skill needed to pass the [test], not a skill that will help them throughout life.” Another teacher found no effect of the test in motivation or attitudes but felt that teaching students to pass a test “is something that I do to my dogs; we should expect more of our students than we do of our dogs.” This finding supports research by Salhi (1998) about factors influencing student negativity; students who are given no choice or control of their topics, as is the case with FCAT, feel negatively about writing.

Implications

The effect of the Florida writing test pervades students' and teachers' writing perceptions, making a stronger case for writing across the curriculum than previous research. Through writing across the curriculum initiatives, students increase confidence in their writing abilities and learn to connect learning, thinking, and writing (Hilgers, Bayer, Stitt-Bergh, & Taniguchi, 1995) Writing should help students see knowledge as interrelated, honor students' interests and values, and build relationships between and among students, schools and communities. When asked about assignments that would encourage and strengthen students' writing, both students and their teachers cited student-centered writing activities involving student choice and relevance to students' beliefs and experiences. Although all students cited practice in FCAT essay writing as key to their success, not one endorsed it as a way to encourage or strengthen writing; this underscores their belief that school-sponsored writing should have a purpose besides improving test scores. Pre-service teachers should learn—and faculty in all disciplines and in all levels of instruction should reinforce—the principle of writing as an instrument of thinking and learning.

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