

The Grain of Sand in the Oyster: Competency Testing as Catalyst for Attitude Change in the University¹

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I

In their Preface to **Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies** (1986), Karen Greenberg, Harvey Weiner, and Richard Donovan observe that «Often only the reality of an imminent test has been able to force dialogues that ultimately produce a consensus on goals and standards on a particular campus» (xiv). At Laurentian University we instituted an Arts graduation competency test in September of 1985, and over the five years from 1985 to 1990 we engaged in the dialogues, sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, and saw a consensus begin to emerge. Starting from a largely *ad hoc* and departmentally localized testing situation prior to 1985, we went through significant changes in the ensuing five years, changes which had, by 1990, largely shaped the current environment for writing at Laurentian. The milestones of change were

1. the creation of the Arts graduation competency requirement mentioned above, 1985;
2. the creation of the *Language Competency Test* in English and French, 1985;

3. the creation of the Centre for the Official Languages of Canada (Language/Writing Centre), 1985;
4. the establishment of a Laurentian/Sudbury Board of Education Liaison Committee on English-language writing competency and pedagogy, 1985;
5. the creation of a Senate Committee on Writing Competency, 1988;
6. the creation of a Writing Across the Curriculum Program/*Langue Intégrée aux Programmes*, 1988;
7. the change of name from *Language* to *Writing* competency, 1988;
8. the Laurentian/Sudbury Board of Education jointly sponsored conference on **Writing: Process and its Evaluation**, 1988;
9. the designation of writing competency as an academic priority in the Academic Planning Committee's recommendations to the budget committee, 1988/89, 1989/90;
10. the extension of the graduation competency requirement to the faculty of Science, 1990;
11. the establishment of similar requirements in most of the Professional Schools, 1990.

The writing environment Laurentian had achieved is best symbolized by the university and SSHRC supported conference on **Contextual Literacy: Writing Across the Curriculum/La Litteracie en Contexte: Langue Intégrée aux Programmes** which we hosted in October of 1990. This bilingual conference, which featured over 30 speakers and attracted over 100 participants, would not have had institutional support even two years earlier.

The consequences of our stringent competency requirement cast a wide net; our primary 1985 objective, of ensuring that the students our entrance accessibility policy allowed into Arts would meet rigorous standards in writing before leaving, underwent a metamorphosis. We were, and continue to be, brought face-to-face with the administrative and pedagogical, and on a higher plane, the political and moral implications of our policy of accessibility. The issue has become one of educational responsibility—ours as well as the student's. As then Vice President Academic Dr. Michael Dewson said in his welcome to the

Contextual Literacy/La Litteracie en Contexte conferees, «Laurentian sees the creating of a fruitful environment for writing as its ethical responsibility.» At bottom we are scrutinizing the role of the university in the late twentieth century. At each widening of the net of consequences, we have made and are making decisions which involve ethics and the acceptance or rejection of responsibility: to test or not to test; the use of multiple choice versus writing sample tests; entrance versus graduation requirements; English/Français courses or WAC/LIP courses as follow-up; learning to write or writing to learn in WAC/LIP courses; the teaching of writing as integral or as 'add-on' in WAC/LIP courses; to provide remedial help or not; to castigate lower schools or to establish dialogue. The test has proven to be a catalyst for discussions its originators did not envision.

The process is heuristic—and we are still in it. We who profess the value of heuristic learning need to lobby hard for shared responsibility rather than monolithic decision making. Writing problems cannot be adequately addressed by the English or French Departments or the Writing Centre alone; only a recognition that all faculty share the responsibility for making a change in the level of student writing will enable that change to occur.

II

Why do schools implement writing tests? The common denominator response would be our concern to maintain standards, to have our students writing at a certain acceptable level. This common ground acknowledged, however, the variety of functions our testing programs perform tend to group themselves more or less clearly at either end of a spectrum running from basic gate-keeping on the one hand, to assessment for the purpose of amelioration on the other. In the former model, we screen students either to prevent them entering university (primarily an American phenomenon) or to prevent them exiting. In either case we are engaged in self-protection—insuring, for both ourselves and the wider community, the integrity of university standards. Our concern clearly is not for the students we subject to the tests. In the latter model—assessment for the purpose of amelioration—the welfare of the student becomes more central. On the basis of test results we steer

the student in any number of directions in the hope of addressing the problems he/she is experiencing. Once the student has done the appropriate penance—perhaps make a number of required visits to a writing centre, or take a required course—we feel we have done our duty, whether or not the student has improved. A third model, which partakes of the previous two, combines the concern for amelioration with that of gate-keeping. At Laurentian University we require Arts and Science students to pass a competency requirement to graduate, but we also require them to sit the test on entrance to give us an opportunity to identify problems they are experiencing. We direct students to the writing centre, to composition courses, or to Writing Across the Curriculum/Langue Intégrée aux Programmes courses, according to their test results. Students can satisfy the graduation requirement through achieving adequate results in designated WAC/LIP course work. They can also be asked to leave the university if they have not achieved specified levels of ability at the end of both 30 and 60 credits.

These models may tell us, in a rough and ready way, why we test. But if we probe more deeply into our tests themselves, and the follow-up we either do or do not undertake, we begin to encounter questions of a far more fundamental nature. Andrea Lunsford for example, asks «what model of learning and what values» our writing tests reflect, and goes on to suggest that though we all «no doubt would support a collaborative, interactive model of learning and would say that we also value freedom of speech and the way writing promotes it by allowing us to make and share meaning about our world,» our tests tend to reflect an «ethos» antithetical to such values. In her view «our insistent striving for objectivity» undermines the kind of meaning engendered through the collaboration of teacher and student. Students are expected to know certain chunks of knowledge, to be *literate*, and our tests—whether multiple-choice or writing sample—are designed to check for that knowledge, to assess «minimum competency»(8). Aviva Freedman as well laments such reductiveness because «nothing happens in a vacuum in education, everything has consequences. Evaluation drives the curriculum. For that reason,» she goes on, «we had better be very sure that the evaluation procedures we select are those which we wish to influence pedagogy»(14).

At Laurentian we are learning first-hand how evaluation can drive the curriculum. Between 1985 and 1990 the consequences of our competency test moved us away from an ethos of testing which was monolithic toward one characterized by collaboration and shared responsibility. I say «toward» because the degree of movement is, of course, variable. Those at the centre of the testing milieu—the English and French departments, the Language/Writing Centre, and those in the WAC/LIP programs—are further along, to the point where some of us are beginning to see the test as a potential impediment to further change. At the same time, some of the professional schools use the test as just another hurdle their students must clear before being admitted to professional years.

III

Universities, despite their common general purposes, have distinctive features which make them individuals. The context within which a university defines and undertakes its mission can provide insight into the programs it develops and into the relationship it establishes with its students. Located in Sudbury, Ontario, Laurentian—a bilingual English/French institution with approximately 5000 full time and 5000 part time students—has as its mandate the serving of northeastern Ontario, a vast area stretching from the mid point of the north shore of Lake Superior east to the Quebec border, north to James Bay, and south to Parry Sound on Georgian Bay. Affiliated campuses in Kapuskasing and Sault Ste. Marie, and an extensive distance education program collaborate with the Sudbury campus to fulfil the mandate. Three other factors contribute to Laurentian's situation: the area's economy is primarily in the raw resources industries: mining and forestry; there is a significant native Indian population in the northeast; and northeastern Ontario has one of the largest francophone populations in Canada outside of Quebec. Consequently, when Laurentian was established in 1960 the central concern was to provide post secondary education to populations which had not been able to participate previously. Our students are still, to a great degree, first generation university attenders, and they come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and with wide variation in their degrees of preparation.

In response to this constellation of factors, Laurentian has maintained a policy of high accessibility. Students need only 60% out of secondary school to be accepted in most programs. Mature students (21 and over) are strongly encouraged to apply, on both full and part time bases, and their secondary schooling ranges from traditional and complete to non-existent. Consequently, Laurentian has long recognized that a certain percentage of its student body has difficulty with university writing. Prior to 1985, however, there were only *ad hoc*, departmentally localized attempts to deal with these problems.

Why the university as a whole did not respond to the situation with policy and programs is largely a matter of speculation. Quite probably the smaller student-faculty ratio in the 60s and 70s made one-on-one help more feasible. Another speculation, which though hard to document has a good deal of anecdotal support, is the contention that students in the 60s and 70s simply read and wrote more before coming to university. As a result they were able to «latch on» to university work eventually. It is only since the late 70s and through the 80s that we have been hearing of the significant effects of increased television watching on school children: the most familiar being a decreased attention span which results in a reduced desire to read. Interestingly, the number of Canadian households subscribing to cable television rose from 215,000 in 1964 (4%) to 4.9 million in 1982 (59.8%), with the majority of this growth, or «penetration,» happening by the mid-70s (Babe). Sudbury received cable television in 1976, and by 1990 had 90% penetration (Brown, M.). Put simply, the reading and writing culture has largely been replaced by an image culture in all areas of society but education; and increasingly education follows suit as teachers strive for ways to compete with the dominant culture.

Consequently, through the 70s it was easier for Laurentian, along with most other Canadian universities, to accept students with lower averages and expect them to sink or swim. The only exceptions to this rule were the English and French departments, both of which had tests and writing or language courses. The French department, since it taught French as a second language, felt the need to assess entering students for placement purposes. Their course was primarily a grammar introduction. In English², on the other hand, a composition course—Engl. 1500 Language and Written Communication—was introduced in 1974 in

response to a request from Physical Education. Such a course was novel in Canada, and was the result of two significant factors: first, the initiative for creation of the course came from a new professor who had recently taught introductory composition in the U.S.; secondly, the department was top heavy with faculty since expected literature enrolments had not materialized. The influx of Physical Education students enabled the department to keep its staff working.

The English department tested all Physical Education students, and any others who wished to take the course. The Physical Education school required its students to pass the test or take the course; for others, who had no requirement, the department only admitted those who failed the test, unless there was room in sections. The limit per section was 25. The test consisted of a reading comprehension passage, a grammar section, and a short essay on an assigned topic. Laurentian's English language writing program remained roughly as I have outlined it until the Arts Competency Requirement was introduced in 1985. By that time the department offered on average 10 sections of Engl. 1500 per year; only approximately 100 of these 250 students were from Physical Education. English also offered one section of Engl. 1540 (the same course for francophone students), and normally one section of Engl. 1550 (broadly the same course for Visa students), both with enrolment limits of 20.

IV

The 1985 requirement had its origin in a Joint Social Sciences/Humanities Curriculum Committee, established in November 1982 to revise the B.A. regulations. After broad consultation the committee recommended the introduction of an Arts graduation competency requirement consisting of the passing of a proficiency test. Beyond what I've already said about increasing enrolments and pervasive television, the fact that other Ontario universities were going this direction was a significant influence on the committee. If we examine the characteristics of the first testing milieu, we see something of Laurentian's testing «ethos» at that time:

1. initiated on a three year trial basis;
2. a graduation requirement, for Arts only;

3. administered by a newly established Language Centre in conjunction with the English department;
4. consisting of a two hour essay test (Appendix 1) developed by English, and marked by English according to the department's interpretation of the university's policy statement on grading standards (Appendix 2);
5. able to be taken by students at any point in their academic career;
6. offering three possible scores to students: 1=pass; 2=fail; 3=profound fail;
7. students receiving 2s are strongly recommended to take Engl. 1500; students receiving 3s are denied entry to Engl. 1500 and required to do remedial work in the Language Centre.

What do we see here? Superficially we see the university meeting its obligation to students identified as weaker writers; satisfying Aviva Freedman's assertion that «what is implicit in post-admission testing is an obligation by the institution to help students identified as weak»(11). But **how** does the 1985 ethos meet the obligation? By establishing the English Department as the cure-all. Initially this may sound fine—those in the English Department are, after all, the experts, and are simply getting their proper recognition. But there is something else going on here. We are all familiar with the scenario of English teachers as grammar fixers. In this scenario, if students are writing poorly it is because English teachers are not doing their job. By donning the mantle of the «expert,» English Departments also accept the role of scapegoat for the rest of the educational community (see Steven «Beyond»). But there are further implications to consider.

In community colleges, and increasingly in universities, the English Department takes a service role—either wholly or partially. That role may take the form of «Business English,» or «Science Writing,» or may be a generic composition and grammar course (the «if this is Tuesday it must be commas» approach). In 1985-86, after the introduction of the requirement, the only thing that prevented Laurentian English from becoming an introductory composition service empire was the lack, in Sudbury, of available, qualified part-time instructors. But what does service mean? We do something for someone else, something the client

knows must be done. Certainly this is acceptable if the something to be done is a genuine service, like a dental checkup, or winterizing a car. But can the teaching of writing be dealt with in this manner? Is the engendering of «higher order thinking skills» (Rexford Brown's HOTS) something we can farm out? Or are we not seeing the utilitarian model creeping in, reducing the process of learning to write—a heuristic and recursive process—to a commodity which a specialist can supply? If we agree with Janet Emig (1977) that learning to write is also learning to think, then to buy into the service model reduces learning to a passive state. At the university—traditionally dedicated to higher order thinking—such a reduction amounts to irresponsibility.

V

Thankfully, from our present perspective, English could not find those qualified part-timers in 1985-86. If we had, a very different environment for writing assessment and instruction would have grown up at Laurentian. Rather than a collaborative, interdisciplinary community of faculty being fostered by our Writing Across the Curriculum Program, we would have manufactured a monolithic composition empire staffed in large part by a ghetto of underpaid, part-time, female instructors. As it was, however, in the fall of 1985, when 75% of the roughly 500 students tested (in English) **failed**, we in the English Department were left scrambling for cover. The students were angry at failing, and some of them were even angrier at being denied a spot in Engl. 1500 because of our lack of instructors. The media had a hey-day with Laurentian's «illiterate» freshmen, and the Sudbury Board of Education was out for our blood, because the city council was out for theirs. The only group not particularly vocal was other faculty. They seemed content to watch what happened to the scapegoat.

The Dean of Humanities, Dr. Douglas Parker, an English professor who was very involved with the creation of the English competency test, and under whose jurisdiction the Language Centre operated, was faced with a choice: he could follow the time-honoured tradition of gently (or perhaps not so gently) castigating the secondary schools, turning **them** into the scapegoat; or, he could attempt to establish dialogue with the schools, engage them in a conversation about

our mutual responsibility. Given the juncture at which we had arrived, either route had a discernable odour of damage control about it. Still, despite the practicality which contributed strongly to the move, Dean Parker's decision to advocate a joint university/school-board/ministry committee to look into competency in the light of our test proved to have significant ramifications for the way our program would develop over the next few years.

The meetings this group had sporadically through 1985-86, and more regularly (in a smaller format) through 1986-87 and 87-88, were mutually rewarding. From us the secondary school English Heads, and board superintendents learned that we were not branding their graduates as illiterate. We stressed that the requirement was a **graduation** requirement, and that students entering could not necessarily be expected to write with the appropriate facility. We stressed that the test was given on entrance to enable us to identify problems the students were experiencing, and to direct students to proper courses or to our Language Centre. We also asked the secondary teachers whether they felt the students they graduated with a 60% grade in English (and so who Laurentian would admit) were writing at a university graduation level of competency. We shared with them preliminary statistics showing that students entering with a grade of 75% on grade 13 or O.A.C. (Ontario Academic Course) English had an 80% chance of passing the test at the first sitting. We offered to go into high schools to talk to students about our test, and subsequently visited a number of area schools, even talking to teachers on Professional Development days. The attitude cultivated always was that we shared common experiences, difficulties, and ideals. We felt the «them against us» posture relax.

As we entered their world our attitudes shifted significantly as well. The clichés about high schools watering down their programs, pandering to student interest, and abrogating their responsibility to teach people to read and write, were shown to be just that—clichés, and largely untrue. (There is always some truth at the core of cliché; in this case there is about as much truth to the charges of irresponsibility in the schools as there is to the charges that universities are ivory towers that provide coddled professors with a free ride.) What we found were people who were strongly encouraged by their board and ministry to transform the English classroom from a place where students are passive receivers

of information and rules to an environment promoting active learning, where students come to experience writing as a heuristic and recursive process rather than simply as a technical skill. Literature, in this view, was a world to encounter rather than a Chinese wall to dynamite.

The vision here (and I stress that it was a vision, with widely varying degrees of implementation) chimed with our own intimations that our composition course Engl. 1500 needing a more complete revamping. Up to the end of the 1984-85 academic year the course had employed a bottom-up approach to writing, from punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, paragraphing, to the whole essay, with a workbook for grammar exercises, and a reader for models of writing modes—compare/contrast, classification/division etc. Students wrote eight in-class essays in different modes, a ten page research paper, and a final exam. The pedagogy required memorization and application of theory and rules delivered in lectures. Nowhere had there been any attempt to integrate the **process** of learning to write into the curriculum. Throughout 1984-85, however, a number of instructors of Engl. 1500 began to lobby for a change. We could see that while students often were able to learn and parrot back the theory and rules, only the strongest were able to transfer the information into their writing occasions, thus becoming independent, self-confident writers and thinkers (Aitken). By far the majority managed to ape the formula for the five paragraph theme. Though for a substantial number of students even this was progress, and made Engl. 1500 popular, somehow it was not what we envisioned writing at the university level to be—a heuristic discipline of sustained inquiry. We were in accord with George Whalley: «language is not so much a *medium of expression* as an instrument of inquiry. [...] There really is no other way of coming to terms seriously with language than by trying to write well» (135). In May of 1985 we adopted a new process-rhetoric text for the course, and reoriented the syllabus to some degree, stressing a top-down approach from rhetorical occasion (subject/audience/purpose) through topic, outline, draft, revision, to submission of the completed paper. Paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation were dealt with in the revision stage, and through use where possible of actual examples from the class. We still used a reader for models of the various essay modes, and had students write within them.

Consequently, when we encountered the situation in the secondary system, and when we read the Ontario ministry English guidelines (especially the new 1987 version), we were astonished to find that pedagogically the elementary and high schools were substantially ahead of the university system in the teaching of writing. The introduction of the O.A.C.s in 1984 had made official, province-wide, after years of planning, a move to the process approach which we were gingerly beginning to undertake in 1985. We learned of peer editing, small group work, writing folders, journals, of the teacher as facilitator, as mentor, as conductor, rather than as lecturing fount of all wisdom. We learned of their pilot projects in Language Across the Curriculum in the early 80s, as the implications of the belief that learning to write is learning to think were followed up.

In the summer of 1986 we undertook the wholesale revision of Engl. 1500 that we knew was necessary. We introduced a far stronger component of reading, not as models to imitate but as material to engage in dialogue with and ultimately to write in response to. We established writing groups, peer editing, journals, workshops, and one-on-one conferences. What in fact we did was to transform Engl. 1500 from a writing skills service course to a *bona fide* university introductory composition/rhetoric course. We signalled the change with a new name: from «Language and Written Communication» to «Introductory Composition.» In an attempt to ease the pedagogical transition for our instructors, we invited two high school English Heads to participate in our Engl. 1500 orientation session in late August 1986, to share with our composition teachers their experiences teaching writing as a process. Again, though there were those (as there always will be) who thought the guests had nothing to teach a Ph.D., we found that the occasion was an opportunity to recognize areas of shared concern, and most of the instructors appreciated what the visitors had to say.

A symbol of the relationship we had with the schools was our collaboration throughout 1986-87, and increasingly through 1987-88, on a jointly sponsored conference entitled **Writing: Process and its Evaluation** which we held on the Laurentian campus in May 1988, and which attracted 125 university, college, secondary school, board, and ministry participants.

VI

While the English Department's relationship with the school board was flourishing throughout this period, all was not quiet on campus. In 1986-87 the Dean of Humanities, Dr. Parker, suggested there was a possibility of permanent Alternate Stream faculty positions to teach writing in the English Department. The offer was tempting, given that the biggest difficulty we had with the program was staffing. The implications for the direction we were now headed, however, were less than desirable. The offer required the new faculty member to teach, as regular load, four sections of Engl. 1500 from September to April, and a fifth section during the May-July intersession. What this load meant, in effect, was that Engl. 1500 could not possibly be anything more than a technical, rote learning, writing skills service course. No teacher could carry that load and be the creative facilitator and mentor that the process approach to writing as inquiry demanded, and that we, as a department, were increasingly committed to. We could see that with two or three such positions, the regular faculty would not have to participate in the writing program. While some thought this would be a good idea, they acknowledged that creating a composition ghetto was not a viable alternative. We stressed to the Dean that composition was a legitimate university study which should be staffed appropriately so as to avoid the entrenching of the service element of our program. We expressed our concern that having to provide such service to the rest of the university community would curtail our own department's development in either literature or rhetoric. Our departmental unanimity on these points is a measure of the change our attitude to writing had undergone in little more than a year. In the fall of 1985, we would have been pleased to hire alternate stream positions to help us meet the demand for our services; but then the administration was not offering, perhaps not yet seeing the implications of the competency requirement for Engl. 1500, the only form of amelioration offered to the vast majority of English language students who failed the test. By the end of the 1986-87 academic year we were well on our way to a clear recognition that if we were to protect our department's integrity, and raise the level of writing ability of Laurentian students, we would have to share the responsibility for the teaching of writing—as, again, a heuristic discipline of

inquiry—with the rest of the university community. We were on our way to *Writing Across the Curriculum*.

VII

As the three year trial period for the competency requirement wound on, awareness of the test increased. Prior to 1987-88, the third and final year of the trial, furor about the requirement had been limited largely to the testing times in September and April. In 1987-88, however, as students who had never done the test, or who had repeatedly failed it, began to worry openly, and as faculty members began to realize that some of their students might not graduate, things started to heat up. In response to growing expressions of concern, Senate delegated the responsibility of investigating the state of the requirement and making a report to Senate to the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee. In the fall of 1987—with only the April 1988 testing session left before the axe fell on those students who had not satisfied the requirement—this committee convened forums for students, faculty, and administration on their reactions to the competency requirement. Concerns clustered around a perceived lack of communication about the requirement, with students saying they had not been adequately informed of what they had to do. They also felt that the university should not take students' money if their writing was poor enough to indicate that success on the test was unlikely. They were frustrated that only Arts students were subject to the requirement. In addition they felt that there should be another route available to students through which to satisfy the requirement. Many felt passing English 1500 should be sufficient. Faculty echoed this, and also joined with students in expressing frustration, and sometimes quasi-aggressive disbelief, that students could «pass all their courses but fail the test.» Those speaking on behalf of the English test—usually the Director of the Language Centre, the Coordinator of the English Department Writing Program, and the Chair of English, but also some students and faculty—pointed out that Arts had a number of departments that did not require much writing in their programs. In addition they stressed that the Language Centre was not sufficiently funded to be able to provide extensive follow-up. English was vocal about not wanting to be reduced to a service department, and stressed that since the university community

had left English alone to interpret university standards of competency, that community could not now very well castigate English for doing so as it saw fit. Certain students, who had passed the test, expressed concern that the quality of their degree would be undermined if such a basic requirement as writing competency was watered down.

VIII

While the Teaching and Learning Committee continued its deliberations, the new Dean of Humanities, Dr. Jon Gonder, seeing the division among faculty, struck an *ad hoc* Arts committee to review the requirement. It was composed of interested faculty from most Humanities departments and a number of Social Science departments, and it met regularly for five months. Here the two basic models for teaching writing at the university met head on and finally realized themselves as such.

1. The English Department and Language Centre staff who had created, administered, marked, and followed-up on the test were now, after two years of collaboration with the board, ministry, and each other, committed to a model of shared responsibility and lobbied hard for it in the form of rapid impression holistic marking of a writing sample, done by a trained interdisciplinary team and followed up by a Writing Across the Curriculum Program. Such an approach elicited a good deal of sympathy from other faculty in, especially, Humanities.
2. Faculty who had not been closely involved with the requirement and the attendant collaboration, came into the discussions with the traditional attitudes: they were concerned about falling standards but were leery of accepting responsibility for the maintenance of them. They wanted to retain a competency requirement, but were uneasy with the current essay test. They felt the experts (English) should handle the problem of failures by providing Engl. 1500 as an alternate route for all those who failed the test. At the same time they argued that English should not presume to dictate university standards through an essay test. They pushed for multiple-choice tests to ensure «objectivity.»

Those of us in support of writing samples, holistically marked and supported by WAC, responded that «objective» tests may seem attractive because they appear to place responsibility on numbers rather than with people who are «subjective.» In fact, though, responsibility can never rest anywhere but with human beings; the cry for objective testing masks a desire to pass the buck, since, as Gertrude Conlan explains,

An objective test is simply one that can be scored by a machine or by people who need make no judgment about the acceptability or unacceptability of a response. The rightness or wrongness of an answer has been decided by the test developer. The test itself is not objective; it does not function as an ideal criterion against which all and everything in a subject can be measured. [...] it was designed and put together by human beings who, like all other human beings, have faults and opinions. (110)

We argued that just because the responsibility inevitably had to rest with people did not mean that our tests were, finally, only «subjective,» and our standards arbitrary. We made the case that if the university is a community of scholars dedicated to the heuristic discipline of sustained inquiry, then it is that community—initially at any rate—which provides a context in which to judge the results of inquiry, or, going further, a context which allows the searcher to know there are results. And, we continued, if we can agree that, on the whole, good writers are good thinkers, then writing should be, and should be seen to be, central to our sustained inquiry, our community. We make it so, we went on, by retaining our requirement, and by sharing in the developing of Laurentian community standards for judging it. The most effective way for faculty to do this is to participate in interdisciplinary marking of the tests. We were pleasantly surprised when a number of faculty from Humanities and Social Science departments told us they would be willing to mark tests, saying they hadn't offered earlier because—beyond their own uncertainty—they had assumed that English would view the gesture as a questioning of its authority. Perhaps two years earlier that would have been the case.

Though not everyone was convinced of the validity of the collaborative route, the upshot of the committee's explorations was a recommendation to Senate—supported by the Teaching and Learning Committee—for the creation of a Senate Committee on Writing Competency, and a Writing Across the Curriculum Program. We recommended that the graduation requirement and test be maintained, but that satisfactory performance on the writing component of a WAC course be sufficient to clear the requirement without a retest. Our lobbying had done its work—there was little opposition.

IX

The Senate Committee on Writing Competency went to work quickly in order to have new regulations for the requirement in place for the 1988-89 academic year. It recommended, and Senate subsequently approved, a number of significant changes:

1. a change in the test from a 3 point to a 4 point grading scale, as follows:
 - 1= The student has satisfied the competency requirement;
 - 2= The student has some difficulties in writing effectively. A WAC course is recommended [this is essentially an indication of borderline status, something that had been hidden in the earlier version];
 - 3= The student has significant difficulties in writing. A WAC course is recommended, and supplementary help is available from the Language Centre;
 - 4= The student has major difficulties in writing. The student must seek help and guidance at the Language Centre.
2. limits on student progress, to ensure students do not misinterpret their status:

Arts and Science [as of Sept. 1990] students must obtain a grade of at least 3 on the writing competency test (or the **writing component** of a WAC course) before they can proceed at Laurentian beyond 30 credits (5 full-course equivalents). These students must obtain a grade of at least 2 before they can proceed beyond 60 credits (10 full-course equivalents). They must achieve a grade of 1 before they will be allowed to graduate from Laurentian. (Competency Programme Pamphlet)

3. a) criteria for guiding the grading of both the test and writing done in a WAC course; b) criteria for guiding the grading of tests and WAC writing for Native, immigrant, and Visa students (Appendix 3). [Our experience here bears out Aviva Freedman's observation that «the criteria will inevitably represent formulations of intuitive judgements already at work; university teachers, like all teachers, already know which students have limited and limiting writing abilities.» (19)]
4. a policy statement for WAC courses (Appendix 4).

The WAC/LIP Program itself, headed by the Language Centre Director, with representatives from the English and French departments (all with varying teaching load reductions), strongly encouraged all new WAC/LIP faculty to participate in the test marking sessions as a way to familiarize themselves with program—and so university—standards of competency. In this there has been substantial success; on the WAC side easily 50% of the markers are now regular faculty members from outside the English department. They find the experience reassuring, helpful, and collegial. On more than one occasion someone has commented that there is no other forum in the university for interdisciplinary conversation about one of the things we all do so often—evaluate students.³

In terms of numbers—fall 1990 saw roughly 70 sections and 1000 students, with faculty participants from across the Humanities and Social Sciences⁴—Laurentian's WAC Program is succeeding. There is always, however, the temptation to fall back into the old attitude, often without realizing it is happening. Usually this phenomenon, which had a certain reality at Laurentian even two years after the inception of the

program, involves the faculty participant seeing WAC as an add-on to what he/she regularly does in a course. What this means is that tutors (supplied by the program if enrolment warrants) are told to «work on the writing» of an assigned number of students with problems. These «problem» students are separated from their peers, and work on error correction or essay drafting outside the crucible of the course where the necessary thinking should occur. In effect the faculty member, who is very well-intentioned, is again shunting the responsibility for the writing of his/her students down the line to someone else. Though such problem-specific extra help may be necessary for some students, it is a misapplication of WAC pedagogy to make such help happen in WAC classes. These students should be assigned to tutors or small classes in the Writing or Language Centre. The majority of students in Laurentian's WAC courses simply need to use writing far more integrally in class as an impetus and occasion for, and an embodiment of, thought.

The response from some WAC faculty when made aware of the need to have writing made an integral part of their courses is that they won't have time to do all this writing with students, do all the marking, and cover the course content. What they are coming face to face with is the need to transform their pedagogy (in whole or in part) from the «presentational» to the «interactive»; from «content delivery»—which tends to require passive thinkers—to «content discovery»—which requires students to become active thinkers: inquirers. How faculty go about this varies from discipline to discipline, and from professor to professor, and takes ingenuity and inventiveness; that is why the program requires participants to attend workshops in instructional methods and evaluation (see Appendix 4). In those workshops we get a range of comment, from reservations about a participant's ability to make it work, to pleasure that the university is finally offering support for the «kind of thing I've always done.» At the least we engage in interdisciplinary conversations about writing and thinking at the university; conversations which are all too rare in the usual course of events.

Considering the point at which Laurentian has arrived regarding writing competency, some might suggest that having our students sit a timed essay test contradicts the interactive, heuristic pedagogical milieu we are fostering in our faculty and students. Ultimately, I agree, and in one possible future I can see a time when we will dispense with the test,

having sufficiently raised the awareness and degree of writing on campus. In another future I see us retaining the test but making WAC/LIP courses the requirement unless a student challenges out of them by passing the test. In any future, though, I am confident that increasingly the function of the test will be to reveal areas where students experience difficulty; WAC/LIP courses will be the usual route to satisfying the requirement.

In the final analysis, the benefit of the test is that it is testing us as much as it is the students who take it. The process we have undergone and are undergoing at Laurentian is one of culture building. We are discovering what we value and are changing our pedagogy accordingly. To drop the test in the near future would perhaps be to lose the centre, perhaps not. Only the process will tell. But we must strive to keep it *our* process—something we all have a stake in. As Greenburg, Weiner, and Donovan say,

there are enormous benefits in developing a writing assessment test at local campuses—again, as long as the effort involves faculty members sharing ideas and working toward common goals. Here is a case in which reinventing the wheel may be the best way to assure that the vehicle will run. (xiv-xv)

The anecdotal and narrative mode I've chosen for this paper is my deliberate attempt to convey the sense of a current of change, a process carrying a group of people inextricably into a confrontation with views which are deeply held but not often confronted. At Laurentian, we are still in the process.

APPENDIX 1

English Language Competency Test

This test has only one part, an essay, which you are to write in the examination booklet provided. Write only with a pen, not a pencil. N.B. Dictionaries are allowed.

Before you choose a topic from those given below, however, we ask you to read through the following explanation of the examination.

1. *Of what does the test consist?*

The test consists of an essay on a topic students choose from a limited set of alternatives. Given the range of topics, students of diverse backgrounds should be able to find a topic they can discuss without special preparation.

2. *What qualities should the essay have?*

Within the limits imposed by test conditions (reacting on the spot and within a limited time to a topic you may not have thought through beforehand), test essays should have the qualities that go with all acceptable compositions at the university level: a degree of thoughtfulness, clear organization, and sound grammar and style.

Markers will ask such questions as the following about each paper:

- a) Is there a main idea for the essay? Has the student stated the main idea in the essay's introduction?
- b) Is there an orderly arrangement of paragraphs that support the main idea with evidence or other relevant points?
- c) Is each paragraph developed with its own main idea and supporting details?
- d) Are sentences effectively phrased?
- e) Is vocabulary appropriate?
- f) Is the grammar sound?
- g) Are spelling and punctuation correct?

3. *How long will the test last?*

You are given two hours to learn about the test and to take it.

4. *Are there any techniques students can use to do well at the test session?*

Many writers find that it is worth thinking of the composition process in three stages, even though they may move backward as well as forward through them: a stage of preparation, a stage of composition, a stage of revision.

- a) Give yourself some time to plan before you write. On scrap paper, freely jot down any word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of your topic. Uncritical jotting will help you recall what you know about your topic to start with and will help you generate further ideas.
- b) Now, be a bit critical and select the most useful words and phrases to arrange in outline form. The outline can be a rough one, but it should make clear that certain ideas are the dominant ones and that others are there to help you explain the dominant ones. Further, the outline should show the order of your presentation—which point you might best start with and what pattern of presentation will take you to the end.
- c) In composing your essay, leave room at margins and between lines for revisions that you make as you go or that you make at the end of writing the essay. The final version should, of course, be legible and clear; but there is nothing wrong with striking out words and writing above the lines to make changes. Try to avoid writing your essay out in an illegible version and then merely copying it over to produce something markers can read. All of your time should be spent actively thinking, not mindlessly setting down a second time what you already have thought of.

- d) Leave some time to revise specifically for style and grammar instead of for basic content. Correct spelling errors, supply or remove marks of punctuation as necessary, correct mistakes in grammar and improve words and phrases for general clarity.

* * *

ESSAY TOPICS—CHOOSE ONE:

1. «A governmental decision to legalize abortion is an infringement of the rights of the unborn.» Defend or refute.
2. French immersion public school education is a highly controversial topic to which Canadians react in diverse ways. Contrast negative and positive views of the topic.
3. While some parents claim that children should only be allowed to read «good» literature, others claim that it does not matter **what** children read as long as they **do** read. In the light of your own childhood reading experience, evaluate these attitudes.

APPENDIX 2

Laurentian University Grading Scheme

[excerpt from Laurentian Calendar 1990-91 page 78]

- A** indicates *Exceptional Performance*: comprehensive knowledge in depth of the principles and materials treated in the course, fluency in communicating that knowledge and originality and independence in applying material and principles.
- B** indicates *Good Performance*: thorough understanding of the breadth of materials and principles treated in the course and ability to apply and communicate that understanding effectively.
- C** indicates *Satisfactory Performance*: basic understanding of the breadth of principles and material treated in the course and ability to apply and communicate that understanding competently. [This was the rubric the English Department used as its focus when deciding on a standard of graduation «competency» for the test.]
- D** indicates *Minimally Competent Performance*: adequate understanding of most principles and material treated in the course, but significant weakness in some areas and in the ability to apply and communicate that understanding.
- F** indicates *Failure*: inadequate or fragmentary knowledge of the principles and materials treated in the course or failure to complete the work required in the course.

APPENDIX 3

Anglophone Competency Test Marking Standards

[The criteria for the marking of the test are given to each student as part of the test paper. See Appendix 1 for the seven criteria listed as items a through g in the section «What qualities should the essay have?» These criteria are also used as guidelines in the evaluating of written work in WAC courses.]

Score of 1: **Satisfies Competency Requirement**—Student satisfies criteria a, b, c, d, e, f, g.

Score of 2: **Borderline Failure**—

- a) Student satisfies organizational criteria (a,b,c) but has significant problems with mechanical criteria (d,e,f,g);
- b) Student satisfies mechanical criteria (d,e,f,g) but has significant problems with organizational criteria (a,b,c).

[Clearly many borderline cases do not fall cleanly into one or the other of these two categories. The benefits of collaborative team marking become apparent here, because the marker can appeal to the larger group for a judgement.]

Score of 3: **Significant Failure**—Student shows significant shortfall in **no more than two** of criteria a,b,c, and d, plus significant problems in e,f,g.

Score of 4: **Profound Failure**—Student shows significant problems in all criteria.

* * *

There are some exceptions to the standards outlined above: Students whose principal language of schooling has been neither English nor French will be required to satisfy different minimum writing competency

standards in English or French as established by the Senate Committee on Writing Competency. Native students whose mother tongue is neither English nor French and who can demonstrate competency in their native language will be required to satisfy minimum writing competency standards in English or French as established by the Senate Committee on Writing Competency. The dean of the student's faculty shall rule upon any request to be included in these categories. (Laurentian Calendar 1990-91, page 85) *The different standards established by the committee essentially allow that for these exceptional cases a score of 2 will be considered a pass of the requirement when combined with some work done in the Language Centre.*

APPENDIX 4

Writing Across The Curriculum Program Course Policy

1. Each student must submit original written work totalling at least 2000 words.
2. Courses must include explicit treatment of writing in the discipline, on an ongoing basis.
3. WAC professors must participate in workshops on the local campus on instructional methods and evaluation procedures.
4. Each WAC professor must submit for approval a statement, explaining how he/she will implement #2, to the WAC coordinator before the course begins.
5. The WAC professor must evaluate a student's writing competency using the same standard applied to the appropriate language competency test.

NOTES

1. An earlier, expanded version of this chapter appeared in **Textual Studies in Canada** 1 (1991): 115-144.
2. This study concentrates on the English side of Laurentian's history with writing competency. The French side is generally similar, but differs in some important specifics such as the nature of the test, the marking regimen, and the degree of faculty involvement in Writing Across the Curriculum (*Langue Intégrée Aux Programmes.*). The French side also has not had as fruitful a relationship with the school board as has the English side, though this is changing in 1994.
3. Susan Drain and Kenna Manos encountered a similar response at Mount St. Vincent University: «One of the major benefits of our experimental test was that it allowed faculty members from widely varying disciplines the opportunity to debate what they meant by good writing. In the questionnaire completed after the test, almost all readers mentioned the collaborative training session with other faculty as the most fruitful part of the experience.» (276)
4. The Faculty of Science was a hold-out at Laurentian, only adopting the competency requirement in September 1990. Their joining was a clear case of community pressure. The university administration did not want to impose the requirement, and this was probably wise. It is far harder to resist the groundswell from below (or in this case from the students in other faculties who--with their own professors--could not understand why science students were not treated in a like manner) than it is to resist an edict sent down from above. In any event, as of 1990 they had no faculty participants in the WAC Program; they now have two. We continue to work on them.