

# Standards, Standards Everywhere, and Not a Spot to Think

P. L. THOMAS

**B**eing an English teacher for nearly twenty years pales in comparison with being the father of a daughter coming through the public school system and sitting daily in language arts class. I have learned an enormous amount about reading and writing instruction—what works, what is counter-educational, why teachers do the things they do—as my child has grown from kindergarten to her current sixth grade. Two moments in my daughter’s life stand out as I consider the impact the current standards movement has had on reading and writing instruction.

This year, my eleven-year-old daughter, Jessica, made an observation: “All they care about is the PACT test; they don’t care if we learn anything.” She was speaking of the most recent statewide testing (in South Carolina) that will determine grade promotion and eventually graduation.

A few years ago, as a third grader, Jessica failed a text-prepared test on complete sentences. The assistant superintendent at the time ran a reading level check on the test, finding that the sentences on this third-grade test were written on the eighth-grade reading level. My daughter had marked as fragments sentences she did not understand in terms of content; to her, these sentences *were* incomplete thoughts, thus fragments. At home I gave her what I felt was an authentic measure of her understanding of complete sentences. After being asked to write a series of ten sentences from ten separate verbal prompts such as, “Write a sentence about playing soccer,” she wrote ten grammatically complete sentences with standard capitalization and punctuation. The child understood complete sentences, but the text-supplied test had falsely measured her as a failure.

Yet, when I spoke with her teacher about the test, she expressed a perceived obligation to give the test because that was what she felt the administration

wanted and that was what students needed for the standardized tests that year. She sincerely believed that the isolated instruction and assessment that she was implementing were required for preparation to take standardized tests—never questioning whether the testing was legitimate or not. As a professional educator, she had never questioned the authenticity of measuring a child’s editing skills as a reflection of a child’s ability to compose complete sentences—and she had never questioned the quality of the text-supplied test. The reductionistic nature of high-stakes testing as the *de facto* curriculum had distorted both the students’ authentic understanding of language and the teacher’s professional legitimacy.

## Standards and High-Stakes Testing Corrupt Instruction

Currently, American education is in the midst of a twenty-year movement toward statewide and national standards and high-stakes testing. Standards and testing are not new, of course, and the reduction of instruction to teaching-to-the-test has been a part of education for much of this century. But our current movement does show a serious negative impact on the teaching of reading and writing in particular.

In effect, standards and high-stakes testing have solidified isolated instruction and inauthentic purposes for both reading and writing in classrooms at all grade levels. These standards and tests have overshadowed decades of research on the most effective best practices for teaching reading and writing.

Early in the 1990s, Warner identified that teachers continued to cling to isolated grammar instruction because those teachers felt, among other things, that isolated instruction was needed for student success on standardized tests. In English classes, the tail wagged the dog; inauthentic reading (when students read then answered multiple-choice questions) and writing (which was not even composition, but editing instead) were the *de facto* curriculum and instruction of the English class—again despite research rebuking isolated instruction and assessment. Later in the decade, Freedman found that high-stakes testing of writing in the UK had produced the same corruption of writing instruction: “When national exams take control of something as personal as writing . . . a distant examiner, rather than the teacher and students, ends up owning the writing” (29). Close-ended approaches to instruction and assessment effectively destroy both learning for understanding by students and the professional nature of teaching for educators. When instruction becomes a slave not only to the content but also to the format of uniform assessment, education is little more than a superficial and hollow ritual played out over and over at the expense of individual children and the whole of society.

While English teachers who treasure authentic reading and writing by students have long railed against traditional multiple-choice tests, many of us have embraced wholeheartedly the rubric-driven composition assessment—best represented by the College Board’s English Literature and Composition and English Language and Composition written portions of their Advanced Placement exams, but also common now among state-mandated tests of composition ability. Yet Mabry has noted that rubric-driven writing assessment has the same reductionistic and limiting effects that traditional objective testing has had on writing instruction. Since rubric-driven written assessment falls into the same standards paradigm as objective testing—they both prescribe a fixed end that becomes both the bar for assessment and the primary guide for instruction—the authentic purposes for student writing become insignificant within the classroom. Mabry explains

that standards-driven assessment of writing conforms to a linear and analytical concept of instruction and testing; further, standardized assessment becomes reduced to issues of reliability and validity—essentially disregarding the authentic purposes of writing and the chaotic nature of language acquisition and human learning. Rubric-driven writing assessment implements the same finish-line mentality of multiple-choice testing, since it limits what counts as learning and what counts as a demonstration of learning. Writing, like reading, is a human endeavor that is valuable for the journey, not for some concrete outcome; standards and high-stakes testing are by their nature ends-oriented, thus wholly incompatible with authentic reading and writing experiences by students.

Standardized writing assessment—even when having students actually write and then having that writing judged against a rubric—also ignores student interest; more and more, research shows that both the content and surface features of a student composition are impacted strongly by a student’s concern for the piece. The lower the concern, the less vivid the content and the more flawed the surface features. Mabry ultimately asserts that reductionistic standards and testing negate effective writing instruction and authentic purposes for students. Standards-driven instruction and assessment, especially concerning reading and writing, represent an oppressive system that does more to inhibit students than empower them. The current standards movement and high-stakes testing are primarily political and superficial in nature; whether or not students are in classes, learning, or interested is essentially irrelevant.

### **Claiming Authentic Purposes for Student Reading and Writing**

English teachers are now faced with a potentially pivotal role in the future of reading and writing instruction. We must claim the classroom for authentic purposes and drive reading and writing instruction with research-based practices that value both the constructivistic nature of learning and the authentic purposes of language use. Further, we must demand that state standards and statewide testing value those same principles. Reading and writing standards must be conceptual, they must be open-ended, and the testing must be ongoing and designed to enhance individual student achievement over a long period of time. Prescriptive curricula that in-

clude pacing guides (all students will do such-and-such by such-and-such time) and testing designed to be gate-keeping must end, as must isolated instruction in reading and writing.

Broadly, English classes must claim authentic purposes for reading and writing. Student reading is authentic when it involves reading for student understanding and reading for pleasure. Authentic writing includes writing to understand and writing for self-expression, with a premium placed on student choice.

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A great deal of reading instructional time now spent in English classes concerns vocabulary instruction and reading passages, where the primary goal is to answer multiple-choice questions at the end. Since English teachers know the format and approaches of tests students will take, vocabulary work often involves—usually in workbook format—students manipulating synonyms, antonyms, and analogies *in isolation*. These activities are inauthentic and validated only by isolated items on standardized testing, especially with formats such as the verbal section of the SAT. When the tests and testing formats are removed, the instructional strategies become pointless; students then are freed to read, both for understanding and for pleasure.

Another brief example of the inauthentic nature of reading instruction is the obsessive concern we have for teaching students reading strategies such as context clues. In the real world writers do not consciously include context clues *as the isolated*

*strategies taught in English classrooms*. Virtually the only places where context clues strategies work are in materials designed to teach those strategies and on the tests designed to measure a students' awareness of them. A text identifies five or ten strategies for context clues that the editors have culled from standardized tests, and those strategies become the curriculum while the text-prepared worksheets become the lesson plans—all because of the tests. Real-world writing merely includes purposeful word choices and sentence formations; the context of the entire passage, of the entire work *does* matter in real-world reading, but the systematic teaching of a prescribed list of context clues is justified only by a set of standards and a test designed specifically to measure those prescribed strategies. That is not reading. And every child would be better served spending hours upon hours reading for understanding and pleasure than practicing strategies to pass a self-serving test. The importance of context and vocabulary knowledge in real-world reading is far more complex and sophisticated than isolated instruction on context clues suggests; in reality, such approaches actually inhibit a child's ability to develop advanced reading awareness. The cyclic nature of scope-and-sequence standards, isolated instructional practices, and isolated items on tests is a closed system that has no authentic purpose beyond the academic hallways of schools.

Instead of teaching to the standards, thus ultimately to the test, English teachers must begin to shift the instructional practices of the classroom toward having students read for understanding and pleasure—the two aspects of reading that are authentic because they serve humans well throughout life. Professional educators and laypeople alike know that experience is the best teacher. But some things in life are better left in the intellectual realm than in direct experience. Celie's horrifying early life in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a life, regrettably, led by many. But a reading of the book allows millions of people to gain a wealth of understanding about humans, oppression, and life that would most vividly be learned by being Celie—although the vicarious experience gained through reading the book prevents readers from having to suffer the direct trauma of Celie's life. But through an authentic reading experience students can gain understanding and awareness—an experience not served well by having a handful of context clues strategies at their disposal.

Further, English teachers must begin to shout loudly and clearly that the understandings we gain through reading cannot be prescribed or predicted and often cannot be measured in any simple and standardized way. Life is enriched in a billion chaotic and idiosyncratic ways when a student has a fulfilling and provocative experience with written art—novels, plays, poetry. While it does serve educators well to have some measure, some verification of that learning, we must strive to ensure that the quest for measurable and demonstrable assessment does not destroy the opportunity to gain deeper understanding. A hundred students will have a hundred various responses to *The Color Purple* or the novels of Kurt Vonnegut or Milan Kundera (if they are ever allowed even to discover these authors); not only is that lack of conformity among student responses acceptable, it is unavoidable in any real sense. All we must ask of students in their reading development is authentic reading and sincere responses to that experience.

Reading for understanding cannot be separated from reading for pleasure; coming to know the world better and more deeply is a type of pleasure that cannot be underestimated. For English classes, reading for pleasure has taken an unmerciful beating throughout the last century. Especially at the secondary level, reading by choice has virtually been obliterated by our never-ending drive to standardize student learning. We persist in believing that all students must read *The Scarlet Letter*. Yet nothing suggests that such uniformity is needed, and few dare to acknowledge that mandated reading results in little actual reading—students do not read a great deal of what is assigned and rely on teacher lectures and commercially produced summary notes in place of reading the text—and drives students away from the pleasure inherent in reading. They simply do not read and are taught by the hidden curriculum that actual reading is not an integral component of learning about and understanding the world because the assessment given may be passed without the student ever reading, since the teacher's instruction is geared toward preparing the student for the test, not toward facilitating the student's expanding awareness through a reading experience.

Authentic writing has suffered a similar fate to reading in the English classroom. Editing inane sentences (not original to the students), writing that is little more than regurgitating facts in sentences and paragraphs, conforming to Standard English,

and demonstrating artificial writing forms are all the pale substitutes for writing instruction that dominate the English classroom. Why? These instructional strategies are linear and measurable; they conform to prescriptive standards and formats of standardized tests. But are they authentic writing instruction? No. Student writing, just as with student reading, should be made authentic by having students write to learn and understand and allowing students to write, both in form and content, from individual motivation and by choice. With writing, the path to being authentic includes giving students opportunities to write and to choose.

Writing in the English classroom must shift emphasis to the content of student writing as well. When students write to learn, the writing must be a process that allows reflection; writing to learn is a journey, not an end in itself. Both students and the teacher begin to see the idiosyncratic understandings and misconceptions of students as they form and evolve. Writing to learn is functional and justifies itself by its existence; a set of standards cannot predict it, and a standardized test—whether multiple choice or a rubric-assessed composition—cannot reflect in one sitting a measurable level of learning and understanding from writing to learn. The English classroom becomes a never-ending process of individual student growth—a coming to know the world through language, through student expression. Writing to learn is making somewhat permanent the struggle itself that is learning.

In the 1930s, Lou LaBrant redefined “creative writing” to be anything written by student choice, in both form and content. Here she was taking a stand against the imposed nature of writing instruction and composition assignments; English teachers tell students what to write, have a preplanned rubric of what they are to say, and dictate a template for the format of the writing. It is robotic at best and dehumanizing at worst. LaBrant's argument—now supported by decades of research—called for having students engaged in their writing, thus producing a more authentic representation of their ideas and their ability to manipulate written language effectively and purposefully.

Writing, as with reading, is an idiosyncratic act. When students write journals to express their evolving understandings or to ask questions, their writing to learn is unpredictable and chaotic. Further, a student moved to self-expression in the form

of writing must have full choice of topic and form or that desire for expression is squelched, manipulated, and ultimately cheapened.

### Each Part Is Greater Than the Whole

Standards and standardized testing are well-intentioned beasts that value the whole over any of its parts. Reading and writing are individual acts at the most intimate level of evolving understanding and learning. In effect, state or national standards, along with high-stakes testing, are wholly incompatible with authentic reading and writing instruction by teachers and authentic reading and writing by students.

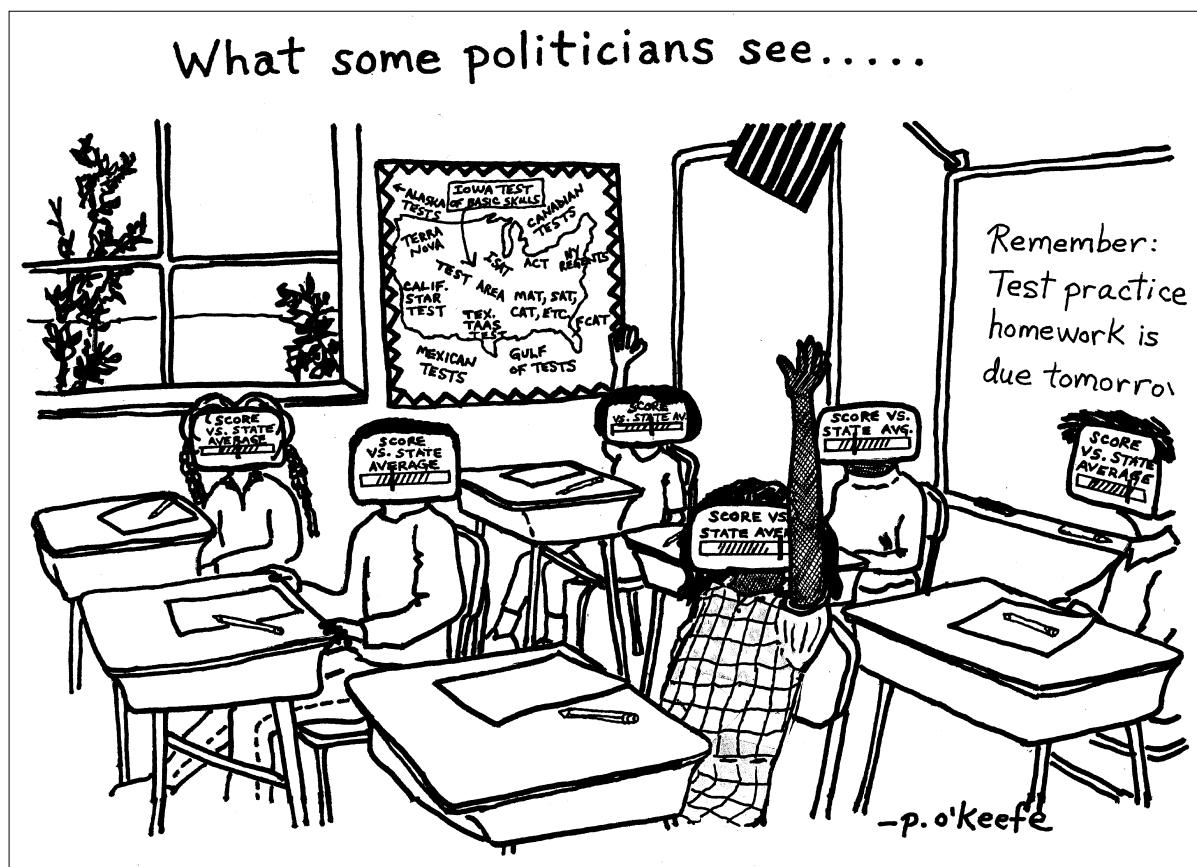
The standards movement reduces student understanding; reading and writing are acts of expanding understanding. The English classroom is the central place where teachers and students must begin to champion and embrace the unpredictable and chaotic nature of coming to know this world through language. In her call for student choice in writing assignments, LaBrant ended her plea for

creative writing with, "Let's not tell them what to write" (301). I would add, let's not tell them what to read; let's not tell them what to think. Getting to what they think is the journey of life that is at the heart of life's beauty.

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P. L. THOMAS teaches at Woodruff High School, Woodruff, South Carolina.



Pat O'Keefe, a former high school English teacher, is currently a literacy volunteer who resides in Ingleside, IL.