
Democracy & Education

Writing That Counts

Grounding a Critique of the Common Core English Language Arts Standards in Classroom Memories

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Abstract

The authors of this article call upon classroom memories to demonstrate the harm of the standardized testing apparatus in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Goal setting under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has led to targeted school intervention based on metrics, and many states have chosen to double down on standardized ELA and math test data to determine the quality of a school, student learning, and teacher effectiveness. The authors argue that the assessments associated with the ELA Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are harmful to all students, and particularly students from marginalized communities whose literacies are not always recognized by direct writing assessment.

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Introduction

TAMPIO (2018) ARGUED that the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (CCSS) encourage an undemocratic pedagogy, showing how a faithful implementation of the reading standards forecloses independent thinking. Additionally, he made an important point that the standards reflect an implied mistrust of teachers, highlighting how the standards were not written by teachers and were instead designed by “distant others.”

We appreciate Tampio’s argument and agree that regardless of the intentions of the standards, they have certainly hindered more democratic aims of teaching and learning. As a former ELA teacher and as a student who identified as a writer *despite* these Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aligned assessments, however, we want to emphasize additional concerns.

Students possess multiple literacies, while these tests only assess and reward one set of literate practices. Most direct writing assessments (Huot, 1990), such as those aligned to the CCSS, judge a student’s writing ability based on an essay written in response to a fixed prompt that requires White Mainstream English.¹ The CCSS

1 Following Alim & Smitherman (2012, as cited in Baker-Bell, 2020) we use the term White Mainstream English to emphasize that this language is no more standard than any other, but rather a function of white supremacy.

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have worked to define English teaching in terms of “fixed knowledge and generic skills” (Brass, 2014, p. 121) that are then assessed by static tests of students’ abilities to write on demand in response to texts that others have selected for them (Jeffery, 2009).

Although often touted as neutral and rigorous, the standards can have the most debilitating impact on multilingual students whose multiple literacies are neither recognized nor rewarded by direct writing assessment. Further, any critique of the CCSS necessitates a critical analysis of the racism inherent in standardized testing. It is necessary to hear the scholars of color who have been calling for a moratorium on standardized testing for decades. The problematic assumption underlying standardized testing is that the assessments somehow provide an accurate account of student learning and, by extension, good teaching (Au & Gourd, 2013). In turn, multilingual students are then made most vulnerable to subtractive schooling practices (Valenzuela, 2010) that often devalue their abilities and position them as lacking.

Following Flores (2019), we agree that the CCSS themselves can provide space for students to write toward a multitude of authentic audiences and for a variety of purposes. The issue, though, is that the assessments themselves do not allow for the same degree of flexibility, measuring only what students produce in a single fixed setting without any attention to writing for a real-world purpose. Direct writing assessment is often regarded as objectively measuring writing proficiency even though it does not present an authentic writing opportunity for students to write for meaningful social impact or real audiences (Behizadeh, 2014).

In what follows, we reflect on our own experiences, calling upon classroom memories to demonstrate the harm of the standardized testing apparatus in the English Language Arts classroom. “When the shoe does not fit,” as Tampo (2018, p. 6) said, it is important to hear why—and to understand that it was never designed to.

“My Opinion Was No Longer My Opinion”: A Student’s Story

I was writing by the age of five in Dominican Republic. I composed poetry and developed stories before coming to America at the age of seven. I wrote in Spanish at first, and as time passed, I started writing in an English that turned out to be Spanglish. As long as my point got across in a coherent manner, which I thought was the exact definition of the English word *writing*, I didn’t see what the problem was.

But I had a hard time in middle school. Seventh grade was the first year that I took the Common Core state test. I would voluntarily sacrifice my free period to practice responses for the coming exam.

As if answering an essay prompt that I didn’t relate to wasn’t hard enough, I had to write in only one language. I struggled to find the right translation for a word in the multilingual word bank in my mind. Sometimes I would leave blank spaces in my essays because I didn’t know the right word to put. I always hoped to fill those blank spaces at the end, once my essay was completed, but time always ran out. Other times I would know the correct translation, but it took a while to spell it out. A few times I just wrote the word in Spanish. Whenever I did, the results were the

same. A paper with an array of blank spaces and misspelled words. A paper that was far from complete.

I felt trapped in a box answering prompts that left me no room for self-expression. In the task, a quote would be given to me. I had to write an essay—“in which you discuss two works of literature you have read from the particular perspective of the statement . . . agree or disagree with the statement . . . support your opinion using specific reference to appropriate literary elements from the two works . . .”

If they had only told me to agree or disagree about something that I chose, I would’ve happily and easily written a three-page essay. But how could I voice my opinion when they pressed me like this? They limited me even more when they demanded that I speak about the literary elements.

I was completely offended as a writer. The audacity of, “In your opinion.”

In my opinion? How could I write my opinion? My opinion was no longer my opinion—it simply became what they wanted to hear. It became difficult to write more than two paragraphs with prompts like these. Tampo (2018) said that under the CCSS, students as writers have “few chances to write from their own perspectives or select their own research agendas” (p. 5). That’s true. But it was the biggest blow for a girl who aspired to be a writer. I became frustrated and overwhelmed.

Even so, my passion for writing continued throughout high school. I was in honors English and writing classes my freshman and sophomore years. Entering my junior year, I was selected to be in AP English. During that whole year, I never once received lower than a B+ on any paper or essay I handed in. That year I even won third place in a schoolwide competition due to one of my writing pieces. I wrote all the time. And yet when I took the AP exam, I received a 2.

“Adequate Yearly Progress”: A Teacher’s Story

As English teachers, we are responsible for what our teaching does to the self-image and the self-esteem of our students.

—Conference on College Composition and Communication, Students’ Right to Their Own Language, 1974, p. 3

One of my favorite students lingered in the classroom doorway. Anaisbely had a quiet maturity about her. As the other seventh grade students ran off to lunch, she asked if we could talk about the state test that she would take the following week. She held up her notebook, which was filled with images of nature and poetry. “I love to write,” she said, “but not for this. Not for this.”

As a white English teacher, I taught in a public middle school that served almost exclusively children of color. I listened as Anaisbely described the process of searching her brain for the right English word as she felt time slipping away. I listened as she described forcing herself to echo a question that she felt had nothing to do with her.

I told Anaisbely to remember that she was more than the test. I regretted my response almost as soon as I uttered it, and looking back, I regret it even more now. Kinloch (2017) addressed how

student resistance to writing can be misread as troublemaking when it can often be better understood as an attempt by students to preserve their selves, language, and community in the face of harmful gazes.

My response felt particularly hollow given that I had been encouraged to focus my energies on the students who were closest to meeting state proficiency benchmarks the previous year. The emphasis on these “bubble kids” (Booher-Jennings, 2005) like Anaisbely meant that school data reports might obscure the fact that students who were marked as far below or already meeting the standards would be essentially ignored.

Later that week, as I collected the materials on the second of three full days of testing, I noticed that Anaisbely had adorned the back of her test booklet with drawings of clocks and with these words:

20 minutes on the clock.
My brain is sweating.
My pencil's racing through pages.
My hands are crying
“I can't take it anymore.”
My eyes cry onion tears
Oh no! 10 minutes left
One passage blank
One response half done
The pale chalk
In my teacher's hand
Mocking my pain
As she erases the numbers and says
“Two minutes left”
Smoke is coming out of my ears
What does “dismal” mean?
I need an ambulance
My heart is going to come out
My hands have a cold
They're shaking as I circle
The letter B
I am drunk
I'm shrinking
And the room is getting bigger
HELP!
5, 4, 3, 2, 1 . . . TIME'S UP!

Our eyes met, and for a moment I remembered how the school testing coordinator had been adamant that teachers actively monitor their classes to ensure that no student “deface” the materials. As I paced the classroom, I thought about what it might mean that her writing was defacement.

I worried that at age twelve, my students would be marked by what Behizadeh (2014) has called “the single story of writing ability” (p. 125) and that poor performance on these assessments would play a significant role in determining their high school admission prospects.

After the testing period ended for the day, I made a photocopy of the back cover of Anaisbely's booklet and brought the poem to

her during dismissal. She crumpled the poem into her backpack as we walked downstairs.

I wanted her to believe that her writing mattered, so I suggested that Anaisbely include her poem along with other pieces from her portfolio that year in her high school application. She was applying to a few different schools, and one offered a creative writing emphasis.

Several weeks later, Anaisbely's writing, “Book 2: A Poem About Testing,” was published online. But her results on the Common Core ELA state test led to her placement in lower-tracked classes the following year and mandatory literacy support services where she spent many hours restating the question and filling in graphic organizers for short responses to “improve her writing skills.”

Continually labeled as below grade level by high-stakes testing, Anaisbely's poetry revealed a fuller range of her linguistic and literary resources (Friedman et al., 2018). She took writing seriously, composing pieces throughout the school year on many topics, from her disdain for the school uniform that she was required to wear to her love for basketball.

I had been asking all the wrong questions. Over time, discussions with my students and colleagues led me to wonder why students in schools like ours often lack access to critical literacies. The question is not whether students like Anaisbely are literate but whether she was literate in the ways that are valued by text-dependent questions and essay prompts that were designed to enable and extend the feasibility of the Race to the Top computerized testing agenda (Tampio, 2018, p. 5).

Fecho and Skinner (2008) argued that “if literacy is a civil right, we need a literacy that gets beyond the rote skill and drill of phonics, decoding, and comprehension” (p. 105). Additionally, there is a well-documented lack of discussion in ELA classrooms on the term the “democracy divide.” Hess (2008) showed how a lack of sustained opportunities for student exploration through talk corresponds to a larger gap in civic and political engagement. My earliest years as a teacher made me realize that this divide also exists with respect to the genres students are permitted to experiment with as writers, the audiences they are allowed to imagine, and the kinds of writing that counts in their schooling.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

We think our stories are more common than some may realize. Standardized assessments often ensure that teachers in “failing” schools are under the most pressure to align their teaching to the tests at the expense of their students (Sleeter, 2012). Goal setting under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has led to targeted school intervention based on metrics, and many states have chosen to double down on standardized ELA and math test data to determine the quality of a school, student learning, and teacher effectiveness. Yet to define and measure students' literacy practices solely through direct writing assessment and then to focus on catching up or addressing imagined deficits neglects their brilliance and writerly agency.

When students and their literacies are considered lacking, they are often taught that they need to fill certain gaps and attend

to their “organization,” “formal language,” and “background knowledge,” to name a few. Kynard (2013) stated that “what these students need [is] beyond the confines of prescriptive grammar, skills-based instruction, thesis statement formulas, and the academic-discourse cloning that [are] the supposed keys for unlocking new middle-class doors” (p. 4). While perhaps well intentioned, this enactment of writing instruction is based on a discourse of deficiency regarding students who have multiple literate practices and an efficiency model of education.

Sociocultural researchers view literacy not as an issue of measurement or of skills, “but as social practices that vary from one context to another” (Street, 1984, p. 3). In this way, literacy is understood as a process of making meaning and constructing knowledge. For decades, multiliteracies scholars have understood literacies as multiple (New London Group, 1996), situated (Barton et al., 1999) and linked with power relations in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

But the lives of many ELA teachers and students in their classrooms have not kept pace with this research about literacies or writing development (Behizadeh, 2014). In expecting and validating only White Mainstream English, these assessments stigmatize students and make whiteness the default (Baker-Bell, 2020). Simply put, students can do so much more with language than these prescribed curricula and tests will ever allow them to demonstrate.

It is our hope that policymakers will start to consider the words of students and teachers and begin to disentangle teaching and learning from these assessments. School closures this past spring disrupted many familiar aspects of the secondary and postsecondary education landscape. In some instances, students were prevented from taking the usual battery of standardized assessments. Yet as districts continue to grapple with what it means to reopen schools safely and humanely, Betsy DeVos recently announced that states will not receive waivers from the federal requirement to administer statewide assessments for the school year.

These tests never measured student learning or teacher quality and the last thing schools need is a return to “normalcy” when normalcy never worked for the vast majority of children in our public schools. What happens when a lucrative assessment cycle is interrupted, and how does it make us question taken-for-granted practices that shape teaching and trajectories for youth, particularly youth of color, in harmful ways?

While it should not take a pandemic to prompt these questions or highlight how things could simply be otherwise, it is our hope that one of the few positive consequences of the pandemic is a reevaluation of the education survival complex that starts with a refusal to continue with the business of education as usual (Love, 2019). It is vital that we question these assessments and the impact they have on teaching and learning for all students, and multilingual youth in particular. We must recognize that an educational system built on measuring and sorting students will

never deliver on promises of equity from early childhood through higher education.

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