

"I'm afraid I won't pass the high school competency exam," my alternative ed. public high schoolers have often lamented. "Some of my friends at regular high schools still haven't passed it." And imagine the horror of today's whole crop of 9th graders, who will be the first California graduating class (2004) required to pass the even more stringent high school exit exam in order to receive a diploma. "I'm really nervous," one 13-year-old inner city youth told a reporter. "Teachers say it's going to be really difficult and if you don't pass, you don't graduate." With all the pressure of high stakes testing today, if I were an at-risk student, *I'd probably just drop out.*

Why? Because who better than those who have already borne the harshness of the system to know that there will be no leniency shown nor qualifiers allowed on test day; that poor results in any section of this multi-part test can spell failure of the whole exam — and nullify the last 13 years of a student's life. These kids know from experience that the system will not hesitate to sort them into categories of "success" and "failure;" into categories of those who will go forward with society's imprimatur, and those thrown onto the slag heap for disposal. As with all pass/fail tests, there will be no mercy, no middle ground, with this exit exam; it will be cold and impersonal, imposed from above by people whom the test takers will never meet. Yet successfully surviving this experience will be students' only hope for entering adulthood with attractive options available to them.

In order to see just how much a disservice a one-sitting exam can be for kids, especially those already at risk of failure, consider the following two examples of doing poorly on timed writing exams — my own Achilles heel — from my own experience. Please humor me by allowing me to use my life for illustration. The high-stakes testing issue is certainly not about me. But it's stunning to consider that, as an educated professional, an educational "insider", and with years of focused

# Today, I'd Probably Just Drop Out

by Mark Kennedy

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preparation, I could summarily fail tests whose structure was so similar to the high school competency and exit exams. How must our at-risk kids view such instruments? As we saw in the opening quotations, students are frightened. It seems probable that many will respond with resentment toward an establishment which is paid — and paid only — to look after these very students' welfare for the K-12 years, only then to hold the prospect of a giant "gotcha" over their heads at the end. At any rate, here's my story.

As I was preparing to begin teaching in the 1980s, the California Basic Educational Skills Test (C-BEST) became a prerequisite for all prospective teachers in the state. At that time I was still relatively young and naive, and had no fear of this exam. In fact,

after four years in the Viet Nam era military, then supporting a family while earning a college degree, a fifth-year teaching credential, and a master's degree, I came to believe myself pretty test-savvy. How wrong I was! While sailing through the objective portion of the C-BEST (90%), I came within one point of failing the writing section (51%). I scored well enough to pass, but the close call was stunning, since a failure would have kept me from becoming an educator.

It turns out that the C-BEST episode was not a fluke. A few years afterward, I began to prepare for the Language Development Specialist (LDS) exam. To make a long story short, several years of preparation led up to those three hours of testing, and as the morning of the event arrived, I was extremely confident. This time, however, I did fail. Still, the results paralleled those of the C-BEST. High marks on the objective portions of the several-hours-long test were offset by a low score (this time, a failing score) on the subjectively-graded short essay segment. I began to wonder in the wake of this experience, "Is it just me, or is there more to it?" Was I way off the mark in estimating my preparedness and level of skill, or were

the assessment instruments and their grading criteria flawed, rendering the scoring outcome after my years of preparation a shocking display of impersonal bureaucracy? Which answer we choose has deep implications for students at-risk.

■ *Was the failure just me, or was there more to it?*

Of course, the obvious answer to why I consistently do poorly on timed writing exams is that I'm a terrible writer. What could be more simple? But perhaps this explanation is merely simplistic. In the post-Enlightenment western world, we have a predilection for treating two events which are in close proximity as cause and effect, when their true relationship might be merely correlational — they have some relationship because they are in the same vicinity at the same time, but it might not be an *if ... then*, causal relationship. It has long seemed to me that the power brokers who contribute to educational policymaking, such as some in the news media or politics, make a living off of such erroneous thinking. But now as I sit here, having made this charge, I'm wondering if it can be demonstrated. If you will allow me, I'd like to test my assertion by looking for two examples, using only what's close at hand to my desk. I promise to record the results honestly, and if my belief is unfounded, to stop writing the rest of this article.

■ *As with all pass/fail tests, there will be no mercy, no middle ground, with this exit exam; it will be cold and impersonal....*

First, I will pick up today's local newspaper. Here on page A6, I see that the journalist makes this statement about an elementary school in the area: "One-fourth of the teachers are on emergency credentials ... (and) the school received a 3" (in statewide standardized testing rankings, which are on a scale of 1-10). The writer seems to imply that the emergency credentialed teachers are a cause of the low test scores — perhaps *the* cause. But she presents no evidence that the former caused the latter; instead, she merely capitalizes on a popular opinion. In the obverse, we are led to conclude that if all teachers at the site were fully credentialed, test scores would go up. But in fact, this is counter-intuitive to the experience of many educators, including myself. Such experience suggests there have been more than a few fully credentialed, entrenched veterans of whom one could not help but think, "It's not so much that they've taught 20 years, as that they've taught one year, 20 times." At the same time, more than a few first and second year teachers on emergency credentials have demonstrated remarkable teaching ability (Kennedy 2001).

To look for a second example of my belief about the media/political error, I see that a monthly educational periodical arrived in today's mail. In glancing through it, I find that this statement jumps out: "The [current] administration's class size initiative has centered around the hiring of 100,000 new teachers.... [One] plan aims to build on this success.... " But, I wonder, what success? As laudable as is the effort to lower

class size, there is no reason to infer that doing so is tied to student success, and certainly no justification in this news piece for such a conclusion. "Well, it's just common sense," someone might respond. But I submit that what we call common sense is really just a commonly held set of presuppositions about life; in short, a belief system. The effort to hire more teachers/reduce class size is an admirable goal and may

■ *Indeed, don't we preach to our students the importance of their continually revising their own writing?*

prove to be a cause of student success. But within the context of this article, the two are at best correlative; one is not shown to cause the other.

So while perhaps the answer to why writing exams often result in poor scores for me is that I just can't write (cause and effect), on the other hand maybe it's not that simple. Consider that, in the years since the episodes chronicled, I have had the good fortune to have a dozen professional articles in various stages of publication, a book in print, and a firm grasp on a second book. Of course, this is pretty thin when compared to the work of many authors, but it's probably enough to suggest that I'm not *that* terrible a writer — not so much so, anyway, that I would fail a simple writing skills test.

More to the point, however, is this consideration: If the unseen, unknown examiners could judge me so wrongly, how many of the students who are served by this journal's readers will be misjudged by a one-sitting, one-size-fits-all exit exam, with tragic results? As an adult and an educator myself, I was able to see that being summarily failed was probably the result of a flawed system — to see that it might be the test, and not me. But what of the 12- to 18-year-old children many of us serve? Already burdened with regrets, already veterans at failure, already seasoned in distrust for the educational system, how many will assume from their pasts that they can't meet the final requirements necessary to succeed under this system? Again, since my experience seems to offer clues to the structural and conceptual weaknesses inherent in the current high-stakes testing instruments, please bear with me in looking at a four-pointed diagnosis of my failures. I hope that this approach proves enlightening by allowing us to highlight several areas in which mandated high-stakes testing is unfair for students, and that this discussion encourages you to make connections from your own teaching and learning experiences.

## Diagnosing the failure

**First**, and a factor which can be easily underestimated, is that my handwriting is hideous. This is not a trivial thing when I am taking a timed writing exam, especially since the more I hurry, the worse the script. It is both interesting and alarming to me that the new California language arts standards call for the teaching and assessment of penmanship. This is interesting because it is so obviously a part of the back-to-basics current of the educational reform movement. This segment of reformers reminds me of the aphorism, *when you*

*don't know what to do, do more of what you know.* In this “dot-com” age of email, ecommerce, personal web pages and newsletters, and customized information searches and subscriptions, why else would this industrial-age skill merit such attention?

This confusion over whether the focus of reform is to be backward or forward, further leads me to be alarmed about the validity of the penmanship standard, as illuminated by the following example. One California district recently received a grant for students in two fourth grade classes to receive laptop computers which go everywhere with them. What an exciting opportunity for those children, their families, and their teachers. But remember, the California language arts standards call for teaching and testing of penmanship. Were each of these students required to qualify with superior penmanship before getting their computer? If so, why? How are penmanship and computer literacy related? If students were not required to qualify with penmanship, however, then aren't the school and teachers setting kids up to fail by not teaching to the standards? Do we want kids at-risk, who are usually behind in school already, to spend what little time they have practicing penmanship? Yet, if they don't so practice, they may be in danger of failing timed writing exams on this criterion alone.

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**Second**, as a primarily reflective thinker, I need time to think through an answer, although once I give the answer, I will rarely feel the need to modify it later. This way of operating is in contrast to that employed by impulsive thinkers, whose strength lies in their ability to deliver the quick answer. For these people, if the first response is not always correct, another will arrive fast on its heels. This kind of thinking seems almost a personal form of brainstorming, sometimes called mindstorming. In another article, I suggested that chess can be a good curricular and extra-curricular activity for building “mental muscle” (Kennedy 1998). But I would withdraw this suggestion if every game were turned into speed chess. I for one would no longer play, since reflective thinkers would be severely disadvantaged; put at risk, if you will.

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Both reflective and impulsive types of thinking have strengths and weaknesses. I believe the evidence shows that neither is better or worse, both being inherent traits instead of learned skills (Dunn 1996). If this is true, then favoring one type over the other is nothing more than indefensible discrimination. Requiring a closely-timed response, then, is merely an expression of such discrimination: In favor of the impulsive thinker and against the reflective thinker. How will such dis-

crimination harm those students who are reflective in their thinking processes? And what should high-stakes, timed exams test for: Inherent thinking type, or acquired knowledge? Finally, given the probable damage to kids by the fast-paced nature of the culture at large, are we doing further harm by privileging speed over depth in thinking?

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**Third**, Steven Krashen (1990) seems to speak for many of us in the article, “How reading and writing make you smarter, or, how smart people read and write.” His essential point is that when we write, we get more ideas, which leads to revision, which leads to more ideas, then more revision, and so on. A “final” draft then is merely the product as it stands whenever the writer calls a halt to the process. I myself will often rewrite a piece twenty or thirty times before calling it “finished” and showing it to anyone else. Indeed, don't we preach to our students the importance of their continually revising their own writing? How often have we wished our students to understand the value of a process-oriented approach to writing rather than one concentrating merely on the final product? One particularly odious result of this product orientation is the idealized concept of the *first* version as an adequate representation of someone's writing skill and knowledge — that the first thing he or she writes down will accurately represent what she or he knows, can do, and wishes to say — which is the assumption of timed writing exams. This privileging of product over process has been roundly criticized by many composition theorists and teachers for the past two decades. What do timed exams, focusing purely on product, really tell us about students if reading and writing make you smarter?

**Fourth**, my life experience has included a fair amount of exposure to other cultures. This exposure has come through such venues as formal language study; traveling and working with people from many ethnicities and nationalities while I was serving in the Navy; working with people in business who had emigrated from all over the world; and finally, teaching the children of those immigrants. All of this has taught me that, while American English has its own style and conventions in writing, the other cultures and languages in which many of our at-risk students were cradled can present very different characteristics, some of which have rubbed off on me; as a result, my writing is sometimes less linear than that which exam scorers seem to privilege.

To see an example of these differences, let's consider a comparison of Arabic, Spanish, and English language patterns (which I first understood in that aborted LDS training). We might think of the Arabic language as following a somewhat circular course. Envision for a moment a meeting between two native-Arabic speakers. It is easy to imagine the conversation beginning with pleasantries and compliments, perhaps at some point briefly touching on the purpose of the exchange,

then proceeding in a general manner, and finally reaching the point. In Arabic, getting right to the point is not considered admirable, but rude.

In a similar vein, I think of Spanish as somewhat courtly, proceeding in a polite, people-oriented manner. In observing/holding a conversation in Spanish, one might perceive/follow a somewhat spiral pattern which could begin with talk of family, mutual friends and cultural events, and then slowly narrow to the point. My exposure to Spanish-language cultures has seemed to suggest that the time taken for personal and interpersonal items is a critical aspect of communication (perhaps Arabic and Spanish are similar in this regard in part because of the substantial Arabic influence in Spain during the later Middle Ages).

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In contrast to Arabic and Spanish, however, in the English language we value a linear, analytic approach: Thesis statement, proof, conclusion. We want to get right to the point, and so in our writing exams we test for this quality. In our culture, circular or intuitive thinking is considered problematic. For non-native speakers of English, when such thinking is exhibited in their writing, it is often evaluated as being an instance of a “second language interference problem.”

It is interesting that if we consider the overall approach of these languages, Arabic and Spanish language patterns can be seen to place people first, while English more strongly values the accomplishment of the task. I believe that my exposure to other cultures and languages has caused my writing to move away from a strictly to-the-point style of communication and so brought me to a place of understanding the predicament of students learning English as a second language (ESL). A test which judges too narrowly, too rigidly, for just one “correct” style of writing is probably prejudiced against many students, and thus in my opinion is invalid. It would seem that the broader one’s exposure to other cultures, the more unfair are traditional, one-sitting, English-based writing tests. Do we want students to have a broad cultural exposure, or a narrow one? Do we want to honor a wide range of learning manifestations or a severely limited one?

*To avoid the “gotcha,” I’d probably just drop out.*

With all my test-taking preparation and life experience, if the educational power brokers had no qualms about summarily failing me, why would we expect at-risk students to fare better? As we’ve seen, my own trouble with writing tests has probably resulted because of the barrier created by my poor handwriting; my inability to shorten a reflective thinking process; the undesirability for me of settling for the very first draft of a written work; and my unwillingness to communicate in a rigidly task-oriented form.

Still, these factors are merely illustrative: While for me the problem with traditional expectations and exams has been in the area of writing, others may have problems with traditional approaches to other subject areas, such as math, science, history, or even physical education. But whatever the final list of specific concerns, the problems we’ve examined in this article are evidence that educational policymakers in California (where I teach) and elsewhere have not adequately ensured for assessment vehicles which give everyone a fair shot at success. We must wonder, “Will the upcoming exit exam truly test the learning of kids, or just impose on them — and all of us — the belief systems of some adults, who at present seem too ready to perpetuate simplistic cause/effect solutions to complex problems?” If I were an at-risk student in California today, I would be mistrustful of a system which may have already failed me in many ways. Rather than invest more years of my life in something that might well end with a giant “gotcha”, I’d probably just drop out.

## References

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- Kennedy, M. (1998). More than a game: Eight transition lessons chess teaches. *Reaching Today's Youth: The Community Circle of Caring Journal*, 2 (4), 17-19.
- Kennedy, M. (2001). *Lessons from the Hawk*. Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press.
- Krashen, S. (1990). How reading and writing make you smarter, or, how smart people read and write. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

## Suggested Readings

Ron Miller’s book, *What are Schools for? Holistic Education in America* (Holistic Education Press, 1995), provides an excellent background reading for how the standards/assessment/accountability movement came about (The Great Debate).

[www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org) is the web site for a bipartisan, pro-standards group which offers states ‘guidance’ on this issue.

[www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/index.html](http://www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/index.html) is the California Department of Education home page for standards and assessment. It contains a wealth of links.

Linda McNeil’s book, *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing* (Routledge, 2000), details the high cost of standards to children and educators.

Mark Kennedy’s book, *Lessons from the Hawk* (Holistic Education Press, 2001), offers practical ways for educators to reach all students in this era of standardization.

Quality Counts 2001. (January 2001). A thematic issue of *Education Week XX* (17), devoted to the standards/ accountability issue, with a summary and “report card” on each of the states.