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AUG - 6 2003

FCCCC President's Address
CCC Board of Trustee's Meeting
Wednesday, August 6, 2003

Chairman Tyree, Chancellor Watson, members of the Board, Officers of the District, faculty, staff and all others present, Good morning.

This morning, before the activities and concerns of the new school year overwhelm us all, I'd like to expand on my comments in the July report. I want to discuss the differences between testing and assessment and the impact of these differences on the establishment of standards in education. I've distributed an article that summarizes these differences; the article is somewhat lengthy, a testament to the complexity of the issues, but I want to emphasize only a couple of points.

I am not going to be particularly popular among my faculty colleagues by bringing up the so-called chimera of assessment, but it is one of the most influential areas and potentially positive aspects among the teaching and learning initiatives from the past decade. The North Central Association, our accrediting body, for instance, is now emphasizing assessments in its focus on institutional excellence. We cannot ignore assessment and accountability when we emphasize standards.

But here is one of the problems. We need to be careful to differentiate testing and assessment, especially with regard to their impact on classroom practices. Assessment may include testing but it also may be achieved through alternative methods. As Black and William suggest in their article that I've passed out to you ("Inside the Black Box," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1998, p. 2), "the general term (classroom) *assessment* (is used) to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes *formative assessment* when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet students' needs." (In the literature, this is also called authentic assessment.)

Let me give you an example of how conflating testing and assessment may harm students' learning. One of the basic skills that an adult needs is the ability to communicate effectively in written form, whether that form is a committee report, a memo to a staff member, a letter to the editor or article for publication. Note that I haven't said, "use Good English" because that really brings up issues of class and power and suggests a certain formal method of writing. As most of us know, communicating effectively in an email is quite different from communicating well in a report. My emails contain saltier language than my board reports, but each presentation, I think, is effective in its way.

Every college in the district has embedded in its mission statement somewhere a sentence or paragraph that states as one of the general education goals or competencies for its students, the ability to communicate effectively in written form. (This, for example, was the impetus behind the writing across the curriculum initiative.) And I'd wager that every student, even the drop in/drop out student, needs this skill. There is no debate that this is fundamental for any student. But here's the question: how can we determine that a student can communicate well in written form? One answer has been to administer an exit exam for English 101 for which students are asked to write a standard five-paragraph essay in response to a question. A committee of English instructors scores (pass/fail) the writing sample on such things as mechanics, coherence, appropriateness to question asked and so on. These are all good things; this works as far as it goes. It isn't, however, what Black and William would call formative assessment. (And I should tell you that authentic or formative assessment isn't an easy concept either to understand or to implement, which further complicates the issue.)

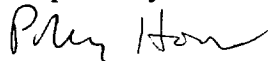
Why isn't this a formative assessment and why might this harm rather than help a student? First, as I suggested above, writing a five-paragraph essay in response to a prompt within a certain timeframe is only one form of communicating well, and it's one we don't employ very often in the real world, although we use it all the time in the academic world. Second, if we rely on an exit test to tell us whether a student can communicate effectively in a written form and use only this test as the barometer, we discount the way most of us write and the way we actually encourage our students to write, that is, in multiple drafts and with ~~many~~^{many} revisions. Furthermore, it discounts how we integrate information into an essay, how we edit our own papers and how we ask for editing help from our peers. Indeed, it suggests an occult science of writing: some committee with special knowledge and in secrecy decides what good writing is. Finally, there is some evidence (and, of course, counter-evidence) that minority students, in particular, when faced with an exam that has substantial consequences, are less likely, not more likely, to do poorly on the exam just because the exam is so important.

Not surprisingly, for these reasons, some faculty think that an exit test for English 101, for example, doesn't really address the greater challenge of teaching our students to write effectively. And why should we expect one course to meet this challenge? These faculty would argue that a better model for more authentic assessment would be a portfolio

review, which would include early and later examples of the student's writing. Indeed, it need not be exclusively writing done for an English professor but could include examples from Humanities courses, the Social Sciences and the Physical Sciences. An outside reader could assess the contents of the portfolio at any time in the student's career as well as at the end of a particular course. Other benefits of this approach are that it more authentically reflects the writing process in which we all struggle, that it encourages the student to see her evolution as a student, her weaknesses and strengths, and that it allows a variety of forms of writing. But it is still not what Black and William would call formative assessment until there is some consequent change in teaching as a result of the examination of the portfolios. And that final piece is, in some ways, the hardest aspect.

I am not arguing against testing, but I am suggesting that across the district testing does not always capture the larger goals of assessment of student achievement which it purports to do and it doesn't necessarily address our individual missions as learning-centered institutions with diverse student populations. Faculty will be meeting at the end of August according to our particular disciplines to address these challenging and complicated issues, but I think we should think of these meetings as dialogues about processes and paths to achievement rather than the production of products and exams.

Respectfully submitted,



Polly Hoover

President, FCCCC