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## Teaching Tenth Grade English: Student and Teacher Perceptions of Standardized Testing

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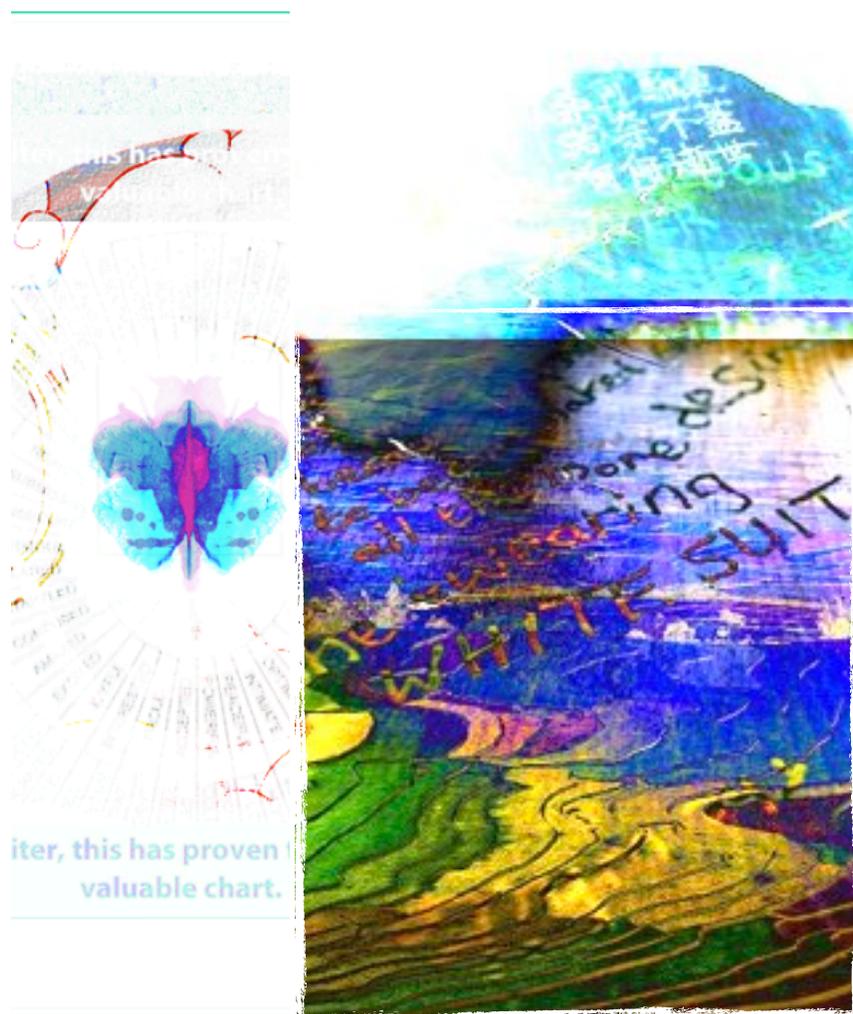
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# teaching tenth grade english: student and teacher perceptions of standardized testing

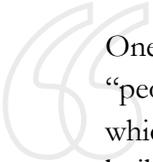
norma denae dibrell



*Our students trust their teachers. They trust us to teach them what they need to know in college and in their future. I feel as though the standardized tests that pressure us don't allow us to fully do that.*

## **Teaching Tenth Grade English: Student and Teacher Perceptions of Standardized Testing**

Norma Denae Dibrell



One of my students, David, described English teachers as the “people who help students understand language, ideas, and words, which is how everything from math or science to engineering is built.”

Standardized test scores are on my mind as much as lesson planning, student relationships, and classroom management. As a tenth grade English teacher, one of my main goals for my students is for them to all pass the STAAR (the standardized test in Texas). If they don't pass the tenth grade English exam, they have to take summer school remedial courses and possibly lose time in an elective class each semester for tutoring until they pass. If they don't pass the test, they don't receive their high school diploma, even if they pass all of their classes. Needless to say, passing the test is one of the main goals I have for my students. My school administration has also prioritized the test because the test data is one of the primary ways used to measure growth and success by student, by school, and by district.

In this project, I have tried to gain a better understanding of how my students see standardized testing so that I can adjust how I teach and how I present standardized exams. I want to teach my students so many things, as I'm sure all teachers do, and I want to do it in a way that makes my students feel successful and challenged.

I entered this project thinking that my students all see the test as basically a gatekeeper for college and English teachers as basically people who teach them how to pass the test. I have learned so much over the course of the past few months. My students have pleasantly surprised me by telling me that English teachers are here to guide them to be prepared for writing in their futures. One of my students, David, described English teachers as the “people who help students understand language, ideas, and words, which is how everything from math or science to engineering is built.” Unfortunately, standardized testing may get in the way of this happening and keep some students from truly engaging with reading and writing in a meaningful way.

### **Background**

#### *Students*

Just to give a brief overview of my students, I'd like to describe the school environment. My school is primarily composed of ELL (English Language Learner) students. Many of my students have told me that English is their most difficult or

least favorite subject just because they do not feel comfortable in speaking English, much less reading or writing it. My students almost all speak Spanish at home and as a first and preferred language.

### *Testing*

The standardized test that tenth graders take in Texas (STAAR EOC English II) is composed of about four parts: revising and editing (grammar, punctuation, varied syntax, diction, sentence/paragraph organization, etc), reading comprehension (author purpose, theme, tone, conflict, characterization, etc), short response writing (making inferences based on text), and a persuasive essay. Students have five hours to complete the test. Students who are ELL may have additional time, access to a bilingual dictionary, or permission to seek clarification of words or phrases. This test covers reading and writing in a very formulaic and structured way. The students know what will be test and what they will be expected to write. They just don't know what the stories will be or what their writing prompts will be.

### *Methods and Procedures for Student Interviews*

I asked three of my top three students if they were interested in participating in a two month long interview series. The students were in no way randomized. They are all my students. They are 15-16 years old and in the tenth grade. The students were excited to have their voices heard in this project, and their parents/guardians agreed to have them share their opinions publicly.

I interviewed two of my students three separate times in my classroom. I asked them different questions that built on what they had previously shared with me. One student only attended one interview session. All three students were present for that interview. I typed what they said. My computer screen was available to them if they want to know what I typed or wanted me to repeat what they said.

## **Student Perspectives**

### *Student Backgrounds*

Samantha Bermudez: "I've always considered education to be an important part of life; English has always been my favorite subject. I'd like to attend college in the UK or Canada. I think that standardized testing is something we have to change because it takes away the meaning of learning when you replace someone's mindset with one that seeks to just attain a number."

Nora Colunga: "My favorite subject is math; I plan to become a neurologist. My parents have always pushed me to get above an A, and if I didn't they would be disappointed in me. I feel like with standardized testing now in place, school isn't about learning, it's more about memorizing than learning. And once you've learned it, you can forget all about it after the test."

David Padron: “I want to be a cardiovascular surgeon. My favorite subject is science. My first language is Spanish, for my parents as well. So when we first came here when I was four, it was really hard for them to help me with my homework. I consider myself to be fluent in English although I sometimes have a hard time with proper grammar and phrasing. Standardized testing has forced schools to prepare students for a specific test and not knowledge that is needed in the real world.”

## **Interviews**

*Question: What is the point of standardized testing?*

Answer: Samantha Bermudez

“[Our teachers] always told us standardized writing tests are to measure how we’re doing in terms of score in order to teach us and see if they need to make any adjustments to what they’re teaching us. I think personally they just want to see how you write and where you stand.”

Answer: Nora Colunga

“I think it’s just to test whether your writing is good enough to pass on to the next grade. “Good enough” is defined by people who score the test because they have more experience.”

Answer: David Padron

“Standardized testing puts to the test only the skills a student acquires in the classroom and only for a few hours. It also puts pressure on teachers, which may affect the way they teach. Their jobs depend on grades, and the pressure may get to them. The students aren’t the only ones suffering. Sometimes they think the teacher is being too hard on them, but in reality the system is being too hard on the teachers. Sometimes, for some students, having the test on their mind blocks out any other information that they have learned.”

## *Teacher Reflection*

This student feedback also says to me that our students, at least some of them, know that standardized testing pressures students and teachers and blame it for the lack of flexibility that some English teachers are able to provide in an English classrooms. Our students trust their teachers. They trust us to teach them what they need to know in college and in their future. I feel as though the standardized tests that pressure us don’t allow us to fully do that.

*Question: How have your teachers prepared you for the English standardized tests?*

Answer: Samantha Bermudez

“There is not exactly a way to study for an English test. There is no solid way to prepare for English. You can know your terms, but if you aren’t familiar with English, you won’t know what’s going on. It’s not a question of whether or not you’re skillful at the language but what the questions are asking you for. For the first semester of English class, there is not as much pressure. But now, I’ve noticed for all classes, it’s more: you learned different units at first, now let’s learn a few more then spend the rest of the time reviewing. The STAAR, the second semester, changes my way of thinking. It becomes more about scores than what I’m really getting out of the class. It becomes less about sharpening my skills and more about sharpening my STAAR skills”

Answer: Nora Colunga

“[To study for] the actual multiple choice, we use packets of stories and practice questions. When it comes to writing the actual essay, [the teacher] give[s] us prompts to better enhance and feedback so we know what we did wrong and what can do to get better. It’s all about memorization, nowadays, once you take the test, you forget everything you learned.”

### *Teacher Reflection*

To me, as a teacher, this says that we do need some system to measure what students have learned, but it should be based on their personal growth goal. Each of my students have such different goals and such different abilities, why judge them all based on how well they can write a persuasive essay? Granted, I agree that my students all do need critical thinking skills, reading comprehension skills, and writing skills, our current system does not allow for each student to be creative in their own way to prepare them for their own future. The current systems we have in place like the STAAR, the SAT, the ACT, and other standardized tests are simply not working. They measure how well you can take those tests and how well you know that specific material. But there are so many students who have shown growth as writers, as readers, as students, and as English speakers that those tests will never show, and the students know that. So how can we keep confident, eager learners in classrooms that are part of a system that isn’t made for them?

The system is currently made for students who have spoken English their whole lives and who read at a tenth grade reading level. I’m not saying that that should not be the standard, but the reality is that many of my students are not yet at that level because of the language barrier. Just because some students will not end this year speaking, reading, and writing at a perfect tenth grade English level does not mean that they are failures or that they have not improved from a 3rd to 8th grade reading level, which is tremendous. Sitting down for five hours to read over four

short stories, answer fifty-two multiple choice questions, write two short responses and an essay is difficult even for students who speak English as a first language; I can only imagine the exhaustion and frustration that ELL students face. I do agree that the test is not extremely difficult or that students at the expected level should fail it. We need to realize that not all students are at that level for many different reasons, and we need some way to measure progress that is made for all students.

*Question: What do you think is the point of an English class and what have you learned in yours?"*

Answer: Samantha Bermudez

“[Teachers] teach you the different styles of writing- persuasive, expository, and examples of what’s good, and grammar, which is really important. It’s also weird because there is a certain level of writing that is considered wrong, but since you’ve reached a certain score, whether or not you capture the reader’s attention depends on the reader. What this English class is for, is to expand what you know about the language. This class is meant for people who speak at least a middle school level of English. To develop your own style of English. For others, it’s just to know the language. What teachers imply, is for you to know the language. But personally, I think it’s to develop a style of English.”

“When I was younger, they just said “write a page” and you don’t have to worry about it. There was no format. Testing molds us to write that even outside of school, you still use that format and it really limits what you can say. After learning all of the guidelines, you start to write that way even outside of school.”

Answer: Nora Colunga

“In the real world, you will have to write. You need to learn. I feel that English class is preparing you for the types of writing you will need to write in order to appear more professional in what you’re doing. English is a very broad language that is one of the major language in business. It’s important to be able to speak it well, that’s what English teacher wants us to do—to speak it well, and write it well, or else.”

Answer: David Padron

“The role of an English teacher in my life is to properly show me the use of grammar and vocabulary in my everyday life. Everybody needs reading and writing for their future; it’s involved anywhere. I want to be a cardiovascular surgeon. I’m going to have to communicate to a bunch of people while working in a hospital. Learning to write formal emails with proper use of grammar and language is necessary in order to communicate important information.

I am learning new words and the ability to write a persuasive essay, which helps me because in the future, when I am trying to gain a higher position, I will need to convince my employer that I am worthy by elevated diction.”

### *Teacher Reflection*

Aside from acknowledging that English II is meant for English speakers, my students also emphasize the importance of prescriptive grammar. This may be my fault for emphasizing grammar rules and norms in class too often. Nora and David clearly see English as important to communication, but not necessarily because of the ideas or the arguments or the analysis they make, rather the vocabulary and the grammar. As their teacher, this makes me think about what I should be doing to emphasize the importance of writing as a form of learning and thinking, not just a set of rules used when communicating.

### **Overall Teacher Reflection on Student Perceptions**

My students are brilliant and more aware and insightful than I was in the tenth grade. They brought to my attention that our students realize that standardized testing is stressful not just for students but for teachers as well. What message is that sending to them? I’m not quite sure, but I can say that it is negative.

Overall, our students are incredibly perceptive. They know that they need to pass these tests to graduate and that their English teachers have a lot to teach them. They also know that high school English classes, at least in this community, are designed for students who are already fluent in English, which is an entirely different issue. The fact that our student are aware of this makes us as teachers even more responsible for how we talk about standardized tests and how we present them.

### **What Does This Mean for Students in the Long Run?**

Students are no longer pushed to think outside of the box. Creativity, personal experience, voice, style, and all of the beautiful and interesting things that sparked my interest in English and kept me going through college are no where to be found on a standardized test prep curriculum. I have often gone off the curriculum and taught objectives in what I felt was a more meaningful way. I have used Tupac poems, song lyrics, president speeches, and editorials in class to allow my students to engage more deeply with the material. I have used the persuasive essay, which my students learned for the first time in my class, as an introduction to argumentation. We have read arguments and practiced making thoughtful and educated ones. To me, this allows my students to be prepared for the test and to also take valuable skills out of my classroom.

So why teach to the test, or in PC terms, why teach the skills that the students need to have to prepared for the test? Well, for a couple of reasons. First off, I know all of my students are capable of passing the test. And I know that they

need to in order to graduate. I want what's best for them, and graduating high school is definitely on that list. Secondly, I like teaching high school English. And if part of that is to prepare students for this test, then prepare them I must. I have just made a conscience decision to teach in a way that makes my students aware of their environment, their community, and themselves, which is not in the curriculum or on the test.

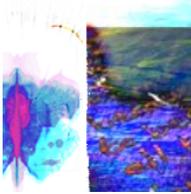
### **Concluding Thoughts**

Before I entered the classroom as a teacher, I had just graduate from college and was still fully immersed in the dialogue of my senior-level rhetoric and composition writing courses. I planned on teaching argumentation and writing as conversation and dialogue. My class motto was "Writing is Leadership;" I wanted each student to feel empowered by words and feel like their voice mattered. I wanted my students to string together their stories and for us to engage in rich and thoughtful conversation about literature and our personal experiences. And then I started teaching, and I realized that my students, while intelligent and passionate and capable, are not college graduates with English degrees. Only I am. Because of the many different layers of being a high school English teacher, despite my daily desire to channel Jim Corder in my classroom, it has proven to be difficult. Corder wrote about learning to use English with love and understanding and how we are each human narratives and our words should be used to share our stories with others (Corder). As much as I still try to implement this approach with socratic seminars and class discussions, I also have learned that writing is a means of communication that will, at least in a high school classroom, have to be used under very strict confines, set forth by a teacher or supervisor, not just to learn about others or to understand.

This is where I think Writing About Writing (WAW) can play a crucial role in high school English classrooms. The WAW approach to teaching allows is somewhat constructivist in that it allows to students to pull from what they already know to make connections with texts and use writing as a means of making these connections. WAW makes students more aware writing and how to transfer ideas and skills from their writing courses to other courses. It guides students and helps them see writing as a process and texts as conversations that their writing can contribute to. This approach would allow high school students to prepare for the writing and critical thinking portions of the test while also allowing them to constantly reflect on themselves as writers and writing itself.

## References

- Corder, J. W. (1985). Argument as emergence, rhetoric as love. *Rhetoric Review*, 4(1), 16-32.
- Wardle, Elizabeth A., and Doug Downs. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011. Print.



### Useful Assignment

*Teaching Artifact*

Norma Denae Dibrell

I have officially been a high school English teacher since August 2014. The one assignment that I am thankful for and that I will continue to use is the post-essay reflection. Inspired by Downs and Wardle's reflective prompts in *Writing About Writing*, the assignment asks students to look at their audience, look at themselves as writers, and dive into why they wrote what they wrote.

By having students reflect on what they have written, regardless of why they wrote it, they can at the very least begin to analyze themselves as writers. They can wonder why they used specific words and what their intentions were with those words. This way, students can be prepping for the standardized test and learning the skills they need to be successful on the exam, but they are also taking it a step further and really engaging with the text they have written and why they wrote it.