TWENTY MINUTES OF FLUENCY — A TEST

I spent five days in mid-December at the park-like conference center ETS maintains outside of Princeton reading my share of the 84,000 essays written during the December administration of the College Board’s English Achievement Test. There were fewer readers than usual this year because the essays were to be read only two times, with a third reading reserved for those papers receiving more than a one-point spread.

Students were asked to respond to the quotation “We have met the enemy and he is us” by referring to their reading, experience, or observation. And they responded at length, with at least 50% writing more than one full page in the 20 minutes allowed. I saw few of the short, one paragraph papers so common in earlier readings. Fluency, at least, is no longer a problem for the college bound.

But there were problems. Most students organized their papers by simply taking a run at the topic. They’d rephrase the question into something like a thesis, sometimes by simply saying “How true,” more frequently by stating that “We are our own worst enemies” and then spilling out example after example until time was called. I don’t remember seeing so many papers organized in this aimless, logorrheic way before, but my memory may be at fault here. In another category were those papers whose writers had mastered the art of the five-paragraph essay, an introduction, body, and conclusion, with major paragraphs, for example on the dangers of nuclear warfare, the dangers of pollution, and the personal problems of someone referred to as “this person.” One student wrote, “I am really writing about my aunt, but I am not at liberty to divulge her name.” It’s always a wonder how many words can be generated without saying anything by simply following that classic five-paragraph formula. The number of papers that were true “essays,” written by students who gave the topic some thought rather than a superficially

IN MEMORIAM
MINA SHAUGHNESSEY

“There is, I believe, only one adequate and appropriate memorial to Mina: that we enact her courage; that we fight the current retreat - no, rout - into the elitist irresponsibility of earlier decades, where once again we agree to teach only those who can learn without our active and imaginative efforts; back to those mean, hemophiliic responses to ‘What is knowledge’ and ‘Who shall have access to that knowledge?’ Mina truly believed, without sentiment, in the republic as the shining city on the hill. And she would undoubtedly agree with many of us that unless, as a community, we reverse ourselves and the direction that our schools, colleges, and universities are currently taking, this country is truly no longer morally habitable.”

by Janet Emig,
Rutgers University, New Brunswick,
New Jersey.

Quoted from her tribute to Mina Shaughnessey in Conference of College Composition and Communication (cccc) March 1979.
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immediate response, by students who tried to reason through an idea in the scant time they were allowed, were few and far between. But the few great papers I did come across were magnificent. The best was written by a boy from Oklahoma City who first placed the quote in the context of the specific Walt Kelley comic strip in which it appeared, Pogo and his alligator friend looking out at their polluted swamp and commenting on their world. He went on to explore the contrasting views of mankind expressed by Hume and Locke—with appropriate quotes—and then traced the influence of Locke to Jefferson and Hume to Nazi Germany, wrapping it all up with an assessment of man’s current state with references to Sartre, The Diary of Anne Frank and recent political events. Writing in a very small hand, this student produced two full pages of flawless prose in twenty minutes. A rare performance.

But all top papers (the 4’s on a scale of 1 to 4) were rare performances, with one 4, maybe two, appearing in each packet of 25. And a wide gulf separated the 4’s from all other papers, even the other upper half papers marked as 3’s. Besides the random outpourings and the mechanical paragraphs masquerading as organized essays, there was a constant stream of papers filled with over-generalizing, posturing, and earnest moralizing. I began to think that the thesis sentence itself was the culprit. After writing something like “Man is his own worst enemy” — a typical thesis — many students seemed forced into a generalizing state of mind, into a generalizing rut, which they didn’t know how to break out of. And generalization, “Man is...,” followed generalization, “The government must...,” like hiccups.

On the other hand, I came across no short stories, poems, or fanciful flights to support the frequent claim that American teachers are placing too great a premium upon “creativity.” Rather, one earnest paper followed another, relieved seldom even by those wondrously wild slips that I so cherish. One boy, however, was concerned about that new California “cult from Shirley’s Temple,” and another observed that we all live in a “doggie-dog world.” And I did come across a new medical problem in a paper that discussed “abortion and youth in Asia.” One student, looking ahead to college, noted that some colleges today have “open and Roman policies.” Another claimed that we had but two natural enemies: “foreign countries and wolves.” But the animal kingdom was regularly rejected as a threat to man: “Is our enemy the bear? No! Is our enemy the lion? No! Is our enemy the fox? No!”

I came away from the reading with almost too many impressions. Yet somehow I felt, for those five days at least, that I had my finger on the pulse, that I knew what our students could do, after twelve years of schooling, when asked to write on demand. Many of the readers were delighted with what they read. “We have nothing to worry about if our schools are producing students who write this well,” one reader was quoted as stating in a local New Jersey new story. I wasn’t so pleased as she. Most of the papers I read varied from not too bad to pretty grim. And yet... the students had only twenty minutes to write. I wonder what I could have done in that amount of time and under that kind of pressure.