

# CRACKING THROUGH THE SHELL: CLASSROOM INQUIRY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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My interview with Todd, a seventeen-year-old basic writer in my Special Assistance basic writing class, had stalled. Frustrated with questions about his writing processes, he pulled out his electrical engineering homework and asked me to read it. I couldn't interpret a single mark—except for his teacher's "Excellent job!" or the line of numbers down the left-hand margin, signifying a homework set of twelve discrete problems. Stammering through a ritual confession of my illiteracy in the face of a code he had mastered, I must have struck the right chord with Todd. He leaned over and whispered, "I'll share a secret with you."<sup>1</sup>

"The rich," he said, "live in an egg. Inside they have everything provided for them, everything they need. As far as they can see the world is rich. They can't see the shell. They can't see that their world is soft and protected. And they sure can't see that the shell is gonna crack."

It was a stunning metaphor.

Todd, in his Confederate cap and sturdy jeans, had condensed a semester's worth of weekly conversations into a few sentences. These conversations had touched upon his working class family and their struggle to hold on to a small family business; upon

the thirty hours a week he worked in a local machine shop, after school and weekends, saving money to provision a household for himself and his fiancée. Mostly they touched upon the world of work, of harsh and demeaning labor, of exhausted fathers, temperate mothers, and scattered, distant families.

But this conversation articulated a sharper theme: his allegiance with these “harsher realities” as he called them. For a working class male like Todd, the interior of an egg is comfortable, but it is not the world. It is meant to be a temporary support, like childhood is a temporary bliss before the inevitability of hard and demanding labor. “I’m ready to be out of school, see,” he added. “You take college. I could go to college after I graduate and play around for a couple of years like *them*.” He gestured toward the college prep students working as peer tutors in the classroom. “I could, but I won’t. Crack the shell and get one with it.”

A stunning metaphor.

But although who Todd was and the place he envisioned for himself in his rural county home surrounded his words, his target was the Maryland Functional Writing Test (MWT), a test he had failed twice and which threatened to keep him from graduating, from cracking the egg.<sup>2</sup> Somehow, he and the other students assigned to me for Special Assistance were going to try again, for the third time, to produce two writing samples of sufficient quality that four anonymous scorers hired by a distant subcontractor would provide the numerical justification of their “functional literacy.”

As a teacher-researcher I had questions about how these students would brave the test, about the assumptions they brought to the test, and about the effects of the test in their lives as readers and writers. But my students had questions too, questions which grew out of their three-year interaction with the test and with writing instruction designed to “prepare” them for it. They bombarded me with questions on the first day of class:

- What was this test *really* about?
- What do the scorers *really* want?, and
- Why does the State *really* care about this anyway?

Their unselfconscious use of “*reeaaally*,” lengthened and inflected, suggested less a need for information and more a hermeneutics of suspicion which characterized their encounters with

the MWT and with those spokespersons, teachers, and administrators associated with it. After several years of interactions with the test, they had come to approach it as a trick, a mask, a deception—one more move in an institutional game of us against them. I invited them to try to formulate answers to their questions through classroom-based research. Perhaps, they agreed, participating in a classroom research project might help them look behind the mask. And so we began a research project which was essentially political in nature, the investigation of educational policy as it is lived in the classroom.

In Spring of 1986, thirty-six Special Assistance students, six tutors, and I undertook classroom research together. The students, all eleventh grade students who had failed the MWT in ninth and tenth grades, were sorted together into two non-credit Special Assistance classes mandated by State guidelines to provide “appropriate assistance” to students unable to pass the test. Most of the students were white, general education, working-class students; one was Black. All, however, had been unable to manipulate the system sufficiently well to be “excused” from this requirement. The six tutors were members of the twelfth grade Advanced Placement course who volunteered to work with me in the class. Together, the 43 of us kept process journals, audiotaped conferences and peer response groups, developed and answered questionnaires, and pigeon-holed each other in interviews. We studied these products along with our writing, searching for themes and arguing over interpretations. We thought at the time that we were collecting data for our own investigations and writing. We did not realize that we were also engaging in careful deliberations over educational policies and practices.

I would like to examine the intersection of classroom inquiry and educational policy. Teacher-researchers have long argued that classroom-based research is an important mechanism for knowledge production. Questions such as “what can the teacher-researcher contribute to educational research?” or “what type of knowing is reflective inquiry?” are most salient in debates regarding the epistemological status of practitioner inquiries.<sup>3</sup> These are not unimportant questions. I simply would like to accentuate a different question: “Can teacher-researcher become a vehicle for creating just and politically sensitive accounts of how educational policies affect real lives?”

## **INTERSECTIONS: EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND REAL LIVES**

The instance of policy in question is the Maryland Writing Test (MWT), part of a multifaceted effort to ensure minimum competency for all graduates of Maryland public schools by linking "functional tests" in reading, writing, math, and citizenship to graduation. The MWT requires students to produce two passages, one "explanatory" and one "narrative," which are scored using a four-point modified holistic rubric. Students are given a writing prompt which specifies a topic, form, audience, and purpose for writing, and students who go too far afield from the prompt may produce a "non-scorable response." The test is untimed; students are encouraged to spend time planning and revising their written piece. Only final drafts are scored, and the highest possible combined score is 8, meaning that a student scored a 4 on both writing samples. The passing rate until 1989 was a combined score of at least 5.5 out of the possible 8 points for the two passages.<sup>4</sup> In 1989 the passing score was raised to 6.0 in order to equate the 1989 passing score with the 1984 passing score. In the future, the passing rate will fluctuate depending upon the results of an annual equating study.

In an important review of new trends in writing assessment, Catherine Keech Lucas identifies the MWT as an example of "phase three" writing assessment, assessments which attempt to create tests worth teaching to while simultaneously reflecting "psychometric demands and the needs of 'managers' for scientifically and legally legitimate measures" (15). In other words, since the MWT required from students actual pieces of writing which could be produced by a process of pre-writing, writing and revising, the State hoped to spur educators to teach writing through a process approach when they "taught to the test." At the same time, by reducing the response to those pieces of writing to easily stored and manipulable numerical scores, the educational bureaucracy could scientifically legitimate judgments of functionality, of success or failure, on a broad scale. They could, in fact, attempt to achieve public consensus that a passing score on the MWT should be a requirement for graduation from Maryland's public schools.

But what is "functionality" in the production of written discourse? It was within the confines set by the test itself—and assumptions about an appropriate technology for mass assessment

of writing—that the MWT set the terms for functionality in writing for Maryland students. In 1978, the Maryland State Department of Education developed a list of “competencies” which could be assessed in state functional tests (Resolution No. 1978-39). Called the Declared Competency Index (DCI), this document specified the tasks the MWT would assess and in its own fashion attempted to define “functional competence” as a writer. However, the particular demands of the MWT administration and scoring as a specific literacy event set up a competing definition. In a 1983 no-fault administration of the test, teachers and students became familiar with this competing standard as they encountered the test itself.

All of my Special Assistance students had vivid memories of their first encounters with MWT prompts either in the no-fault administration of the test or in instructional activities related to the test. The following prompts from the no-fault test, for example, were widely distributed as instructional tools for future tests and the bedrock of their assumptions about the demands of the testing situation:

*Explanatory Prompt:*

Suppose that your principal has asked your class, ‘Should the students at this school wear uniforms?’ Write a paragraph for your principal explaining your view on whether school uniforms should be adopted.

Before you start writing, you might want to think about the good and bad points of school uniforms. Consider what it would be like if everyone wore similar clothes to school. Consider what it would be like if students continued to wear what they wanted. Decide whether you think uniforms would be an improvement or whether things should stay as they are.

Now write a paragraph, explaining to the principal your views on school uniforms.

*Narrative Prompt:*

Suppose that you have just watched or heard a performance by your favorite musical group. You enjoyed the performance so much that you want to share your experience with someone else. Write a letter telling one of your friends about the performance.

Before you start writing, you might want to think about how the performance began. Think about what happened during the performance and how the performance ended.

Now, write a letter, telling your friend about the performance of your favorite musical group.

In an instructional tool distributed by the MSDE, these prompts were accompanied by samples of student responses, anchor papers, which illustrated the kind of writing required to earn each of the four possible scores on the test: score points 1 through 4 (MSDE 1984). In 1983, no one knew much about which students were earning which scores or about who passed and who failed. Students took the test in ninth grade, and as yet too few students from the system as a whole had taken the test for clear trends to emerge. Marylanders were discovering, however, that passing rates varied significantly across districts and between schools and a storm of controversy ensued. In some areas passing rates were "comfortably high," 70-80%; in others, "alarmingly low," as low as 29%. The dangers of playing district off against district led to critiques of the test and of its larger meaning.

But while newspapers printed stories about "A" students who failed the test or about low achieving students who managed to pass, the MWT was effecting changes in school practice in significant ways. To many students' benefit, teachers began to require more writing and better writing, and State language arts educators applauded this. Less discussed, though, was how ninth grade English curricula were reformed to provide substantial test preparation, eroding the freedom of teachers to negotiate a curriculum with their students. And finally, although the passing rate for the test was supposed to reflect minimum competence at the point of graduation, ninth graders who failed it were tracked into programs for remediation—Special Assistance—even in areas where tracking was not an official curriculum policy. As an ETS review of the MWT later noted, "Unfortunately, failing the test in ninth grade is perceived as a negative evaluation, and the test experience is perceived as a formidable barrier. This impression has influenced the attitudes and confidence of students, teachers, and parents" (Camp, et al. 4).

By 1985, teachers and administrators were beginning to understand the beast. For two years, teachers had been trained in holistic scoring, helping them better understand the expectations of the test, that competing standard of "functionality." Many teachers trained their students to analyze test prompts, score responses, and justify their estimations of a text's quality in the

language of the MWT scoring rubric. Passing rates went up. Students who had failed in 1984 passed in 1985.

### Statewide Pass Rates for the MWT: 1983-88

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Grade	School Year					
	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
9	47.7 <sup>a</sup>	51.4	54.1	68.5	67.1	82.2
10	—	—	47.1 <sup>a</sup>	62.1 <sup>a</sup>	51.9	70.2
11	—	—	—	—	—	74.2

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<sup>a</sup>No fault administration of the test  
(MSDE 1988, 10)

But those that had failed twice came to look more and more inadequate—their failure now accruing to them as individuals rather than to the merits of the test. There was more talk about how effective the test was in identifying students who “really didn’t deserve to graduate.” By Fall 1985, the crop of juniors who had yet to pass the test seemed to look like the right crop; informally, people noticed that the list for special assistance looked like the list for in-school suspension, like the list of perennial absentees, like the “ineligible list.”<sup>5</sup> The test confirmed an objective mark of failure on kids who were failing everywhere else. Perhaps it was this confluence of judgments that lay behind Todd’s anger, his confirmed belief that the test was less a way to identify him as a student needing focused instruction in writing and more a way for the privileged to retreat behind their fragile shell and to legitimate him as an outsider.

### A CLASSROOM STUDY: WHO DOES THIS TEST ASK ME TO BE?

It was within the larger context of the test that my two Special Assistance classes began their inquiry into the nature of the MWT.<sup>6</sup> We discovered that this larger context was partially structured by graduation requirements, procedures for taking and scoring the test, and for reporting results—by official policy. But it was more powerfully shaped by the combined experiences of success and failure, of information disseminated or withheld, of intentions misapprehended or understood only too well which the students and

I brought into the classroom. We began our investigations into educational policy with ourselves and our lived relation to the test.

The class's primary "problem" with the MWT, revealed in field notes and in transcripts of audiotaped conferencing sessions, was that these Special Assistance students were puzzled by or were resistant to the invitation to write which the the prompts posed. They reacted to the invitation to role-play, to imagine a hypothetical writing situation, with confusion or with resistance. And, as they attempted to insert themselves into the prefabricated constellation of audience, topic, purpose and form which the prompt required, their recurring question to the tutors and to me was: "Who does this test ask me to be?"

*Suppose that your principal has asked your class, 'Should the students at this school wear uniforms?' Kelly writes in her process journal: "This is so stupid. I don't know anything about uniforms. Why would he ask me? What does he want from me? Other people know more. I think he's a jerk. I couldn't talk to him. He never comes to my class unless someone's in trouble. I'm scared of him. How can I write to him? Wouldn't someone else be writing this—someone in Student Senate or something?"*

*Or, suppose that you have just watched or heard a performance by your favorite musical group. You enjoyed the performance so much that you want to share your experience with someone else. Chris, whose journal entries were short and direct, refused to even write in response to this prompt. "Either he comes with me or he eats shit. What kind of jerk would write a note about this? That's not me."*

Who do you have to be to be functionally literate?

Not what do you have to know or do, but who do you have to be? Linda Brodkey, in "Tropics of Literacy," argues that "[b]ecause all definitions of literacy project both a *literate self* and an *illiterate other*, the tropics of literacy stipulate the political as well as cultural terms on which the 'literate' wish to live with the 'illiterate' by defining what is meant by reading and writing" (emphasis in original, 47). For my eleventh grade Special Assistance students, the forms of literate activity required by the test were powerful definitions of self, definitions which persuaded them to reject the identity which the test seemed to legitimate, definitions which they reacted to in their own cultural terms. The hypothetical situation of the prompt sparked conflict among students and between students and tutors as they debated whether the occasion

described in the prompt truly called for writing at all or for writing in the specified form. The choice to mark life events with letters or personal reflections or to elaborate friendly correspondence with “colorful details” or “show, don’t tell” revisions was a choice with heavy overtones of social class. Some students engaged in pointed resistance, refusing to attempt certain prompts or to write on the topic as assigned. Others attempted to answer, but saw as impossible the generation of sufficient elaboration to merit a passing score.

After a conference where I attempted to coach Todd to add detail to his writing, he summarized the class’s feelings by saying, “This test doesn’t test functional *literacy*; it tests functional *literariness*.” The literary Other was not a person these students generally aspired to be. Their resistance was focused on three fronts:

1) *Elaboration as emasculation*: In order to score a three on the test, students needed to provide substantive elaboration for their ideas. In narrative prompts, in particular, this took the form of descriptive details, details expressing the thoughts and feelings of the narrator, or embedded adjectives and adverbs adding color to sentences. More than half of my male students judged this style of writing to be inappropriate to the voice they would want to create—particularly with their friends. John was a prototypical example. In transcripts of his peer response group, he spoke most often to refuse to speak. When students would prod him for “personal details” to add to his narrative, he would answer simply “That’s my business.”

Recordings of his peer response group discussions of his drafts reveal that injunctions to add colorful details, to think about what he was thinking or feeling during the events covered in the draft, or to create a mental picture for the reader were actively resisted. On one of the few occasions when I could prod John to talk about his writing behavior, he revealed that a “literary” model of text was linked to an “emasculated” model of text. He would refuse stubbornly any attempts to “write like a girl,” he said, and further asserted that during the events he wrote about, he felt “nothing particularly worth writing about.” If he “went around noticing things all the time and saying ‘oh beautiful sunset,’” he wouldn’t get much done in his life. John’s model of an aggressive, physical masculinity demands a rejection of the persona of the “literary writer” with its accompanying emphasis on mental rather than

physical labor and its valuation of the emotional labor of perception and reflection.

After four weeks in the class, John decided to withdraw from Special Assistance rather than continue to write the type of discourse invited by the narrative prompts on the MWT and encouraged by me. He preferred a class where skills sheets and grammar drills allowed him to succeed academically without revealing the self. His parents agreed not to hold the school legally liable should John fail the MWT again, and with the question of the school's responsibility in the face of John's resistance settled thus, John was permitted to transfer into another course where neither sustained writing nor participation in classroom research was requested of him.

No other male student was as steadfast in his resistance to an "emasculated" model of text, yet many were resistant to elaboration. However, the males did find it generally appropriate to write with ample detail and great relish about violence.<sup>7</sup> Chris, although he refused to write a letter to a friend about the musical performance, did enjoy telling his peer response group about an Ozzy Osbourne concert he had recently attended where Ozzy allegedly blew up a goat. Opinions were exchanged as to the possibility that the goat was already dead and the "stuffings" that blew out really were just that—stuffings. When a tutor suggested he write about his future topics with the same degree of relish that he brought to the vivid description of the Osbourne concert, he commented quite matter of factly, "Chris, you can't write about that on a test. Don't be stupid." Later, he did make use of some of the detail he generated with his response group in a practice prompt about "things you like to do with your leisure time." In that passage he described the enjoyment of finding animal carcasses in the fields around his house, stuffing their body cavities full of M-80s, and blowing them up. As he shared this last passage with a female tutor who expressed great uneasiness with his graphic imagery, he stopped and said, "Shit, what if a woman grades this one. You all can really screw us to the wall, can't you."

2) *The big lie*: Although the female Special Assistance students generally did not resist elaboration, and often revised mechanically to slot for adjectives and adverbs, they suffered their own particular brand of anxiety about elaboration. As a class we labeled this anxiety "the big lie," and it applied to two thirds of the females in the two Special Assistance sections.

"The big lie" is what these students imagined themselves telling if they strayed any distance beyond the literal truth in responding to the writing prompts. Their process logs revealed that their first task upon receiving a prompt was to conduct a thorough memory search for a "real incident" that would fit the prompt. The fact that the test was administered by the State in an official capacity made it all the more important to find something *real* to talk about—the prompt took the form of an order from an authority figure in the highest position to disclose something cleanly and accurately. "Fictional license" was defined as a willful lie.

Anita, for example, found herself stumped in an attempt to write about a visit to her aunt's. Her tutor asked her to imagine details of setting, to elaborate the first paragraph where she arrived at her aunt's house.

Tutor: "Well, what did you see as you approached the house? What color is it?"

Anita: "It was dark, I was only a kid. I don't know."

Tutor: "Well, what color would you like it to be? It's your paper, you can make it whatever you want."

Anita: "No, it's a real color. I don't know the color. But it's a color."

Tutor: "Are there other things you could say about the house?"

Anita: "I don't remember the house. I don't know nothing 'bout the house. And anyone who wanted to could go check the real color and see I faked it."

Of all the Special Assistance students, Anita felt the pressure to be truthful in prose most acutely. Interestingly, the type of prompt seemed not to affect her commitment to full and truthful disclosure. When the prompt called for a "friendly letter," she argued for the importance of being truthful with friends, of avoiding the temptation to embellish stories because of the potential consequences for hurt feelings or manipulation. When the prompt called for a more transactional response, such as an accident report, she would argue for the importance of accuracy in public disclosure.

The tutors and I found ourselves adopting curious and spurious positions in our conferences with the nine students who worried so deeply about "the big lie." We noted that the test was only a test, that no one would ever care about the veracity of an individual test response, that "fictional license" would always be

granted in favor of a better story or a more fully developed passage of exposition. In short, we argued, that no one *really* cared about the specifics of what she wrote. In one such conference mid-way through the class Anita became upset, almost tearful, as she pulled from her binder page after page of social studies work: homework, tests, quizzes. Pointing with pride to the high grades she had received for cleanly and accurately reproducing the facts contained in her American history textbook, she said, "All these are facts. And I have a good memory. I remember lots. Real lots."

3) *Class antagonism*: Each of these objections, one characteristically female and one characteristically male, bore traces of class antagonism. Indeed, the strong bifurcation of male and female responses to writing prompts struck the middle class academic student tutors as typical of "those kinds of students"—students defined by the tutors as "the other." And the tutors frequently served as foils for the Special Assistance students' descriptions of their preferred stances as readers and writers, a strategy Todd made use of in his metaphor of the egg.

Proffered as a state requirement, the MWT exacerbated the latent fractures in the student body and in the community. Students like Todd linked the encroachment of this particular brand of literate activity required by the test with the encroachment of the suburbs on his rural home, with professional families creating "bedroom communities" where farms and family businesses once thrived, and with a profound loss of local control. Indeed, the MWT was associated with the transference of control over educational policy away from the county where he lived to the State Department of Education. Teachers and administrators also felt a lack of local control over curriculum and perhaps a purely professional brand of "class antagonism."

Todd, reflecting in his journal on the samples of "score 4" papers provided by the Maryland State Department of Education (1984), wrote:

You know, people who write these things sound as if they're sitting around some fancy dinner table talking all night. All stuffy talk. I don't do that. I work. I go to school. I got my life. I write just fine for what I need. The people that score this test had better realize that it's not mom and dad and the kids at the dinner table anymore. It's a fast food world.

Todd was explicit in what he disliked about the score 4 passages, copying phrases from them into his journal. Reacting to a sample score 4 response to the prompt requiring students to write a friendly letter about a musical performance they had just witnessed, Todd carefully copied out the sentences which he “would not be caught dead saying to a real friend” underlining those which struck him as typical of stuffy dinner table talk:

Dear Greg,

*Recent I went to see Led Zeppelin in concert at Washington. We arrived early and the seats were filling up quick. You could feel a mood of excitement in the air as the clock headed for seven. Finally, the lights went out and all was dark and quiet. Suddenly I heard a tremendous crash of sounds as lights flashed about the whole place. [copied into Todd’s journal]*

As usual, Todd was perceptive. The papers we were looking at, as well as several written by the tutors or by me as we participated in two practice test situations, seemed to be part of what has been called the essayist tradition.<sup>8</sup> They were explicit; they were “schooled.” As Todd noted, they carried the idioms and inflections of the middle class. This assertion struck at the heart of what the student tutors and I were trying to do in Special Assistance class, tapping everything from the choice of a Writers’ Workshop format to the selections provided on the “free reading shelves.” Although we did not abandon our beliefs about quality in writing, about what an education in and through writing could or should be, about how writing classes could or should be run, we did come to view these beliefs in all their particularity as choices and constructions. Furthermore we came to see the MWT as a mechanism for privileging one set of constructions over and above others; we felt the guilt of cultural imperialism.

## **INTERSECTIONS: EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND CLASSROOM RESEARCH**

From the vantage of the school, the production of the *commodities* of educational policy—Task Force reports, funding formulas, or minimum competency tests—may seem to be a dry and technical affair operating at some distance from the classroom.

From that vantage point, the classroom may seem to be the object of educational policy. When considered as the site of *lived* policies, rather than the object of *commodified* policy, classroom power dynamics are inseparable from educational policy. Classroom-based research, in producing accounts of those dynamics, can contribute to policy discourse. As teacher-research provides careful descriptions and reflections upon classroom life, it illuminates the classroom, introducing voices and valorizing perspectives often missing from other discourses. While as problematic as any discourse,<sup>9</sup> classroom-based research as a practice offers an opportunity for teachers, students, and even parents and community members to collaborate in creating accounts of educational practice which are broader, more encompassing of voices and perspectives, and perhaps more just. As the 43 of us in the two Special Assistance classes collected data jointly, negotiated its use, access and interpretations, and actively worked to take the perspective of others in the classroom, we were staying close to the human face of policy. The accounts we began to create about reading and writing in one classroom in one school system were some of the most powerful writing we did that semester. Students began writing their opinions directly—an extensive letter to the editor was sent to the county paper, petitions arguing that the test be waived for a year formally deposited, along with writing folders, in a central holding tank. Tutors began to write of their experiences in college application essays and sociology classes.

We were surprised, however, to discover intersections between our classroom research and “officially-sponsored research.” Several of the issues Special Assistance students saw as problematic, for example elaboration/“literary style” and the “situation of the prompt,” received extensive treatment in an Educational Testing Service Review of the MWT requested by the Maryland State Department of Education. Another problematic issue, the “big lie,” also became an issue of public concern.

ETS was requested to review the process of MWT development and implementation in April, 1986. In their review they note:

- that the four-point rubric, in use by contracted scorers, might be causing a downward squeeze in scores (Camp et al. 18). In other words, as papers scoring at the upper range of the rubric, high 3's and 4's, improved year by year, the papers which might otherwise earn mid-range scores looked less and

less adequate. With only four score point designations to choose among, scorers had little room at the "high end" of the scoring range to reward excellent responses. ETS, which conducted a re-scoring of previously written test papers, focused this concern on "elaboration."

Furthermore, the ETS review also questioned "Do the prompts call for imaginative ability that may not be essential to functional writing?" (Camp, et al. 9). The students' perception that they needed to provide a level of elaboration not called for in "functional writing" found some justification.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the MWT scoring rubric was revised in 1988 to "insure the clear and consistent application of the scoring criteria to the widest conceivable range of MWT-II prompts" (MSDE 1988 Technical Report, 2).

•ETS also addressed the rhetorical situations the prompts developed. They queried: "Is the audience designation realistic, particularly if students are unable to relate to that audience, or if different students perceive the audience differently? The writing assessment literature suggests that providing designations in prompts, such as audience, may affect writing in yet undetermined ways" (Camp, et al. 9).

Much of the students' resistance to the hypothetical situation of the prompt was expressed as resistance to entering into a relationship with the specified audience. This was most acute in prompts specifying audiences like "principals" or "policemen."

And as for the "big lie," the State itself was wondering how to react to responses to an MWT prompt which asked about an "important decision the writer had to make." As students dutifully reported important decisions about abortions, drug deals, child abuse, and other similar topics, the State had to wonder if the readers of these responses were liable for acting on the information contained therein. While the ETS review debated whether "any of the prompts arouse emotional reactions that might interfere with a student's ability to write a well-controlled response," the State debated whether these papers constituted a matter of official disclosure. Even at the highest levels of State educational policy, a conscious decision was required to define the situation of the test as calling for fiction rather than fact, mitigating "the big lie." Much as the tutors and I tentatively suggested to the

students in Special Assistance, the State has no official interest in the truth value of what they write.

### **THE INTERSECTIONS MULTIPLY: CLASSROOM RESEARCH AND THE MWT**

Since that semester, much has happened in Maryland. Controversies over the MWT forced MSDE to postpone implementation of the MWT as a graduation requirement for the classes of 1987 and 1988 while the test was under review. Of the Special Assistance students, all but eight declined to take the test at all, even as a no-fault measure. Ironically, neither they nor I will ever know if they would have passed it after our semester together. In 1989, the passing score was raised to 6.0 leading MSDE to once again postpone implementation of the MWT as a graduation requirement.

However, teacher-researchers and their students are carefully documenting the classroom as a policy environment as the class of 1990 now becomes the first graduating class to face the MWT's sanctions. Committed to conducting research collaboratively with students who have failed or who are likely to fail the MWT, twenty-seven teachers and administrators have joined the Basic Writing Teacher-Research Network. They are teachers of ESO and special education students, teachers in rural counties and urban systems. They are struggling against the isolation of the classroom and its particularistic concerns, an isolation which contributes to the deception that the classroom is the object, rather than the site, of educational policy. And they are coming to see classroom-based research as one process for creating just accounts—participatory, polyvocal, ethically sensitive—of policy as it is lived in our classrooms. The key is its *participatory* nature, complete with all the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions participation implies.

Educational policy is always a measured attempt to influence the progress of real lives by shaping and regulating the institutional environments in which they are lived; it is therefore primarily political, its technical aspects serving to legitimate, or obfuscate, its political thrust. Tests provide legislatures with a relatively inexpensive way to influence instruction, even in states where a strong history of local control over education has led to a "hands off" approach by the state educational authority. And testing has high symbolic value, seeming to take a tough line against educational

incompetence and mismanagement while posing as an objective, scientific, politically neutral act of measurement which triggers policy sanctions as antiseptically as a pressure valve releases steam.

This influence is not uniformly bad; many in Maryland welcomed it. In Maryland more teachers are teaching writing, are abandoning archaic and damaging skills and drills approaches which do not help students on the MWT, and are studying scholarship in the field of composition the better to improve their practice. In some schools, English departments have come together to plan and evaluate test-related instructional programs, while in others the link between the English department as a subject area responsible for test-related instruction and a graduation requirement was a source of departmental power in the school. Other teachers felt the thrill of power as an outside, ostensibly neutral, mechanism for evaluation confirmed their judgments about student progress.

But we cannot forget that as the use of testing as a policy tool increases, teachers and students will find it harder to negotiate control over curriculum and over teaching and learning processes. The implications for writing classrooms are clear: writers and readers in the classroom are undercut as potential judges of quality, evaluators of writing in their own communities, champions of the local voice. Judgment is removed from the community of teachers and students except insofar as their judgments can be brought into line with the results of the test. Encircling our classrooms are broader and wider networks of influence, bureaucratic structures, interlocking regulations. Like the Special Assistance students, we should perhaps ask, Who does this profession ask me to be? and Do I want to be legitimated in these terms?

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Material for this essay was drawn from data collected in two Spring 1986 Special Assistance classes in a rural county in Maryland. Data include papers, journal entries, transcripts of audiotaped conferences, interviews, and peer response groups, questionnaires, and interviews. Three times during the course of the semester students were requested to remove from the collection of data any material they would not want to have shared. At the request of the students, remaining material was to be referred to anonymously (real names have not been used) and to be corrected to Standard Edited English. Also, given the

sensitive nature of the class—one linked inexorably with issues of success and failure in school contexts—all study participants are committed to the privacy of members of the class.

I thank all these students for making this study possible and regret that they did not want to be recognized by name.

<sup>2</sup>The Maryland Functional Writing Test, now called the Maryland Writing Test, was piloted in a no fault administration in 1983. Freshman in spring of 1984 were initially targeted as the first class to be held accountable for passing the test as a graduation requirement. Those students became my juniors in 1986. Currently, the class of 1990 is the first to face the necessity of passing the MWT as a graduation requirement. Graduation requirements also include tests in reading, citizenship, and math.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, Arthur Applebee, "Musings" (*Research in the Teaching of English*) and the various debates he sparked in *Language Arts* 64 (November 1987): 714-747; Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman, *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987); the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, John Elliott, John Nixon, and Garth Boomer; Stephan Kemmis and Wilfred Carr, *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research* (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1986); Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "Teacher Research: Toward Clarifying the Concept," *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project* 11.2: 1-27.

<sup>4</sup>Standard setting for the MWT was accomplished with the involvement of two sets of persons. First, a survey sample of 3,307 parents, teachers and students was sent a set of eight papers representing two papers at each of the four score points for one of the tested domains. They were asked to mark the point where the papers represented a score appropriate for a Maryland high school graduate. A second group of 175 teachers, parents, students and administrators participated in one of three workshops involving twenty papers. Both groups recommended passing scores and the unweighted average of their recommendations yielded 5.5. In 1989, the passing rate was adjusted to 6.0 in order to equate the 1989 test with the 1984 test. In the aftermath of the score adjustment, the Maryland State Department of Education decided to waive the MWT as a requirement for the class of 1989 as they had done for the classes of 1987 and 1988.

This standard setting did not resolve the two separate definitions of functionality represented in Maryland State Department directives: one implicit in the State Department's Declared Competency Index and the other set by the demands of the testing situation and its accompanying scoring.

<sup>5</sup>Ellwein, Glass and Smith's case studies of the implementation of minimum competency policies mirror Maryland's experience with the writing test. They suggest that "competency tests and standards function as symbolic and political gestures, not as instrumental reforms" ("Standards of Competence" 8). Perceptions of appropriate passing rates reflect deep-seated cultural assumptions and are more acceptable as they are "redundant" with other designations of success and failure.

<sup>6</sup>A more substantial description of how the students participated in the classroom-based research is provided in "The Solitary Reader: Exploring How Lonely Reading Has To Be" *The New Advocate* 1.3 (1988): 165-176.

<sup>7</sup>Roger Simon writes of the dilemma teachers face when they want to both

support their students in writing about their own lives from their own cultural orientations yet finding those orientations problematic. See "Empowerment as a Pedagogy of Possibility," *Language Arts* 64.4 (April 1987): 370-383.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, articles in David Olson, Nancy Torrance, and Angela Hildyard (eds.) *Literacy, Language and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michael Stubbs, *Language and Literacy: The Sociolinguistics Analysis of Reading and Writing* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>For excellent discussions of the "problematics," see James Clifford "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1.2 (1983): 118-46; Paul Rabinow, "Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup>"Elaboration" is defined in the MSDE technical glossary as "information that expands or extends the ideas in a narrative response" (1988 Technical Report, p. 21).

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