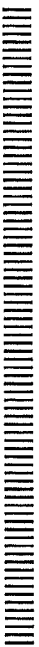


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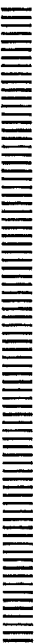
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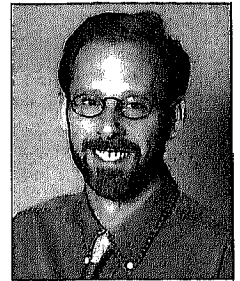
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Speaking My Mind

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Hidden Dangers of the AP English Exams

The expanding presence of the College Board's AP exams is amply demonstrated by the fact that the number of students taking their tests has nearly doubled in the last ten years (College Board Online). This statistic, combined with the notion that many English departments now seem to equate the success of their curriculum with the amount of students taking the AP, might prompt us to take a closer look at the impact of these exams on our



pedagogical practices. While these tests receive seemingly universal support in both secondary schools and college communities, I suspect that they carry with them hidden dangers that may be having a destructive effect on students and teachers alike. A dialogue about these dangers needs to take place, and soon.

Endorsements of the AP English exams are obvious and well advertised. As a goal, the exams help to guide teachers and students toward important aspects of analytical reading. Among other skills, the AP exams assess a student's ability to read closely; to analyze rhetorical style; and to understand the effects of structure, diction, and syntax. Furthermore, a passing grade on these exams undeniably helps students with the college application process, as it also helps them avoid basic college rhetoric courses that would likely be repetitive. Financially, students are potentially able to save thousands of dollars by testing out of college classes: if the college is willing to accept a passing grade (a 3, 4, or 5) as credit, then the student does not have to buy those credit hours from the school. All of the above benefits represent tremendous advantages to a student, and the universal acclaim these exams receive is not without some foundation.

In spite of all the well-published virtues of the AP English exams, there are at least a few reasons for us to be wary. Most importantly, these exams en-

courage little reflection and the "testing of truth," as they are focused almost entirely on assessing skills. The AP English exams demand that students demonstrate the ability to analyze texts atomistically as well as holistically; yet, they do little to assess whether students have scrutinized the basic premises of a text in regard to "truth" and what the implications of a text could be on a personal and global level. In other words, the tests focus on only half (at best) of what we English teachers should be teaching our students.

Again, it's undeniably important to teach skills of rhetorical analysis; however, it's of greater importance to use these skills for our growth as humans in a liberal education. Seen from this perspective, doesn't the AP exam ask a student to demonstrate analytical skills within a closed system—in many ways as an academic exercise? *How did Queen Elizabeth's rhetorical style make her speech effective?* While this type of question assumes that students have well-developed analytical skills, it requires that little be done with those skills. For example—here Elizabeth uses parallel construction to underscore a point, there she uses carefully selected diction with the intent of subtly rebuking another's point of view, etc. With enough of this type of analysis, students may do well on the AP exam but will have gained little from the experience. Close reading is truly useful only when students can come to grips with the truthfulness or falseness of the underlying ideas. And in

the realm of a fast-paced AP class, students will look for the “truth” of underlying ideas only if expressly told to do so. *How does Queen Elizabeth’s rhetorical style make her speech effective?* is only half of the question. The rest of the question should sound something like, “Do you think the basic premises are true, and if they are true, what of them?” Unless we ask the last two questions, students remain trapped in an academic exercise that is ultimately useless to personal growth.

Is the study of English nothing more than an academic exercise? What message do we send our students when so many of our AP English courses have the AP exam as a kind of goal? The objection to the last question is obvious. I myself have said, “Well, *I’m* not going to teach to the test, and my class will be more than a rhetoric course.” I know better, don’t I? Of course I do. But do my students? From the first, they learn that the AP exam will help them with admissions, that it can save them thousands of dollars, that it’s rather prestigious to get a 4 or 5, and that the measure of their growth as English students can be embodied in a single score. Don’t those ideas have a much greater concrete appeal to a seventeen-year-old than do the ideas of personal growth and a liberal education? Isn’t it possible that, in spite of our efforts to convince them otherwise, students will somehow equate the study of English to the AP exam? To me, even the *possibility* of such misunderstanding is both unnerving and tragic.

Although much has been written about the ill effects of “objective answer” tests, half of the AP English exam is of this type, and it makes a lasting impression. Clearly, words, language, and texts are all filled with ambiguity. The variety of interpretations that a text offers is both maddening and wonderful—examining ambiguity is at the heart of solid English pedagogy. If we agree with this, then isn’t an “objective answer” test fundamentally at odds with our teaching? How can we endorse the idea that texts are subject to only one correct interpretation? That the AP College Board or the teacher has a monopoly on what is “correct” I’ll leave alone as patently offensive. My conviction is simply that it’s a teaching crime to allow students even the possibility of thinking that texts are two-dimensional objects that admit to only single, correct answers. While many students labor through practice multiple-choice tests and then Part I of the actual AP English exam, they are quite aware that only one of the five “bubbles” is the “right” one. With this type of training and testing, why wouldn’t

a student begin to accept the idea that texts should have only one correct interpretive answer?

Maybe you and I would be successful in helping our students steer clear of the above misconceptions. But what about teachers new to the profession who are developing their own philosophies as they are also working to gain tenure? It is a matter of common knowledge that schools get the exam results back and that most schools will break down the results by each teacher’s class. For better or worse, more and more young teachers are in a merit position in regard to both tenure and pay scale, and it’s easy to envision a relationship between AP exam results and job security and pay. Am I being alarmist? I don’t think so. Why wouldn’t a young teacher deem it wise to spend a great deal of time and effort teaching to the test? Aren’t there many AP workshops being held throughout the country that basically show educators how to do just this? Don’t school boards pay big money for these workshops and consequently send a rather clear message to their English faculties? Remember, the overall number of AP exams doubled in the last ten years. And if these forces affect the development of the teacher, why wouldn’t the classroom environment be dimmed by the specter of the AP exam?

And what about the fact that more and more juniors are taking the AP language exam than ever before? In fact, in my school alone, the number of juniors taking the test has jumped from two students in 1988 to 146 students in 1998. Clearly, juniors are somewhat less sophisticated and more impressionable than seniors and therefore more apt to see the AP exam as what “English is about.” In any case, that so many younger students are taking this exam must mean that it is having a greater impact on more people sooner in their academic lives.

Am I calling for the termination of the AP English exams? Idealistically, I would say, “Yes, let the College Board crumble into splinters and let them all get new jobs in the classroom, where they would hopefully do some good.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful to do away with *all* standardized tests and employ some assessments that would actually benefit our students? Yet, my practical, cynical side sees the College Board firmly entrenched and blindly supported by school administrations fixated on numbers and parents who hope to save a few bucks on tuition. Will we do away with these tests anytime soon? No. The question remains, will the tests do away with what’s left of liberal education?