

TEACHING TO THE TEST

The National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy
Lorraine Wilson & David Hornsby, 2011

“In the 2011 NAPLAN writing test, students will write a persuasive text. ...
The same task is used for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.”
(www.naplan.edu.au/writing_2011_-_domains.html)

Everyone wants to “do” persuasive writing in schools this term because it is going to be tested by NAPLAN in May. Teachers everywhere are frantic, spending inordinate amounts of time having students write persuasive texts.

Professional development on persuasive writing is in high demand. Like other education consultants around Australia, we have been inundated with requests to lead such sessions.

Australian teachers have a proud history of planning curriculum which is relevant to the diverse needs of the students they teach. Now, because they are pressured to teach to the test, they are all focusing on one narrow form of persuasive text despite the social and cultural diversity of their students who come from very different geographical locations - extremely remote areas, or inner city suburbs, or underground in Coober Pedy!

Lengthy searches of education department websites across Australia reveal something very telling - and disturbing. They advertise persuasive writing professional learning workshops. However, we could find no evidence that education departments or regions are providing professional development in science, the arts (including drama and music), social education, physical education, and other areas of curriculum. It is clear that budgets, time and energy are being directed towards the test. (A quick check of websites will quickly confirm this.)

Just as schools across the country feel pressured by comparisons of individual school results on the My School website, is it possible that Education Regions now fear similar comparisons? Educational bureaucrats are fostering a climate of competition now, instead of a climate of cooperation, and according to Professor Margaret Wu, it's all based on invalid and unreliable data.

Education Departments used to employ curriculum consultants in all areas of the curriculum, eg. drama, visual arts, science, physical education. Teachers could request professional development in any curriculum area – not just literacy and numeracy – and specialist consultants in these curriculum areas were there to help. The demise of consultants representative of a broad range of curriculum areas is strong evidence of the very narrow curriculum focus of today's politicians and bureaucrats.

Many wise and respected educators and leaders have commented on the narrowing of curriculum. Professor Robin Alexander (Cambridge University, 2009, 2010) has said that the narrowing of the curriculum may have actually reduced overall standards and robbed children of their right to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Sir Ken Robinson (2006) has accused education departments of killing creativity in schools (see link to video clip).

Victorian Opera's Sir Richard Gill (2011) has decried the loss of the arts in our schools. "I want to make my stance very clear: NAPLAN tests and My School have nothing to do with the education of a child. This abhorrent and insidious method of assessing children, teachers and their schools needs to stop now. Principals, teachers and parents need to stand up and be counted and resist this unnatural activity."

Year 3 and 5 teachers tell us they are required to practise test items for many weeks prior to the tests. If teachers have composite classes such as Year 3/4 or 5/6, the Year 4 and 6 children are usually left doing busy work while the other children in the room practise test items with the teacher.

Schools are buying practice test items from those that have suddenly become available online. They are photocopying tests from previous years and blowing their photocopying budgets apart just to have students do the old tests.

We are NOT opposed to teaching persuasive writing. However, it should be taught in context and when a purpose is clear. For example:

- (1) A group of Year 2 children is disappointed that the older students "take over" the playground equipment every recess break. Initially the issue is discussed, with the language of persuasion being used orally. The teacher helps the children list the arguments supporting their view. Then, during shared writing, the teacher helps them to compose a persuasive text to send to the Junior School Council re use of the playground equipment.
- (2) After an accident at the school crossing, a Year 6 class decides to become active about traffic management in front of the school. They want to write to the local council, so the students work in small groups to list their concerns and possible solutions. This leads to persuasive writing in the form of letters to the local council.

So yes, we teach persuasive writing – but always as part of the work in progress; always when the students see a purpose that drives them to express their views.

Different genres and text types are experienced and written by the students to investigate and understand issues of concern and interest to them. It's one of the most powerful ways of engaging students. They are not subjected to fractured writing experiences dictated by a May test.

Just think for a moment – all around Australia at this time, children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, are being drilled in persuasive writing. What an example of 'decontextualised, 'one size fits all' curriculum!

Do we really want all Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students studying the one form of writing for the first few months of the year in preparation for an invalid and unreliable test in May? Consider the needs of some Australian children – those who have been affected by bushfires, cyclones and floods of this past Summer. What are their immediate needs? How is the school program, and the writing program in particular, helping them to express their feelings, and to work towards an understanding of their life experiences? Schools should be free to help students find ways to express and explore their understandings, feelings and emotions through drama, art/craft, music, dance, literature, listening, speaking, reading and writing – through all curriculum areas.

Do the politicians and bureaucrats truly respect diversity, or do they desire uniformity? Do they truly want equity in education (as stated in the Melbourne Declaration, 2008) or are they exacerbating the growing gap between our advantaged and disadvantaged students? Analysis of the PISA data from 2006 and 2009 clearly shows that the gap between students from low socioeconomic families and those from high SES families got wider in reading, maths and science (PISA Report 2010, AEU 2011).

Children in the same year levels across Australia are clearly not the same. To have all year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students practise one form of persuasive writing for three to four months simultaneously across Australia, is a matter of shame. It defies logic. We thought we'd moved past the nineteenth century "factory approach" to education where students were all doing the same thing at the same time as they were moved along a production line. Is this what we want for students today?

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