

Ricci, C. (2004, Winter). Breaking the silence: A marker speaks out against standardized testing. *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 13(2) #74, 75-88.

V. 13 N.2 (#74) Winter 2004 \$12.00

OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

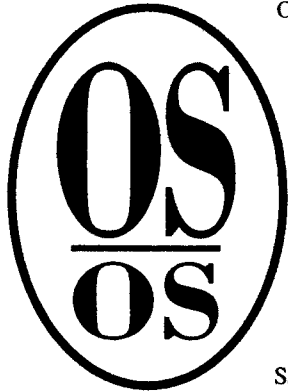
Breaking the silence:
a marker speaks
out against
standardized testing

The fight to preserve day
care in Quebec

Going to Harvard for
\$7.50 an hour



**A Gay/Straight Student Alliance
in Red Deer, Alberta**



Our Schools/Our Selves is published four times a year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 410-75 Albert St., Ottawa, ON K1P 5E7. This is Volume 13, Number 2, Issue #74 of the journal (Winter 2004). Our Schools/Our Selves is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association. It is indexed in the Canadian Magazine Index and the Alternative Press Index.

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ISSN 0840-7339

Production

Typesetting and design: Nancy Reid. Printed in Canada by Imprimerie Gagne, 80 Ave. St. Martin, Louiseville, PQ J5V 1B4. Publications Mail Registration No. 8010.

Cover Design

Nancy Reid

Front Cover Illustration

Leiza Hirtz



Page One Photo

For the Love of Learning, Ontario's Royal Commission of Learning, 1994.

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Carlo Ricci

Breaking the silence: An EQAO marker speaks out against standardized testing

My first stint of marking for the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) took place in the summer of 1998. At that time EQAO was just beginning and the atmosphere was relatively relaxed, collegial, friendly — but the marking process was flawed. When I was a teacher-marker in April 2002 the atmosphere had undergone a thorough change: it was tense, regimented, controlling. The marking process remained flawed. I am currently teaching at the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University. At the time of my most recent marking, I was teaching Secondary English. I asked for and was granted permission from my principal to take a week off teaching (8 April 2002 — 12 April 2002) to mark the grade-10 literacy test for EQAO.

The Facility

The Toronto Congress Centre is a fabulous building for trade shows; unfortunately, it is not a good place for EQAO marking. They needed to find a large and flexible space where they could feed over 1000 people lunch. On this point I need to say that

unlike my first marking experience I found the breakfasts, lunches, and snacks to be very good; nevertheless, given the budget cuts in education, I question how the enormous cost needed to feed all of these people directly benefits education. Another big expense: people are flown in or given money for mileage, housed in hotels, and given money for dinners. This adds up, particularly as they try to bring in people from different parts of the province to ensure fairness.

The Congress Centre is a noisy environment, with rooms divided by makeshift partitions that are open at the top, contributing to the noise. The lighting is challenging (people wear baseball caps due to the glare on the screen of our Personal Digital Assistant that we use to score our booklets. The PDA, I'm sure, monitors when we log in, how many books we mark and so on). The support staff uses a wireless network to collect data. A huge warehouse accommodates the four booklets each of the 142,072 students uses — a total of over a half million booklets in all. There is a standard lunch hour — with guest speakers (another expense, presumably) — because it would be even noisier if the breaks were staggered. There is security 24 hours a day, and all bags and coats are required to be checked to ensure that no booklet will be smuggled out of the building (an easy thing for any marker who decided to do so).

8 April 2002

On this the first day, we could sit anywhere and are asked to be comfortable. Over the noise from surrounding groups our group leader outlines specific rules about attendance, punctuality, no drinks, only tap water — and sets a militant tone by asking one woman to get rid of her juice and waiting for her to throw out the full bottle. The rationale: student papers could be rendered illegible if smudged. We are then introduced to each other, and the group leader assures us we are going to be a wonderful and productive group. Attendance is picked up every day by a runner at 10:00 a.m. If we arrive after 10:00 a.m. it is up to us to correct our attendance at the information desk.

If markers live more than 90 km away they are set up in a hotel room. One person is 2 km short of the 90 km limit and has to drive in everyday. Because of traffic the drive takes two hours.

The woman sitting next to me shared her feelings about the negative impact of standardized testing — a feeling, I was later to find out, that many markers share. She told me that she knew about instances when teachers or schools were blamed when students performed poorly on the grade three EQAO test. She mentioned an instance where marks were skewed because four students were exempted from the test and all four would have likely scored a level four on the test.

Our group leader gives us binders that we cannot write in and for which we are responsible containing training papers and anchor papers, many of which we cannot read because of poor photocopying. We are given a form to record our document number, and “post it” notes to grade our training papers. We then share and discuss our assessment decisions with others and connect them to the EQAO expectations. We are told not to take breaks other than those scheduled. We are informed that as the regular bathrooms are always packed we would do better to use the portables.

The woman next to me shares a story about her experience marking the opinion piece for EQAO last year, where students were to write three paragraphs. By the end of the week markers were told that if students repeated/copied the question it was now to be counted as one of the three required paragraphs. Clearly, there are serious concerns about consistency between papers graded earlier and papers graded later. However, we are told that this is a literacy test and we are not to approach it as English teachers. (In fact, those marking the reading section do not have to be teachers. The rationale — I believe — is that the responses are rigid and therefore training as a teacher is not a requirement.) And because the papers have already been through the “holistic marking” stage, we are going to mark one out of every four booklets. But although our rubrics are different from last week's markers, if there are substantial problems due to this evaluation technique the papers will be reexamined.

Supporting Our Schools Building Our Future



Which of these statements make you proud?

- Toronto has an international reputation as a successful city, known for its diversity.
- Dedicated and caring education workers and educators have played a major part in Toronto's success.
- Our schools are leaders in teaching International Languages, English as a Second Language (ESL) and providing quality Basic Adult Education and Literacy programs.
- Our public school system is being torn down by a provincial government that **DOES NOT CARE.**

We're proud of what we've **BUILT**.
We'll fight to **DEFEND** it.

**YOUR INVOLVEMENT
MAKES A DIFFERENCE!**

*WE MUST NOT LET THIS
GOVERNMENT TEAR DOWN
WHAT TOOK SO MANY
YEARS TO BUILD!*



Local 4400, Canadian Union of Public Employees

Students' Task

Students have to write a summary, a series of paragraphs expressing an opinion, a news report, and an information paragraph. The summary is to be between 100-200 words, the opinion piece is to be a series of three paragraphs (introduction, body and conclusion), and the news report is to follow a newspaper format.

As one of our first tasks we are asked to summarize the same piece of writing that the students are asked to summarize. My quick and half-hearted attempt at writing the summary reads as follows:

73.7 million T-shirts are purchased each year. The average North American owns 25. T-shirts have gone from being used as underwear to outerwear. T-shirts are now used to support/advertise for manufacturers of t-shirts. This practice needs to stop. T-shirts need to be used as rags for washing our 1.7 million cars and not to help support manufacturers.

After rereading my clever summary I checked the EQAO instructions and am mortified to discover that I (a former English teacher, now with a PhD) did not fulfill the criteria as structured by EQAO. Still I remain convinced that my piece is an excellent summary. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that in my summary I was non-compliant, too creative. EQAO expects the summaries to include the main idea (although what this is for any piece of writing is clearly debatable) and at least two important details to support it. I am informed that another flaw in my summary is that I did not say specifically that the article is about how we need to "get rid of the T-shirt" even though this point is clearly suggested by my last sentence. It is interesting to note that whether the student needed to explicitly say "get rid of the T-shirt" for full credit is, at points, unclear to us as markers, leading to lack of consistency in the marking process.

During my 15-minute break there are large lineups to the bathroom, and a shortage of food. It is crowded and chaotic. After the break I write another summary that conforms to EQAO standards. It is not better than my first attempt but it conforms. This experience

reminds me of the impact of anxiety resulting from a timed test, and how some people need what Dr. Jack Miller at OISE/UT refers to as an incubation period: to allow an idea to sit for awhile before they

Within our cohort some people clearly spent more time, took the task more seriously, while others rushed.

Who is the better summary writer?

can write a good summary. This seems to encourage the following diagnosis: instead of recognizing that there are students who write half-heartedly (as I did) just to get the activity over with, because of the artificial test-taking conditions EQAO would consider these students non-literate. There is no opportunity to revise, penalizing those students who have learned that writing is about process.

Within our cohort some people clearly spent more time, took the task more seriously, while others rushed. Who is the better summary writer? So the question remains: does this task gauge a student's ability to write or does it gauge how much they care, or how anxious they are at having to write such a high stakes test?

As markers we are asked to mark only for the main idea, supporting detail, and spelling, but not knowing the student whose work you are marking makes you an unfair judge of his/her work. According to the EQAO the summary has to say get rid of the T-shirt, and uses as justification for this the "fact" messages on T-shirts are either unattractive or meaningless. If the student goes beyond the EQAO's main point and suggests people should boycott Indonesian manufacturer's goods, for example — a substantive and perfectly valid comment — according to the EQAO's criteria that response would be inaccurate. If students decide that this piece is about the popularity of T-shirts (and according to the test directions support this main idea with two supporting points) their response is inaccurate because it does not correspond with the EQAO's chosen main point. Likewise, if they talk about the history of the T-shirt they are also — according to the EQAO — wrong.

There is, however, a contrary argument that students may use to support why we should keep the T-shirt. The article says that the

T-shirt has been used as great democratic portable billboards, presumably urging others to resist injustices. I, for one, support a T-shirt urging a boycott and ban of EQAO and therefore, believe that we should not get rid of all T-shirts. This argument of course will result in my failure on this component of the rubric. In short, there is only one right way to summarize this article and EQAO has the answer; even though, clearly other readings, including oppositional ones, are possible.

One fellow marker makes a fundamental point about how we cannot avoid the subjectivity of the marker. In her last session, because of further reflection and a new perspective, the markers were asked to discard several anchor papers that were suddenly deemed inaccurate — despite the assurances given by the director about the fairness and consistency of the process because of careful planning. Later, I would witness similar incidents: our group leader would instruct us to go into our binder, rip out a certain section that we had been using as a guide and throw it out.

During lunch I speak to some of the reading component markers who are incensed not only at the obvious bias in the test, but at having been instructed not to speak about their frustrations outside of the room. One question on the test is about various sports and the answer is that basketball is the better sport because people in wheelchairs can play it. The suggestion is that people in wheelchairs cannot play other sports — clearly a false and "ablest" assumption.

Consistency and fairness continue to be issues of concern. In our room, on several occasions we disagree about the accuracy of the anchor papers and my solution is to side in favour of the student. We also disagree with EQAO's answers to some of the reliability and orientation papers. In many cases, one marker would consider the same paper as accurate, while another would mark it as inaccurate.

So the question remains: does this task gauge a student's ability to write or does it gauge how much they care, or how anxious they are at having to write such a high stakes test?

Other cohorts are using other rubrics to look at, for example, tone: did the student stick to the summary or put in some of his/her own thoughts? They also look at organization and the use

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of connecting words. We, once again, are only looking at main idea, supporting detail, and spelling. This means that the piece we mark is marked by another group looking for different things and using a different rubric. The process is very mechanical.

Over lunch another person is upset at the rigidity of the responses expected. She told me how a question asks why in the piece is there a short sentence that describes the weather. The answer that many students gave is that the sentence is short because details about the weather follow. This is an answer

that many of the markers in her group agree should be accepted. EQAO says it is wrong, and that the sentence is short because by being short it adds emphasis.

As markers we do not know who passes and who fails, and only mark for a specific skill. Possibly this gives EQAO more flexibility in shifting the pass/fail as they see fit.

One purpose of the EQAO analytic marking is that if students fail they can get specific feedback. In theory, that is. Unfortunately, the format and timing of the test renders the information students do get about their results virtually useless. The students do not get to see their test, only a summary sheet that gives them statistical information. In many cases I would be hard pressed to rationalize to a parent or student why their son/daughter scored as they did with the test even if the test was in front of me. Often marking is just an intuitive decision. And in spite of the importance of immediate feedback, students receive their results months after writing the test.

9 April 2002

We are reprimanded because people are spending too much time talking (often trying to get consensus on a student's paper) and not enough time marking and are told to limit our talking — although we still have significant disagreement about how an answer should be marked.

To accommodate “special needs” students, they are given various modifications. For example, there are yellow booklets with black writing to aid students who had trouble reading black on white.

For some of the papers I am marking the students have the correct words copied down from the text, but it is questionable whether they understand the meaning of what they wrote because they simply copied the “relevant” pieces directly from the text. The impact of standardized testing is becoming evident. Students are scoring high on mechanics and low on creative and critical thinking. For example, spelling is high and main idea is low. I attribute this largely to the limited range of response that EQAO accepts as accurate.

In the afternoon we are given our reliability paper to score. (Every morning we score an orientation paper and every afternoon we score a reliability paper to see and measure how consistent our scoring is.)

10 April 2002

Today I had my newspaper confiscated, and although they suggest that it is for security reasons, we know that they are worried about productivity.

It is sunny outside so the light shining in is making it very difficult to see the PDA screen. The markers are complaining about the rubric being flawed and how we need to rely on our intuition. Some yellow booklets were coming through with bigger writing: another modification. Some students typed and stapled their responses to their booklets.

Many of the markers are frustrated about being forced to slot students into the limited options offered by the rubric. Left on their own, teachers could make better anecdotal comments.

The phenomenology of marking is becoming apparent. At a different time we would have scored some of these papers differently. If a parent or teacher asked me why I gave a particular student an “accurate” instead of a “supporting” often my response would have to be that it is an arbitrary choice.

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whereas with rubric B if there is insufficient evidence we have to categorize it as “not from the original,” even if it happens to contain information from the original question, because we do not have a category for insufficient evidence. This is a serious flaw, and creates problems for the student feedback sheet. They will be told that their information is not from the original question when it is. What they should be told instead is that insufficient evidence is the problem. If the rubric is changed to reflect this flaw, what does it do to the goal of consistency from year to year?

We are now instructed to look at rough notes regardless of whether they are in sentence form and regardless of whether the student directs us to look there — changed yet again.

Some people are still relying on the training papers we were given on the first day to make a decision on a particular student. Our

At 11:30 on the Tuesday we are asked to change the way we mark, and what we are now able to score as original work. In some cases we are told that if rough notes are in sentence form we can now mark them — this is yet another change in practice.

We are using “rubric B” (this rubric focuses on main idea, supporting detail and spelling). Another group is using “rubric A” (it focuses on tone, connecting words and so on). There is a gap in rubric B that is not in rubric A. For example, if there is insufficient evidence, rubric A allows the markers to categorize the student with “insufficient evidence.”

group leader is concerned about the accuracy of doing this and suggested we do not rely on these but on our anchor papers.

Recently the government has introduced a grade 12 course that those who fail the EQAO literacy test can take, and if they pass it, it will count as part of their diploma requirement in place of the grade ten-test. To date (July 2003) well over 100,000 students have failed the EQAO grade-ten “high stakes” test, pressuring the government to offer an alternative. Since teachers will ultimately make the determination through this grade twelve course, why are we spending hundreds of millions of dollars (if we add up all the money and human resources spent to support EQAO and the money spent by boards of education and schools) on EQAO annually?

Analytic marking is done using a summary rubric, and holistic marking focuses on the whole piece of writing. A holistic marker may ask him/herself the following question: Do I understand what the students wrote? The piece may have flawless sentences but it lacks organization, so the whole is greater than the parts. With the analytic rubric, the student is informed that he/she has problems in for example, three areas: spelling, main idea, and tone.

The EQAO reading portion of the test is based on the curriculum expectations, it is analytically scored, and acts as a diagnostic tool since the students get information returned to them. The students are asked a series of multiple choice questions, discrete questions, and questions that require integration and assimilation. The questions are expensive to develop and so they are not given away but banked for future use.

11 April 2002

We are informed that they are pleased with our efficiency and productivity. We are told that there is a problem with how we are scoring in the area of supporting detail, so they are encouraging us to look at the anchor papers for guidance. We are expected to decide what the student has written as the main idea (often an arbitrary task) and to see if the student has two connecting details to go along with this. This is difficult to score because in some cases a student has the right main idea but no supporting details for it. At the same

time, the student will have another main idea that is inaccurate according to EQAO but the student has correct supporting detail. So, in the first instance, the marker can choose to grade the student as accurate for main idea and no supporting detail or inaccurate for main idea but with supporting detail. What would benefit the student most? What did the student intend to do? This is yet another concern and flaw in the process and with rubrics.

12 April 2002

The tension is mounting. The group leader has clearly been instructed to ensure that we start marking earlier, and spend less time discussing our concerns, confusions, and inconsistent marking of the morning orientation paper. We are still having fundamental disagreements about whether a piece should be scored as accurate or inaccurate. It is now Friday, one more day left of marking, and there are still problems with how we score supporting detail.

I would love to have the students in front of me to ask them questions about their responses — it would make the process so much easier and much fairer.

As we go along and discuss how we would score a piece, the subjectivity of the process becomes increasingly obvious. The group leader has each of us mark several papers with her to ensure that we are consistent; but through this process it becomes increasingly clear that the students' score is contingent on who is the marker. In almost every case when the group leader challenges a decision, the markers — some of who have taught for 30 years and who have marked for EQAO five times or more — must score according to her judgment, as if she is "correct" and the others are "incorrect." This is such a farce. A false sense of objectivity is being mythologized and the public is being fooled. We are part of the machine.

We as markers are constantly being told different things. For example, sometimes we are told that if the student gets the gist of the main point ("get rid of the T-shirts") then the student response is accurate; today we are told that it needs to be stated explicitly to be accurate. This is Friday, marking ends Saturday, and we are still confused. As I increasingly see the pointlessness of the exer-

cise, it is becoming harder and harder to mark. Fatigue is setting in and my concentration is waning. After reading and scoring over 600 booklets so far this week it's hard to focus, especially under these conditions.

And it becomes clear that there is no real respect for the judgment of the markers. EQAO decides the correct reading, and theoretically could keep sending the booklets through until the desired consensus is achieved. After all they go to great lengths to try and train us to mark in the same way — whichever way seems to be correct depending on which day it is.

Tensions are high. People are questioning, challenging, and are frustrated by the disagreements. In fact, the educational officer is coming into our room because of the anger people are feeling. People are visibly angry at the lack of consistency about how things are suppose to be marked. What the group leader is telling us to do is inconsistent with the anchor papers we are to use as our guide — yet another flaw in the process.

We get no straight answers about, for example, whether a blank should be scored as not from the original. Can we use the students' rough notes or not, or only when the students direct us to? What about when they have a partial thought? and on and on. The stress level is high.

We are told that they agree that the rubric is flawed but that it would be unfair to change it halfway through the process. But if they change it for next year can we compare this year's results to next year's results? And if they do not change it, will it not remain flawed?

Whether or not they admit this rubric is flawed, the reality is that we are being trained to use this rubric — and it is limiting. In fact, EQAO's claim of statistical consistency virtually depends on this limitation: markers have only so many choices in which to slot students. And often it's not a question of the "right" choice, but of the only choice. We have been given an impossible job to try and fit over 140,000 students' writing into a limited and limiting rubric.

Some people are invited to return and continue marking for week 5. They chose only those who are considered productive and accurate, in other words, those that readily conformed to the EQAO expectations.

13 April 2002

One significant problem that I see in marking the summary section of the test is that EQAO has a limited view of writing; namely that there is only one main idea per piece of writing. It is Saturday now and we find it hard to keep our productivity and reliability up. I also felt like a victim of double speak — EQAO insists that reliability and accuracy is high, but I question how this is the case when we in the room disagree constantly. At first I thought that this is an anomaly, but later I learned that this is a common complaint in all rooms. The trouble is that this process is informed by a structural approach to reading and writing that assumes that there is one way to read a piece; rather, than a post-structural approach that assumes multiple readings.

The phenomenology of test-taking also needs to be considered. If you give students the same test at a different time the students could perform in a different way, so it is unfair to have such a high stakes test attached to such an unbelievably flawed process. We cannot ignore the context and the baggage that students may be bringing with them. For example, when my wife was in university a professor forced her to write an exam the day her mother died. At that time, being a nineteen-year-old in a weakened state, she complied. How could this experience not have an impact on her test-taking competency?

Ultimately, EQAO is part of a process that streams people into career choices. If you want to be a hairstylist or an electrician and fail to pass the EQAO test (or now the proposed grade 12 course), you do not get a high school diploma and therefore cannot become a hairdresser — in spite of performing well in other subjects — a job at which you might be quite skilled. Likewise, if you are extremely intelligent but do not have a command of the English language or writing and therefore cannot pass the EQAO grade-ten test, you are prevented from pursuing many career options.

Carlo Ricci teaches in the Education Department at Nipissing University in North Bay.

Larry Kuehn

The creeping privatization of B.C. public schools

A creeping privatization of the public schools is taking place in B.C., with the creation of School District Business Companies as one of the tools. Education Minister Cristy Clark sees education as one big market, with students and parents being consumers who make choices. She told students in Cowichan on the day school opened that “we need to provide choices for kids just like they do in private schools.”

When one thinks of school as a private market rather than as a community good, priorities shift. This can be seen in the decision of secondary schools in North Vancouver not to accept students from their neighbourhood because places were reserved for paying international students.

It can also lead to what might be called the “X-filing” of the B.C. curriculum. Vancouver was the setting of the filming of the *X-files* for five years, but Vancouver was always disguised as various American cities, because the U.S. was the primary market for the show. Similarly, during the consultations on the new B.C. graduation program, one of the submissions urged that decisions not be made that would make B.C. less attractive for paying international