DR. EDWARD H. BEHRMAN

State Standards and the Teaching and Testing of Literature

When I began teaching high school English in the Philadelphia public schools in 1969, we had come to the end of a pedagogical era in which strict adherence to a scope-and-sequence guide was expected. Previously the district curriculum guide required, for instance, teaching Julius Caesar to all tenth graders in March. Instead, we were entering a new generation of organic teaching, fostering classrooms responsive to the perceived needs and interests of the students.

Although there was still a general sense that teaching English involved the language arts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, there were no strong mandates as to exactly what kind of reading (or writing, speaking, and listening) should be taught. Under this emerging philosophy, an English teacher was free to forego the traditional literature anthology, novels, or plays formerly used at the grade level, and replace them with non-literary reading material taken from the daily newspaper, magazines, everyday documents, or popular teen fiction. While it is difficult to imagine a chemistry teacher removing the periodic table or a geometry teacher removing the coordinate axes from the curriculum, many well-intended English teachers did in fact remove the study of American, British, and world literature from the high school English program. "My students can;t read it, and it's not relevant to their lives ," were common refrains heard at department meetings in defense of English-sans-literature.

Other districts across the US similarly adopted the organic approach to teaching English. In one sense, it was an exciting way to teach, making the teacher a collaborator instead of a dispenser of knowledge. The teacher was now a curriculum developer, not simply a curriculum implementer. Yet, for those who believed that development of literary knowledge, comprehension, and appreciation was a critical component of English learning, these organic classrooms were considered to be diverting or "watering down" the curriculum.

Since in many districts there was no longer a consistent English curriculum, it became more difficult to assess student learning across classes. Too often, schoolwide, districtwide, or statewide attempts to measure what students had learned in high school English devolved into administering a test of generic reading ability rather than assessing literary understanding. Alan Purves noted that " the nation s testing programs devote a great deal of energy to testing reading and writing but they fail to treat literature and cultural literacy seriously" (Purves 1990, p. 2). By 1990 it was reported that only five of the 50 states and D.C. were testing literature as a separate area (Purves 1990). Literature was tested as a " subset of reading" (Purves, Li, & Shirk

1990, p. 1), not an important domain of study in its own right. In a generic reading test, the student is presented a series of short passages drawn from a variety of subject areas (e.g., history, geography, earth science, perhaps fiction) and asked to respond to questions (usually multiple-choice) measuring literal comprehension, inference, and vocabulary. A student s understanding and application of literary concepts (such as theme, imagery, symbolism) is not assessed, nor is ability to analyze or evaluate specific authors, works, or literary movements.

Generic reading ability is a measurement construct that appears inconsistent with what we now know about the reading comprehension process. Schema theory proposes that reading is the active coordination of new information from the text with existing information (Rumelhart 1981). Further, research in cognitive psychology indicates that reading comprehension, as a measure of cognitive ability, may depend more on factors specific to a knowledge domain, or area of inquiry, than on domain-general factors (Byrnes 1995). Therefore, a student's comprehension in one discipline (e.g., literature) may be higher, or lower, than in another discipline (e.g., history or science) based on prior content knowledge and content-specific strategic knowledge. Judith Langer of the Center for English Learning and Achievement argues that "there are basic distinctions in the ways readers (and writers) orient themselves toward making sense when engaging in the activity for literary or discursive purposes" (1994, p. 2). In her view literary comprehension requires a link between text and prior knowledge of humanity, causing readers to reflect upon their own lives and the lives of others. Readers may interpret literature from a variety of viewpoints.

Thus, literary comprehension requires what she calls a "horizon of possibilities ," a process fundamentally diferent from the comprehension of other academic text, where the focus is more on knowledge acquisition. In discursive reading, the reader attempts to gain a sense of the main idea, which serves as a point of reference unless refuted or modified by subsequent text. In literary reading, there is rarely a fixed point of reference, as the "horizon continually shifts for the reader. Literary comprehension is therefore reflective and interpretive. Because a student's comprehension of text is influenced by the nature of the content read, generic reading tests that yield a single overall reading score may be misleading or even invalid" (Johnston 1984).

There is of course a reciprocal relationship between what we test for and what we teach for. It is not surprising that a recent survey of state coordinators of language arts (Applebee 1997) found that the issue of most concern was assessment, mentioned by 66 percent of the respondents. As we place a greater emphasis on the testing of literary learning, as opposed to generic reading, it is likely that the teaching of literature will fully regain its status. Fortunately, the curriculum standards movement now sweeping across the US brings with it the possibility of reforming both what we teach in English and how we measure what students learn in English. Curriculum standards re-

quire standards-based assessment, aligning the testing program with what is actually taught in the classroom. If literary comprehension is included in a state's curriculum standards, then literary comprehension must be tested as part of the statewide assessment, which in turn will encourage districts to promote literary learning.

California's (1998) new English-Language Arts Content Standards, adopted in November 1997, exemplify a state that has recently made a strong commitment to the teaching of literature. The California standards make a clear distinction between reading of informational and literary text. Included under the Reading standards is "narrative analysis of grade-appropriate text for grades K-2" and"literary response and analysis for grades 3-12." The standards are specific enough to inform not only classroom practice but test development as well. For example, in grades nine and ten the general literature standard requires that "Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in-depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes" (Grade 9-10, Standard 3.0). There then follow twelve more detailed literature standards, such as "Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text (e.g., internal and external conflicts, motivations, relationships, influences) and explain the way those interactions affect the plot" (Grades 9-10, Standard 3.3). Table 1 presents all twelve literature standards for Grades 9-10.

Once literature standards are defined, those standards may be assessed using a combination of teacher-made, district-made, and state-administered tests. States such as California that recognize literary comprehension as a significant and distinct strand of English learning must develop standards-based tests to measure literary comprehension, not generic reading ability. A standards-based test of literary learning should measure both (a) knowledge of literary terms, devises, genres, authors, works, periods; and (b) ability to apply that knowledge to interpret, critically analyze, and evaluate a literary work. The challenge to statewide assessment is how to reliably, validly, and efficiently include both levels of literary learning in a statewide test. Tests should include fixed-response items to measure convergent thinking (" In which line is an example of hyperbole?") and open-response items to measure divergent thinking (" How is the theme of the story related to contemporaneous social events?").

For example, to measure literary learning, Alberta's Diploma Examination in English requires students to read several literary pieces and respond in a multiple-choice format. A recent examination included an excerpt from "Vulcan" by Peter Behrens, a poem "The fish with a coin in its mouth" by Alden Nowlan, an excerpt from "Battle for Your Brain" by John Leland, and a short story "The Huntsman" byAnton Chekhov (Alberta 1997). In addition, as part of its writing assessment, Alberta also requires students to read a literary selection and then write a personal response.

In conclusion, the standards movement, which brings promise that the teaching of literature will again attain prominence in the secondary English curriculum, must also bring standards-based testing that encourages the teaching of literature and accurately reflects what students are being taught in English class. English teachers and English educators are urged to adopt a credo based on the following principles:

- District and state curriculum standards should recognize literature as an important strand of English-language arts.
- Any districtwide or statewide test to assess achievement in secondary English should be directly aligned with the English-language arts standards.
- A standards-based test to assess literary learning should not comingle literary comprehension with comprehension in other subject areas, as is common on generic reading tests.
- To measure comprehension in other subject areas, separate content-specific comprehension tests should be developed.

Table 1. California Curriculum Standards for Literature (Grades 9-10)
Source: California Department of Education (1998), English-Language Arts Content Standards

3.0 Literary Response and Analysis (Grades Nine and Ten)

Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They include in-depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes. The selections in Recommended Literature, Grades Nine Through Twelve illustrate the quality and complexity of the materials to be read by students.

Structural Features of Literature (Grades Nine and Ten)

3.1 Articulate the relationship between the expressed purposes and the characteristics of different forms of dramatic literature (e.g., comedy, tragedy, drama, dramatic monologue).

3.2 Compare and contrast the presentation of a similar theme or topic across genres to explain how the selection of genre shapes the theme or topic.

Narrative Analysis of Grade-Level-Appropriate Text

3.3 Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text (e.g., internal and external conflicts, motivations, relationships, influences) and explain the way those interactions affect the plot.

3.4 Determine character's traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

3.5 Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.

3.6 Analyze and trace an author's development of time and sequence, including the use of complex literary devices (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks).

3.7 Recognize and understand the significance of various literary devices, including figurative language, imagery, allegory, and symbolism, and explain their appeal.

3.8 Interpret and evaluate the impact of ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and incongruities in a text.

3.9 Explain how voice, persona, and the choice of a narrator affect characterization and the tone, plot, and credibility of a text.

3.10 Identify and describe the function of dialogue, scene designs, soliloquies, asides, and character foils in dramatic literature.

Literary Criticism (Grades Nine and Ten)

3.11 Evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism. (Aesthetic approach)

3.12 Analyze the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical period. (Historical approach)

Works Cited

Alberta Department of Education. English 30: Diploma Examination Results Examiner's Report for January 1997. Edmonton: Author. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 408 602, 1997.

Applebee, Arthur N. Issues in the English Language Arts: A Survey of Teachers and State Coordinators. Albany, NY: Center on English Learning and Achievement, 1997.

Byrnes, James P. "Domain Specificity and the Logic of Using General Ability as an Independent Variable or Covariate." Merrill-Palmer California Department of Education. English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through grade Twelve. Sacramento, CA: Author, 1998.

Johnston, Peter. "Prior Knowledge and Reading Comprehension Test Bias. " Reading Research Quarterly 19 (1984): 219-239.

Langer, Judith A. A Response-Based Approach to Reading Literature. (Report Series 6.7). Albany, NY: National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, 1994.

Purves, Alan C. Testing Literature: The Current State of Affairs. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 321 261, 1990.

Purves, Alan, Hongru Li, and Margaret Shirk. Prototype Measures of the Domain of Learning in Literature. (Report Series 3.3). Albany, NY: Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, 1990.

Rumelhart, David E. Schemata: The Building Blocks of Learning. Comprehension and Teaching: Research Reviews. Ed. James T. Guthrie. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1981: 3-26.

Dr. Edward Behrman teaches in the School of Education at National University in Inglewood, California