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Editorial: A Horse Is a Horse, of Course?

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A Horse Is a Horse, of Course?

Faced with a predicament caused by his institution's reliance on computerized-writing assessment, Stuart Brooks sought a strategy that would assist his students. He writes, "I started out trying to teach the students to become better writers and got caught up with the . . . obsession of teaching to the test. Once we cracked the code, the test was very easy to beat." The "code-breaker" is what Brooks terms a "triple-nickel essay," a formula that his students practiced under his guidance until they were experts at passing the writing test. The situation seemed surreal enough to Brooks that he situates his experience by analogy to the classic Kubrick nightmare atomic bomb apocalypse film in his essay's title, adopting the appellation of "Dr. Test Cracker" and recounting how he "stopped worrying" and took action (see page 276 in this issue).

Sadly, the situation isn't really surreal. In fact, it's all too common in higher education at this time. Brooks's essay seemed to invite a conversation, and so I reached out to two-year faculty across the country asking for their take on "Dr. Test Cracker," his quandary, and his solution. We thus present several Readers Write pieces that offer varied perspectives on the meaning of what Sharon Mitchler terms Brooks's "cautionary tale." And, interestingly enough, these writers also reach for analogies to help explain the surreal circumstances of an assessment system where the "triple nickel" is not the latest fourth and ten defensive formation in the NFL but instead is the new configuration in the basic writing curriculum.

Thus, Peter Dow Adams reads Brooks's story as a modern-day "modest proposal," while Eric Bateman draws upon *The Matrix* trilogy to ground his reading of the tale. James Freeman likens the conflict between writing assessment by computer program and writing assessment by expert instructors to the mythic battle between John Henry and the steel-driving machine. To Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt, the whole affair is reminiscent of the McDonald's dollar menu.

For me, the entire series of commentaries and Brooks's narrative summoned memories of my days as a Victorian lit grad student and sent me back to Charles Dickens. You may recall the scene in *Hard Times* when Sissy Jupe is asked by her stern schoolmaster to define a horse. Unable to do so, Sissy's classmate Bitzer offers this definition: "Quadruped Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisors. Sheds coat in the spring; in marsh countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by

marks in mouth.”To which Mr. Gradgrind says, “Now girl number twenty . . . you know what a horse is.”

If there’s one thing Dickens is not as a writer, it is a surrealist, and there is nothing fanciful about this description of the deadening effects that modern education can have on a child’s imagination. The analogy of this scene to the computer-assessed writing experience that Stuart Brooks’s students had to face seems enlightening to me. Bitzer’s definition of a horse may be accurate, but it doesn’t breathe or move like a horse. The “triple-nickel” essay may well win the day, but it doesn’t breathe or move like actual writing.

Grant Wiggins told us twenty-five years ago, “A school *should* ‘teach to the test.’” He then clarified, “The catch is that the test must offer students a genuine intellectual challenge” (704). It seems abundantly clear to me that any writing test that can be passed by writing a “triple-nickel” essay is hardly a “genuine intellectual challenge.” The implications of a situation where cracking the test code as Stuart Brooks has done seem worth exploring. I hope you will find these five responses to Brooks’s tale as insightful and thought-provoking as do I. They may be five in number, but I am confident that they all have more than five paragraphs consisting of five sentences each. Not even worth counting...

Works Cited

Wiggins, Grant. “A True Test: Toward More Authentic and Equitable Assessment.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 70.9 (1989): 703–13. Print.

—J.S.

TYCA OFFICERS TO BE ELECTED

The Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), the national organization of two-year college English faculty within NCTE, has named the following candidates for the position of **Associate Chair** in the spring elections (one to be elected; term to expire in 2016): **Jeff Andelora**, Mesa Community College, Arizona; **Margaret Barrow**, Borough of Manhattan Community College, New York.
