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**UNDOING THE TIDY TALE OF ACCOUNTABILITY:
A REVIEW OF TOM FOX'S *DEFENDING ACCESS: A CRITIQUE OF
STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION***

1.1 In *Defending access: A critique of standards in higher education*, Tom Fox argues that "standards" for writing work against the democratic purposes for colleges. Through detailed historical, rhetorical, and empirical critiques in five chapters, he demonstrates the key link of such "standards" to subversion of access to college for students of color and other under-represented groups. In his analysis, fox helps to connect the dots to provide a bigger picture of what is going on in the pervasive "standards" movement.

Standards as a Means of Exclusion

2.1 For openers, Fox examines the conservative backlash that emerged when diverse students began attending college during the second half of the twentieth century. William Bennett's claim that "standards were swept aside," (1992, p. 156) illustrates the use of the word "standards" as an odd singular-plural which suggests a have-or-have-not quality--"like morals or values." (p. 3). This rhetorical push towards standardization appears also in D'Souza's lectures on merit, where Fox sees the individualist "web of values that inhibits collectivity" (p. 5). These now-familiar reactive notions are a historical and individualistic. What deeply disturbs Fox, though, is how shrewd rhetorical strategies hide the real target: "Their critique of falling or abandoned standards is always accompanied by a critique of affirmative action and multiculturalism" (p. 5). In this book, Fox ties concerns with standards to attempts to undermine democratic access for diverse students, actions motivated by "the wish for a [mythic] homogeneous past." He urges throughout that "unless we rigorously examine the assumptions about standards that we hold" (p. 3), educators may unwittingly become complicit, compromising our commitments to economic and social access for students.

2.2 Fox elaborates the historical and social uses of standards "as a means of exclusion" (p. 18) in the "troubled history" of the development of college composition, alongside the history of meanings that literacy held for African Americans. As Harvard introduced remedial composition as a means of socializing non-elite students into "good academic manners" (Miller, 1991, p. 66), those marked as needy were immigrants, Jews, working classes. These standards were touted as a necessary means of nationalistic unity. In a separate, parallel history of African American writing Fox shows literacy which began as purposeful, collective political practice—even emancipation—diverted towards domesticating

literacy, through acculturation into abstract institutional standards, to the "academic manners of the elite" (p. 39). In both histories, he argues, literacy was undermined by elevating standards of style, individual character, and morality.

2.3 In the early 1970s these two histories met in the Open Admission movement in the City University of New York. Many new students of color went to college, and fears of this change again elevated "standards" to work against "ethnic integration" (p. 42). Fox's analysis of the rhetoric of that time in Chapter 3 exposes the connection between standards of literacy and what appears to be morality, even cleanliness. Students of color with their "problems" of verb endings, for example, were portrayed as weak in *the* English language. In this social-political context the "basic writer" was born, overdetermining and underestimating the literacy of students of color and working class, non-native speakers, Native Americans, and Chicanos. These different folk were contained in a marginalized space of basic writing classes where literacy was reduced to a set of skills apart from intention, meaning, action.

2.4 In the remainder of the book, Fox unpacks the tensions between democratic access and exclusion through standards--in several ways. He puts a human face on students disserved in these institutional spaces by closely looking at the experiences and writing of Monica, Leon and many others, to demonstrate the inadequacy of theories that look merely at language skills and mechanics, or cultural styles. For instance, he examines the successful academic work done by Leon's exploration of his own oppositional identity as he reflects critically on the complex topic of the conflicted racial discourses he lives. Mechanical errors aside, Leon's text is more sophisticated than the simplistically unified texts that a decontextualized basic writing skills pedagogy promotes (the topic sentence with details that fit the single controlling idea). Leon's essay tackles his messy reality with academic power. Yet the gatekeeping function of basic writing standards could exclude Leon based on *its* limited, tidy version of academic literacy.

2.5 To illustrate coordinated action for working against ideologies which exclude students of color, Fox provides a collective case study of three writing programs at his own university. He argues the need to avoid complicity with dominant ideologies by examining rigorously the assumptions embedded in local rhetoric about standards, in order to use leadership positions for resistive practices. While such work is local and cannot fix all oppressive structures and racist exclusions, Fox shows how rhetorical vigilance against ideologies which limit access can over time offer opportunities to recast agendas, provide forums, and subtly transform institutions.

2.6 In his own pedagogy, Fox teaches writing as a means to resist the opposition of standards and access. Through stories of his African American students, he demonstrates a pedagogical framework for critiquing inequities, commonplace assumptions, complex issues, contradictions; discussion which includes history, power, conflict as part of the work of the class; historicizing student writers as members of a literate African American community with a tradition of writing for social action; resisting racist and sexist actions which silence and exclude. Moving away from notions of "mysterious ailments" in their language to social action in their writing, his students begin to reconceive academic prose as potentially liberatory and powerful. In the end, Fox recommends that teachers construct such transformative pedagogies, stick around to show students how to grapple with cultural difference and racism to create standards *for* access--and then let students show the way.

Relevance for the K-12 Standards Movement

3.1 Although Fox focuses his critique of standards on higher education, much of his argument is quite relevant to the standards movement in K-12 education. Concerns about minority access to college could

well begin years before the freshman year—in elementary and grade school where hopes for higher education are shaped or dashed.

Standards creating domesticating literacy

3.2 In particular, the reduction of literacy to narrowly defined writing standards in higher-education mirrors what is happening in the public schools. For example, in an interview study of almost 400 teachers in 5 states and analysis of state standards and the writing tests derived from them, Hillocks (2002) concludes that state writing tests have a generally harmful effect on the way students are taught to write. The investment of millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of hours of teacher and student time for standards-based assessments of writing, he finds, encourages teachers to focus on simplistic structures for writing (what goes where) rather than on strategies of inquiry for thinking through problems (p. 201). Although in state rhetoric the goals are "raising standards" and "achieving excellence," Hillocks carefully documents that the standards underlying state writing tests do not represent excellence and that tests derived from them do not detect excellence.

3.3 A longitudinal study of New York English teachers' response to the standards-based writing assessment (Miller, 2002, 2003) provides evidence that over time in many schools, test-prep practice developed into a kind of rote writing, a paint-by-numbers composing with such explicit patterning that students would have "no questions." Student thinking about the topic in a timed test on an unfamiliar topic (e.g., medieval cooking or Suzuki violin) was construed as a disadvantage. In one teacher's critique, the writing test in his working class school seemed like "[a] dog show —with students trained to do specific tasks fast." Developing writing skills which can be produced for evaluation of information-processing often under timed circumstances narrows the curriculum toward a "domesticating" rather than "empowering" literacy —passivity rather than critical thinking (Anyon, 1997; Finn, 1999). The resulting texts are simplistically unified, like the ones Fox says are promoted in basic writing. Long before college, many students trained to meet state standards for tests are denied access to rich literacy. Learning to think through complex issues in talking and writing in K-12, Hillocks (2002) argues, "appears to be confined to an elite group" (p. 7).

Minority students losing access in the new discrimination

3.4 Despite eloquent arguments against "one-shot, timed, writing tests" the "ideas of acontextual standards as fair, equal, reasonable" have become commonsense institutional notions—even though "these tests typically fail nonnative speakers of English—African Americans, Latinos and other groups seeking access to higher education" (Fox, p. 112).

3.5 Similarly in K-12 education, such centralized standards and testing of writing create many losses for underrepresented minority students. New inequalities for K-12 minority students are part of the "contradictions of reform" (McNeil, 2000) rhetorically aimed at "excellence" for all students. McNeil studied the widely emulated standards and accountability system in Texas, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TASS), which is, in part, a test of writing. Her analysis reveals "the new discrimination" in the standardized system with "the appearance of sameness to mask persistent inequalities" (p. 731). Like Fox, McNeil creates sensitive portraits of highly successful teaching and learning among students of color—in urban magnet schools where, for example, Latino students examine Gary Soto's poetry and trace initiation themes in *Bless Me, Ultima*. However, pervasive, expensive test-prep books are displacing substantive curriculum, chiefly in African American and Latino schools. These under-resourced schools invest in test-prep books to raise test scores—the only means in this accounting system of gaining more funding. The commercial TAAS test-prep materials for writing provide exercises on five-paragraph essays and exercises in mechanics (Hillocks, 2000).

Thus, in this system, a cumulative deficit grows "separating minority students from the education being provided their more privileged peers" (McNeil, 2000).

3.6 As test scores rise in Texas, underrepresented minority children are dropping out of school at increasing rates (Haney, 2000; McNeil, 2000). According to Haney,

TAAS is having a continuing adverse impact on Black and Hispanic students: Only 50% of minority students in Texas have been progressing from grade 9 to high school graduation since the initiation of the TAAS testing program. Since about 1982, the rates at which Black and Hispanic students are required to repeat grade 9 have climbed steadily, such that by the late 1990s, nearly 30% of Black and Hispanic students were "failing" grade 9. Cumulative rates of grade retention in Texas are almost twice as high for Black and Hispanic students as for White students.

Rather than bringing equity and access, McNeill argues, "Educational standardization harms teaching and learning and, over the long term, restratifies education by race and class" (McNeill, 2000, xxvii). Raising standards with no investment in equalizing resources for historically under resourced urban schools, she argues, "is no reform. It is a creative new form of discrimination." (p. 732). Such inequity harms minority children, cutting short life chances long before they have any chance of gaining access to college.

Undoing the tidy tale of accountability K-16

3.7 Given this common ground, K-16 educators working together might better uncover the hidden complexities in the tidy tale of accountability told by the national and local standards movements. Linking Tom Fox's critique of standards and access in higher education to the current scene in the public schools allows a broader story through which to unpack the historical-rhetorical motives of those who push for educational standards.

3.8 Fox traces the historical and political underpinnings of the skills view of writing, arguing that "Teaching basic skills underestimates and undermines both teachers and students" (p. 53). Representing teaching and learning as skills-based approaches narrows the purpose for teaching English/writing, brings teaching and learning under control with assumptions of neutral knowledge, pure motives, educators as technicians and a tidy tale of accountability. This skills approach is evident in K-12 state writing assessments which "control learning" and harm student writing (Hillocks, 2002).

3.9 What K-16 students need, instead, are opportunities for focused exploration of complex topics and critical reflection on the multiple discourses in which they live (e.g. home, school, work, media).

3.10 In historicizing basic writing, Fox shows how clever rhetoric masks discrimination. Uncovering the rhetoric of "raising standards" and accountability—McNeil does the same for K-12. In both analyses, the language of equity hides the intentions and assumptions of inadequacy and deficit-theories.

3.11 The notion of using a single indicator of student performance for basic-writing or school testing comes from "business-controlled management accountability systems"—so that control is away from the profession and the public (McNeil, 2000) and toward a status quo business-values system. This is the not-so-hidden politics underlying the language of standards. Fox points to the distortions of intention in the "misnamed California Civil Rights Initiative" (p. 7) which ended affirmative-action programs for women and people of color--in order to raise standards. The same distortion is evident in the misnamed No Child Left Behind documents with rhetoric "contrived specifically to place blame

directly on the children, their parents, and their teachers through this colonial model of education while perpetuating the myth of a democratic model of education" (e.g., Wilson & Segal, 2003).

3.12 Clearly, the stated intention of basic writing in colleges was to provide support for writers perceived as struggling, yet the resulting stratification of classes marginalized those students and positioned them as deficient, underestimating their literacy. The irony that the original rhetorical intent of the K-12 standards movement--to provide a level playing field--may be accomplishing just the opposite has been addressed by many researchers, including McNeil (2000): "The apparent 'sameness' of the test masks persistent disparities in the conditions of learning that children face" (p. 732).

3.13 The genesis of standards for K-16 is the same political impulse to standardize students and uses a logical-deductive argument whose rhetoric hides its political agenda.

3.14 A tidy tale of "accountability"—raising standards and thereby assuring achievement for all—sanitizes the messy historicized reality.

3.15 In each case, we need the human faces of standards to interpret the usefulness of the logical-deductive argument. Through the lived experiences of Leon and Samantha and the others, we need to test the logical-rhetorical arguments. We should be troubled by the historical uses of standards to limit access, and take on the local work of unpacking the rhetoric and using theoretical tools to account for it.

3.16 In focus groups teachers living the experiences in K-12 always turned to discrepancies across their school districts (Miller, 2002, 2003). More affluent districts provided more time and resources—even extra pay—for their teachers to score writing exams in a professional and reflective manner. Urban teachers had none of that. An experienced urban teacher in this conversation formulated her own version of test ideology as "fixing the game...Keeping people in their place"—a vision of racist stratification as the underlying motive for standards-based assessments. Besides the issue of inequity, this African American teacher questioned the validity of the test on several other grounds, particularly the damage it causes by taking away from children and adding nothing:

It's pulling from children, it doesn't add anything; it doesn't assess their learning, it doesn't show growth, it's certainly not showing any progress from one point to the next. It's pulling things out because testing means something to children....Children think it tells you if you're competent or not.

In this critique by a high school teacher the school use of testing standards to assess deficits could be seen as the prior-history of Leon--and Fox's other students. The historical-rhetorical motives and consequences are all of a piece for college and K-12 contexts.

What way, teachers?

4.1 The deceptive rhetoric of standards-based accountability raises questions of who is in on the deception and who is being duped. How educators are being written by these rhetorical-historical motives and stances is part of Fox's major warning: as educators we are complicit if we are not aware of how we and our students are positioned and if we do not work to interrupt that in our praxis/pedagogy.

4.2 Critiques of the standards movement suggest that investments in accountability "serve a political function in centralizing control over education" (McNeil, p. 732) and teachers in the system are rewarded for compliance, as are students. Teachers feel their change of status from subjects to objects of reform: they feel that they, like the students one teacher in a working class school described, "are something to be worked *on* rather than an agent for their own education" (Miller, 2002).

4.3 If the intent of the standards and accountability movement is shifting control of public education away from the public and the profession, what new roles might teachers play? Fox outlines the need for college faculty to be active political workers transformative intellectuals critiquing ideologies, engaging in resistive practice.

4.4 The K-12 teachers, like higher-ed composition faculty, are vulnerable and caught in a system. Collective action among some K-12 teachers has strengthened their ability to resist test-prep teaching and promote powerful literacy by linking with like-minded educators in email groups, book clubs, and professional organizations (Miller, 2002).

4.5 What might collaboration across the K-12 and college boundaries look like? What kinds of resistive practice might coordinated political action involve? How might collective work on behalf of students help them "resist the limiting and damaging practices" that deter access? Fox's framework for writing standards which work *for* access based on teachers' judgments may be a starting point for critical dialogue on continuities for K-16 education. A few teachers working across these boundaries are beginning to show the way (e.g., Appleman, 2000; Carey-Webb, 2001; Gaughin, 1997; Vinz, 2000).

4.6 Failing children, disenfranchising them, reifying unequal structures of opportunity are, in a real sense, failures of democratic education (Bomer, 2002). Critiquing the rhetoric of standards, grappling with cultural difference, writing for social action, are, in a true sense, education to transform.

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