

# When Process Becomes Policy

## *The Paradox of Kentucky State Reform For Exemplary Teachers of Writing*

---

BY SHELBY A. WOLF AND  
MONETTE C. McIVER

*The authors look closely at how one exemplary teacher of writing, Mr. Bass, addressed the requirements of KIRIS as the winds of Kentucky assessment shifted toward CATS — and how he perceived the day-to-day irony of setting out his teaching and his students' writing for the neighbors to see.*

**T**HIS FALL, Mr. Bass,<sup>1</sup> an exemplary teacher of writing in the rural hills of eastern Kentucky, taught his class the Newbery award-winning novel *Miss May*.<sup>2</sup> The story centers on one family's struggle to survive the death of kin. Ob, grieving for his wife, is brought back from depression with the help of two children, Summer and Cletus.

A simple man with complex ideas about life and art, Ob had spent much of his adult life making whirligigs. Typically these are spinning contraptions hooked to a garden fence to scare off birds. But Ob's creations stayed indoors and captured the essence of things — thunderstorms, heaven, and his wife, May, whose whirligig had more spinning parts than the rest. As Cletus explains, "Ob won't just make a whirligig from something we can understand. He don't carve out little doggies and kitties. Because he don't care about things *concrete*. Ob's not making yard decorations. He's mak-

ing art. I can understand why he never put the 'gigs out in the yard. He never meant to entertain the neighbors."

Like Ob, Mr. Bass is a straightforward man with complex ideas about life and writing for his seventh-grade students. He works daily to help them create art in their writing, but because of the demands of real-world writing, which is often pragmatic in nature, as well as the requirements of the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) testing, he has learned to set out something *concrete* in his school yard every spring.

Ob's whirligigs can serve as a metaphor for what happens when teaching the writing process becomes state policy. The paradox of teaching a complex process while helping students fit the form of KIRIS products is one that Mr. Bass well understands. Yet he's not resentful. In fact, he's appreciative of a system that turned his teaching around and brought recognition to a geographic area of the state that had been long neglected. However, last spring, just as he and his students were putting the final touches on their KIRIS writing whirligigs, the winds in Kentucky shifted again.

Responding to concerns raised by educators, parents, and testing experts, the 1998 General Assembly passed H.B. 53, which effectively dismantled KIRIS and replaced it with the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). Currently, many Kentucky educators are involved in rethinking both the new tests for students and the accountability system for schools. Although CATS is in process, there are promises that the new test will, like KIRIS, address concerns about reliability and validity. In addition, there are high hopes that the new system will be able to report test results to schools within a shorter time frame.

For Mr. Bass, the details of the writing assessment are a bit up in the air, but there are several promised consistencies with the old program. An on-demand writing assessment as well as writing portfolios consisting of samples of student work will still be components of the new assessment system, and the same rubric will be used to evaluate student writing. Teachers will still be expected to score and report students' progress and to be accountable for high-quality writing. One shift in the current thinking is that the number of portfolio pieces will be reduced from six to four at the elementary level and five at the middle school level. This potential reduction could be a way to address a goal described by H.B. 53 as "reduced writing portfolio time" for teachers and their students. Although many teachers were committed to the writing assessments, the amount of classroom time needed to prepare for and

---

*SHELBY A. WOLF is a National Academy of Education Spencer postdoctoral fellow and an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where MONETTE C. McIVER is a doctoral candidate and a recent AERA/Spencer doctoral fellow. With their CRESST (Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing) colleagues Hilda Borko, Rebekah Elliott, Brian Stetcher, and Sheila Barron, they have been studying writing assessments in Kentucky over the last two years. They would like to thank Mr. Bass for his insight into the art of whirligigs and writing, Shirley Brice Heath for the idea of writing a policy piece for the National Academy of Education Spencer Fellows Forum, and Patricia Enciso for suggesting the Kappan as its final destination. The work reported in this article was supported under the Education Research and Development Center Program, PR Award Number R305B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, but the opinions expressed are the authors' own.*

complete these tasks, particularly the portfolio pieces, was extensive.

A critical part of the new legislation was that the KIRIS testing administered in spring 1998 would still count. This stipulation would allow Kentucky teachers to complete the assessment cycle as well as provide them with much-needed feedback on how they and their students were doing. It would also help smooth the potentially uneven task of continuing in an old system while rumors of a new system were rife.

In this article, we look closely at how one exemplary teacher of writing, Mr. Bass, addressed the requirements of KIRIS as the winds of Kentucky assessment shifted toward CATS, and, based on our conversations over the past two years, we show how Mr. Bass perceived the day-to-day irony of setting out his teaching and his students' writing for the neighbors to see.

## KERA and KIRIS

To understand the irony of Mr. Bass' situation, it's important to define two Kentucky acronyms. In 1990 Kentucky did something that had never been done before. Responding to a lawsuit that challenged inequities in school funding, the legislature created an entirely new school system through the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). While KERA mandated wide-ranging progressive reform (including new finance formulas and ungraded primary classes), KIRIS testing made sure that teachers got the job done.<sup>3</sup>

Though all Kentucky teachers are involved in writing, those at the fourth-, seventh-, and 12th-grade levels were responsible for three basic student assessments.

- *Writing portfolios.* These contained students' original writing rather than specific prompts and included a table of contents, personal expressive writing (personal narratives, memoirs), literary writing (stories, poems, scripts), transactive writing (real-world writing such as letters, editorials, and brochures), and a letter to the reviewer in which the student analyzes and reflects on his or her writing.

- *Open-response questions.* These questions seek students' responses to short narrative or expository passages that they have read. The responses are not specifically used to assess writing; instead, they are designed to evaluate content knowledge (for example, in grade 4 the items are used to assess reading and science knowledge).

In addition, these items are not scored for writing craft, artistic expression, or punctuation. Still, many writing teachers in Kentucky, including Mr. Bass, see these questions as their responsibility, and it seems clear that when students write thoroughly, insightfully, and even artistically, their scores will be higher.

- *On-demand writing.* Students had 90 minutes to plan, prewrite, draft, revise, and edit their response to a specific prompt. While some in Kentucky see the on-demand task as a way to ensure that the writing is truly done by the student and not by parents or peers, others prefer to see it as yet another real-world writing situation, for we are often asked to write under time pressures with little opportunity for feedback.

While students worked on their portfolios throughout the year, open-response and on-demand writing opportunities came in a week of testing in the spring. For Mr. Bass, the three forms offered quite different views of the writing process, and each had to be addressed in unique ways.

## Teaching Process In Portfolio Writing

Of the three forms, the writing portfolio best lent itself to the authentic and artistic aspects of process writing. To help students create their portfolio pieces, Mr. Bass read from literature and showed how authors craft their language into effective metaphors and images. He demonstrated typical steps in the writing process — prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing — though not in rigid ways. He modeled his own writing process, once discussing a problem he was trying to solve in his own poetry. He also held individual conferences with students about their writing, asking questions and pointing out organizational strategies.

For example, on an early day in May 1997, he conferred with students as they worked on personal narratives. One student wrote the following draft:

My First Dirt Bike.

I was just 6 years old when I got my first dirt bike. It was from my Grampa who has influenced me alot. Over the years he has taught me alot. The Apache language, how to hunt, and the ways of the forest. He has influenced me alot over these many years. He has shaped and molded who I am today.

In his conference with the student, Mr. Bass read the piece silently and commented, "You call your topic 'My First Dirt Bike.' But to me, the piece goes quickly into your grandpa. If you want to write about your grandpa and how he's influenced you, you could do that instead." The student agreed that what he really wanted to write about was his relationship with his grandfather, a man who had spent much time teaching him to fish and hunt. But he was unsure how to get his ideas on paper.

In response, Mr. Bass quickly sketched a cheeseburger, explaining, "You're building a sandwich. Here's the bun. 'My grandfather has influenced me.' But there's no meat in it." Using the words the boy provided, Mr. Bass filled in his sketch.

He continued, "You've got to build a triple-decker cheeseburger. You want to make sure that you support this statement. How has he shaped and molded you? What are specific experiences you remember when he did this?"

As the student turned back to his writing and Mr. Bass moved on to confer with other students, we were struck by his effective, efficient, and age-appropriate image. The student was stuck, yet the metaphor of a triple decker got him going again. In the protocols for the KIRIS writing portfolio, there were strict prohibitions against teachers' rewriting of student pieces, but they were encouraged to act as true readers and to ask authentic questions of student authors as well as model successful strategies for problem solving.

When we visited with Mr. Bass that May, the deadline for KIRIS portfolios had already passed, but Mr. Bass said that he continued to teach writing just as he had throughout the year. We wondered if the pace of his teaching might have been a bit more leisurely in May than in the month prior to the portfolio due date, and Mr. Bass agreed that January through April were the cruelest months. In a letter he wrote to us in January 1998, he talked about the pressure of portfolios with his typical wry delivery:

About three days into the new year, I began to be afflicted by what we affectionately(?) refer to as *portfolioto-sis*, a common debilitating disease that strikes our seventh-grade teachers for a span of three months, generally rearing its ugly head the first Monday of the new year. There is no known cure for this illness, which always seems to mi-

raculously cure itself sometime in mid-April! Let's hope you are not diagnosed with a case of this dread disease when you come to visit in March. Be prepared to fight off this sickness with Post-It notes, red pens, Liquid Paper, and a plethora of pencils! Remember, once you become infected, there is no cure! ! !

He went on to suggest what some of the characters of *Missing May* — including Ob, the whirligig maker himself — might do if faced with a portfolio task. Mr. Bass wrote, “Ob would probably do no writing, but take his portfolio folder and make an Origami bird or something.” In other words, Ob would be hard to pin down to the task at hand, being more inclined to the artistic than the pragmatic side of things. But Mr. Bass has to juggle both, and one of the ways that he does so is through the use of artful questions.

In the spring of 1998, and this time just a few weeks prior to the portfolio due date, we visited Mr. Bass again. During our visit, we observed him in conference with another student, Shannon, as they talked about her writing. She had been working on her “letter to the reviewer” and had asked Mr. Bass to look over her current draft. She was worried that perhaps the letter sounded “arrogant” because she felt so confident of her writing abilities. Mr. Bass read the draft and responded, “I think you’ve reworded it well. I like the way you’ve said why you did it so much better. That’s not being arrogant. I think you can be confident in your abilities. And I think you can mention that you are confident in your abilities.”

Shannon smiled and added the following passage to her letter while Mr. Bass looked on: “Through books and teachers, I have had many influences both personally and professionally. One time, a teacher told me that I couldn’t write very well, so I just told myself that I could do it that much more because I knew I could do it and nothing could have stopped me from showing her I could.” Mr. Bass pointed to the end of this sentence and asked a seemingly simple question, “Why?” Shannon explained that she felt that her teacher was jealous “ ‘cause I wrote a really good book of poetry and she said it got mixed up with the writing from another district and she could never find it. I didn’t win any awards that year and I think I shoulda.” Shannon felt that her teacher had “lost” her poetry on purpose so that another student would win.

Mr. Bass discussed the fact that she persisted in spite of this controversy with the teacher and asked, “Where does that motivation come from? Are you that way with everything?” Shannon nodded thoughtfully and replied, “I think I’m that way with everything.” And as Mr. Bass moved on to work with another student, she added the following to her letter: “I don’t know what compelled me: the fact that she was kind of jealous of my writings or that it was just my personality, but it worked and I’m here today from what I learned.”

To ask “Why?” and to question a student about her motivation are typical of Mr. Bass’ approach to conferences.<sup>4</sup> Both in the “cheeseburger” example and in his discussion with Shannon, he asked genuine questions to demonstrate when he was curious or confused as a reader, and his queries evolved into conversations with students, whose responses often ended up in their writing. For Mr. Bass, a critical part of the process of writing portfolio pieces meant engaging students in substantive discussions about themselves as well as those who would read their work. Thus, in teaching the art of portfolio writing, he stressed the importance of audience, subtly reminding his students that, just like himself, other readers would have questions about what motivates a writer to do and say what he or she does.

### Teaching Process for Open-Response and On-Demand Items

Mr. Bass used a different approach as students worked on the second KIRIS task, for open-response items asked students to answer specific questions based on a reading passage. The process for the task was also different, for Mr. Bass, like many Kentucky teachers, used the “four-column method” to help his students organize their thoughts for writing. In this method, each of the four columns is topped with a heading and a question, and students can use the rest of the column space for taking notes. The four columns read:

KNOW: What do I need to know in order to answer this question?

DO: What is this question asking me to do?

EXAMPLES: What examples from the article can I give to answer each part of the question?

CONNECTIONS: How can I connect some part of my answer to a real-life situation?

Though this form was more prescriptive than students’ portfolio writing, Mr. Bass found ways to add his own individual creativity to the process. For example, he used a released item from a previous KIRIS assessment as a practice model for his students. The item consisted of a passage on bats, and the students were asked to answer the following: “What would happen if bats became extinct? Use information from the article to support your answer.”

After leading his students carefully through the note-taking aspects of the four-column method and emphasizing key words like *support your answer*, Mr. Bass modeled several hypothetical responses that he had made up the night before. He then rated the responses according to the state scoring system. His first example modeled a zero score, which the state described as “totally incorrect or irrelevant”: “I don’t like bats. Their ugle and try to eat my nek.”

When he asked his students why this response merited such a low score, one boy laughingly retorted, “It ain’t an open response, and it ain’t spelled right.” Mr. Bass chuckled, though he noted that spelling plays a minor role in open-response scoring. More important, he stressed, “It has nothing to do with the question. The question didn’t ask me my opinion of bats.”

After demonstrating several examples that received different scores, Mr. Bass modeled a “4” response (the highest score) with an inviting introduction, clear support from the article, and a clever, synoptic closing. He reminded his students that they should not “regurgitate facts from the article.” Instead, as he told me later, here the writing “just shines. It sparkles. It draws conclusions, makes generalizations. There may be several connections to the student’s real life. With the bat question, it might have begun with a real-life experience, some type of anecdote, some type of humorous story. It might have begun with some kind of factual information that the student had prior knowledge of that’s not in the article.”

But a distinguished response walks a thin line between creativity and the need to respond correctly. As Mr. Bass warned his students, this was not a time for a lot of personal voice. He commented, “Before you answer a question, you must know how to break that question apart, analyze it. You can’t just fly by the seat of your pants and do what you want to do. You have to plan your answer. The test scorers are really in-

terested in how you answer the question. Bottom line: Answer the blessed question.”

Answering questions was also a feature of the third KIRIS task, on-demand writing. Added to the accountability index in 1997 to standardize KIRIS testing even further, this component gave students a choice of two prompts and 90 minutes to produce a final written response to one. Here the writing process was encouraged, with space provided in the booklet for pre-writing and planning as well as instructions reminding the students to “make notes, web, draft, revise, and edit.”

But encouraging the writing process and *compressing* it into a specified time span seem to be contrasting goals, though not unlike the demands of the real world, where timely and pragmatic writing is often needed. When Mr. Bass had his students practice this form of testing, he took them down to the team room to simulate the testing conditions. Still, what really prepared them for the 90-minute task was the portfolio work of the entire year. As TJ, a student in Mr. Bass’ class, told us, “We went over so many types of writing, it wasn’t really that hard.” However, students had two concerns with on-demand writing.

• *Time.* “It’s a lot harder. I’m so worried about the time, I don’t get to express myself as much. If I had more time, I could make the second draft a lot stronger.” (Anna)

• *No peer conferences.* “You don’t get opinions or anything. If they could change that — have like a person you could switch with — that would help, I think.” (TJ)

Interestingly, the time pressure was something that the students seemed to put on themselves. Although the task was designed for 90 minutes, the state allowed students to take more time if necessary. As Mr. Bass explained, “It has to be completed that day, but they can take two or three hours if they want to.” However, because of the way his students perceive the importance of the test, they “want to do a good job, and they may think that that entails finishing on time.”

Beyond the students’ criticisms about time and peer conferencing, they felt well prepared for the task. As Katie explained, “It gives you a chance to see what you can do in a certain amount of time, and that’s good. See what you learned. Just takes time

and courage. It was actually easy for me because I have courage in my writing.”

### Writing Whirligigs

Mr. Bass also has courage in his teaching, and, like his students, he has both praise for and criticisms of the demands he must meet every spring. Of the three forms, the portfolio was his favorite to teach, though in consideration of KIRIS deadlines as well as the unpredictable weather (which in eastern Kentucky can keep students off slick mountain roads and out of school for days), he has learned to be pragmatic. This past year, rather than take students through the entire writing process for every piece, he had them do a lot of drafting so that they would “have at least one example of every possible portfolio piece by Christmas.” As he explained, “I can’t afford to spend, let’s say, three days revising a personal writing that Sally Jo will never use.”

Turning to open response, Mr. Bass praised the “immense” benefits of these kinds of questions because the form “teaches students to focus on the material and become critical readers.” For on-demand writing, the timing and the lack of conferences worried him a bit, but he settled his misgivings by convincing himself that deadlines and real-world writing are challenges that his students must be able to meet. Still, of the three forms, he felt “more uncomfortable with the on-demand,” explaining, “I understand the purpose behind it, yet therein lies the paradox. You know, you’re supposed to teach revision. You’re supposed to teach that a piece is never finished, but we’re not going to give you time to do that. So I don’t know. I think a portfolio is a more accurate assessment of what a student learns.”

Because of these views, Mr. Bass devoted more time to portfolio writing than to any of the other forms. He explained that any careful on-demand practice test takes at least three days — one to prep the students for the process, one to do the test, and one to debrief. But every time he devoted three days to such a task, his portfolio time suffered. Calling the dilemma a Catch-22, he explained, “If you do it, your on-demand scores are going to go up, but you’re losing portfolio time. If you don’t do it, your portfolios are going to be probably in a little better shape, but your

on-demand scores may be lowered. You’ve got to find a happy medium. So as soon as portfolios are finished, I’ll spend the next two or three weeks on open-response and on-demand items.”

Still, his strongest criticism centered on the difficult contrast between teaching students the art of the writing process and meeting deadlines for writing that comes in bounded forms: “I’m responsible for the on-demand items. I’m responsible for the open-response items. I’m responsible for the portfolio. And doggone it, there are times that — boy, this is really strange. Because of KERA, I changed my style of teaching to a more workshop-oriented approach. But because of KIRIS, I’m not allowed to truly implement that approach.”

All Kentucky teachers in KIRIS accountability grades had tremendous responsibilities, and some met the challenge with a combination of resistance and compliance, going through the steps of the reform without substantively reforming their practice.<sup>5</sup> They refused to invest in a reform that might not last. As evaluation and policy analyst Ernest House explained, “Most reforms are the simple ideas of political and educational entrepreneurs. Almost all become fads, only to disappear eventually. . . . Why bother?”<sup>6</sup>

But the exemplary writing teachers we’ve talked with in the past two years were willing to bother because they believed the reform made sense. They felt that KERA validated the kind of process teaching they had practiced for years, or, as Mr. Bass indicated, they found that it provided a new view of teaching that met the needs of their students. Thus they too were surprised by the shift in the political winds that sent KIRIS out and swept in the new CATS assessment system.

But perhaps it should not have been so surprising. In our first interviews with administrators in the Kentucky Department of Education, most seemed confident (or at least hopeful) that the new reform would last. One administrator, however, used a gambling metaphor to advise caution.

Kentucky has been through a succession of educational programs in terms of assessment, and they’ve changed about every four to five years. And if you look at the pattern, it’s CTB [standardized testing] and always a something, then

CTB, then something, then CTB, then something, then CTB, and right now we're in the something. And if you have been around long enough and were a betting person, which a lot of folks in Kentucky might be, you know, they might say, "Let's see. This thing came in 1990, let me bet when we're going to go back to CTB."

When we discussed this comment with Mr. Bass, he laughed and said, "How very prophetic!" His own response to the recent changes in Kentucky was mixed. He was glad to hear that the number of portfolio pieces might be reduced (even if only by one piece) and felt that that step had the potential of reducing the pressure that he and his students experience every spring — those cases of portfoliotosis. However, his biggest worry was "this new CATS test." It would be hard to know how to prepare for the year, with so little information on what the final assessments would be. He explained:

The test developers are gonna be awfully, awfully pressured to get this thing in by the 1999 assessment. They've got their timetable for giving the test, but they don't know what'll be on the test! [He began to chuckle as he imitated the officials who are responsible for developing the test.] "We're gonna give them a test on May 1 and whatever we've got done by April 1, that's what we'll use. Make a bunch of copies, ship them out, make your mark dark and heavy, and 'Good luck, kids!'" So it's frustrating.

Still, as an exemplary teacher, he was phil-

osophical: "I know it has to be done, so I can deal with it."

Mr. Bass, like many of the reflective practitioners we've talked with over the last two years, is willing to "deal" with change, but he does not embrace reform without question. He is concerned that students who have "courage in their writing" may feel less courageous if the rules of the game keep changing. Even with KIRIS, Mr. Bass felt that certain kinds of writing were too risky to include in the portfolio: "Poetry's scary to put in a portfolio because you never know how it's going to score, so you just take your chances." And the chances may diminish if the number of required portfolio pieces in CATS goes down.

Thus, across Kentucky, talented teachers must learn to weigh the balance between teaching writing as an artistic process and meeting the demands of concrete policy that simultaneously opens and closes the view. If a poetry submission is "scary," then what does that say about the assessment system? Certainly we know that when we attempt to fit the large, round peg of artistry into the small square hole of affordable, reliable assessment, much of the recursive, exploratory, passionate, and purposeful nature of writing has to be reshaped to cut corners.<sup>7</sup> So the scariness of certain kinds of writing makes unfortunate sense.

But when Ob made his whirligigs, he didn't make them to scare off birds. He made them to express his artistic spirit and ultimately to give himself the courage to continue despite the fact that he was still missing his wife, May. At the end of the

story, Ob carried his 'gigs out to the garden and set them spinning. Each spring, Kentucky writing teachers do the same. Like Mr. Bass, they teach students to write whirligigs — shining, sparkling word 'gigs — as a way to express humor, prior knowledge, and life connections. But they also teach them to share their art with real-world neighbors. It is a paradox that occurs when process becomes policy, and the paradox is compounded with irony when the policy keeps changing. But it's also a wind teachers like Mr. Bass have learned to live with in order to set their young writers moving in the world.

1. Mr. Bass is a pseudonym, as are the names of his students.

2. Cynthia Rylant, *Missing May* (New York: Orchard Books, 1992).

3. See Ken Jones and Betty Lou Whitford, "Kentucky's Conflicting Reform Principles: High-Stakes School Accountability and Student Performance Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1997, pp. 276-81.

4. In fact, Mr. Bass' method of questioning is typical of the exemplary teachers we've worked with in Kentucky. See Monette C. McIver and Shelby A. Wolf, "The Power of the Conference Is the Power of Suggestion," paper presented at the National Conference on Large-Scale Assessment, sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers, Colorado Springs, June 1998.

5. Susan Callahan, "Tests Worth Taking?: Using Portfolios for Accountability in Kentucky," *Research in the Teaching of English*, October 1997, pp. 295-336.

6. Ernest House, "A Framework for Appraising Educational Reforms," *Educational Researcher*, October 1996, pp. 6-14.

7. Shelby A. Wolf and Kathryn Davinroy, "'The Clay That Makes the Pot': The Loss of Language in Writing Assessment," *Written Communication*, October 1998, pp. 419-64. **K**

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**Shelby A. Wolf and Monette C. McIver, When Process Becomes Policy: The Paradox of Kentucky State Reform for Exemplary Teachers of Writing, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 80, No. 05, January 1999, pp. 401-406.**

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to [kappan@pdkintl.org](mailto:kappan@pdkintl.org).