



## Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers a question about standardized testing.

Chris Turner, our learning difficulties consultant, helps tutors with students struggling to master new skills. For the past month, she has been working with staff, students and tutors to develop our standardized testing procedures. Call us if you have a question for Chris.

### **Why is the Literacy Council doing testing?**

The U.S. Department of Education provides federal funding to adult education and literacy programs. Here in North Carolina, this money is distributed by the Community College System. Programs that receive this funding are being required to test all of their adult students using a standardized test. In order for us to continue to be eligible for this funding--about \$30,000 a year--we must administer these tests.

### **What is a standardized test?**

Standardized tests are given and scored in an objective manner following carefully constructed procedures. The tests and procedures have been rigorously checked to minimize the extent to which extraneous factors might influence the test results. The tests we use have also been normed. In other words the scoring system has been established by looking at the test results of a large group of adult education students. Your student's results will be compared to that group.

### **What tests are you using?**

We had a number of fairly similar tests to choose from. We will use the TABE, the Test of Adult Basic Education for literacy students and the BEST, the Basic English Skills Test, for ESL students. Both tests have been in widespread use for a number of years.

The TABE was recommended by our colleagues at the Cape Fear Community College. It is a multiple choice test with three parts: Reading, Language (including grammar and spelling) and Math. It is a criterion referenced test, meaning that the test results tell us how well a student has mastered specific skills.

The BEST has two parts, an Oral interview and a Reading and Writing Test. It gives us a student performance level which we can match to our materials.

## **How often will you give the test and how long does it take?**

In order to meet our funder's criteria and measure student progress, we must give the test twice a year. The first test establishes a starting point and is called the pre-test. The second test is usually given after at least 50 hours of instruction and is called the post-test. The difference in results will tell us something about the progress a student has made during a year. The TABE takes about two and a half hours to complete and the BEST takes an hour and a half.

The TABE is a fairly complicated assessment. The first time students are tested, they will need to take a Locator Test, which typically takes about an hour. This will ensure that we give them the right assessment, one which tests them at their level.

## **How will testing help my student and me?**

As I have been working with tutors and students over the last month, I have noticed three ways that I believe testing will help you.

### **Tests reveal specific strengths and weaknesses.**

These tests give us precise information that we can use to give you better advice about what areas to concentrate on and what materials and activities to use. This should result in more efficient and effective learning. We will be providing each tutor and student with a diagnostic profile that shows how well a student has mastered specific skills, for instance being able to summarize or to use correct punctuation.

Last week, for example, I tested a student who had been having great difficulty. Her test results showed what we call splinter skills--although she could do some things, she showed big gaps in her skills. These gaps are preventing her from building on what she knows. Now she and her tutor will be able to fill in those gaps and I think ultimately she will make better progress.

### **Tests demonstrate progress.**

Secondly, we believe that tutors and students deserve to have an objective picture of the progress they are making. We think that most tutors and students will find this motivating. For example, last week I talked with a tutor who felt that her student had not been making much progress in the last few months. After giving him a pre-test, we looked at the areas he had done well in and she laughed and said, "that's what we were working on." While her student may not have been moving as quickly as she would wish, it was clear that she had been teaching him and that he was learning.

In the event that a student and tutor are not making progress, that is also important for us to understand. It may be that they have not been able to

devote much time to learning, but it may also be that they need a different approach, perhaps because of learning difficulties. With these test results, we will be able to help tutors whose students are not learning.

### **Test-taking is an important life skill.**

Thirdly, we live in a test-taking, form-filling age. One of the things we do before we test students is to teach them *how* to take a test. You would be surprised at how many students don't know how to fill out a bubble sheet. It's an important life skill. These days, even school janitors who want a promotion have to take a test. Two weeks ago, a student thanked me for teaching him how to take the test and then he told me he wished he had had this instruction just a few days earlier, since he had to fill out a bubble sheet in his doctor's office.

### **Do you foresee any problems with testing?**

Yes, but we are working to minimize the problems. The greatest problem, of course, is that testing is not fun for most people. Our students, in particular, sometimes find it upsetting or humiliating. I have been pleasantly surprised so far that most students seem to welcome the opportunity to find out what they can do and where they are. Some students have more resistance and we are trying to make the testing as non-threatening and as useful as possible. The other problem is time. It may be as difficult to get students in twice a year for their test as it can be for dentists to get patients to come in for their check up. We need you to encourage them.

### **How can I prepare my student for testing?**

There is absolutely no need to study for these tests or teach to the test. The main preparation students need is to understand that this is not school. We do not give grades and there is no failure. You can help your student to relax and develop a spirit of curiosity about learning. Just encourage them to do the best they can on the test

Students often make a breakthrough when they start to take a more active role in their learning. Make sure your student understands that you will be talking and planning together after you get the test results.