




---

Copyright©1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

---

## *Why the "Monkeys Passage" Bombed: Tests, Genres, and Teaching*

BONNY NORTON PEIRCE

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto*

PIPPA STEIN

*University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg*

### Abstract

Pippa Stein and Bonny Norton Peirce, two White educators in South Africa, explore issues of textual meaning, testing, and pedagogy based on their experience piloting a reading test to be used as a college entrance examination for Black students. Drawing on Stein's personal experience administering the test and on literature in the fields of genre analysis and textual interpretation, Stein and Peirce question the test's meaning and validity. The authors discuss how the students' interpretations of the text differed as Stein altered the social context, illustrating the ways in which the politics of different social occasions contribute to the production of multiple meanings. In their exploration of how shifting power relations produce multiple meanings, the authors raise important questions at the heart of testing, equity, and pedagogy. (pp.50-65)

---

Insurgent readings are not simply struggles over the sign — what a text means — but actually struggles over forms of life, struggles over how people's identities will be constituted and history lived. (Simon, 1992, p. 116)

We wish to relate a cautionary tale of an experience in a high school graduation class in Johannesburg, South Africa, in which we piloted a passage from a reading test to be used for admissions purposes at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg. The piloting of a reading passage about an encounter between monkeys and humans, what we call the "monkeys passage," began as a routine procedure and turned into a classroom experience that disrupted our assumptions about tests, texts, and teaching. We believe that the process we underwent provides a window onto a number of important issues in assessment, reading, and pedagogy that are of importance not only in the South African context, but also for many teachers in the wider educational community who are concerned about issues of educational equity.

### Admissions Testing in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Educational assessment is a growing industry in post-apartheid South Africa. Institutions across the country, from schools and universities to businesses and corporations, are attempting to identify students of color who have the potential to succeed academically and professionally, despite the debilitating effects of an apartheid legacy (Yeld & Haeck, 1993).

At the end of secondary school in South Africa, all students write a national matriculation examination based on the courses they have taken for graduation purposes. In the apartheid era, different racial groups had different matriculation examinations, a practice that is in the process of being dismantled. All students who pass these examinations receive a secondary school certificate. Some of these students will also qualify for a university entrance certificate. Because of high demand in some universities, such as Wits, some faculties and departments impose additional cutoff points for entry, over and above the government-stipulated criteria for university admission.

An additional barrier for Black students is the status of the English language, notwithstanding the fact that there are now eleven official languages in South Africa. Although English is the first language of less than 10 percent of the population, and only one of the official languages, it is de facto the most dominant language in the society. Black South Africans, who constitute the majority of the South African population, frequently speak two or three languages, but do not speak English as their first language. Of particular relevance to this article is the fact that English is the medium of instruction in the majority of universities in the country. Thus, the Wits University requirement (as stated in the General Information for Applicants, 1994) that students in all faculties must be proficient in English is a particularly onerous requirement for Black students.

The matriculation examination that most students write has been an unreliable predictor of Black student success, and has often served as a barrier to their admission to universities. Since 1985, the Faculty of Arts of Wits University has been administering an alternative admissions procedure to identify students who have fulfilled the requirements for university entrance, but who nevertheless fall below the cutoff point for

automatic entry into the Faculty of Arts (Stack, 1994). Currently the three main components of the alternative admissions procedure are a test of English language usage, a test of reasoning and table reading, and a biographical questionnaire. Students within the Black community who have been particularly disadvantaged by apartheid education are the main target group for the Faculty of Arts Admissions Committee.

The Faculty of Arts English test seeks to determine the extent to which applicants, most of whom are English Language Learners (ELLs), can cope with the language demands of an English-medium university.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the test is to facilitate the admission of students into the Faculty of Arts who would otherwise be denied admission, based on their matriculation examination results.

In our respective capacities as teacher educator (Stein) and language testing specialist (Peirce), we have participated in the development of this English proficiency test, currently referred to as the "Exercise in English Language Usage."<sup>2</sup> Pippa Stein is a White South African woman who has worked in English language teacher education at the pre-service and in-service level since 1980. She is based at Wits University, working at a pre-service level with secondary school teachers who intend to teach in multicultural, multilingual secondary school classrooms. Bonny Norton Peirce is a White woman who has worked in language education in South Africa, Canada, and the United States. She received her training in language test development at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, from 1984 to 1987, and was invited by the Faculty of Arts of Wits University in 1991 to help revise their English admissions test. Peirce is currently doing post-doctoral research in the Modern Language Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada. She spent several months in 1991, and again in 1993–1994, as a visiting scholar at Wits University. Peirce and Stein have mutual interests in assessment, literacy, and educational equity, and were both members of the Faculty of Arts Admissions Committee in 1991.

The English proficiency test has undergone many revisions since it was first developed in 1985. Although the university is now in a post-apartheid era, it still needs to set criteria for admission because of high student demand for admission. The 1992 version of the English test had three components: a short, multiple-choice reading test, a longer comprehension test with short answer questions, and an essay question. The monkeys passage, based on a local Johannesburg newspaper article, and a set of multiple-choice questions on the text were to be included in the first component of the short, multiple-choice reading test. The purpose of the first component of the test was to serve as an initial screening device to identify the applicants who did not perform well on the monkeys passage test and exclude them from further consideration for alternative admission. Below is the text of the monkeys passage, followed by the multiple-choice questions:

### MONKEYS ON RAMPAGE

**A troop of about 80 monkeys, enraged after a mother monkey and her baby were caught in a trap, went on the rampage at a Durban home at the weekend attacking two policemen who were forced to flee and call for help. A 14-year-old boy also had to run for his life and reached the safety of a home split seconds before a full-grown monkey hurled itself against the door. The troop also attacked a house, banging windows and doors.**

Mrs Kittie Lambrechts, 59, of Firdale Road, Sea View, told reporters how the monkeys' behaviour was sparked off by events on Saturday. She said her family had been pestered by monkeys for over a year.

"They come nearly every day, and they steal all the fruit from our fruit trees before it's ripe enough to pick," she complained. "We didn't know what to do, so we wrote a letter to the Durban Corporation. They said that it would be unsafe to use guns in the neighborhood, and that we should not poison the monkeys because sometimes dogs and cats eat the poison; rather, we should set traps. On Saturday we bought a trap and put it in our garden. Shortly afterwards, the monkeys arrived and a mother and her baby were caught in the trap. The whole troop went into a raging fury and attacked us. Edwin Schultz, a young visitor from the Transvaal, had to run for his life and slammed the door closed just before a full-grown monkey could get hold of him. It jumped against the door. The troop attacked our home and hit against the doors and windows. It was terrifying."

Mrs Lambrechts telephoned the police and Const N M Moodley and Const E Coetzer of the Bellair police station went to investigate. But when they arrived, the troop turned on them and they had to run for cover as well. "The men ran to their van and called for help while monkeys surrounded them and jumped against the vehicle," Mrs. Lambrechts said. Police armed with shotguns arrived on the scene and four monkeys were shot dead. The troop then fled into the bushes, apparently because their leader had been among the monkeys shot dead.

— adapted from *The Star*, July 1986\*

1. This newspaper article is about

- (a) Edwin Schultz's visit to Durban from the Transvaal;
- (b) how Mrs Lambrechts runs her fruit business;
- (c) monkeys that attacked people;
- (d) the accidental poisoning of dogs and cats.

2. A "troop" of monkeys is

- (a) monkeys that live near people
- (b) any group of monkeys living together;

(c) any group of animals living together;

(d) monkeys having the same mother.

3. Why were the monkeys considered pests?

(a) The monkeys were dangerous and attacked people.

(b) The monkeys made a lot of noise and disturbed the family.

(c) The monkeys took unripe fruit from the garden.

(d) The monkeys made a mess in the garden.

4. The Durban Corporation advised Mrs Lambrechts

(a) to shoot dead the leader of the troop;

(b) to set traps in her garden;

(c) to poison the fruit in her trees;

(d) to telephone the police.

5. When the monkeys went on their rampage,

(a) Mrs Lambrechts was enraged;

(b) Mrs Lambrechts' husband called the police;

(c) Mrs Lambrechts' son was chased by a full-grown monkey;

(d) Mrs Lambrechts was terrified.

6. Edwin Schultz, at the time of the story,

(a) was visiting the Transvaal;

(b) was 14 years old;

(c) lived on Firdale Road in Sea View;

(d) was caught by a full-grown monkey.

7. Const Moodley and Const Coetzer

(a) shot dead the leader of the troop;

(b) called for help;

(c) never left their van;

(d) interviewed Mrs Lambrechts.

8. Why did the monkeys flee into the bushes?

(a) Police arrived with shotguns.

(b) The monkeys had already chased the people inside.

(c) Their leader had been shot dead

(d) Their leader led them into the bushes.

9. How many monkeys were shot dead by the police?

(a) 1 (the leader)

(b) 4

(c) 5

(d) all of them

10. This article was written by

(a) Const E Coetzer;

(b) a witness;

(c) Kittie Lambrechts;

(d) a journalist.

At a Faculty of Arts test development meeting in August 1991, Peirce raised questions about the suitability of the monkeys passage text for Black students. She was concerned that in the prevailing political climate of violence and instability, the young adults whose communities had been most affected by violence might become distressed by the passage. Her primary concern was that if test takers became unduly disturbed by the content of the test, their performance might be compromised.

This, in turn, would weaken the validity of the test and undermine the credibility of the alternative admissions procedure in the Faculty of Arts. Peirce suggested that the text be piloted on a sample of the target population to determine whether the passage might be disturbing to test takers. Stein volunteered to administer the test to a graduation class of Black students in a Johannesburg secondary school. The following section is Stein's personal narrative describing the testing event.

### Stein: Piloting the Test

In August and September of 1991, I piloted the first section of the proposed 1992 English Proficiency Test with Black high school students whose first language was not English. I had been involved in pre-service teacher development work in local Black high schools since 1986. Part of my job was to visit teacher-trainees who were completing their practicum in English language teaching in local schools. Through this work, I had established connections with a large network of schools, particularly in downtown Johannesburg. It was in one of these schools that I wished to pilot this section of the test.

This secondary school had been recently established by a group of private individuals for students from the surrounding segregated townships whose schooling had been interrupted by the chronic instability and violence of the apartheid era. This was not a state-run school and it had no state subsidy. As a privately run enterprise, it was financially dependent on private funds from the commercial sector and tuition paid by students.

The school of four hundred students was housed in a building on a run-down office block. On the day I visited, a nearby building was being demolished. There was constant traffic outside the main classrooms. Material resources were scarce: there were no photocopying or reproduction facilities, few textbooks or exercise books, and no overhead projectors. During my visit, I learned that a group of students had been suspended from classes for not having paid their fees. In my view, the school environment, administratively and educationally, was not conducive to sustained and focused learning.

The principal allowed me to conduct the piloting procedure with the graduation class who, one month later, would be writing their matriculation examinations. I was introduced to the students' English teacher. I told her that I was evaluating the suitability of a reading comprehension passage that was possibly going to be used for examination. She introduced me to her nineteen students as a "lecturer from Wits" and asked if they would be prepared to take a short reading comprehension test for me. Even though the students' lunch break was about to begin, they agreed to take the test. From the expression on students' faces, I was concerned that many were apprehensive. I assured them that I was in no way assessing their individual abilities, but rather the suitability of the test. I indicated that the results of the test would not affect their grades or be used against them in any way. This statement appeared to put them at ease. I also introduced the students to Jean Ure, a visiting colleague from Edinburgh, Scotland. A colleague of mine had asked me if Ure could accompany me on my school visits that day, and I asked Ure if she would help me to administer the test. Later, after the class, she commented on how interesting she had found the experience, and I asked her to record what she had observed. My main purpose for this was to have a written record from a different perspective to present at the Admissions Committee meeting the next day. The majority of the class took between nine and twelve minutes to complete the test.

After the students had completed the test, I wanted to initiate an informal discussion with them on their responses to the text. I have enough experience as a teacher to know that in order to do this successfully, I had to try to change the atmosphere in the classroom from the formality of the testing event to a more informal context that would facilitate open discussion. I had to shift my position from a subjective "tester" to that of a "conversational partner." For me, this shift is deeply connected to the spatial and body relationships in the classroom, so I knew I had to change my physical position in relationship to the students. I had to shift from the position of being the "surveillant" in the testing event, where I had stood and walked around the classroom, to one of conversational partner, where I sat informally on one of the desks. In retrospect, it is interesting to note that I was not ready to relinquish complete control — I was still sitting on the desks "above" the general sightline of the class.

I asked the students, "What did you think of the passage?"<sup>3</sup> The first student to answer said that it was "funny." "What do you mean, 'funny'?" I asked. At this point, other students started to participate in the discussion, which rapidly became centered on the topic of monkeys. It became clear to me as the discussion progressed that the use of the word "funny" specifically meant "strange" or "threatening." One woman explained the cultural significance of monkeys for her:

I was offended by the passage because monkeys have a special significance in our culture. . . . They are associated with witchcraft.

Other students pointed out the racist associations:

Black people are often thought of as monkeys.

Building on their readings of the monkeys as "Black people" in this text, several students interpreted the text as an extended metaphor for Black and White social relations:

It's about Black people, who are the "monkeys" "on the rampage" in White people's homes.

This discussion led to an animated debate among the students on the issue of land ownership:

It's about who owns the land — the monkeys think the land belongs to them but the Whites think they own the land.

How are the monkeys supposed to know about private ownership of property?

Many students expressed sympathy for the monkeys and deep rejection of their violent treatment at the hands of the police:

Why did they need to shoot the monkeys? The monkeys were hungry. Why don't they have the right to pick the fruit?

I don't like the violence in this passage. We live with violence . . . why do we need to read about it?

It was unnecessary to shoot the monkeys. They should have found other ways of dealing with the problem.

However, a few students rejected these alternative readings of the text:

I think it's just a story about monkeys. It was nice and easy. I hope we get something like this in the final exam.

The atmosphere in the classroom became more and more charged as the students became increasingly interested in debating the moral issues raised in this text: Who owns the land? Why should the monkeys go hungry? Which parties have the right to the fruit? Why not seek nonviolent solutions to the problem? Most of the students entering the discussion read the monkeys passage as an example of racist discourse and appeared to identify with the plight of the dispossessed monkeys. Jean Ure described the atmosphere in the classroom in a written account:

This test, which the students appeared to do quite carefully but without enthusiasm, led to an increasingly richer and more impressive discussion following questions pressed on them consistently and persistently by PS [Pippa Stein], which gradually broke down an initial reserve and which by the end, most of them seemed to find exciting. . . . The questions brought out a deeply felt rejection of the text, on a variety of grounds. . . . Two men, older than the rest, objected on the grounds both of the violence extended to the animals and to the reporting of violence in these terms. . . . I had the impression that, although this test proved excellent for discussion, and the discussion was cathartic, not only would it have been disastrous as a test, but that it worked as well as it did because of the shared, communal nature of the discussion.

My own response to what was emerging from the discussion was complex. I was completely taken by surprise at the students' reading of the text as racist. My reading of this text as a simple factual report about monkeys in Durban shot by the police was fundamentally challenged by the students. I was embarrassed that I had not been more sensitive to a possible reading of this text as racist.

I left the class feeling confused and disoriented. I had entered the classroom with what I assumed to be a "universal" understanding of the monkeys passage as a factual account of monkeys who are a nuisance to a Durban family and who are shot by the police. My assumptions about the meanings of a text were seriously challenged. Where does the meaning of a text lie? Is this text about monkeys or is it about the dispossessed? What discursive histories did each individual student bring to bear on that text in that particular place at that particular moment?

Another assumption was challenged as well: my assumption that high school students are relatively naive about the ways in which they might use the different readings of text to their advantage. In this classroom, students were extremely adept at juggling a series of different readings in their heads, which they used appropriately, according to the demands of the social occasion.

I reported back to the Faculty of Arts Admissions Committee on how the students had responded to the test. The monkeys passage was rejected by the committee on the grounds that it might be interpreted by test takers as a racist text.

### Analysis: Texts and Genres

From such an impassioned discussion of the offensiveness of the passage, we were concerned that the students' performance on the test might be compromised. We were surprised that so many (63 percent of the students) scored high (80 percent correct). In order to address this paradox, we turned to recent developments in genre analysis. While genre analysis has been used in a wide variety of fields, such as literary studies, linguistics, and rhetoric (Swales, 1990), it has only recently been applied to the field of language testing, where the standardized reading test has been framed as a particular genre (Peirce, 1992).

Our conception of "genre" is not the more conventional notion of "text type" as, for example, a sonnet, term paper, interview, or prayer. Drawing on Kress (1989, 1991, 1993), we conceive of a genre as a social process in which different texts — either oral or written — are socially constructed:

Language always happens as text; and as text, it inevitably occurs in a particular generic form. That generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations. (Kress, 1993, p. 27)

In Kress's terms, a genre is constituted within and by a particular social occasion that has a conventionalized structure, and that functions within

the context of larger institutional and social processes. In this formulation, the social occasions that constitute a genre may be formulaic and ritualized, such as a wedding or committee meeting, or less ritualized, such as a casual conversation. The important point is that the conventionalized forms of these occasions, along with the organization, purpose, and intention of the participants within the occasion, give rise to the meanings associated with the specific genre.

A central aspect of Kress's formulation of genre concerns the differences between spoken language and written language:

A social theory of genre will need to be closely attentive to the constantly shifting relations between the language in the spoken and in the written mode, and its relations to shifts in power. (1993, p. 37)

The immediate presence of an audience in speech makes it potentially interactional and spontaneous. Both speakers and listeners jointly construct a world of shared meanings, constantly modifying and elaborating according to the responses of the moment. Turn-taking patterns shift according to the power relations between the interlocutors. In a conversation, for example, where the power relations may be relatively equitable, turn-taking may be subject to negotiation. In a typical classroom lesson, on the other hand, the interaction between teacher and students may be controlled to a greater extent by the teacher.

Kress (1989) argues that the power relations between participants in an interaction have a particular effect on the social meanings of the texts constructed within a given genre. In essence, the *mechanism* of interaction — the conventionalized form of the genre — is of primary importance in genres where a greater power difference exists between the participants, while the *substance* of the interaction — the content — is of secondary importance. The power differences also affect the relative "closedness" or "openness" of an interaction — in other words, the extent to which the social meaning of an interaction is open to negotiation. In a lesson — a genre in which the power differentials are great — the interaction is more closed, whereas in a conversation — a genre in which power differentials are reduced — interaction is more open.

Peirce (1992) argues that the standardized reading test is a genre. The value ascribed to texts within the standardized reading test genre is associated with a ritualized social occasion in which participants (test makers and test takers) share a common purpose and set of expectations, but whose relationship is constituted on inequitable terms. The social occasion is characterized by strict time limits in which test takers have little control over the rate at which information is transmitted or needs to be processed. The test takers are expected to be silent at all times, observe rigorous proctoring procedures, and read the text in solitude. Both test makers and test takers recognize that the purpose of the test is to discriminate among readers with reference to an arbitrary criterion established by the test makers. The shared expectations are that the personal experience of the test takers has little relevance to the items being tested, and that the test makers decide what an acceptable reading of the text should be. The relationship between test makers and test takers, a manifestly unequal one, has a direct bearing on the social meaning ascribed to texts in the standardized reading test.

Kress's conception of genre and Peirce's conception of the standardized reading test help to make sense of the contrasting readings of the monkeys passage that occurred on September 19, 1991. The intended reading, which occurred during the written test-taking event, positioned the text as a story about monkeys who were a nuisance to a Durban family, and who were accordingly disciplined by the authorities. This intended reading — or what we call the "dominant reading" — was, in fact, partly an artifact of the test maker, as evidenced in the framing of multiple-choice questions and the optional answers provided. The very first question, for example, is phrased as follows: "This newspaper article is about. . ." The test-takers are provided with four options, including the intended answer, "monkeys that attacked people." Question three reinforces the view that the monkeys were "pests," while question five depicts the monkeys' actions as destructive and undisciplined. Although the students were presented with multiple choices, they were not given the option of considering whether the text had multiple meanings. This problem is inherent in the structure of multiple-choice tests.

The divergent reading, or "insurgent reading" (taken from Simon, 1992), which arose out of the discussions following the test-taking event, positioned the text as a metaphor for inequitable social relations between Blacks and Whites in South Africa. Simon's conception of an insurgent reading is a reading produced at a particular point in time and space that contests sets of meanings that hegemonically frame text interpretation. These "sets of meaning" are the taken-for-granted assumptions shared by the writer and the intended audience.

In the case of the monkeys passage, the newspaper reporter who wrote the story takes for granted that the rights of the powerless are secondary to the rights of the powerful, and uses language in such a way that it obscures the manner in which the powerful abuse power. For example, the author positions the actions of the monkeys who were defending a trapped mother and baby as violent and extreme through words such as "rampage," "attacking," and "hurled." Later, the writer does not use the active voice to state that the police "killed" the monkeys. Instead the writer uses the agentless passive voice to indicate that the monkeys were "shot dead." In the insurgent reading of the text, it is precisely such sets of meaning that are called into question.

Our central argument is that these two contrasting readings of the text were revealed within the context of two very different social occasions, albeit on the same day and in the same place. The first social occasion was the test-taking event, with its ritualized procedures and time constraints. Key features of the first occasion included the emphasis on the written mode, the individual nature of the reading event, the reductive characteristics of the multiple-choice format, and the imposition of direct control by a White adult "expert." The second social occasion was the subsequent class discussion about the text, which began as a typical teacher-initiated discussion but rapidly developed into a conversational interaction. The mode of communication was oral rather than written.

We argue that the difference in the power relations between the teacher (Stein) and the students on the two different social occasions is implicated in the production of two different readings of the monkeys passage. To support our argument, we will explore this dynamic in greater detail.

On the first social occasion, when Stein was introduced and administered the test, she was the "test maker" — a White, English-speaking professional from prestigious Wits University. The students were the "test takers" — Black, secondary school English Language Learners from a

city school with scarce resources. Despite Stein's attempts to put students at ease, we believe that her race, class, and institutional position at that point in time put her in a position of power relative to the students. We assert that not one of the students was, in fact, in a position to refuse the request to give up their lunch break in order to take the test. In this context, the mechanism of the interaction — the conventionalized form of the test event — determined to a great extent how the students "read" the text. They understood that they were expected to comply with the dictates of the genre, and to reproduce the test maker's reading of the text. When Stein asked students, "What did you think of the passage?" it is significant that some students responded to her question by highlighting the *level of difficulty* of the passage and not its interest value. Those who said, "It was nice and easy. I hope we get something like this on the final exam," were responding to the text as test. In other words, their interest in the text was structured largely by the *mechanism* of the interaction and not the *substance* of the interaction. Many students voiced less of a concern about a critical analysis of the text than with how easy it was to ascertain a "legitimate" reading of the text — a reading that a lecturer from Wits University would validate.

On the second social occasion, after the tests had been duly collected, we believe that the power relations between Stein and the students altered dramatically. Stein was no longer the test maker nor the students the test takers. Stein sat informally on the desk, inviting comment and criticism. Although she may have positioned herself at the beginning of the discussion as the controller of knowledge and power, her subject position seems to have shifted in the course of the interaction. In Stein's view, the students were no longer apprehensive, and they appeared to become more confident as they verbalized their critical reading of the text. On this social occasion, the substance of the interaction — the content of the text — became more important than the mechanism of the interaction, and there was no longer a single, legitimate reading of the text voiced by the students. Students could draw on their background knowledge and experience to analyze the social meaning of the text, and there was space for multiple readings. Students no longer appeared isolated, silent, and unenthusiastic. They interacted with one another animatedly; they debated, argued, and laughed together. The predominantly *social* context in which this discussion took place allowed for the further development of an insurgent reading that gained widespread support in the class as the discussion deepened.

Given this social occasion, the value ascribed to the monkeys passage was complex and contested. For most students, the text reflected race and class interests at the expense of less powerful communities: "It's about Black people, who are the monkeys 'on the rampage' in White people's homes." "It's about who owns the land." "It's about violence in our society." For other students, the story remained simply a story about monkeys disturbing a family.

In sum, the piloting of the monkeys passage illustrates that the social meaning of a text is not fixed, but is a product of the social occasion in which it is read. This social occasion, in turn, is a complex tapestry in which the status of the participants, their use of body language, their race (among other characteristics), the time and place of interaction, and the purpose of interaction have a direct bearing on the social meaning of texts apprehended within the occasion. Our analysis of the two contrasting readings of the monkeys passage is, however, incomplete. We do not know what power relations existed among the students themselves — whose voices were taken up and whose were ignored. We do not know whether the women were silent, or whether the speakers of minority African language were marginalized, because such differences were not attended to by Stein during the test event.

### Implications for Testing and Pedagogy

We have argued thus far that the shifting power relations between Stein and the students on the two different social occasions was an important factor in the construction of the two contrasting readings of the monkeys passage. However, the debate raises two important questions that we wish to address. First, did the monkeys passage test really "bomb"? Second, what are the implications of the test event for pedagogy? The question of whether the monkeys passage really failed to achieve its objectives of measuring English reading comprehension is complex. It is difficult to determine from such a small sample whether the psychometric qualities of the test were satisfactory. The Admissions Committee rejected the text because committee members were concerned that the students had read the text as racist. The committee did not want Wits University, with its stated ideals of non-racialism, implicated in the use of a racist test.

While this issue is clearly an important one that should not be underestimated, there is another issue about the suitability of the text-as-test that should be addressed: the "washback" effect of a test. The washback effect of a test, sometimes referred to as the systemic validity of a test (Alderson & Wall, 1993), refers to the impact of a test on classroom pedagogy, curriculum development, and educational policy. If test developers are accountable only to administrators, then a test such as the monkeys passage, with more trials, might well have proved to be a successful instrument as an initial screening device. If, on the other hand, test developers are concerned about how texts and testing impact learning and teaching in the classroom, a more complex picture emerges (see, for example, Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994).

It would be paradoxical for a university to promote a student's passive and uncritical reading of a text in an admissions test, and then expect these same "successful" students to display an active and critical approach to learning and testing once they have passed through the university gates. If a student's academic potential is defined as the ability to recognize the assumptions and worldview of test makers, then the monkeys passage did not fail; if, on the other hand, a student's potential is defined as the ability to draw on experience and knowledge to understand and critique existing knowledge, then the monkeys passage has little utility as a testing instrument. In our view, the monkeys passage failed, not because of its psychometric qualities, but because it could not be justified on pedagogical grounds.

Furthermore, even if the ability to recognize the assumptions of test makers is considered acceptable for testing purposes, equity issues become a central concern. In essence, if test makers are drawn from a particular class, a particular race, and a particular gender, then test takers who share these characteristics will be at an advantage relative to other test takers. Clearly, such inequities are not restricted to the testing of English proficiency or language testing in South Africa (see, for example, Hanson, 1993). To promote equity in educational assessment, different stakeholders, such as testers, teachers, administrators, parents, and students should be able to contribute to the test development process.

This does not address our second question, however: What are the implications of the test event for pedagogy? More specifically, how does the teacher create the conditions that will enable students to draw on their experience and understanding of the world to engage with texts and become active, critical readers? We have found Simon's (1992) work on textual interpretation particularly helpful in addressing this question.

Drawing on the work of Said (1982), Simon argues that all texts are apprehended within socially regulated discourses, and that there is an "inherent instability" of textual meaning. The very fact that the same students provided at least two different readings of the monkeys passage on the same day and in the same place testifies on behalf of this position. Simon believes, however, that although a text can be read in multiple ways, such a possibility does not mean that we are "adrift in a relativism that challenges nothing and takes us nowhere" (1992, p. 113). He argues that what is pedagogically productive is to ask ourselves what makes insurgent readings possible.

With reference to the monkeys passage, a wide range of social and pedagogical conditions enabled the students to construct an insurgent reading of the text. At one level, the inequitable social and economic conditions that regulated the students' day-to-day lives in South Africa led them to identify with the dispossessed protagonists in the monkeys passage. We question whether White, middle-class students would have been likely to construct a similar reading of this text because the White, middle-class Admissions Committee had not anticipated that the text might be read as racist. As Simon argues:

[An insurgent reading] ruptures the taken-for-granted grounds of our own understanding and teaches us that the scars and wounds of history cannot be erased within our search for universal truths. (1992, p. 24)

At another level, the pedagogical conditions that made this insurgent reading possible were significant. From the learner's point of view, the context for reading had shifted from a focus on an individual, highly ritualized, and controlled reading event (in the case of the test) to an interactive, collective oral discussion.

Drawing on Simon, we suggest that the challenge for the teacher is to *reframe* the focus of classroom discourse from a consideration of what the text "really" means to a consideration of how multiple readings of the text are socially constructed:

The question to be asked from an educator's point of view is what discourse is regulating an insurgent reading and whether it would be desirable and possible to support that as a counterdiscursive position. (1992, p. 115)

What this means in practice is that the teacher can use the range of readings produced to explore critically with the students what investments they have in the readings and how these investments intersect with the students' histories, their relationship to the social world, and their desires for the future.<sup>4</sup> It is not possible for a teacher to predict the many readings students may produce from a single text, nor is it easy to predict which text will ignite insurgent readings in which context (Janks, 1993). Clearly, however, when readers' investments and identities are at stake, they may go to great lengths to seek validation for their claims to knowledge and power. What becomes important, then, is that the teacher not uncritically privilege different readings, but instead create possibilities for discussion and analysis of the social construction of these readings.

## Conclusion

In post-apartheid South Africa, both the National Educational and Policy Initiative reports (NEPI, 1993) and the African National Congress (ANC) draft framework on education and training (1994) promote fundamental principles of non-racism, non-sexism, democracy, and redress. In the wider educational community, both in South Africa and internationally, such principles are inseparable from the promotion of equity in assessment and pedagogical practices. In striving for educational equity, teachers, testers, parents, students, and politicians will be inextricably enmeshed in debates and struggles over the meaning of texts and the purposes of tests.

The struggle over the meaning of the monkeys passage and its place in a university admissions test is part of larger, related questions that have relevance in many international contexts. For example, if students from historically disadvantaged communities seek access to schools, universities, and workplaces, what forms of assessment would give them the best opportunity to demonstrate their talents and abilities? Are students being excluded from certain institutions because they do not share the worldview of test makers, or because they do not have the potential to succeed? Indeed, who determines criteria for "success?" Related questions concern the meaning of texts and the validity of insurgent readings. Who determines what an acceptable reading of a text should be? Which texts are considered works of art and which are relegated to the margins of social life? Such questions, in turn, are inseparable from struggles over the ownership of tests: to whom should test makers be accountable? How should test makers address the diverse interests of stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, students, parents? Who are the test makers?

Our article may have raised more questions than it has successfully addressed. However, drawing on our experience with the monkeys passage, we have demonstrated that consideration must be given to the way both tests and textual meanings are socially constructed, and whether these social constructions serve the interests of justice and equality. In addition, we have highlighted a fundamental validity paradox in some language tests that are used for university admissions purposes: While admissions officers may desire language tests that identify critical, independent learners, the testing instruments they use may not give test takers the opportunity to demonstrate such abilities. Furthermore, students of color may feel particularly constrained to draw on their background experience to engage with texts used in tests. We have suggested that both test developers and teachers should use their talents to validate the histories and identities of test takers and students, encouraging them to deconstruct their insurgent readings of texts. In this way, test takers from diverse backgrounds may have the opportunity to demonstrate the richness of their experience, and students may learn not only about their past, but also construct a hopeful vision for their future.

---

## References

- African National Congress (ANC). (1994). *A policy framework for education and training*. Johannesburg: National ANC Office.
- Alderson, C., & Wall, D. (1993). Does washback exist? *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 115–129.
- Hanson, F. A. (1993). *Testing testing: Social consequences of the examined life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



- Janks, H. (1993). *Closed meanings in open schools*. Proceedings of the Australian Reading Association First International Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Kress, G. (1989). *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G. (1991). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 11, 84–89.
- Kress, G. (1993). Genre as social process. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *The powers of literacy* (pp. 22–37). London: Falmer Press.
- Lacelle-Peterson, W., & Rivera, C. (1994). Is it real for all kids? A framework for equitable assessment policies for English Language Learners. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64, 55–75.
- National Educational and Policy Initiative (NEPI). (1993). *Framework report*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Peirce, B. N. (1992). Demystifying the TOEFL reading test. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 665–691.
- Peirce, B. N. (in press). Social identity, investment and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1).
- Said, E. (1982). *The world, the text and the critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simon, R. (1992). *Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Stack, L. (1994). *Report to the Arts Faculty Admissions Committee*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press.
- Yeld, N., & Haeck, W. (1993). Educational histories and academic potential: Can tests deliver? In S. Angeli-Carter (Ed.), *Language in academic development at U.C.T.* Unpublished manuscript.

We would like to thank Heather Brookes, Hilary Janks, Gunther Kress, Nomsa Ngqakayi, Roger Simon, and Sue Starfield for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article. In addition, the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Academic Support Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, is gratefully acknowledged.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term "English Language Learners" is taken from Lacelle-Peterson and Rivera (1994) and refers to students whose first language is not English. The term includes those who are beginning to learn English, as well as those who have considerable proficiency.

<sup>2</sup> Many members of the academic staff at Wits have participated in the development of the test, including Norman Blight, Qedusizi Buthelezi, Lorraine Chaskalson, Hilary Janks, Tom Lodge, Debra Nails, Esther Ramani, and Louise Stack.

<sup>3</sup> The following quotes are taken from the field notes that I wrote the evening after the testing event.

<sup>4</sup> See Peirce (in press) for a discussion of the relationship between investment and social identity.

---



[Back to Table of  
Contents](#)



[Related  
Articles](#)



[Send a Letter to the  
Editors](#)



[Back to HER Home  
Page](#)

---