

## TESTING WRITING—FOR WHAT?

(excerpt from keynote address)

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Language, like laughter, is a unique human function. These functions—language and humor—reflect the awesome and mysterious capacity of the human cortical cells not only to control and organize behavior; to respond to internal and external stimuli; to take incoming sensations and to organize them into patterns of perceptions, thereby defining realities; but also, language makes it possible for us to create and to cope with the uniquely human realm of abstract ideas and thoughts.

While animals vocalize as a response to an immediate present internal or external stimulus, their vocalization is a form of concrete behavior which in turn serves as a stimulus for the behavioral response of other animals. This form of concrete vocalization is also found among human beings, but human cortical cells enable them to go beyond and communicate abstract ideas. It is this ideational realm which the human cortical cells impose on the objective external reality of experience.

Words, the basic ingredient of language, are the tools with which the human brain seeks to understand and communicate the commonality of human experience. Through the instruments of language we learn to deal with the actual and the anticipated fears and anxieties; hopes and aspirations; the complexities, conflicts and ambivalence of feelings and emotions; and the conflicted and ambiguous passions of love, fear, hostility, despair, happiness. Language differentiates man from animals and enables functional, social and psychological communication among human beings.

The topic of the Conference, "Writing Assessment in the 80s," is indicative of the increasing concern with upgrading the ability of Americans to communicate. Something has to be done, beyond improving the reading skills, to remedy the deficiencies in writing skills. I believe

the decrease in reading and writing skills started with the lowering of academic standards with the uncritical acceptance of educational permissive theories about four decades ago. This was a period which emphasized the right of free expression among students, deemphasizing rules, disparaging the beauty and logic of grammar and, consequently, the clarity of communication. This resurgence in the interest of teaching and testing writing skills which your group represents is most important, but its implementation will not be easy.

If you are successful—and I have no doubt that you will be because you must be—you will make many valuable contributions to our society. One of these contributions will be the control of the tyranny of objective, multiple-choice tests as determinants of human understanding and knowledge. Valid and effective writing tests must test one's ability to communicate ideas. Tests of writing are inherently tests of social interaction. One writes in an attempt to communicate one's perceptions and understanding of reality to others and to share feelings and values.

Valid and appropriate writing tests must tap the individual's respect for the beauty, the logic, the clarity, the consistency, and the coherence which language makes possible in communication and interaction among human beings. By helping students understand how language facilitates the ability to cope and grapple with ideas and feelings, the students will gain a sense of confidence, achievement and security. In addition, they will develop such uniquely human qualities as empathy, justice and social responsibility. These abstract concepts have their base in the same pattern of human cortical mysteries which make language—verbal and written communication—possible among human beings. Through empathy and shared experiences we demonstrate our commonality among human beings. Therefore, in testing writing skills, we are at the same time testing our collective humanity.