Opening Plenary Session

GREETINGS

Joseph S. Murphy, Chancellor
The City University of New York

I am reminded that in this century an important German social thinker, Max Weber, made a prediction about the future. He predicted what he described as the cage of the future which would be populated by specialists without vision and volupptuaries without heart. He took that to be a characterization of bureaucracy. I have had occasion in the last three or four months to talk to a large variety of people, many of whom are increasingly involved with what they call the new technology: word processors, computers, chips—the whole panoply of what is considered to be part of the second industrial revolution. And I reflected on the volupptuaries without heart and specialists without vision. When I consider that Jimmy Carter is now writing his memoirs on a word processor, I wonder how Shakespeare managed, or Socrates; I am in despair thinking about how much better Churchill's memoirs might have been had he had a word processor.

The emphasis on new technologies obliterates a terribly important fact in our lives; increasingly things we do are drained of their particular and unique human aspects. There is a depersonalization, a dull, boring homogeneity in the way in which letters stare out at us in code from screens or projectors. A whole variety of technical improvements improve all kinds of things with regard to the delivery of something, and address themselves not at all to the substance of it. There is, indeed, a kind of impersonment to a technology in which we all begin to talk, sound and write like each other.

The importance of this conference and the importance of the work you do is that you make it possible for individual human beings to assert themselves in unique and individual ways: to describe not only their external world but their own interior world in a way which nothing can duplicate and which cannot be enhanced in a mechanical way. You are fortunate in having such a distinguished speaker as Kenneth Clark this morning, whose life has been dedicated to the notion that in all human beings there is the capacity to express themselves and indeed by doing so to control the world and their external environment. What you do is terribly important—not simply the substance of it but the consequences it has for the way in which people lead their lives. I thank you all for being here, and I greet you.

TESTING WRITING—FOR WHAT?
(excerpt from keynote address)
Kenneth B. Clark, New York State Board of Regents

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 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 idealized 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.