

WRITING ASSESSMENT AND CURRICULUM

Facilitator: Elaine Maimon, *Beaver College*

In her opening remarks, Elaine Maimon noted the broad acceptance of testing by faculty and students in general, how it seemed to sound the voice and values of the larger community and its more immediate and profound effect of shaping the goals and design of writing programs and curricula. She also counseled healthy skepticism toward testing, since any writing test is a kind of compromise which can never reveal the whole truth about a student's ability to write.

Maimon considered writing assessment in three roles: as a tool for initial placement, as part of a proficiency requirement, and as one of the ways to evaluate a writing program. Testing as a tool for placement is valuable because it gives students a good start and a better chance to succeed, while sending a strong message to the faculty and to high schools that writing counts. As part of a proficiency requirement for graduation, writing assessment was abandoned by the Beaver College faculty, primarily because it was adopted too quickly and so, became a political issue, and because faculty realized that writing was a complex lifelong process about which they needed to know a lot more. The program shifted to faculty and curriculum development. Maimon said that as a way to evaluate writing programs, writing assessment is a very complex variable. No tests submit to the kind of statistical rigor required in the social sciences and are to be approached with a good deal of skepticism.

In the general discussion, an objection was made to writing assessment as a placement tool since it creates too homogeneous a classroom although students at large, open-access, public colleges would probably reflect a greater range of competence than their counterparts at small, private, liberal arts colleges. Recommended ways of enhancing a writing program included teaching teachers how to handle a mixed group of writers, giving weaker students tutorial help or, simply, more time to complete a writing sequence, creating a strong network of peer support outside the classroom and establishing a telephone hotline.

Discussion shifted to the use of a writing portfolio as another kind of "test" of proficiency and as a means of shaping curriculum design. The writing portfolio has its own problems: What do you want in a portfolio: revisions? permissive essays? experimental pieces? and the problem of unwieldiness at large colleges. Still, its value is to ensure that students revise their work and that teachers get involved in students' writing as a process. Maimon concluded that perhaps we need different types of tests for different purposes, but that we must also look carefully and constantly at how we test and use tests so that we may remain intellectually consistent.

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