CREATING AND FIELD-TESTING TOPICS

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Leo Ruth began the session by reminding us that all writing tasks involve reading problems which the test maker must attend to. Sandra Murphy seconded this by further reminding the group that classroom prompts are negotiable: students may question assignments and teachers, while working to make themselves understood, disclose goals and suggest strategies. Knowledge of the teacher and the course context also helps. Writing assignment test prompts, however, must stand on their own.

With this introduction, we then got to criticize a sample real-life prompt. Some of the questions we raised involved content: Would most students know enough to write on this topic? Would they have to worry about offending the unknown reader? Most of the questions concerned the rhetorical mode and structure of the essays elicited by the prompt. The prompt was criticized for calling for three tasks: Is this too many for ease of students' performance or coherence of the product? What variations of emphasis or organization of the tasks are tolerable? If the prompt says, "Describe a problem," are we asking for a description? How will exam readers react to narrative writings which students find easier and do better, if the readers are expecting argument? These and other questions called for agreement between test makers and graders relating the nature of the prompt to the purpose of the test and an assessment of the abilities of the test-takers. As an example of the first consideration, do we want *typical* writing or *good* writing and, if the latter, what *kind* of good writing? As an example of the second, are our test-takers sophisticated enough to distinguish between "real" questions and "school" questions and to respond with appropriate behavior? One participant told of a returning adult student who refused to respond to her prompt on the ground that she believed the teacher knew the answer to her question.

Many of the participants, particularly those from CUNY, were interested in the discussion of "agree-disagree" prompts (CUNY uses this format for its Writing Assessment Test). Though research suggests the superiority of this type of prompt, participants pointed to problems. The phrasing of the question may give agreers an edge, since the question offers suggestions on what to say. For the insecure writer, agreeing generates more verbiage, while disagreeing, which permits and may even enforce a narrower focus, may generate better essays from those for whom verbiage generation is no problem.

Besides the sample prompt, participants were given two other handouts: "Guidelines for Developing Topics for Writing Assessments" and "An Evolving Model for Studying the Writing Assessment Episode," the latter detailing relationships among participants (test-maker, test-taker and test-rater), processes and products. The handouts turned out to have anticipated many of the participants' questions and concerns. Additional handouts can be obtained from Professor Leo Ruth, Bay Area Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley.

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