Facilitators: Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy  
Bay Area Writing Project

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 essay elicited by the prompt. The prompt was criticized for calling for three tasks: Is this too many for ease of students' performance or coherency 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 ares an edge, since the question offers suggestions on what to say. For the insecure writer, agreeing generates more verbiage, while disagreeing, which permits and even enforces 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-rate), procedures, 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.

Charles Pitch, Recorder  
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POLITICS OF TESTING, (continued)

the test. Have faculty-generated the criteria for grading a test, then have them participate in grading. Realize that there is significant public support for testing. One participant described a junior-level reading/essay test which avoids the pass/fail grade and asks instead, "What will this student's program for the next two years look like?" Students at this institution also have a chance to revise their essay the next day, and faculty from all disciplines are involved in grading the tests and counseling students. Are we observing a natural cycle that begins with public alarm at poor writing and that leads to a demand for testing, new courses, refinement of the test, and ultimately an impetus toward programs in writing across the curriculum? Although some participants felt that the notion of a cycle accurately describes recent developments on their campuses, a participant from a SUNY campus argued that there is too much rigidity in the system to permit the cycle to occur. Another participant pointed out that if a movement toward writing across the curriculum is to develop, it must be actively promoted from the very top, preferably by the president of the college.

Hendrix remarked that the discussion confirmed his hypothesis that testing has been a divisive issue on campuses. On one hand, assessment has been used to get students, especially adults, into education, to develop alternative routes for education, and to educate by defining competencies. On the other hand, public outcry for a return to basics, mandated state-wide or city-wide tests, and new research interests in testing has lead to more and more tests, some of which screen students out of education. Thus, he concluded, we stand at an interesting and complex moment in the politics of testing.

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TRAINING READERS, STANLEY, (continued)

reading decides the issue. Some participants, mindful of budget constraints at their institutions, wanted to know how to keep third readings to a minimum. Others wanted to know who should have the third readings. Should chief readers have to shoulder this burden in addition to their other administrative tasks? Should special, experienced, "third readers" be designated (or elected)? What should chief readers do when they "know" that a third reading is incorrect? Should some of the third readings be discussed and reviewed at some point in the testing session? What procedures are used for dealing with consistently aberrant readers?

There was a general consensus that many of the problems associated with essay readings could best be resolved by developing good training sessions for readers. Such sessions should be repeated each time a reading is held, and readers should be required to attend them. The general aim of the test administrator should be to impart to the readers a feeling that they have an active input into the testing program. Testing sessions should not be too long; should take place in a pleasant, collegial environment, and should be oriented to reader participation. The ideal goal should be to make "training" a continuing and natural, organic part of every reading, for everyone involved.

It would seem from the geographic range of the session's participants that testing programs throughout the United States (and elsewhere) are likely to grow rapidly in the near future. This expansion will be especially interesting for us at CUNY as many of these programs are based on the CUNY model. This session indicated that in the future we will certainly be able to learn more from each other.

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