

THE GREAT DEBATE: OBJECTIVE TESTS VERSUS WRITING SAMPLES

Moderator: Marcia Silver, *Brooklyn College*

Panelists: Stephen Witte, *The University of Texas at Austin*
Ann Herrington, *Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*

Marcia Silver's opening remarks set a useful tone for the lively and extensive discussion that followed. Her generous framework suggested the possibilities for both speakers and the audience to move away from the adversarial approach suggested by the title of this section toward an open serious evaluation of the needs and problems of the conference participants. Silver suggested that we involve ourselves less in debate than in discussion, that we show ourselves more willing to confront the questions we need to ask than definitive answers we would like to find.

Following this lead, Stephen Witte described what he is doing for the FIPSE project he is currently working on, examining the complex nature of the choices we make in designing the assessment of writing abilities. This work considers two areas essentially:

- How can we create reliable and valid assessments?
- What does writing ability entail?

In exploring these areas, the experimenters in the project have moved in several directions, to look at how attitudes toward writing (particularly students' attitudes) affect the products; to examine the importance of different concepts of knowing (as suggested by Gilbert Riles); and to study aspects of the process of writing. They have also looked at issues raised by holistic reading and scoring—questioning the effect of the manipulation of topics and of the training of readers. At present, the experiments involving topic manipulation and the training of readers are being carried out to gain information from other colleges.

From what he has seen so far, Witte's suggestion is that we think about some new ways of assessing writing, such as "Performative Assessment" (Faigley) in which we identify specific skills necessary for effective writing; or design tasks that control for the effects of prior knowledge; or direct the writers to address different audiences. In considering holistic reading, Witte emphasized that we do not really know what is being measured, and that there are doubts about assessing writing that arise from our difficulty in comparing topics with relation to skills demanded, rhetorical context presented, or audience addressed. A historical survey of literacy might suggest, according to Witte, that what we are doing in setting writing assessments is to describe what it means to be literate in this culture at different times. He asked us, in concluding, to be ready to examine our different assumptions about what it means to be literate in this time and place.

Ann Herrington also began in a cautionary mood. Her doubts about assessment testing seemed to arise from two sources: her knowledge as a tester and her experience as a classroom teacher of writing. Rather than debating the value of one test vs. another, she chose to examine the question of whether to assess or not and how. Her basic position is that a single assessment is not as reliable as the examination of a number of writings, and that the single, mass testing of writing is not a natural situation.

Herrington summarized succinctly the positions on kinds of testing: an objective test does not ask people to write, but it can give high correlation with achievement; a writing sample creates an occasion for composing, but we don't know how to assure comparability of topics or

reliability of readings. Considering the counter-claims for each form of testing, Herrington endorses some combination of objective and writing sample testing. Like Witte, Herrington thinks that the choice of tests reflects the values of the designers. But she doesn't think this is all bad: "Our values are the values of our school...we want our students to meet these standards." Given our need for caution and the need to recognize the fallibility of our choices, Herrington concluded with this advice: think twice about proficiency testing; emphasize placement testing: make no judgment—of placement or exit criteria—ever by a single standard; combine evaluation of test results and teacher expertise in making final judgments.

At this point, the discussion became general, as the panelists polled the audience. We were asked about our experiences with writing assessments, our evaluation of objective vs. writing sample tests, the way we handled placement and exit criteria. Each participant spoke briefly giving information, asking questions, or responding to earlier queries. To summarize: 10 schools used objective tests for placement, 9 used writing samples, 7 used some combination; for exit or proficiency testing, none used objective tests, 13 used writing samples; 1 used a combination; 2 combined a writing sample with teacher evaluation.

Toward the end of the sessions, Witte and Herrington summarized the discussions and commented on the results of the polling. Witte suggested that people are not altogether happy with objective testing since it is an indirect assessment of writing. Although most people probably feel this way, a fair number, as our poll revealed, do use objective measures for placement. Whichever choice we make, Witte offered these qualifications: a particular test is probably useful only for some things, not for others; the range of experience we now have may not be good enough—we need to develop more and better information. Finally, when we use writing samples, we should acknowledge that we ask students to produce writing under conditions we wouldn't accept. Our methods of composing are probably protracted, yet we don't allow for revising, even when we may accept Don Murray's formulation: "Writing is revising."

Herrington's final comments stressed the perspective of the teacher of writing: she asserted that the basic question about proficiency or competency testing of writing is "Is there something we cannot do in the classroom or in classrooms across the campus?" She suggested that we limit testing to placement only, and that we offer topics and situations that give students multiple opportunities to show us how they write.

Witte's final remarks again broadened the focus of the discussion to pick up on Herrington's emphasis on writing across the curriculum and on curriculum development as the way to develop students' writing abilities. He called for increased articulation of English Department faculty with others, for attention to all language arts in order to understand writing, and for the use of multiple pieces of writing, such as a "writing portfolio."

With their shift from analysis and study to advocacy, the panelists evoked spirited response from members of the audience.

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