

THE GREAT DEBATE: OBJECTIVE TESTS VERSUS WRITING SAMPLES

Moderator: Virginia Slaughter, *Instructional Resource Center*

Panelists: Kenneth Bruffee, *Brooklyn College*
Evans Alloway, *Educational Testing Service*

In her introduction, Virginia Slaughter emphasized the reality of the "Great Debate" by pointing out that three-quarters of all colleges and universities in the United States use objective tests "to some extent" to evaluate student writing, despite growing evidence that writing samples "have excellent reliability" and that most faculty prefer them. Then, by request of the panelists, the participants broke into small groups to formulate questions they most wanted the panelists to comment upon. Some twenty questions were forthcoming; among them were:

- What are the pros and cons of objective versus writing sample tests, especially in regard to educational validity, fairness to students, practicalities of administration and scoring?
- What is the most reliable kind of objective test? Writing sample?
- What is the best method for administering and evaluating a writing sample? Can sample tests be designed to evaluate the process of writing as well as the outcome of writing?
- How can administrators and other faculty be convinced of the superiority of writing samples over objective tests?
- Do professional test-makers consider a school's curriculum when designing a test? Do they consult with faculty?

In his response, J. Evans Alloway made the following points: The best reliability comes from tests combining short answers with several writing samples; holistic grading of writing samples is reliable, provided that the evaluators are well-trained and able to apply agreed-upon criteria to their evaluative readings with reasonable consistency; writing samples have the advantage of being valid by definition, but short-answer tests must prove their validity; once proven, short-answer tests are more economically and efficiently administered and scored, thus making them attractive to administrators. The main thrust of Alloway's responses, however, was aimed at apprising participants of the roles that educators and those who influence educational policies play in the kinds of tests school systems select, design, or commission. The inference was that the "Great Debate" was not so much between those favoring objective, and those favoring writing sample testing, but rather a debate among the various constituencies that have a say in the policies of a particular school or school system. As Alloway put it: "The testing of writing is a social and political issue as well as an educational one."

Kenneth Bruffee expanded on the concept that the testing of writing is not a strictly educational matter. Referring to his experiences in helping to create the CUNY testing and evaluation program, he cautioned those involved in setting up such programs against the idea that they can operate without reference to the political, social, cultural, and economic forces that affect wide-scale, mandatory testing programs. The testing program that a school finally decides on will represent a "big compromise" that reflects and, at least to an acceptable extent, satisfies the various "mandates" that are laid upon a school by interest groups exercising varying

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degrees of authority and control over educational policies and practices. Bruffee advised those who take on responsibility for instituting writing assessment programs to start with the attitude that there are "absolutely no absolutes" that can be applied automatically to every writing assessment situation. Given the inevitable pressures from the various mandates that must be satisfied, educators must try to "manipulate the mandates" so that, despite compromises, the testing of writing "serves educational ends."

Both panelists made it clear that the "Great Debate" is not simply an "in-profession" disagreement among

educators holding different views about the best way to test and evaluate writing ability. Both stressed that the best test for a school or school system is one that reliably assesses the writing ability of students while, at the same time, satisfies the diverse demands that arise from the larger community of which the school is a part. The question, "Why are we testing?" therefore, must be answered before the questions of "Which test?" and "Which evaluation procedures?" are addressed.

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