

TRAINING READERS

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Participants at this session represented a geographic range from Utah to Paris. Most of the participants came from institutions where placement or competency testing programs had been recently instituted and where they, as directors of those programs or as chief readers, were faced with the task of training and/or recruiting fellow faculty as readers.

Chief among the topics of discussion was the problem of training new readers to differentiate between placement and competency measurement. Several of the participants admitted that in their own minds these two criteria often tend to blend together. The trend of the discussion suggested that before testing programs get underway sufficient time ought to be devoted to developing rangefinders that accurately reflect the purpose of the tests being used. Several participants also remarked about the importance of punctuating reading sessions with frequent reference to rangefinders, especially in cases where experienced faculty are readers and where placement is not the only goal. It was thought that experienced faculty would have, as readers, a natural bent to read for placement.

Some of the participants new to testing inquired about procedures for training sessions. Some experienced test administrators provided information about the day-to-day tasks involved in training readers to work effectively in a testing program. Above all, readers need motivation, not only in the form of money or released time, but in the knowledge that they are viewed by their colleagues as competent professionals involved in a very serious process. To this end, training sessions ought to be held in an atmosphere fostering mutual respect. Getting college faculty to put their own judgments to the test in range-finding sessions can be difficult. It is very easy for someone who has made a judgment out of line with the consensus to feel humiliated, even when no one intended that result. Therefore, leaders of training sessions ought to be very sensitive to their colleagues' sense of professional pride.

Training sessions should take place on the same day as a test reading, preferably in the morning when readers are alert. Amenities such as coffee and snacks should be provided to keep readers alert and to foster a spirit of group cooperation. In addition to learning how to follow their institution's technical procedures, readers need to learn to subordinate their personal standards to those determined by the rangefinders. The aim of the person in charge of the training should not be to get an individual to forever abandon his or her personal view of how writing ought to be evaluated, but to temporarily set aside that view in favor of larger common aims. This end, it seemed generally agreed, ought to be the central aim of training sessions.

The role of readers in the generation of rangefinders was also a topic of discussion. Some participants thought that rangefinders should be continually modified over the course of the academic year, both to set better standards and to give the readers a sense of involvement in the direction of the testing program. Other participants pointed to the "floating" standards likely to result from such a practice. Everyone seemed to agree, however, that readers should have a role in determining future topics.

A thorny problem for the session, as for most testing programs, was the question of resolving pass/fail splits. Most testing programs represented at the session use the CUNY model where each essay receives two readings. Where there is a pass/fail difference, a third

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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 do 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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