

RESEARCH FINDINGS: A PANEL DISCUSSION

Moderator: Harvey Weiner, *Co-Director, National Testing Network in Writing*

Panelists: Gertrude Conlan, *Educational Testing Service*
Rosemary Hake, *California State College, Los Angeles*
Richard Larson, *Lehman College*

Gertrude Conlan spoke of her past research and the pragmatic experience of ETS, from which a number of clear observations had emerged:

- Every essay measures "an almost infinite universe of knowledge and skills"; topics and questions do not equal each other
- There is no formula to produce effective test questions
- Any change in the topic—including what was on TV the night before the test—may change the task, often in unpredictable ways
- A question must be able to be scored. It cannot be too emotion-charged, or too boring for the readers

Finally, Conlan noted, there was typically no clear personal voice in the writing of younger college students; it was present in older writers. James Hoetker pointed out that elementary school students typically wrote with a voice, but that it was suppressed in high school.

Rosemary Hake's presentation focused on her present research on the way teachers read essay exams. She

noted that narration is hard to grade because reader sympathy interferes with the evaluation. Hake also discussed the following research findings:

- More abstract topics elicit more consistent readings
- The reader tends to make an esthetic, intellectual whole of a piece of writing, and otherwise to interpret and add to it

Hake advised that the grading leader should determine "standard grading" practice of individual readers and of the group, and adjust scores to maintain consistency.

In closing, Hake re-emphasized that grading is "safer" (more consistent) when the topic and the writing are intellectual and abstract rather than direct and personal.

Richard Larson's presentation concerned future research—specific areas that need examination. He rapidly surveyed recent texts and articles in testing, with special mention of the work of Barbara Hoetker Ash, Karen Greenberg, James Hoetker, Gordon Brossell, and Leo Ruth. He also called for an assessment of writing done outside composition courses. And finally, Larson reminded us what the test says to the student-writer, and to the classroom teacher: What does the test writer "hear" when he reads instructions and questions? What does a test tell teachers about what they should be doing in class?

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