ALTERNATIVES TO CURRENT TESTING PRACTICES

Speaker: Richard Beach, University of Minnesota
Introducer/Recorder: Tom Albritton, The Florida State University

Richard Beach stated that he is convinced that the form of essay testing currently used by the NAEP does not cue students to use the types of strategies that would allow them the produce their best writing, but instead instructs students only to "discuss" the topics. According to Beach, this type of assignment format does not invite the student to invent through particular techniques such as listing, summarizing, inferring, etc., nor does it in any way elicit or test the student's pre-writing strategies.

Beach is now working to develop more helpful assignments that would direct the student to call on various strategies which are essential to success in both reading and writing. The activities include goal-setting, visualizing and responding, ordering and summarizing, self-assessing, and revising. The final two components of this list are intentionally separated to emphasize Beach's belief that self-assessment is a completely different activity from revising, and that the former affects a deeper level of cognitive performance than the latter. Writers should do more than examine the text; they should examine themselves for what they know and for what and how they want to communicate as writers.

Good writers, said Beach, have the ability to name what it is they are doing. This self-understanding eases the tension between the person's intention and the text produced. Thus, in order to teach people to become good writers, the teacher must emphasize the importance of the relationship between various writing strategies—listing, backgrounding, supporting, contrasting—and the manifestations of these strategies in the form of what Beach calls "criteria"—relevancy, validity, clarity, etc.

Teachers must structure essay questions that will help students use and organize their knowledge of writing strategy in relation to their purposes and audiences. This is not a traditional consideration of audience, but rather one similar to self-assessment, only with the reader as the object of concern instead of the writer. According to Beach, a consideration of audience should involve the writer's asking, "What do they know?" and "What will they need to know in order to understand my message?"

This deeper level of awareness of all of the people involved in the writing event will allow for clearer and more sophisticated expression, moving the writer from capacities for narrating or describing to the more engaging capacities for reflecting and dramatizing.

CREATING ESSAY EXAMINATION TOPICS

Speaker: Alice Brekke, The California State University and College System
Introducer/Recorder: Bonnie Braendlin, The Florida State University

Alice Brekke presented a short history of the testing situation in the California system. Focusing on the English Placement Test, Brekke discussed the statewide committee's initial dissatisfaction with essay topics that were unfocused or too specific or too restrictive. She then described the process by which the committee, using guidelines from E.T.S., currently researchers, composes, and field-tests essays to determine the best possible topics. Brekke discussed some of the topics, delineating criteria by which they are judged to be satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Subsequent discussion with the audience explored the students' range of responses to various kinds of essay topics, the confidentiality of topics, ways to get students to respond in pretesting, and recruitment as holistic scorers of faculty from disciplines other than English.

SCORING PROCEDURES: HOLISTIC, ANALYTIC, AND PRIMARY TRAIT

Speaker: Richard Stiggins, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Introducer/Recorder: Warren Almand, Chipola Junior College, Florida

One of the missions of the 17-year-old Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory is to gather and disseminate news on performance assessment. Its Center the Performance Assessment, headed by Dr. Rick Stiggins, has for the past four years, been engaged in collecting information and data. Stiggins shared the Center's findings and concerns with us in this session.

Scoring writing samples, he said, is based on the assumption that one either is or is not a writer. This is absurd because writing is a multi-dimensional skill of such complexity that no one-number evaluation can describe it accurately. But the assessment of writing is increasing around the country, and so we need to know much as possible about the various methods of writing assessment.

The first thing we need to understand is that there are, according to Stiggins' Center, eight uses for writing tests. One method of writing assessment, of course, cannot serve to evaluate writing samples for all eight purposes. Currently, the holistic, primary trait, and analytic methods of assessing writing are most often used. All of us involved in assessing writing must understand these and other alternative methods.

The Center has developed the following table of uses of writing tests and the assessment method(s) that seem consistent with those uses.

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