Impact of Writing Assessment on Minorities

Speaker: Leroy Simmons, Florida A & M University
Introducer/Recorder: Jean English, Tallahassee Community College

"The writing problems of minority students are acute," stated Leroy Simmons in his opening remarks. "This finding is not surprising given that so little writing in general is taught in the public schools." Simmons cited two major factors that have impacted on testing: The minimizing of writing skills instruction at the elementary and secondary level, a trend which has carried over into writing assessment, and the tendency to allow colleges and universities to initiate and to take full responsibility for writing assessment. An analysis of the available data on test scores of minority students of the writing sections of the Teacher Certification Examination and of the College-Level Academic Skills Test makes more apparent the impact of writing assessment on minority students. On timed tests, they have more oral language problems and they produce more verb errors. Simmons discussed these problems and went on to criticize several widely held inaccurate assumptions such as the assumptions that non-standard English vernacular lacks grammatical rules and that non-standard English speakers are incapable of abstract thought.

Simmons concluded with four recommendations:
1. Minority students must understand that if they are to achieve any degree of success they must be able to compete in a pluralistic society.
2. We cannot condone unwarranted assumptions, nor can we allow ourselves to fall victim to the practices of labeling, prejudging or setting limits on the learning capacity of non-standard English speakers, else we foster apathy and mediocrity.
3. We must engage in the necessary curriculum modifications at the public school and post-secondary levels to meet the writing needs of our students. This revitalized curriculum should have, minimally, the following elements:
   a. A strong program of diagnoses and prescriptions supported by quality multi-ethnic curriculum materials.
   b. An increased number of writing assignments integrated with exercises that clarify low context situations.
4. There should be further research focusing on writing skills and assessment of minority elementary and secondary school students.

Impact of Writing Assessment on Non-Native Speakers of English

Speaker: Kyle Perkins, Southern Illinois University
Introducer/Recorder: Bonnie Braendlin, The Florida State University

Kyle Perkins began by discussing the impact that writing assessment and research in writing assessment have had on the institutions whose faculty researchers share their findings with one another. His major focus was on the effects on non-native speakers of large-scale systematic testing of writing. A major problem, Perkins said, is that too often indirect (objective) testing is used to assess writing. On an objective test, a student's "intuit to communicate" and his or her "communicate competence" cannot be accurately measured. Consequently, non-native speakers may do well on an objective exam, but have great difficulty composing essays in courses like Freshman English. Perkins argued for writing assessment by essay examinations that are holistically graded by human beings, not machines. Subsequent discussion centered on problems of holistic grading of non-native speakers' essays and ways to help non-native speakers in composition.

Computer Applications in Writing Assessment

Speaker: Lillian Bridwell, The University of Minnesota
Introducer/Recorder: Warren Almand, The Florida State University

At The University of Minnesota, Lillian Bridwell and Don Ross have the luxury or a three-year contract to look at the use of computers across the entire college curriculum. They traveled the usual route into "compuwriting": from testimonials about how writers use computers to software programs to finding their own way into incorporating computers into writing courses. Then they had to find out how to assess compuwriting.

Bridwell stated that computers themselves can be part of the assessment. A computer can, for example, keep records of the number of times it takes a user to master a writing skill. It can also count and record how many key strokes per second a user makes while composing, and replay that record at real time speed or in slow motion, thus allowing teachers to question students about their composing technique and help to refine it. There are many software programs in use with a wide variety of assessment capabilities. Some are programmed to analyze and respond at three levels of usage. Some programs respond to a user's composition in written form, informing the user of such things as how many polysyllabic words he used, and how the ratio of those to shorter words compares to the "normal" ratio for other writers at the same level of usage or writing for the same purpose.

Although computers may assign scores, most computer assessment is aimed at helping users revise.

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Such revision is based on text analysis software programs. Bridwell provided a checklist of what such programs can and cannot do. They can find and count features that can be specified precisely, such as the number of words, sentences, "to be" verbs, abstract words, frequently misused words and phrases, misspelled words, "Th" openers, and punctuation in limited contexts (e.g., double quotes, single quotes, and parentheses). They can also compute indices such as "readability," average word length, average sentence length of sentences that contain certain constructions (e.g., prepositional phrases, "to be" verbs), and comparisons of these counts and percentages with pre-set "standards." Text analysis programs cannot, however, phrase sentences with 100% accuracy, create standards for style in different kinds of documents or for different audiences, decide whether a construction is appropriate to a given context, make rhetorical judgments about the ideas or the organization of an essay, and scan a handwritten document.

Bridwell emphasized that there is also no way a machine can judge "creativity." She ended her talk by pleading with her audience to use computers as tools, not to let them dictate to or dominate them. She compared the lie detector and the computer. The lie detector isn't very good at detecting lies, but has lots of power to control what its subjects say. The direct analogy to computer writing is that the computing machine can exercise power over its users, and do so in the worst possible way—by emphasizing the superficial aspects of writing.

How You May Participate

NTW needs the active participation of those who have a concern with writing skills assessment, whether as specialists, administrators, or classroom teachers. If you wish to become a member of the network or simply to learn more about who we are, what we plan to be doing, and how our plans could involve you, just complete the attached coupon and return it to us along with materials describing yourself and your professional interests in writing instruction and assessment.