AN INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING AND TESTING PROGRAM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Speakers:  
Lana Silverthorn, University of South Alabama  
Marc Matre, University of South Alabama  
Renese Harper, University of South Alabama

Introducer/Recorder: Tom Albritton, The Florida State University

In 1979, the University of South Alabama formed a twelve-member college committee on writing. This committee recognized three things: (1) that writing skills improve by practice at all age and class levels, (2) that writing enhances learning in all disciplines, and (3) that each discipline should be responsible for language training and preparation for placement testing. The university committee saw a need for extending writing courses beyond the freshman year and beyond the department of English, and their proposals for addressing these needs are as follows: (1) initiating a cross-curricular writing program operated by at least one representative from each department, (2) implementing a skills test for placing transfer students either into the upper division writing courses or into remediation, and (3) forming a university-wide committee for developing the upper level writing program.

Two basic problems confronted the committee in developing and activating the new writing program. Along with these were several positive results. The major opponent to cross-curricular writing was fear, a by-product of the non-English teacher's lack of confidence as a writing instructor. To overcome this problem, the university held several workshops for training teachers in writing assignment and assessment, the results of which were teachers from all disciplines who were confident and competent instructors of writing, and who some for the first time) learned to see writing not only as reporting or recording, but as discovery and experimentation as well. These workshops, along with subsequent ones, helped each teacher develop spiraling and sequential assignments which facilitated learning and anticipated future applications of the subject matter involved.

The other major problem was establishing the transfer student testing procedure: a way of compensating for the fact that such a student may not have had the same freshman and sophomore writing experience as had the four-year University of South Alabama student. Great effort was made to place the transfer student testing into the hands of a "stratified" group of teacher-graders, and to consider a wide range of writing quality (styles being necessarily different, depending on the writer's discipline). The students were given a test similar to that of the placement test for freshmen. If they received a grade of U rather than S, they were placed into a semester of remedial instruction, then allowed to repeat the placement test.

The University developed a writing lab so that the content area teachers would be able to avoid remedial teaching. Also, these content area teachers could maintain high standards as writing instructors, thanks to the writing lab, because their "failing" a student simply meant referral to more (and more specialized) help rather than outright rejection or demoralization. The lab, staffed with experts in remedial writing, English as a Second Language, foreign languages, and with graduate students in English, is now open forty hours a week, serving 40 to 50 students a week.

THE WRITING ASSESSMENT PROJECT AT LOUISIANA TECH

Speakers:  
Michael McCready, Louisiana Tech  
Virginia Melton, Louisiana Tech

Introducer/Recorder: Marian Bashinski, The Florida State University

Michael McCready and Virginia Melton stated that the purpose of their research was to determine the extent to which large-scale writing assessment was being used in some school systems. The information that they collected included (1) type(s) of measurement technique(ies) used—direct, indirect, or both; (2) type of storing method used for results of direct measurement; (3) method of reporting; (4) uses being made of results; and (5) information as to whether decision makers at state or national level considered writing samples essential to measurement.

They reported that there seems to be little agreement on definitions and descriptions of scoring systems, and schools felt free to use combinations of them. Data revealed that the decision to use a writing sample resulted from policy rather than from mandate. Since very few writing tasks are available in item banks, most had to be developed by teachers and administrators themselves. Most writing samples were scored holistically. On objective tests, the majority of items related to mechanics. Although there was agreement that certain qualities in writing cannot be measured by objective testing, there was no agreement on identification of those qualities.

A New Orleans conference with leaders in the field actually was more revealing and helpful than were answers to questionnaires. One question which asked, "Why are you doing a large-scale assessment?" brought such answers as (1) so that students will attain a minimum competency in writing; (2) to assure that our students have mastered the basic skills; (3) to determine the state of the art in writing assessment in the schools. Conference agreed that both a writing sample and an objective test should be used.

A report which followed the Louisiana testing resulted in a handbook for classroom teachers, but since the writing test and the objective test had not been planned together, correlation of results was difficult. One very important finding of the Louisiana study, however, was that for assessment to have an impact, the results must get to the classroom teachers so that English departments can sequence what they are doing.