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 nonstandard 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 diagnosis 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 'intent 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 Almond, The Florida State University

At the University of Minnesota, Lillian Bridwell and Don Hoss 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 "computing", from testimonials about how writers use and like computers to software programs to finding their own way into incorporating computers into writing courses. Then they had to find out how to assess composition.

Bridwell stated that computers themselves can be part of the assessment. A computer can, for example, keep records of the number of trials 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 letter 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.