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, composers, 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 as 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.

(Continued on page 6)
ARTICULATING WRITING ASSESSMENTS IN TWO-AND FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Richard Donovan, The City University of New York
Jeaninne Webb, The University of Florida
Aida Ruiz, The City University of New York

Introducer/Recorder: Pamela Laws, Tallahassee Community College

Richard Donovan told the audience about the Ford Foundation Program, a new project that has identified seventy-five four-year colleges where minority students have not been accepted as quickly as white students from two-year schools. Donovan’s preliminary findings were that two-year colleges across the country are, in fact, having articulation problems with four-year colleges. Common course numberings, a logical step towards better articulation, is not widely practiced. Moreover, programs between two- and four-year institutions are rare, and where they do exist, frequently they address only special areas. These problems seem to be common to all of the institutions identified by the Ford Foundation Program.

Noting that students are making uninformed choices about entering programs, Donovan said that four-year schools bring back successful two-year graduates to serve as peer counselors. Other schools have simply become more responsible to two-year colleges that hold Ford grants.

Jeaninne Webb is responsible for the statewide administration of CLAST and the scoring of essays in Florida. She addressed most of her comments to those processes. The most positive result of CLAST thus far has been the stepped up communication between two- and four-year colleges in Florida. Previously, four-year colleges and university faculties had generalized about the poor quality of instruction at two-year colleges. However, a combination of CLAST results and common course numberings has resulted in the unquestioned acceptance by four-year institutions of students with the A.A. degree from Florida two- and four-year faculties to agree on course content. In addition, faculty from both types of institutions have worked together to identify 117 skills in communications and mathematics, and they are creating test to measure these skills. Moreover, two- and four-year faculties, as well as some senior high school instructors, have worked out the focus of an objective skills test, have created the topics for an essay writing test, and have defined the standards for the test.

Webb carefully described the process of holistically scoring 20,000 essays in three sessions per year. At the grading sessions, she observed that readers learn a great deal about how students write, about how well certain teaching strategies work, and about how beneficial dialogue between disciplines has become. Personally, Webb noted that she has discovered the elegant language of talking about writing. Aida Ruiz cited the following problems for students attempting to transfer to The City University of New York from two-year schools:

1. Too many people have to be notified before the process is complete.
2. Too many papers have to be processed.
3. Students’ grades are frequently not received in time for processing and registration at the four-year institution, although the students may have made the request well before the deadline.
4. Students have to repeat skills test that they have successfully passed at the two-year institutions.

In her interviews with students at CUNY, Ruiz found several persistent problems. Students were not pleased that some four-year institutions make students repeat the same reading and writing assessments. A few students have tried to beat the system in order to succeed. In fact, Ruiz cited one incident in which a student memorized six essays and chose one to suit the test topic when it was presented.

In her closing comments, Ruiz offered the following suggestions:

1. Determine the purpose of assessing the writing of two-year college students. If the purpose is to diagnose students’ skills, then one composition read holistically is not enough. Test-level skills of communicating should not be measured by holistic reading.
2. Assess and modify programs of English instruction so that they reflect current research on the composing process. Establish a network of two- and four-year college writing teachers to work together on an articulation.
3. Consider the nature of the learner, the learning process, and the learning environment.
4. Require writing for a number of tasks, so that students engage in many writing tasks, not just one.
5. Provide enough time for a student to plan, organize, structure, and revise.

SCORING PROCEDURES... (continued)

TEST CONTEXT TYPE OF SCORING

1. Instruction management Holistic Analytic Primary trait
   A. Diagnosis X X
   B. Placement X X X
   C. Guidance ? ?

2. Student screening
   A. Selection ? ?
   B. Certification (of minimal competencies) X X

3. Program evaluation
   A. Survey evaluation X
   B. Formative evaluation X X X
   C. Summative evaluation X X X

The Center also collects and studies commercially available writing tests. Counting new tests in increments of three years, it found that the number of new tests is steadily proliferating. Moreover, 58% of the new tests in 1979-81 included an optional writing sample test—up from 0% in 1973-75. There are also interesting trends in specific skills tested. From the advent of modern writing assessment to 1981, those tests that claim to evaluate spelling and mechanics are fewer, those that claim to evaluate usage and writing (indirect testing) skills have remained about constant in number, and those purporting to measure sentence structure and organizational skills have increased in number. Stiggins stated that there are quality writing tests "out there," for what they are designed for.

During the question and answer period, thoughts surfaced that served to summarize and conclude this session. Everyone seemed to agree that state assessment tests should be the result of input "trickled up" from teachers in the field rather than from the state down. Stiggins concluded by voicing hope that, in the future, measurement of writing skills will better reflect the complexity of writing.