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WHAT RESEARCH IS CONTRIBUTING TO WRITING ASSESSMENT

One of the most difficult tasks facing writing researchers has been, and still is, measuring development. How can we know when learning has taken place and when growth has occurred? We need measures by which to gauge progress, and yet we have found it difficult to develop entirely adequate measures. Although more work needs to be done, we have nevertheless made some progress toward building an adequate repertoire of measuring devices. The first devices measured sentences; next have come ways to measure texts (or, the "interconnectedness" of sentences); finally some have proposed ways of measuring the processes which presumably improve both the sentences and the whole text.

For a number of years, we have been able to adequately measure sentence level phenomena: syntactic complexity, grammatical correctness and appropriate usage, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. It is only within the last few years, however, that we have attempted to develop measures which go beyond the sentence to describe inter-sentence coherence in a piece of writing. Work on developing such "text level" coherence has now provided several suggested methodologies. The importance of these methodologies is underscored by recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress which show that there is more of a problem with test level coherence than with sentence level mechanics in most student writing in this country. [1]

Leo Ruth and his associates have shown that holistic judgments, when handled appropriately within a school or district, can be very useful in measuring overall growth in writing. [2] Others have attempted to develop more specific measures of linguistic forms which predict text coherence. Halliday and Hasan, for example, have specified ways of quantifying the use of linguistic devices which create what they call "cohesion," the quality which makes a text a text, rather than an odd assortment of sentences. [3] Also, Jacobs, building on the work of Grimes and Kintsch, has developed what she calls "predication load" within sentences which predicts text level coherence. [4] These measures, and others like them, are interesting attempts to objectify what we can intuitively perceive: coherence, or lack of it, in a piece of writing as well as growth, or lack of it, in this aspect of writing over time.

Most recently, attention has shifted toward the processes which work together to produce a particular piece of writing. What is significant about this most recent work is that these processes take into account the context for the writing, not just the text which is the end product. Odell suggested a taxonomy of intellectual processes which may be used to measure growth in writing. [5] Staton used Odell's suggested processes to identify three kinds of growth in writing: topic focus, elaboration, and sense of audience. [6] Clearly a writer needs not only to select but also to focus his or her topic so that the piece of writing is concise and does not range from topic to topic. Clearly also, a writer needs to elaborate on the focused topic so that the piece of writing is more than one sentence. Shaughnessy, among others, cites lack of elaboration as a major problem in the writing of unskilled writers. [7] Third, a writer needs a sense of audience so that the piece of writing makes explicit what the audience does not yet know, and leaves implicit what the audience already knows. Much real world writing, in fact, is difficult precisely because there are multiple audiences (e.g., several levels in an institution) or because the audience is unspecified. In order to cope with varying degrees of specificity of audience, one first needs to develop a sense of audience in writing and then flexibility in writing to a variety of audiences.

The shift toward processes in assessment parallels a similar shift toward processes both in research on writing and in the teaching of writing. It seems a very reasonable shift to make at this time, and we are likely to get fruitful results if we continue work in this vein. Odell made a good beginning by identifying *what* processes should be measured. Staton and her associates added to this by determining *how* three processes could be measured with specific devices. What we need to do now is to refine Staton's devices and/or develop other ones which measure similarly important processes. In doing so, it will be crucial to keep a focus not only on processes, but also on the context in which these processes operate, that is, on such concerns as audience and purpose.

[1] National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Writing Achievement 1969-79: Results from the Third National Writing Assessment*, Volumes 1-3. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981).

[2] Leo Ruth et al., *Properties of Writing Tasks: A Study of Alternative Procedures for Holistic Writing Assessment*. (Final Report for National Institute of Education, NIE-G-80-0034, available through ERIC).

[3] M.A.K., Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English*. (London: Longman Group, 1976).

[4] Suzanne Jacobs, *Composing and Coherence: The Writing of Eleven Pre-Medical Students*. (Unpublished dissertation: University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1981). Joseph E. Grimes, *The Thread of Discourse* (The Hague, Holland: Mouton and Co., 1974). Walter Kintsch et al., "Comprehension and Recall of Text as a Function of Content Variables," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 14 (1975): 195-214.

[5] Lee Odell, "Measuring Change in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing," in Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (eds.), *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*. (Champaign, Il.: NCTE, 1977).

[6] Jana Staton, *Analysis of Dialogue Journal Writing as a Communicative Event*. (Final Report for National Institute of Education, volumes 1 and 2, NIE-G-80-0122, 1982, available through ERIC).

[7] Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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