THE QUESTION OF VALIDITY IN ASSESSING WRITING

Ian Pringle, Carleton University, Ottawa

This presentation focused on the issue of the ecological validity of writing assessment, specifically in the Canadian context. The need to ascertain and report on standards of academic performance has often led to the creation of tests or testing procedures which have actually changed the nature of the pedagogy. Spelling is a traditional example, and at the present time the drive to test small group process shows clearly how the desire to test can subvert the original pedagogical intention.

This has long been the case with the testing of writing, especially in the United States. In Canada, educational jurisdictions are to varying degrees free of the political and economic pressures, which drive the writing-testing industry in the United States, and therefore of the tradition of large-scale writing assessment as it is carried out there. Nonetheless, Canada repeatedly hears echoes of current concerns in the U.S.; “standards” are therefore a current issue in Canada. One consequence is a repeated insistence that Canada needs to institute large scale programs of writing evaluation. The models which underlie such calls are almost invariably reflections of extant U.S. models. However the undesirability of such models from a pedagogical standpoint is perfectly clear, and there is every reason, therefore, to fight against such a movement in Canada if there is a practicable alternative.

The ecological validity of tests of writing ability has to be considered in relation to intentions of and goals for the teaching of writing. The more the pedagogy of writing takes advantage of what is now known about the importance of having a real reason for communicating and a real audience to communicate to, the less traditional one-shot (or even multiple-shot) in-class tests make sense. Assessment through portfolios is the only justifiable approach. Systems of moderation can ensure a sufficient uniformity of judgment. In principle, such an approach is practicable in Canada. The key question is whether the jurisdictions and political spokespersons that call for large-scale writing assessment have the sense and the will to move in this direction. Also, does the profession have the courage to insist on—and the political power to enforce—such a move?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEARN SOMETHING? PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING WRITING TO LEARN

John C. Bean, Seattle University

This session combined formal presentation and collaborative brainstorming with a goal of developing an innovative design for the study of writing as learning.

In the presentation portion of the workshop, I described an experiment in an Introduction to Psychology course at Montana State University. This experiment involved a treatment/control design in which the control group did conventional homework while the treatment group did extensive writing involving journal tasks, short essays, and collaborative group work. “Learning” was measured by student performance on standard objective tests on textbook and lecture material. The results (which are suggestive only because of problems in the experimental design) revealed inferior performance for the treatment group, whose scores on objective tests were lower than that for the control group. These results—potentially embarrassing for the writing-across-the-curriculum movement—seem to be corroborated by the findings of Langer and Applebee, whose research suggests that writing about a topic produces selective learning of material rather than retention of a wide body of data. If student learning is measured by objective tests, then writing-to-learn doesn’t seem effective.

I attempted to account for this phenomenon by showing how the “knowledge” measured in standard multiple choice tests is different from the “knowledge” generated by composing meanings in an essay. I also examined the positivist assumptions about knowledge underlying the objective exams used in the psychology course. Rather than a setback for writing-across-the-curriculum, the MSU experiment helps undermine the myth of objective knowledge measurable in multiple choice tests. But this interpretation, persuasive
perhaps within the community of composition scholars, is at odds with a positivist interpretation preferred by many scientists who do not welcome the burden of writing across the curriculum.

The "think tank" portion of the workshop was devoted to a discussion of the different research designs and to brainstorming for new approaches. Among the suggestions were research aimed at testing long-term recall of material and research employing the procedures of George Hillocks where the control and treatment groups are not asked to recall previous material but to apply skills to new situations.

EXPLORING MODIFICATIONS OF PRIMARY TRAIT SCORING: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING OF STUDENTS IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Peter J. A. Evans, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

The chief objective of this presentation/workshop was to acquaint teachers with a variety of kinds of descriptive analysis of a sample of the writing of Grade 9 students in Canada's Northwest Territories. Our analyses can lead to development of resources of use to teachers in writing programs with attention to all students but with particular focus on the achievements and needs of students of native-language background who make up about half the student population tested annually 1985-1988.

We provided participants with an overview of the scoring procedure (holistic) and the various types of analysis (analytic scoring, error counts, variations on "primary trait") that were applied subsequently to a large random sample stratified by score (the holistic score originally obtained). The general performance comparisons (native and non-native) revealed a number of differences among these writers as to narrative and exposition points of view.

We illustrated the descriptive analysis in greater detail, using graphs to show how particular features related to holistic score: i.e., which seemed to have closest association with over-all achievement, which seemed present or absent in the writing of most students, and what this information suggested concerning stages of writing development or particular blockages for some students. The results influenced decisions made concerning resource development for the writing program.

Participants applied these variations on primary trait scoring first to Grade 6 writing of fantasy (from another source) and then to three point-of-view essays from the Northwest territories 1987 Assessment.

The variations on primary trait employed here provide more scope for capturing the range of student response than the American NAEP version, and include features that may be simply identified (with their frequency) as well as those that may be scaled.

WRITING ASSESSMENT IN PHYSICS, HUMANITIES AND ENGLISH: A FEMINIST APPROACH

Fran Davis, Arlene Steiger, and Karen Tennenhouse, Vanier College, Montreal

This session was organized by three members of an interdisciplinary research team presently testing feminist pedagogical strategies with the aid of a grant from the Quebec Ministry of Education. Two of the areas under investigation are the importance of writing in the educational experience of women students and the kinds of writing assessment which are most encouraging of these students' development and growth. Since the research was still in progress in April, the team was not able to present a project report: instead, the presentation focused on the assessment strategies that these researchers have defined as feminist.

We briefly outlined the research, which indicates that, both in self-esteem and commitment to continue their education, women are much more easily discouraged than men. We also summarized the research demonstrating that women students talk less in classrooms, fare less well in competitive situations, and are less comfortable in purely intellectual, nonaffective situations. We showed how this research on women's educational experience led the present