LEVELS OF ATTAINMENT IN WRITING

Patrick Dias, McGill University

Much testing of language involves specifying attainment levels for various age groups. The report of the Kingman Committee in Britain, for instance, specifies attainment targets at the ages of seven, eleven, and sixteen. There are obvious problems involved in identifying such targets; primarily, the reductiveness involved in such specifying. It should be quite clear that the qualities of writing we value cannot easily be set on a developmental grid. The aspects of writing which are most easily mapped on to levels turn out to be those which describe the use of conventions of writing and certain surface level features. While one might describe patterns of development on a sociocognitive dimension, for instance, the difficulty is essentially with specifying which developments ought to occur when and to what degree.

This session provided samples of writing obtained from writers at several grade levels to question the value and validity of such specifications and to suggest directions in which we might move to meet the demands for such descriptions.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: ADVANTAGES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Pat Belanoff, SUNY at Stony Brook
Marcia Dickson, The Ohio State University at Marion

Although our title indicated that our talk would focus on praising portfolio assessment, we decided that a question-and-answer period which addressed issues raised by other portfolio sessions at the conference would be more useful. We asked the audience to formulate questions about portfolio assessment, identified the most important (or at least the most asked about) issues, and set about creating a dialogue between the two of us and members of the audience. In brief, teachers and administrators seemed most concerned about establishing reliability and validity in scoring, devising means for preventing plagiarism, overcoming faculty fears that portfolio assessment will compromise their authority as graders, and developing coherent systems which will address the needs of individual composition programs. Although our discussion was primarily concerned with exit and proficiency testing, many teachers expressed interest in using portfolios in the classroom to diagnose and follow the overall development of student writing ability. It became obvious that a significant number of the members of our audience already had experience with portfolio assessment, and we found that this experience was as helpful to us as we hoped it was to the other participants.

Feedback from our audience indicated that the dialogue provided both support for ongoing programs and answers to questions proposed by those who are considering portfolio assessment. This leads us to feel that more sessions which promote problem-solving dialogues between those who have established portfolio assessment programs and those who are planning to create them would be of infinite value to NTNW members in the future.

MAKING ROOM FOR GROWTH: THE WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

Andrew Gelber, PATHS/PRISM, Philadelphia

The informing principle of the Writing Assessment Program in the School District of Philadelphia is that writing instruction and writing assessment should and can enhance one another. Just as the best kinds of classroom writing instruction are embedded in meaningful contexts, so does information about students' developing abilities as writers need to be generated within a staff development context that makes such information applicable to teacher and student growth. Since the inception of the Writing Across the Curriculum Project in 1984, Philadelphia educators have given increasing attention to the importance of situating classroom writing activities within a meaningful instructional context.

The Writing Assessment Program in the School District of Philadelphia, currently (1988-