MONITORING NATIONAL STANDARDS IN SCOTLAND: WRITING TO A PURPOSE

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In large-scale monitoring of writing standards (as in other forms of writing assessment) the use of decontextualized exercises suffers from two fundamental weaknesses. The first of these is practical in that many writers are not sufficiently interested to engage seriously in the activity; and the second is theoretical in that such writing bears little resemblance to any of the kinds of writing done outside the classroom. Attempts to build a context around a writing task often seem contrived and may result in more rather than less confusion about the “required” audience and purpose.

It occurred to the English Language Monitoring team in Scotland that one solution might lie in the notion of teleology: that some final outcome to be achieved should provide the justification, context, and purpose for the task. The team designed packages, which begin with the statement of the end to be achieved (e.g., “you will finish off the story and then prepare to produce it on stage”). Each of a series of language activities then contributes to achieving the endpoint, including Viewing, Listening, Reading, Discussing, Writing, and Talking.

Audience is automatically specified in this process, and issues of appropriateness of style and register can be validly assessed. Above all, the purpose of the writing task, albeit still only simulated, is clearly and easily conveyed by the overall context. Teleology turns out to be a remarkably efficient way of conveying instructions about purpose, audience, and context to the children. We hope too that the packages motivate students. A major problem is that writing most naturally comes towards the end of such a package of work which means that the children may be tired out before they start.

The results and experiences of the survey will be evaluated in the summer of 1989.

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ASSESSING STUDENTS’ PROCESS PROGRESS

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Classroom assessment of students’ writing progress requires teachers to make decisions about assessment focus, assessment strategy, and assessment management. The ultimate necessity (and value) of product evaluation is clear, and literatures are replete with methods and research reflecting attention to product. Though portfolio assessment has broadened the concept of assessment, portfolios do not necessarily focus teachers’ attentions on a variety of enlightening writing and nonwriting student behaviors. Once they turn attention to assessments not based exclusively on product evaluation, teachers face new and nontraditional problems.

The focus of teachers’ attention can be broadened to include what language behaviors they can observe; what students say about writing in writing; what students produce as they compose; and what students are able to share orally regarding their writing or development as writers. Interviews, informal but regular surveys of attitudes and perceptions, and observation are all useful assessment strategies. However, teachers need a clear sense of what to look for and ask about. Teachers are beginning to provide useful, classroom-tested strategies as they experiment with nontraditional assessments of writing.

Management techniques, especially record-keeping and scheduling, can be troublesome and encouraging. The best management systems are likely to be classroom specific, and yet defined by generalizable constraints (too many writers, so little time).