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 hope 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 NCTE members in the future.

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

Andrew Geler, 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-
89) in its third year, combines several components for maximum impact on teachers and students alike. These components include: (1) providing teacher-led staff development, focusing on the design of effective writing assignments and on instructional strategies for contextualizing those assignments in the classroom; (2) training teachers in the development of criteria for evaluating student writing, using their own students' writing as the data from which those criteria are elaborated; (3) bringing together teachers from all areas of the city and from several different disciplines (English/language arts, social studies, mathematics, science), in order to generate greater districtwide agreement on expectations and objectives; and (4) building into all workshop activities the kinds of formative information that enable participating teachers to undertake classroom writing instruction more effectively.

Program components and highlights for 1988-89 include: (1) a sequence of citywide workshops on assignment-designing and evaluating student writing for 120 teachers of grades three, five, seven, and eleven; (2) implementation of school-based, school-site writing assessment programs in four pilot schools (two elementary, two senior high); (3) a Saturday symposium, "Nurturing Student Writers," open to all educators in the School District of Philadelphia; (4) publication and dissemination of Making Room for Growth: A Documentary Portrait of the 1987-88 Writing Assessment Program in the School District of Philadelphia.

The Writing Assessment Program, initially conceived as a discrete three-year (1986-89) initiative, is now poised to become a permanent, ongoing component of professional development for teachers and administrators in the School District of Philadelphia. The guiding aim of the program, as it continues into 1989-90 and beyond, is to enable critical reflection on students' writing abilities and teachers' instructional practices in ways that will enable both to improve.

DETERMINING THE VALIDITY OF ESSAY TEST PROMPTS USED BY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Karen L. Greenberg, Hunter College, CUNY and NTNWI

Every year, since 1978, The City University of New York has been testing the writing skills of 50,000 students with a universitywide writing sample test. This test—the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test (the WAT)—consists of a single, 50-minute expository essay that is holistically scored. We have been using the WAT for a decade now, and it has proven to be a reliable instrument for determining students' minimum writing competencies. However, we have decided that it is time to take another look at the validity of the WAT's prompts. We are currently in the middle of a three-year study designed to demonstrate whether our writing test is measuring the skills and abilities that it was intended to assess. Specifically, we are trying to discover (1) the extent to which the WAT is identifying skills that faculty agree are worth identifying in that they are modifiable through instruction or practice; and (2) alternate types of test tasks might produce data that are equally or more appropriate for accomplishing the WAT's purpose.

The first activity in this research project was a survey of faculty's ideas about the subdomains that constitute academic writing. In general, faculty indicated that the task types they assign most frequently are informative and persuasive tasks which require writers to organize and reorganize personal experiences and socially shared information.

Our next step was to meet with faculty to discuss the tasks that are representative of the types they assign in their classrooms. We finally reached consensus about six experimental test tasks that we are currently pilot-testing. All of the tasks ask for the articulation of a point of view and for a defense of that point of view. The actual experiment took place Fall 1989 and Spring 1990.

Meanwhile, the project is having an important unintended benefit: writing faculty from all seventeen CUNY colleges have been