Feature analysis scales were used with holistic scoring results, in order to diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses of middle-range writing. The scales not only helped to identify important features that contribute to successful communication, but also throw light on the actual criteria which holistic raters apply when scoring. We ended by outlining the implications of the use of holistic scoring of ESL writing for programs at the secondary, pre-university and college or university levels.

RESPONDING TO THE CONTENT OF STUDENT WRITING: A CONSIDERATION OF AESTHETICS, ETHICS, VALUES, AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASSESSMENT

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Helping children to express their thoughts through writing brings into question not only the assessment of process and product, but also content and intention, particularly in terms of assessing values, ethics, and moral responsibility. Such considerations become increasingly significant in classrooms where writing is shared amongst peer audiences. Issues of sexism and racism, and sensitive subjects such as neglect, abuse, divorce, and suicide arise in successful writing programs where children feel free to write.

Using scenarios collected from teachers in Australia and Canada, we focused on assessing the content and intent of writing that teachers confront in their classrooms. We drew on research in ethics and aesthetics, moral development, censorship, gender studies, values in education, counselling, and student law in order to examine the content of student writing within the context of writing process curricula. We argued that the process has taken precedence over content.

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

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When teachers read students’ writing, in draft stages or as finished products, our reactions carry great weight. Our response (or lack of response) can shape a student’s image of himself or herself as a writer, sometimes even as a person. Our comments, suggestions, and corrections affect the student’s ability to use writing for personal growth, for communication with others, and for career success.

We often measure student writing against an imaginary, absolute standard of “good writing,” far removed from meaningful contexts. Instead of asking ourselves whether the student is achieving a purpose he or she has set or whether the student is reaching an audience, we play copy editor with the text. On the other hand, we give some texts no more than a cursory response: “O.K.,” “Well done,” “Needs work.” Any of these reactions—a river of red ink or a global comment (often accompanied by a grade)—stills the voice behind the prose and ignores the self being expressed. Since studies have repeatedly shown that literate, well-educated adults have great difficulty agreeing upon what good writing is, what messages are we sending when we glibly label student writing for good or not good?

In order to understand our students’ experiences with writing assessment, the feedback they have received, and their responses to that feedback, we collected information from students in management programs at McGill University. Our inquiry focused on the feedback they have received from teachers, peers, and supervisors in both academic and nonacademic settings. We presented the results of our study and discussed the implications of this information for the composition classroom.