EVALUATION IN A WRITING PROGRAM: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

John Ilarsky, Connie Graham, St. Vital School Division No. 6, Winnipeg

The presentation described the approach used by a school district, with a student enrollment of 9,000, to assess writing in K-12 within the context of an English Language Arts Program Review.

The program review was conducted in accordance with the district's policy. That policy identifies the purposes of a program review and the principles and guidelines which must be observed in the review. The district conducted the review in a manner that was intended to be supportive of and consistent with an integrated (whole language) English Language Arts program. Consequently, they conducted the assessment of writing in conjunction with assessment of three other strands of language development, namely reading, listening, and speaking. Furthermore, they collected writing assessment data on both the writing process and the writing product. And, in accordance with district policy, they also collected data on classroom instructional practices, including student evaluation and reporting.

Data collection included questionnaires (all English Language Arts teachers, students in selected grades and their parents), classroom observation (over 70 classrooms in K-12), interviews, achievement tests (provincially developed instruments to assess reading and writing) and samples of writing collected in classrooms during the Fall term of 1988.

Assessment materials were distributed to participants and reviewed through presentation and discussion.

SELF AND PEER EVALUATION OF WRITING IN THE INTERACTIVE CLASSROOM

Dannie Rothschild and Felicia Klingerberg, Vancouver Community College

The evaluation of writing in the ESL classroom has traditionally been the teacher's prerogative and has often remained outside the interactive model of student learning. Our goal is to bring evaluation into the classroom in order to increase learners' awareness of criteria for good writing, promote greater improvement of writing by giving learners a diagnostic tool, promote greater learner independence, and develop positive attitudes toward writing.

Although much research has been done on peer and self-evaluation of L1 writing, and although increasing numbers of L1 teachers at all levels are using these strategies, little work has been done in ESL. The students in our project are high intermediate level adults from diverse backgrounds, who are studying general English language skills part-time at a Canadian community college. The grades the students receive during and at the end of the term are often meaningless to them other than in the pass/fail sense. They are not party to how the marks are obtained or on what they are based, and therefore don't know where they have "gone wrong" or how to improve.

Our project had two parts. Part one involved adapting an appropriate evaluation scale, training students in its use, and having them use the scale throughout the term to evaluate their own and their peers' writing. In part two we studied various end-of-term effects of the scale on students. In a pilot investigation we tested the hypothesis that students trained in the use of the scale (the experimental group) would have a concept of good writing more congruent with that of instructors than would a control group. In addition, we compared the criteria most often cited by both groups as they judged the quality of a set of compositions. Finally we examined the responses of both groups to a survey on their attitudes toward writing.

Results are encouraging, although not conclusive. We find a trend in the predicted direction between the experimental group, and
EVALUATION OF A PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL: IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Catherine Schryer, Ontario Veterinary College

Evaluation is a major focus of a research project investigating literacy at Ontario Veterinary College. Using ethnographic research methods, I discovered that a set of reductive evaluation practices were at work in the college—an overdependence on in-class exams using short answers to test for information for its own sake rather than information used to solve problems or to argue for a diagnosis. Bloom's taxonomy, James Britton's work on expressive vs. transactional writing, and research into coherence suggested that such practices were leading to students experiencing difficulty when asked to do extended pieces of writing (especially in class) requiring synthesis and evaluation and to a lack of opportunity for students to master the cohesion needed for fully transactional writing.

Further investigation revealed that these evaluation practices have evolved in response to forces outside of the College—both faculty and students believe that they are in the midst of an information explosion and that no time is available for fully transactional writing. Curriculum and pedagogy also reflect and influence the present evaluation system. Despite the college's declared interest in problem-solving and interactive instruction, most of the teaching remains presentational. Thus, the evaluation system and pedagogy work to exclude students from learning how to contribute actively to their discipline.

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ONE PERSON'S PRACTICE

Margaret Proctor, Erindale College, University of Toronto

This session focused on a current project at Erindale College that attempts to help students meet the demands of academic writing in various disciplines. Professors are frustrated at the poor quality of students' writing, and students complain that writing assignments impose arbitrary patterns on course material and expect impossible standards of language correctness. Conference participants responded to these comments. To illustrate my attempts to diminish these negative feelings, I exhibited some material used in the project to demonstrate that academic writing can develop and express thinking in specific subjects. Students in cultural anthropology, for instance, find that the standard patterns of exposition match anthropological methods of analysis, and commerce students recognize that accounting practice provides some basic structures for discussing the meanings of numbers. Indeed, data from the project indicate that students learn to revise more competently because they feel greater confidence and recognize an overall goal.

Participants agreed that the improvement and assessment of students' writing skills should be the responsibility of content-area professors, and they offered advice and parallel experiences. Some questioned the desirability of defining explicitly what is expected in a writing task rather than letting students explore possibilities. Suggestions focused on ways to help professors design assignments which would recognize the importance of stages in the writing process.