DETERMINING THE DIFFICULTY OF ESSAY EXAMINATIONS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Carol Petson Haviland and Milton Clark,
California State University, San Bernardino

The three speakers described research on difficulty of essay examination questions and writing assignments. Noting that research on essay examination questions has largely ignored what student writers themselves might be able to reveal about the difficulty of essay questions posed, we reported on a two-year study in which students evaluated questions used on midterm and final examinations. We gathered data at the end of several examination writing sessions as well as in class sessions in which students responded to collections of typical questions. We received varied and revealing responses. For example, many ESL students reported that when given a choice of two questions, the topics almost were inconsequential; they elected the question that required the fewest departures from present tense verbs. Other students reminded instructors of some learning theory basics, noting that combining a difficult task (writing) with a negative personal experience was depressing, not enabling. They preferred questions that did not ask them to write about failures, bad decisions, or regrettable incidents. Students also noted preferences about other elements such as number of questions, use of poetry or quotations, and structure of prompts.

We concluded by cautioning that rather than rushing to follow all of students' directives, question writers must mesh their suggestions with testing objectives.

A LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT MODEL THAT WORKS: THE ALBERTA EXPERIENCE

Elana Scraba, Alberta Ministry of Education

The presentation outlined the principles used in Alberta for developing written response tests and examinations in English and French Language Arts and Social Studies (Grades 3, 6, 9, 12). The discussion focused on principles and procedures that are used for scoring the written work of large numbers of students. This included a description of procedures for setting standards, training markers, ensuring consistent and reliable scoring.

We reviewed the model used for framing scoring descriptors and such long-standing issues as evaluating personal responses and the effects of exam situations on students' work. The presentation concluded with a discussion of what we have learned about students' writing and what our observations suggest for classroom and for research.

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' FIRST-LANGUAGE NARRATIVE WRITING: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Lynn Senechal, Richelleu Valley School Commission

The presentation described preliminary findings of a longitudinal study of Canadian English-stream and French-immersion students' narrative writing with emphasis on the results of semantic and syntactic analyses of first-draft and revised texts at grade 3, 4, and 5 levels. I used sample texts drawn from the assessment files of high, average, and low achieving students to illustrate grade-by-program developmental trends, and described techniques for narrative writing assessment and instructional implications of the study's findings.

The primary objectives of the longitudinal study were: description (i.e., the delineation of developmental trends in English-stream and French-immersion students' narrative writing), and comparisons (i.e., establishment of the presence/absence of significant differences among grade, achievement, and program subgroups). These objectives were introduced through reference to the literature regarding English-stream/French-immersion writing development, and examination of a variety of student texts at the grade 1 to 6 levels. We discussed the development of criterion-based guidelines for teacher evaluation of narratives, as well as the design of more detailed semantic analyses (e.g., procedural frame analyses): we offered analyzed texts to illustrate use of these techniques. Finally, we presented preliminary findings regarding English-stream and French-immersion
students' writing development, emphasizing results of the semantic analyses of grade 3, 4, and 5 students' narratives.

Participants and presenters discussed the implications of these findings for student evaluation, classroom programming, and future research regarding the writing process.

ALIGNMENT OF THE CALIFORNIA DIRECT WRITING ASSESSMENT WITH CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Fran Claggett, California Direct Writing Assessment Program

The California Direct Writing Assessment uses matrix sampling to allow the testing of eight types of writing at grades 8 and 12, with 5 types repeated. Now in its third year of operation at grade 8 and first year at grade 12, the test design has from its inception encompassed teacher involvement. The test and all teaching materials are closely aligned with the new California Language Arts Framework, Grades K - 12, and with the accompanying Model Curriculum Standards.

From the outset, the test makers have attempted to design a testing project that would improve the teaching of writing in California. Classroom teachers, chosen primarily from teachers trained by the California Writing Project and the California Literature Project, have been involved in every aspect of the test design and implementation, from serving on the advisory committee to providing inservice workshops throughout the state. The major developmental work was done by a cadre of 24 classroom teachers who designed and field-tested multiple prompts for each type of writing; prepared extensive teaching materials that model the best teaching practice and current thinking about discourse theory; and served as table leaders for scoring sessions at multiple sites around the state.

Results of the test are reported directly to teachers in a special teacher report as well as to districts and state officials in a more comprehensive publication. Sample essays for each score point for all eight types of writing appear with commentary along with the various statistical results. Selected comments from the 450-500 teachers who read each test are included in the reports.

A comprehensive survey of California Junior High and Middle School Teachers on Teaching and Assessing Writing, conducted by the Center for the Study of Writing, along with individual case studies of schools, dramatically shows the results of teacher awareness and teacher involvement. Eighty-one percent, for example, have used at least one of the writing guides developed by the CAP Writing Development Team of teachers for this project while 75% have attended at least one workshop on how to teach specific kinds of writing.

CONTEXTS FOR ARGUMENT

Avisa Freedman, Carleton University, Ottawa

What kind of writing do students produce when given a task that implies—to teachers and assessors—the writing of "argument"? Does this vary by grade and/or ability level? How and why? These are some of the questions that guided our reanalysis of writing produced in several Board-wide research and evaluation projects in Ontario: for each project, the participants included all students in grades 5, 8, and 12 (both 12 General and 12 Advanced). For two of the studies, half the subjects wrote narratives on topics of their own choosing. The task for all other participants was to respond to an argumentative prompt: briefly, students were asked to focus on anything in their school, their home-life, or the world at large that needed changing, and to write a piece arguing for such a change.

Analysis of all scripts showed remarkable development over the years—according to affective, cognitive, and linguistic measures. There was also increasing mastery of the conventional schema for the type of discourse attempted, story or argument, with the following difference: By grade 8, nearly all students could write stories that embodied conventional narrative form; in contrast, while there was significant development from grades 5 to 8 to 12G to 12A, even for the 12As, only 65% of the