LITERACY ASSISTANCE FOR ESL SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: THE MICMAC INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Ann F. V. Smith, Dalhousie University

When planning the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work program, the Nova Scotia Micmac community gave ESL literacy low priority. However, when the students were admitted, two thirds spoke but did not write Micmac as a first language, and educational levels ranged from grade nine upwards. Therefore the new policy gave priority to spreading ESL across the curriculum.

All social work courses emphasized students' writing, reading, public speaking, and study skills. They adapted a process approach to meet the needs of Micmac ESL students. In particular, course assignments frequently formed the basis of functional writing activities and the revision component stressed affective feedback from peers and the instructor. Students were encouraged to develop their own style and voice in harmony with the program's philosophy which combines the self-directed learning of Knowles and the empowerment of Freire.

After an initial literacy assessment, students received feedback through their course assignments. Professors graded for course content and the instructor reviewed the style, content, structure, and syntax. Ongoing individual and small group tutoring or counselling followed as appropriate. Teachers developed a handbook and an assessment form.

As the program draws to a close, the community sees many advantages to this approach. It provided ongoing literacy development, rather than crash course remediation, and it recognized the effects of outside pressures on school performance. In addition, the real assessments and assignments enhanced student motivation. However, certain disadvantages dull the glow. Writing Skills was a noncredit course, and relied on the cooperation of professors, which varied considerably. Some viewed literacy as less valid than content and a challenge to academic freedom. Some students found the combination of upgrading and social work content overwhelming and dropped out.

Others found the skills sessions frustrating in the multilevel group.

Academic ESL across the curriculum has provided an exciting and innovative approach to Native students' literacy development. It can also provide a thought-provoking alternative for writing teachers in postsecondary education.

THE GRAIN OF SAND IN THE OYSTER: COMPETENCY TESTING AS A CATALYST FOR ATTITUDINAL CHANGE AT THE UNIVERSITY

Laurence Steen, Laurentian University, Sudbury

In their preface to Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies (1986), Karen Greenberg, Harvey Wiener, and Richard Donovan observe that "Often only the reality of an imminent test has been able to force dialogues that ultimately produce a consensus on goals and standards on a particular campus." Laurentian University instituted an Arts graduation competency test in September of 1985, and over the past three and a half years faculty have engaged in dialogues, sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, and a consensus is emerging. They have moved from a largely ad hoc and departmentally localized testing situation prior to 1985 to the present environment, which includes the Arts graduation competency requirement mentioned above; a thriving Language Centre; a Senate Committee on Writing Competency; a Writing Across the Curriculum Programme; competency requirements in the schools of Translation, Social Work, Physical Education; plans to introduce requirements in Nursing, and in Science and Engineering; writing competency given a university priority two years running by the Academic Planning Committee; and fruitful and ongoing dialogue with the Sudbury Board of Education and its secondary school English heads.

The consequences of our stringent competency requirement have cast a wide net. We have been brought face-to-face with the administrative and pedagogical, and on a higher plane, the political and moral implications of our policy of accessibility into Arts. The issue has become one of educational responsibility—ours as well as the student's. At each widening of the net of
consequences, we have made and are making decisions which involve ethics and responsibility: to test or not to test; to use multiple choice or writing sample tests; entrance versus graduation requirements; how much writing across the curriculum emphasis; how much remediation; and how to establish effective dialogue with the lower schools.

The process is heuristic—and we are still in it. We who profess the value of heuristic learning need to lobby hard for shared responsibility rather than monolithic decision-making. Writing problems cannot be adequately addressed by the English Department or the Writing Centre alone; only a recognition that all faculty at all levels share the responsibility for improving student writing will enable that to occur.

AN EXAMINATION OF HOLISTIC SCORING: RESEARCH AND THEORY

Brian Huot and Sydney Smith, Syracuse University
Penny Pence, University of Pittsburgh
Michael M. Williamson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Kathleen Hunter, College of Saint Elizabeth

Because faculty view holistic scoring as the most economic, efficient, and flexible of all direct writing assessment procedures, it has become the most popular method for assessing student writing ability. Proponents of holistic scoring have claimed that most of the basic reliability problems inherent in direct writing assessment have been solved. However, increasing concern about the validity of holistic scoring procedures has been emerging in the last couple of years.

The panel presented a review of theory and research on holistic scoring and reported an ongoing research study of the validity of holistic scoring. The review aimed to place holistic scoring in a theoretical framework of educational measurement. The goal of the research study is to provide some validation of holistic scoring by examining the differential responses of expert and novice raters through the use of verbal protocols. Interestingly, expert raters appear to achieve a more personal reading and to be able to read from a much wider range of stances than do novice raters.

LARGE-SCALE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN THE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY: STORIES OF PROBLEMS AND SUCCESS

Chris M. Anson and Robert L. Brown, Jr., University of Minnesota

We reported on the three-year progress of an institutionally-mandated assessment program at Minnesota. The first two years of the program seemed unremittingly positive. In response to the university administration's call for a mandatory admissions testing program—as a means to curtail and limit the student population—the Composition Program had effectively redirected efforts into a principled portfolio assessment for entrance and graduation. More significant than the program itself was the change in faculty attitudes brought about by a massive reeducation effort on the part of composition professionals acting as change agents. But major financial, administrative, and programmatic confusion in the University in 1988-89 virtually canceled the portfolio project.

That these changes were simply announced without consulting the Composition Program indicated that the ideological forces initiating the original regressive testing mandate remain undiminished. We detailed the ethnographically oriented process through which we reexamined the place of writing and assessment in their institutions. Working by a collaborative series of stories and analyses, we showed the complex of beliefs about writing which characterize many research universities and which must be well understood by program designers. Using theoretical systems from ethnography and credit-cycle economics, we suggested that faculty members' interests drive educational and curricular policy. To succeed, writing policy must not conflict with those interests. Since a major university is a conglomerate of small working units, policy makers must proceed locally and specifically—from the bottom up. The labor- and time-intensive program of portfolio assessment directly threatened the reward system of the university at large. But at more local levels,