THE IMPACT OF A FIFTH GRADE WRITING TEST

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John Mayher began the session with a discussion of the background of New York's statewide writing test. Although New York State had been involved in the evaluation of writing since 1979, its program had been focused primarily on the secondary level. From the beginning, however, the need to develop an assessment instrument for the lower level was apparent. When teachers of young children became involved in developing the statewide testing program, they pressed for assessment at the lower levels. The result was the collection and evaluation of 10,000 papers from elementary level students, and then the development of The Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools, which is now given to all fifth grade students in the state of New York. The test items in five categories (personal expression, personal narrative, process writing, description, and response to a "story starter") were tried out in February, 1982 in a representative sample from New York elementary schools.

In October, 1982, the State Department of Education began to train a group of fifty evaluators in holistic reading methods. They in turn trained fifth grade teachers throughout the state. Subsequently, papers from all fifth grade students in New York's public schools were evaluated in their own schools, the administering and evaluating conforming to standards that had been established statewide. Each student wrote two papers, each of which was evaluated independently by two readers, and each student's score was the sum of scores from the two papers.

Mayher noted that the purpose of this first testing was to establish a baseline or statewide reference for future testing. However, one of the most important uses of the test scores is the early identification of students in need of special instruction. Thus, students (who must ultimately pass the Regents Competency Test to graduate from the schools of New York State) and their teachers now have a means of developing early awareness of any special needs. As the program develops, a growing body of information and criteria are evolving to support the statewide effort to bring a large majority of students in the public schools to a level of achievement that qualifies them for graduation.

Nancy Lester described that test in detail. It is divided into two parts, each to be given on separate, preferably consecutive days. It consists of two writing tasks, one for each day, drawn from the established five categories mentioned previously. Teachers read the directions aloud to the students, who are given up to two hours to complete the test. There are several kinds of prompts included in the directions. The first presents the topic to be written on, the second provides questions to help the student generate information to be used in writing the paper,

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inherent conflicts between different kinds of test validity and of the competing purposes of the exam. The resulting tension between the course and the exam affected instructor-student relationships adversely, and these, in turn, resulted in demands from both instructors and students to change the exam. Initial objections to the exam focused on the validity of the measure. The instructors complained that the multiple-choice section of the original exam measured editing skills rather than writing and composing skills. In response to this argument and to the knowledge that research has been unable to demonstrate a relationship between awareness of formal grammar and improved writing skills, the program director eliminated the multiple-choice section and increased the amount of time students were given to write. Students were allowed 35 rather than 20 minutes for the personal essay and 1 hour and 15 minutes rather than 45 minutes for the expository essay.

The instructors, however, continued to object to the exam, arguing that an impromptu writing task was an invalid measure of the writing skills that students developed in a process-oriented course emphasizing prewriting, planning, and revision. Students objected to the exam for another reason; the exam grade (1/3 of their final grade) often resulted in their receiving a lower final grade than they expected. Because of the deferred grading system, this grade affected two courses (8 units) rather than one.

Some prior research by Sanders and Littlefield and Rosemary Hake had indicated that an impromptu writing task underestimates a student's writing ability. In the spring of 1984, Michael Holzman, the previous USC Director of Freshman Writing, and Betty Bamberg conducted a study to compare the effect of giving students prior knowledge of the exam topic. They found that the average holistic score improved significantly when the students knew the topic and could discuss it before writing the essay. In the fall of 1984, the exam was changed to its present form. Bamberg has found that by gathering a small group of readings and announcing the exam topic ahead of time, the exam writers are able to develop more interesting and challenging questions. Not only are exam scores better, but also the responses are more interesting for graders to read. In addition, Bamberg believes the exam now more closely approximates out-of-class writing assignments and course objectives and, therefore, emphasizes the most important function of the exam: to provide a focus on course content and objectives.

In conclusion, Bamberg explained that the USC Freshman Writing Program was restructured in 1986-1987 to eliminate the deferred grade and to create two separate courses. Bamberg hopes to keep the exam as part of USC's writing program because she believes its original purposes remain valid. However, its form must be carefully designed to maximize the beneficial aspects and to minimize conflicting purposes.

and the third provides concrete aids for the writer. Examples of these prompts follow:
I. Topic—You have asked a friend to take care of a pet because you are going away for the weekend. Write a composition of about 150 words telling your friend about the pet and how to take care of it.
II. Questions—1. What kind of pet can you write about?
2. What are some things you want your friend to know about the pet?
3. What are some things that your friend should do to take care of the pet?
4. Think how you might end your composition.

III. Concrete aids for the third prompt.
In preparing your composition, remember to:
1. Write your first draft on scrap paper.
2. Read carefully what you have written.
3. Make any changes that will improve your first draft.
4. Write your final copy on the answer paper given to you by your teacher. Use a pen to write your final copy.
5. Draw a line through any mistake you may make when you are writing your final copy. Make the correction and continue on with your final copy. You do not need to begin a new final copy.
6. Read your final copy before you hand it in to make sure you have not made any copying mistakes.

Mayher's and Lester's concluding comments focused on the impact of the test. The adoption of a statewide test, with the holistic mode of evaluation, has resulted in many benefits:
1. Statewide attention to the writing of elementary children by their teachers and administrators.
2. Reinforcement of the ideas that students must write early and regularly and that attention must be given to their development of a methodical approach to writing.
3. Introduction of in-service training in a number of elementary schools.
4. A new awareness on the part of teachers of the benefits of a coordinated attack within a school on the problem of improving student writing.

LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH (continued)
Keech discussed one of her studies in which the error counts stayed the same for pre- and post-test samples for a freshman composition group, but she noted that, in the post-test samples, there was a marked difference in the kinds of errors the students made. Another audience member pointed out that to do well on a proficiency test, a timed situation, students must have teachers who will "teach to the test." Keech affirmed this, noting the need for making students "test wise," and added that in the evaluation project she had helped lead, the students could not do well because within the course of their instruction, they had learned the importance of time as a necessary element in the writing process.