CLASSROOM RESEARCH IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speakers: Linda A. Morris, *University of California, Davis*
Miles Myers, *University of California, Berkeley*
Introducer/Recorder: Laura Stokes, *University of California, Davis*

Linda Morris, Director of Composition at UC Davis, is the co-founder of the UCD Campus Writing Center, an interdisciplinary composition program that combines writing instruction with study of other subject areas. She reported that what she and the CWC faculty are learning from this program will likely lead to revision of the traditional freshman composition curriculum. She noted several specific issues in freshman composition instruction that she wishes to examine through classroom research, but stated that a larger, more pressing question continues to intrude upon all others: "How do we know we're teaching the best curriculum in these courses, to begin with?" Researchers usually approach such a question by looking from the "inside out": by examining articulation between courses and exit assessments and requirements. The danger of limited research to such approaches, Morris pointed out, is a kind of intellectual isolation and elitism — the taking for granted that "we know about writing; others don't." The alternative to the "inside out" view, she suggested, is to examine curriculum from the "outside in," a perspective afforded by an interdisciplinary writing program. The immediate questions that arise from the "outside in" view are: 1) What kinds of writing must university students do in all other courses? and 2) How well does the traditional freshman composition curriculum prepare them for this outside work?

Morris summarized the results of a UC Davis survey of writing assignments in many other disciplines (including sciences, social sciences, humanities):

1. The students work from an *abundant* body of material from many sources, which they are expected to have mastered;
2. They work intellectually with the material in many ways — they sort, select, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize it;
3. The writing tasks are narrowly defined;
4. Students are often asked to express an opinion informed by their thinking through the abundance of material, though it is never called *opinion:* Analyze the advantages of *X* over *Y*, the effectiveness of *Z*;
5. Writing assignments include problem-solving components, an indication that professors view writing as a thinking-through exercise, although they may not articulate it in these terms;
6. The assignments generally identify a particular audience.

The survey also revealed the types of intellectual abilities students must employ. Very frequently, assignments require students to simulate an "on-the-job" situation. In these assignments, which stand out as particularly creative and motivating, an abundance of simulated (or real) data is provided, and the students must apply the principles learned in the course to manipulate this data and solve the problem. Other often used directives include compare and contrast, define and evaluate, agree or disagree, analyze causes and effects, discuss..., and summarize and critique. Morris proposes that this information must lead to new scrutiny, and revision, of the traditional freshman composition course. At Davis, for example, she hopes to "ease out" of the curriculum some traditional assignments. For example, personal narrative, while legitimate, should not be central in a course sequence, since assignments based on student-invented material are unlike all that students will do in their college careers. Assignments that require analysis of trivial subjects should be eliminated. Morris reminded us that we get what we ask for. Instructors should include activities that require students to synthesize and select from an abundance of information from a variety of sources. In addition, students should learn to write abstracts, critiques, summaries, interviews, and reports/analyses of data. And assignments should develop a clear sense of audience—and of a *variety* of audiences—particularly when students are analyzing complex material. Morris concluded her presentation by stating that curriculum development, followed by classroom research into the results, should be informed by a vision of writing as a way of thinking.

Miles Myers, Administrative Director of the Bay Area Writing Project, has conducted many large-scale assessments of student writing, most of them in inner-city school environments. In his presentation, he focused primarily on two classroom applications of his studies: using holistic assessment in the classroom to enable students to acquire competency models and standards, and using a portfolio method to measure progress in student writing. He also introduced a new area of interest that has emerged from his program evaluation of the California Writing Project: applying holistic assessment principles to the measurement of teacher classroom practice.

Myers stated that teachers agree consistently in rating top and bottom student papers in a set of anchors representing a wide ability range, and that some slippage in ratings occurs with the mid-range "splitters." When students rate similar papers, however, Myers has discovered that they only agree (80%) in their selection of the worst papers; in the mid-range, they agree on 20% of their selections and, at the top, on only 30%. He noted that "students *know* what's bad, have only a vague idea what's good, and have no idea what's in the middle."

Using Stephen Krashen's models of language acquisition (and of competence *vs.* performance), Myers proposed that students acquire competency models and standards subconsciously. In addition, Myers suggested that this acquisition and the subsequent judgments that arise from it are holistic, rather than feature-based. Myers asserted that if teachers use holistic readings frequently in the classroom so that students can acquire normative standards, rather than teachers basing their instruction and response to student writing on feature analyses, then the students will learn more about the qualities of *good* writing. He praised the "read-around" technique, which employs student holistic assessment of many papers, followed by the nomination, reading aloud, and discussion of papers chosen as best.

Myers then shifted to the issue of *teacher assessment* of student progress in writing. He was particularly interested in students who, though they

(Continued on page 17)

appear to be readers or natural storytellers, consistently perform at the bottom end of the range because they do not do "school-writing" well. As an example, Myers read a student essay that neglected the rhetorical conventions of exposition but which was nonetheless verbally rich and powerfully narrated. In order not to lose these students to inescapable failure, Myers argues that case study analysis must become a part of any large-scale assessment of student writing competency.

The problem of consistent student failure has led Myers to a second suggestion for analyzing student growth. He cited the example of students who perform near the bottom at their first competency test sitting (20/100, with 70/100 a passing score), who struggle to improve, who then perform much better (50/100), but who still fail: "We teach them to improve, then fail them. We're simply teaching them to reach new levels of failure."

Myers suggested that classroom teachers should develop a portfolio method for measuring the progress of all students, and in particular those who fail consistently. A systematic portfolio analysis would trace improvement in drafts of writing (revision being an ability that is taught but not assessed), and would show student development over time. Pieces of student writing would then form a continuum, with all data readily at hand for teachers and students to examine, rather than a set of discrete performances.

Announcing

WRITING ASSESSMENT: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

Edited by NTNW Co-Directors
Karen L. Greenberg, Richard A. Donovan, and Harvey S. Wiener.

Featuring essays on theory; ethics; history; research and development; problems and pitfalls; practical approaches; topic design; and the impact of testing on students, teachers, and curricula.

Available: Spring 1986 from

Longman Inc.
95 Church Street
White Plains, NY 10601