

PROBLEMS AND PITFALLS IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speakers: Edys Quellmalz, *Stanford University*
Richard Stiggins, *Northwest
Regional Education Laboratory*

Introducer/Recorder: Rhonda Webb, *University of
California, Berkeley*

Edys Quellmalz opened the session with a presentation of the components which have proven to be important aspects in designing large-scale writing assessments. Richard Stiggins continued the session with an analysis of problems and solutions in writing assessment at the classroom level.

The five components that Quellmalz identified as most important in the design of any writing assessment are as follows:

- 1) *Specifying the writing domain* - Since assessment can only attend to a small number of the kinds of writing, designers are caught between striving for scope and having to narrow down a representative sample of various kinds of writing assignments.
- 2) *Designing prompts* - Test developers must consider the extent to which their topics and prompts represent realistic or functional writing assignments.
- 3) *Defining criteria* - Faculty and test developers must agree about the balance of text-level and sentence-level features. It is extremely important that the criteria be specific and clear so that teachers can easily apply them.
- 4) *Developing scoring procedures* - Test designers must decide whether the test score will be a single holistic number or a set of holistic numbers. Feature checklists which include items such as clear thesis statement, supporting statement, organization structure, and paragraphing are other scoring options.
- 5) *Relating assessment to instruction* - This is the major problem faced today. Instruction and assessment should be closely interrelated. Also, there is too little sharing of information with parents and students in terms of prompt interpretation and scores.

Quellmalz went on to discuss areas of test design which are currently being looked at more closely. She stated the writing process is beginning to be considered in writing assessment because students need to be cued about appropriate processes and strategies. Too often writing assessment is crammed into short periods, and students are not given an opportunity to engage in aspects of the writing process that they master in class.

She also discussed areas that the state of California is looking at more closely. At the minimal competency level, students write on topics related to personal experience. At the national assessment level, information is given to the students and their writing is based on that information. According to Quellmalz, California is currently considering an extended writing assessment that requires students to collect data for their writing. The state is also involved in developing a prompt bank, which would be available to all teachers, as one means of improving writing prompts in both large-scale and classroom-level assessments.

Quellmalz closed by reminding us that the relationship of writing assessment to instruction is a major problem. We need to look at ways in which the prompts given in large-scale assessment can be useful at the classroom level and, also, to consider the writing assignments that classroom teachers give and how they might be made better.

Richard Stiggins spoke about problems and solutions which are typical of writing assessment at the classroom level. He noted that teachers receive little or no training or technical assistance in any area of assessment. Training can be instituted by the districts if teachers are given the opportunity to score papers rather than having the papers sent to an outside source for scoring. Furthermore, teachers' obsession with grades prevents good writing assessment from occurring. Stiggins feels that by grading writing, we are trying to translate complex human characteristics into a single score. We must move beyond grading as the primary purpose of writing assessment. Both Stiggins and Quellmalz believe that a student profile, which includes a checklist for monitoring growth, would be a more appropriate method of scoring than grades.

Stiggins also commented that there is a major imbalance of factors being measured in many tests. Mechanics dominate most scoring scales. A feature checklist — that is analytically scored — might provide more assurance that all areas of writing are being assessed. Five other serious problems that Stiggins discussed follow:

- 1) The type of assessment given frequently does not fit the purpose. The purpose must determine the method.
- 2) Prompts are frequently inadequate. More careful development of prompts, as well as access to a prompt bank, would improve the quality of writing tests.
- 3) Students do not have opportunities to learn how to evaluate writing. While the teachers' evaluation is important, if students are sometimes given the opportunity to judge their peers' writing, they will become better writers and evaluators.
- 4) Prompts and scoring criteria change so frequently that there is no equivalence over time. Information should be shared more continuously, and prompts and criteria kept intact for comparison over time.
- 5) Holistic scoring is often translated into letter grades, but this is inappropriate because holistic scoring shows only variability within groups.

Quellmalz and Stiggins concluded that although we have come a long way in writing assessment, there is still a great distance to go.