PROFICIENCY TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

 Speakers:
 Kathleen Soltwich, Northern Michigan University
 Eileen Lothamer, California State University, Long Beach
 George Gadda, University of California, Los Angeles

 Introducer/Recorder:
 Stephanie Tucker, University of California, Davis

 Kathleen Soltwich began by describing the Writing Proficiency Examination administered at Northern Michigan University. A mid-sized university, NMU has an open admissions policy. Consequently, a number of its students are not proficient writers when they enter. In order to emphasize to the students the importance of competent writing skills and to ensure an acceptable level of proficiency, NMU instituted a proficiency exit test in 1975. This examination is given only to students who have completed two composition courses. It is offered twice a year (fall and winter) and takes two hours. Students choose a topic out of several possibilities, none of which is a response to a text. (Two examples are: "What is the quality of teaching at NMU?" "How do you explain the recent increase in juvenile crime?""). The exams are graded holistically (1-3: very proficient; 2: proficient; 3: not yet proficient; 4: very weak) by readers who are members of the university faculty, all of whom are invited to participate. One must have read at least one set of essays before they can be considered as readers for the WPE. Papers which receive a 1 are read only once; others are read at least twice and two readers must agree on whether or not they are passing or failing papers. Consequently, some require a third reading which must be done by a member of the English Department. Seventy-three percent of the students who take the examination in any given year pass. Those who do not are required to meet with Professor Soltwich to discuss what steps they should take in order to improve their writing. Frequently, they are advised to attend the writing workshop. Students with serious writing difficulties may be advised to take another composition course. Those who fail may retake the test as often as necessary, although they are charged a fee after the first time.

 One problem with the WPE which Soltwich mentioned is that the faculty use it to avoid assuming responsibility for poor writing in their classes. She also recommended that a course be offered to those students who fail the exam, that readers receive sufficient pay for their work (they presently are paid $1.00 per paper), and that a training program for readers be implemented, preferably along the lines of a two-day intensive program, with money as an incentive. Professor Soltwich stated that for the most part, however, the WPE works effectively in a mid-sized, open admissions university. It succeeds in its task of communicating to faculty and to students that writing is important, and it assures the university that its graduates are competent writers.

 Next, Eileen Lothamer discussed the California State University system-wide credit-by-exam program and its campus-specific graduation writing proficiency requirement. In writing examinations for these or any testing program, Lothamer suggested that three questions be posed: 1) Why are we testing? 2) What are we testing? 3) What procedures should we follow? The English Equivalency Examination (EEE) can be taken by entering freshmen or re-entry students who wish to receive a full year's credit for college-level English. In order to develop the EEE, CSU faculty throughout the system and which surveyed to determine what was in fact being taught in the first year's courses. A two-part examination was developed. The first section is a 90-minute, multiple-choice exam which tests the understanding of literature and reading comprehension. The second is comprised of two forty-five minute essays, the first experience-based analysis and the second an interpretation of an extended literary passage. Topic committees, composed of CSU English faculty throughout the system, write and field test the topics yearly to make sure that they are accessible, non-biased, and not "reader-boring.

 A statewide committee annually reviews this program. Since 1973, some 114,000 students have taken the EEE, and 14,000 of these have received the full year's credit. Since 1977, the Committee has set a second-cut score so that students can also be exempted from taking the English Placement Test (EPT), a mandatory placement test for incoming freshmen in the CSU system. If students fail the EEE, they alone are notified. Campuses are told only which students passed for credit and which were exempted from the EPT; they are not told who has taken and failed the EEE.

 George Gadda spoke about proficiency testing in the University of California system, which is composed of eight campuses and which possesses few university-wide requirements. It does, however, have a system-wide Subject A requirement. Established in 1988, its purpose was to assure student proficiency in written communication at various times, and a Subject A requirement has fulfilled the functions of an entrance, placement, and graduate proficiency requirement. Now it serves as a placement "screen" for entering freshmen. Students can fulfill the Subject A requirement by scoring 600 or better on the College Board English Composition Achievement Test, by scoring 3, 4, or 5 on either Advanced Placement Exam in English, or by writing a passing 400-600 word analytical essay. This writing sample is text-based, as part of its purpose is to determine the students' ability to analyze. The writing sample is graded holistically using a 6-point scale. Each paper receives two readings by writing-program instructors. A composite score of 8 exempts students from taking a pre-baccalaureate composition course. Two UC campuses (Los Angeles and Santa Cruz) also use their exams to exempt from freshman composition students who have composite scores of 11 or better. At Santa Cruz, the students are required to take one further composition course; at Los Angeles, however, they have no further composition requirements. Both procedures exempt a small number of students: about 5% at UC-Santa Cruz, about 1% at UCLA. The other six campuses believe students should not be exempted from freshman composition through examination, because the course serves an important socialization process for freshmen by introducing them to and integrating them into a community of discourse new to them. Also, some educators question whether any test can tap the abilities developed in a composition course which emphasizes revision. Only two UC campuses (Davis and Irvine) have an upper-division writing requirement. To satisfy this requirement, students have the option of taking either

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RESEARCH ON WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speakers:
Arthur Applebee, Stanford University
Gordon Brossell, Florida State University

Introducer/Recorder:
Dick Worthen, Diablo Valley College

Arthur Applebee began by noting that the Education Department at Stanford University has been studying writing across the curriculum in a number of secondary schools — not just writing in the English Departments. Some tentative observations from this study in progress that Arthur Applebee shared with the group are:
1) Less than half of student writing is done in English classes;
2) About three-quarters of student writing deals with specific ideas presented in class, not with personal experiences;
3) Writing is more often assessed than taught;
4) In most student writing, there is less emphasis on originality and organization and more on accuracy of reporting and on information portrayed;
5) Students seem best at, and favor, writing narratives. They seek ways to work narrative into an assignment that calls for analysis. If it is insisted that the writing be analytical, their achieved fluency usually falters.

Applebee noted that there are many differences within a faculty as to what good writing is — differences as to why and how we teach writing. This makes it difficult to develop school-wide standards for assessment and exposing a major problem of controlling how pedagogical method, student perception, and writing assessment interact.

Gordon Brossell pointed out that testing often drives curriculum. Because the statewide Florida writing test, The College-Level Academic Skills Test in Writing, calls for a short expository essay, a good many community-college programs have begun to emphasize the writing of fifty-minute compositions (i.e., practicing for the test). If writing assessments like this one were geared to writing processes rather than to short salvos of writing production, they might very well stimulate the writing teacher (and writing programs) to pay more attention to the craft of composing — to generating ideas, gathering data, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. Assessments modeled after the composing process would get the message across that this is what happens in good writing classes and that this should happen in all classes.

RESEARCH DESIGNS (continued)

and 1500 essays were collected for analysis. Each essay was holistically scored and inter-rater reliability checks were conducted throughout the scoring procedure. Two discourse features were analyzed. One category, development and focus, consisted of the ability to state generalities and support those generalities. Another, high level mechanics, included evidence of proper sentence embedding and varieties of sentence constructions. This study is still in progress, so no final report was made. However, it proved extremely useful as a model of how to set up an effective research design and helped illustrate issues to consider in managing a complex research project.

Brossell reminded us that the means of testing can and should affect instruction. A large question, then, is how in assessing writing do we build into writing prompts the stimuli that evoke what we desire from students? And how do we get those teaching writing to coordinate curriculum and programs in such a manner as to support and prepare the student being tested and make rational the assessing process? We must move carefully to assure that the cause-effect relationship is asserted in the right direction. Brossell suggested that we should start with the questions "Why do we teach writing and what skills in writing comprise the qualities in the writer we want the schools to produce? How can we achieve such consensus across the curriculum?"

Brossell has surveyed the area of student response to the writing prompt. He notes three variables in writing assessment: topic variables, writer variables, and procedural variables. How do we muster our efforts as teachers and testers to achieve feedback that serves the purposes we have created our curriculum for? Brossell gave us several generalizations that deserve our attention but may leave slightly uneasy as we seek some larger verities for pinning down an admittedly elusive field:
1) Small differences in wording within the same general framework seem to make little difference in student responses.
2) Topics with low cognitive demands and high experiential demands elicit higher scores from readers.
3) The problem of unequal familiarity with the topic can usually be overcome by supplying ample information.
4) A writing prompt calling for an argument rather than a narrative is more difficult to respond to, especially among young respondents.
5) Prompts that are at least moderately specified (rather than open-ended) elicit more focused and better organized essays. This is more important in a timed essay.

Brossell concluded by noting that Alan Purves and his colleagues at the Curriculum Lab of the University of Illinois have been working on a model of the composition assignment which sets forth fifteen dimensions of a writing assignment: instruction, stimulus, cognitive demand, purpose, role, audience, content, discourse, specification, tone and style, preparation, length, format, time, number of drafts, and criteria for evaluation. The categories are intended to give test-makers and teachers a set of tools for "adjusting" writing topics.

PROFICIENCY TESTING (continued)

a course or an exam, similar to that given to satisfy the Subject A requirement, but more sophisticated. They too are evaluated by the writing program staff, which reads them holistically. At Davis, a score of 8 (out of a possible 12) is necessary to pass, and the percent passing ranges from the high 40's to the mid 60's. At Irvine, where 11 or better is a passing score, the pass rate is 8-10%. In both universities, this test functions as a challenge exam that exempts students from the upper-division requirement; those who fail the exam must take an upper-division composition course.

Soltwisch, Lothamer, and Gadda concluded by urging faculty who participate in test development to be concerned with appropriate, fair, and legally-defensible assessments of writing skill.