PORTFOLIOS AS PROFICIENCY TESTS

Speakers: Roberta Camp, Educational Testing Service
           Patricia Belanoff, SUNY at Stony Brook

Introducer/Recorder: Karen Greenberg, National Testing Network in Writing

Roberta Camp began by briefly describing the developments that led to portfolio assessment. She defined a writing portfolio as a collection of student writing gathered for the purpose of evaluating students' writing ability. Basically, portfolios provide a method of assessment compatible with recent changes in writing theory and practice (and purposes for assessment). Portfolios enable students to feel that they "own" the writing that is being assessed and they enable teachers to feel like coaches rather than judges. Portfolios grow out of instruction in writing (and thus, are compatible with it), and the results of portfolio assessment can be used to guide classroom instruction and decisions about writing programs. Camp then described the ETS writing portfolio. It consists of four pieces of writing: (1) a narrative/descriptive piece, (2) an expository piece or an analysis of a piece of prose, (3) a persuasive piece, and (4) a piece of writing of the student's choice. It also includes a cover letter that provides a rationale for the selections in the portfolio and a reflection on the collection.

After describing examples of portfolio use and design, Camp posed questions to consider in determining the uses of portfolio assessment: What kind of information do you want to obtain about students' writing ability and about their writing processes? What is the best method of obtaining that information? How should the writing be evaluated?

How should the results of the evaluation be communicated? What provisions have been made for revising the assessment after you have had some experience with it? She discussed these questions in detail.

Next, Patricia Belanoff described the assessment procedures of SUNY at Stony Brook, which uses portfolios to assess students' writing proficiency. The Stony Brook portfolio also consists of four pieces of writing: (1) a revised narrative/descriptive/expressive essay, (2) a revised essay organized around a point, (3) a revised essay analyzing another piece of writing, and (4) an in-class essay. These portfolios are evaluated twice during the semester. At midterm, selected pieces from the portfolio are evaluated by two or more teachers; if these papers fail, students can revise them and include the revisions in their portfolios. At the end of the semester, the full portfolio is evaluated by the classroom teacher and by a small group of teachers. Students are allowed to appeal their grades.

Belanoff noted that this system has many benefits. It provides a method of assessment that supports instruction and that is consistent and fair. Moreover, it has encouraged a high degree of communication and interaction among teachers. Finally, teachers no longer feel like judges. However, Belanoff pointed out some of the system's problems: it makes more work for teachers and causes them some anxiety over their grading criteria. Belanoff concluded by explaining the ways in which the portfolio system reflects the complexities of the writing process and recognizes the problems inherent in interpreting and evaluating texts.

COMPUTER ADAPTIVE TESTS

Speaker: Lucky Abernathy, The College Board

Introducer/Recorder: Karen Greenberg, National Testing Network in Writing

Lucky Abernathy presented a hands-on demonstration of new computerized adaptive tests recently developed by the College Board in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service. The tests use personal computer technology in conjunction with newly refined concepts of item response theory in order to individualize the set of items presented to each test-taker. The tests are designed to identify student .entry skill level in Reading Comprehension, Writing Skills, Arithmetic, and Elementary Algebra.

Abernathy noted that the Computerized Placement Tests (CPTs) are based on the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Tests. The tests give test-takers and institutions immediate feedback about students' skills. He also said that the CPTs provide fine discrimination over a wide range of ability levels but present students with a minimum of items to answer (because they eliminate items that fall out of each student's ability range). Furthermore, he pointed out that the large storage capacity of most computers means that CPTs have many more questions at all difficulty levels available than can be published in a linear paper-and-pencil format. Abernathy ended the demonstration by showing the three types of scores generated by the CPTs (total right score, range, and percentile) and the four types of written reports that the test software can generate (percentile, individual, roster of total right scores, and summary of total right scores).

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