

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING PROMPTS

Speaker: Gordon Brossell, The Florida State University

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

Gordon Brossell's session addressed issues of importance in developing prompts for large-scale writing assessments and for classroom assignments. Brossell noted that most essay exams offer only a truncated opportunity to engage in the processes of writing that our profession has generally come to see as essential for teaching writing. In addition, most essay tests provide only a single instant of writing performance--a "snapshot"--which may not be representative of the writer's ability. Brossell warned that one of the questions which teachers must consider is whether they want to teach students how to write or how to pass essay examinations. The two activities are not the same, though there is the potential for bringing them closer together.

Brossell stated that all writing tests are, to a certain extent, also tests of reading and interpretation. Writers read and interpret topics or prompts differently, and this affects their writing performance. Understanding a topic in one way causes a writer to approach the composing of a written response in a certain way. How much information writers have at their disposal is tied to how they interpret the prompt. Moreover, Brossell noted that different prompts ask for different cognitive and rhetorical activities. The demands on writers are different if the task is to describe an event or tell a story or to present an argument. Students who understand what a prompt is asking them to do have a better chance of writing well than those who do not.

Next, Brossell reviewed recent research on factors affecting prompt variability. First, he said that changes in the wording of prompts tend to produce no discernible differences in essays written in response to them. Second, he examined the effects of the subject matter of different prompts and explained the "content-fair" prompts that he and James Hoetker developed for Florida's statewide College Level Academic Skills Test in Writing. These prompts enable writers to select their own subject matter (for example, they chose the practice in the prompt, "Describe a common practice in American schools that should be changed"). This solves the problem of unequal familiarity with the content of most prompts in large-scale writing assessment. Then, Brossell discussed the research on the rhetorical specification of prompts. Several of the studies that he reviewed showed that providing explicit information about the purpose and audience for writing does not necessarily elicit the best writing performance from the students, a finding that calls into question conventional wisdom about rhetorical specification.

Next, Brossell pointed out some implications for the teaching of writing: (1) a good prompt is not writer-proof (so there is no substitute for extensive prewriting activities and teacher feedback), (2) teaching to a test prompt--with many in-class practice essays--may help students pass but it dramatically undercuts the learning process and students' writing processes, (3) classroom writing assessment cannot--

and should not--mimic large-scale assessment. He concluded by stating that large-scale assessment ought to be modeled after the ways in which writing is taught and learned. This means that the composing process has to be incorporated into the testing situation.◊