WHAT IS PROFICIENT WRITING AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL?

Speakers: Howard Cohen, University of Massachusetts, Boston
Suzy Groden, University of Massachusetts, Boston

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

The speakers began by stating that they were going to explain the procedures used to determine how the standard of writing proficiency recognized by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Massachusetts-Boston compares with that of experts in composition theory.

Suzy Groden described the Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE), the test that students in the college of Arts and Sciences must pass by the end of their sophomore year. Before students take the test, they are asked to choose a set of readings from a booklet of three sets, each of which is about twenty pages long. The selections are based on topics from courses across the curriculum. When students take the test, they are asked to choose one question from a choice of two about the set of readings that they selected. They are asked to answer the question solely on the basis of the material that they have read in the reading set. Students are allowed three hours to respond to the question and revise and edit their writing.

WPE essays are graded by two (or more) faculty members of the Proficiency Evaluation committee using a nine-point checklist of the elements of writing proficiency. Grades are either "pass" or "repeat." Students who think that they have been graded unfairly have the right to appeal their grade to a panel of faculty members not involved in the original grading. Students who do not pass this test by the end of their sophomore year are required to reduce their coursework and to enroll in a "Fundamental Skills" course. And those who do not pass the test by the middle of their junior year are not permitted to enroll in further courses for degree credit until they pass the test or receive a passing grade on a portfolio of their work. The portfolio is an alternative method of demonstrating writing proficiency that is recommended for students who have special difficulties in performing well on tests. The portfolio has to meet specific conditions: three of the four papers must be expository essays written for courses; at least two of the papers must be based on reading materials; the fourth paper must be about a series of readings distributed by the Office of Academic Support; and none of the papers can consist solely of personal narrative.

Howard Cohen then explained their effort to compare the level of proficiency required of their students to nationally recognized standards of proficient writing. In order to do this, he sent 45 sample WPE essays to eleven nationally recognized composition experts and asked them to compare their judgments with those of the faculty who had graded the WPES. The results indicated that there was a surprisingly high degree of accord among the consultants as to the rating of each essay and a high degree of agreement with the ratings assigned by the College of Arts and Sciences faculty. Thus, Cohen noted that he and his colleagues concluded that the grading standards that they have been using to assess the WPES are in accord with those used by composition theorists from other institutions: "We seem to agree on what constitutes an appropriate ability to read and write critically for a mid-career undergraduate, and our sense of what represents excellence in the performance of such a student, as well as inadequacy, is pretty much the same as that of our outside consultants."

Cohen and Groden then handed out the report to their faculty detailing the study, the grading sheet used to rate WPES, and the booklet, Nine Elements of Proficiency in Writing (a manual describing the exam and the elements of proficient writing that the exam assesses).

QUALITY ASSURANCE STANDARDS IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speakers: Sybil Carlson, Educational Testing Service
Mary Fowles, Educational Testing Service

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

As the field of essay testing develops, policies and procedures are being established, but important issues remain unresolved. Sybil Carlson, a researcher, and Mary Fowles, a test developer, discussed some of these unresolved issues and reviewed current trends in essay testing.

Carlson began by explaining that her perspective on standards for the direct assessment of writing, developed through her research on instruction in problem solving and in the open-ended assessment of performance is more appropriately described in qualitative than quantitative terms. However, she noted that qualitative assessments must also be valid and reliable. Indeed, because approaches to essay testing can vary considerably in quality, Carlson stated that it is important to develop and apply guidelines that will assure us that the information obtained through the assessment is relevant and accurate. Carlson then pointed out that although the American Psychological Association (APA) standards serve well as guidelines for objective testing, they are not directly transferable to direct assessment, nor do they provide sufficient detail in areas that are more critical to direct assessment (such as scoring).

She then outlined some of the subjunctive issues that our profession still needs to address. First, we need to define more clearly and comprehensively the writing competence that we are attempting to measure. Next, we must determine the extent to which performance is equivalent, in the several instances in which it might vary (i.e., across topics, tasks, and population groups). Third, we must make our criteria explicit as the definition of competent writing is translated into assessment practices. Before assigning labels to a possible universe of writing features that contribute to the total effect of a piece, Carlson said that we need to know the extent to which these features can be identified and evaluated independently. She concluded by noting that as we
reach some agreement about a set of common guidelines or standards for direct assessment, we will be able to communicate in a language in which we share common definitions.

Mary Fowles then presented the ETS Guidelines for Developing and Scoring Free-Response Tests. She discussed the steps involved in planning direct writing assessments and in developing writing test specifications. Next, she explained the guidelines for writing the scoring specifications and techniques for developing writing test items and scoring criteria. She also described methods for pretesting the test items and field criteria, and cautioned conference to ask questions about the test and the scoring criteria, such as "How well do the examinees understand what they have to do?" "Do the tasks elicit the responses that were expected and desired?" "Can the criteria and scale be used to score the test easily?" "Are the readers using the scoring system in the way that it was intended?" "To what extent do the readers agree on the scores that they assign to the responses?"

Fowles then described each of the steps in administering and scoring an essay test of writing. Next she explained the use of statistics to evaluate the test and the scoring system. She ended with a discussion of techniques for evaluating the validity of writing tests.

**WRITING ASSESSMENT K-12: IS THERE AN INSTRUCTIONAL SIDE?**

**Speakers:** Diane Bloom, New Jersey Department of Education
Charles Chew, New York State Education Department

**Introducer/Recorder:** Rose Ann Morgan, Middlesex County College, N.J.

Diane Bloom began by briefly mentioning the four areas that would be covered in her presentation: research and reform, testing as an institutional part of scholarship, writing theory and its impact on the New Jersey High School Proficiency Test, and support for an effective writing program K-12. Bloom noted that education has undergone many reform movements; at present we are in the third wave of the eighth reform. The first wave was characterized by the issuance of reports such as the Carnegie Report, A Nation at Risk. The second was characterized by the reaction, "The report may be right, but what now?" And the third is characterized by what we are doing now— instructional research.

Bloom said that today, we know certain things to be true about testing: (1) it is the barometer of public accountability for our schools; (2) it is part of professional rigor; and (3) it influences instruction and instruction influences it. But we must not forget another important fact: we cannot hold students accountable for what they have not been taught, nor can we hold teachers responsible for what they have not been trained to do.

Bloom pointed out that nineteen states now require testing in order for a person to earn a high school diploma. In 1982, New Jersey implemented its High School Proficiency Test (HSPT), the writing component of which is four years old. In New Jersey, testing has become increasingly aggressive, and there has been much growth in basic skills competency. In the first year of the HSPT, the passing rate was 50%. It is now 90%, with 85% of students from urban areas passing. The ninth grade HSPT is a test which measures cumulative skills K-8. The results of the test are used for curriculum review and development, in addition to being used for student placement. The HSPT consists of two parts: essay and multiple-choice. In terms of a student's mastery of writing, the essay is more important than the multiple-choice part, but the multiple-choice part is necessary for validation. Where writing is concerned, theory, research and principles of instruction must be integrated with principles of assessment.

Charles Chew briefly described the writing assessment program in New York state. New York state has had a Regents exam since the 1870s and competency testing since 1979. Chew is not certain that writing can be accurately assessed by only one piece of writing. New York's writing test includes several different samples of writing. Extensive pre-testing of prompts is conducted in order to ensure that students can handle the topics, and students are required to write in different forms for different purposes and for a variety of audiences. In addition, the test requires students to do whole pieces and allows for revision.

In New York, students are tested state wide from grade 5 through grade 11. For the fifth grade test, students must write two different pieces on separate days. They can choose from five different kinds of topics. Pre-competency testing is administered in grade 8 or 9, depending on a school's administration. For this test, students must write a business letter, a report, and a persuasive piece (the scores of all three are added and averaged). The Regents competency test is administered in grade 11 to two different groups: (1) non-Regents students and (2) Regents students. The test can be taken regularly until the student reaches the age of 21. The first group—below average students—must produce three separate pieces of writing, just as with the pre-competency group in grade 8 or 9. The second group—average and above-average students—is tested for listening skills, spelling, vocabulary, and in five other areas. These students must produce two pieces of writing, one on literature and the other on a non-literary topic. For evaluation of essays, New York state uses the modified holistic approach. Results of these tests indicate that the elements of good writing are the same across grades 5, 8, 9 and 11.

Chew stated that the assessment program has had enormous impact on instruction across the state. The state now trains teachers at all levels in holistic scoring on a regular basis. Moreover, teachers are trained to examine test results analytically with an eye toward improvement. New York has also designed a new language arts curriculum, and it is now planning an approach to address the newly revised English Language Arts syllabus.

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