CREATING AND FIELD TESTING TOPICS

Facilitator: Richard Lloyd-Jones, *University of Iowa*

The problems in creating and field-testing topics were outlined in Richard Lloyd-Jones' opening remarks:

- Students may write badly because of poorly conceived topics.

- Too long a "stem" or stimulus question, may confuse students.

- We may harm students with poor tests and testing procedures.

- An essay test topic leads to a performance that is one datum (as opposed to fifty items on a multiple-choice test, of which one or more may be discarded).

- Sometimes within the constraints of a test situation, we cannot elicit from students the kind of writing we would like: a one-hour essay may not allow for profound thinking.

The participants then discussed these problems at length and suggested several possible solutions. First, faculty and administrators who design writing tests must avoid test bias (which occurs when the knowledge needed to do well on a certain test is more prevalent among certain student populations than among others). On the other hand, in creating topics that will be appropriate for everyone, we must also try to avoid the banality of boringly general questions. Boring topics may result in greater discriminations among students because they frequently demand greater originality and cleverness. We should provide several interesting questions to elicit the best writing from all our students.

In addition, field-testing is very important for determining the demands of a test question. Field-testing a topic may be impractical if test security is an issue. But perhaps students should be allowed to know in advance the questions that they will write on; maybe they could even have a role in helping to formulate essay test topics.

Several participants also noted that test topics often emphasize the argumentative mode to produce an expository essay, but this tendency may limit students (and perhaps whole composition courses) to one rhetorical mode. Test questions requiring the use of other modes might be equally useful in evaluating writing.

Finally, the group suggested that the National Testing Network in Writing should provide a pool of questions to be used in testing and composition programs around the country.

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