

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN TESTING

(excerpt from closing address)

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I hope my remarks thus far have suggested that a careful look at past assessment can help us speculate profitably about future directions in testing, and that such a look touches at least peripherally on many issues (such as test topics and the reason for testing) focused on during this conference. I would now like to consider three sets of speculations which this look at the past has provoked in me.

The first speculation concerns our efforts to achieve and maintain separate or discrete assessment in writing, reading, and speaking. The history of the movement which produced this separation is fascinating in itself, but for the purposes of our discussion, I would only note that in the eighteenth-century system described earlier in my remarks, assessment in the three areas was merged. In spite of our modern tendency to separate them, I believe that the issue of the relationship among these three communicative arts is far from resolved. Recent research by Marilyn Sternglass, Lynn Troyka, David Bartholomae, Mike Rose, and by cognitive psychologists such as Bob Bracewell and Carl Frederiksen has pointed up the many links between reading and writing, while research on professional or work-related writing has recently found that such writing most frequently grows out of and is closely related to speaking. And, of course, even in assessment we have been unable to make a complete separation of these skills. In one session during the NTNW conference, a participant pointed out that many essay exams, especially those based on or closely related to a reading passage, may test reading more than they do writing. A large number of schools, in fact, offer six or more topics to choose from on writing proficiency tests; yet they usually fail to realize that such a test on *writing* is invalid, among other reasons, because the profusion of topics makes the test as much of a reading test as anything else.

While I am convinced that there are major differences among speaking, writing, and reading, and that we must continue to acknowledge and stress those differences, I am also convinced that the research and trends I have mentioned argue against our attempts to test writing as a completely separate and discrete skill. Will our theories of assessment and our methods of testing accommodate a new focus on the importance of speech to writing on the job—or in the links between reading and writing? Can we find integrative ways of assessing reading, speaking, and writing that will also satisfy our demands for validity and reliability? Answering these questions can have profound implications not only for future directions in assessment, but for a curriculum which has, over the last fifty years, persistently separated the teaching of speech, writing, and reading.

My second speculation relates not to the relationship among skills to be tested but to the model of learning and the values reflected by any given test. These issues are at the heart of what we might call the *ethos* of testing. If we return to the 18th-century method I described earlier, we can see that it reflects a collaborative, interactive model of learning. In addition, the method of assessment reflects the values held at that time: a high standard of public discourse, freedom of speech, and a concern for abstractions such as justice and the social good, abstractions that Dr. Clark pointed out to us in his keynote address are at the base of our unique linguistic heritage.

Most of us would no doubt support a collaborative, interactive model of learning and say that we also value

freedom of speech and the way writing promotes it by allowing us to make and share meaning about our world. But how many of our tests actually reflect that model, or those values? I believe that our insistent striving for complete objectivity has gone hand-in-hand with the demise of a truly collaborative learning model because such a model depends on measurement whose criteria are based not on national norms but on the performance of the teacher as "connoisseur" and the student as "apprentice" in a context of shared cultural values. In many of our tests, the criteria for achievement are external to the teacher-student relationship and hence militate against it. Further, many objective tests especially suggest that we value writing NOT for making meaning or for finding our stance in regard to the crucial issues of our lives, but merely for labeling things "right" or "wrong."

These speculations raise important questions, I think, about future directions in testing. Can we meet the challenge of producing tests which accurately reflect the learning model and the values which we profess? Is it important to do so, and why? Much has been done in the last four years to answer these vexing questions, yet each of us knows all too well that we have far to go.

My final speculation is related in some ways to the relationship among speaking, reading, and writing, and to questions of *ethos*, but it is far removed from the eighteenth century. I am referring to the tremendous challenge presented to us by the information revolution. Let us consider very briefly some of the implications this revolution has for us and for assessment.

First, such systems as videotext, teledata, and telidon, and such methods as teleconferencing, reinforce rather than sever the connections among reading, speaking, and writing. The advent of voice-operated computers will make those connections even stronger. And we have already looked at the implications such connections will have, both for testing and for the curriculum.

Second, the use of computers may well affect the way we perceive structure and organization in discourse. Watching and talking with youngsters doing computer programming, I am astounded at the speed with which they make certain kinds of synthetic leaps and at the dense sequencing they have mastered. If computer use does affect cognition, it will also affect how we perceive "good" writing, much as the medium of print journalism radically influenced our perceptions of structure and quality in writing. Such shifts, of course, will present profound questions for assessment.

Third, computers offer powerful potential for interaction and for collaborative learning, especially in terms of dialogue and group writing. A *New York Times* article recently reported a story told by a professor at Carnegie-Mellon who came home very late one night and settled down at her computer terminal to do some work. When several students at the university, who were working on one of her assignments, noticed that she had logged on, they sent an urgent "Help!" message. She answered, and together they discussed the assignment. The teacher later said that, while she had never in her entire teaching career known a student who would call at 2:30 a.m. for help, the computer served to allow students to communicate more openly with her. But if computers hold potential for dialogue and communication, they also open intriguing possibilities for group writing. Lisa Ede and I have begun preliminary research on the group or collaborative writing process, and we have found that this model predominates in most on-the-job writing and, in

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fact, in most academic faculties other than English. We are, by and large, the only ones who view writing as a solitary act; and our tests, of course, reflect this view. Who could be more solitary or agonized than the student hunched at a desk trying to respond to a topic never seen before? By making group writing simpler, the use of computers may force us to reexamine our concept of writing as a lonely, solitary activity and, in turn, our means of assessing it.

Finally, computers in conjunction with word processors may alter the goals of tests. Many tests currently aim at diagnosing problems with mechanics and usage or spelling. Yet many students who routinely work on word processors tell us that these are not their major problems. In fact, fairly decent software programs on spelling and mechanics are already available. Students also report that using word processors encourages a view of trial-and-error as constructive and necessary to success. My thirteen-year-old godson is willing to make a hundred errors in programming a game, because he knows he is on the way to success. And this tolerance for error, for using error as a way to achieve his particular ends, has carried over to his writing on the word processor. Perhaps, then, the use of word processors in composing will help us perceive the instructional value of error and hence reinforce a lesson Mina Shaughnessy so eloquently taught us.

I have said that I believe the information revolution holds great potential for helping us understand the connections among speaking, reading, and writing; for encouraging interaction and dialogue; for bringing distant group authors together; for fostering a constructive view

of error; and for speeding the transmission of information. Yet I am inclined to agree with Dr. Clark that computers will not be the answer to our prayers in terms of assessing student writers. What they may well do, however, is alter our concept of assessment.

What would happen if students could publicly debate, via computer, issues on which they might be asked to write? What if they could work in groups, via computer, to stimulate ideas and to practice with real audiences? What if they could use a simple spelling program that would allow them to focus more clearly on their major point and its logical support, much in the same way students now use calculators in order to focus more clearly on the overall mathematical problems to be solved? What if they could use trial and error profusely and still produce—almost instantly—a clean copy, thus freeing them to concentrate not on avoiding messiness but on what they want to say and giving them, in addition, more time to write the long essays holistic markers seem to love and reward?

It occurs to me that such things might well alter our concept of assessment. And in doing so, we might find ourselves more able to provide testing which combines reading, writing, and speaking, which reflects a collaborative learning model, and which stresses as the uppermost value of writing its power to help us create and share meaning. In bringing us together at this conference, and in provoking us to ask—and find answers for—these questions, the National Testing Network in Writing has taken a major step forward in helping us to realize such a goal.