

INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN READING AND WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speaker: Susan Jeffords, *The Florida State University*
Richard Steinacher, *IBM Inc.*
Introducer/Recorder: Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *The Florida State University*

Susan Jeffords began the session by noting that the session's topic could be interpreted in two ways: interrelationships between reading assessment and writing assessment or interrelationships between the act of reading and the assessment of writing. In fact, Dr. Steinacher spoke to the former interpretation, Dr. Jeffords to the latter.

Richard Steinacher acknowledged the "schizophrenic" nature of his training in both types of assessment. On the one hand, his expertise in reading assessment came as a result of formal training, both in theory and in the diagnostic aids used to test reading skills. On the other hand, his training in writing assessment had been very informal, based primarily on workshop experiences and practicums, and on his own memories of the horrors of freshman composition. Thus, as a practitioner specializing in the teaching of both reading and writing at the "remedial" college level, he had, over the years, come to feel a real dichotomy in his professional life. In the reading lab, he was administering group silent-reading tests which failed to take into account the context brought to the reading task by the individual student. Armed with test results, he was then leading his students through "canned" materials to increase their skill and comprehension, in preparation for retesting at the end of the semester. In writing classes, however, he was using an ungraded approach that incorporated journals, peer assessment and editing, and a constant interaction between teacher and class based on apprehending and appreciating not only the contexts brought by each student to the writing task, but also the processes by which the student worked through the task.

Steinacher stated that he has come to see that such a dichotomy is not only limiting but also destructive. Unless we begin to approach reading assessment in the hands-on, one-to-one way we have come to teach writing, much of our effort in the teaching of both reading and writing is being wasted. Ironically, Steinacher feels that increasing sophistication in the use of computers will enable the teaching of both skills—not in a programmed way, but by giving us the tools to diagnose *process* (as opposed to result) far more carefully and accurately, on a mass scale, than we can do now.

Jeffords' presentation was addressed to theories of reading—forming interpretations, "making sense" of what we read. She began by suggesting that in any classroom experience of reading, there are at least three levels of reading theory at work: (1) the teacher has a theory of how he/she reads; (2) the teacher has a theory of how his or her students read; and (3) the student has a theory of how he or she reads. We need to become more conscious of these theories. Without that enhanced consciousness, we hamper our ability

to assess writing.

According to Jeffords, the theory of reading that we adhere to has an important impact on our teaching and our assessing of writing. Students who think about how they read, who formulate theory, are more conscious of the reader for whom they write. Teachers who consider the theory of reading of the writer they are assessing are far more able to understand the writer, and to recommend more efficient approaches.

Following the presentation, the audience engaged in a discussion centering for the most part on the practical application of reading theory and of informal writing assessment. One idea to which several discussants kept returning was the gulf between what teachers assume students know about the conventions both of reading and of writing a particular type of text and what the students *actually* know. Many of us assume that college students understand the conventions of the critical essay long before they have read enough critical essays to understand the conventions of the form.

Jeffords then proceeded to outline several operating theories of reading. The theory of reading growing out of the New Criticism which dominated the teaching of literature from the 1930's through the 1950's holds that a text contains everything that is necessary for the reader to apprehend and appreciate the text. The meaning is there (and there *is* a clear "meaning") and waits only for the careful and thoughtful—and perhaps sensitive—reading of the student. This New Criticism theory of reading is essentially passive. The student need bring nothing to the work—everything he or she will need is in the poem or story or essay itself. A second basic theory of reading is found in several varieties, especially among French critics. The most noteworthy grows out of Deconstruction theory. For the Deconstructionist, the task of the reading is to second guess the text, to "read under erasure," always remembering that every word or image in the text has many possible interpretations, always going back to earlier interpretations in the light of later ones. Hence, the New Critic would say, "This Ode is about X," while the Deconstructionist would say, "This Ode is about X1, X2, X3, X4...."

Several other theories of reading may be grouped under the rubric Reader Response criticism. In this model, the reader is active, always participating in the act of reading. Each reader builds meaning for himself; meaning is not inherent in the text alone (or, for some critics, not inherent in the text at all). *How* we build meaning is still under debate. For some critics, the answers lie in the psyche of each reader; for others in an interpretive community, in gender orientation, in the processes of consistency-building, or in individual understandings of the conventions of a particular text.