
MONITORING NATIONAL STANDARDS IN SCOTLAND: WRITING TO A PURPOSE

Alastair Pollitt, University of Edinburgh

In large-scale monitoring of writing standards (as in other forms of writing assessment) the use of decontextualized exercises suffers from two fundamental weaknesses. The first of these is practical in that many writers are not sufficiently interested to engage seriously in the activity; and the second is theoretical in that such writing bears little resemblance to any of the kinds of writing done outside the classroom. Attempts to build a context around a writing task often seem contrived and may result in more rather than less confusion about the "required" audience and purpose.

It occurred to the English Language Monitoring team in Scotland that one solution might lie in the notion of *teleology*: that some final outcome to be achieved should provide the justification, context, and purpose for the task. The team designed packages, which begin with the statement of the end to be achieved (e.g., "you will finish off the story and then prepare to produce it on stage"). Each of a series of language activities then contributes to achieving the endpoint, including Viewing, Listening, Reading, Discussing, Writing, and Talking.

Audience is automatically specified in this process, and issues of appropriateness of style and register can be validly assessed. Above all, the purpose of the writing task, albeit still only simulated, is clearly and easily conveyed by the overall context. Teleology turns out to be a remarkably efficient way of conveying instructions about purpose, audience, and context to the children. We hope too that the packages motivate students. A major problem is that writing most naturally comes towards the end of such a package of work which means that the children may be tired out before they start.

The results and experiences of the survey will be evaluated in the summer of 1989.