

RESEARCH ON WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speakers: Arthur Applebee, *Stanford University*
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Introducer/Recorder: Dick Worthen, *Diablo Valley College*

Arthur Applebee began by noting that the Education Department at Stanford University has been studying writing across the curriculum in a number of secondary schools — not just writing in the English Departments. Some tentative observations from this study in progress that Arthur Applebee shared with the group are:

- 1) Less than half of student writing is done in English classes;
- 2) About three-fourths of student writing deals with specific ideas presented in class, not with personal experiences;
- 3) Writing is more often assessed than taught;
- 4) In most student writing, there is less emphasis on originality and organization and more on accuracy of reporting and on information portrayed;
- 5) Students seem best at, and favor, writing narratives. They seek ways to work narrative into an assignment that calls for analysis. If it is insisted that the writing be analytical, their achieved fluency usually falters.

Applebee noted that there are many differences within a faculty as to what good writing is — differences as to why and how we teach writing. This makes it difficult to develop school-wide standards for assessment and exposing a major problem of controlling how pedagogical method, student perception, and writing assessment interact.

Gordon Brossell pointed out that testing often drives curriculum. Because the statewide Florida writing test, *The College-Level Academic Skills Test in Writing*, calls for a short expository essay, a good many community-college programs have begun to emphasize the writing of fifty-minute compositions (i.e., practicing for the test). If writing assessments like this one were geared to writing processes rather than to short salvos of writing production, they might very well stimulate the writing teacher (and writing programs) to pay more attention to the craft of composing — to generating ideas, gathering data, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. Assessments modeled after the composing process would get the message across that this is what happens in good writing classes and that this should happen in all classes.

Brossell reminded us that the means of testing can and should affect instruction. A large question, then, is how in assessing writing do we build into writing prompts the stimuli that evoke what we desire from students? And how do we get those teaching writing to coordinate curriculum and programs in such a manner as to support and prepare the student being tested and make rational the assessing process? We must move carefully to assure that the cause-effect relationship is asserted in the right direction. Brossell suggested that we should start with the questions "Why do we teach writing and what skills in writing comprise the qualities in the writer we want the schools to produce? How can we achieve such consensus across the curriculum?"

Brossell has surveyed the area of student response to the writing prompt. He notes three variables in writing assessment: topic variables, writer variables, and procedural variables. How do we muster our efforts as teachers and testers to achieve feedback that serves the purposes we have created our curriculum for? Brossell gave us several generalizations that deserve our attention but may leave us slightly uneasy as we seek some larger verities for pinning down an admittedly elusive field:

- 1) Small differences in wording within the same general framework seem to make little difference in student responses.
- 2) Topics with low cognitive demands and high experiential demands elicit higher scores from readers.
- 3) The problem of unequal familiarity with the topic can usually be overcome by supplying ample information.
- 4) A writing prompt calling for an argument rather than a narrative is more difficult to respond to, especially among young respondents.
- 5) Prompts that are at least moderately specified (rather than open-ended) elicit more focused and better organized essays. This is more important in a timed essay.

Brossell concluded by noting that Alan Purves and his colleagues at the Curriculum Lab of the University of Illinois have been working on a model of the composition assignment which sets forth fifteen dimensions of a writing assignment: instruction, stimulus, cognitive demand, purpose, role, audience, content, discourse, specification, tone and style, preparation, length, format, time, number of drafts, and criteria for evaluation. The categories are intended to give test-makers and teachers a set of tools for "adjusting" writing topics.