

MODELS OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

- Speakers: Roberta Camp, *Educational Testing Service, Princeton*
Patricia Belanoff, *State University of New York, Stony Brook*
- Introducer/Recorder: Sandra Murphy, *University of California, Berkeley*

This session provided a wealth of information about portfolio assessment. Roberta Camp discussed research conducted by the Educational Testing Service on the role of portfolio assessment in the admissions process. Patricia Belanoff addressed advantages and problems associated with a portfolio system that has been adopted as an alternative to more traditional forms of proficiency testing at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Roberta Camp began the session by discussing features of the portfolio method of assessment. Camp acknowledged that adopting a portfolio method means giving up some of the traditional controls that are associated with standardized testing, but she also noted several positive aspects of the method. Portfolio assessment, said Camp, provides a powerful tool for instruction, and it is more directly tied to the curriculum than other methods of obtaining information about students' talents and abilities. It also provides for attention to process in writing, giving recognition to the fact that writing is more than just composition. Finally, in a portfolio assessment, student responses to a range of writing tasks are evaluated. A portfolio assessment can thus provide a more comprehensive source of information about students' writing abilities than assessment procedures which measure only one or two kinds of writing. Camp considers the following characteristics to be necessary to a writing portfolio:

1. Evidence of process in writing,
2. Variety of rhetorical purposes and audiences,
3. Encouragement of, or if possible, evidence of writing across the curriculum.
4. Some writing done in naturalistic settings, in situations like those in which students normally write.

Camp went on to share information about the ETS Writing Portfolio studies. An ETS portfolio assessment has been based on the following sequence of writing tasks:

1. A narrative based on personal experience,
2. An expository paper (or "information writing") requiring analysis of an everyday phenomenon, or an analysis of a literary or a political piece of writing,
3. A persuasive paper based on evidence drawn from a set of readings (preferably nonliterary),
4. A paper of the student's choice in a genre that he/she considers suitable,
5. A letter introducing the portfolio to its reader.

Camp noted that the first three papers above were collected under relatively controlled conditions. A first draft was written in class, students received feedback on their compositions, and then the second draft was written. The fourth element was introduced so that students could view the portfolio as *something of their own*, and guidelines were given for making a choice.

(Continued on page 7)

MODELS (continued)

The students were also given guidelines to help them determine their probable audience for the fifth task, their letter to the reader.

Camp also discussed the objectives for the Writing Portfolio project at ETS. The original objectives were:

1. to provide a broader range of information about students, talents and abilities than is provided by the Scholastic Aptitude Test,
2. to emphasize writing in the secondary/post-secondary transition and thereby compensate for imbalances in secondary school curricula caused by emphasis on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (designed to be independent of curricula),
3. to provide a more comprehensive and more reliable source of information for admissions (and possibly placement) than is currently provided by application essays.

Revised objectives for the project are:

1. To provide a comprehensive measure of writing ability, a measure that allows secondary school students to demonstrate a wide range of writing experiences.
2. To provide a focus for the improvement of secondary school writing programs by
 - a. demonstrating the value of writing in assessment,
 - b. formulating a set of writing tasks commonly recognized among teachers of writing,
 - c. enhancing the professional development of teachers of writing,
 - d. providing the instructional and descriptive materials necessary to the integration of the portfolio into existing writing programs,
 - e. providing a forum for discussion of writing and writing instruction.
3. To facilitate, eventually, the transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions by providing information less subject to distortion than that provided by the current application process, and by improving communication between secondary and post-secondary institutions.

In addition to these objectives, Camp said that the Writing Portfolio project will provide valuable information to the field of writing assessment, including information about the relationships between performance on different measures of writing ability (e.g. indirect vs. direct), as well as information on several different kinds of writing tasks. The project will also generate information about sources of error and provide answers to questions about the relative reliability of different kinds of measures (e.g., two essays scored once, or one essay scored twice).

Like Camp, Belanoff raised the issue of the relationship between the curriculum and testing. Belanoff argued that our new emphasis on process in writing may conflict with our method of evaluating students. Belanoff went on to comment on the dissatisfaction teachers at Stony Brook had felt with the traditional proficiency exam, pointing to problems with the validity of scoring, the effects of anxiety on some students, the impact of particular topics on particular students on particular days, and the practice of asking students to discuss serious social and intellectual issues without previous thought in a brief (two-hour) exam.

In investigating alternatives, Belanoff reported that the teachers at Stony Brook initially experimented with portfolio assessment. Five teachers and 96 students participated in the first phase of their experiment. In this phase, each student produced a portfolio consist-

ing of four revised pieces (two arguments, one informal essay, and one piece of free-choice prose, in addition to an in-class writing). Only 55% of the students succeeded in passing. In the second phase, a mid-semester evaluation of one of the compositions was instituted so that students and teachers would have a better understanding of the standards expected. In this second phase, the number of papers was also reduced to three (one argument, one interpretive essay, and one piece of free-choice prose.) During the second semester, the interpretive essay was replaced with an analysis-of-argument essay. At the end of the semester, 417 portfolios were read and evaluated. Now that the system is no longer experimental, approximately 1250 students per semester are producing portfolios, which are read by 45 teachers.

Belanoff also discussed problems that have surfaced since the portfolio system has been adopted. Some teachers have complained that the portfolio system robs them of initiative in class, and some feel that they, as well as their students, are being tested by the portfolio system. In addition, some teachers (and some students) believe that certain groups of portfolio graders are tougher than others. Still another problem stems from the desire of teachers to award effort and diligence. Because the students' papers are not evaluated by the classroom teacher, there is no way to recognize effort and progress. Teachers retain the authority to fail a student, but they may not pass a student who has failed the portfolio. Finally, another sort of problem stems from the anxiety raised by the process. Some students and teachers feel a mounting anxiety during the last half of the semester.

Belanoff argued that many of these "problems" can be viewed as opportunities. What this process does is to force the directors and the teachers to think carefully about the assignments they give. Changes are possible, and teachers have a voice in deciding what kinds of assignments should be included in the portfolio. They have not yet encountered a situation in which a particular teacher has had a high rate of failure. Belanoff also suggested that the fact that some students fail may end up being a good message to teachers — every teacher has students who fail.

With regard to differences in standards, Belanoff said that the system itself does not create them. What it does is bring the issue out in the open so that it can be discussed. As far as the students are concerned, Belanoff says that they need to recognize that writing is rarely done for an audience of one; "all of us write for an audience of individuals who agree on some things and disagree on others." If teachers at Stony Brook feel that their students have been judged unfairly, they have recourse to second opinions from other readers.

Belanoff concluded her talk by discussing positive aspects of the system, briefly summarized here: 1) it judges writing which students have done in fruitful ways, with time for planning, discussing, revising, and copy editing; 2) the message to students is that thinking, and therefore writing is enhanced by conversation with peers and teachers; 3) it makes teachers allies of their students—the coaches of the team rather than the umpire who punishes infractions; 4) it draws teachers together, encouraging discussion about ways to help students and about standards; 5) it makes students work harder. Standards are higher, but students tend to feel that they can meet these standards; 6) it recognizes the reality of differences and similarities in audiences, and it emphasizes work and learning more than evaluation.