NEW APPROACHES TO PRIMARY TRAIT SCORING

Speakers: Charles Cooper, *University of California, San Diego*
Mary Barr, *San Diego Unified School District*
Introducer/Recorder: Daniel Wolter, *Napa Valley Unified School District*

Charles Cooper began by advocating primary trait scoring, while stating his awareness of its problems and limitations. He said that the purpose of his presentation was not to set off one system of writing evaluation against another. Rather, by first speaking about writing and assessment in general terms, he would then be able to describe the place of primary trait scoring in assessment.

After noting the differences between writing and other forms of language, as well as the complexities involved in the thought processes, he outlined the many differences written forms may take. With this background, Cooper posed and answered the question of what constitutes good writing instruction. Students must be taught to be aware of and to manage the writing process. They must be taught the forms and purposes of many different kinds of texts. And they must be taught control of the conventions of writing.

Given these goals of writing instruction, Cooper said a school-wide or district assessment should not violate our knowledge about writing and should help to improve student writing. Among the several functions of formal writing assessment (sorting and placing students, determining competence, diagnosing writing problems, evaluating programs, monitoring achievement), primary trait scoring is his clear choice.

What then is primary trait scoring? According to Cooper, primary trait scoring is a system that starts with a clear description of objectives. One must state the exact type of writing to be assessed. The writing task in a primary trait assessment is stated as a form of communication involving purpose, audience, and subject. The unique features of the particular type of writing to be elicited are described in the scoring scales. Consequently the reporting form of a primary trait assessment is useful in several ways and differs from other forms of assessment. Good examples of primary trait reports can be found in NAEP reports and the San Diego City Schools report "Result of the 1983-4 Writting Assessment: Grades 9-12."

Cooper followed with specific examples of primary trait tasks and scales. One task adapted from the California Assessment Program pilot eighth-grade assessment asked students to write an expressive narrative about an unforgettable experience. Students were told to include how they felt about the experience and what it meant to them. Another task asked students to write a letter to their school principal proposing a solution to a school problem. This task, a policy proposal essay, identified the primary trait on a scale indicating how well the argument for the proposed solution is developed. A scoring guide based on such tasks may have four or more levels of achievement for the defined trait. A major difference between a primary trait scoring guide and other forms of writing assessment is that no attempt is made to identify a normative standard or to set minimal competency levels. Rather, one starts with an idea of the best possible student model.

In addition to the primary trait for the specified type of writing, secondary traits can also be identified and scored. The "evaluating a short story" essays were classified according to the type of evidence (content of the story and personal associations) used in elaborating criteria. In the expressive narrative about an unforgettable experience, secondary traits measured were presenting details about people in the scene and integrating expressions of feeling. These primary and secondary trait scales provide specific instructional information, unlike common analytic scale categories such as focus, coherence, and elaboration.

Mary Barr discussed the effects and goals of writing assessment in San Diego public schools. Teachers thought that prior forms of assessment were not measuring what was important to teach. To provide more useful writing assessment, and to avoid teaching to tests aimed at a limited portion of the curriculum (the business letter, for example), the following goals were identified:

1) To encourage more purposeful writing,
2) To encourage more writing instruction,
3) To link thinking with writing,
4) To show student growth,
5) To pinpoint program needs.

Primary trait scoring tasks and guides tied to the curriculum at each grade level were developed. In addition, an "Attitudes Toward Writing" survey was conducted during the assessment. A district sampling of each grade level's tasks was scored and the data compiled for the district report. Then teachers at each site were trained to score all the papers at their site. Thus each site could compare its results with the district-wide results.

In future years the San Diego school district plans to use different writing tasks and scoring guides over a four year cycle so that sixteen types of writing currently being taught will be assessed. One of the negative effects of assessment, the narrow focus on a single or limited type of writing, will thereby be reduced or avoided.

Both speakers concluded that if one believes that writing assessment should reinforce current knowledge about what constitutes good writing instruction, and if one thinks that different types of writing possess definable characteristics, primary trait scoring should be a useful tool.

HOLISTIC SCORING (continued)

papers for the second stage, the training of readers.

Each table of four or five readers is given a duplicated set of five papers so that each table does a common reading. Readers are asked to rank them and then the Head Reader announces the scores previously given those papers by the Table Leaders. After time to absorb the implications of the first reading by the readers, they are given another set and the process is repeated. There follows a general discussion of the papers and their grading. Then the process continues. The readers are asked to adapt their reading toward the emerging norms.

All this is preliminary to the actual reading of the exit papers. Each paper is read by two readers and a difference of more than two points calls for a third reader. The Table Leader's job is to check for erratic scoring, call it to the attention of readers, and generally encourage consistency and rigor at his or her table.