

NEW PROBLEMS IN HOLISTIC SCORING

Speakers: Suellyn Duffey, Ohio State University

Nancy Woodson, Otterbein College, Ohio

Introducer/Recorder: Toba Jeffery, Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio

Nancy Woodson, former Director of the Writing Workshop Program at Ohio State University and currently a teacher of writing at Otterbein College, reported on her research, "Constructing Effective Prompts: Examination of Prompts and Their Responses," which focuses on writers who are suspended between oral and textual cultures. Woodson stated that writers who have oral patterns of composing cannot plan language. Oral-based writers have problems remembering and rereading what they have written, so their writing tends to be repetitive, whereas that of textually-based writers reflects a search for specific words and expressions. In addition, oral-based writers rely on the reader to fill in the meaning; thus, their writing often has the appearance of one-sided dialogues.

To study the influence of dialogic language on basic writers, Woodson conducted a pilot study of fifty students taking the placement test for the 1984 summer session at Ohio State University. She hypothesized that lower-level basic writers would produce written work dependent on oral dialogic composing strategies and that skilled writers would use monologic composing strategies, indicating their awareness of the audience.

Three prompts were created: tell a story (dialogic), persuade (an audience), and monologic analysis (with no audience identified so that the writer must create an audience and interpret the idea from his or her experiences). Students were placed in classes based on the scores of their responses. Testing results showed dramatic improvements in writing strategies when lower-level students selected the dialogic prompt; the reverse was true when they selected the monologic. Even skilled, upper-level writers had more difficulty with the monologic prompt. Thus, Woodson concluded that prompts can affect students' writing skills and that people involved in holistic grading should examine the essay prompts being used.

Suellyn Duffey, the current Director of the Writing Workshop Program at Ohio State University, reinforced Woodson's concern with prompts and their impact on holistic scoring. Her presentation, "What the 'Problem' Paper Can Tell Us About Evaluation," focused on the particular features of writing that are reflected in different scores. Duffey noted that the features that make for complexity include the level of analysis, the source of generalization, the writer's distance from the topic, and the writer's relationship to the text, to self, to the reader, and to others. An analysis of these features in "problem" student papers can help in the evaluation of writing as process rather than merely product. The vocabulary that appears in current writing textbooks does not assist us in describing what we see as discourse and does not work well in process-oriented classrooms. Both Duffey and Woodson stressed the need to examine the interaction of writer, prompt, and text in all writing assignments and writing tests. ■