

THE CENTRALITY OF MEASUREMENT

Speaker: Edward White, California State University, San Bernardino
Introducer/Recorder: Harvey Wiener, La Guardia Community College, CUNY

Edward White pointed out that many writing teachers not only are ignorant of measurement concepts but are proud of their ignorance. Since measurement is central, not peripheral, to the teaching of writing, a writing teacher must know something about measurement, according to White. By examining three of the most prominent problems in the teaching of writing today, one can see how an understanding of the principles and procedures of writing measurement is necessary in order to address these problems. Inattention to these problems represents inattention to the teaching of writing itself:

1. Unclear and inappropriate writing assignments.
2. Arbitrary and unfair grading of student writing.
3. Insufficient or no attention to the writing process in general and to revision in particular.

White said that writing teachers are legendary for their bad assignments. Students often do not know what their teachers want. Yet, a teacher who has participated in a test committee for the creation of an essay test will generally change her or his classroom assignments for the better. Test committees review, revise, and pretest essay assignments. Those teachers who have worked on test

committees understand the obligation seriously to consider test construction, that is, the kinds of writing assignments that are appropriate.

White went on to discuss the second problem — arbitrary and unfair grading of student writing. Our students generally believe, based on their experience, that grades for writing are unpredictable, arbitrary, inconsistent, and normally a matter of luck more than skill; and most research into teacher grading shows that they are right. Teachers involved in an essay testing program will soon realize that scoring reliability is necessary for the sake of fairness and achievable with some effort. Teachers who learn the techniques of scoring can use these techniques to evaluate students' classroom writing consistently and fairly.

In regard to the third problem, insufficient or no attention to the writing process in general or to revision in particular, White commented that every experienced writer, particularly the professional writer, knows that revision is the substance of writing. The student writer needs to learn this. The most important obstacle to the teaching of writing is that most students write only a first draft. White believes that students will not revise their work until teachers teach them enough about evaluating writing to enable them to see what needs improvement in their own drafts. The half-hearted tinkering that most good students do to please teachers — often worsening rather than improving their work — has little to do with real revision. Revision means evaluation, and teachers cannot teach revision until they themselves understand evaluation and measurement. ■