
WRITING ASSESSMENT K-12: IS THERE AN INSTRUCTIONAL SIDE?

Speakers: Diane Bloom, New Jersey Department of Education
Charles Chew, New York State Education Department

Introducer/Recorder: Rose Ann Morgan, Middlesex County College, N.J.

Diane Bloom began by briefly mentioning the four areas that would be covered in her presentation: research and reform, testing as an institutional part of scholarship, writing theory and its impact on the New Jersey High School Proficiency Test, and support for an effective writing program K-12. Bloom noted that education has undergone many reform movements; at present we are in the third wave of the eighth reform. The first wave was characterized by the issuance of reports such as the Carnegie Report, *A Nation at Risk*. The second was characterized by the reaction, "The reports may be right, but what now?" And the third is characterized by what we are doing now--instructional research.

Bloom said that today, we know certain things to be true about testing: (1) it is the barometer of public accountability for our schools; (2) it is part of professional rigor; and (3) it influences instruction and instruction influences it. But we must not forget another important fact: we cannot hold students accountable for what they have not been taught, nor can we hold teachers responsible for what they have not been trained to do.

Bloom pointed out that nineteen states now require testing in order for a person to earn a high school diploma. In 1982, New Jersey implemented its High School Proficiency Test (HSPT), the writing component of which is four years old. In New Jersey, testing has become increasingly aggressive, and there has been much growth in basic skills competency. In the first year of the HSPT, the passing rate was 50%. It is now 90%, with 85% of students from urban areas passing. The ninth grade HSPT is a test which measures cumulative skills K-8. The results of the test are used for curriculum review and development, in addition to being used for student placement. The HSPT consists of two parts: essay and multiple-choice. In terms of a student's mastery of writing, the essay is more important than the multiple-choice part, but the multiple-choice part is necessary for validation. Where writing is concerned, theory, research and principles of instruction must be integrated with principles of assessment.

Charles Chew briefly described the writing assessment program in New York state. New York state has had a Regents exam since the 1870s and competency testing since 1979. Chew is not certain that writing can be accurately assessed by only one piece of writing. New York's writing test includes several different samples of writing. Extensive pre-testing of prompts is conducted in order to ensure that students can handle the topics, and students are required to write in different forms for different purposes and for a variety of audiences. In addition, the test requires students to do whole pieces and allows for revision.

In New York, students are tested state wide from grade 5 through grade 11. For the fifth grade test, students must write two different pieces on separate days. They can choose from five different kinds of topics. Pre-competency testing is administered in grade 8 or 9, depending on a school's administration. For this test, students must write a business letter, a report, and a persuasive piece (the scores of all three are added and averaged). The Regents competency test is administered in grade 11 to two different groups: (1) non-Regents students and (2) Regents students. The test can be retaken regularly until the student reaches the age of 21. The first group--below average students--must produce three separate pieces of writing, just as with the pre-competency group in grade 8 or 9. The second group--average and above-average students--is tested for listening skills, spelling, vocabulary, and in five other areas. These students must produce two pieces of writing, one on literature and the other on a non-literary topic. For evaluation of essays, New York state uses the modified holistic approach. Results of these tests indicate that the elements of good writing are the same across grades 5, 8, 9 and 11.

Chew stated that the assessment program has had enormous impact on instruction across the state. The state now trains teachers at all levels in holistic scoring on a regular basis. Moreover, teachers are trained to examine test results analytically with an eye toward improvement. New York has also designed a new language arts curriculum, and it is now planning an approach to address the newly revised English Language Arts syllabus.

Continued on page 15

Chew concluded by noting that there is the danger among administrators, teachers and parents to use a test to encourage limited instruction and to use a test for classroom and school management. Some administrators believe that test results are the only indicator of student performance. However, writing done in a test situation may not truly reflect a person's ability as a writer.◊