
TRAINING SESSION IN THE HOLISTIC SCORING METHOD

Speaker: Rose Ann Morgan, Middlesex County College, N.J.

Introducer/Recorder: Dennis Donahue, New Jersey Institute of Technology

Rose Ann Morgan gave conferees attending this session a hands-on introduction to holistic scoring. Participants had an opportunity to read, score, and discuss examples of essays written by students as part of the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test (NJCBSPT). The session was a scaled-down simulation of the training given to the readers, usually high school and college teachers, who score these essays.

Morgan explained that the essence of holistic reading and

scoring is the non-subjective appraisal of the work in question. Readers are not asked to do anything but to assign numbers to discourse. The numbers (1 to 6 on the NJCBSPT) represent different levels of achievement on the test, but the significance of the numbers, the judgment regarding which number represents passing or failing or placement in one course or another, is to be made by others. Such a judgment might be made, for example, by the person at a college responsible for placing students in a course at an appropriate level. Such people see the whole range and distribution of actual scores. The function of a holistic scoring training session is to make sure that all the readers know and are able to employ the full scale and range of scores for evaluating essays.

In an actual holistic training session, given just before a reading, readers sit in groups of six or seven under the guidance of a table reader, an experienced reader who has participated in a preliminary holistic scoring session a day or so prior to this general reading. The readers are given copies of prescored sample essays, called rangefinders, and are asked to learn--or re-learn if they are experienced readers--the scale to be used throughout the reading. They are asked to rank order these essays and then to assign each a score ranging from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). There is at least one essay for each of the six scores.

When all have finished scoring the rangefinders, the readers are asked to announce their scores by a show of hands. Readers can see instantly whether they are scoring essays higher or lower than the table leaders and other readers in the room. They then make any mental adjustments necessary to bring their scoring into line with the scale being used by the group. Additional rangefinders are scored and discussed and then, when the chief reader is satisfied that readers are using the agreed upon scale, "live" essays are brought out and the actual scoring begins. At irregular intervals during the session, additional rangefinders are scored by the group to keep their idea of the scale sharp.

At the abbreviated training session given at the conference, participants were given the same information readers at an actual session get. They were told that the writers had been given just twenty minutes to write an expository response to a question relating to a task they had not previously been able to perform but now could. Participants were reminded that the writers' task was complex, that a full answer might deal with the writer's past and present and might give an explanation as to why the writer now could perform that task. But Morgan asked readers to read the essays supportively, and not to expect all writers to respond to all three areas. Rather, the readers were to score the essay on the basis of what had actually been written. When Morgan was asked whether this was unfair, she responded that it wasn't, that a given essay *might* cover all three areas, not that it *should*. She added that a writer's covering all three areas was no guarantee that the writing was good, whereas an essay that had dealt with only one or two areas before time elapsed might in fact be well written, if incomplete.

A special method of training readers was then employed. Participants were given just three rangefinder essays to begin and were asked to rank them high, middle, and low. Then they were given two additional papers and asked to interleave them among the first three. Finally, they were given the

last four rangefinders and asked to interleave them as they did the others. The readers were asked to be certain that each of the six scores was assigned to at least one of the essays. When the participants revealed their scores and the results were tabulated, they learned that they had achieved a fair amount of agreement among themselves and that their scores were reasonably close to scores given these essays at New Jersey Basic Skills scoring sessions. Agreement was most clear at the extremes of the scale, at the 6's and the 1's. Scores tended to be distributed more loosely in the middle of the scale. If time had permitted, participants here, like readers at an actual holistic reading, would have been given additional rangefinders to score so that they could sharpen their understanding of the middle range.

In a question and answer period that followed, Morgan discussed a number of issues, among them the procedures for determining the various score levels and for resolving debates about scoring a given essay.◊