

Those of us involved in the assessment of writing know how much more we know today than we knew just a few years ago, but there is still much to be learned.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: EARLY CONFLICTS

Speakers: *Chris M. Anson, Robert L. Brown, Jr., and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, University of Minnesota*

Introducer: *Virginia Slaughter, CUNY*

Faced with a mandate to begin assessing students' writing at the University of Minnesota, members of the Program in Composition and Communication were finally convinced an interdisciplinary task force that a cross-curricular portfolio assessment would be the only way to bring about large-scale changes in the quantity and quality of writing instruction beyond their own writing program. In this session, the speakers shared pieces of an ongoing cultural critique that focuses on the political, curricular and ideological contexts in which they are struggling to turn a potentially damaging process into a method for empowerment, enrichment, and educational change.

Currently, the University of Minnesota plans to require applicants to submit a high school portfolio as part of the admission requirements. These portfolios require samples of writing from several subject areas as a way to encourage writing across the curriculum in the high schools. Throughout their college years, students will continue to build on their portfolio until they are juniors, at which time their major department will be responsible for assessing the quality of their writing for exit from junior-year status. Increased attention to writing, including new composition courses, writing-intensive courses across the curriculum, and trial assessments before the junior year, will provide support for the assessment program. Composition faculty will take on a greater consultative role to help departments incorporate writing into their curriculum and to help them establish methods for the portfolio assessment.

Chris Anson described the University's plans for this assessment as these are outlined in the 1987 report of the Task Force on Writing Standards. Reactions to the report were solicited from departments and colleges at the University of Minnesota, from 143 secondary school teachers and administrators across the state, and from assorted other readers, including personnel at the Minnesota State Department of Education and local professionals. Anson's close reading of these readers' responses to the report revealed a more positive attitude toward instruction among secondary teachers than among teachers at the University itself. In comparison to college faculty, the secondary teachers showed a deeper understanding of the relationship between testing and teaching, expressed fewer fears about increased workload,

and worried more about the potential hazards of testing when it does not support enhanced instruction. Using quotations from several responses, Anson showed how faculty members' views of writing assessment are not only saturated by their tacit endorsement of the surrounding academic values of their institution, but also by the more specific ideological perspectives of their discipline.

Anson explained the resistance to portfolio assessment among the college faculty by describing the institutional ethos at Minnesota, a university that privileges research and publication and de-emphasizes undergraduate education. After exploring some of the ideological reasons why university faculty resist rich types of assessment and accept simplistic types (such as multiple-choice tests of grammar skills), Anson argued that before a writing assessment program can be implemented successfully, administrators must study and understand the academic culture that surrounds the planned assessment. Armed with this knowledge, administrators can plan ways of implementing rich assessment programs without facing the sort of resistance that can lead to impoverished tests and instructional decay.

Central to these understandings is an awareness of the relationship between writing programs and the larger academic culture. Composition teachers and administrators in radical writing programs are change agents, whose political praxis must be consciously grounded in theory or run the risk of becoming ineffectual, or worse, of merely reinscribing the ideologies they seek to change. Beginning with this premise, Robert Brown set out to raise theoretical questions central to such praxis. An adequate theory, he claimed, would be hermeneutic, and might take as its text the university itself, in its several manifestations: the behaviors of its members, its constituting texts, and its organizational structures. The university-as-text speaks of knowing and knowledge: their nature, value (economic and otherwise), creation and social utility. We might profitably read this text through the reciprocal processes defined in radical ethnography. If we do, we can simultaneously explicate the bureaucratic forces we encounter in attempting to build genuine literacy programs, and our own culture-specific ideologies.

Creating change requires ongoing dialogue across the curriculum about such issues as standards vs. individuality and creativity; program assessment vs. individual growth; and the place of writing instruction in the rise of the new professionalism vs. the liberal arts education. Arguing that change is possible with the right incentives for faculty, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles concluded the session by outlining some of the assessment activities underway at Minnesota. These include a study of "strong, typical and weak" writing samples across the undergraduate curriculum, studies of writing in "linked courses" which combine composition instruction with content learning, and planning the implementation of portfolios as a requirement for admission. The newly endowed Deluxe Center for interdisciplinary Studies of Writing will

provide ongoing research funds for faculty interested in five categories: the status of writing ability during the college years; characteristics of writing across the curriculum; the functions of writing in learning; characteristics of writing beyond the academy; and curricular reform in undergraduate education. Other efforts to improve the context for the planned assessment include early pilot projects for portfolio assessment that have been conducted in 18 Twin Cities Metropolitan school districts, and collaborative writing assessment projects that are part of the Alliance for Undergraduate Education, a consortium of 13 public research universities.