

TRAINING OF ESSAY READERS: A PROCESS FOR FACULTY AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Speaker: *Robert Christopher, Ramapo College, New Jersey*

Introducer/

Recorder: *Mary Ellen Ashcroft, University of Minnesota*

Robert Christopher emphasized the imperative of assessment, pointing out that assessment has always been intrinsic to the classroom experience, but it has now become extrinsic. He noted that many faculty fear writing assessment efforts because they represent an intrusion on their methods for evaluating students. He stated that faculty fears can be countered by several arguments: assessment helps students, it facilitates faculty and institutional research, and it is a professional activity.

Christopher went on to suggest ways of building faculty consensus for assessment. In a training readers, he suggested starting with a loyal, supportive core. This group's primary responsibility would be the development of an instrument for assessment, a task which should take six months to a year. He suggested that good readers are people who are task oriented, are good collaborators, are preferably not new faculty members (who might not have a sense of writing at the institution), and who work with "all deliberate speed." Good readers must not be "Matthew Arnolds" before whose standard everything fails. It is important, according to Christopher, that a large pool of readers be developed, so that a small loyal group will not wear out.

The next step, according to Christopher, is conducting a reading to build consensus. The initial reading should consist of 500 to 1000 essays, so that readers get a sense of the range of writing abilities of students at the institution. The reading must be conducted "blind" with each paper read and assessed twice. Essays are identified as "strong," "weak," and "in-between"; readers discuss each essay and slowly evolve into an interpretive community.

In terms of curricular implications, Christopher pointed out that placement assessment is easier to

accomplish and has been more fully studied than proficiency assessment. He also noted that assessment can be used for students to learn to talk about their writing in small groups and in conferences, so that students learn to to better readers and editors. Assessment can also be used to encourage collaborative or group teaching, said Christopher. As faculty members relinquish some control to group or collaborative situations in the assessment process, they learn from one another and share techniques and materials.

In answer to conferees questions about developing the holistic process, Christopher suggested that the English Department provide a core of expert readers which should eventually grow to become interdisciplinary. He noted that in any two-day reading of essays, there is always the need for reliability checking ("Let's all read this essay and make sure we're on track"). Finally Christopher pointed out that students benefit from holistic essay assessment because their writing skills are evaluated by a team of teachers. This kind of assessment program, Christopher says, works on behalf of students.