

USING VIDEO IN TRAINING NEW READERS OF ASSESSMENT ESSAYS

Speaker: *George Cooper*, University of Michigan

Introducer/

Recorder: *Terence Collins*, University of
Minnesota

Large scale testing programs face a recurring problem of reader consistency and reliability. In this presentation, George Cooper demonstrated how the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan uses a video presentation of reader "standardization sessions" for self-monitoring within the reader cadre, for training new readers, and for disseminating information about the ECB's procedures to various campus constituencies. While Cooper presented alone, his remarks were prepared with Liz Hamps-Lyon.

In its placement readings, members of Michigan's ECB teams are guided by statements of criteria clustered under three headings: "structure of the whole essay," "smaller rhetorical and linguistic units," and "conventions of standard English surface features." Students write essays in response to prompts that define a situation and provide several choices of opening sentences. Two important characteristics of the 6000 student essays, then, are that topic choice is limited and orientation toward the topic is guided through provision of choices for essay openings. Further, the essays are rated for placement: recommendations fall into one of the following categories: exempt (7%), Introductory Composition (82%), and tutorial (11%). These recommendations reflect scores of 1, 2-3, and 4. While criteria for quality are outlined to readers, no specific calibration of trait content for the four point range is provided.

Scoring in this system depends on achieving what Cooper calls a "community of values" among readers. The video of reader standardization sessions grew out of one summer's experience in which this community of values has been lost as Cooper put it, "readers were using an unimaginable range of criteria by which to evaluate essays" and "had become entrenched in their own perspectives." The original motive for the video was self-examination. Through videotaping daily standardization sessions in which papers receiving "split" scores were the focus of discussion, Cooper's team of readers sought to capture the articulation of values giving rise to the discrepancies and to record the process of moving to agreement on application of criteria. This led the team to analyze and communicate important characteristics of their standardization sessions and our assessment as a whole. Also, this procedure modeled a process of "give-and-take" that was helpful in training new readers and in explaining the placement process to various departments.

From ten hours of session tapes, the team assembled thirty five minutes of actual exchanges interspersed with explanation and highlighting. The standardization discussion presented in the tape enacts what Cooper calls "positive sharing": talk marked by the various readers' attempts to recognize the qualities in an essay that lead to divergent scoring, each reader's comments leading to further discussion and finally to agreement. Such discussion (whether on the tape or in person at the start of a reading session) reminds participants of the criteria governing scoring. It serves the further purpose of helping group members realize the vitality of the act of reading, placing an apparently perfunctory reading act (in the context of reader-response theory) into the full context

of extra-textual factors that shape readings in open view. The importance of reflecting on the evaluator as reader--co-creator of a text--rests in the capacity of texts to sway a reader-evaluator when they embody positions to which the reader might be favorably inclined or which the reader might find repugnant.

Cooper asserted that the taped standardization sessions play the key role of "forming individual consciousness into a community consciousness." The video record of this work in progress puts flesh on the abstraction and models the process for beginners in order to cultivate a community of readers who will evaluate not only the student essays, but who will also study their own responses, keeping in mind the relationship of their responses to the criteria.