

WHAT SHOULD BE A TOPIC?

Speakers: *Sandra Murphy*, San Francisco State University,
Leo Ruth, University of California, Berkeley

Introducer/

Recorder: *Robert L. Brown, Jr.*, University of Minnesota

Taking a cue from the Bay Area Writing Project's collective spirit, Sandra Murphy and Leo Ruth rejected the usual panel format by opening the session to audience discussion of issues influencing subject-selection for holistic scoring. They directed the session with six questions (treated at greater length in their recent ABLEX book Designing Writing Tasks for the Assessment of Writing). Their questions examined the dual problem facing assessment designers: naming a subject and providing the writers with instructions about what to do with it. In part, the session provided a forum for a

critique of both the entire agenda of holistic scoring and of the specifics of assessment design. But it also allowed Murphy and Ruth format in which to report some of the findings from their work.

The six questions treat variously the syntactico-semantic structure of the items, the discourse structures suggested, the power relationships established between test(er) and writer, and the cultural knowledge presupposed. The six questions and comments from the presenters and audience are as follows:

1. How much information should be provided about the subject?

Murphy and Ruth's findings suggest that a simple referring phrase (NP) elicited less rich responses than a full proposition. When a predicate was provided, writer responses were more "reasonable and responsible."

2. How does specification of a subject constrain response?

Discussion demonstrated the range of possible constraints: discourse type, qualification, quantification, text structure, style, and--always--ideology, explicit and implied.

3. How does knowledge of the subject affect performance?

The session members soon raised the meta-question of whether any topic could not require "specialized knowledge," and therefore whether holistic essay testing could be free from political bias. Generally, Murphy and Ruth and the session members agreed that knowing a lot about the topic was a great advantage, and the "knowledge" extended well beyond simple propositional knowledge to familiarity with cultural discourses.

4. Should students be given options in selecting topics?

Generally, options invite confusion. Items may not be equally difficult. Students may not be wise in selecting, picking complex topics and writing complex, bad essays. Confusion over the selection process may penalize.

5. How do rhetorical specifications affect performance?

Students did not seem to be helped by suggestions of rhetorical type. Typically, they ignored them or found that the problem of executing the rhetorical command interfered with their writing in general.

6. To what extent should admonitions about the writing task be mentioned? Time limits, pitfalls, and so on?

Again, the political demands of the writing assessment as an institution overwhelms the testers' attempts to help: students write the essay they have in mind, ignoring the instructions or finding themselves confounded by them.

The session eloquently expressed reservations about the ideology of holistic scoring and mass assessment in general. The conferees reacted to the inherent artificiality of pretending to write authentic prose while authentically demonstrating familiarity with academic conventions. They agreed that students who know the conventions of testing will, predictably, do best.