

## SOME NOT SO RANDOM THOUGHTS ON THE ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

**Speaker:** *Alan C. Purves*, The State University of New York, Albany

As I near the end of a seven-year long comparative study of student performance in Written Composition sponsored by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, I should like to set forth some conclusions I have reached about writing assessment.

1. Written Composition is an ill-defined domain. There have been a few recent efforts at mapping the domain through an examination of writing tasks and through an examination of perceived criteria, but in general these have been ignored in most assessments of student performance. Most assessments tend to rely on a single assignment selected at random.
2. Written composition is a domain in which products are clearly the most important manifestation; the texts that students produce form the basis for judgments concerning those students. Teachers and assessors know that and so do students.
3. These products are culturally embedded, and written composition is a culturally embedded activity. The culture may be fairly broad or it may be relatively narrow such as the culture of a Lee Odell or an Andrea Lunsford, but students inhabit and produce compositions that reflect those cultures.
4. When a student writes something in a large scale assessment in the United States, what is usually written is a first-draft on an unknown assignment that is then rated by a group of people who make a judgment as to its quality. The result is an

index of "PDQ," Perceived Drafting Quality. Whether PDQ has any relation to writing performance or ability is unclear, although it is probably a fair index.

5. Given the fact that what is assessed is PDQ, it is little wonder that students see writing performance as comprising adequacy of content, handwriting, spelling, grammar, and neatness. Such is the case of the reports of secondary school students as to the most important features of the textual products of a school culture.