

ASSESSING WRITING TO TEACH WRITING

Speaker: *Vicki Spandel*, Northwest Regional Education Laboratory

Introducer/

Recorder: *Alice Moorhead*, Hamline University

Rarely are the lessons learned from large-scale writing assessment translated into terms that make them relevant for and useful to the classroom teacher. Yet many of those lessons show how teachers can use systematic writing assessment--especially when teaching writing as a process. Large scale, district-wide writing assessment is a costly process (at least 2.5 days for training/assessing and between \$2-\$8 a writing sample); however, as part of professional development programs, most districts could justify the necessary time and budget.

In this presentation, Vicki Spandel discussed her efforts, along with those of Richard Stiggins', to link writing assessment and instruction through their work in the Portland area for Northwest Regional Education Laboratory. Spandel's current assessment method focuses on using an analytic rating guide. She argues that although it is difficult to separate form from content in assessment, one can assess the features of writing, thus her interest in an analytic guide that can be used holistically to assess and to teach writing. Since teachers are often afraid of assessment, using the rating guide can ensure that what teachers value gets assessed and then gets translated into practice.

As an assessment tool, Spandel's analytic rating guide was generated from writing samples rather than developed as a guide to impose upon writing. The guide captures a more complete profile of the writing samples when used along with holistic assessment. It distinguishes six features of writing: ideas and content; organization; voice, word choice; sentence structure; writing conventions. Each feature is described and ranked by degrees for a score of 5 or 3 or 1. Not only does this analytic rating guide objectify expectations for writing but it also offers a more defensible version of the subjective process of writing assessment.

Using this guide with the holistic assessment process, particularly as in-service workshop for professional development, has two key advantages:

- (1) The assessment process promotes "real" agreement among teachers and professional raters about strengths and weaknesses in writing.
- (2) Teachers can re-enter the classroom to teach writing more explicitly on what "counts" in writing and know this instruction is in concert with and reinforced by others.

Not only can teachers use the analytic guide but so can students. In peer review groups, students can focus their writing efforts more directly with the six feature guide as "revision stations" for students to visit for specific feedback on their writing. In Spandel's experience, teachers welcome the use of this analytic guide for assessment and for teaching writing. Many teachers claim: "I'll never teach or think or writing in quite the same way."