K-12 WRITING ASSESSMENT: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speakers: Charles Chew, New York State Department of Education
Gratia Murphy, Youngstown State University, Ohio
John Mason, Youngstown State University, Ohio
Introducer/Recorder: Jane Boomer, Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio

This session focused on large-scale writing assessment in public institutions. Charles Chew stressed the importance of assessment. He stated that educators need to assess writing because a close link exists between assessment and classroom instruction. In addition, the recent competency movement reflects the desire of the public also to know how students are doing. Moreover, educators need to know how to evaluate students. New York State has a long history of testing, dating back for a century. For nearly a decade now, the state has given writing competency tests.

Chew described a model currently used by the state of New York to test the writing of thousands of students. Administered to all fifth graders, eighth graders, and eleventh graders, the tests are carefully constructed, based on reviews of past exams, results of pretests given to a similar student population, and attention to consistency in test formation.

Chew explained that the New York State writing assessment model includes three writing samples. Its tasks are linked to sound theory and practice in the area of writing, and include more than one mode. Using the writing samples, educators should be able to determine areas where students need further instruction.

Chew pointed out that the criteria for grading the test are similar at all three grade levels. These criteria include perception of the task, plan of organization, paragraph development, support, sense of audience, sentence variety, and correct mechanics. The fifth grade test, given to all students once a year, includes two pieces of writing. The test is untimed and directs students to prewrite, complete a first draft, and then revise. Each paper is marked locally by two raters using a scale of 1-8. The 11th grade test includes three pieces of writing rated on a scale of 0-100, with 60 being the minimum passing score. Again, all papers are marked at the local level, this time by three graders; however, any paper which is scored as passing must be rerated in Albany. If the student does not pass, he or she has the opportunity to retake the test. In addition, the student may appeal for additional ratings of the test, although the final decision is always made at the state level.

The evaluation of the writing samples is holistic, with emphasis on prewriting as part of the process. Additionally, the test structure requires revision by student writers. Finally, in New York State, anyone below the cut-off point receives state-mandated remediation to correct writing deficiencies. Therefore, the state obviously attaches importance to writing. Some issues of concern spring from this model of writing assessment. To avoid teaching to the test, staff development is important. Also, mandated remediation needs to be based on valid theory and should reflect the findings of recent research on appropriate curricula and pedagogy.

Gratia Murphy and John Mason continued the presentation on K-12 Writing Assessment with a description of Project ARETE, a three-year-old collaborative project of Youngstown State University and area public secondary schools. With funding from the Ohio Board of Regents, ARETE (Assessment and Revitalization Efforts for the Teaching of English) set out to assess the writing of eleventh graders and to provide in-service work with the teachers and administrators of those students. The project called for writing samples from over 3,000 students and provided written summaries to students, teachers, and administrators. To manipulate and store the data generated by the project, the directors used a computerized program.

Four factors guided the development of ARETE. First, the project was a collaboration aimed at improving writing and teaching at both the high school and college levels. Providing an opportunity to discuss writing, this collaborative effort proved mutually beneficial for university and secondary teachers by enabling them to define criteria and set goals. In addition, participating teachers had the opportunity to write about writing. Second, the assessment process itself became a model for good writing. For example, the project required the teacher to write prompts for the writing tasks, forcing attention to purpose and audience. Additionally, the assessment model required students to complete their writing samples in two days: the first day was devoted to planning and drafting, and the second day to revising and editing. Third, the collaborative method emphasized the process rather than the product. Finally, this project acknowledged that assessment is really only the first step.

Although the very word assessment may threaten high school teachers, the directors of Project ARETE structured the program so that teachers would see assessment not as a means of evaluating teachers but as a way to improve conditions in the classroom. As a result, plans for assessment were coupled with plans for in-service programs. Also, the university's role was not limited to a one-shot assessment model. Off-shoots of the assessment program included a manual for the teaching of writing, written by a group of high school teachers and university consultants. This manual has been provided to all high school teachers of writing in the area and is being used extensively. A second off-shoot of the program was the development of a new course of study for the Youngstown Public Schools, enhanced by workshops for teachers and a paid textbook committee to select texts reflecting the program's objectives. Finally, the assessment program has increased the professional activity of teachers at the high school level.

All three speakers concluded that educators can structure large-scale assessment of writing in a fashion that sends important positive messages to students, teachers, and the community. ∎