THE CHANGING TASK: TRACKING GROWTH OVER TIME

Speaker: *Catharine Lucas,* San Francisco State University

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Catharine Lucas explained that traditional writing assessment is designed to determine whether student writing improves on a given specified task, whereas what we need is a new kind of assessment that focuses on how students change the task as they grow as writers. She noted that we know that as writers develop, they formulate new structures to represent tasks, and that they may be awkward in their initial attempts at working with new structures. For example, writers may experiment with complex argumentative structures, abandoning the simpler narrative structures at which they may be more skilled. Ideally, writing assessment should recognize and reward their attempts at more sophisticated formulations, even when performance falls short, rather than constraining the writing task in a way that only measures their ability at what Moffett calls "crafting to given forms."

To debunk the myth that writing is a unitary measurable construct and to show instead the impact of a student's maturing task representation, she provided samples of one student's writing that were submitted in response to a longitudinal portfolio assessment of his writing abilities from ninth to twelfth grade. During each of the four years, the student was asked to produce an essay as part of a school-wide assessment program. Four readers then rank-ordered the four papers to determine the writer's best and weakest work. While we would assume that his ninth grade essay would be weakest and the twelfth grade version the best, instead a different pattern emerged: raters consistently rated the twelfth grade effort the worst.

The reason for this surprising result was found through closer inspection of the writer's choices in task representation. In the three papers he submitted in grades 9, 10, and 11, the writer used the narrative form, a structure that develops comparatively early, since 6th graders are typically sophisticated story tellers. These essays were successful, in part, because he was using a familiar form. However, in the 12th grade essay he chose to represent the task with an argumentative form, usually a later developing skill, and one in which he was as yet inexperienced.

Thus, Lucas concluded, we need a way to take a writer's growth into account in assessment. Writers experimenting with new structures face a harder task, one which is likely to cause the writer initially to produce new errors. Evaluators of writing, like judges of figure

skating, diving, and other "performance sports," need to develop systematic ways of taking into account the difficulty level of what the performer is attempting. In order to account for changes in what is attempted we need to study how writers develop both across and within discourse domains. This will require a common language for identifying domains and a way of charting what carries over and what changes when writers move form one to another. All discourse theorists polarize fictional and non-fictional writing, or as Britton terms it, poetic and transactional writing. As a result, we tend to assume that the two are mutually exclusive: fiction writers rarely include essays in fiction and in academia we rarely allow poetic expression. In addition to these polar ends of the discourse continuum, Lucas posits a middle category, which draws freely on both fictional and academic styles, and includes autobiography, belles letters, the New Journalism, and the personal reflection essay widely used in classrooms and school assessments. While it is relatively easy to chart a writer's development within either the literary or the discursive domains, growth in this middle domain is sometimes marked by shifts from fictional techniques to extended abstract discourse, as in the case presented. Whether students are moving within the mixed domain, or from the literary end of the spectrum to the discursive end, even when teachers recognize the second piece as representing a later effort, they recognize that the text is often less successful in what it attempts than the earlier piece. This difference diminishes, of course, as the student gains skill in handling discursive, transactional writing.

To make possible more careful comparisons of what changes as students move within and across domains, Lucas has developed a method of defining tasks that draws on work done by Freedman and Pringle ("Why Children Can't Write Arguments") based on Vygotsky's (Thought and Language) distinctions between focal, associational and hierarchical arrangements, as well as on Coe's (Toward a Grammar of Passages) method of charting relations between propositions in a text. Lucas's system distinguishes between four text patterns: (1) the chronological core in which the student tells a story, providing commentary at end--a sign the writer is moving toward abstraction; (2) the focal core in which the title provides the subject of focus, with each sentence relating to it--a sign that some notion of related ideas is emerging; (3) the associational core in which we see chains of associations forming, often with a closing commentary; and (4) the hierarchical core, in which long-distance logical ties supplement short-range connections between complexly interrelated ideas, in a pattern typical of advanced exposition in Western cultures. Using this system, we may begin to see how writers build new schema within these different domains, and begin to reward them for these promising signs of growth in our assessments of their writing abilities.