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SOME ISSUES IN THE TESTING OF WRITING

Problems and concerns about testing writing reflect all the issues involved in teaching writing. Hence, in our problem-ridden discipline, the issues to be addressed require careful and extensive organization and treatment. In the space available here I will look at only two: the uses of testing by teachers, and problems for further research.

Teachers of writing need to abandon the clichéd hostility to testing they have learned from bad tests in order to profit from the systematic thinking that has gone into criterion-referenced tests of writing. Test sophistication can reduce the major abuses of composition teaching: unclear, pointless, or random essay assignments; over-attention to editing, to the detriment of cognitive issues or the writing process; confusion over curriculum and sequencing of instruction; quirky, personal, and arbitrary evaluation; useless or destructive commentary about student writing, and the like. Since an understanding of testing calls for attention to test criteria, teachers will need to think about their curriculum, its objectives, sequencing, and relation to other courses. Attention to test development calls for refinement of assignments and awareness of teacher responsibilities for clarity; work on scoring tests responsibly will require group activity aimed at reliable and fair grading, and some attention to the general issue of effective response to student writing.

Despite the problems in developing accurate measurement that are patent to all, the current state of the art has a great deal to offer all writing teachers. A major task ahead is to find ways of disseminating both knowledge of and experience in the testing of writing throughout a generally hostile profession.

When we turn to future research, we see a great deal to be done. A list of problems would include:

Product/process issues in measurement. How can we develop tests of process that approach the reliability of product measures? How can we involve the concepts of invention, revision, and audience?

Mode of discourse issues. We know that assigned mode of discourse affects test score distribution in important ways. We do not know how to develop writing tests that will be fair to students who are more skilled in the modes not usually tested.

Program evaluation issues. The recent handbook written by Davis, Scriven, & Thomas [1] shows the immense complexity of writing program evaluation. We need to develop methods and materials that are responsive and responsible.

Sub-skill definition. We have a considerable number of supposed sub-skills in writing. Are any of them real, or meaningful, or distinguishable, or measurable? To what degree is reading skill separable from writing skill?

Cognitive development and curriculum issues. Despite some initial work by Britton, Berieter, Emig, and others, we do not understand the relationship between theories of writing instruction and theories of intellectual development. We need to learn how to develop meaningful diagnostic tests that relate to writing teaching beyond mechanics. We also need much more information about appropriate tests at the several college levels: placement, credit, degree competency.

Equity problems. A recent study (*College English,* March 1981) suggests that test bias remains a severe problem, one not likely to yield to easy solutions.

Finally, the time has come to resist the routine oversimplification of this issue. Writing testing is normally done improperly, and its results are normally misused. Everyone in the field has a stock of grim anecdotes that show the low level of professionalism that is now acceptable. A national effort to reduce bad practice in the testing of writing would have a salutary effect upon all writing instruction.

[1] *The Evaluation of Composition Instruction* (Inverness, Calif.: Edgepress, 1981).

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