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ABSTRACT

Conclusions from an examination of the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that it furnishes little help for those involved in the publication of composition textbooks. Four main difficulties in making inferences from the Assessment data on writing are (1) it is not clear why individuals perform as well or as poorly as they do; (2) it is not known whether examinations measure writing competency, rather than something else (e.g., maturity or psychological development); (3) it is impossible to determine whether individuals tell the truth about how often they write or about what kinds of writing they do, and (4) the objectives for writing are too narrow and do not indicate current thinking about the importance in the schools of personal and creative writing. Nonetheless, the findings can be useful to linguists, can provide a base against which further assessments of writing can be compared and suggest the need for a number of carefully controlled studies about how persons develop competency in various kinds of writing. (DD)

Implications of National Assessment Writing Results

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Occasionally I feel fortunate to be who I am and to have my responsibilities rather than those borne by some other suffering soul. This is one of those occasions. I am glad that I am not a publisher trying to infer from released national results what changes to make, if any, in textbooks on composition. Truly, I would not know what to do with or about the voluminous data supplied on writing so far by National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Since I do not have your inventories to worry about, your overhead, your need to be accountable to your stockholders, or your burden to develop textbooks that reflect current scholarship, are engaging to students, attractive to both teachers and administrators, acceptable to parents, and just costly enough to allow one simultaneously to outsell the competition and to make a comfortable profit, I can on this occasion be a free spirit. As such, I advise you to look elsewhere than National Assessment if you seek certitude about the writing skills and aptitudes of American youth and young adults, particularly if you come in search of expert guidance about what kinds of writing people should do, the reasons that they write as they now do, and the ways by which textbooks could help them write better.

As you know more intimately than do I, we are living at a time when knowledge proliferates in almost all fields and in some rises exponentially. What is today's recognized truth is tomorrow's heresy. While writing as a skill subject does not suffer the vagaries of intellectual fashion that some subjects do, approaches to it do change. As attitudes toward rearing and teaching the young change within the society and as research about the

psychological and linguistic development of children accumulates, the teaching of writing undergoes modification. Since 1965, at which time the objectives for the writing tests were developed by Educational Testing Service, those of us teaching English have witnessed within the profession a resurgence of interest ir the personal and creative writing of students, an emphasis upon the value of having students keep journals and diaries; compose stories, poems, and plays; reveal in writing their feelings about both vicarious and personal experiences--in short, a shift away from almost exclusive emphasis upon expository and impersonal writing. I don't want to spend time accounting for that shift, except to say that both psycholinguistic research and a predictable recoil from the post-Sputnik, Gradgrindian emphasis on cognition gave it impetus. The important point is that personal writing, initially discussed in 1965 as one of five possible major categories for assessment, was eliminated in the process of establishing objectives. The consequence is that the examinations do not now reflect the best current thinking in the profession about the spectrum of writing skills students need to develop.

In the preface to the brochure National Assessment of Educational Progress: Writing Objectives (Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education, 1969), recognition is given to the fact that education today is not a static entity and that objectives need to be restudied to determine if those developed in 1965 still represent current goals in education. I understand that the objectives for writing are being revised for the second round of testing in 1973, and that additional objectives have been written to allow for assessment of personal and creative writing. But in the interim, the corpus of data we have is limited by objectives established six years ago.

A further difficulty in making right inferences from the data is that one cannot always be sure that writing and not something else has been tested. For example, when nine-year-olds were asked to complete an application blank using the name Adam Baker Carson (for boys) or Alice Baker Carson (for girls), many of them used his or her own name rather than the one given. These responses were judged unacceptable; only 16% of the children completed one of the application blanks correctly (last name first), and only 12% the other (first name first). Again, only 31% of the nine-year-olds included in a note all the necessary information from a telephone conversation. In both cases, something other than writing ability may have been measured, perhaps nine-year-olds' psychological development, their inability to use a pseudonym because they have not as yet developed a sufficiently strong sense of self, or their inability to audit carefully information from the outside because they inhabit a limited, egocentric world. When thirteen-year-olds listened to a tape-recorded conversation between Al and Ben and were instructed to write the note that Ben would have had to write, 67% did so correctly, a growth of 36% over the 31% acceptable performance of the nine-year-olds. Maturation alone may account for the greater success of the older group.

We learn that at age nine, males performed better than females when asked to write about a kite; that at age thirteen, males included more essential information in ordering a pair of seahorses than did females; that at age seventeen, males performed better than females when asked to write a message involving two boys; that as young adults, 10% more males than females acceptably reported an automobile accident depicted in a diagram. On the other hand, more nine-year-old girls wrote acceptable cheerful messages than did boys; when asked whether they had done social writing during the past year, more girls replied affirmatively than did boys. What is being

measured is not necessarily writing proficiency: in some cases biological sexual differences and in other cases cultural role expectations for the sexes may explain the differences in performance. But we are not sure.

Again, we are informed that at all ages, Southeastern performance was below that for the nation--a median of 3.4% below national results at age 9; 6.0% below at age 13; 7.2% below at age 17; and 8% below for young adults. We are further informed that for all four age groups performance in big cities (those with a population of 200,000 or more) and smaller places (areas and counties with population less than 25,000) is below the nation as a whole. However, for all ages, performance in urban fringes (areas around big cities) and medium-size cities (areas containing cities with at least 25,000 population) is above the nation as a whole. We can speculate about the causality of differences in performance: the depressed economic conditions of both Southern states and big cities, the racial conflicts that in each have disrupted education, the comparative affluence of the suburbs, the difficulty of retaining excellent teachers in small towns or in inner cities. But again, we are not sure. The fact that only 78% of nine-year-olds in the Southeast wrote an acceptable thank you note to "grandma" for a gift, whereas 88% of all nines in the nation wrote an acceptable note, may be more a consequence of regional mores than of regional deficiencies in education.

Throughout the publications sponsored by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the reader is cautioned about the limitations of the study and warned not to draw what might be specious inferences:

> . . .the sample is not drawn in such a way that we can make any statements about individual schools, districts, or even states. The smallest area we can talk about is a geographical region. (Questions and Answers About the National Assessment of Education Progress, Nov. 1970, p. 1)

> The National Assessment study, while pointing to differences in writing performance between sexes, regions, and sizes of community, warns against attributing poorer performance just to the fact of being a member of one sex or another, or of living in one region, or size of community. . . . Many factors such as migration, availability of school facilities, parental education and others may have to be considered in analyzing causes for differences. While the present data describes /sic/ the present-day situations, the report warns against drawing simple cause-and-effect relationships to explain all of the results. (ECS News Release, April 2, 1971, pp. 6-7)

> Many factors affect an individual's performance level in the subject areas assessed by NAEP. One reason for assessing these subject areas by classifications such as sex, geographic region, and size of community is to describe differences in performance (if any) between members of one group and another. When looking at the results for groups within one classification at a time, however, one cannot say that a difference or effect is due solely to the individuals being members of the group in question. The fact that individuals belong to a certain sex, geographic region, or size of community is not necessarily the cause of their doing better or worse. (National Assessment Report 5, 1969-1970 Writing: Group Results for Sex, Region, Size of Community, April 1971, p. 9)

The fourth objective, "Appreciate the value of writing," was assessed principally through answers to questions about respondents' writing habits, e.g. "Other than a school assignment have you ever written a poem? Short story? Play? Article for a magazine? Story for a newspaper? Words for a song?" In defense of this means of assessment, the authors of Report 3, 1969-1970 Writing: National Results (Nov. 1970, p. 7) explain, "It is assumed that writing any of these things indicates an interest in writing and appreciation of the value of writing." Honesty then prompts them to add immediately, "A weakness of this type of exercise is that the respondent asked to indicate whether he has done something may not tell the truth." In like vein, the authors of Report 5 state (p. vi), "There is no way to tell from our data whether the atypically

high acceptable response of certain groups on report of activity exercises reflects actual performance, or some desire to give answers perceived as desirable."

If one could trust young persons' reports on how much they write, he would need not fear the decline of the written word, McLuhan's divinations notwithstanding. But I am not convinced, either as teacher or parent, that the reports are accurate. Far more significant, I believe, is that almost one-third of young adults, those out of school and no longer a captive audience, failed to write an essay when asked to do so. About this matter, the authors of Report 3, 1969-1970 Writing: National Results comment,

> . . .it should be pointed out that nearly one-third of the adults received a score of '0' on their papers--29% either did not attempt to write the essay, or indicated in some way that they could not or would not do so. We do not have information to tell us why this is so, but it is possible that adults did not wish to do the task, either because they felt they couldn't do it well or simply because they were busy.

I hunch that the principal reason was the former, that many adults refused to write because they feared failure. Once out of the clutches of compulsory education, they were damned if they would willingly resubject themselves to sadists with red pencils. But I am no more sure of the why than are the assessors for National Assessment.

Allow me to summarize briefly:

1. We now have considerable data about the writing of individuals of different ages and sexes, living in different-sized communities in different parts of the United States.
2. We are not sure why individuals performed as well or as poorly as they did.
3. We are not sure that examinations always measured what they purported to measure--writing competency, rather than something else.
4. We are not sure that individuals told the truth about how often they write or about what kinds of writing they do.

5. The objectives for writing in the first assessment are too narrow and do not indicate current thinking of scholars and educators about the importance in the schools of personal and creative writing.

All that is not to say that the information we have is useless. Linguists can mine it for a multitude of purposes; it provides a base against which further assessments of writing can be compared; it suggests the need for a number of carefully controlled studies about how persons develop competency in various kinds of writing.

And I am back where I began, grateful that I am not you, able to tell you only that composition texts in the immediate future will have to be composed of the same old ingredients: a bit of scholarship, a stream of tradition, a smidgen of market research, a hodgepodge of hunches, and, if they are to be successes, more than a modicum of luck. If you find yourself short of hunches, feel free to call on me. But then, I always was gamesome at venturing others' capital, rather than my own.