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ABSTRACT

One of a series dealing with current issues affecting language arts instruction, this paper focuses on writing evaluations. The paper begins by noting that any practical discussion of the evaluation of writing must address the question of how to obtain reliable, informative judgments about students' writing. The paper then discusses the purposes for evaluating writing: to find out what students need to do in order to become better writers, to make predictions about students' chances of doing well in subsequent writing courses, and to find out how well students are doing currently. This is followed by a discussion of what teachers expect of student writers, and what kinds of skills they want the students to develop. The paper concludes with a list of six basic requirements for an evaluation of writing: (1) provide students with writing tasks; (2) ask readers to make judgments about the quality of students' writing; (3) demonstrate that these judgments are reliable; (4) examine more than one piece of writing; (5) remember that the schools' primary obligation is to improve student writing, not merely to evaluate it; and (6) develop a good program for teaching writing. (HOD)

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Support for Learning and Teaching of English

EVALUATING WRITING

The Issues

Any practical discussion of the evaluation of writing has to answer one basic sort of question: What do we *have* to do to obtain reliable, informative judgments about students' writing? Which evaluation procedures are really essential and which would be nice to try if we lived in the best of all possible worlds? Are there any respectable shortcuts?

In order to answer these questions, we will have to consider two additional questions:

1. What are our purposes for evaluating students' writing? What do we hope to learn and how do we plan to use what we learn?
2. What do we expect student writers to be able to do? What kinds of skills do we want them to develop?

These latter questions may seem to lead us into a quagmire of speculation and pointless theorizing. But they won't. Current information about writing and the writing process provides direct answers to these questions. And these answers, in turn, let us make informed, responsible decisions about what we must do in order to evaluate student writing.

Professional Viewpoints

Purposes for Evaluating Writing. One reason we need to evaluate students' writing is to find out what students need to do in order to become better writers; this involves diagnosing problems students must overcome and identifying strengths teachers may help students utilize. Another purpose for evaluation is to make predictions about students' chances of doing well in subsequent writing courses. An advisor at a college, for example, may want to counsel students about their chances of succeeding in a particular college writing course. A third purpose for evaluation is to find out how well students are currently doing. This may mean that we want to find out which students in a group (in a particular twelfth grade class, for example) are the best writers and which are the poorest; it may also mean that we want to compare the writing of one group of students with that of another. Or it may be that we want to find out whether a particular composition program is, in fact, helping students to improve their writing.

This third purpose may be the one we most often associate with evaluation. When students come to the end of a semester or a year or a high school career, we are greatly concerned about whether they have learned to write with a reasonable degree of skill. Indeed, this concern may be so strong that it leads us to overlook the first purpose I mentioned, that of diagnosing students' strengths and weaknesses as writers. Such an oversight is a serious mistake. The purpose of the schools is to improve students' writing, not simply to judge it. And, of course, it is hard to improve students' writing unless one has a good idea of the areas in which students need help. Fortunately, we can both judge and diagnose through a single evaluation procedure. But we have to be careful. Not all procedures will allow us to accomplish both goals.

Of course, we might decide to have two or more separate evaluations, one to accomplish each of our purposes. But that seems inefficient. Or, we might decide that diagnosis is the exclusive responsibility of classroom teachers. Such a decision seems reasonable since classroom teachers are continually engaged in diagnosis. The only difficulty here is that diagnosis by individual teachers may not let us identify problems that are common to, say, many of the tenth grade students in a given school.

Expectations for Student Writers. From reading newspaper articles and listening to television commentators, one gets the impression that teachers primarily expect students to learn to observe certain conventions of usage, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. That expectation is just reasonable enough to be seriously misleading. Certainly writers must be able to spell and punctuate correctly. They must also be able to write in complete sentences and avoid double negatives. But we must also expect writers to have other basic skills which have almost no relation to the ability to spell, etc. These other skills are *basic* in that, without them, one cannot communicate effectively in writing.

For one thing, we must expect writers to be able to determine what they wish to say. That is, they must be able to explore a topic, to think about their ideas, feelings, and values in order to decide what they want to communicate through their writing. If a writer has previously given a great deal of thought to a topic or has frequently encountered the problem that he or she is writing about, ideas may come very quickly; the writer may decide almost immediately what needs to be said. In other situations, one may have to deliberate for a while, perhaps doing some background reading, perhaps discussing the topic with a friend, or perhaps just sorting out one's own ideas, experiences, or feelings. In any case, writers have to formulate the point they wish to communicate through their writing.

We must also expect writers to be able to choose the language, sentence structure, organization, and information that will enable them to achieve a particular purpose with their intended audience. In writing letters, reports, memos—even in filling out forms—writers have to answer such questions as these: What does my audience already know about this topic? What additional

information do I need to provide my audience? Will my audience appreciate my attempts to be casual or humorous, or should I maintain a formal tone? Have I used phrases that my audience is likely to misconstrue?

In summary, we must certainly expect students to observe certain conventions of spelling, punctuation, and so on. But, equally as important, we must also expect them to discover what they wish to communicate and to express their message in a way that is appropriate to their audience and purpose.

Strategies for Action

Thus far, I have been laying the ground work for answers to the practical questions of how we should evaluate student writing. I'll begin by giving an answer to the most practical of these question: *Are there any respectable shortcuts?* More specifically, can we rely on standardized "objective" tests? With only one exception, the answer must be NO.

Standardized tests are only useful for making reliable predictions about a student's chances of success in subsequent writing courses. For other purposes, these tests are virtually useless. They do not ask students to engage in the activities they have to engage in when they write. Standardized tests do not ask students to decide on a message they wish to communicate, nor to choose the information, language, and sentence structure that will communicate that message to a particular audience so as to achieve a particular purpose. At best, standardized tests determine whether students can perform only one of the basic activities of a competent writer—observing conventions of spelling, etc. Because of this limitation, standardized tests can give us very little information about students' strengths and weaknesses as writers; they cannot help us much with the problem of diagnosis. Our first "strategy for action," then, is to give up the notion that standardized tests can provide a respectable shortcut in the diagnosis and judgment of students' writing ability.

The question "What do we *have* to do?" leads us to other strategies for action.

1. We have to ask students to write. More specifically, we have to pose tasks that give students the chance to determine their audience and purpose, and we have to allow them enough time to formulate their ideas, write a draft, revise it, and check their spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure.

2. We have to ask readers to make judgments about the quality of students' writing. That is, we cannot evaluate by counting specific features of writing—the number of errors, the length of sentences, the use of relatively rare words. We have to ask a reader to decide whether a writer has discussed the assigned topic in ways that are appropriate for his or her intended audience and purpose.

3. We must demonstrate that these judgments are reliable. We must show that a single reader is consistent in his or her use of a particular set of criteria for judging writing. Or we must show that two or more judges, working independently, can use a particular set of criteria to come to similar conclusions about the quality of a particular piece of writing.

4. If we want to make reliable judgments about the writing of an individual student (rather than judgments about groups of students) we must examine more than one piece of writing. There is some evidence that an individual student's writing performance will vary from day to day or from topic to topic. To insure that we have a fair sample of what an individual student can do, we must base our judgment on at least two pieces of that student's writing.

5. We must remember that the schools' primary obligation is to improve student writing, not merely to evaluate it. Thus, we must choose evaluatory procedures that will help us diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses as writers.

6. We must have a good program for *teaching* writing. We must give students regular instruction in doing the sort of writing tasks which we will use in our evaluation. This instruction cannot be limited to a single course or a single year.

Thus far, I have talked about only the most basic requirements for an evaluation of writing. Space will not permit me to consider specific procedures that will vary depending on whether the evaluation is done by an individual teacher who wants to measure student progress, a school that wants to measure the effectiveness of its writing program, or a state department of education that is obliged to determine which students in a given state are minimally competent and which are not. Fortunately, these procedures are spelled out in great detail in the list of resources at the bottom of this page. The point with which I must conclude is that we can do a responsible job of evaluating student writing and meet the criteria suggested above. And we can insure that evaluation not only lets us make judgments about student writing but also enables schools to get on with their basic job of improving that writing.

Resources

Cooper, Charles R. "Measuring Growth in Writing." *English Journal* 64 (March, 1975): 111-120.

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