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ABSTRACT

In March 1988, the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, New York, initiated a short-term, participatory research project in alternative assessment. It consisted of two major components--a five-session seminar held for two hours on Wednesday afternoons in May and June and two rounds of interviews with Adult Learning Center (ALC) students conducted by students participating in the project. This project was intended as the first step in development of a model procedure for classroom-based assessment in ALC classes. Interviews focused on ALC students' current status as readers and writers and on their knowledge about the texts, tasks, contexts, strategies, and processes involved in reading and writing. Three ALC teachers and five students from their classes participated. Five experiential workshop sessions provided some theoretical background on reading and writing processes and on the nature of ethnographic research. The series also took participants through a process of planning, conducting, and analyzing interviews of ALC students. This project showed that students, with training, can conduct assessment interviews with other students that produce useful information about student learning. Implications from this alternative assessment were proof of its cost-effectiveness, a closer relationship between assessment and a student-centered curriculum, and need for an assessment method for student writing. (YLB)

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EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: A PROGRESS
REPORT FROM NEW YORK

by Marcie Wolfe

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Effective Practice: A Progress Report From New York

Many literacy educators in New York City recognize the need for more responsive alternatives to the ways adult learners are tested. At the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, The City University of New York, we have begun to develop alternative assessment pro-

cedures for our Adult Learning Center (ALC). The Center is one of the City University's city- and state-funded literacy programs.

We already use an alternative intake/placement procedure called the "open house". New students are *not* tested but are placed in classes through an assessment by peers,

ALC teachers, and themselves. The open houses have raised questions for ALC teachers and students about the relevance to the learning process of students' reading and writing histories, their purposes for reading and writing, their ability to read and write in specific contexts, their metacognitive strategies, and their composing processes. These areas have been central to the development of more distinctive and responsive assessment procedures.

A Step Closer to Classroom Based Assessment

In March, 1988, the Institute for Literacy Studies initiated a short-term, participatory research project in alternative assessment with support from the City University of New York's Office of Academic Affairs. The project consisted of two major components — a five-session seminar held for two hours on Wednesday afternoons in May and June, and two rounds of interviews of ALC students conducted by students participating in the project. We hoped that this project would be the first step towards the development of a model procedure for classroom-based assessment in ALC classes.

This was very ambitious, because we only had three months for the project. In that time, it seemed possible to develop sample interviews for participating students to conduct with classmates. We decided that the interviews should ultimately focus on ALC students' current status as readers and writers and on their knowledge about the texts, tasks, contexts, strategies, and processes involved in reading and writing. This notion of "knowledge" is based to a great extent on the work of Susan Lytle (see "From the Inside Out" this issue), who has acted as a consultant to our project.

Through the project we were seeking answers to the following questions:

- How possible is it for students to collect this information from each other?
- What themes or categories related to students' knowledge about reading and writing might emerge from the interviews?
- What would we know from these

themes and categories?

- How could this information be used to develop a similar interview to be conducted in classes at the beginning of each cycle?
- What training might students and teachers have to receive in order to develop alternative assessment procedures and begin to put them into practice?

We hoped that what we learned from the interview process could lead us to the design of a model for in-class peer interviews done at the beginning of each of our cycles. Such an interview would provide us with important base-line data on each student. Information collected in subsequent interviews could be compared with this base-line.

The Working Group

Three ALC teachers and five students from their classes participated in the project. The teachers were self-selected and experienced. Each had some professional training in teaching reading and writing to adult learners. One had just completed a case study research project in her own classes.

Four of the five student participants were in Level II classes, with tested reading levels ranging from 5.0 to 7.4. The fifth was a Level I student who tested at 3.3. Three of the students had just begun attending ALC at the beginning of the spring cycle in April, but they already showed a great commitment to the center. They were regular attenders who were quite vocal about their image of themselves as readers and writers and about their interest in working on any ALC projects that could possibly benefit the students in the program. The two remaining students were ALC "veterans" who were engaged in many phases of the program. One had served as a student representative and had worked as an interviewer/aide at our intake and placement open houses. The other, in addition to attending her Level II class two nights a week, had been volunteering to work in a Level I class one extra night each week as a peer tutor.

Our group therefore had exciting potential. But we also had quite a challenge. We wanted the students to be the primary developers and

conductors of the interviews. Would we be able to remain faithful to such a model of participatory research? And would we, as a group, be able to collect any data useful for assessment purposes?

The Workshops

The five sessions provided some theoretical background on reading and writing processes and on the nature of ethnographic research. The series also took participants through a process of planning, conducting, and analyzing interviews of students in the ALC. In keeping with the philosophy of the other activities of the Institute for Literacy Studies, these sessions were experiential, including various reading and writing activities that involved all participants and providing ample opportunity for discussion both in the large group and in smaller groups of three (one teacher and two students).

By examining and categorizing elements of their own processes of reading and writing, participants developed an extensive list of questions to ask other students about reading and writing. After sorting the questions into themes and issues, each student in the group, assisted by the teachers, chose a series of questions from the list related to one or two issues. Student participants then conducted two sets of interviews with other students, focusing on such areas as:

- the impact of previous schooling on your perception of yourself as a reader and writer,
- uses of reading and writing in your life,
- how you have changed as a reader and writer because of classes at the ALC.

We taped these interviews, so that the group could review the transcripts and code the information. We are now working on final data analysis.

The Process Continues

Although we had some serious problems trying to accomplish too much in too little time, the group agrees that the project has already helped them in their roles as teachers and students. All of the teachers

in the project applied information and activities from the workshops to their own classes. They have begun concentrating more on discussions of students' processes of reading and writing in their classes. They have focused specific reading activities on the ways prediction and background knowledge function in the reading process. And the research process continues within their classes. They stop to jot down interesting comments from students that seem related to our interview themes.

The quality of the students' work in this research project has affirmed the ALC's commitment to active student participation in all phases of the program. The input that only students can provide on instruction, recruitment, scheduling, and now assessment, has enhanced the entire program. Students in our program work as peer tutors, office interns, interviewers/assistants at open house intake sessions, and now as researchers. ALC students are interested in continuing to work on ways of describing their growth in order to supplement the limited data provided by the TABE.

The project also gave the student participants an opportunity to analyze their own learning. Students developed a metacognitive vocabulary enabling them to articulate this knowledge and discover similarities and differences with the other students and teachers in the group. We want to continue offering seminars that include students and teachers together. The experience moved us more towards a community of learners, whether student or teacher.

The Future of Alternative Assessment

One of the most exciting findings of this project has been that students, with training, *can* conduct assessment interviews with other students that produce useful information about student learning. This project has been a logical outgrowth of our open houses. This student-to-student format also addresses one of the criticisms of using qualitative assessment procedures — that they are not at all cost-effective or manageable. Clearly programs cannot hire ethnographers to conduct periodic interviews, nor can individual



At Adult Learning Center open houses, new students, assisted by experienced student aides, engage in a series of activities including a personal information interview and reading and writing tasks. Photographs courtesy of The Adult Learning Center

teachers be expected to take this on by themselves. Some of these problems diminish when students interview one another; although, ways of handling tape transcription will have to be sorted out.

Through this process, a closer relationship between assessment and a student-centered curriculum will develop as assessment itself becomes a classroom activity for students. The content of the interviews also has implications for the curriculum. Classes may move towards a greater concentration on metacognitive self-analysis. Discussions and reading/writing activities may focus more on issues related to learning — for example, students' own definitions for and uses of reading and writing, the impact of schooling, and the role of literacy in self-esteem and identity.

Another important implication concerns the assessment of student writing. In our interviews, every student mentioned goals connected to writing. The revolution in the teaching of writing that began in the schools 15 years ago has had a tremendous impact on the teaching of adult literacy classes in the last three or four years. Teachers have begun to emphasize the connections between reading and writing in their classes. Students write pieces that are published and used as further readings. Also, students learn about their processes of composition by analyzing the choices writers make in shaping a piece to be read by specific audiences. Yet, no procedure exists for assessing student progress in writing. We intend to do some work in this area in the next year.

At the Institute for Literacy Studies, we are excited about the modest start we have made. With the continued commitment and participation of the students and teachers in the Adult Learning Center, we hope to move further in the next year towards a model of alternative assessment.

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