Authentic Writing Assessment.

Carmen Chapman
Illinois State Department of Education

In view of the role writing plays in people's academic, vocational, social, and personal lives, the development of students' ability to write is a main priority of schooling. Since educators can use writing to stimulate students' higher-order thinking skills--such as the ability to make logical connections, to compare and contrast solutions to problems, and to adequately support arguments and conclusions--authentic assessment seems to offer excellent criteria for teaching and evaluating writing.

This article discusses some of the ways authentic writing assessment can be used in education. Using the Illinois Writing Program as an example, this article also looks at some of the goals, solutions, and experiences of a program that is implementing authentic writing assessment.

EMERGING IDEAS IN AUTHENTIC WRITING ASSESSMENT

New directions in authentic assessment are aimed at getting beyond writing as an isolated subject unto itself. The goal is to integrate writing into the teaching of all subject areas, including science and mathematics. For example, if mathematics instructors have students write explanations for their procedures for solving problems, the instructors can evaluate the students' ability to perform the task without relying solely on the correct--or incorrect--numerical answer to measure achievement.

Literature teachers can use authentic assessment to help students discover the natural connections in understanding various themes, importance of settings, character development, comparisons, and contrasts of ancient and modern story plots. Students' writing in response to reading is one of the most valid indices of whether the student has been able to derive meaning from the text. Many believe that traditional multiple-choice response formats cannot duplicate the thinking and constructing necessary to evaluate a piece of literature.

THE FORMAT FOR AN AUTHENTIC WRITING ASSESSMENT

An authentic writing assessment should reflect various types of writing as well as levels of complexity related to the task assigned in the prompt. For example, a writing assessment assignment can be:

* totally open-ended, where the student is asked to construct an essay either requiring or not requiring certain background knowledge

* limited to specific components of the writing process, such as planning, outlining, or even revising

* used for short answers which may be either a part of planning or an abbreviated check for a basic understanding of key points

Assessment formats are also related to the amount of time one has for the assessment.

An increasingly popular format is portfolio assessment, in which students complete a body of writing over a prolonged period of time. Portfolios typically include several types of writing, and teachers consider a student's entire portfolio--not just single assignments--providing a more naturalistic approach to teaching and evaluation. As with authentic assessment programs in general, the drawbacks to portfolio assessment include technical issues of reliability for applying criteria across students and time.

AN EXAMPLE: THE ILLINOIS WRITING PROGRAM

The founders of the Illinois Writing Program are philosophically committed to integrating instruction and assessment. To accomplish this, their assessment specifications require:

* representing defined writing skills, status, and growth,

* verifying that the methods used to construct, conduct, and verify the assessment meet technical standards, and

* implementing an information network for classroom and district personnel to use test results to improve instruction.

To give a descriptive profile of a student's command of fundamental techniques of clear writing, the program has a rating system with the following analytic criteria:

* Focus: Is the main idea, theme, or point of view clear and consistently maintained?

* Support/Elaboration: Are arguments and conclusions adequately supported and explained?

* Organization: Is the logical flow of ideas clear and connected?

* Conventions: Are standard English conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation) properly followed?

The assessment also produces a focused, holistic score Integration which reflects how well the composition as a whole accomplished the assignment.

This rating system emphasizes stages of development and avoids pejorative classifications. For example, writing at the lower end of the scale is described as "not being developed" rather than being "poor" or "weak."

The Illinois Writing Program which presents assessment results as a score profile is also designed to help teachers determine areas of instructional need. By instructing teachers on the use of the scoring system for assessment, the major emphasis becomes defining what the teacher expects students to be able to write.

TEACHER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROGRAM

In Illinois, teacher workshops are held to teach the system as a model that may be modified to meet classroom needs. Participants are given an overview of the assessment system and then are introduced to each analytic feature. The teachers then practice scoring sample papers that represent the full scale of underdeveloped to developed writing. Teachers must not only understand the assessment, but also adapt their teaching methods to help students prepare for it.

Five years after the program began, more than 1,000 teachers have been trained with the writing assessment model. Survey and anecdotal information from the trainers indicate that teachers are overwhelmingly supportive and enthusiastic about the workshops and information tools they receive. This is especially true for elementary teachers who, for the most part, have never received instruction in teaching writing beyond grammar, spelling, and the Palmer Method of penmanship.

Positive results occur in writing instruction not only because teachers have received information that they can use in their classrooms, but also because they are in charge of the training. They have a vested interest and ownership in the entire project. Teacher trainers explain to workshop participants not only the mechanics of the system, but also the ways in which they have adapted and adopted the system for their own students.

ADDITIONAL READING

Chapman, C.W., Fyans, L.J., Kerins, C.T. (1984). Writing assessment in Illinois, *Educational Measurement,* 3, 24-26.

Chapman, C.W., (1989). Teaching to the writing test is O.K.: Integrating classroom instruction with assessment, *Excellence in Teaching,* 6, 9-11.

Chapman, C.W. (1991). *Write On,* Illinois Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Board of Education.

Illinois State Board of Education Student Assessment Section (1991, in process). Results of the 1990 language arts assessment, Springfield, Illinois: State Board of Education.

Quellmalz, E.S. (1984). Toward successful large-scale writing assessment: Where are we now? Where do we go from here? *Educational Measurement*, 3, 29-32.

___