HOW DO TOPICS MEAN?

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This session addressed several questions that have long been largely ignored in writing assessment. We have usually assumed that each writer receives the same message to direct the writing performance. But contemporary reader response theory and constructivist theories of reading cast doubt on this assumption, requiring us to ask the question: What determines the meanings and effects of given writing topics? We called upon transactional theories of literary response as well as other recent constructivist approaches to the study of reading comprehension to develop a model of the participants' constructions of meanings in a writing assessment episode. Our model suggests that readers of the topic (both the student writers and the teacher raters) choose among cues embedded in the text of the task, both honoring and ignoring elements which may enable them,

with varying degrees of success, to match the test-makers' intentions and expectations. We reported results of investigations confirming that the "meaning potential" of any given task for a student-writer or a teacher-rater is relative to the linguistic, cognitive, and social reverberations set off in the respondents.

Next, we questioned an assumption underlying much of current writing assessment practice, the assumption that there is only one objective reading of a topic text. We also argued that in order to make adequate evaluative judgments, it is necessary to consider the question: How does the topic text interact with the social context to affect the interpretations of test-makers and test-takers? Drawing on topics that have been used in actual writing assessments, we provided several examples of the way the informational content of a topic can interact with the social context and the testing event to provide unexpected variations in interpretation among respondents.

We then questioned the fairness of the practice of arbitrarily declaring a student "off topic," drawing attention to a distinction between "selective reading" and "misreading," suggesting that a more fruitful approach to the evaluator's reading allows for a range of variation in student response.

Our materials called into question certain commonplace practices in writing assessment. We argued that we need to move toward a model of writing assessment that respects the complexity of individual responses to writing topics. That model must accommodate a range of reasonable interpretations of the task that may fall outside the narrow pre-ordained structures of primary trait rubrics. Contemporary reading theory provides insight that we can no longer ignore into ways that personal meanings are treated in the minds of the writers not only as they read the text of the prompt, but also as they write, read, and re-read the text that they are creating.