
THE QUESTION OF VALIDITY IN ASSESSING WRITING

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This presentation focused on the issue of the ecological validity of writing assessment, specifically in the Canadian context. The need to ascertain and report on standards of academic performance has often led to the creation of tests or testing procedures which have actually changed the nature of the pedagogy. Spelling is a traditional example, and at the present time the drive to test small group process shows clearly how the desire to test can subvert the original pedagogical intention.

This has long been the case with the testing of writing, especially in the United States. In Canada, educational jurisdictions are to varying degrees free of the political and economic pressures, which drive the writing-testing industry in the United States, and therefore of the tradition of large-scale writing assessment as it is carried out there. Nonetheless, Canada repeatedly hears echoes of current concerns in the U.S.; "standards" are therefore a current issue in Canada. One consequence is a repeated insistence that Canada needs to institute large scale programs of writing evaluation. The models which underlie such calls are almost invariably reflections of extant U.S. models. However the undesirability of such models from a pedagogical standpoint is perfectly clear, and there is every reason, therefore, to fight against such a movement in Canada if there is a practicable alternative.

The ecological validity of tests of writing ability has to be considered in relation to intentions of and goals for the teaching of writing. The more the pedagogy of writing takes advantage of what is now known about the importance of having a real reason for communicating and a real audience to communicate to, the less traditional one-shot (or even multiple-shot) in-class tests make sense. Assessment through portfolios is the only justifiable approach. Systems of moderation can ensure a sufficient uniformity of judgment. In principle, such an approach is practicable in Canada. The key question is whether the jurisdictions and political spokespersons that call

for large-scale writing assessment have the sense and the will to move in this direction. Also, does the profession have the courage to insist on—and the political power to enforce—such a move?