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THE MINNESOTA WRITING ASSESSMENT

By

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What is the Minnesota Writing Assessment?

The Minnesota Writing Assessment is one part of a comprehensive program of assessment of educational progress in Minnesota which also includes reading, math, social studies and science. Assessment of student performance has always been part of the educational process, but criterion referenced assessment on a state wide basis is a fairly new approach to information gathering and reporting.

State assessment in Minnesota is modeled on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which began survey work in the late 1960's. The goals of state educational assessment are essentially the same as those of national assessment. The goals are to

1. make available on a continuing basis comprehensive information on the educational achievement of young . . . (Minnesotans).
2. measure and report changes in the educational achievement of young . . . (Minnesotans).
3. conduct special 'probes' or special surveys into selected areas of educational achievement . . . such as . . . (writing).
4. provide data, analysis of the data and reports for various audiences
5. aid in the use of . . . (state assessment) technology at . . . (district and school) levels.
6. further develop and refine the technologies necessary for gathering and analyzing . . . (achievement data).¹

¹ Q and A About the National Assessment of Educational Progress.
Denver: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1977, p. 1.

The Minnesota Writing assessment is a survey of the skills and understandings of public school students in writing. This school year the writing assessment program is being administered to fourth, eighth and eleventh graders. Subsequently, the results will be evaluated and reported to the public.

The statewide writing assessment is the first such survey conducted on writing in Minnesota. Data gathered in this survey will reveal how well students write at present, and it will also provide a data-base for comparison with the results of future Minnesota writing assessments. Moreover, as some of the Minnesota test items (exercises) are the same as those used in the NAEP surveys, it will be possible to make some comparisons of the writing performance of Minnesota students with students nationally. NAEP has assessed by age (9, 13, 17) rather than grade level, but adequate allowance for this difference has been made to permit fair comparisons.

Inter-grade level comparisons of Minnesota student writing will also be possible in certain respects as some of the same items are used at grades four, eight and eleven.

2. Why is a Minnesota Writing Assessment necessary?

The people of Minnesota who pay for public education have a need and a right to know how well students are doing. Without this knowledge there is no way for taxpayers to judge what they are getting for their money. Assessment is also necessary to provide educators with factual data about the outcomes of instruction so that they may formulate sound plans for improvement.

The State of Minnesota Department of Education provides a "piggyback" option for local school district assessment.

Individual school districts wishing to determine performance levels of groups of students on a district or school basis, may elect the "piggyback" option. For a fee (to cover the cost of materials and scoring), arrangements may be made to test all or a representative sample of students in all or some of the test areas. Results from this option are reported back to the school district; no other use or dissemination is made. Comparisons are possible with national, state and school districts of a similar size or type. A unique feature of this program is that it encourages the district to involve

its staff in setting local standards for student performance.²

3. Who is doing the Assessment?

The writing assessment is conducted by the State of Minnesota Department of Education, Division of Special Services in cooperation with the Department's Communication Specialist from the Division of Instruction.

4. Who made the policy decisions about the project?

The policy decisions are of two kinds: (1) decisions concerning the design of the assessment instrument and, (2) the procedures for carrying out the assessment process. The design decisions were the responsibility of a committee assembled and led by the Communication Specialist for the Department of Education. The group was composed of experienced teachers of composition from all levels of instruction (K-college). The committee had an approximately even balance of men and women, and included persons from urban, suburban and rural communities. A consultant from the Division of Special Services of the Department of Education served as the group's advisor for survey design.

The decisions governing the procedures for conducting the assessment were made by the Division of Special Services and resulted in essentially the same procedures as for the assessments in math, reading and so on.

5. What are the major steps in the Assessment process?

First, the goals and objectives of writing instruction were determined; second, exercises which would provide a data base for evaluating student performance were selected or developed and assembled into booklets called packages; third, the exercises are being administered to a representative sample of students state wide; fourth, the data will be evaluated; and, fifth, the results will be reported.

²Information Sheet, State Assessment Program. St. Paul. State of Minnesota Department of Education, Division of Special Services, 1978, p. 2.

6. How many students are being assessed?

The writing survey includes approximately 4,800 participants with 1,600 involved at each of the three grade levels. Four hundred students will take each of the four packages at each grade level.

7. How are student participants selected?

The students who participate are scientifically selected using stratified, probability sampling techniques to insure that they are representative of the state student population.

8. How are student participants identified?

Participants are not identified by name, course, teacher's name, administrator, school or district. The are identified by grade level and by size and type of community (2,000/surburban, for example). The community identification classifications used are: (1) size: 1-499, 500-999, 1,000-2,000, 2,000+, and (2) type: urban, suburban and rurban.

Students, teachers, courses, administrators, schools and districts are not identified in either the national or state assessment reports.

9. What are the in-school test conditions?

Students are assessed in their schools by specially trained school personnel.

A package of exercises is given to each student in an assessment group. An audio-cassette recording called a pace-tape is used by the assessment administrator to give directions to students. Pre-recorded messages are placed on the pace-tape at set intervals to standardize exercise times as well as directions.

Complete student directions are printed in the student exercise packages and students read along in their booklets as they hear the directions given by the pace-tape. The aural directions eliminate possible inconsistencies in the directions given to students and reduces comprehension problems encountered by students of low read-

ing ability.

Students actually write in the Minnesota Writing Assessment. No objective exercises, such as multiple choice, completion and listing items are used. Students write notes, letters, stories and essays. Each writing exercise approximates a real-life writing situation as much as possible. Each package takes about 30 minutes to complete-including the time required for directions and student writing.

10. What information about student writing is being sought?

The Minnesota Writing Assessment is an attempt to find out on the state level what NAEP found out about student writing on the national level: (1) how well students write "to reveal personal feelings and ideas-through free expression and through the use of conventional modes of discourse,"³ and (2) how well students write ". . . in response to . . . societal demands and obligations . . . (using correct) usage, punctuation, spelling, and form or conventions . . . appropriate to particular writing tasks, e.g. manuscripts, letters."⁴

Student writing is to be assessed in seven categories using appropriate criteria. The table on the following page shows the categories and the criteria.

³ Rexford Brown. Expressive Writing, Writing Report No. 05-W-02. Denver: National Assessment of Education Progress, 1977, p. 35.

⁴ ibid.

Writing Categories	Evaluation Criteria
A. Recording	accurate, complete, coherent and appropriate content
B. Responding	Appropriate content and form
C. Describing	explanatory ordering through detail
D. Analyzing	logical explications; development, organization
E. Persuading/Arguing	defended point of view; utilization of: facts, opinions, appeals
F. Narrating	narrative, sensory detail, point of view, insights, fantasy, dialogue, role
G. Summarizing	condensation, fidelity to original

11. What is the makeup of the Assessment packages?

The assessment is composed of four different packages, one for each quarter of the students being assessed at each grade level. In this way it is possible to quadruple the amount of information gathered and quarter the time required of the participating students and school personnel.

Each package is composed of several exercises and each student participant is to do all the exercises in his/her package. Some of the exercises to be used are, as noted earlier, NAEP items, some are Minnesota items. NAEP items are not copyrighted and may be used without permission or cost. The Minnesota items were developed by the Writing Assessment Committee; they are not copyrighted and, may be obtained upon request from the Assessment Office, Minnesota State Department of Education.

There are four types of writing responses required of students in the Minnesota Writing Assessment: notes, letters, stories and essays.

Exercise item features include prewriting, writing and rewriting; open topics; proof reading; picture stimulus; semantics and the conversion of oral messages into written ones.

Four different types of writing evaluation are employed: primary-trait, expert preference, holistic and structure/mechanics. Primary-trait scoring is a procedure for judging a piece of writing by whether or not it contains the element essential for a specific communication purpose. The primary purpose of a thank you note, for example, is to say "thank you" and a piece of writing that has this trait would be judged satisfactory. Expert preference scoring is a check on whether a student agrees with writing experts that a particular specimen of writing is the best of a set. Holistic scoring is a method for judging the overall quality of a piece of writing which employs specially trained readers to rank papers. The final method of evaluation used is structure/mechanics scoring. Structure/mechanics scoring is an error tally system covering organization, punctuation, spelling, capitalization usage and so forth.

That concludes the factual description of the Minnesota Writing Assessment. At this point permit me to make a few personal, subjective observations:

1. The Minnesota Writing Assessment will certainly generate some new data that may or may not be used to improve student writing, but it will make us better informed than we are at present about student writing in Minnesota. In this respect the effort is decidedly positive. However, there is a decidedly negative side to the Assessment as well.
2. The Minnesota Writing Assessment is flawed in at least two major respects.
 - a. It is flawed in that there is no sample of the writing of Minnesota adults taken at the same time so that the achievement - or lack of achievement - of students can be reported in proper context. The teachers on the Minnesota Writing Assessment Committee insisted that adults be assessed along with students because we knew that if this were not done we would be helping to load the gun of criticism that would eventually be pointed at their own heads. The adult assessment was promised but in the end State of Minnesota Department of Education officials said it could not be done.
 - b. The Minnesota Writing Assessment is also flawed

in that it contains no opportunities for students to do any rewriting--despite the insistence of teacher members of the committee that rewriting was a critical phase in the writing process. Again, officials of the Minnesota State Department of Education vetoed the request of the teachers. There was no intention to sabotage the effort, just a lack of appreciation for the special features of writing assessment as distinct from assessment in reading, math, social studies, etc.

In short, the Minnesota Writing Assessment is significantly less than a perfect process. Any interpretations made of the sampling results must, therefore, be qualified by allowance for at least two major limitations: the absence of a comparable adult writing sample, and the absence of rewrite opportunities for student writers.

At present, the Minnesota Writing Assessment Project seems to be a worthwhile enterprise, but it is hoped that if the writing assessment program continues in Minnesota, there will be an opportunity for the aforementioned imperfections to be eliminated - along with the others which would most assuredly crop up.

REFERENCES

Brown, Rexford, Expressive Writing, Writing Report No. 05-W-02 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1977).

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TIRED TEACHERS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

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Because a tired teacher is often a dull teacher, I believe it is worthwhile for us to lighten our load deliberately when we can do so without impeding our students' progress.

That we have a time problem is undeniable; even those in other disciplines offer sympathy. If, as Conant says, the average English load is 120 students, and if each student writes one two-page paper a week for a twelve-week semester, then one teacher reads 1440 papers. If each paper takes ten minutes to grade, then 240 hours of work--20 hours per week--are added to a schedule already filled with five classes and a study hall. Did someone mention preparation? Or conferences?

But students need to write to learn to write. No denying that. Filling in blanks or underlining the right word won't do it. How can we reduce the paper load to a manageable size? Not light, just manageable?

By listening to teachers and by reading, I've discovered six ways to save time, and I'll begin with the most radical suggestion, one I first read in Don Murray's book A Writer Teaches Writing: we can give only a mid-term and final grade in composition classes. In that way we can save the time and energy we use in frequent debates between, for example, a C- and a D+.

But suppose we must, for some reason, grade more than twice a period. Then we can try a second approach: grading only some of the papers. We can select at random the ones to be graded, or we can announce that we will correct and grade every second or third paper, or we can let students choose from among groups of their papers the ones they want graded. Responding to journal writing adds to our time dilemma but, here again, selectivity can