EVALUATION OF THE BAY AREA WRITING PROJECT:
The Scriven Report

The following Technical Reports about the Bay Area Writing Project were written during the three-year evaluation funded by the Carnegie Corporation and directed by Michael Scriven. These reports comprise the total evaluation and the summary of the findings and recommendations will be found in publication No. 22, "Executive Summary of BAWP Evaluation."

2. BAWP Open Program, 1977, by A. Walworth: the report of an observer of the 1977 BAWP Open Program (141 pages, $9.00)
7. Procedures for Running a Writing Assessment, by C. Keech: A description of how the evaluation's large-scale, holistic assessment was organized and conducted (65 pages, $5.00)
8. Glossary of Writing Evaluation Terms, 1979, by S. Thomas: a guide to terms used in the BAWP Evaluation Reports (10 pages, $2.00)
9. Topics for Assessing Writing Through Writing Samples, by C. Keech: a guide to types of topics which can be used for writing samples either in the classroom or in large-scale writing assessments, with an extensive list of sample topics (108 pages, $7.25)
10. Rubrics for Writing Assessment, by C. Keech: a discussion of how the scoring guide for the BAWP Writing Assessment was developed, along with a more general discussion of issues and listing of alternative models of scoring guides (90 pages, $5.25)
11. Long Term Follow-up of Four BAWP Programs, 1979, by J. Stahlecker: a report of a survey made of participants in four BAWP programs held during 1975-79 (84 pages, $6.00) 14a. Abstract (4 pages, $.50)
13. Critical Competitors of BAWP's Inservice Model, by S. Thomas and P. Watson: a descriptive survey of programs offering services similar to those of BAWP (40 pages, $3.75) 16a. Abstract (2 pages, $.50)
15. Cost Analysis Report, by J. Stahlecker: descriptions and cost analysis of: the activities of the BAWP Central Staff; a "typical" BAWP inservice; a BAWP Target Area Program; and the programs of some critical competitors (64 pages, $5.00) 18a. Abstract (4 pages, $.50)
16. NWP Evaluation Report, by C. Keech, J. Stahlecker, S. Thomas, and P. Watson: a review of NWP teacher evaluations, a NWP Directors Survey, and data from eleven NWP student writing assessment studies (88 pages, $6.00) 19a. Abstract ($0.50)
17. Cumulative and Side Effects of BAWP/NWP, by C. Keech, S. Thomas, and P. Watson: a report of observed effects of BAWP/NWP based upon interviews with experts in the field of inservice and composition instruction (17 pages, $2.50)
18. Executive Summary of BAWP Evaluation, by M. Scriven: an overview of findings, the rationale of the evaluation design, and recommendations (12 pages, $2.25)
19. Evaluation Questionnaires for Writing Programs, by Evaluation Staff: questionnaires used in the various surveys of the Evaluation (32 pages, $3.25)

These reports will be made available at cost (duplicating, mailing, and handling) and can be ordered at the following address:

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THE TEST OCCASION

Abstract of an experiment study by Pat Woodworth and Catharine Keech, Bay Area Writing Project.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to test the generally held belief that essay tests should specify audience and rhetorical purpose, since, according to theory, students write better when they understand the full rhetorical context of the writing task. The research hypotheses were:

1) Performance on a writing test will be generally better if students are writing to a specific audience with a specific purpose in mind;
2) Performance will be better if the specified audience is real rather than imaginary.

Design

To test these hypotheses, a writing task was chosen which could be adapted to three audience conditions:

Condition 1: Describe an occasion when you experienced something for the first time. (NO AUDIENCE SPECIFIED.)

Condition 2: Think of an occasion when you experienced something for the first time. Describe the occasion as if you were writing for someone who has not yet had such an experience. (IMAGINARY AUDIENCE SPECIFIED.)

Condition 3: Think of an occasion when you experienced something for the first time. Choose someone you know who would benefit from or be interested in hearing about your experience. Write to them, describing the occasion. (REAL AUDIENCE SPECIFIED.)

Pat Woodworth’s six English classes, three ninth grade and three mixed junior/senior groups, participated in the study. The ninth grade classes included several low ability sophomores.

Within each class period students were randomly assigned to the three test conditions. The teacher led a pre-writing discussion of “first experiences,” and informed students they could write in essay, letter, journal, or any other form. Students knew that their essays would be read and scored by outside teacher/researchers, and that the scores would not affect their grades for the course, although they would be given class credit for participating in the study.

Papers were read twice. Readers used a rapid impression marking, with 1 as lowest, and 4 as highest score for composite score of 2-8. Readers did not know that papers had been written for three audience conditions—no topic appeared on the essays collected.

After the holistic marking for general impression, the papers were rated on several factors, including genre (letter, essay, journal, etc.), openings and closings, and other signs of audience awareness.

Pat Woodworth gave each student a personal rating on general verbal ability and on attitude or academic interest. These ratings were also from 2-8, and were used as an input variable in comparing the performance of students in the three test conditions.

Results

1. There was no statistically significant difference in the mean holistic scores of groups writing in the three conditions. (Using the method of adjusted averages, and a t-test comparison of means.)

2. Use of the letter form appeared in all conditions, but was more frequent in conditions 2 and 3 which specified audiences.

3. Letters in condition 2 showed more signs of special attempts to address the audience or use the rhetorical context to advantage.

4. Nearly half the essays in condition 3 (REAL AUDIENCE SPECIFIED), including some in the form of letters, were actually addressed to “no one in particular” according to students when they were asked to indicate the age and relationship of the recipient to themselves.

5. The genre identified as “short story,” distinguished from “informal essay” by signs of literary intent like imaginative openings and closings, use of imagery or other stylistic devices, appeared in all three conditions, but occurred more often in conditions 1 and 2. This form, which indicates sophisticated awareness of audience and of the effects of language, almost always earned top scores. The audience for this form, however, is more often a general rather than specific one.

6. Many students wrote better for this experiment than on any other assignment of the school year.

Conclusions and Suggestions

1. Students may regard test-readers as being like the “general audience” addressed by most literature and much non-fiction writing. Therefore, when the writing topic, like this one, invites autobiographical writing, the student may not necessarily be helped by a prompt which specifies audience. We may conclude from the absence of differences in holistic scores:

Either:

a) That the rhetorical context of the text situation is so much like the natural rhetorical context of much writing for general audiences that no further rhetorical context need be specified.

OR:

b) That the context of the test situation is so strong that attempts to impose other contexts are not successful. Even if the student writes for an imaginary audience, or for a real audience other than the examiner,
he may actually be writing primarily for the teacher/judge who will be scoring his paper.

2. Requiring students to think of a real audience to address, with assurances that papers will be delivered to these real people, may impose an extra demand on the writer that not every student can meet. It is suggested that in future attempts to research the effects of writing for real audiences, the teacher should supply the real audience.

3. The fact that students, in all audience conditions and in all grade levels, tended to write at the top of their ability for the occasion provided by the research study, suggests that students may be motivated to their best efforts by a "sense of occasion." The researchers speculate that the sense of occasion can be provided by a variety of rhetorical situations, including writing for real audiences, writing for special testers, writing for publication, writing to share with peers, etc. The researchers compared the characteristics of the test topic, regardless of audience condition, to the characteristics of other successful assignments they have given as teachers, and came up with the following suggestions for creating special occasions that will help students write their best:

a) Provide an audience (real, even if unknown) beyond the teacher. May be peers or other adults. May be general or particular.

b) Allow the student to write with authority by inviting him to write in his own voice out of his experience.

c) Provide a general enough topic that the student may discover her own intention to write: don't hem her in with lots of specifications about which aspects of an experience to write about, unless you are testing particular skills like her ability to observe. Leave the student writer freedom to compose purposefully, providing only enough direction to stimulate thinking.

Challenge

This last suggestion is, of course, easier said than done. How much guidance is too much? The teacher/researchers of this study hope that other teachers will begin to make careful studies of the results they get from different kinds of writing assignments. We need to notice more than whether students avoid the particular errors or use the particular sentence structures we taught about last week. We need to observe what aspects of the writing occasion seem to make a difference.

(The full report is part of the Bay Area Writing Project Curriculum Publication, The Write Occasion, which can be ordered from the Writing Project, 5635 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. Available January 1980.)