

Writing Assessment at SVSU: Portfolio Approach Selected for Pilot Project

by Dr. Basil Clark

The Writing Assessment and Improvement Team (WAIT) was appointed one year ago by President Gilbertson in response to the report of the Undergraduate Education Committee of the University Planning Task Force.

This committee had found that "the University needs some means to monitor and assess the language skills of all of its graduates" and recommended that "the University develop and implement a Writing Assessment and Improvement Program to be required of all students who have completed 60 or more credits and to be successfully completed prior to registration for any courses in excess of 90 accumulated credits."

Three methods for writing assessment were studied by WAIT: the multiple choice test, the holistically scored writing sample, and portfolio assessment. Multiple choice testing, because of its obvious limitations as a measurement of writing, was early on dismissed. The holistically scored writing sample, while widely used as an assessment instrument, presents at least two external constraints which argued against its exclusive use for the Team's purposes,

these constraints being those of limited time and of an assigned prompt.

The Team opted to go ahead with plans for the portfolio approach and has committed itself to a pilot project to test the feasibility of such a plan.

With the assistance of the SVSU Office of Institutional Research, the Team has invited 89 students to participate in this activity. These students were chosen at random to represent all major departments or at least all five SVSU colleges. All have earned 30 to 75 credits toward a bachelor's degree.

They are being asked to submit four pieces of writing for assessment: a persuasive paper; a documented paper; a paper required for a course in their major or on a topic in their intended major, or a paper written as part of their employment; and an impromptu paper written under supervised conditions.

A team of trained readers will review each portfolio and determine, on the basis of this review, the level of a student's writing proficiency. Since this is a pilot, a dry run, this assessment will have no effect on a participant's academic record.

INSIDE

- 1 Writing Assessment
- 2 Creative Writing
- 3 Linking Literature & Interpersonal Communication

MLA-FIPSE
Curriculum
Review

Over the long term, the results of this pilot will contribute to the Team's recommendation for University writing assessment policy. Discussion about the other part of WAIT's concern, writing improvement, is ongoing.

The Writing Assessment and Improvement Team is chaired by Basil Clark, English. Members include Deborah Bishop, Management; Jean Brown, Teacher Education; Sachiko Claus, Nursing; David Dalgarn, Biology; Kay Harley, English; Phyllis Hastings, English; Drew Hinderer, Philosophy; Chris Looney, Academic Support Services; and Fred Porterfield, Public Information.

WRITING

The Role of Creative Writing in the English Curriculum

by Dr. Tom Hearron

Should anyone concentrating in English, either as an English major or as a future teacher of the subject, take a course in creative writing?

The answer to this question is not as obvious as it might appear, for English Departments have traditionally had misgivings about the role of creative writing in the English curriculum, and SVSU is no different.

When I first came here in 1973, for example, English majors were not allowed to count creative writing credits toward their major.

Fortunately, the situation has changed, and creative writing is achieving recognition as a worthy field of study.

James Britton, the British theoretician about writing, defines three main categories of writing:

- 1) expressive, which he defines as writing having ourselves as the primary audience and having the goal, as the name suggests, of expressing ourselves. Diaries and private journals are examples of expressive writing.
- 2) transactional, which he defines as writing in which the audience is someone other than the self and in

which the purpose is to communicate information, to "get things done." Lab reports, essay exams, and research papers are examples of transactional writing.

- 3) poetic, by which he means not just poetry, but all forms of creative writing. Poetic writing has an audience beyond the self, and the purpose is not to convey information but to move someone emotionally. In other words, Britton's poetic writing is what we Americans call creative writing (90-91).

"When I first came here in 1973, English majors were not allowed to count creative writing credits toward their major. Fortunately, the situation has changed..."

A reputable program in English, I would argue, needs to offer its students experience in the study of both literature and writing; most contemporary English curriculums, including SVSU'S, in fact do so. Students need experiences in creative writing for exactly the same reason as they need experience in expository (Britton's "transactional") writing: to understand the process by which fiction and poetry come into being.

In other words, in place of studying literature from only an external perspective, a course in creative writing gives

an **internal** perspective. Just as the experience of having painted our house makes us more attuned to the paint jobs of others, writing a short story or poem gives insights into literature as being the result of a creative process—rather than as an alien object that might as well have fallen to earth from outer space.

It is comforting (or depressing, depending on one's viewpoint) to realize that the great writers have had to go through the same process—sometimes delightful, more often agonizing—to make a work of literature come into being.

All of this is not to say, of course, that studying creative writing will cause our students to write great works of

literature—though they might. They will, however, understand more clearly why certain authors are considered great, other than because some English teacher says so. And to me that is a good enough reason to study creative writing.

Works Cited

Britton, James et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. Houndsmill Basingstoke Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975.

Have you enjoyed The Literacy Link?

In order to help justify continuation of this project, we would appreciate your comments on the quality and helpfulness of The Literacy Link. Please take two minutes to fill out the brief survey below and return it via campus mail to Sally I. Cannon, 359 Science, by Friday, May 8.

1) How many issues of The Literacy Link did you read?

1 issue _____

2 issues _____

3 issues _____

2) What kinds of material did you find helpful? (Check as many blanks as apply)

articles on writing pedagogy _____

articles on reading pedagogy _____

articles on critical thinking pedagogy _____

articles on writing projects at SVSU _____

articles on reading projects at SVSU _____

others (please specify) _____

3) How did you use the information presented in The Literacy Link? (Please specify)

4) What changes would you recommend if it were to be continued? (Please specify)

TEACHING

Linking Literature and Interpersonal Communication

by Marcia Ribble

The research, reading and thinking that I am doing as a scholar largely relates to the linking of art and science, the use of one to illuminate the other, or to supply answers that are unavailable within one aspect of knowing but available in the other. Such a serendipity occurs with the linking of Literature and Interpersonal Communication Theory and research.

Teaching a literature course, one of the questions I've really struggled with has been the issue of how human beings understand a work of literature over a period of centuries. Current emphasis on political readings of texts suggests that the meaning of a text changes as political changes occur.

And I've noticed that comprehension of a story often is at least partially dependent on whether or not students actually have experienced a time period, a way of living, or a situation in which the characters find themselves.

However, I believe that some aspects of a story are timeless, that they would be the same no matter when, where or how the readers and the characters were living. Recent research done by Wallbott and Scherer (1988) examined emotional responses of hundreds of subjects from 27 countries on five continents.

They found that emotion is the same in humans of all socioeconomic groups, of all geopolitical systems. From the most primitive society to the most complex society, the people have virtually identical emotional responses and they interpret emotion in others almost identically.

From ancient Greece come stories about people behaving in essentially the same way people behave today. If they are happy, they laugh. If they are lonely, they feel sad. If they are angry, they may lash out at others. If they are jealous, they may be driven to foolish action ultimately destructive to the relationship.

We may not be able to put ourselves into their geosociopolitical lives and understand that aspect of their stories fully, but if Wallbott and Scherer are correct about feelings and their universality, feelings have not changed much over the course of recorded human history.

Joy, anger, fear, love, disappointment, loneliness, excitement, surprise and all the other human emotions may be the basis for an awareness of the human communication process by which one person distant in time and space, distant in economic and political systems, can hear a message from another.

continued on page 4

English Department's MLA-FIPSE Curriculum Review

Earlier this semester SVSU's English department sponsored a series of four meetings in conjunction with a consultant's visit. Donald McQuade, Professor of English and Dean of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, met with English faculty, other faculty, staff, administration, and students in conjunction with the department's three-year curriculum review now under way.

While the consultant's report is not yet available, the department will be moving ahead by holding meetings at two-week intervals through much of the summer, with discussions ranging around two questions: 1) What is central to the English major and to the study of literature? 2) To what extent are the areas of writing, literature, language, cultural studies, and so on, interconnected? if there are connections, what are the curricular implications? While the topics are most directly relevant to English faculty, the meetings will be open to the college community; times are to be posted with the faculty secretaries (3rd floor Science).

Anyone interested in these matters should feel free to talk with members of the department's MLA-FIPSE committee (Thompson, Munn, Barnett, Harley, or Whittaker). Especially of interest would be bibliographical suggestions.

Dr. Gary Thompson

Linking Literature *continued from page 3*

While Wallbott and Scherer's research is directed largely toward internal processes of the ability of an individual to recognize emotion in dissimilar others, that probably is the same process we use to interpret the literature we read about different people in different times and places.

My students seem to really enjoy feeling in some control of the interpretive process when they use their awareness of human communication processes to interpret works of literature. "I can relate to Hagar (a character in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*)," one young man said, "I was in love with someone who wasn't in love with me and it really hurt."

Almost all of my students can find a way to relate experiences much different than their own through awareness of emotional responses to life in the human communication process between characters and within them.

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