

## TOWARDS A MORE RATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH

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It might come as a surprise to some to learn that Queensland is often acclaimed as a State of educational reform, especially with the introduction of internal assessment over the past decade. However, the introduction has not been so simple in practice, and the multitude of reviews of school-based assessment over the past decade has naturally engendered some not inconsiderable cynicism amongst teachers. This is especially so within the humanities, where the problems of subjective assessment are perhaps greater. The recent emphases on skills-based assessment, rather than norms-based assessment, is certainly a positive one. However, there remain a number of crucial issues within assessment which have yet to be addressed.

The initial problem does seem to be that of practicality. The ROSBA Scheme suggests that there be an emphasis on exit assessment, grounded upon a consideration of the whole of the work of the student. Ideally this involves a group examination of the work folio for each individual student and a discussion upon what is an appropriate achievement level for the individual student. Theoretically this is most laudable. However, it does ignore the realities (a) of the numbers of matriculating students, especially at larger schools and matriculation colleges, (b) the number of assessment items from each individual student, possibly up to ten per semester, and (c) the number of individual criteria upon which student work is assessed, normally comprising some ten criteria per item of work. The situation that the Board of Secondary School Studies has not considered this might be one indication of just how far removed the educational bureaucracy in Queensland is from the working teacher.

The secondary problem yet to be addressed seriously is that of comparability. This problem essentially flows from the practical difficulties with ROSBA, inasmuch as Schools and Colleges are forced, through the reality of student numbers, to revert to a reliance upon marks. Of course the nature of skills criteria within the English Syllabus, and the development of this through assessment checklists, does go some way in overcoming this problem. However, a closer analysis of the criteria for achievement in English does suggest a high degree of subjectivity. What happens is that indefinite descriptions, such as Very High Achievement and High Achievement, tend to be supposedly defined by even more numerous indefinite descriptions. Thus we talk subjectively of very high skills of expression, high skills of expression, sound expression skills, and so forth. This flows through to individual assessment lists, where sub-skills tend similarly to be described in rather subjective comparatives and superlatives. Ultimately, then, the system is one of a highly subjective judgement by the individual teacher. There is nothing wrong in this, if there is some formal system of comparability. However, such systems of comparability within English assessment tend to be very limited. [3/4]

The third and final problem for English assessment is that of the originality of student work. With the majority of student work being submitted as assignments, it is increasingly difficult to determine and even enforce that the work be completed by students themselves. Teachers generally like to think they can detect plagiarism, although in reality there is no certain way to do so. The problem includes completion of assignment work from another source, or even completion of assignment work with extensive parental assistance. Experience suggests that this is now quite a common practice, even amongst quite highly-ranked students. It is also obviously making a travesty of our educational system.

The general concern throughout all discussion on assessment is that it does tend to dominate teaching in Queensland, and at least in this respect it: must be said that internal assessment in Queensland has been a dismal failure. One clear solution would be for schools and colleges to leave the determination of a Tertiary Entrance Score to the universities and tertiary institutions themselves, administering any entrance examinations which those institutions might decide. This is certainly the practice in the USA and elsewhere, and it does overcome the problems in assessment as outlined above. Potentially it can also leave schools and colleges free for more creative teaching.

In the meantime perhaps what can be done in English assessment is to introduce more objective-type multiple-choice language skills testing, both graphic and aural, and counting for at least half of the total assessment. The legitimacy given to ASAT scores within the Queensland assessment system is perhaps a tacit recognition that they can be useful in predicting student performance. Therefore there seems little or no reason why this type of assessment should not be used also in individual summative assessment. Clearly there is a need for long-term changes in the assessment of English in Queensland at the current time, and perhaps a need for overall change. However possibly the above might be one minor improvement.