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Changing Practices in the Assessment of Writing a Discipline Redefining Itself

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CHANGING PRACTICES IN THE ASSESSMENT OF WRITING
A DISCIPLINE REDEFINES ITSELF

A Thesis Presented
by
Marie E. Schleiff

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DEDICATION

To Bill -

for his generous support in every way.

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ABSTRACT

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June, 1996

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This thesis concerns how changes in the assessment of writing mirror the historical changes in the purposes and methodologies in education. We have witnessed a dramatic shift from the viewing and testing of writing as a series of sub-skills, with emphasis on error-avoidance and correctness of form, to viewing both the process of writing and its assessment as a means of discovery, reflection, and learning. New practices in the evaluation of writing reflect knowledge of how writing occurs and how it is taught. Results of a survey conducted over two years show high school students' responses to traditional and new assessment methods. The important role writing may play in aiding students to better understand and learn school related materials is explored. The use of portfolios in writing classes can provide students with experiences they can carry outside of the English classroom. Creating a portfolio and portfolio

assessment in the writing classroom are ways to nurture creative and critical thinking. Through the use of portfolios in the writing classroom, teaching, learning, and assessing can work together as a recursive whole. Portfolios can provide the authentic experience and the authentic assessment called for by today's educational theorists, writer-researchers, and classroom teachers to prepare students for the complex world waiting for them in the twenty-first century.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1982, Donald Murray, a writer who also teaches writing, expressed the following view:

> Research into the writing process will eventually produce an understanding of how people write, which will have a profound effect on our educational procedures. We now attempt to teach a writing process we do not understand; research may allow us to teach what we understand (Murray, 1982, p.80).

Now, over a decade later, we are beginning to witness those profound effects predicted by Murray as we examine current practices in teaching writing and begin to see dramatic changes in assessment in every academic discipline. In this paper I hope to provide a philosophical and theoretical overview of why assessment of writing has to change. Despite the pedagogical shifts and methodological changes, many traditional grading practices are profoundly flawed because instruction and assessment are not philosophically consistent. Assessment methodologies must complement instructional methodologies. Assessment must move inside the curriculum to become formative as well as diagnostic in function. A second goal here is to provide support for the use of portfolios as a pedagogically sound measurement tool to assess growth and achievement reliably and validly. Teachers need to learn how to become better responders to student writing and need to determine which response strategies are most helpful and which may even be harmful. A third goal is to show how the research of cognitive psychologists has been useful in helping us understand the writing process. Writing and its assessment may influence learning and nurture creative and critical thinking. If, in the future, we need flexible, self-directing workers as James Moffet tells us in The Universal Schoolhouse (1994), we need thinkers who can problem-

CHAPTER 1

THE PAST: ASSESSMENT IN THE "FACTORY MODEL" OF EDUCATION - 1910-1950'S

To understand why the teaching and testing of writing have been harmful to generations of students, we need to look at the history of the American high school. The initial goal of the Boston Public Latin Grammar School, established in 1635, was to prepare university students. Boston English's charge was to prepare middle class students for the trades and business. A literate society was envisioned, one which could be comfortable in social and written discourse. Boston English became a model for high schools throughout America (White, 1985). English classes were to be in command of linguistic etiquette, literary socialization (letter writing), myths, manners, culture and reading. Teaching was based upon "correctness" of the usage of the language. What was taught was basically what was testable: vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. This philosophy continued into the 1960's even though, along the way, many teachers of English rebelled against the established pedagogy. Even though Horace Mann proclaimed that literacy improves the ability to think, educational procedures were developed that hampered or denied the growth of that ability. Witte, Trachsel, and Walters provide a diachronic perspective of literacy and assessment (Greenburg, 1986). Around 1845, for the first time in Boston public grammar schools, written exams were used to evaluate academic performance for students too numerous to test in the traditional fashion, which was orally. An interesting note here is that even then evaluators recognized the problem of rater-subjectivity and one-sample rating. By 1910 the form of a student's writing was separated from content for evaluation. Also, at this time education was in the "factory model" stage which lasted into the 1950's. Emphasis was placed upon the production of a fairly literate public capable of reading and writing for practical purposes.

Writing was looked upon as a mechanical ability consisting of various sub-skills. Tests, then, logically tested what was valued and were time-saving and objective in nature. The multiple-choice test for assessing writing ability evolved from this philosophy. Yet, even in 1929 an eighth grade teacher, Zelma Huxtable, lamented the neglect of thought in the teaching of writing and the fragmenting of writing into sub-skills (in Greenburg). In 1931 there existed a written component to the college entrance exam; however, with increasing numbers of test-takers, this practice disappeared and did not re-emerge until 1994. In the 1930's and through the 1970's, voices against multiple-choice exams rose and expressed fear of "teaching-for-the-test." Without the support of theory or research, many English teachers intuitively knew that such standardized tests encouraged rote memorization and learning. These tests demand the simplification of complex issues and measure a student's ability to write by using questions pertaining to the placement of a comma, spelling, choice of the appropriate pronoun, and the agreement of a verb with its subject. What suffers most, say past and present critics of standardized testing, is critical thought. Testing for mechanics and usage requires a lower order of thinking; and, as a result, little thinking is demanded in the classroom. Testing affected instruction and methodologies and guided curricula. Again, the way we have tested reveals what has been valued, and those values have been erroneous or, at the very least, misconceived for generations. However, no other way was seen to "mass-produce" a literate society in a cost-effective way. The development of creative and critical thought, students' ability to apply what has been learned to specific situations and problem-solving techniques, was thwarted by the need for efficiency, the increasing number of students, and cost. These issues persist into the present.

As a result, a reductionist notion of writing and literacy was set in place. Writing was viewed as a mechanical process with rules for form and usage to be drilled upon and memorized and practiced in non-contextual exercises. The way we tested also influenced the methodologies of many English teachers. The value of writing as a

tool of discovery and learning, and as a vehicle for thought and communication, long went unrealized. Also, educational psychology influenced standardization of testing for, in this field, the importance of reliability and measurement took precedence over validity. However, the rebellious and intuitive voices persisted. A study by Stalnaker in 1951 supported the view that literacy is devalued by objective exams since they do not require a high order of thinking involving creativity, synthesis and organization (in Witte, et al). In 1956 Wiseman, an aptly named British researcher, warned of the destructive nature of objective testing of literacy (in Witte, et al). Yet, many, acknowledging the deleterious effects of standardized tests and seeing them as a destructive intrusion in the learning process, viewed them as necessary for accountability and ranking. The practice of using numbers to measure people has never lived harmoniously in the minds of humanistic teachers.

Yet, even in the 1970's, no one claimed to be an expert or know much about the testing and measurement of writing. However, research in the composing process conducted at the beginning of that decade by Emig (1971), Mischel (1974), and Stallard (1974), all showing that long planning time and pauses for reflection distinguished the writing processes of good writers, seems to have precipitated the close examination of the process of writing, what writers actually do when they write. Emig predicted,

> Finally, a shift may consequently come in who evaluates whom and to what end...American high schools and colleges must seriously and immediately consider the teacher-centered presentation of composition, like the teacher-centered presentation of almost every other segment of curriculum, is pedagogically, developmentally, and politically, an anachronism (p.95).

The number of studies and the amount of research in writing, composing and assessing writing that has taken place in the last ten

years validates Emig's words. The tested and still emerging theories have led to a new pedagogy in the "teaching" of writing and literacy which demands and requires a change in the way we test and assess. In the present, objective writing tests are still being used to measure the competency or incompetence of students and teachers and the effectiveness of curricula and methodologies. But, now these tests are being viewed as limited in scope and of little benefit to the student. To a great extent, testing determined curricula into the 1970's. The situation probably exists today in many places. Newly developed curriculum frameworks and statewide assessment programs will influence curricula. However, once changes in the way we thought about the teaching of writing began to occur due, in large part, to research in the writing process, assessment ideas began to change for traditional measurement techniques came under scrutiny at the same time.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRESENT: CONFUSION, CONFLICT, AND CHANGE - 1970-1995

The transition period, which began in the 1970's, has not followed a linear path. Great shifts and much confusion characterize the way teachers thought about writing, teaching writing, and testing writing. At this point in time, explains James Britton (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl, 1983), writing was not being seen as a communicative exchange between reader and writer. He analyzed the kinds of writing students actually do in schools. Britton found that students were writing, generally, for three reasons: (1) to prove what they had learned; (2) to imitate a style; and (3) to demonstrate a writing skill. His conclusions hold true today in many classrooms.

The situation into the early 1980's could hardly be worse for three hostile camps existed and probably still do. Teachers comprise the first group. Testing makes teachers defensive of methods and curricula, and teaching for the test is always a source of tension. Then the public, with its basic distrust in education, places great credibility in numbers, statistics, and ranking. We have a society which thrives on and is enamored with testing and statistics. And, third, we have the test-makers - a group not to be taken as unimportant. They are the "number crunchers," a huge industry which concerns itself with technical issues and, which is viewed by many teachers with arrogance for they anticipate the way test results may be misconstrued by parents, administrators, and the general public. However, the political and economic impact of testing cannot be understated. And, who, ironically grades and evaluates more than English teachers?

Brain research conducted in the 1970's and continuing through the 1990's has influenced the way we think about the writing process and, of course, the thinking process. It, too, is transforming

assessment procedures and pedagogy. The charge to reassess, re-evaluate, reform and transform seems to have fallen to those concerned with literacy and writing. However, authentic assessment, now being called for in the teaching of science, arises at the same time we recognize the need to involve students in creative and critical thinking. Finally, we are fully realizing the strong connections between what the writer does and what the scientist does. How and why we separated the two academic areas can be explained by a "product-producing" philosophy of education and content-coverage pedagogy.

Professors of English like Edward White, who is also an expert in the assessment of writing, have accepted the charge. In White's book, Teaching and Assessing Writing (1985), he demonstrates the flaws in past writing assessment practices. He confirms the view that quantitative objectivity does not seem possible in writing. Large-scale testing measures at the college level, usually entrance procedures, influence pedagogy at the college level which eventually filters down to the high school classroom practices. One influential failure which White describes is Kellogg and Hunt's T-unit methods of text analysis. An evaluator counts the number of T-units in a piece of writing, a T-unit being a single main clause. This method of evaluation is open to much question for it totally overlooks content and deals only with form. This assessment practice can be appropriate for research purposes; but, unfortunately, it moved into pedagogy in some instances. Another measurement device which made the movement from research to pedagogy and then into dispute is error analysis. Counting the errors in a piece of writing was thought to be an appropriate way to evaluate. However, in the classroom this created an emphasis upon error-avoidance which became a basic principle in many classrooms. This evaluation process was simple, easy, but seriously flawed. Certainly a piece of writing can be free of error but weak in content. As Mina Shaughnessy points out in Errors and Expectations (1977), we must understand the reasons behind the errors. Murray holds the same view and explains that errors are merely symptoms of a larger

problem, and the writing teacher must become a diagnostician, not an evaluator. Emig, in The Web of Meaning (1983), explains,

> Much of the teaching of composition in American high schools is essentially a neurotic activity. There is little evidence, for example, that the persistent pointing out of specific errors in student themes leads to the elimination of these errors, yet teachers expend much of their energy in this futile and un-rewarding exercise (p.96).

Albert Kitzhaber in Themes, Theories and Therapy (1963) looks at composition instruction from the turn of the century to the mid-1900's and also addresses error eradication. He points out that such a focus fails to provide students with any help in other aspects of their writing like the reformulating of ideas and even the primary aim of this method, teaching students to produce error free texts. Perl (1983) and Sommers (1980) also hold this view. Perl sees an emphasis on editing as a breaking down of the rhythms generated by thinking and writing. Students' concern is with correctness rather than development of ideas. It can actually thwart the composing process for many students.

CHAPTER 3

CURRENT RESEARCH AND THEORY IN WRITING AND ITS ASSESSMENT

Those who delved into psychological research of writing apprehension (Smith, 1984; Rose 1983; Holland, 1979) saw the destructiveness of this pedagogy. Why would a student write if error avoidance is the main concern of the writer? White explains that whenever the teaching of writing focuses on the end product without much concern for its audience or the process by which it was created, a text-analysis as measurement lies behind the pedagogy. High reliability comes from counting numbers and consistency can be ensured but not validity.

Professors, writers, and writing consultants have sought and tested new ways to assess writing on a large scale. It has been acknowledged that some type of pre-test, post-test situation would be the natural way to evaluate writing; yet, three models continue to be used. One is the norm-referenced test, a multiple-choice instrument which probably measures aptitude rather than achievement. Such an instrument may show the effect of short-term instruction, but a student whose learning environment emphasizes process and creativity may not do well or receive any benefit from such a test. Analytic scoring provides a series of separate scores for sub-skills. This type of assessment tool sees writing as a sum of its parts, not as a whole. No evidence exists that shows that writing quality is the result of a series of sub-skills. The theory is fundamentally flawed. It has long been recognized by researchers such as Godshalk, Swineford, and Coffman (1969) that multiple-choice tests deny the importance of writing and creativity, and thinking.

The second widely used assessment tool is the single-essay test. At least, in this instance, the emphasis is on actual writing; however, a single piece of writing is asked to carry more weight than it can bear. Norm Chomsky points out that a single performance

may not reveal underlying competence (Greenburg, 1986). It is too insensitive a measure to show growth or improvement of writing ability; yet, it can work to a limited extent if the teachers involved agree to an appropriate writing topic and the scoring guide. Still, Leo Odell warns us that we should be cautious about diagnosing and categorizing writers. Teachers and researchers should not read too much into a single piece of writing (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl, 1983).

A third model involves the evaluation of varied results. Several holistically graded writing samples are written on a variety of topics and modes. This large-scale method involves training teacher-readers, establishing scoring guides based on agreed upon standards, and determining measurement issues. The enormity of this task cannot be understated. This type of evaluation is a massive effort requiring much time and money. However, it is regarded as the most valid for the student's work is seen as a whole, not a sum of its parts, and writing is recognized as a complex thinking task. Portfolio assessment is based on this model.

Large-scale methods such as those described above have been adapted for individual classroom use with varying degrees of success. In addition to scoring guides or rubrics, with many being created by teachers and students, the use of holistic grading or general impression evaluation is becoming popular; yet, at the classroom level, traditional grading of individual papers remains a widely used method of writing assessment despite the fact that letter grading does not show a writer how to solve a problem. Not only can a letter grade be meaningless and subjective, it may also thwart creative thinking. As Murray instructs, "Not correcting papers may be the hardest thing for a writing teacher to do. It may make the teacher feel virtuous, but it does little for the student (Murray, p.135)." Worse, receiving low grades on writing assignments may confirm the student-writer's belief that he or she cannot write or learn to write. Grades can then be paralyzing and contrary to any encouragement to improve. Another study done by Hays and Decker in 1984 suggests that students frequently even misread comments and may take positive comments in a critical way

(in Weiser). Experience also shows that, at times, comments can be used to merely justify a grade rather than instruct or encourage. In "A Polemic on Evaluating Writing" (1993) Joseph Strzepek and Marjo Figgins of the University of Virginia conclude that many English teachers use grading practices that stifle students' growth as writers. Teachers, they say, may feel the need to grade so that a piece of writing will be taken seriously, and it also shows the teacher as expert. The teacher then owns the writing, not the student. In the 1980's alternative writing practices were called for by teacher-writer-researchers like Nancy Atwell, Peter Elbow, Donald Graves, and Lucy Calkins. They recognize a need for numerous inventions, time for reflection and revision, and small-group and workshop feedback. These methods of evaluation offer an alternative to the inhibiting practice of assigning grades. Grading must be subordinate to instruction, learning, and thinking. Instead, assessment must become part of the pedagogy. In a recent interview, Robert Tierney tells us that we cannot advocate new forms of assessment while still assigning grades in a traditional way and analyzing students in a traditional way (Crumpler, 1994).

Research in writing and the creative workings of the human brain beginning in the mid-1970's has spawned new theories, methodologies, pedagogy, and assessment practices. Gordon Brossell notes in "Current Research and Unanswered Questions in Writing Assessment" that research in writing assessment is still in the developmental stages and no proven theories exist yet, but we know that "...a valid test of written performance, multiple writing samples on different occasions and in various rhetorical modes are preferable to single samples drawn from an isolated writing instance (1986, p.179)." Theorists suggest that an identifiable set of conditions can influence the production of good writing: interesting topics, appropriate rhetorical specification, a sufficient amount of time to write, the opportunity to obtain responses to one's writing and a chance to revise (Brossell). Ideal assessment procedures would reflect these conditions. Broswell's thoughts serve to shape the theme of this paper. Writing assessment ought to reflect knowledge of how writing occurs and how it is taught. It

should proceed from an understanding of writing as a complex, high order thinking process involving discovery, problem-solving and communication. With the use of portfolio assessment in the 1990's, we are witnessing movement toward this goal. Finally, the way we assess and the way we teach and the purpose of our teaching have begun to merge. As White points out, "In one decade, in a notoriously conservative and slow-moving profession, a new concept in testing and in teaching writing became accepted while no one was watching (p. 19)." By the end of the decade of the 1980's, ninety percent of the English departments reported experimenting with holistic scoring and scoring guides, in some fashion, at the college level. We have witnessed a decade in which teachers and professors have experimented with evaluation procedures such as holistic grading, analytic scoring guides, writing conferences, rubrics, and pre-and post-tests. All are obvious efforts which show the realization that change in assessment must follow changes in the methodologies in the teaching of writing. What has clearly emerged as the question of the 1990's is, "What do we want evaluation to do?" Testing and assessing involves power and, thus, is a political issue. Teachers know that they need to handle that power with maturity, decency, and fairness. The National Writing Project emphasizes the connection between what we measure and the way we teach. Also, The Standards for Assessment of Reading and Writing (1994), a joint effort produced after years of work and collaboration by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, attempts to address the question in a humanistic way by providing guidelines for the future.

CHAPTER 4

THE FUTURE: NEW STANDARDS OF ASSESSMENT

In our post-industrial, multi-cultural society the goals of education have changed from those of the factory model. The nurturing of independent learning built upon inquiry rather than the transmission of knowledge is becoming the basis of learning and teaching. In his new book, The Universal Schoolhouse, James Moffet tells us that we need self-sufficiency in the American workplace,

> ...which is changing from an authoritarian factory or office run hierarchically like an army, each worker doing one task for years on end, to a shifting complex of activities requiring flexible, self-directing workers commanding more mental than physical skills and capable of collaborating in teams (1994, p.45).

If what we need and value should control how we assess, and if we acknowledge that assessment must drive instruction, all academic areas will be affected. If we are to promote critical and creative thinking and problem-solving and the generation of multiple solutions, we need assessment procedures that complement these goals, and we need procedures and methods which will allow students to explore what they have learned and to determine if they have met their responsibilities and goals. Assessment, then, must serve the student by motivating the student to learn, to reflect on that learning, and to evaluate intellectual growth and by teaching lessons that can be carried into adult life. Assessment tools must help in preparing students for survival in a future which promises to be saturated with complex decisions and choices. The preparers of the new Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing, The International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, tell us that the past thirty years has produced research which calls for revolutionary changes in our understanding

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of languages, learning and literacy. We must outgrow the limitations of traditional forms of schooling and assessment. This shift from knowledge transmission to inquiry has important implications for assessment (1994, p.6). The new standards for writing and reading assessment warn that any assessment procedure that does not contribute positively to teaching and learning should not be used. The promotion of critical thinking for all students is primary. Thus, those procedures that determine specific or limited sub-skills, do not demand reflection, focus on ranking, rating, or comparing, or oversimplify complex behavior like writing, should be abandoned. The authors of the new standards call for authenticity gained by giving up one-time tests and writing samples and taking advantage of continuous classroom assessment. Multiple opportunities to observe growth must be provided. Teachers' direct documentation is prescribed for the classroom while test results should be viewed as "indirect estimation." By using these general guidelines and by determining the specific results which we want evaluation procedures to effect, we can develop explicit goals for an assessment tool.

CHAPTER 5

THE IDEAL

After surveying the literature of past and present pertaining to writing instruction and its assessment in addition to relying upon experience, I offer a list of what we would like writing assessment to accomplish. Ideally evaluation should do the following for the student writer:

1. reduce writing anxiety.
2. encourage risk-taking.
3. encourage rewriting and revision.
4. develop a positive attitude toward the writing process.
5. provide feedback.
6. show growth.
7. encourage reflection.
8. reveal potential.
9. effect change and growth.
10. offer control and responsibility (ownership).
11. encourage authentic learning (inquiry).
12. nurture independent learning.
13. encourage metacognition.
14. provide standards of quality.
15. provide the elements of evaluation.
16. provide decision-making opportunities.
17. encourage writing without the teacher.
18. enable students to evaluate themselves.

The above list is, I am certain, not exhaustive, but I hope it offers a

1. encourage coaching and guiding.
2. offer freedom control and criticism.
3. provide standards for excellent writing.
4. encourage mastery.
5. follow growth and development of the writer.
6. relieve stress from grading.
7. allow abandonment of the rank-book.
8. motivate weak writers.
9. replace judgment with encouragement.
10. aid in decision-making.
11. provide a wide view.
12. provide opportunities for dialog and conferencing.
13. aid in teaching revision.
14. aid in recognition of patterns.
15. aid in developing a sense of what works.
16. improve the quality of teaching.

Finally, we need to list the characteristics of the ideal assessment instrument:

1. The emphasis should be on the positive rather than the negative. It should recognize what the student can do rather than cannot do.
2. Assessment should enhance learning and be an actual learning tool.
3. An assessment tool must be valid and reliable.
4. It should be continuous, dynamic, and open-ended.
5. An evaluation tool should encourage honesty and trust.
6. It should be formative, summative and reflective.
7. Accountability should be less important than responsibility.
8. It should encourage independent learning.
9. It should encourage creative and critical thinking.
10. It should encourage mastery and goal-setting.

Again, the above list is not exhaustive but offers general guidelines. The three lists are not mutually exclusive, but recursive in nature.

In a general sense, this project set out to determine how teachers should respond to a piece of writing, to determine which kinds of responses would be most helpful, and to determine the most effective method. The results of a survey described in Chapter nine of this thesis should be of value. Clearly, the writing teacher's response should encourage and, thus, influence change and growth in the student and encourage independent learning. James Britton (1975) envisions the teacher in a role other than that of the examiner, a role in which teachers do not use writing to test whether a student has learned something. Rather, he envisions the teacher using writing as a means of hastening that. Through writing, revision, and assessment the students discover and clarify what they know, come to understand their writing strategies, and develop new strategies to communicate and evaluate effectively. He acknowledges that we must, in the end, give some type of verdict on student but he agrees with Donald Murray in stating that we should strive to do it as little as possible. In addition, Britton believes that we need to sample a great output, and the student should help in controlling the selection of the sample. The choice itself should be a rational and deliberate process with both student and teacher participating. He calls for a good deal of dialog in this selection. Grant Wiggins, an assessment expert, tells us that authenticity is the key (in Thompson, 1985). We need to replicate what real writers do: research and generate ideas, evaluate and select observations, organize and synthesize thoughts, revise and reformulate thinking, and finally, write for real audiences. The student writer needs to face the same challenges and deal with the same standards. Not only writers, but business people, scientists, historians, and many other professionals face these tasks. Then we, as educators, must bridge that gap between the artificial school community and authentic experience. We need to deal with what will be faced in the real world of the twenty-first century. Wiggins, along with Guba and Lincoln (1989), recommends assessment dedicated directly to enhancing learning and instructs that it must be direct rather than indirect. Teachers and students should engage in daily formative

evaluation in determining what makes writing work in certain contexts. The closer the assessment process gets to the student, the more likely it will have an effect on learning. The more immediate it is, the more likely the feedback will be used. Someone has to make an evaluation and that someone must include the student. Great agreement exists concerning the fact that writing assessment should not be an isolated, independent task or event. Learning is not a linear continuum, nor is the assessing of writing. Assessments cannot be separated from instruction. Dennie Palmer Wolf and James Moffet have expressed similar views on this issue. Wolf explains that an increasing number of educators are working to diversify and humanize the way we evaluate student learning. This paper and much research supports the fact that traditional methods actually work to prevent students from becoming thoughtful respondents and judges of their own work. Moffet advises,

> When students become empowered to make choices, they take charge of their own education, and the main problem of schooling-alienation-rapidly diminishes (p.48).

Moffet claims that superior ways of assessing can indeed take place in the classroom as some teachers are now showing, and he calls those methods the three P's - performances, portfolios, and projects. He identifies these as authentic activities and valid assessment and learning tools.

CHAPTER 6

THE PORTFOLIO: A MEANS OF DISCOVERY, REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENT

Although the use of a portfolio as an assessment tool has been in existence for many years, its wide use in evaluation began to appear in writing classrooms in the 1980's; and, far from being a passing educational fad, their valid use in assessment has been documented by many teachers-researchers like Catherine Lucas, Kathleen Yancy, James Newkirk, and Roberta Camp. Also, they are in use in large-scale assessment programs like the Vermont Portfolio Project and the Bay Project in California. Teachers Mary Ann Smith and Sandra Murphy in Looking into Portfolios address the potential of portfolio assessment (1992). They view it not as an end, like a final exam, but a beginning. The learning process and assessment are interactive in the portfolio classroom. There exists "...a dynamic and recursive whole" in which learning, teaching, and assessment work together, and where the teacher is not an examiner, but a collaborator and students become "active, thoughtful participants in the analysis of their own learning (p.58)." Geof Hewitt, a writer, teacher, and consultant in the Vermont Writing Project gives sweeping support for the use of portfolios as an assessment tool by stating, "Probably no human activity offers a fuller picture of a learner's growth than writing. Thought and feeling are made visible in a language the reader shares with the writer (Hewitt, 1995, P.ix)."

In his work with the project he has learned that portfolios provide a record of a student's development as a writer and a thinker. In addition to his experience, a review of the literature supports this form of assessment for portfolios exemplify all the characteristics of the ideal assessment tool. The new Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing tells us that portfolio

assessment can be reflective and can involve students in their own learning as well as assisting teachers in refocusing their instruction. Research conducted during the 1970's and 1980's by Flower & Hayes found that planning time was one outstanding characteristic which distinguished expert writers from novice writers. A properly managed classroom portfolio program requires planning and reflection time.

This paper's intent is not to outline the setting up of a portfolio program or to list the specific characteristics of such a program in large-scale or classroom use, but to demonstrate the portfolio's potential in providing authentic learning experiences and authentic assessment. In the portfolio classroom a student keeps a record of personal writing in which topics are chosen with a good deal of freedom. As Wolf points out, student writers do what professional writers, thinkers, and inventors do. They keep longitudinal collections of their ideas, drafts, and questions which provide them with a storehouse of possibilities. Such activities nurture creative thinking. Also, Hewitt reminds us of the Latin root of assessment - assidere- meaning to sit beside, and that is what the teacher in a portfolio classroom does. The teacher works beside the student as a coach; he or she does not stand in front of the student as an expert or sit behind a desk as a judge. Rather the teacher in such a classroom nudges, questions, listens, converses, offers feedback, reasons, intervenes, and models. The teacher directly participates in the student's learning process. In "Non-technical Assessment", Peter Johnston suggests that we change terms in order to change attitudes and thinking. Instead of calling observations "subjective" or "anecdotal," we should view them as "direct documentation (1992)." Teachers must learn to value their own assessment knowledge, and we must deal with our cultural concern for being objective and scientific and our society's high value on quantification and control. Because portfolios do not quickly or cheaply produce a great amount of standardized data, they may not be a certainty for large-scale assessment in the future even though they are now in use in Vermont, California, and Michigan and being considered for assessment use in other states such as

Massachusetts. However, as individual classroom teachers, we need to think in terms of responsibility rather than accountability. Johnston points out, "...to arrange for responsibility, you have to focus on building communities, involvement, trusting relationships and self-assessment (p. 188)." This is what the portfolio classroom has the potential to achieve. Portfolio assessment, because it offers a wide range and large sample of a student's work, also offers a continuous and tangible record of student progress. It demonstrates to the student that his or her work is valued. The collection of work allows for risk-taking, rehearsal, a practice-field, and many opportunities for reflection. All of this gives their use relevance beyond the classroom. Students must know where they are before they can determine where they would like to go or need to go. The work of cognitive psychologists Scardamalia and Bereiter (1985) calls for "procedural ︰ ilitation" in the classroom. A simplified routine and external support can help students get a start on more complex executive processes, but students must understand where the facilitation is helping them go. Portfolios encourage goal-setting. Students contribute to and know the criteria, use it, and, as a result, internalize it. This type of deep processing fosters long term retention of lessons learned. If students become aware of strategies and goals, they can take a more active role in their learning. Carl Bereiter, in The Psychology of Writing, explains that by gaining insight into their cognitive processes, it is hoped that students will take a more active role in the development of their cognitive strategies (1987). Students' metacognitive development would seem to be aided by giving them greater access to data arising from their own cognitive processes. Caroline Lucas points out that students are not being tested but stretched and challenged each time they attempt something new. Writing-to-learn researchers Schumacher and Nash in "Conceptualizing and Measuring Knowledge Change due to Writing", describe the intense cognitive effort involved in the writing process (1991). This effort, they say, probably produces enduring change in the structural aspects of the knowledge domain about which one is writing. Although the picture is confusing and incomplete at the

moment, it is widely believed that writing plays an important role in the knowledge change. The cognitive model of the writing process created by writing researchers Flower and Hayes classifies writing as thinking, a type of problem-solving, and the result of a complex series of recursive mental activities. In portfolio assessment, students reflect and write about their writing in describing the process they observed and in forming their evaluations. The student is put in touch with his or her composing process. This is metacognitive activity. Also, Donald Graves, writer and teacher, explains, "Children grow because they become aware of what they are doing, then forge on to tackle new issues in their composing (Graves, 1984, p. 129)."

Writing conferences are an essential part of the portfolio assessment process. Murray feels that eighty-five percent of the learning takes place in the writing conference. He offers teachers a guide to conducting conferences and evaluating by saying that "less is more." Nancy Atwell echoes Murray in advising that conferences should be short, frequent, and informal. Conferences are meant to draw out students' thoughts, not put teachers' thoughts in. Murray advises teachers not to do work which rightfully belongs to the students. Students must learn to evaluate in order to produce a more effective draft without the teacher. Students can gain trust and confidence in themselves as writers and thinkers in portfolio assessment. Portfolios, I believe, give students the chance to develop what Murray calls "the other self," the "self" who tracks what is taking place, the "self" who reads the text, the "self" who steps backward and evaluates as a craftsman, the "self" who edits, the "self" who is critical, and the "self" who articulates the process and gives the engineering history. This other self can take over the function of the teacher; and thus, the student becomes an independent learner. These conclusions assume a certain degree of motivation on the part of the student. Again, writer-researchers

In using portfolios the student is given rights: the right to experiment as a professional writer does, the right to many drafts, the right to response and feedback from teachers and peers in addition to oneself, the right to discover personal meaning, and the right to work toward high standards. In using portfolio assessment, the teacher is not telling the student to "do his own thing" by offering freedom and choice but rather is placing responsibility upon the student by having him or her claim ownership and management of work. The teacher becomes a demanding and encouraging intervener, and the pressure is placed upon the students to decide what they want to say, know the chosen topic or subject, find a voice and audience, and monitor their writing processes. This is nothing less than critical thinking. Some writing teachers, like Graves, Caulkins and Sowers find that "think-alouds," to monitor the writing process, and letters of reflection, to evaluate and describe that process, effectively foster revision. Murray finds conferencing in which the student reasons out his thinking and comes to conclusions as efficient. Either way, students are asked to be involved in a metacognitive activity. These findings show portfolios to be a fusion of evaluation and learning, and, as a result, a valuable and desirable assessment tool.

CHAPTER 7

REALITY REMAINS: HOW DO WE ASSESS THE PORTFOLIO?

Portfolio use allows teachers to delay grading as long as possible, but some form of final assessment must come. Rexford Brown in A Personal Statement on "Writing Assessment and Educational Policy" expresses the view that writing teachers do not need tests in the ordinary sense, and they certainly do not need objectivity in the psychometric sense. They need qualitative, not quantitative, objectivity. He specifies this view by adding,

> Qualitative objectivity has to do with making factual, defensible observations - engaged evaluation-like when the director works with the actor or the craftsman stands over the apprentice, when the editor works with the writer to move the writing towards its potential - then learning and evaluation fuse (1986, p. 51).

This is what the portfolio teacher strives to do; yet, grading remains a reality. The question to ask at this point is, "What does the 'portfolio' teacher not want to do?" Individual pieces should not be graded for each piece could be viewed as a "one-time" test rather than an ongoing work. In a recent article (1994) Theodora Wilson warns that the one-time test teaches students a destructive lesson because life and learning are not like that. Failed experiments must not be penalized if we want to foster creativity and motivation. Every time we grade, with letter or number, we are stopping a movement and denying the importance of revision. And, as many writing researchers like Flower and Hayes have demonstrated, global revision is a characteristic of the competent writer. Then, if we do not grade, in any sense, each draft or revision, how do we coach our students and foster reflection, revision and self-evaluation? The

question remains, "What do we do along the way?" Teachers like Newkirk, Wilson, Atwell, and Randall Pfeiffer, experienced in the use of portfolio assessment, offer the following suggestions. All call for some type of formative rather than summative evaluation. Each draft confronts the student with rereading, evaluation, and revision. The demand is great and somehow the teacher must help to bear the weight. Rubrics and scoring guides developed by teachers and students have been used in a positive way. Peer conferencing and student-teacher conferencing are also effective. Various methods should be attempted for standardization of evaluation would defeat the goal and lessen the potential of portfolio assessment. As noted earlier, Atwood and Murray favor short, informal conferences during the drafting stages. Atwood offers a tentative grade with a conference at mid-term but has few takers. Wilson offers comments on a card attached to the draft. Without grading she finds that comments focus on improvement, not justification of a grade. Pfeiffer, in an experiment in record keeping in a portfolio classroom, found that attaching a writing conference form to each draft is a positive practice that provides focus for the conference and encourages reflection about the process (1994). Later, he found that the form provides him with a way to assess the student's response to revision suggestions. His form is typical of those used successfully in other portfolio classrooms. He asks several questions concerning the following: the strengths of the draft, major concerns, improvements necessary, and what seems to be working in this context and, most important, why. When the time comes to review the entire portfolio, he finds that these conference forms provide a formalized way to track student accomplishments and a valid procedure for judging a student's process and effort. With this method, he finds that questions of fairness, accuracy and time constraints are addressed. In "Portfolio Practice in the Middle School" Newkirk underlines the fact that a writing conference at the

successfully used small peer groups in which the writer participates as an alternative method of providing feedback.

In "Pitfalls in the Testing of Writing" Professor White stresses the necessity of revision and the time necessary for that reflective activity (in Greenburg). He feels that we teachers often receive bad writing from our students because that is what we call for, despite our best intentions. For example, our most frustrating task as writing teachers is the teaching of revision. Few students take revision seriously because we often fail to plan time for the revision process. The portfolio classroom builds in this time for revision and reflection. White is another teacher who has found scoring guides to be useful in the drafting stage because they indicate to the student the qualities and standards to be achieved in a particular piece. He too warns against uniformity, and points out that new guides need to be developed for each new piece of writing. At the college level and high school level such guides can be developed quickly by teachers and by students. These can be a highly effective learning tool since a guide allows a student to evaluate his or her own work. In this instance the teacher is giving the student some intellectual integrity as well as receiving great relief from the curse of grading. Younger students must understand the scoring guide to use it effectively, and, for that reason, student participation in its development is necessary. Many teachers have successfully experimented with student-teacher created rubrics and scoring guides. At the college level White has had students develop scoring guides using "anchor" papers from previous classes as models. I have done this with positive results at the high school level. These model papers clearly exemplify goals and tasks to be accomplished.

CHAPTER 8

A LOOK AT CURRENT PRACTICES: A PILOT STUDY

Portfolio use offers many opportunities for various kinds of feedback. In Learning to Write/Writing to Learn Mayher, Lester, and Pradl (1983) give great value to feedback from a reader by stating that as an aid to a writer's matching her text with her intentions, it cannot be overemphasized. They believe that peers can be enlisted to provide response, but the teacher of school writing will undoubtedly be the most important source of feedback for the student. The response to the questionnaire in Appendix A supports their view. A pilot study of approximately fifty students in grades eight, ten and twelve requested student response to the kinds of feedback which offered the most help in revising. Students were to rate the most widely used methods as "very helpful," "helpful," of "some help" or of "no help." Students were to consider newer methodologies like rubrics, peer groups and holistic scoring as well as traditional grading, student-teacher writing conferences, and the use of a narrative written by the teacher. A description of each method was provided in case students had no experience with a particular type of feedback. A decisive ninety-four percent of all students thought that a letter grade with comments would be "helpful" or "most helpful" in revising. Grade level showed little difference in opinion. (See Assessing Writing Chart I on page 31). The second highest rated form of feedback was the student-teacher conference. Seventy-eight percent of all students found this method "helpful" or "very helpful." Here grade level did make a difference. Ninety-two percent of the tenth graders (See Assessing Writing Chart 2 on page 32.) and the same percent of twelfth graders (See Assessing Writing Chart 3 on page 33) rated this evaluation technique highly compared to sixty percent of the students in grade eight. (See Assessing Writing Chart 4 on page 34). Older students would have more experience in conferencing; however, maturity
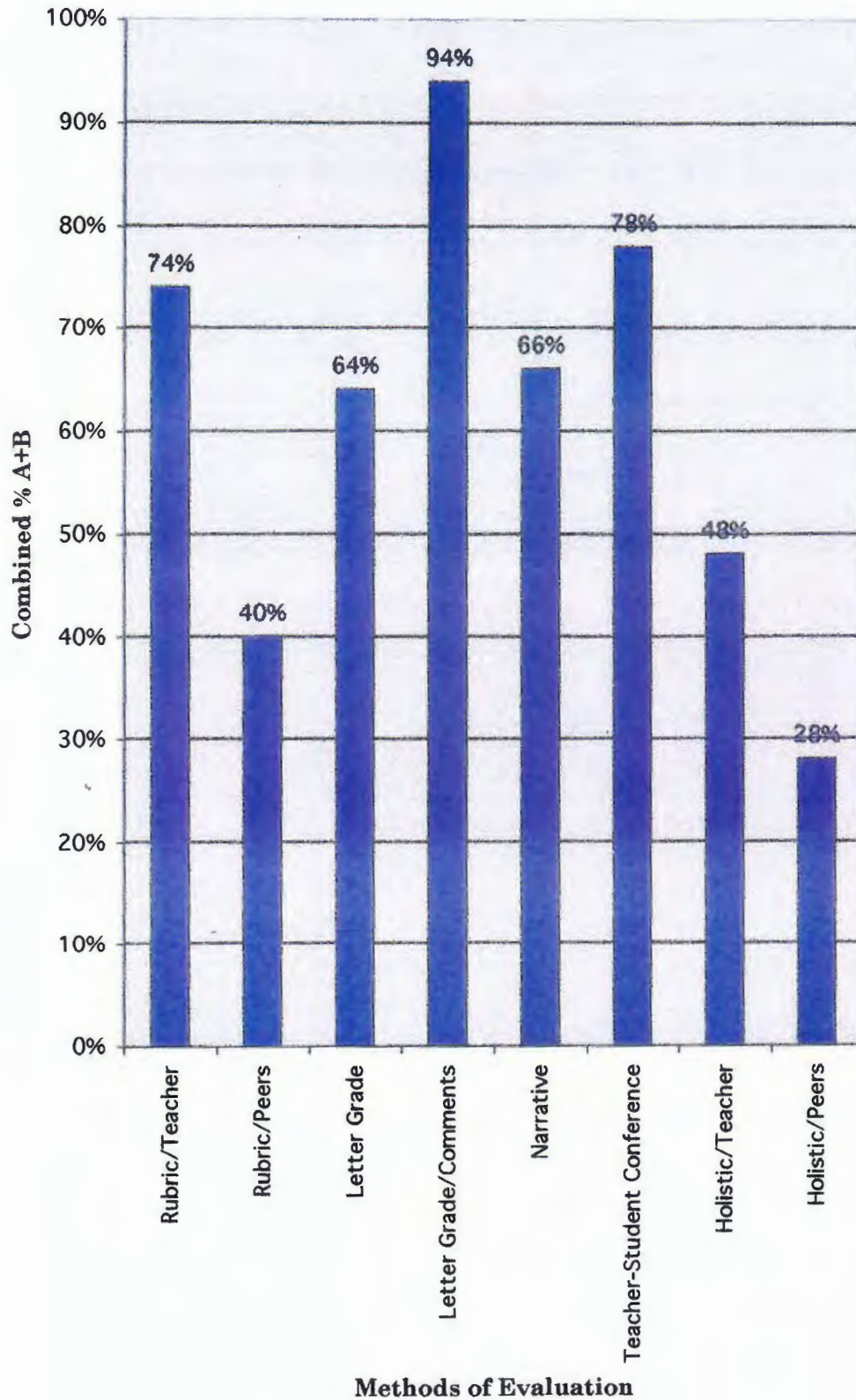
could be a factor in this instance. Nevertheless, the results would seem to support the view that teacher feedback is important to the students in this high school. Assessing Writing Charts 5 and 6 on pages 35 and 36 show which methods of evaluation and feedback the students found to be of "no help" in revision. These grade ten and twelve students always thought teacher feedback from a letter grade with comments, a narrative written by the teacher and giving no grade, or a student-teacher writing conference would be of some degree of help. The zero percent rating in these three categories again indicate strong reliance on teacher feedback. Chart 7 on page 37 shows the opinion of grade eight students to be similar with one clear exception. Twenty-four percent of these students saw a narrative as being of "no help." Again, this may also be due to the level of maturity of the student and/or the length of the teacher response and the degree of experience. Assessing Writing Chart 8 on page 38 shows that among all students holistic grading by one's peers was thought to be the least useful in revision. This may be due to the fact that students had the least experience with holistic grading. (See Assessing Writing Chart 9 on page 39). Assessing Writing Chart 8 shows that a rubric completed by one's peers received the third highest rating in being of "no help." Peer group review, in general, seems to be of the least value to these students. The fact that students give peer review little credibility may be due to personal feelings of ineptness in evaluation. Students, not trained to do this effectively, may see little value in evaluation from their peers. Here again, portfolios have the potential to provide opportunities to practice evaluation skills.

Students were also asked to indicate the forms of evaluation with which they had experience. Assessing Writing Chart 9 shows that most students had some experience with the methods used. Almost all grade eight students indicated experiences with all forms of feedback. Students in grades ten and twelve indicated little experience with rubrics and less with holistic scoring.

of teacher experimentation with alternative means of assessment. Letter grades and letter grades with comments are in the widest use with teacher-student conferencing being next. This may also signal change. This pilot study tested the efficiency and validity of the questionnaire. It does seem to visually show us a fairly traditional school where innovations and changes in assessment are occurring to a significant extent. It also shows a heavy reliance on grades as may be expected in a high school in a high economic area in which approximately ninety percent of the graduating seniors go on to a four-year college.

Given the fact that teachers need to become better responders to student writing and need to determine which response strategies are helpful and which may even be harmful, such a study provides useful information. Obviously, the most helpful kind of feedback must be given before the writer considers a piece of writing finished. Revision has been a neglected area in the teaching of writing until the last decade when cognitive psychologists conducted research which demonstrated the use of planning, pausing, and revision by highly competent writers.

Helpful/Very Helpful-Combined-Grades 8,10+12

Grade 10 - Helpful/Very Helpful

Bar chart showing Combined % A+B (y-axis, 0% to 100%) by Methods of Evaluation (x-axis):

- Rubric/Teacher: 69%
- Rubric/Peers: 31%
- Letter Grade: 62%
- Letter Grade/Comments: 77%
- Narrative: 85%
- Teacher-Student Conference: 92%
- Holistic/Teacher: 23%
- Holistic/Peers: 23%

Grade 12-Helpful or Very Helpful
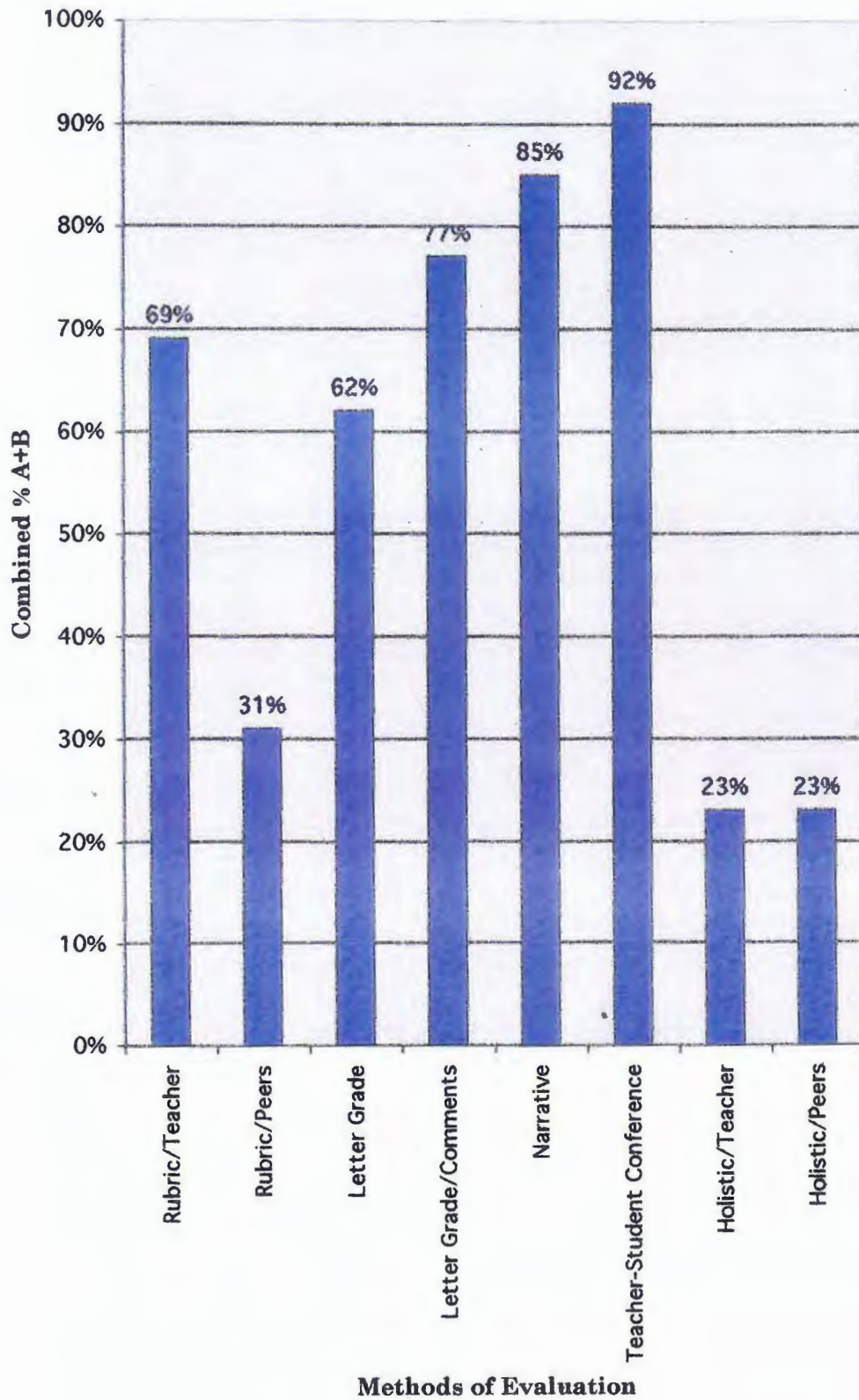
Methods of Evaluation
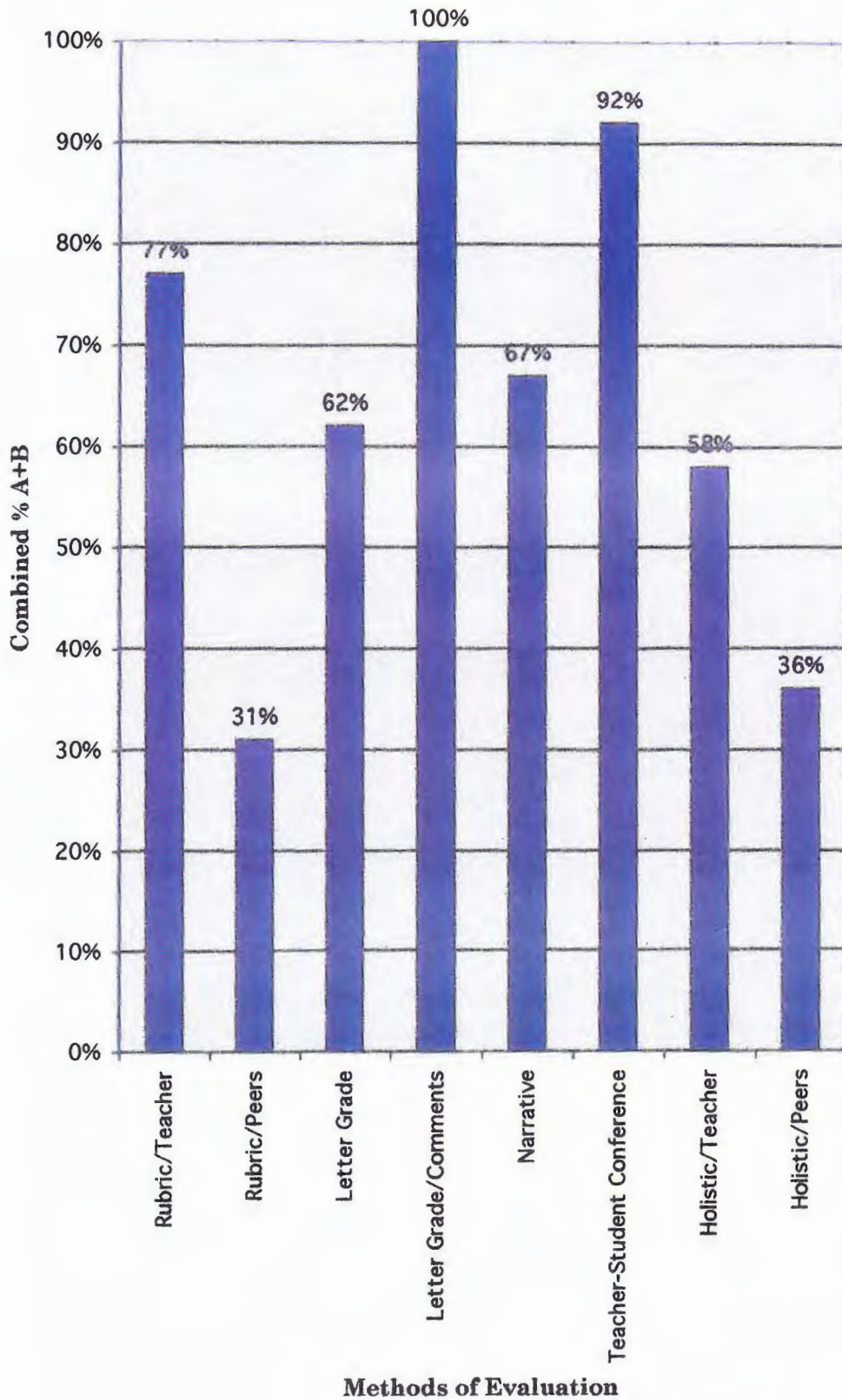
Grade 8-Helpful or Very Helpful
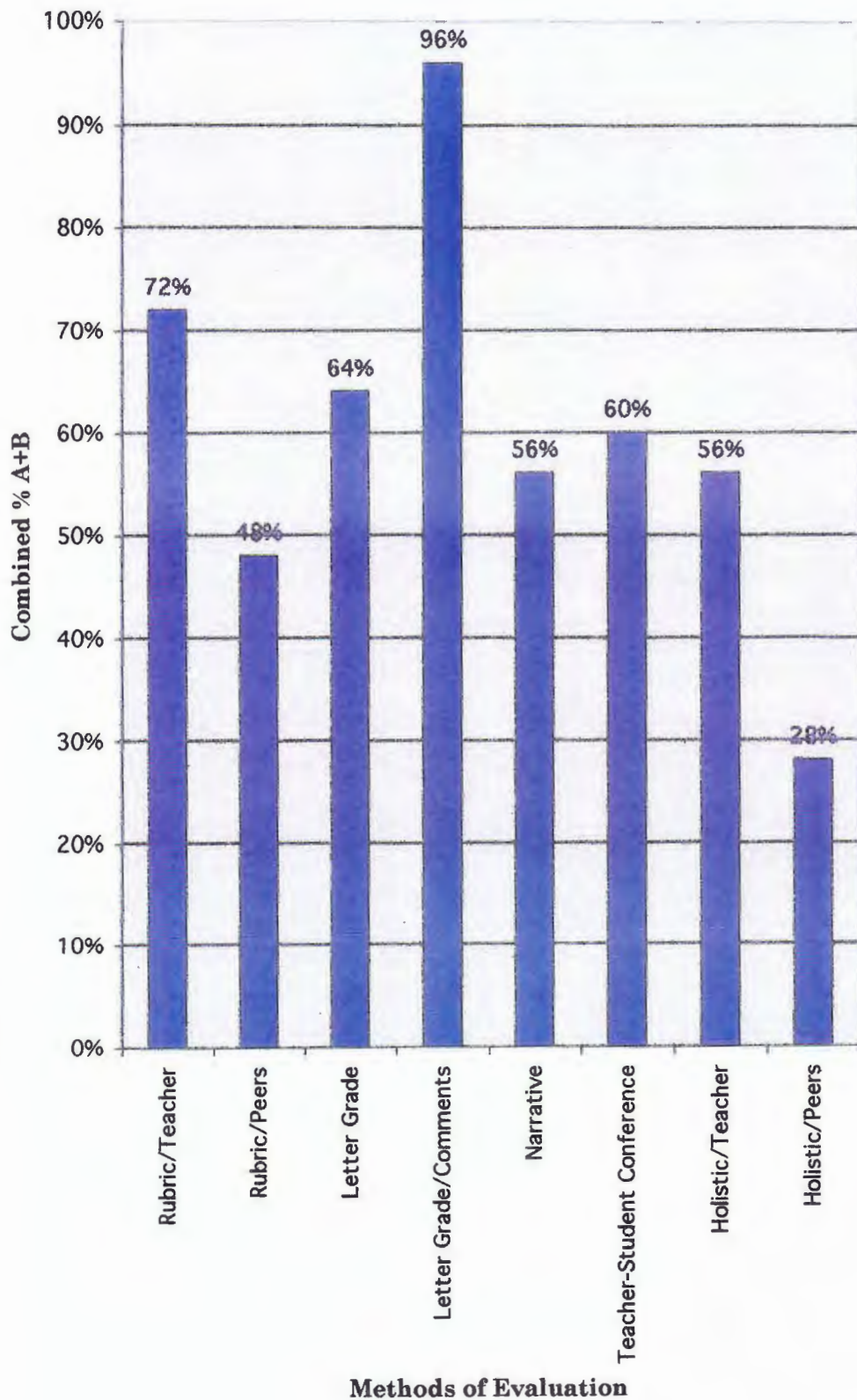
Grade 10-No Help

Grade 12-No Help

X-axis: Methods of Evaluation

Y-axis: % Part D. "No Help"

- Rubric/Teacher: 8%
- Rubric/Peers: 15%
- Letter Grade: 15%
- Letter Grade/Comments: 0%
- Narrative: 0%
- Teacher-Student Conference: 0%
- Holistic/Teacher: 15%
- Holistic/Peers: 27%

Grade 8-No Help

(Bar chart titled "Grade 8-No Help". Y-axis: "% Part D. "No Help"" ranging from 0% to 40%. X-axis: "Methods of Evaluation")

Method of Evaluation	Value
Rubric/Teacher	0%
Rubric/Peers	28%
Letter Grade	4%
Letter Grade/Comments	0%
Narrative	24%
Teacher-Student Conference	8%
Holistic/Teacher	16%
Holistic/Peers	36%

Grades 8,10+12-No Help

Chart showing "% Part D. 'No Help'" (y-axis, 0% to 35%) versus "Methods of Evaluation" (x-axis):

- Rubric/Teacher: 1%
- Rubric/Peers: 22%
- Letter Grade: 14%
- Letter Grade/Comments: 0%
- Narrative: 11%
- Teacher-Student Conference: 1%
- Holistic/Teacher: 25%
- Holistic/Peers: 31%

Students Experienced With Evaluation Method

Bar chart — Number of Students (y-axis, 0 to 50) vs. Methods of Evaluation (x-axis):

- Rubric/Teacher: 38
- Rubric/Peers: 32
- Letter Grade: 48
- Letter Grade/Comments: 48
- Narrative: 31
- Teacher-Student Conference: 42
- Holistic/Teacher: 30
- Holistic/Peers: 26

CHAPTER 9

A SURVEY OF STUDENT RESPONSE TO CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

The pilot study indicated a strong dependence on teacher response in student revision of a piece of writing and a definitive lack of credibility in peer evaluation of writing. Students showed a strong reliance on a grade even though they were instructed to base their choices on the assessment methods which would be most helpful in the revision process. In the second year of this project, the survey was expanded. Approximately two hundred students were surveyed including twelfth grade students from a high school with a much different socio-economic composition. Although differences in grade levels seemed to have minimal effects on the results of the pilot study, grade eight and ten students at a small suburban high school were again included to test the validity and reliability of the survey.

Assessing Writing Chart 10 on page 42 shows the responses of grade eight students in the expanded study. Again, a high number of students in this grade, ninety percent, showed heavy reliance on a teacher grade with comments to aid them in the revision stage. The lowest credibility was again given to a holistic grade from a small peer group. Only thirty percent of the students found this method helpful. This percentage almost matched the overall twenty-eight percent response to this method in the pilot study. A rubric completed by a peer group also had a low response of thirty-two percent. Results of the expanded study validated the findings of the pilot study for this grade level with one interesting exception. The results show a significant difference in the students' response to a narrative written by the teacher. The pilot study showed that only fifty-six percent of grade eight students found this helpful while the second study gave this method of assessment much higher

credibility with a positive response from seventy-one percent of the students in this grade. These students also gave a teacher-student conference a lower rating. Forty-eight percent indicated a degree of helpfulness. A surprisingly larger percentage of students in the expanded survey, twenty-eight percent, thought conferencing to be of no help. Lack of experience in teacher conferencing could be a factor influencing this result. Only thirty-eight percent of these students responded that they had experienced teacher-student conferencing. This surprisingly correlated with the results from the pilot study in which thirty percent of all students in grades eight, ten, and twelve reported experience with teacher conferencing. It may be that the traditional forty minute period at the secondary level lessens the opportunity for teachers to use this valuable stimulus to revision advocated by writing teacher-researchers like Atwell, Murray, and Elbow. Again, rubrics and holistic grades were given the lowest values in helpfulness in the revision process. Less than twenty-five percent of these eighth graders found these assessment methods helpful. This result suggests that students trained to expect a grade would exhibit little reliance on these types of evaluation.

Grade ten responses also indicate that students believe the value of a grade with comments from the teacher to be most helpful. Assessing Writing Chart 11 on page 43 shows that ninety-three percent of these students favored this method of assessment. This result corresponds with the overall finding of the pilot study in which ninety-four percent found teacher given grades and comments to be helpful or very helpful. Holistic grading and a rubric completed by peers again received the lowest rating. Teacher-student conferencing was valued far more highly by grade ten students. Once more the result here could be attributed to experience with conferencing. Sixty-eight percent of these students reported experience compared to thirty-seven percent of the eighth graders. Teacher response was highly rated by grade ten students whether the method used was a rubric (eighty-three percent), a grade with comments (ninety-three percent), a narrative (eighty-six percent), or a conference (eighty-five percent).

Grade 8-Helpful or Very Helpful-1996

Methods of Evaluation
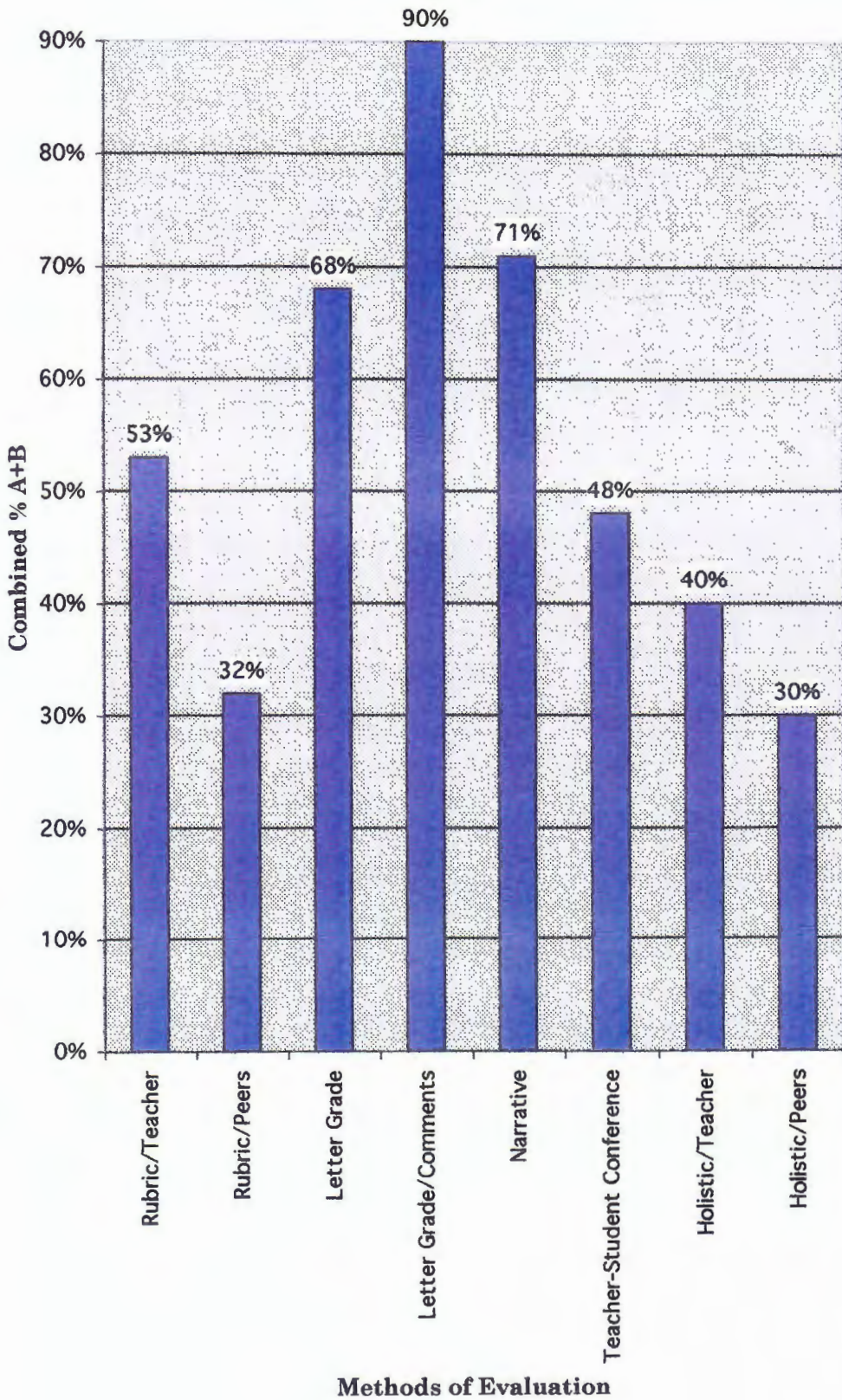
Grade 10-Helpful or Very Helpful-1996
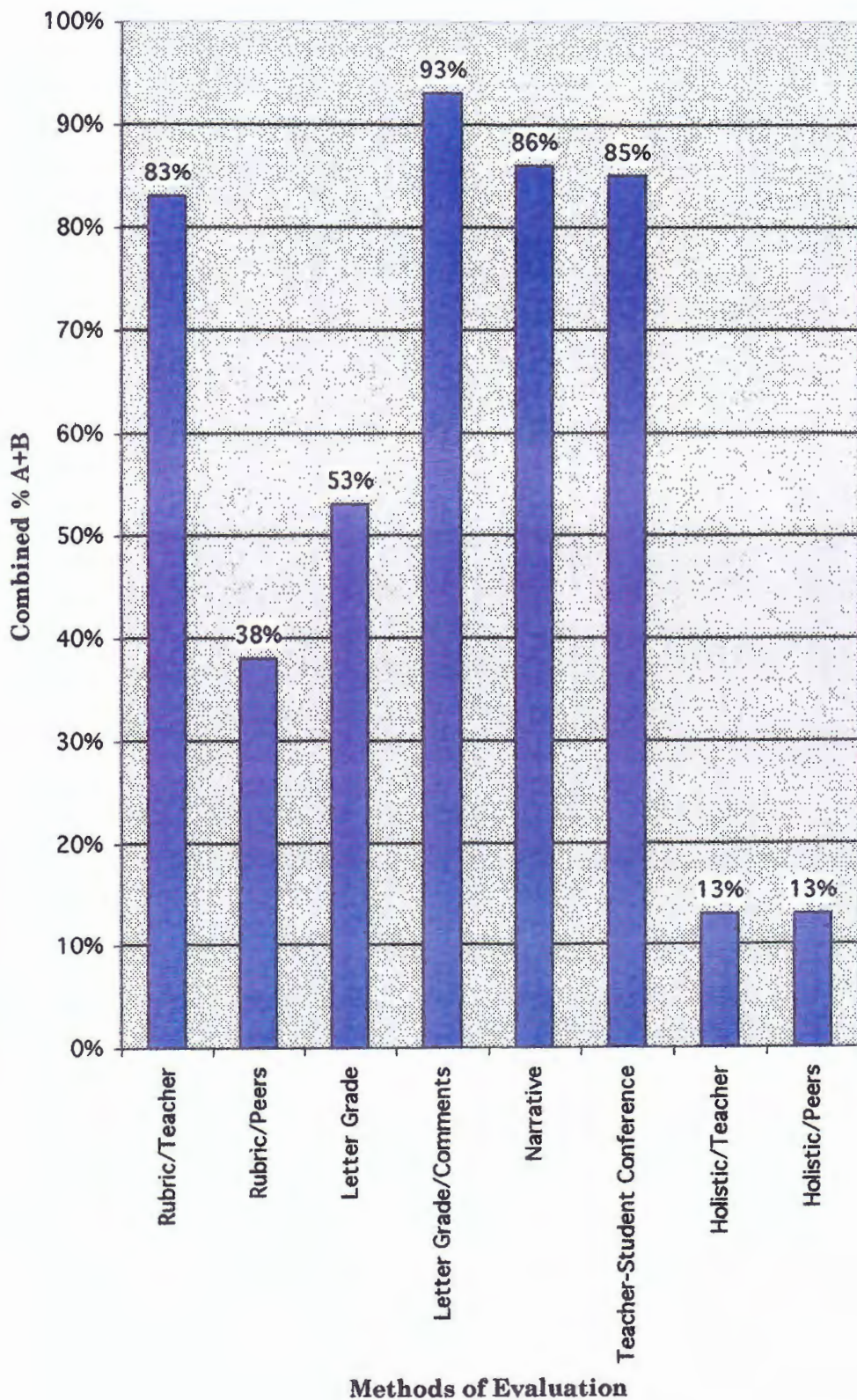
Grade eight and grade ten responses validate the results of the pilot study. Students do indeed look to the teacher as expert and value that feedback. Teachers then need to determine the best response strategies. However, students need to give more credence to their peers' assessments in order to realize the worth of their own evaluation skills. More training is necessary and must start at an early age. An important and hopeful change can be seen in the response to a teacher-student conference. By grade ten, eighty-five percent of the students saw the value in this method of assessment and found it significantly more helpful that just a letter grade. The comparison also shows that the grade ten students gave less credibility to holistic grading although the difference in experience with small peer groups was less than two percent. (Twenty-three percent of grade eight responders claimed experience compared to twenty-five percent of the tenth graders.) There was only a seven percent difference in holistic grading by a teacher. (In grade eight twenty-three percent showed experience compared to thirty percent of the grade ten students.)

The second year study of grade twelve students reveals the same heavy reliance on teacher response. Assessing Writing Chart 12 on page 47 displays the following results. Ninety-eight percent of the students in this grade felt a teacher's grade with comments to be the most valuable feedback, followed by a teacher narrative. A rubric completed by a teacher was rated almost the same as a teacher conference. Unexpectedly, forty-six percent of the grade twelve students had experience with this evaluation method compared with thirty-four percent who reported experience with conferencing. Grade twelve and grade eight experience with conferencing was almost the same, and quite in contrast to grade ten where sixty-eight percent of the students reported conference experience. However, one grade twelve teacher reported that students believed the conference would come at the end of the process as a formal evaluation. In this instance, the conference would justify the grade rather than be a learning or teaching opportunity. Grade twelve students at a large suburban high school,
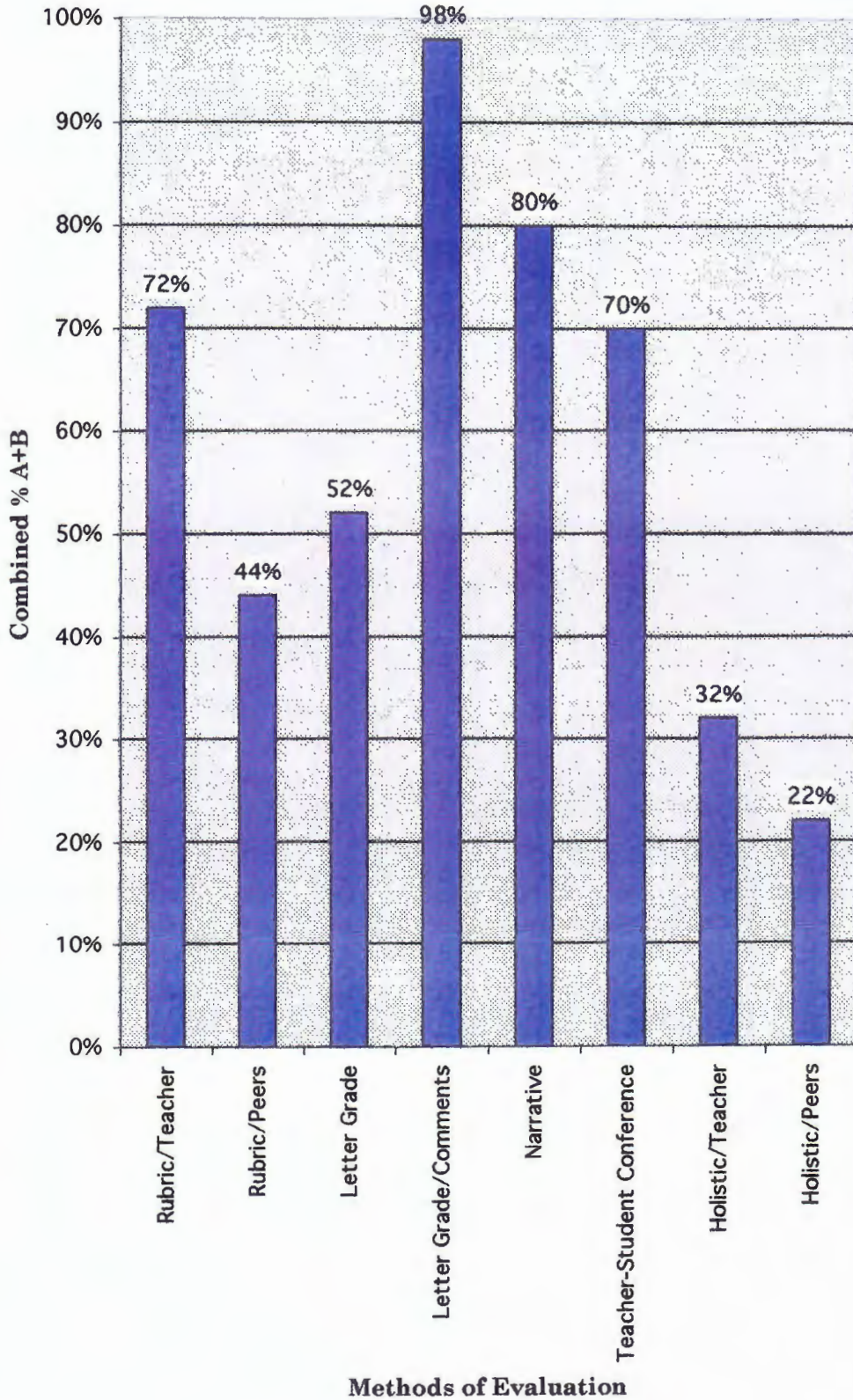
the comparison school, reported that forty-six percent had experience with conferencing. Again, holistic grading by one's peers received the least credibility. This finding held true for all grade levels as well as grade twelve students at both high schools. Giving a holistic grade, described in the survey as general impression scoring with a simple rating of 1, 2, 3, or 4 may simply not provide the writer with the quality and quantity of feedback which the students feel they need to revise. Although quite efficient for the teacher, it may be an ineffective strategy given the strong negative response to that assessment method at all grade levels and at both high schools surveyed. A holistic grade, furnishing little information, is, in reality, only a general measure of quality. Here we may have a large scale assessment tool, useful in making comparisons among students and districts, showing little or dubious merit in classroom use. Writing Assessment Chart 13 on page 48 clearly displays students' value of this strategy.

A second high school was included in the second year of the study to test the reliability of the findings of the pilot study. Is a high school with a high percentage of four-year college bound students unique in its response to this particular survey? The answer seems to be no. Writing Assessment Chart 14 on page 49 shows quite similar responses from grade twelve students at a much larger high school with significant socio-economic differences. In addition to being more socially diverse, forty-two percent of these students go on to an education at a four-year college compared to ninety-five percent of the students at the small high school which graduates approximately eighty students per year. Students at this large high school, which graduates approximately four hundred students annually, also place a great deal of value on response from a teacher rather than a peer group. The only significant difference seems to be in the credibility these students gave to a rubric completed by a peer group. These students rated this as low as holistic grading by one's peers. These students also indicated significantly less experience with this method of assessment. Writing Assessment Chart 15 on page 50 shows that the only other considerable difference in experience was in holistic scoring by a

teacher. Less than half the students from both high schools reported experience in teacher-student conferencing.

The expanded survey underlines the findings of the pilot study. Students want and value teacher feedback, have a traditional reliance on grades, and place little value on peer response. A holistic grade or a rubric completed by one's peers has considerably less value to students in comparison to a holistic grade or the use of a rubric prepared by a teacher.

Grade 12-Helpful or Very Helpful-1996

Grade 12-No Help-Comparison

Chart showing "% Part D. 'No Help'" (y-axis, 0% to 35%) versus "Methods of Evaluation" (x-axis). Legend: Small Suburban High School (solid), Large Suburban High School (white).

Method of Evaluation	Small Suburban High School	Large Suburban High School
Rubric/Teacher	6%	2%
Rubric/Peers	10%	16%
Letter Grade	16%	24%
Letter Grade/Comments	0%	0%
Narrative	4%	4%
Teacher-Student Conference	4%	0%
Holistic/Teacher	18%	24%
Holistic/Peers	28%	34%

Grade 12-Helpful or Very Helpful-Comparison

Bar chart titled "Grade 12-Helpful or Very Helpful-Comparison" with y-axis labeled "Combined % A+B" (0% to 100%) and x-axis labeled "Methods of Evaluation."

Legend:
- ■ Small Suburban High School
- □ Large Suburban High School

Method of Evaluation	Small Suburban High School	Large Suburban High School
Rubric/Teacher	72%	72%
Rubric/Peers	44%	26%
Letter Grade	52%	44%
Letter Grade/Comments	98%	88%
Narrative	80%	78%
Teacher-Student Conference	70%	78%
Holistic/Teacher	32%	46%
Holistic/Peers	22%	28%

Methods of Evaluation

Students Experienced With Evaluation Method-1996-Comparison

Legend:
- Small Suburban High School
- Large Suburban High School

X-axis (Methods of Evaluation):
- Rubric/Teacher: 46% / 42%
- Rubric/Peers: 52% / 18%
- Letter Grade: 88% / 90%
- Letter Grade/Comments: 78% / 78%
- Narrative: 44% / 46%
- Teacher-Student Conference: 34% / 46%
- Holistic/Teacher: 52% / 26%
- Holistic/Peers: 4% / 8%

Y-axis: Percent (0% to 90%)

Methods of Evaluation
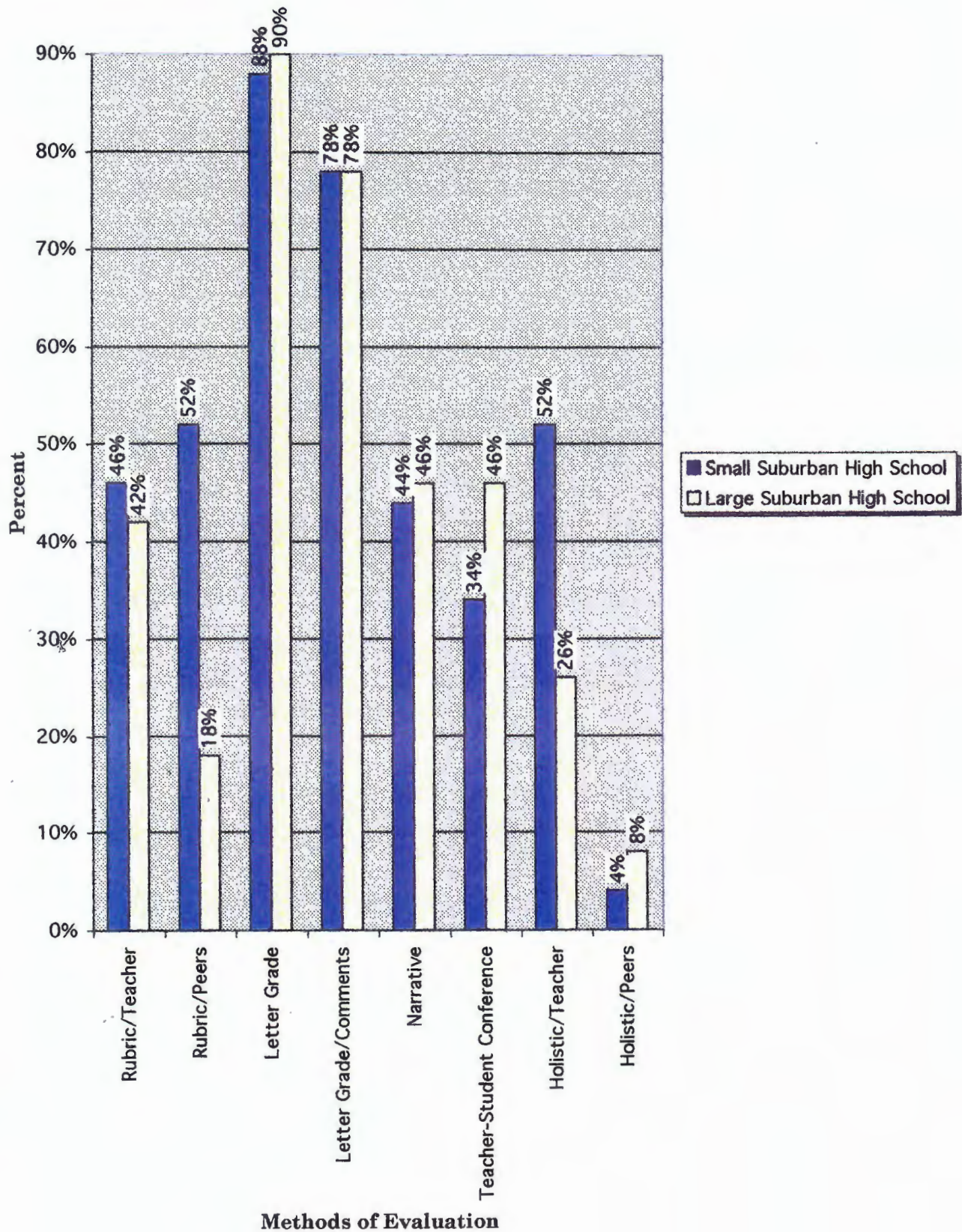
Interpretation of Results: A Teacher's Perspective

In addition to relying on teacher response for revision, students appear to be looking for quantity of response as well. Although the students reported the most experience with just a letter grade, they valued a letter grade with comments far more highly. Two conclusions seem valid here. Student perception is that the teacher is the most valuable resource. Thus, teachers must ensure that they use the best strategies to foster and encourage global revision. A portfolio program has this important potential for there the option to rewrite is always open. Giving ample time to rewrite demonstrates the value of revision to students. Used properly, portfolios in the writing classroom give students the opportunity to reflect upon their own writing and become more skilled evaluators. As the student writers become more skilled evaluators of their own work, they will give more credibility to peer response. At this point, the students' perception seems to place little value on the judgment or observations of peers.

Several other interpretations are possible here. Students do indicate that merely a grade is not sufficient for revision. They would seem to be in agreement with the new standards document, The Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing (1994). It instructs, "...reducing reading and writing performances to a letter or a number grade is unacceptable (p.21)." Also, increased experience may change the perception that a rubric completed by peers or a general impression from one's peers is the least valuable form of feedback. However, the lack of credence given to holistic assessment across grade levels and between schools may show this to be the assessment method least conducive to effective revision.

Finally, what might this survey indicate about current teacher methodologies? Teachers may use holistic grading as little as possible because those trained in the humanities tend to prefer evaluation models based upon experience and intuition (Greenburg, p. 46). They prefer modes of evaluation that are qualitative rather

than quantitative. A holistic grade, using a number to indicate a general impression, does not suggest a thoughtful response. Effective writing teachers want students to learn about their own writing processes, their own thinking, and to learn the patience needed for writing and revising prose. For these reasons, I think we see limited use of holistic grading in the classroom.

However, teachers realize that the final product, not just the process, does indeed matter and that standards are important. This fact may explain the growing use of rubrics in addition to two other factors. First, a rubric is efficient. Teachers and students look for three or four selected traits in one piece of writing. Second, a scoring guide can easily determine how well the text matches the intention of the piece. These traits, which should be established before the writing begins, set standards clearly.

The survey shows that students highly value a narrative or written comments from a teacher. This offers a dialog between teacher and student. However, in practice, time constrains the teacher of writing. Extensive comments drain the teacher of time and energy. More time can be spent on the evaluation of writing than in the planning of classes. Surprisingly, in a 1979 study of student writing and revision, Beach found little evidence that between draft comments on high school student essays produced differences in overall quality (Faigley, Cherry, Joliffe, and Sinner, 1985). In another study Searle and Dillon (1980) found that the majority of teacher comments are judgmental in nature and thus do not anticipate student revision (in Faigley, et al). Yet, a later study by Hillocks (1987) shows that revising can affect performance of subsequent writing tasks, and teacher comments are effective if they are part of a broader instructional process (Faigley, et al). His findings would support the use of portfolios in the writing classroom as a tool for learning and assessment for such a program is wide in scope rather than dependent on an individual essay to determine growth.

Expanded use of the teacher-student conference would seem to provide a solution for it offers opportunity for dialog, reflection,

and immediate teacher response which anticipates revision. In the 1996 survey students rated this method highly; yet, less than half the students surveyed at a very large or quite small high school indicated having this experience.

Ransdell and Glau conducted a survey in 1993 in which the main goal was to elicit college students' advice to their former high school instructors. These freshman college students at the University of Arizona offer some thoughts which give further validity to this 1996 survey. They asked for personal "one-on-one" help. One student said, "Tell me how to write and give more feedback instead of sitting back and then giving a grade (p.20)." Another student advised that she always knew why she got the grade, but she did not know how to fix it. In addition, Melanie Sperling's research and experiences show that teacher responses are opportunities for teachers to teach and students to learn about the process of writing (1996). Also, studies by Calkins (1986) and Graves (1984) show that teacher conferencing, as well as peer conferencing, encourages revision.

In reality, the traditional forty minute high school teaching period offers the teacher a two minute conference with each student given the fact that there are approximately twenty students in a class. Even this estimate may be optimistic. A class of twenty-five would mean less than one minute for each student. Conference time can be arranged outside of class time but often becomes a juggling act among teachers and busy or reluctant students. Longer classes, such as those which could be provided by the use of block scheduling, should furnish the time necessary. Portfolio use will also encourage classroom conferencing because students work individually, and the classroom becomes student-centered rather than presentational. These methodologies would serve student writers well.

In the end, the student must become an evaluator, and there seems to be a possible process to follow. Ransdell and Glau's

course, is when they are asked to revise their work (p.20)." Students also asked for fewer essays and more time for revision. Two to three weeks of work with ideas associated with one piece of text would be the ideal. Administrators need to accept that students need time in class for guided practice in order to learn revision and evaluation skills. Students can begin by looking at anonymous anchor papers which serve as models. This practice builds trust and confidence in their own evaluation skills. Practicing evaluation of their own writing before evaluating the writing of peers may also be an important step. Murray, in a later book, noted the heavy reliance on teacher rather than student evaluation. He tells us that the student must be motivated to make the prose clear to himself (1987, p. 211). Students must be their own first readers, and they need to know which questions to ask. The basic question asks about the intent of the piece of writing, and the second asks if what is actually on the page matches that intent. Students need to learn to read what is on the page rather than what was intended. In a portfolio classroom students begin by setting their goals and end by evaluating text to see if those goals have been achieved. They must ask what still needs to be done. This should not be done in isolation. Murray, like Elbow, recommends small peer group workshops to which students come with a specific question about their work. In this way students are free of the teacher. Murray also tells us that students need to develop the skill of asking for and giving help (p. 199). Elbow instructs, "The original, commonest, easiest-to-produce kind of interaction is between people. If you are stuck or trying to figure something out...find someone to talk to (p. 49)."

These are skills which have a life far beyond the writing classroom. The emphasis on question-asking shifts the focus of authority from the teacher as the bearer of the right answers to the student as problem-finder and problem-solver. The ability to ask questions and seek out answers on their own should replace students' reliance on the teacher of writing. It is the student, in the end, who needs to determine where he has to go and how to get there. These are high order thinking strategies which facilitate critical and creative thinking. Decision making is obligatory in the process.

Students need to and should do it, not the teacher. We must remember that the ultimate purpose of assessment or any form of evaluation is to enable students to evaluate themselves (Costa, 1989).

Another Perspective: Student Voices

"They all offer different things," was one student's astute, summative comment when reviewing the results of the 1996 survey of student reaction to writing assessment methods. An advanced English class of grade eleven students was given the overall findings of the survey and Assessing Writing Chart 12 and asked to comment. Students agreed that they were not surprised at their peers' responses to each method of assessment and expressed quite definite feelings about each method. Two sentiments were often repeated, the importance of a grade and the view of teacher as expert. Most determinations about value were based upon the information concerning the teacher's requirements which the student received. Students echoed each other in saying that they need to know "...what the teacher wants."

Grades command importance. Many of these high school students felt that a grade gives validity to a teacher's comments. A grade, one student indicated, makes a student take a teacher's comments seriously. Several students viewed a grade as a stimulus for it shows a need to do better. One student even asked, "Why would anyone write for no grade?" The fact that students like and want a grade appears undeniable, and students' reasons often reveal some quite traditional thinking. A grade offers them a standard of quality. Several felt that a grade also lets them know where they stand in comparison to others. One student said that a grade lets her know "...how far I have to go." While students tended to separate the function of a grade from teacher comments, they highlighted the fact that a grade gave credibility to comments.

These students also judged a rubric used by a teacher as a helpful stimulus to revision. The view of teacher as expert was reiterated in these comments. These eleventh graders thought that a rubric established by a teacher sets standards for a piece of writing and helps writers know what they have to do. One said that a rubric lets him know what he has to fix. Here again, the feeling was that

the use of a scoring guide helps students know what a teacher wants.

The majority of these students felt that a student-teacher conference is best because a "one-on-one" situation exists. In that situation more than a few students indicated that they could not only get suggestions but ideas. Because a student could receive an explanation, a conference is valued highly. One student explained, "You know exactly what the teacher wants." The goal of receiving a good grade by supplying what the teacher wants was quite apparent in this discussion also. This reasoning seems to explain the high value given to any assessment method involving teacher response.

These speculations may show why reliance on peer evaluation is minimal at all levels. In addition to questioning the honesty and biases of one's peers in evaluating text, more than one student asked if fellow students could know what was wrong with a piece of writing. One asked, "Do students know what the teacher wants?" However, one thoughtful student reflected that peer evaluation could be helpful if all students were working with the same kind of paper. They would understand the problems encountered. This shared experience, then, would be most helpful in revising.

Although most students viewed holistic grading as minimally helpful, the value of this method was recognized by a few. One student said that holistic scoring makes the student recognize errors. If the teacher points out the error, the correcting is really done for the student. Another student explained that holistic grading forces him to think for himself. The heavy reliance on a traditional grade may then be attributed, in part, to a lessened demand for student effort. If a teacher does a good deal of the analyzing and evaluation and suggests specific revisions, then the demand for creative and critical thinking by the students will be quite less.

The fact that grades are important to students is not a debatable issue in light of the pilot study, the 1996 survey, and student interviews. Grades are a reality, and very good grades, for these competitive students, assure admission to a college of their choice. Thus, we must recognize their importance but also their

limitations. They must be viewed as a "means" not an "end." In addition, one issue arising from students' comments could be worrisome. The prevailing thought in these discussions with students was that students need to give the teacher what he or she wants in order to be successful. Since the teacher is the grade-giver, a student needs to know exactly what the teacher wants and a conference, a grade with comments, or a rubric provided by a teacher, furnishes this knowledge. No student voiced the opinion that writing should provide personal satisfaction or meet personal students standards of quality. Strategies to secure good grades rather than methods to produce better writing preoccupy students' thoughts. The feelings that a student can play a part in the setting of standards, can enter into a dialog concerning quality, and can take a role in the negotiation of a grade seem to be missing at this point. In general, students see these as "teacher" tasks. Although the students acknowledge the importance of learning how to write well, they do not claim ownership of their writing. Control belongs to the teacher, not to them. They do not yet realize that they have to determine "how far" they have to go.

CHAPTER 10

THE ASSESSMENT OF A PORTFOLIO

I began my study of portfolios with a persistent question. How does one grade a portfolio? After a two year study of "portfolio" pedagogy and a review of the recent literature on related subjects such as the teaching of writing, research in the composing process and innovative assessment procedures, I found that the "grading" of a portfolio is not the issue, nor the problem. A portfolio's evaluation is an integral part of the pedagogy. The underlying philosophy calls for giving students authentic learning experiences in addition to ownership of and responsibility for their learning. By the end of a semester or a school year, it is hoped that a student will have developed a significant degree of confidence and resiliency. Students and teacher have generated criteria for standards throughout the development of the portfolio. The teacher has learned to be a guide, and the student has learned to be an evaluator. If the students have become thoughtful and active participants in the analysis of their own learning, then the grade must be a shared decision. In negotiating a grade, students write and discuss what they have accomplished. Grade anxiety will be minimal. In The Portfolio as a Learning Strategy Porter and Cleveland say that certainly there is a grade involved in the use of a portfolio, but the message is clear that it is growth and understanding of one's personal learning that results in the grade (1995, p. 131). Kelly Buckley and Austin Willoughby in Redefining the Boundaries of Portfolio Assessment acknowledge the reality of grades but use a student grade proposal (1994). Willoughby claims that it is the most important paper the student writes because it is where he or she attempts to prove that the work is worth the grade. Buckley (1994) explains that a grade proposal requires a student to

recognize strengths and weaknesses. Another teacher takes a daring approach in search of reliability and validity for her use of portfolios. In exploring the possibilities of portfolios, Kathleen Sims has outside reviewers determine a grade based on the selected portfolio and the strength of the student grade proposal. All her students received the grade requested or better. Sims reports that Chris Sullivan, another high school teacher, has grade proposals and reviews by a principal, a superintendent, and the director of the portfolio project. In all these cases the student is given a strong voice. In traditional grading the student is barely in the conversation; in portfolio assessment the student is part of the dialog.

Most of the experimenters in this assessment process favor a selected portfolio because the student chooses the work for presentation and evaluation. Professional writers know that not every effort deserves publication, and teachers who promote creative thinking know that failed experiments should not be penalized for they are learning opportunities and practice situations. What student and teacher finally look at is an achievement, a collection of work, which is the result of cognitive and metacognitive development over a period of time. Theodora Wilson concludes her article with the thought that a grade does not provide a vehicle for assessing what we hope will happen in a portfolio. Geof Hewitt suggests an assessment portfolio which is a product of goals and acts in a more traditional way as a "showcase" for student work and a working portfolio which demonstrates growth. Dual portfolios might relieve the tension concerning standards. If we teach process, we must assess process. However, product does matter. Product is what we can show and does answer those demands of accountability which will arise. Two types of portfolios may well address the problem.

A set of standards is critical and necessary if the portfolio movement is to raise student learning outcomes. In June of 1993 a conference on alternative assessment dealt with the question. Most participants agreed that standards are needed, not parochial norms. Robert Tierney, who leads the department of Educational Theory and

Practice at Ohio State University, instructs, "...diversity in student work should be embraced...and protected against reliability (in Wilson, p.7)." While this is difficult to argue with, models of excellence need to be in place to provide students and teachers with quality standards while still preserving a student's personal signature. Debate still surrounds the resolution of the tension between assessing students for outside accountability and allowing teachers and students to develop their own learning goals which support differences rather than uniformity. The New Standards for Reading and Writing should help greatly for now we have a common set of agreed upon standards. Nevertheless, this debate does not diminish the effectiveness of portfolios as a form of assessment which enhances learning.

Can portfolio assessment be subjective in nature but also reliable and valid? Many teachers like those described above are showing that indeed this can be the case. In "Objective Measures of Writing Ability" Gertrude Conlon tells us that the more chances students have to show what they can do or what they know, the more accurate the measurement is likely to be (1986). In large-scale portfolio assessment now being done in Great Britian and Australia an impressive, high reliability is being achieved. With consistent teacher-student based standards and classroom-teacher trained readers, there is a high inter-rater agreement. Oregon boasts a ninety-five percent inter-rater agreement after a good deal of teacher training. It is hoped that this paper shows that validity is apparent and reliability can be achieved in performance-based assessment. However, the one-hundred percent accuracy demanded by statisticians may be unattainable. Yet, given the above information, accuracy may be extraneous to the task and not a desirable aim. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) conclude, we need to "...substitute relativity for certainty, empowerment for control, localized understanding for generalized explanation and humility for arrogance (p.48)". They see this as the challenge for the "fourth generation" evaluator.

Portfolio assessment provides empowerment evaluation, evaluation which can help others help themselves. It is designed to

foster self-determination rather than dependency and focuses on improvement. It offers skills that can last a lifetime. The lessons learned in the portfolio classroom can be carried not only to other classrooms but into life.

CONCLUSION

As the discipline of writing redefines itself so has its assessment. Process writing demands that we assess for process, rather than only product. An assessment tool has grown into a pedagogy which recognizes the student as a writer who uses writing for exploration, discovery, thinking, and communicating. Assessment must nuture independent inquiry in our students. If students rely primarily on teacher response; we, as teachers, take away opportunities for critical and creative thinking. If, to live successfully in the twenty-first century, students need skills in creative and critical thinking, in making connections among ideas, in problem-solving, and in synthesizing information into a coherent written whole, if these qualities make an educated adult, then writing is crucial, and its assessment must fuse with its instruction.

FEBRUARY, 1996

Dear Student,

The most important reason for evaluating students' writing is to help students become better writers. Assessing student writing is the writing teacher's most difficult task for, in writing, there are no completely right or wrong answers. Also, there are no right or wrong answers to this survey since each person learns and writes in his or her own unique way. Your responses to this survey will help to show us which method of evaluation has worked or may work best for you. Which kind of "feedback" to your writing will help you improve a piece of writing? The next page defines the terms used in the most common and popular methods of writing assessment. Please read these descriptions carefully. Ask your teacher for any clarifications you may need before going on to page three. On page three, in addition to choosing either, A, B, C, or D for each item, please put a check mark beside the number of each method of evaluation with which you have had experience. (EXAMPLE - If you have had experience with a rubric, put a check mark beside the number 1. If you are not familiar with a rubric, do not put a check mark, but still make a choice based upon the descriptions of terms on page two.)

Please read the following descriptions of terms used in the most common methods of writing assessment.

1.   RUBRIC

A rubric is a scoring guide which sets down strengths or general qualities to be looked for in a piece of writing. These are standards for evaluation. They can vary with the kind of writing assigned and often points are assigned or a level of mastery is indicated. Please look at the rubric attached to the end of this survey.

2.   GRADE

A traditional letter grade (ex. A,B,C...) describes the quality of the piece of writing.

3.   COMMENTS

The teacher writes short notes, usually in the margins, scattered throughout the piece and/or at the end, indicating strengths and weaknesses in a piece of writing and may suggest ideas for improvement.

4.   NARRATIVE

The teacher includes a lengthy evaluation of the writing, usually a paragraph long, describing the strengths and weaknesses and suggests ideas for revision.

5.   TEACHER CONFERENCING

The teacher and student meet to discuss a piece of writing's strengths and weaknesses. The evaluation consists of a conversation and no grade is assigned.

6.   HOLISTIC SCORING

The teacher or readers rate the writing as a whole. This method is often described as "general impression" scoring. The teacher or the readers are looking for important traits or specific characteristics in the content. Mechanical errors such as punctuation and spelling are of little importance. The rating system is often as simple as a of little importance. The rating system is often as simple as assigning a 1, 2, 3, or a 4 being the highest rating.

7.   PEER GROUP

A small group of students in your class, usually four or five, read and evaluate your piece of writing and may attach either a rubric (See #1.) or comments.

You are sitting in a grade _____ English class and the second draft of an important piece of writing has been returned to you by your kind English teacher who is giving you the opportunity to revise and rewrite this piece of writing. Which method of assessment would you find most helpful in revising? Please circle one of the choices for each of the following methods of evaluation. You may make the same choice more than once.

1.   A rubric completed by your teacher is attached.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. ho help

2.   A rubric completed by a peer group is attached.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

3.   A letter grade is assigned.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

4.   A letter grade is accompanied by comments.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help.

5.   A narrative description of the paper is attached.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

6.   A teacher-student conference follows.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

7.   A holistic rating is assigned by your teacher.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

8.   A holistic rating is assigned by a small peer group.
A. very helpful   B. helpful   C. of some help   D. no help

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