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Classroom assessment tools and uses: Canadian English teachers' practices for writing

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Abstract

Classroom assessment of writing is considered from an anthropological perspective as practitioners' tool use. Pan Canadian data from a 2002 English teacher questionnaire ($N = 4070$) about self-reported assessment practices were analyzed in terms of tool choice and use by secondary teachers of different experience and qualification levels. Four underlying variables were identified in their choice of assessment tools: whether affective traits such as attendance, effort, motivation or participation were factors; whether self-assessment and peer evaluation were considered; whether portfolios or examples of student work were variables in grading practices; and whether multiple choice or short response tasks were chosen. In terms of tool use, the three salient variables were: the nature of the feedback cycle with students; whether homework contributed to grades; and whether homework served in large group instruction. A number of significant differences by career stage and credential level were revealed in assessment instrument choice and use. Implications for teacher pre-service and in-service professional development are outlined.
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1. Introduction

The linguistic anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) has argued that tools, as physical implements used to effect changes in human surroundings, can also include "objects to think with" to accomplish intellectual work. Whether used to support physical or cognitive activity, all tools share several properties: they extend the reach or amplify the faculties of the user; they render more complex tasks tractable; they are material or can materialize and hence render objects susceptible to intervention or manipulation. Other anthropologists (Baber, 2003)

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have distinguished between tools and their uses, noting that tool choice is shaped by: (a) the goals, purposes and expectations of the user, (b) the configuration or shape of the instrument, (c) the perceived environmental constraints in which the user operates, (d) the apprehended uses or activities potential within the tool's range of manipulation, and (e) both the personal style and social practices of the group which has crafted the instrument. While there is an extended debate about whether "function follows form," "form follows function," or "form follows previous failure" in tool use (Petroski, 1985), most agree that studying the paraphernalia used by practitioners is one way of understanding cognition and practice (Keller & Keller, 1996).

Recent investigations by cultural anthropologists have focused on what Vygotsky (1928/1997) has called "psychological tools," those devices that extend cognition and enable the user to ergonomically act upon the immediate working environment. Examples are a physician's medical chart for a patient, an engineer's slide rule or calculator, a navigator's compass or sextant, and a Cartesian graph. Such devices function as cognitive prosthetics that enable the user to virtually reframe and intellectually modify a problem as a precursor to and guide for action. Through them, it is possible to change the structure of a given task and, by doing so, alter the cognitive operations that the task requires. Navigational instruments such as road maps permit the performer to work on a representation of the problem in advance of, or in preparation for, decision-making. Actuarial or taxation tables accelerate, or obviate, computation and thereby enable the user to predict and plan work by constructing alternate scenarios. These implements are cultural products reflecting accepted ways of working. Moreover, many sociocognitive psychologists claim that such artifacts are ways of sharing cognition about a task; they *contain* and *distribute* information as cultural vessels and thus reflect socially acceptable ways of perceiving and structuring a problem. In doing so, they permit others to coordinate work across time and place, facilitating the functional integration of diverse skills. For example, a blueprint of a bungalow enables builders to construct and reconstruct nearly identical houses in different locations at different times, yet economize when purchasing materials, while coordinating trades people. Although the notion of a "psychological tool" is quite elastic, stretched over objects as diverse as language and shopping lists, such artifacts are not only physical and external devices that enable individuals to work more efficiently. They are also representational systems that facilitate the technical work of planning and managing information, define the structure and boundaries of the work domain, and enable professionals to learn, remember, and make decisions about resource allocations (Hutchins, 1990).

In the area of education, assessment instruments in the writing classroom, and in other subject disciplines, have similar properties. Customarily, the practitioners' tools are viewed as devices for gathering information about a student's abilities or skills and the quality of student products, and as vehicles for communicating and operationalizing teacher expectations and curriculum objectives (Gullickson, 1985). But they fulfill many other functions: as utensils for amplifying and controlling teacher perception and judgment; as appliances for distributing and regulating student cognition; as implements for scripting activity flow in the classroom, workplace or home; as an *aide memoire* for students; as procedural plans for class and home activity; or as regulatory or motivational devices to alter conduct (Baber, 2003). For example, a teacher-constructed test establishes for students what is acceptable and sufficient knowledge, defines problems in specific terms, frames student perceptions of content and process, orders student learning in the classroom, extends the teacher's ambit into the home (through homework), serves as a vehicle through which the teacher calculates student performance and makes judgments, and distributes cognition about the topic amongst all the students for whom teachers are responsible. The recent Third International