

Assessing student writers: NAPLAN and the evaluation of construing narrative worlds

Dr Nathan Lowien

The University of New England

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Concerns about the writing achievement of Australian students have been raised by the news press and the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO). These concerns stem from students' performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). NAPLAN is administered to students in years 3, 5, 7, and 9 across Australia. One aspect of the assessment involves writing, in which students are given 40 minutes to compose a narrative or persuasive text in response to a prompt. This paper examines literature on how writers create narrative worlds and imply thematic values throughout a narrative. The paper reviews literature on how narrative writers engage readers by drawing them into characters' internal worlds and by providing compelling descriptions of the outer narrative world, including setting and pivotal plot events. Additionally, literature examining how the evaluative meanings associated with a character's internal world and external narrative world imply thematic values that engage the audience is reviewed. The paper utilises a systemic functional linguistic approach to investigate how a high-scoring narrative produced under NAPLAN assessment conditions realises the inner and outer narrative worlds and the associated evaluative meanings. The paper argues that the NAPLAN standardised marking guide does not address criteria for evaluating how students construe a character's point of view to realise a character's internal world, nor for evaluating how the implied values of characters, settings and plot events realise a narrative's theme. The research indicates a need to refine the NAPLAN marking guide criteria to ensure valid assessment of student writers.