

Writing Assessment: Purposes, Problems, Possibilities A Review Essay

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Karen L. Greenberg, Harvey S. Wiener, and Richard A. Donovan.
Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies. (New York: Longman, Inc.,
1986). 203pp.

Edward M. White. *Teaching and Assessing Writing: Recent Advances in
Understanding, Evaluating, and Improving Student Performance*. (San
Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985.) 304pp.

Lester Faigley, Roger D. Cherry, David A. Jolliffe, and Anna M. Skinner.
Assessing Writers' Knowledge and Processes of Composing. (Norwood,
New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985). 272pp.

In their well-known *Evaluating Writing* (1977), Charles Cooper and Lee Odell identified at least eleven reasons to assess students' writing, reasons that range from diagnosing writing problems to evaluating instructional methods. They noted that writing assessment must meet the often incompatible requirements of administration, teaching, and research. They emphasized that the term "evaluating" subsumed the various tasks of "describing, measuring, and judging."

Ten years later, the term "assessment" reflects continuing attention to the range of purposes for close examination of students' writing or student writers. As WPAs, we are often preoccupied with writing tests required by university officials, funding agencies, or legislatures, but we are also writing teachers who want to measure our students' progress, and we are writing researchers who need to describe written products and writing processes.

Whatever our involvement in assessing writing, three recent books will help WPAs to reconsider its purposes, to anticipate problems, and to envision new possibilities. These books approach writing assessment from differing perspectives and for different reasons, reminding us, as Cooper and Odell did, that "it is critical for teachers, researchers, and curriculum evaluators to know *why* they are evaluating before they choose measures and procedures" (*Evaluating Writing* ix).

The best-known purpose of writing assessment has been to establish campus, system, state or even national standards of writing proficiency that could control students' placement into writing courses, certify their

competence after instruction, or both. These institutional goals are addressed by Karen Greenberg, Harvey Wiener, and Richard Donovan, co-directors of the National Testing Network in Writing, a project initiated at the City University of New York and supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Derived from the work of that network, *Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies*, collects essays on topics that its editors believe "are the core of any testing effort and, taken together, can help any institution formulate, reformulate, refine, and implement a comprehensive program for assessing student writers" (xv).

These "core topics" include the history and context of writing assessment, research on evaluating writing, the benefits and drawbacks of testing programs, equity in evaluating the writing of black students and those who speak English as a second language, procedures for undertaking a large-scale assessment, comparisons of direct with indirect measures, and an annotated bibliography of some fifty items. Contributors are well-known in the fields of teaching and assessing writing and bring to this book considerable experience as WPAs and researchers (Andrea Lunsford, Steven Witte, Kenneth Bruffee, Daniel Fader, Edward White, Rosemary Hake), university administrators (Marie Jean Lederman, Roscoe Brown), developers of state-wide and national writing assessments (Gordon Brossell, William Lutz, Rexford Brown), and ETS personnel (Sybil Carlson, Gertrude Conlan, Brent Bridgeman).

While they are concretely aware of "pitfalls" in writing assessment, contributors to this volume support its practice and urge refinements in methods. The editors concede, however, that in today's institutions testing will occur with or without the support of teachers, so they urge that teachers become part of the process by asserting that "we know what good writing is, how to describe it, and how to assess it" (xiv). Contributors, nevertheless, undercut this claim as they elaborate upon unanswered questions and unsolved problems in writing assessment. Many caution that testing is valuable only insofar as test-makers and test-users are well-informed about its limitations.

In addition to demonstrating a program's impact or its students' proficiency, testing writing may improve the teaching of writing. Exploring this connection is Edward White's purpose in *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, in which he concludes from his experience with large-scale testing that "better understanding of how to test writing at any level will improve classroom teaching at all levels" (4). White argues that the process of developing and scoring an essay test is a powerful model of faculty development (48), and he believes that this process may usefully be imported into the writing classroom (Chapter 13). Although he fears that "most testing of writing is poorly done, destructive to the

goals of teaching, and improperly used" (2), White favors the carefully conducted holistic scoring of student essays. Offering both theoretical and pedagogical justification for the practice, White devotes several chapters to explaining how to develop, administer, and score a direct assessment of students' writing using holistic evaluation procedures. In comparison to Greenberg et al., who identify the ingredients of a testing program, White provides a recipe. Here WPAs will find practical advice for managing all phases of writing assessment, from predicting the costs to providing the coffee. Besides the "how-to" chapters, though, White discusses the politics of testing, the limitations of measurement, and how research in writing and reading impinges on assessment.

Both books reflect an uneasiness about what Brossell calls the "inchoate state of development" of research in writing assessment ("Current Research and Unanswered Questions in Writing Assessment," *Writing Assessment* 179). WPAs hopeful of finding a reliable writing test to import into their programs will be advised by these authors to develop their own, involving local faculty and clarifying local criteria. Creating a test is something like crawling through a mine field, however. In *Writing Assessment*, Brossell reviews research about the "major situational variables" of topic, writer, and procedures, while White warns of "pitfalls" (a position further elaborated in his own book). Their positions are supported by an article in *Educational Measurement* which sets forth a list of "known sources of data contamination" that includes every step in the assessment process from developing the writing assignment to generating and reporting test scores (Meredith and Williams). Its authors believe that "unless stability is brought to writing assessment programs, the information provided to students and teachers will not have the accuracy needed for effective instructional planning" (35). Brossell concludes that at present "the whole enterprise is not likely to serve any purpose higher than routine sorting and certifying" (*Writing Assessment* 179).

WPAs have purposes for writing assessment that go beyond sorting, certifying, and faculty development, however, and we have questions that holistically-scored essays cannot answer. As White points out, holistic scoring does not provide diagnostic information, does not measure against an absolute standard, and is usually less reliable than its practitioners report (*Teaching and Assessing* 28-29). From a broader perspective, Witte, Traschel, and Walters conclude that "the critical issue facing educational evaluators both historically and at the current time is not the relative efficacy of indirect or direct methods of assessment but rather the question of what is being measured in any purported assessment of writing abilities" ("Literacy and the Direct Assessment of Writing," *Writing Assessment* 31). They observe that tests arise from conflicting assumptions about the nature of thought: whether it is a possession ("static") or a process ("dynamic").

Lester Faigley, Roger Cherry, David Jolliffe, and Anna Skinner challenge contemporary practice on both grounds—that holistic scoring is an inadequate method and that written products are an inappropriate focus. Conducting research at the University of Texas at Austin (supported in part by FIPSE), they developed ways to find out what writers know about composing and what they do as they compose. In *Assessing Writers' Knowledge and Processes of Composing*, the authors assume that ". . . if we recognize the diversity and complexity of writing in our society by attempting to teach writing as a process, we must go beyond the relative 'goodness' of students' texts to focus on their knowledge and strategies" (xiv). From this premise they argue that "Understanding what a writer knows is essential to understanding why the writer does or does not make particular decisions and execute particular strategies during composing" (68). As many researchers have discovered, comparison of written products prior to and after writing instruction often fails to demonstrate progress. WPAs, and those to whom we report, may be unable to recognize salutary effects of instruction unless we "look for evidence of awareness of composing strategies as well as textual indications that these strategies have been put to work" (191).

Part I of this book provides a comprehensive review of research in which Faigley et al. classify "process" viewpoints of composing into three categories called "literary," "cognitive," and "social." Attending to all three views, they describe and evaluate research on writers' processes (planning, producing text, revising) and writers' knowledge—defined as "tacit" (what writers know about composing strategies) and "declarative" (what they know about subject matter, organization, and rhetorical goals) (67).

Next the authors explain the instruments and procedures that they developed to assess changes in writers' knowledge of composing (Part II) and composing processes (Part III). They conclude by reiterating the need for a theory of writing assessment and sketching its elements (Part IV), supporting their research with a bibliography of more than 500 titles. The authors argue their position convincingly, providing frequent introductions and summaries to guide readers through the theoretical background and to demonstrate its relationship to the products of research. Their methods for assessing change in writing and in writers will be useful in the classroom, in student conferences, and in small projects, as well as suggesting new approaches to large-scale assessment.

Although it has a long history, writing assessment remains full of unsettled issues—from the practical (how to achieve reliable scoring) to the profound (conflicting values of humanistic and scientific traditions). Authors represented in all three texts disagree about such things as the role of indirect measures in writing assessment, the uses of criterion-

referenced versus norm-referenced measures, and observation of written texts holistically or analytically. For example, Faigley and his colleagues believe that WPAs need better ways to describe the features of (i.e., analyze) students' texts and writing processes, while White argues that "analytic scoring is uneconomical, unreliable, pedagogically uncertain and theoretically bankrupt" (*Teaching and Assessing* 124).

Most contributors to these volumes are comfortable with writing assessment only when its purpose is to place students into appropriate classes and its method is some variety of holistic evaluation. For example, Dan Fader outlines a series of benefits to students, faculty, and program as a result of the writing placement test at the University of Michigan ("Writing Samples and Virtues" in *Writing Assessment*). White reports that "The nineteen-campus California State University established a system-wide placement test for entering freshmen in 1977, but it did not do the same for its graduation proficiency requirement" (*Teaching and Assessing* 40). Rather, most campuses instituted an advanced writing course or offered a proficiency test only as an alternative to the course.

The more consequential the writing assessment becomes for the students who are tested, the more tests are viewed with alarm. An unreliable placement decision can be rectified by a teacher or WPA, but an unreliable proficiency test can bar a student from the program of his choice or stand in the way of her degree. Despite the seriousness of these issues, WPAs involved in proficiency testing will not find in these books answers to such questions as what happens to students who fail proficiency tests or how writing tests have been challenged in the courts. Ken Bruffee reports that the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) was intended as a proficiency test but, for political reasons, was administered to students upon matriculation ("Beginning a Testing Program" in *Writing Assessment*). The WAT has spawned a series of developmental writing courses at CUNY campuses, where students must pass the test in order to continue past their sophomore year. When participants at the 1984 NTNW conference asked about the consequences of failing the CUNY WAT, Marie Jean Lederman was reported to have said that "usually the student is allowed to continue because of the pressure for FTE" ("Writing Assessment in Universities" 7). White points to the upper-level remedial English course as one outcome of proficiency testing (42).

Many problems such as these cannot be resolved by WPAs and their faculties alone. The difficulties of assessment on a large scale extend beyond the design of a single writing test. Cooper and Odell warned in 1977 that "to achieve a comprehensive description of student performance or a reliable rank-ordering of a group of writers," especially to

assess their performance for different purposes and in different modes, "we need multiple pieces [of writing] on multiple occasions" (xi). Among the authors in these books, however, only Faigley describes a procedure in which multiple pieces of writing for each student were included. The project was supported by outside funding and designed to evaluate a program rather than the proficiency of a student. The limits of time and money force most WPAs to accept a single writing sample as the basis for assessment.

Writing assessment demands cooperation between the humanists who teach writing and the scientists who measure outcomes. In a poignant "Personal Statement on Writing Assessment and Education Policy," Rexford Brown explores the dissidence between the humanities and sciences, reminding us that "evidence is construed and used differently; beliefs are treated differently; warrants for beliefs in one tradition are not warrants in the other" (*Writing Assessment* 46). Although he believes that educational reform can come about through research in writing assessment, Brown observes that right now, writing tests best serve the "managerial" emphasis in education. Because circumstances have made testing a reality at most institutions, arguments about whether to test and why often give way to the concerns of when and how. Testing is a political act, these authors remind us; in Bruffee's words, "A test is a bludgeon in a profession that advances, if it advances at all, only by strokes and pats" (*Writing Assessment* 97).

Fully aware of the problems and pitfalls of writing assessment, the authors represented in these books remind us that assessment is an essential ingredient in instruction. They urge that writing teachers become informed about and involved in the assessment of our students, our courses, and our writing programs. The information and advice they offer will help WPAs to clarify our purposes, to anticipate and—occasionally—avoid problems, and to discover new possibilities for the testing and, more important, the teaching of writing.

Works Cited

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