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# Review

Edward M. White. *Teaching and Assessing Writing: Recent Advances in Understanding, Evaluating, and Improving Student Performance*, 2nd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994. 331 pp. \$34.95.

by Lisa J. McClure

Assessment has always been a thorny subject, never more so perhaps than in the latter part of the twentieth century. More and more state agencies are mandating large scale assessments measuring both the effectiveness of education programs and the competencies of students; the most troublesome of these are undoubtedly writing assessments. It is appropriate, therefore, that Edward M. White, a major authority in writing assessment, would publish the second edition of his seminal work in assessment of writing at this time, nearly ten years after the first edition.

Part One, "Assessment—A Critical Tool in the Teaching of Writing," addresses those issues of assessment White views as relevant to writing pedagogy (i.e., how instructors conduct their courses). White uses Chapter 1, "Assessment as Threat and Promise," to place his discussion in the context of controversies among those who have attempted writing assessment. The "threat" is the damaging influence assessment can have on instruction; the "promise" is that "assessment can improve our teaching, make our jobs easier and more rewarding, and demonstrate the value of what we do" (8, emphasis mine). Chapter 2, "Assessment and the Design of Writing Assignments," outlines major criteria for developing successful writing assignments. Through his examples, White makes a case for progressively more analytical assignments and for exposure to and practice in process strategies. Chapter 3, "Using Essay Tests," discusses essay test design and gives valuable tips for teaching students how to take them. White also argues that the practice of taking essay tests is a necessary part of writing classes, noting that "most students will be writing essay tests—and performance on essay tests will have large consequences for students" (87). Chapter 4, "How Theories of Reading Affect Responses to Writing," and Chapter 5, "Responding to Student Writing," are two of the more valuable chapters in the book. The former summarizes the progression from formalistic to poststructural theories of reading and applies them to the reading of student texts, and the latter instructs teachers in various strategies for responding to student writing. Although necessarily a cursory treatment of portfolio assessment, Chapter 6, "Using Portfolios," offers them as a promising method of evaluating students for grading purposes but questions its value for large-scale assessments.

Part Two, "Writing Assessment Beyond the Classroom," moves the discussion from what White calls formative assessment, "assessment whose

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purpose is to improve student writing," to summative assessment, "assessment designed to produce information about the writing ability of students in groups" (133). When I first read the title of Chapter 7, "Language and Reality in Writing Assessment," I assumed White would discuss the issues of language as it applies to the students being tested, issues which he addresses briefly in earlier chapters. Instead, this chapter discusses the differences in language used by writing and measurement specialists and analyzes the conflicting perspectives these languages embody. White calls for a "blending of different languages and perspectives" (148) to produce new and better assessment models. Chapter 8, "Assessing Writing Proficiency," Chapter 9, "Selecting Appropriate Writing Measures," Chapter 10, "Organizing and Managing Holistic Essay or Portfolio Readings," and Chapter 11, "Avoiding Pitfalls in Writing Assessment," present the nuts and bolts of writing assessment. These chapters plus "Resource A" and "Resource B" offers WPAs the basic information they need to begin holistic assessment. Chapters 8 and 9 are perhaps the most important because in them White addresses the difficulties of defining and assessing writing proficiency. Chapter 12, "Evaluating Writing Programs," outlines and discusses models for program assessment. Chapter 13, "The Politics of Assessment: Past and Future," gives an historical view of writing assessment by culling out the political and academic issues which have resulted from and precipitated various movements.

What sets White's book apart from other treatments of assessment is his commitment to linking assessment to the teaching of writing. White sees this "intimate relationship" (xiii) as crucial to the development of writing pedagogy and writing assessment. "My point," he notes in Chapter One, "is that learning . . . in writing—is a matter of steady and clear assessment, which learners must internalize before they can make any real improvement" (9). For White then, *assessment is the thing*—what we work toward and how we get there. I cannot altogether disagree with him.

Clearly, our efforts to help inexperienced and unsuccessful writers have much to do with helping them create products which effectively communicate their ideas. The factors that make a piece of writing successful should be represented in course goals. In this sense, therefore, *where* writing teachers want to take their students (that ultimate assessment) should indeed inform their pedagogy. However, in White's rendering, "that ultimate assessment" can only be discussed in terms of products, the value of which are ultimately quantifiable.

What is troublesome about White's book is its premise—the assumption that assessment in the large-scale testing sense is necessary and justified and that writing teachers must yield to measurement experts as we attempt to quantify writing. It is in this respect that I disagree with White; I do not believe that writing proficiency is entirely quantifiable nor do I believe that we should allow measurement experts to determine what we should or should not measure (nor how we talk about what we measure). Additionally, if part of what we teach in writing classes is an orientation toward process and White himself suggests that

"writing courses should undermine the student attitude embodied in the night-before all-night typing orgy" (23)), then can we allow an assessment of such classes to be based solely on a writing sample or samples? White identifies some of these issues but seems to subjugate them to a need for quantifiable assessment. He offers portfolio assessment as a potential solution, but also admits that portfolio assessment is costly and time-consuming and raises questions of validity and accuracy.

To White's credit the book is, as advertised, *Revised and Expanded*. He makes great effort to include more recent thinking about portfolio assessment, the use of computers in both the teaching and measurement of writing, and cultural differences in language use. Furthermore, through his discussion of assessment, White raises many of the crucial issues in teaching writing. For that reason, I intend to use it as a primary text in my Teaching College Composition course next fall.

### 1995 WPA Grant Winners

The WPA Research Grant Committee (Pat Bizzell, Chair, Kristine Hansen, Ben McClelland, and Robert Schwegler) awarded the following grants for 1995:

**Sally Barr Ebest**, University of Missouri-St. Louis, for a study of how graduate students in composition studies are trained for the pragmatic realities of career advancement.

**Sherrie Gradin** and **Duncan Carter**, Portland State University, for a study that will examine whether writing is being taught effectively by faculty from a variety of disciplines in Portland State's new general education program.

**Susan McLeod**, Washington State University, for a national survey of WAC programs, to be called "Whither WAC?," that will follow up her 1986 national survey on the second stage of WAC.

**Lauren Sewell**, University of Louisville, for a study examining how new TAs develop a sense of authority, both as teachers and as novice members of our discipline, during their first year in a writing program.

**Martha Townsend**, University of Missouri at Columbia, for a study of how teaching writing-intensive courses affects the tenure cases of junior faculty across disciplines.



### Call for 1996 Research Grant Proposals

The Research Grant Committee of the Council of Writing Program Administrators issues a call for proposals to investigate the intellectual work of the WPA. Maximum awards of \$2,000 may be given; average awards are \$1,000. A complete proposal will consist of a description of the project that explains how it addresses the grant theme; outlines how the project will proceed; provides a budget that is realistic, detailed, and specific; and explains how the results will be shared professionally. The descriptive proposal should be no longer than three double-spaced pages. Four copies must be sent to Kristine Hansen at the address below no later than 1 January 1996. Proposers should contact Hansen for more detailed information.

Kristine Hansen, Chair  
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