

Review Essay

To Catch Lightning in a Bottle: Quests for Responsible Writing Assessment and for Definition of Our Discipline

Chris Thaiss

Elliot, Norbert and Les Perelman, eds. *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Edward M. White*. New York: Hampton P, 2012. 530 pages.

Massey, Lance and Richard C. Gebhardt, eds. *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition: Contemporary Perspectives*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2011. 320 pages.

One of the ways by which any culture affirms its identity is to look back over the ground it has covered: to celebrate the landmarks it has built and to tell the stories of the struggles that have been endured in their making. Heroes—and villains—emerge in these stories and are, again and again, cheered and reviled.

The two books I discuss in this review are part of that recurring pattern. The culture is that of writing studies (or rhet/comp or comp/rhet, if you'd prefer), and the achievements celebrated are, respectively, the career of Edward White and the enduring influence of Stephen North's 1987 book, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*.

Both of these new books are worthy of review not so much because of the landmarks and heroes they illuminate. Both books aspire to heroism in their own right—the one trying through its diverse storytellers to describe the ever-intensifying struggle to value properly the writing that our students produce (AKA “assessment”) and the other striving no less mightily to help its readers decide if, indeed, our vibrant culture merits the title “discipline.” I call this review “To Catch Lightning in a Bottle” because both books are striving to capture ever more complex phenomena that thoroughly resist the attempt.

The one effort, edited by Norbert Elliot and Les Perelman, is more than a celebration of White's ongoing contributions to the profession, though what comes through from article to article is how White, even in retirement, continues to be a powerful voice in the community, even as his signature volume from 1985, *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (updated and expanded in 1994), in many ways remains a current guide. Indeed, his heroic stature is proclaimed in the editors' introduction, where the story of "White's law" is retold: "a single discursive statement worthy of a stone tablet: [. . .] 'Assess thyself, or assessment shall be done unto thee'" (Elliot and Perelman 1).

Though this mantra is not repeated epic-like throughout the collection, its influence pervades this very serious agonistic anthology, with contributions from many well-known assessment scholars, numbers of whom are otherwise well-known in the writing studies culture. The anthology structure gives the appearance of a wide diversity of voices—and there is an array of well-argued points of view and well-described assessment techniques. But as one reads, there is no mistaking that there are two main camps in this struggle:

1. the writers representing the Educational Testing Service and invested in devising *reliably replicable and efficient large-scale assessment of writing proficiency*
2. the writers who live in academic writing programs and whose *collective devotion to student and faculty diversity and imaginative freedom* outweighs their sincere efforts to accommodate the pressures for mass assessment.

Please note that none of the writers is so naïve (some might call it idealistic) as to claim at this late date of the assessment wars that the mass assessors should just stay away from individual teachers, who are fully capable of evaluating their own students. Even those contributors who most passionately defend the diversity of students and rhetorical environments (e.g., Mya Poe and Asao Inoue, Peggy O'Neill, Anne Herrington and Charles Moran) understand the knowledge gained by reading the work of student writers across an entire program or institution, or even trans-institutionally. This sophistication of attitudes toward assessment is why this book will become so valuable for WPAs and the administrators they work with in *designing assessment strategies that can work for their environments*.

Yes, there is a fascinating variety of perspectives and strategies here, and there are disputes about theory and methods—some quite heated (e.g., Perelman's "Mass-Market Writing Assessments as Bullshit"), but all the contributors, many of whom address arguments made by other con-

tributors, come across as sincerely and thoughtfully committed to stressful, very difficult work: creating assessments that not only respect the freedom of students and teachers but that can also provide useful information to diverse stakeholders—the students and teachers themselves, the program administrators, upper administrators, state boards and legislatures, the U.S. Department of Education. The list goes on and on.

Frankly, such is the sincerity of all the authors to build “valid and reliable” assessment apparatus that the rhetorical nature of assessment gets lost, or at least under-mentioned, in this book. I much appreciate the detailed descriptions of “dynamic criteria mapping” (Robert Broad), the praiseworthy and well-established portfolio assessments at Washington State (Diane Kelly-Riley and William Condon), and Sherry Seale Swain and Paul LeMahieu’s illuminating history of the National Writing Project’s Analytic Writing Continuum, among other fine pieces too numerous to mention individually. However, I would like to have seen some emphasis on how the data compiled and analyzed by the responsible designs described in this volume get reported:

- how the crucial choices are made of which results to report,
- how the projected readers of these reports are characterized by the report writers,
- and, more basically, *how the instruments are designed in response to the demands of certain influential readers.*

One article that is framed by reader expectations of assessment, or at least focused on reception history, is John Brereton’s close look at changes in the legendary Harvard entrance exams of the 1870s. By unearthing the major differences from year to year in what incoming students *were asked to do and expected to know* for these writing tests, Brereton shows why there might have been major differences in scores from year to year—and why conclusions drawn from the numbers, which falsely appear comparable, may have misled not only Harvard officials, but the countless policy makers in U.S. education since then who have made decisions about writing policy based on “inadequately designed prompts [. . .] confused reporting of results, [and] misleading conclusions drawn from the whole process” (31).

I especially would like to have seen greater rhetorical awareness in the essays by those representing the ETS. I would love to have seen some recognition in these essays that the testing corporations’ drive to produce simple, allegedly-comparative numbers is meant to satisfy (perhaps create?) a demand for a convenient way to make decisions about spending or large generalizations to support a sweeping point from those farthest from the

scenes of education—federal accreditors, legislators, political pundits, mass media, etc. Though we can learn much about the different scenes of their work from the essays by Paul Deane, Hilary Persky, Mary Fowles, Doug Baldwin, and Jill Burstein—they certainly do not speak with one voice on a number of issues—we do not see them questioning their basic rhetorical premise: that normative numbers are a *meaningful* way to describe to *readers outside the teaching environment* a long-term developmental process that occurs in an astonishing range of environments and that is surprisingly different (gloriously so, I'd claim) for each person. In other words, they do not question that a bottle is an appropriate device for holding lightning.

In contrast, I—as a parent, teacher, WPA, and long-time student of writing in diverse disciplinary places—particularly appreciate those essays by writers striving earnestly to create assessments that can speak *complexly, not reductively*, to audiences in the environments in which they work. The essays by Gita DasBender and by Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles (both on directed self-placement) and by Kathleen Blake Yancey (on e-portfolios) exemplify, among other articles, this emphasis in the book. An essay that I feel describes a particularly novel approach is that by Liz Hamp-Lyons on the ambitious attempt in Hong Kong to measure English-language proficiency in speaking across all high schools. What stands out for me in this Herculean effort is its goal of both respecting each teaching environment and achieving comparable results. Or as Hamp-Lyons puts it: “How could we create an assessment that would be welcomed by teachers as beneficial to their teaching, and yet would meet reliability requirements for the examination authority’s reporting requirements?” (389–90). To see if their bottle has caught the lightning, you will have to read the essay.

It is easy for me as a critic to complain about what I would like to have seen—for example, I would love to have seen much more about (1) the assessment challenges of multimedia composing and (2) how assessment of writing must change as our population becomes increasingly multilingual and transcultural. But the bottom line for me is that this book, even as it honors a legendary assessment hero, is a marvelous compendium of the current state of the assessment art and its disparate voices. It may not hold lightning, but it does provide illumination.

* * *

The lightning/bottle tension in the *Assessment* volume is between the proliferating, ever more diversifying phenomena of writing versus the normative, reductive goals of external testers. In contrast, the tensions in *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition* are several. One is created by the choice of

North's 1987 book as a touchstone, hence creating a persistent obligation by the writers to compare the way North mapped the landscape of twenty-five years ago with what we see today. The nod to the past does help to show movement (or lack of movement) from then to now, but in some sense the choice of that specific landmark holds the new book back from fully realizing its goal of mapping the fertile proliferation of scholarship in writing studies. This is not to say that *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* [MKC] isn't worth remembering (even though in North's own reflections in the new book on the earlier one, he is modestly ambivalent about its value). But as a research catalyst for our field, no one can presume to say (North would not) that it has been more generative than, say, Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* or Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* or Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin* or Lev Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, or any of another twenty or thirty books.

Indeed, as I look back at my own growth as a teacher, researcher, and WPA, the North contributions to writing studies scholarship most important to me were his article "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984) and his co-founding (with Lil Brannon) of *The Writing Center Journal* in 1980. The former gave me a sharp, flexible tool to use in my own explanations to colleagues in English and to students in our grad pedagogy course; the latter provided three of my students and me a publishing venue for our own WC research in 1981 and a continuing resource. By the time MKC came out in 1987, I was so heavily focused on WID research and WAC administration, not an important subject in North's book, that I did not, I must admit, pay North's review of research much attention. The big book that year for me was Toby Fulwiler's *The Journal Book*, a collaborative testament to the value of teacher "practice as inquiry," a research approach lauded by North that, in my cross-disciplinary environment, did not need justifying.

Hence, the new volume comes across to me as, to some extent, working at cross purposes. Much of the collection seems to me to be reflecting uneasily on the legacy of this one controversial book—and perhaps too little on describing and analyzing the subject of the title: *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition*. Indeed, if the collection had not been constrained by its looking backward to North's argument, it could have been retitled something like (but better than!) *The Changing of Knowledge in Writing Studies: Current Trends and Future Directions*. As it stands, ten of the nineteen chapters in the collection deal mostly or almost exclusively with personal or critical reactions to MKC itself, to its time, or to its influence on later work (the introduction by Massey and Gebhardt, the essays by White; Lynn Bloom; Victor Villanueva; Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and

Steve Price; Brad Lucas and Drew Loewe; Richard Fulkerson; Massey; and two of the three contributions by North himself).

As history, these are valuable documents, and our field is the richer for the incisive commentary they provide. However, they seem to be part of a different book, one that might be titled more directly *The Legacy of Stephen North's The Making of Knowledge in Composition*. As part of the actual book, which one expects to have a different, more forward-looking energy, the references to the past seem, in some cases, a distraction. For example, the fine chapter by Lucas and Loewe on the potential value of the tool of bibliometrics in tracing the impact of research over time argues thoughtfully for this research method. But using the tool to map the inevitably declining influence of *MKC* over twenty years takes the emphasis off the tool and places it on the example. Similarly, the excellent review of writing center research over twenty years by Liggett, Jordan, and Price is constrained by their using North's eight categories from his research taxonomy in 1987. Developing their own paradigm based on a vision of what WC scholarship needs now and into the future might have given the essay a different spirit.

That other, more future-focused, aim of the collection has its own driving tension: between a definition of composition constrained by English department politics and the broad concept of writing studies at work in 2013 and imaginable in years hence. I began this review by saying that this book strives mightily "to help its readers decide if, indeed, our vibrant culture merits the title 'discipline.'" One conclusion reached by this book is that in those places where the writing studies community is still dominated by English department literary studies, composition cannot be a discipline. Just as in North's 1987 book, there is a profound goal of disciplinary self-justification in this new collection, as if someone in authority outside our own community is constantly calling that into question. Kristine Hansen in her essay concludes that "we aren't there yet" (258), because, citing Richard Ohmann, writing studies in many places does not yet sustain privileged labor positions, control content and resources, hire its own personnel, and demonstrate other forms of power held by enfranchised academic units. Moreover, her own partial survey of research approaches from 1987 to 2007, published in *CCC*, shows a preponderance of articles conforming to the historical, philosophical, and critical research methods privileged in literary studies versus methods, qualitative and quantitative, privileged in social sciences.

Similarly, David Smit, reiterating themes from his 2004 *The End of Composition Studies*, begins his essay here by describing and seemingly lamenting the "fragmentation" of composition studies into diverse stances

and priorities and research subfields, and compares it unfavorably to what he speculates is the greater uniformity of such established fields as medicine and law. Though at the end of his essay he shifts his tone and says that we should proclaim the diversity of our methods as appropriate to the diversity of genres and environments in which students write, there remains the sense that this argument for proliferation will be a tough sell in any academic climate that sees composition's main venue as first-year writing.

A quite different vision, however, moves Patricia Webb Boyd's chapter on ecocomposition, a true interdisciplinary effort, as a spur to writing studies research; Joyce Kinkead's chapter on undergraduate research in the writing studies major; and Patricia Dunn's argument for a reinvigorated teacher-research that restores the synergy that thrived in the 1970s and 1980s between practitioner writing research pre-college and in collegiate years. In these chapters, almost a third book emerges: one not needing to refer to a particular point of view from 1987, nor oppressed by certain English department interests, but energized more by recent growth of independent writing programs and multi-level and interdisciplinary writing studies initiatives. I find the Dunn chapter particularly intriguing in this regard, because she pays homage less to North's 1987 book than to her own rich experience as a graduate student of his and to the inventiveness of his teaching. This example becomes the touchstone for her, and it sparks her bold call for renewed respect for teachers and for rejection of the anti-teacher assessment politics that brought us the disaster of *No Child Left Behind*.

Overall, what speaks to me most clearly from this book is not its angst about the past and about who is looking over our shoulder. What shouts from the "third book" and other places in the collection is its positive outlook on what the future can be, and for me that lights up the whole. As to the question "Are we a discipline?", I invite you to look at all the uses from chapter to chapter of the tiny words "we," "us," and "our," and the slightly longer and never defined phrase "the field." Of course "we" are a discipline and have been for many years; despite the legitimate anxiety about the so-much we still have to achieve, we have a strong sense of what holds us together and drives us forward—even if that bond is not always easy to name. Sometimes we just don't know when we're holding the lightning and how we do it.

In my reading these two books together, a key trait of our lightning also becomes obvious to me: our variety and imagination, our fertile tendency to spin forth and elaborate in a remarkably short time a daunting range of program types, research sites, interdisciplinary collaborations, and hybrid research methodologies. Smit gives one such and very partial list, just of models in teaching first-year college writing and just from the

categories of the first edition of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (2001; a second edition is forthcoming, by the way, with even more paradigms!): “process pedagogy, expressive pedagogy, rhetorical pedagogy, collaborative pedagogy, cultural studies pedagogy, critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, writing across the curriculum, writing centers, basic writing, and writing based on technology” (223). Anyone hoping for a dominant pedagogy to rise up and submerge the rest will be more and more disappointed. That would be like hoping for the concept of WPA to mean only, as it at one time did, coordinator of a first-year writing course and not to include directors/coordinators/chairs of writing centers, National Writing Project sites, WAC/WID programs, developmental writing, writing minors, writing majors, advanced writing, multilingual writing, professional writing, technical communication, writing with technologies, departments of writing (and rhetoric, etc.), MA programs, PhD programs, and so forth. Is it any wonder that the other new volume in this pairing, *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century*, includes a wide array of designs and scenes of assessment, and leaves me looking for more?

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