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The Misuse of Writing Assessment for Political Purposes

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This article focuses on the political dimensions of writing assessment, outlining how various uses of writing assessment have been motivated by political rather than educational, administrative, and professional concerns. Focusing on major purposes for writing assessment, this article examines state-mandated writing assessments for high school students, placement testing for incoming college students, and upper class college writing assessments such as rising junior tests and other exit measures that are supposed to determine whether students can write well enough to be granted a college degree. Each of these assessments represents a gate through which students must pass if they are to gain access to the privileges and enhanced salaries of

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college graduates, and so they carry a particular social weight along with their academic importance. In other words, each of these tests carry significant consequences or high stakes. According to the most recent and informed articulations of validity, each of the cases examined in this article require increased attention to the decisions being made and the consequences for students, teachers, and educational institutions. In each case, this article addresses the political reasons why these assessments are set in motion and point to the inner contradictions that make it quite impossible for them ever to accomplish their vaguely stated purposes.

As I detail in a *College English* article, I first became involved with writing assessment as a result of political interference with the teaching of first-year composition (White, 2001a). In that article, I point out how I stumbled into the field of assessment more than 30 years ago as one of several English department chairs trying to protect our first-year composition programs from being defined by a demeaning test that the Cal State system chancellor wanted us to use to further his political career. Every year since, I have been involved in one way or another with the political dimension of assessment, a perspective that is usually oppressive, insensitive, disrespectful, and manipulative to teachers and students. I look back on three decades of struggling to live with such misuse of writing assessment, even as I have stressed in my scholarship over the last three decades the importance of teacher involvement and understanding of assessment as a professional responsibility, indeed one with undoubted political ramifications. Political figures love assessment because it allows them to posture about education and pretend to themselves and to others that they are improving education by measuring a simplified version of it. Teachers generally dislike and distrust assessment, because it almost inevitably narrows and often reduces what they do to simple numbers that will be used against their students and them. Meanwhile, those of us actually teaching writing use assessment of one sort or another all of the time in our classrooms (see Huot, 2002b, and White, 2006, for a discussion of using assessment to teach writing). How else, for example, can we teach self-assessment and revision? Regardless of the centrality of assessment to the teaching of writing, we are forever fending off the efforts of politicians and testing companies to use assessment improperly, to prove that our students are not learning, and that we are at fault. Although I agree that teachers and writing program administrators (WPAs) are responsible for assessing those programs, the current assessment climate often makes teachers, students, and WPAs accountable to ill-conceived, poorly constructed, and misused assessments. No wonder that the very mention of assessment is enough to send many teachers racing from the room, even if it sends them back to their offices—to continue responding to this week's set of papers.

In this article, I focus on writing assessment in its political definition, not as the form of professionalism that allows us to do our jobs with our students. This is an important distinction because the mandated assessments from those ignorant of what we do have little or nothing to do with our teaching or our students. One canny reviewer of the MLA book I edited with two others entitled *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices* (White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1996) wrote that it

should really have been titled *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Politics, Politics*. So I am going to follow his advice here, attending solely to the politics of writing assessment, an aspect of the field that is, unfortunately, its most prominent and unexamined face. We do need to assess our students' work to help them improve and to assess our programs to see if they are doing what we expect them to do. But we also must dispute the view that testing, particularly testing using nationally normed tests, can determine if we are teaching well and responsibly.

I intend to look at three places where writing assessment is most prominently misused: the high school writing assessments, now afflicting students seeking their diplomas in all but two states; placement testing, the usual sorting of first-year students into those supposedly ready for regular college work and those who are not; and, finally, mid-career assessments, required of college students as they move from the sophomore year to the junior year in an attempt to ensure that such students will have a certain level of ability at reading and writing, at least enough to placate their major professors in college and their employers after graduation. Each of these assessments represents a gate through which students must pass if they are to gain access to the privileges and enhanced salaries of college graduates, and so they carry a particular social weight along with their academic importance. In other words, each of these tests carry significant consequences or high stakes. In each case, I examine the political reasons why these assessments are set in motion and point to the inner contradictions that make it quite impossible for them ever to accomplish their vaguely stated purposes—which leads to a certain amount of thrashing about to identify the problems and possible solutions. Ultimately, I believe we need to reconstruct the stage for writing assessment, and I hope my discussion can begin this important work. We could thus cast this discussion as a study of violations of test validity, using modern definitions of validity that extend beyond score correlations into the entire context of a testing program, including consequences for test-takers and anything else that affects the decisions made on behalf of a measure. But in a short article focusing on political issues, I focus specifically on the inherent problems and contradictions these programs represent and allude to some effective ways to approach the political goals in a responsible way. It bears mentioning that if test users and developers adhered to current conceptions of validity summarized in the most recent *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999) most of the problems I explore in this article would not exist.

High School Proficiency Tests

What could be more logical than to require students seeking their high school diplomas to demonstrate on a test that they can read and write at the level we like to imagine we did at their age? And so, state after state has convened committees, task forces, and consultants to prepare the tests that will determine if teachers and students have done their jobs well—with some even withholding diplomas from students who do not pass and reassigning school principals from "failing schools." The tests are almost without exception unmitigated disasters, constantly being delayed in final implementation and forever being revised so that most of the students can pass them, but that has not deterred state agencies and our most promi-

nent politicians from making such tests the keystones of their political campaigns. It hardly seems to matter if the tests are multiple-choice and detrimental to learning, as they are in Arkansas, or teacher-devised and supportive of learning as they were at one time in California, before the religious right determined that asking students to write was an invasion of the privacy of the home and so subjective that it might lead to children asking uncomfortable questions of their parents. (The California advertising campaign that led the then governor to declare that the proficiency test in writing must be an "off-the-shelf" multiple-choice test featured a charming 13-year-old girl declaring that any test without clear right or wrong answers was unfair.) When the tests become high-stakes assessments, as many—but not all—of them are, with important implications for the budgets of schools and the futures of students, the writing proficiency measures become strange artifacts with little connection to reality. I remember fussing, for instance, when my local school district in California defined coherence (who can object to testing for coherence?) as a paragraph containing three sentences—any kind of sentences at all. Well, argued the district consultant, we can't fail more than half of the students, can we?

The tests are supposed to measure student abilities at the point of graduation. But when they are given to high school seniors, invariably a very large proportion of them fail. Supposedly, that is the point, but no state is prepared to say that 60% or more of its seniors cannot read and write well enough to graduate. So the tests must be given to students in time for them to buckle down and pass them after taking test preparation courses. This means in practice that the tests are actually given to eighth graders, so that the students who fail can work all the way through high school to pass their "proficiencies," as they call them. The senior-level test has now become an eighth-grade test, but, alas, some students still reach graduation without passing them. Nonetheless, political considerations demand that they must be gotten through somehow, so exemptions, exceptions, and fraud enter the assessment system. The courts sometimes get involved, particularly as it becomes clear that racial minorities and the children of the poor fail at an especially high rate (Lutz, 1996). One Florida court forced the state to postpone implementing such a test until the school system could demonstrate that African-American children were actually being taught to read and write, a matter in considerable dispute that had somehow escaped the attention of the politicians pressing onward with the testing.

Meanwhile, the tests have an unfortunate effect on the high school curriculum, generally turning it from instruction in reading and writing to instruction in how to pass multiple-choice tests or how to write formulaic prose. Two essays in this journal's first issue gave convincing argument and evidence for this devolution in learning: Sandra Murphy's (2003) "That Was Then, This is Now: The Impact of Changing Assessment Policies on Teachers and the Teaching of Writing in California" and George Hillocks' (2003) "How State Assessments Lead to Vacuous Thinking and Writing." The Murphy study compares the effects of a careful test in 1988, designed largely by teachers, with a commercial standardized test given in 2001; the results of the later test showed a clear "narrowing and fragmentation of the curriculum" (p. 40). The Hillocks study looks closely at statewide tests in Texas and Illinois, concluding that they "work against the goal of learning how to think critically and argue persuasively" (p. 20).

In addition to the scholarly evidence for the unfortunate effects of these politically directed tests on students, teachers, and learning, I can add a personal experience, from my graduate course in writing research in California, one of the states where the SAT-9 was a high-stakes test, determining budgets and "success" for high schools. One of my students, a fine high school teacher, told me of her confrontation with the school principal, at a teachers' meeting. He had distributed the SAT-9 scores, which were down, and then informed the teachers that everything they did in class must be directed to improving those scores. My student, emboldened by my course, spoke out: "I'm an English teacher. Are you saying that I can't teach reading and writing because they're not on the test?" She spoke mournfully of his reply: "He pointed his finger at me and told me very forcefully that I was not to waste class time on reading and writing or I'd be fired!"

To the obvious contradiction of a senior-level high school test undermining the curriculum so that it can be passed by eighth graders, we need to add the further problem of college entrance. Shouldn't such a test serve for college placement? Well, logically yes. But in practice, almost half of the graduating high school seniors are not heading for college, so why should their high school diplomas depend on a college entrance measure? Besides, the test is in fact designed for eighth graders. Furthermore, it is quite possible that the best high school classes in both English and math are more demanding and set higher standards than the usual first-year college courses in those subjects, so we have no clear definition of what college-level proficiency means beyond particular college practice. National tests, one might imagine, pose a kind of definition; but these range from the relatively strict standards of the Advanced Placement Program to the most minimal multiple-choice scores embodied by the General Examinations of the College-Level Examination Program, both administered by the Educational Testing Service, serving consumers at all levels; test criteria and standards move lower still as we look at the products of less professional testing firms. Because we have no reference point for the definition of "college-level" performance from such varied test criteria, we cannot take solace from national tests without national curricula, which nobody really wants. Thus, the stage is set for a continuing muddle, with the writing assessment asked to solve unsolvable problems and to assure everyone that all can be made well if only teachers worked harder and the administration cracked down on the worst slackers and we tested students often enough.

To be sure, the issue of school accountability is neither trivial nor superficial. It is wholly appropriate for politicians and citizens to inquire into whether the schools are accomplishing established goals. But if they were serious about the matter, this accountability would not rest entirely on the hapless students taking more or less relevant tests. Genuine questions about school accountability would ask about the school environment (does it support learning and is it a supportive, well-maintained, and pleasant place?), teachers and administrators (are they well trained and well paid, the kind of people who should be entrusted with students?), and parents (are they respected as partners in student learning, do they participate?), as well as student test data; but these matters refer to political responsibility for schools in ways that do not allow the politicians to point fingers at others in

nice sound bytes. So only the students are assessed, on the cheap and irresponsibly, and these student tests are assumed to represent the status of schools.

But in fact, nobody really pays much attention to the entire operation, aside from the politicians, pointing with pride to their efforts to raise standards, and the students, forced by punishments or induced by free doughnuts or some other bribe to take meaningless tests. The colleges and universities universally ignore the high school tests, preferring to use tests designed for college admission, and usually, sensibly, preferring their own placement procedures, tailored to their own students. (But that is probably going to change; see the following section of this article.) And high school graduates seem to read and write about as well or as badly as they did before all of these tests were instituted, despite test scores rigged to show improvement, because those actual proficiencies depend on the parents, teachers, and the school environment, the key ingredients in any education. It is not hard to imagine more constructive uses for the vast sums now being spent on testing, to very little purpose, in this sad pretense at school accountability.

College and University Writing Placement Tests

The testing of entering college and university students in order to place them in an appropriate college, or pre-college, writing course has, for more than 100 years, seemed reasonable, responsible, and a nice compromise between high standards for the first-year course and social awareness of the needs of those with weak preparation for study. However, the actual practice of placement testing has never quite lived up to this theory, and many questions have been raised about the way in which college placement takes place, emerging from both the academic left (objecting to invalid testing, institutional tracking, negative labeling, and retrograde employment practices) and the popular right (objecting to the use of university resources for those defined as not ready for university work). When we think systematically about placement into the first-year writing course, we encounter a tangle of academic, professional, political, and social issues that makes it difficult to decide on an appropriate course of action in general or at our own institutions. Again, as with high school proficiency tests, we find that political motives and naïveté about assessment normally lead to meaningless or destructive tests, useful primarily for political posturing and jockeying for funding.

The least satisfactory method of placement—and the most common in American colleges—is by means of some multiple-choice testing of editing skills, a quick impromptu writing sample, or some combination of both. The problems with this kind of assessment have become obvious. The multiple-choice test of editing skills does not require the production of text and so measures skills not directly related to the first-year writing course. Edgington, Ware, Tucker, and Huot (in press) report that more than 250 students placed in remedial courses through the COMPASS test (an untimed editing exercise on computers) were also placed by a writing sample into the regular first-year writing course, and all these students chose the higher placement. More than 70% of these students received an A or B in the course, and more than 90% of these students received at least a C. The indirect relation of such tests to writing is in much dispute and seems particularly weak for stu-

dents from homes that do not speak the school dialect. Although a written impromptu placement test is certainly a better option than tests that do not contain any writing at all, we already have several examples of portfolio placement programs that are accurate, reliable, and affordable (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Hester, Neal, O'Neill, & Huot, in press; Willard-Traub et al., 1999; http://www.muohio.edu/portfolio/). On the other hand, as recently as a decade ago, at least half of all respondents to a national survey on placement indicated that they were using something other than student writing to make placement decisions (Huot, 1994). With the validity of these placement decisions so questionable, one must ask why they dominate American higher education. There are numbers of answers, of course, but political considerations are certainly behind most of them. I became convinced of this, a few years ago, when I tried to convince the writing directors of the California State University system to replace their outdated English Placement Test (EPT; whose development and implementation I administered in 1975-1977) with a more modern and more valid portfolio requirement. "Keep your hands off our EPT," they said, unified for once. "All of our financing depends on those scores."

I may be surprising some readers, because I have, for some decades been a strong advocate of placement testing, based on the theoretical arguments supporting a targeted writing curriculum for entering college students, according to their abilities. There is compelling evidence that entering college students, defined by their institutions as having weak writing skills, will persevere and succeed in college at about the same rate as those with stronger writing ability, if the weaker students receive the extra help basic writing programs can provide; without such help, fewer than 15% of those less prepared students, several studies have shown, will still be in college after 2 years (Phipps, 1998; White, 2001). There is also a commonsense argument that regular college composition courses have higher standards when the weakest students receive extra help before or during those courses. But, although I remain committed to providing opportunities for success to all admitted students by means of different levels of college composition instruction, I have at long last lost confidence in placement *testing* as an appropriate method for determining who should enroll at these different levels. That is, placement into an appropriate curriculum is both responsible and valuable; but placement testing as now generally practiced has shown itself to be a political rather than an academic activity.

You can tell an assessment is political and not serious academically when discussion starts with testing rather than learning and teaching. Placement is meaningless without considering what we are placing students into, a question inevitably ignored by every national placement device and many local ones. In other words, before we can argue about the validity of placement decisions, we must have data that confirm the educational benefits of each placement option. Everyone knows that some students are better prepared than others for college writing and that those others need some extra help. But that is as far as agreement goes. It is hard to find two colleges that define that extra help in the same way or that have the same descriptors for students needing help. Many open-enrollment schools will have several layers of basic writing; some colleges have none at all. Even the same institution, with little program supervision or coordination, might have requirements

for some basic writing sections that are more demanding, in practice, than other courses, nominally for their best students. I have seen an institution mistakenly place some "remedial" students (according to its own criteria) into "honors" sections, where they performed perfectly well. Unpublished studies at the University of Arizona and the University of Louisville (Edgington et al., in press) have shown that many students placed into "remedial" courses by the COMPASS examination, or by a single impromptu essay, can succeed perfectly well in regular composition courses. Sometimes, basic writing courses mean a great deal of technology and drill; sometimes they mean small classes intent on confidence-building through approval of personal writing; sometimes they mean an extended time frame for the same work as regular classes; and sometimes they mean exile to a desert of grammar from which the only escape is to leave college altogether. And meanwhile, everyone knows that such untested matters as social class, finances, motivation, self-confidence, reading experience, and family responsibilities play a large role in student success in every writing class. In other words, large-scale placement tests, which tend to measure editing skills on other people's prose or impromptu fluency on a writing topic about which there is little time to think, do not allow for the same kind of decision making into every college's writing program. They measure only a small component of what is needed for student success, and they cannot be responsive to the program into which they are placing students. They tend to be a social-sorting mechanism, useful for political posturing, but of limited use for students, teachers, or institutions.

So, how can we place students into a well-designed series of college writing classes, including a variety of basic writing instruction, that will lead to student and teacher satisfaction and to as much student success as possible? Clearly, the first step is for each college or university to design well-defined writing courses that are appropriate for its own student body, including some clear sense of what a student should be able to demonstrate in order to profit from a particular course. This is a crucial activity that large-scale placement testing, with its built-in illusion that all college programs are the same, has allowed most colleges to avoid. For them, it is cheaper and easier to let the tests place students, to staff the writing courses with part-time help whose voices on curricular matters will not be heard, to hope that whatever such teachers do in class will be minimally respectable, and (in too many cases) to wish that the students in need of extra help will blame themselves for their weak preparation and just go away quietly, after surrendering their tuition dollars. Regardless of what placement procedures an institution uses, there must be a systematic, rigorous program of validity inquiry in which placement decisions are studied from a variety of perspectives including but not limited to student success in the course and teacher and student satisfaction with the placement procedures.

One interesting and important innovation in placement shifts the proposed solution from assessing students' writing, editing, or grammar or vocabulary knowledge to an enhanced form of counseling. Part of the attractiveness of Directed Self-Placement (DSP) is that it proposes a way through this tangle, one that might keep the advantages of placement yet avoid the disadvantages of placement testing. The idea is deceptively simple. In place of testing students, the institution puts its efforts into informing students about the demands and expectations of the composition

courses available to them and how they can meet the writing requirement. Then the student makes an informed choice, and takes full responsibility for that choice, instead of more or less grudgingly accepting test results and institutional placement. DSP assumes that students will be mature enough to choose the course that is right for them, if they have enough information and pressure to choose wisely. DSP also assumes that there may be many reasons besides test performance for students to choose more or less demanding writing courses in their first year of college. And—perhaps the most perilous assumption of all—DSP depends on the institution clearly defining the requirements and proposed outcomes of its different writing courses, maintaining consistency in those definitions, and then communicating them to entering students. For DSP to be effective, the institution must develop some means of making that information meaningful to young students, generally bemused by the mass of lectures, warnings, greetings, and exhortations offered in the weeks before the opening of classes (Royer & Gilles, 2003).

Of course, DSP is no panacea, although its promise is encouraging. Like many other solutions to educational problems, DSP offers new problems in place of old. Yet, the new problems are those that postsecondary education should be meeting anyway: helping students take responsibility for their own learning, replacing reductive placement testing with sound counseling, developing clear curricular guidelines and outcomes, and becoming less paternal and more, shall we say, avuncular. At heart, DSP, like the concept of placement itself, is a conservative proposal, one that maintains the first-year writing requirement as an essential introduction to college-level writing, thinking, and problem solving. DSP is an answer to those unwisely calling for an end to college writing requirements as unnecessary in modern times of technological and vocational revolution. At the same time, DSP proposes a radical solution to the persistent problems of over testing, negative labeling, and student alienation from required coursework.

Will it work? That is, will it be able to convince those inside and outside of academe that it is meeting the political goals of assessment when it avoids assessment entirely? At this point, nobody really knows. Maybe entering college students are not really able to make wise course decisions; perhaps communicating with entering students about their choices is too difficult; maybe the curriculum is in too much disarray to become transparent. Many institutions will need to revamp their counseling procedures for new students to make DSP possible and such change is exceedingly difficult. All kinds of unforeseen problems lurk behind the implementation of DSP, perhaps most pointedly a shift in perception of who should be responsible for academic decisions. The critiques of DSP are appearing along with the encomiums, even in the Royer and Gilles book. But the concept is promising enough for widespread trials—now under way everywhere one looks—and we need to gather information about what happens, as concept becomes procedure at real institutions.

But, as we may expect, a simple and crude political solution to the issue of placement stands ready to replace existing local placement experiments and abort the promise of DSP. Both of the major American college aptitude testing institutions, the College Board, and the American College Testing Service, have added short impromptu writing tests to their admissions testing programs in 2005. Because

most students bound for 4-year colleges and universities take one of these tests, almost every admissions office will now have ready-made placement information at hand, paid for by the student rather than the college, and buttressed by an imposing set of comparative statistics. It will not matter that on many, perhaps most campuses, the information will be useless or worse; it will be politically difficult, if not impossible, to resist using it to place students. So we can anticipate that local placement procedures and the high promise of DSP will fade away in short order.

What is wrong with using national scores on a short piece of impromptu writing to place students in college writing courses? Think for a moment of devising a writing topic appropriate for the privileged students applying to Dartmouth and for the struggling residents of inner-city blighted neighborhoods; consider attempting to score such an examination—or, worse still, attempting to program a computer to score such an examination—with some regard for the diversity of its examinees; consider trying to understand the results when comparing students who grew up in homes using the school dialect to those for whom other dialects or even other languages were used at home. Locally administered placement tests, locally scored, have been able to deal with these problems in various ways, but all those accommodations will probably now be swept away with one universal score, based on national norms. Perhaps most damaging will be the effects of the new tests on the college composition curriculum (oh yes, that), now more or less tailored to the students who wind up sitting in actual classrooms. If we think of the essential purpose of placement, to match particular students to a particular curriculum at a particular campus, it becomes preposterous to even imagine that a single common test score can be used to make accurate, consequential decisions for more than 2 million students entering a variety of institutions. And because tests inevitably define their subjects, think of the high school students for whom writing will increasingly become narrow test preparation.

An additional cruel twist still awaits. Although the commercial firms devising and scoring these written tests are busy recruiting battalions of human readers to score them, does anyone doubt that those humans will shortly be replaced by computers, now moving rapidly into the scoring of writing? A grim satire looms: student computers writing out prose to be read by scoring computers, in turn placing the students into composition sections increasingly taught in computer centers by computer-based instruction. The economy and efficiency is stunning: Neither students nor teachers will need to write or read, or even show up on campus. Of course, I exaggerate here for effect, and I'm not dismissing the very real and important role computer technology can play in the teaching of writing. On the other hand, my exaggeration has its point. We can emphasize technology at the expense of creating suitable environments for teaching and learning.

Leaving the futuristic satire for the present, we must agree that it will be a bold institution indeed willing to budget its own placement procedures, for its own students, in the face of the scores that will be arriving at no additional cost to the college. Where will we find the political will to fight such a battle? We can expect an impressive marketing campaign, arguing that the vexatious problem of coping with individual students and a broad writing curriculum has now been solved. We must

hope that institutions and faculty will resist such false solutions and the mechanistic future they preshadow. As this essay goes to press it is heartening to observe that several members of the WPA listserv report some resistance to using the new ACT or SAT writing tests for placement purposes.

Mid-Career Writing Assessments

What could be more efficient and reasonable than a mid-career writing assessment, particularly for universities enrolling large numbers of transfer students from community colleges? Such an assessment not only ensures that these students will meet the standards of the receiving institution, but also assures professors throughout the university that student writing issues have been taken care of by the test and so they need not assign or respond to student writing in their own classes. These are great virtues indeed for such a test, but when we look closely at this assessment, and its aftermath, we come to realize that most students are right to see it as an empty hurdle, doing more harm than good. Once again, a test is asked to do much more than it can, and its principal value is political, not academic.

These tests have various names and a long history. The "rising junior" examination at the State University of Georgia was the first large-scale mid-career writing assessment, more than two decades ago, and the California State University followed with its Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement, which took effect in 1981 on its then 19 (now 23) campuses. About the same time, the University of Arizona called it the Undergraduate Writing Proficiency Examination (UDWPE), and other vaguely comic acronyms followed across the land. My favorite is the relatively common "Written English Proficiency Test" (WEPT), which suggests many students' responses after receiving their scores. Many other universities and university systems followed, all with the best of intentions. But, as with the high school proficiency exams, the results have been much less positive than anticipated, while the unintended consequences have been unfortunate to some and devastating to others.

The problems with the rising junior exams are not as severe as they are with the high school tests, at least on the surface. A faculty can often agree on what a student should be able to demonstrate in order to succeed in upper division courses: the ability to read texts of moderate difficulty and write about them clearly enough to show that understanding; the ability to assert some kind of idea and develop it coherently for a few pages; the ability to use source material to support an assertion rather than to substitute for one; and ability to edit written work so it is reasonably free from distracting or embarrassing errors. Sounds easy. But as various departments begin to consider their special needs, more criteria start to appear: the ability to write about scientific or technical matters so a nontechnical reader can understand; the ability to use technology to write and revise; the ability to integrate data and charts into an argument; and so on.

Thus, the creation of a responsible test becomes either so complicated and wide-ranging as to be very expensive and time-consuming, or so simple that it loses all credibility. As always, the national testing firms are prominent in the market with

their multiple-choice tests, which few faculty respect, if they can even be cajoled into evaluating the instruments. Usually, the English department is told to manage the thing somehow and the rest of the faculty wash their hands of the matter. Meanwhile, about half of the students (those who can be forced or cajoled into taking the test) fail it, no matter what it is. They have been counseled to get first-year writing courses "out of the way," and have written little or nothing in their other lower division courses, so they struggle to remember how to do whatever is called for.

If the creation of the rising junior test is difficult and expensive, the scoring of it is more so. Large institutions wind up with hundreds, sometimes thousands of tests to grade and little money for paying graders. More than one such test has been abandoned for lack of money to pay readers (the University of Arizona's UDWPE, for example) and on some campuses absurd multiple-choice tests have been used as a way to keep the shell of the requirement in effect on the cheap (as one Texas university does). But even when the scoring is supported, by student fees or otherwise, the standards for scoring become a vexatious issue. Can we really expect the students in math or agriculture or physical education to come up to the same standards we might expect of English or history majors? To what degree should we tailor the writing topics and test standards as well as the criteria for scoring to the student's major? It is difficult to harmonize such matters as the preference for brevity and clarity in the sciences with the taste for complexity, metaphor, and wit in the humanities, especially when English faculty end up being responsible for constructing and scoring the tests. Even more vexing for scoring is the ambiguity behind the assessment's purpose: Is the test really a minimum proficiency exam, designed to catch only students whose writing is so bad that it will be a public embarrassment to the university, or is it an exam defining the critical thinking and sophistication we actually wish our graduates would demonstrate? A minimum proficiency test satisfies the political needs of employers and the public, but the low standards of such an assessment diminish its credibility and participation among the faculty, eventually generating the same concerns from future employers and the public that motivated the tests in the first place. A genuine examination of advanced writing skills, however, will yield many failing scores, even from students with high grade point averages. Are such standards simply unrealistic and unfair?

But once the test is devised and, somehow, scored, the problems are just beginning. No matter how those issues are resolved, the institution is left with a group of students who have failed the test (otherwise, why give it?). Like the high schools trying to cope with the students who have failed their diploma proficiencies, the college must offer something besides sheer despair to such students. Constant repeats of the test are a version of despair, particularly when those whose first language is not English repeatedly and inevitably fail a timed impromptu brief writing sample; I have observed such a test at a California campus, where some students were taking the test for the 13th or 15th time after completing all other requirements for the degree. Surely, every campus in such a situation is obligated to provide some kind of institutional support for those who have met every requirement for graduation except the writing proficiency examination.

This leads to that particular abomination, the upper division remedial writing course, designed to get students, somehow, through the test. It is hard to tell whether the course is despised more by the students taking it or the teachers teaching it. Where the requirement can only be met by passing the test, the course may or may not be useful for actual writing or thinking; what really matters is test preparation. If passing the course is enough, without retaking the test, then the course bears a huge responsibility for enforcing university minimum standards, which are rarely defined with clarity. Both the test and the course are asked to carry the responsibility for writing that must, if it is to be meaningful, be carried by the faculty as a whole.

The best solution to this vexatious tangle of irresponsibility is the one set out by Rich Haswell and others in *Beyond Outcomes* (2001), which recounts the innovative program at Washington State University (WSU). Although based on a special version of portfolio assessment, it includes various other kinds of assessments, including an impromptu essay scored holistically and a certification sign-off option that has involved more than 1,000 WSU faculty members. More appropriate still, the assessment emerges directly from the curriculum, rather than being imposed on it from outside. WSU has invested substantial funds in this assessment, a rare example of a happy confluence of political and academic goals working together.

Of course, such an elaborate system is not the only way for a university to enforce the reasonable demand that its graduates be demonstrably literate. Some institutions simply require a genuine upper division writing course, connected to a writing-across-the-curriculum program, with some common assessment options, if the political situation requires one. Other colleges require capstone courses in the major, with substantial writing part of the curriculum. And still others have established such a campus culture of writing that a student completing any major can be certified as sufficiently literate. But where those conditions do not exist, the university has to choose among ignoring the political demand for certification of writing beyond the curriculum, meeting that demand with an ineffective and empty assessment program with no real effect on students, or a major investment in a serious curricular and assessment effort as WSU has done. We should not be surprised that WSU stands almost alone at this time.

Conclusion

I want to be explicit here that I am not making a case against writing assessment. We will be better teachers of writing if we know how to assess our students' work responsibly, and our students will learn how to revise their work if they learn from us how to assess their own work. Furthermore, careful and responsible assessment of writing beyond the classroom is professionally important, as we have learned from much experience; if we do not meet the academic and political demand for writing assessment at various levels, others will happily take on that task, whether they know anything about the matter or not. Keith Rhodes (in conversation) has named my little proverb on this matter "White's first law of assessodynamics": *Assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee*. Indeed, in some ways, the misuses of writing assessment I have been discussing are symptoms of

our own failures to accept this responsibility. I am, in short, a strong supporter of the responsible uses of writing assessment.

But what I have been dealing with in this article is the misuse of writing assessment. In some ways, this misuse derives from an exaggerated, even a credulous misunderstanding, of what particular kinds of assessments can accomplish. In other ways, it merely reflects an all-too-American view that competition is a positive value and that it is good for society to have a few winners and many losers. In still other cases, it embodies a devious way to avoid difficult problems by substituting a test score—any old score from any old test—as a pseudo answer to such hard social problems as the meaning of a high school diploma or a college degree, or even for whom the doors of opportunity should swing open or shut. This fast, easy and mis-use of assessment is an important part of the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Legislation that emphasizes an elaborate testing, standards and accountability program without the resources and leadership for students to achieve the skills they will be tested on. We must guard against the misuse of assessment while at the same time we promote a climate of responsibility in writing instruction and writing program administration. Just as administrators, politicians and the private sector urge us to be more accountable, we must also hold these people and the testing companies to the very principles of validity that should drive all test use.

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