Assessment of Writing

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FOREWORD

This volume is the fourth in a series sponsored by the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) focused on assessment in the disciplines. The first year was dedicated to employing assessment in the teaching of business, the second year to the teaching of mathematics and related fields, and the third year to the best practices for assessment in engineering. Future volumes will focus on assessment of the teaching of chemistry and of arts- and design-related fields of study.

Traditionally, the assessment of writing has been considered to be a matter of concern for English professors and especially those teaching composition courses, normally in the first year of college. Some academic programs might also have technical writing courses concerned with a more specialized version of communication in the professional field, which would address assessment as well. As the chapters in this volume suggest, if this was ever the prevailing wisdom, times have definitely changed. Today, the concern about writing is throughout the curriculum, hence, assessment of Writing Across the Curriculum or WAC and extensive use of electronic portfolios to assist with such efforts. Increased collaboration among scholars from multiple disciplines is another common feature of the current ethos in writing assessment. Not only are writing experts collaborating with assessment experts, but they are also collaborating with content area experts in the other disciplines in which students are expressing themselves. It is only through such collaboration that a truly comprehensive assessment of student writing can occur across an entire curriculum.

It is no accident that the editors of this volume, Marie Paretti and Katrina Powell, exemplify the kinds of scholarship so necessary in this new environment in writing assessment. Not only are both writing scholars in the traditional sense, but both also have extensive experience working with those who are not traditional writing scholars. In fact, Marie is currently employed in a College of Engineering, not the traditional home of an English Ph.D. but one, I predict, that will be less uncommon in the future as all disciplines recognize the necessity of improving communication within their own fields by collaborating with experts in written and oral communication from other fields.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Marie and Katrina for their tireless efforts at pulling the chapters together and editing them. Only those who have tackled such a task have an appreciation for the difficulties involved. I would also like to thank Lisa Gwaltney of the AIR staff for her editorial assistance, Gary Pike, chair of the Editorial Board, for his support, and Randy Swing, the Executive Director of AIR, for his continuing support and guidance. Volumes of this type, and the series in assessment, are only possible because of many people such as these.

We in institutional research continue to cherish our role as partners with faculty in improving higher education through assessment. This volume and series are tangible evidence of that continuing commitment.

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Assessment of Writing

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Dr. Paretti is the director of the nationally recognized Materials Science and Engineering Communications Program, as well as co-director of the Virginia Tech Engineering Communications Center. She has been actively involved in assessing professional and workplace writing, with a particular emphasis on engineering. Her current research projects include developing and validating assessment methods for writing in the discipline programs.

Dr. Powell is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech. She teaches courses in Contemporary Composition Theory, Research Methodology, and Feminist Autobiography. Her forthcoming book, *The Anguish of Displacement*, analyzes a collection of letters written by mountain families who were forced to move from their homes in order to form Shenandoah National Park. In addition to serving as Assistant Editor for the journal, *Assessing Writing,* Powell also helped design the recent change in first-year writing at Louisiana State University, where the second semester writing course was shifted to the second or third year. The requirements of this course were revised to account for the WPA Outcomes Assessment and the University's assessment study of writing.

BRINGING VOICES TOGETHER:
PARTNERSHIPS FOR ASSESSING WRITING ACROSS CONTEXTS

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Introduction: Research and Practice in Writing Assessment

Writing assessment, perhaps unlike a number of other domains in the *Assessment in the Disciplines* series, has long been a field in its own right, emerging primarily within the larger discipline of composition and writing studies. Writing faculty and writing program directors, not surprisingly, have a passionate interest in writing assessment; theoretical rationales, methodologies, questions of reliability and validity, practical examples, and uses to which assessment is directed have all been studied and debated in the literature with increasing attention over the past few decades. Landmark texts such as Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (2002), Richard Haswell's *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction Within a University Writing Program* (2001), Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot's *Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum* (1997), Edward White's (1996) *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (now in its second edition), and most recently Brian Huot and Peggy O'Neill's *Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook* (2008) are notable not simply for the number of times they are referenced by the authors in this volume, but for the ways in which they have shaped the practice of writing assessment at colleges and universities across the country over the past 20 years. In addition to these landmark volumes, however, the scholarship of writing assessment includes dedicated journals such as *Assessing Writing* and the *Journal of Writing Assessment*, both of which emerged in the 1990s, along with numerous articles in other premier journals such as *College Composition and Communication, Writing Program Administration,* and *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and presentations and special sessions at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, the International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, the Society of Technical Communication Conference. CompPile (http://compile.org), an online searchable database of publications dating back to 1939 on "post-secondary composition, rhetoric, technical writing, ESL, and discourse studies" includes almost 3,000 books and articles that use *assessment* as a keyword.

The field is even so rich and well-established as to have produced its own histories. For example, Yancey (1999) offers an overview of writing assessment since the 1950s for a special retrospective issue of *College Composition and Communication*, in which she traces the movement from objective testing on grammar,

mechanics, and related skills to holistic scoring of individual essays (often timed writing samples) and finally to the emergence of portfolio assessments, in which evaluators examine not one essay but multiple documents by each student. More recently, Norbert Elliot's book-length study, *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America* (2005) details much of the earlier history, describing the shift during the early 20th century from assessment by individual faculty to large-scale standardized assessment by the College Board and the Educational Testing Service (see Mary Trachsel's *Institutionalizing Literacy* [1992] for additional detail on this issue). In addition, several major professional organizations associated with teaching writing—the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA)—all have position statements regarding appropriate practices for developing writing assessments, which are described in detail in Chapter 2 of this volume.

As a result, readers who wish to find both theoretical frameworks and practical examples for developing a writing assessment process face no shortage of available resources. In fact, the opposite may be true: with such an abundance of scholarship, it may be difficult to locate a starting point. That, we hope, is where this volume comes in. *Assessment of Writing* covers a vast territory that includes placement of incoming students, first-year programs, writing across the curriculum, writing in specific disciplines, and outcomes of assessments of graduating seniors. In selecting contributors for this volume, we have attempted to bring all of these voices together to provide a starting point for anyone charged with assessing student writing. We have invited authors from a full range of institutions to address the full range of assessment contexts, from the first year (e.g., Edgington; Phillips & Ahrenhoerster) to writing in the disciplines (e.g., Schneider et al.; Zawacki & Gentemann; House et al.). The volume, moreover, includes not only practical advice but also critical frameworks for understanding writing assessment (e.g., Janangelo & Adler-Kassner; O'Neill & Moore) as well as discussions of the role of current technologies (e.g., Herrington & Moran; Yancey). Readers have an opportunity not only to find assessment practices applicable to their own contexts, but to understand the rationales behind those practices to enable them to develop locally appropriate strategies. Each of the chapters in this volume includes a strong list of references that will serve to guide readers to additional resources.

Outcomes Assessment and Student Learning: Bringing Together Writing and Assessment Experts

In addition to providing what we hope is a useful starting point for those charged with writing assessment, we also see this volume as an important site of collaboration among professionals in writing and professionals in institutional research—collaboration that is, we believe, essential to the successful implementation of any writing assessment program. As Huot (2002) points out in his discussion of the emergence of writing assessment as a field of study, the field's history has two independent and unfortunately often unconnected strands: institutional researchers

and measurement specialists have been part of one ongoing conversation, with standardized language/writing tests such as the SAT being one of the more prominent outcomes, while writing specialists have been part of another ongoing conversation, resulting in portfolio assessment protocols (see also Huot & Neal, 2006). Too often, these two conversations met only when writing specialists have rallied to critique and oppose the kinds of standardized, computerized testing that has emerged from the measurement community (Huot, 2002), Les Perelman's work castigating the new SAT writing exam being one of the more high-profile examples of late (Anson, Perelman, Poe, & Sommers, 2008; Perelman, 2007).

Huot's argument, however, and one which we hope this volume furthers, is that successful assessment—that is, assessment that not only evaluates student performance but also meaningfully supports teaching and learning—requires collaboration across disciplinary and professional lines. As outcomes assessment has become an increasingly powerful force in education, writing program faculty, with their broad subject area knowledge, and institutional research, with their broad expertise in measurement and evaluation, need to understand one another and work together. Such collaborations, when supported by mutual respect and ongoing dialogue, work to ensure that assessment becomes not an end in itself undertaken merely to fulfill requirements for an external body such as state legislatures or accreditation agencies, but rather a dynamic and valuable tool to further the core mission of colleges and universities—the education of students. The essays in this volume consistently emphasize this collaboration; several are co-authored by writing faculty and institutional researchers, while others describe a variety of processes for establishing successful collaborations. In addition, those authors who focus on assessing writing within disciplinary contexts also stress the need to include faculty from those disciplines along with the writing and measurement experts. While the impetus for outcomes assessments may arise from external drivers, it becomes meaningful for universities when, as all of our authors emphasize, that impetus and its results are used as tools to support students, faculty, and programs.

Understanding What Are We Assessing: Writing as a Social Act

As noted above, a number of scholars have traced the history of writing assessment, tracking moves from standardized tests of grammar and mechanics to holistic scoring of individual essays and portfolios. At the core of these shifts is the central question of what, exactly, we are evaluating when we "assess writing." Tests of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and related skills position writing as primarily the mechanical skill of forming sentences that conform to standard academic English. The move to assess student writing samples, however, emerged from the deep understanding that these mechanical skills are not the same as the ability to write—the ability to combine sentences together in ways that effectively make meaning for both the writer and the reader. This emphasis on making meaning implies that writing is always a social act and that definitions of "good" depend more on context (which writers, which readers, and in which social or professional settings) than on some

mythical archetypal construct of "good writing" that "everyone" agrees on. Evidence for understanding writing in this way is abundant in research on composition, rhetoric, and professional writing; Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), for example, in their book-length study of writing in academic disciplines, illustrate that not only do definitions of "good" vary across disciplines, but even within a given department faculty often have contradictory standards. Carolyn Miller's (1984) seminal article, "Genre as Social Action," traces the ways in which various document structures and styles (a proposal, a progress report, a journal article) are intimately tied to the ways in which the documents are used by those who need the information they present. Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Pare (1999), Beaufort (1999), Artemeva, Logie, and St-Martin (1999), and others have traced the kinds of problems students face when they move from academic to workplace writing, noting the ways in which the forms, styles, and strategies learned in one context do not always easily translate to new environments. Differences across contexts can range from appropriate organizational strategies to type and level of detail expected, accepted sources of evidence, legitimate logical moves used to connect evidence to claims, and even preferred stylistic, linguistic, and digital choices.

Hence the production of a perfect essay in a given format may or may not reflect a student's "ability to write" in some broad, generic sense. Many students who successfully pass the SAT writing exam still struggle in their college writing courses; many who master their first-year English class are still the source of much despair in disciplinary courses as upper-level faculty wonder "why students can't write"; students who succeed in academic writing still emerge as poor communicators in professional settings; and employers constantly bemoan students' weakness in this core area. Unfortunately, particularly for those concerned with outcomes assessment, research demonstrates over and over that the ability to write one type of document does not automatically guarantee the ability to write another kind of document; the successful completion of a generic "research paper" does not ensure the successful completion of a journal article or a business proposal or a laboratory report. In part, this issue of transfer results from the social, contextual nature of writing discussed above; what constitutes "good" in one setting for one audience does not necessarily constitute "good" in another setting. Moreover, writers' understanding of the material is also closely tied to their ability to write about that material successfully. Students who are habitually "good" writers and have learned to successfully negotiate differences in context often still produce "bad" writing when they are working with information or ideas that they themselves do not fully grasp. In such cases, even the "basics" of grammar and mechanics can fall apart as students struggle with their conceptual understanding of the subject matter.

Equally important, research on student writing provides some cautionary insights into the limitations of outcomes assessment as a means to understand the ways in which students develop as writers and the ways in which education affects students' roles as both writers and readers. Drawing on the work of the Harvard Study, which followed 400 students through their college experience to "observe undergraduate writing through the eyes of students," Nancy Sommers argues that "to reduce the

story of an undergraduate education to a single question—do students graduate as stronger or better writers than when they entered?—is to miss the complexity of a college education" (Anson et al., 2008, p. 155). In exploring the complex nature of students' experiences with writing, always inflected with their development as thinkers, professionals, and engaged citizens, Sommers notes the ways in which writing development does not always reflect a clear and steady march of progress, nor is it often characterized by huge gains in small spans of time (a semester, a year, or even four years). She argues persuasively that "the problem with measuring writing development by any set of outcomes is that 'outcomes' reduce education to an endpoint, transferring the focus on instruction from students to written products and leaving both students and teachings behind in the process" (Anson et al., 2008, p. 162). Thus, even as we offer a volume dedicated to writing assessment based on well-defined learning outcomes grounded in the work of professionals in a range of writing contexts, Sommers' work, as well as the findings of other longitudinal studies of students' development as writers, reminds us that assessing writing may only provide one very small glimpse into the process of education.

Implications for Assessment: Location, Location, Location (and Time)

With Sommers' cautionary work in mind, the imperative to conduct meaningful writing assessment remains a powerful force in higher education. The nature of writing as a socially constructed, socially mediating tool rather than an isolated artifact, has a number of significant implications for both teaching and assessing writing that are explored in detail in the following chapters. Here we summarize the salient points as a way to help readers frame the discussions that follow.

First, the inextricable connection between "good" writing and the context in which that writing emerged means that writing assessment is always a localized project. Even while assessment methods such as holistic scoring and portfolio assessment can be used across contexts, the standards used to evaluate writing must always be developed locally and take into consideration the course, the discipline, and the faculty expectations that guided the writing. The chapters that follow offer a variety of examples for developing these standards, but in each case the emphasis is on a localized, collaborative approach among writing experts and measurement specialists, along with disciplinary faculty when assessment occurs in upper-level courses. Assessment practices and evaluation standards need to take into account the context in which students were taught, the goals of the writing instruction, definitions of "good writing" at work for both teachers and students, and the technology available to and used by students as they compose.

Second, this emphasis on localization means that discussions of assessment are always tied to discussions of teaching. We cannot talk about how to assess writing without understanding how writing is being taught and evaluated in individual classes. The kinds of teaching and feedback and grading in those courses affects the ways in which assessment operates; furthermore, the results of the assessment need to feed back into those sites of instruction in ways that are productive and meaningful to

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