The Good Work of Writing Assessment That Reveals What the Field Lacks

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Assessing and Improving Student Writing in College: A Guide for Institutions, General Education, Departments, and Classrooms
by Barbara E. Walvoord. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. 144 pp.

Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs
by Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham. Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 208 pp.

In 1998, Catherine Prendergast argued that in composition studies "race has been an absent presence" (36). While many have worked to make race and racism more present in composition studies since her important article, it is still an absent presence in the scholarship on writing assessment. The two books I review in this essay each deal with writing assessment. They are concerned with the assessment of writing programs (White, Elliot, and Peckham) and assessing writing in GE and WAC programs, departments, and classrooms (Walvoord). Both are useful books for any writing teacher or writing program administrator (WPA) and make solid additions to one's library. However, my reading of both reveals to me what the field of writing assessment still needs in its published scholarship and in its shared, institutional practices: robust ways to understand and account for race, gender, class, and linguistic difference (to a dominant norm) in assessment. This need includes ways to understand intersectionality in assessments.

White, Elliot, and Peckham's *Very Like a Whale* will prove to be an important resource for any writing program administrator or writing program assessment researcher. The book isn't just applicable for graduate students but also for teachers and WPAs. Yes, teachers, because one of the many strengths of this book is not just how it lays out a compelling way to do sound and thoughtful program assessment, but also how through its many extended examples it argues for writing teachers to be an integral part of the entire ongoing process. And when teachers and their students do this work together, everyone benefits.

The book can be understood in two parts. The first part includes chapters 1 ("Trends"), 2 ("Lessons"), and 3 ("Foundations"). The last two chapters, "Measurement" and "Design," make up the second part. While there are concepts and

ideas introduced throughout all the chapters, the first three have the most and may take readers not familiar with assessment theories and concepts more time to work through, but the time will be well spent. In fact, the authors suggest that some readers may wish to consult their college's statistician on the topics discussed in the "Measurement" chapter. It likely will be the thickest chapter for any writing teacher or writing assessment researcher.

There are not many weaknesses to this book. It's an impressive contribution to the field of composition studies and writing assessment, in my estimation. The first chapter surveys the history and literature in order to come up with three important tropes to writing program assessment that one might begin considering: writing program assessment as (1) genre, (2) construct modeling, and (3) ecological study. These tropes run throughout the book, and, arguably, the ecological trope is the strongest. These tropes help readers understand the case study in chapter 2, in which the authors use the writing program assessment efforts at Louisiana State University, a program that was headed by one of the authors (Peckham), to illustrate lessons a program can implement. The authors illustrate how a writing program might align itself with national and institutional models, as well as "generate a robust abundance of information that could be analyzed to determine best teaching practices" (66).

Chapter 3, "Foundations," which forms part of the center of the book, offers (among several other ideas) two important concepts that will be novel to most readers: nomothetic span and idiographic representation of the writing construct. They draw on the work of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Wilhelm Windelbrand, who "made a distinction between two types of knowledge—nomothetic (associated with generalized taxonomy) and idiographic (associated with unique representation)" (73). The figure (3.1) that illustrates "nomothetic span of the writing construct" provides a rich sense of how any school's understanding of what writing is and means is constructed and can be thoughtfully articulated and investigated. Equally rich is the discussion and figure (3.2) of the "idiographic representation of the writing construct," which focuses on the uniqueness of construct-response tasks that produce demonstrations of writing. As the authors put it, "Construct-response writing tasks, linked to a specific construct model, allow us to distance ourselves from the Pavlovian metaphor of stimulus-response and engage in deeply considered sociocognitive modeling of the writing task that, in turn, yield desirable measurement aims of fairness, validity, and reliability" (78). These concepts (and the figures that graphically represent them) offer places to investigate and consciously develop the assessment ecology—that is, develop the elements that inform the writing construct, or investigate the writing tasks to which students respond. This reveals the important distinctions and linkages between the abstraction of our curricula and writing construct and the specific and idiosyncratic writing tasks and responses students offer us.

But perhaps the book's most important contribution to the field of writing assessment, a lesson that the book discusses and illustrates well in many figures and tables, through various case studies and data, is in the "Measurement" chapter, which forms the other half of the heart of this book. The chapter's discussion of

important statistical terms and ideas that have bearing on the data that writing programs should gather is dense but impressive. I feel pretty confident with my understanding of many of these concepts, having handled them in the past, but I learned something on every page of this chapter. The authors discuss gathering descriptive statistics, calculating sample sizes in order to make accurate inferences from data, the importance of null hypothesis significance testing (NHST), collation analyses, significance testing, regressive analyses, and understanding effect size, among other things. If this mostly quantitative data discussion is half of the heart of the book, it may sound like the book sets up writing program assessment as a mostly quantitative effort, or heavy in that direction. This would be inaccurate. The authors are careful to point out that they reject this "value dualism" in English studies generally and in educational measurement. They reiterate their point at the end of the chapter:

> The application of quantitative methods to research design is therefore to be taken neither as isolated from nor superior to knowledge of historical and theoretical research in writing studies. The kinds of empirical analysis demonstrated in this chapter should simply become part of the conceptual toolkit of all next-generation writing program administrators. (137)

In the final "Design" chapter, the authors put everything together in a hypothetical design of a writing program, demonstrating their model of "design for assessment" (DFA), which is informed by the "evidence-centered design" (ECD) model conceived by Mislevy, Steinberg, and Almond. It is a fitting way to end the book, since it suggests possibilities for readers.

Beyond the above discussions and concepts, which likely will become central to the field's best practices, the book offers copious illustrative graphs and figures for readers to see how things work out in real cases. Furthermore, as a reader, I became more appreciative of the many elaborate questions listed at the end of each chapter meant to help readers think through the concepts in that chapter, oftentimes in relation to one's own program or school. As a guide for a teacher looking to begin designing meaningful and consequential writing program assessment at his or her campus, these questions are reflectively helpful, even heuristical. They make the book a clinic on writing program assessment for any reader who is willing to spend the extra time to respond to them. If there was one drawback to the book, it is that the authors do not explicitly incorporate theories of whiteness, race, or racism. They speak about such issues by discussing them in terms of fairness and consequences, and it is clear these issues are on their minds. But for me, this isn't quite enough, even if a good, solid start. WPAs should have a robust and theoretically informed sense of the diversity issues in their programs in order to use any program assessment toward social justice ends, which I assume most wish to do.

While White, Elliot, and Peckham's book is centered on writing program assessment and the theoretical backing for its best practices, Barbara E. Walvoord's *Assessing and Improving Student Writing in College* is designed to offer college faculty from all disciplines ways to assess student writing for a variety of purposes. So in

many respects, Walvoord sets up a larger purpose for her book. Much of the book is dedicated to program assessment, with the final chapter centering on classroom writing assessment. Throughout, Walvoord suggests lots of resources for readers, given that her intended readers not only will be a wide cross section of faculty but will also have a wide set of needs and purposes. The book is organized into four chapters, each written with a particular audience and set of assessment purposes in mind. Chapter 1 is addressed to "everyone" and covers lots of fundamental questions that most program and classroom writing assessments would need to address. For example, two particularly useful sections in the chapter deal with definitions of "good writing" and rubrics. Since the focus of the kind of writing to be assessed in the book is academic writing, and what Walvoord calls Edited Standard Written English (ESWE), the book says very little about assessing other nondominant Englishes, such as dominant civic discourses that may be used in business settings, or multilingual Englishes, although she does offer resources and some discussion here and there concerning L2 or what she terms English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Walvoord is careful throughout her book to leave a wide berth for her readers to situate things within their own institutional, disciplinary, or classroom contexts and concerns. In the first chapter, Walvoord's list of statements that describe academic writing (3–4) is a useful starting point for any teacher to construct a rubric or have discussions with students or colleagues about what makes for good writing in a program or classroom. But I find inductive processes that create rubrics and expectations that look more like Bob Broad's dynamic criteria mapping and Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln's "fourth generation evaluation" to be better ways to respond to the needs and competencies of locally diverse students in a classroom or program. Inductive processes of rubric creation work from the needs of the students in front of teachers, usually using their own writing and their own ideas and languages. It's a ground-up approach, not top-down. Additionally, they offer reflective opportunities for students to think about the rhetoric of assessment and judgment. While Walvoord mentions Guba and Lincoln's book, she doesn't incorporate it into the practices she suggests. Still, the chapter is helpful if one chooses inductive processes for creating rubrics. Additionally in the chapter, she offers a useful set of statements that describe grammar and punctuation (4) in ways that agree with the "linguistic facts of life" that Rosina Lippi-Green summarizes about the research in linguistics (6–7). In the chapter's section on assessing ESOL writing, Walvoord also cites Paul Kei Matsuda's work (among others) on the complexity of working with ESOL student writing in first-year writing courses, but she ignores his most influential work on the problems of those same classrooms' assumptions about the monolingual student norm, what he terms "the myth of linguistic homogeneity." This absence, as I describe below, causes problems for me as a reader who is visualizing how those outside the discipline of writing studies or linguistics will read and use some of the advice given.

Chapter 2 is written for "institution-wide and general-education leaders" and their assessment questions. Much like in the chapters that follow, the strengths

in this chapter center on many examples described and discussed, most coming from published accounts, making it easy for readers to follow up on particularly interesting or intriguing examples. Walvoord also discusses value-added assessment and the difficulties that go with it. Chapter 3 focuses on those who conduct department and program writing assessments, while chapter 4 speaks directly to teachers and their efforts in classroom assessment, including creating grading mechanisms around writing and responding to writing in efficient and meaningful ways.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, the difficulties around understanding and confronting racism, multilingualism, and fairness in all writing assessment are mostly ignored and arguably could be made worse if readers follow the advice too closely, or if they don't understand some of the important literature supporting the assessment of writing in college. I illustrate these problems by discussing chapter 4, and this is my main contention with this otherwise very informative book. This final chapter is indicative of what I see as a flaw in all the chapters.

In chapter 4, Walvoord gives many ideas about scaffolding writing to learn assignments that lead to more formal drafting, and she provides resources for grading and responding that come mostly from writing studies and education. Much of what she provides is good advice and helpful resources, but one assumption that she doesn't question, which I've hinted at already, concerns what constitutes the so-called quality of students' performances and what to make of performances that do not meet some standard of quality. This begins with rubrics but is driven by readers' (in this case, teachers') translations and uses of rubrics, what readers read into rubrics. A rubric can say and do many things in an assessment ecology, but readers are the ones who control much of these things in the ecology. Readers judge writing, not rubrics. For instance, Walvoord offers this advice to teachers: "Do not spend the most time on the worst papers. They are the worst because of some fundamental mistake, or because the student did not spend enough time, and that's all you need to say. It's useless to critique the wallpaper when the whole building is crooked" (73). The assumption that guides the initial judgments of student writing, that shapes the circulation of papers and writing in the ecology, imagines markers of errors or mistakes as either deficiency or laziness. Who do you suppose will have more of these markers in a diverse classroom? Who will be consistently cast as not worth much time? A few pages later in her example of responding to writing, she gives a process in which "[t]he worst papers actually take the least time" and the "better papers will take more time, as he [the teacher] tries to help a capable student become an even better writer" (75).

I dislike the negative language used to characterize all student writing that does not exhibit the markers of quality that any given teacher is looking for, particularly when those markers are unquestionably ESWE, which is closely associated with a white middle-class dominant discourse that many students simply don't come to college speaking or writing, especially those in community colleges and second-tier state colleges. The language Walvoord uses is the language of deficiency that all the literature on remediation in writing has debunked (see Rose; Soliday; Stanley). Calling some writing "worse" and likening it to a "crooked" building will confirm

the initial thoughts of many faculty who are unschooled in the discussions around remediation and literacy. They'll see hierarchy in language performances. They'll see deficient students or lazy ones only, not a varied landscape of difference, all equal in linguistic function and need, all useful and effective in their native contexts and communities. They'll likely see students of color and multilingual students as lazy or not worth their extra time, when often teachers should be spending more time understanding these writers and their writing.

While some of the resources Walvoord provides in this chapter discuss issues concerning ESOL students, her text's discussion and examples do not engage with these important issues in assessment, which are issues of racism and multilingualism in the classroom and in student writing. Granted, there are few resources that do provide such discussions for college writing classrooms, so she has few to draw on that directly speak to issues of writing assessment and racism or multilingualism. Walvoord does list Inoue and Poe's 2012 collection, *Race and Writing Assessment*, but does not discuss it (there's one line dedicated to it). Had Walvoord engaged more with it, with Broad's 2003 work on how teachers value student writing, with Matsuda's 2006 work on the assumptions made by writing classrooms, with any of the growing literature on translingualism (e.g., Horner et al.; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue), with the literature on code-meshing and global and world Englishes (Young; Canagarajah; Young et al.; Young and Martinez), or with the literature on the Students' Right to Their Own Language statement by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson), she might have resisted this language of deficit and laziness and suggested different practices, not ones that penalize students of color and multilingual students more so than white middle-class students. This, I believe, is what her example practice will amount to in many writing-intensive courses. It ignores much of the good work concerning language difference that should bear on the assessment of writing.

Again, I realize that there is not much out there yet that does this kind of work (although *Very Like a Whale* begins to through its discussions of consequences), but this could have been a contribution that Walvoord might have attempted, particularly given her audience. In her defense, changing one's assumptions about what markers in student writing indicate and what a teacher's appropriate response might be to those markers is hard, tangled work, since this work also requires that teachers examine their own priorities and dispositions concerning what they think they can and should teach when they teach writing, what students can and should be able to learn in any given writing assignment, and what constitutes good faith effort and labor in an assignment.

One good practice Walvoord offers is that of asking students to document their writing processes and turn in some kind of log or reflection on their processes and the time spent preparing drafts. This kind of practice acknowledges the effort and labor that all students put into their writing, and it could honor in tangible ways the differences in labor and effort between some multilingual and ESOL students and many native English-speaking students. But again, unexam-

ined assumptions about difference and what can be done in the midst of it in our classrooms gets in Walvoord's way. This practice too easily turns against multilingual and ESOL students in Walvoord's example. She offers it as a check or triangulation practice once the quality of a draft has been determined quickly. If a draft is messy and filled with problems, the teacher is advised to look at the student's log. If there wasn't enough time spent on the draft, the draft is given an F grade and handed back to the student either without comment or with short instructions to spend more time on it and little else (72). Papers that do meet the initial quality check get more time and substance in response. While surely Walvoord intends this practice to give teachers insight into both the student's writing process and product in order to offer a more informed response and grade, I believe that it ultimately does what most racist writing assessment does: rewards those who can already do what we expect, which typically is to mimic ESWE standards, and punish those who cannot, which too often are students of color, multilingual students, ESOL students, and working-class students. And she ignores the very real-time constraints faced by most students who must work and go to school, who are often students of color and working-class whites. Another missed opportunity that comes from the book's fundamental blind spot.

To most who have never attempted writing program assessment and find themselves asked to design and conduct some kind of assessment, Walvoord will be most accessible, but her book requires the reader to hunt down all the resources that are listed but only briefly discussed. It's just the place to begin learning what you need to do. White, Elliot, and Peckham's book is a harder, denser read for a new teacher or program administrator, but it's ultimately more rewarding. It can be used by itself, it theorizes and demonstrates the best practices in the field today, and it doesn't completely miss issues of difference, racism, fairness, and consequences that arguably Walvoord passes over. Both books, however, demonstrate what is currently missing in writing assessment theory and practices. Both show me a need for explicit attention and practices that address the axes of oppression that clearly affect students and teachers in writing classrooms, the academy, and our society: racism, issues of gender inequality, uneven socioeconomics, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. This is the work we have ahead of us as teachers and researchers who hope to use writing assessment for social justice purposes—I see no other larger purpose for writing assessment. Despite what these books show as a deficiency in the field, of all the books on writing program assessment published to date, White, Elliot, and Peckham's is among the very best for what it offers its readers: namely, its emphasis on a balance of quantitative and qualitative measures, its statistical analyses, and its ecological rendering of program assessment. These things can provide for writing assessment as social justice. As one who conducts program assessments regularly and advises others on such things, it is to White, Elliot, and Peckham's book that I'll return, even though I find value in both books. ◀

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