



Awaiting a new wave: The status of state writing assessment in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Large-scale state assessment is in a time of flux in the United States. The Common Core State Standards have been widely adopted, resulting in most states developing or adopting new writing assessments. This article presents results from document analysis of websites across all 50 states conducted in 2015 to determine writing assessment formats and scoring practices. Drawing on the dichotomy of psychometric and sociocultural assessment approaches, three major classifications for writing assessments are used to categorize assessments: indirect psychometric, direct psychometric, and direct sociocultural, with these aligning with multiple choice tests, traditional “direct writing assessment” or on-demand essay assessment, and portfolio assessment, respectively. Findings indicated that 46 out of 50 states (92%) were primarily using on-demand essay assessment, often in conjunction with multiple choice and short answer items, and no state was utilizing portfolios for writing assessment. Regarding scoring, 98% of state writing assessment was scored externally with no involvement of the classroom teacher. Overall, there was no evidence that forms of direct sociocultural assessment were occurring at the state level. The current study offers a snapshot of recent state writing assessment in order to inform the next wave of writing assessment in the United States.

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1. Introduction

Large-scale state assessment is in a time of flux in the United States. Concern about students' preparedness for college and careers recently spurred state leaders in the United States to lead the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; [Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a, 2015e](#)). The CCSS in English Language Arts resulted in most states developing or adopting new assessments for elementary through high school students, including new writing assessments ([Achieve, 2013](#)). Funded through the federal “Race to the Top” program ([U.S. Department of Education, 2009](#)), two state-led consortia, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), rolled out their new assessments in the spring of 2015 in about half of the United States. Even in states not in these consortia, new writing assessments were developed to align with the CCSS and to compete for funding from Race to the Top.

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The new assessments aligned with CCSS have been referred to as “next-generation” assessments (Hayes, 2013; PARCC, 2015a; SBAC, 2015a, 2015b) and have been touted as more rigorous than past assessments. For example, PARCC’s (2015a) homepage referred to their new tests as moving “from standardized to modernized” while SBAC’s (2015b) site contrasted their new tests with “traditional assessment.” However, there has not been a systematic review of US large-scale writing assessment in recent years that analyses the design of these new assessments and determines if they indeed are more rigorous than past iterations.

At the same time that new assessments are being developed and implemented, there is heightened attention in the research community to negative washback of past large-scale, high-stakes tests on US instruction (Au, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Washback refers to an assessment influencing instruction, and negative washback occurs when poorly designed assessments based on inaccurate understandings of a construct (Jeffery, 2009) result in ineffective and inauthentic instructional activities. Therefore, it is important to study how writing is represented in these new assessments because these representations affect how writing is taught in classrooms. By examining what students are asked to do in writing assessment, an implied construct of writing can be established. Additionally, interrogating the scoring practices for these assessments, including whether they are scored locally or externally, relates to how these assessments affect instruction.

Due to the power of large-scale assessments to greatly influence classroom instruction, examining state writing assessment practices is essential for ensuring US students are engaged in meaningful instructional and assessment experiences. A focus on writing is warranted because the CCSS emphasize literacy practices, including the importance of expository and persuasive writing in all content areas (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015c). Also, many researchers and policymakers have expressed concern with low student performance on national and international writing assessments for decades (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This article analyses state writing assessments to ascertain the status of state writing assessment in the United States. Our overall goal was to provide an accurate and recent snapshot of writing assessment across all 50 states. The following questions guided this review:

- (1) What are the formats and contents of state writing assessments across the United States?
- (2) Are state writing assessments in the United States scored locally or externally?

2. Conceptual framework

A key conceptual framework used in this article is Moss, Pullin, Gee, and Haertel’s (2005) distinction between psychometric and sociocultural approaches to testing. According to these scholars, from a psychometric perspective, observers can “infer learning from observed changes in individuals’ performances over time” (p. 70). These observations are generally recorded through quantitative means, such as rating a student’s writing achievement on a rubric and representing achievement with a number. On the other hand, “from a sociocultural perspective, learning is perceived through changing relationships among the learner, the other participants, and the tools (material and symbolic) available in a given context” (p. 70). Importantly, a sociocultural assessment approach aligns with a sociocultural theory of writing, which is currently the dominant theory in writing research (Perry, 2012; Prior, 2006). From this perspective, writing achievement cannot be reduced to one number and needs to be represented in context. One explanation for what this might look like is “hermeneutic” assessment of writing (Petruzzi, 2008; Moss, 1994), where multiple interpretations of a body of work are offered by readers and potentially the writer, and these interpretations taken together represent the evaluation. Importantly, a sociocultural perspective does not discount the usefulness of psychometric analyses of achievement data; instead, it broadens what counts as evidence of student learning and generally requires multiple measures and the integration of quantitative and qualitative data (Cumming, 2013).

2.1. Key dichotomies

The dichotomy of psychometric versus sociocultural is embedded in tests that are aligned with these understandings of learning. However, as with most dichotomies, there is actually a spectrum, with assessments positioned as more sociocultural or more psychometric in their orientation. Conley and Darling-Hammond (2013) refer to this as the “assessment continuum” (p. 21), and they use the term “narrow assessment” to refer to traditional, standardized multiple choice tests and the term “assessments of deeper learning” to refer to performance assessments that require student inquiry and take place over much longer time spans. Within the realm of deeper learning, or what Moss et al. (2005) might refer to as sociocultural assessment, Conley and Darling-Hammond (2013) also detail four levels of performance assessment that progress from less to more rigorous: (1) short, all in-class; (2) requiring at least some out of class time to complete; (3) an inquiry project requiring several weeks or months; (4) a summative project that applies and then exhibits a semester or year of learning. They include writing portfolios in this last category (see pp. 22–27).

Conley and Darling-Hammond (2013) posited that the closer the assessment is to these larger, application projects, the better the assessment is for teaching and learning. A sociocultural approach to assessment focuses on developing the student as a cultural, situated being with the potential to have impact on the world through composition, and these scholars have established a theoretical imperative for sociocultural writing assessment. Yet there is another dichotomy that is useful to consider in tandem with sociocultural and psychometric assessment, and that is *direct* and *indirect* writing assessment.

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