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Assessing Writing

Just Ask Teachers: Building expertise, trusting subjectivity, and valuing difference in writing assessment

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ABSTRACT

The authors theorize a method for writing assessment that deemphasizes the traditional privileging of validity and reliability generated from multiple-reader, calibrated scoring of samples of student work. While acknowledging the holistic model's benefits to the field of writing studies, the authors assert that its claims of accuracy and objectivity minimize the numerous tangible and intangible variables that writing teacher/experts understand and value as they evaluate writing. The removal of the "object" – writing artifact – from its context in order to assess it quantitatively diminishes the opportunities for achieving meaningful and pedagogically effective results for a writing program. Rather than calibrating teachers to a rubric, the proposed method here generates a rough calibration of teacher "values" via facilitated conversations, accepting the differences of opinions and "messiness" of teachers' subjective views of writing. Teachers then periodically assess their students' performance on these values as well as the course objectives. In this way, the process develops teacher contextual expertise while producing focused assessment data that is both useful for outside agencies and meaningful to the program's goals of improving the teaching of writing.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, for accreditation requirements, English faculty members at Murray State University were charged with developing a rubric to assess writing in first-year composition courses and junior-year writing intensive classes. As faculty involved with the writing program within the department (Paul is the present coordinator and director of the university's National Writing Project site; Jeff is the former coordinator and remains a member of the first-year writing committee), we were disappointed that the writing assessment process ultimately settled for an assessment based on a dated validity model – assessing single papers using a 6-point scoring rubric and multiple raters calibrated to the rubric in order to achieve high reliability. Although this is a common method – a "second wave" model in Yancey's (1999) terms – we were concerned that its results – a single holistic score – would be limited to accreditation purposes rather than program purposes. In other words, its validation would be non-local and of little use (see Kelly-Riley & Elliott, 2014). Because of our reservations about the meaningfulness of these data, the two of us began developing an assessment method for our writing program that would emphasize our program's values and our teachers' experience and expertise, using as springboards Smith's (1992) study of experienced-teacher expertise and Broad's (2003) book, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Smith's and Broad's studies, as well as numerous others, reiterate the significance of context for meaningful assessment; not only how assessment needs to consider the context of the writing it assesses, but about how assessment itself – including its usefulness and value – takes place within a particular context.

One of the governing claims of this article is that we must work to protect our trust in teachers' expertise and that many methods of assessment erode that trust – if not necessarily, at least in practice. Therefore we acknowledge absolutely the contextuality of trust and expertise. Assessing writing at a mid-sized comprehensive university in the United States differs from large research-intensive institutions where most first-year-writing courses are taught by graduate assistants rather than full-time faculty and experienced part-time faculty. At our university writing courses are taught almost entirely by full-time tenure-line faculty and experienced lecturers and adjuncts – we only have two graduate assistants per year. We do not automatically assume that new tenure-line, adjunct, or GA hires will be experts at teaching writing in our program's culture. At the same time, we believe that completing graduate study in English provides a level of proficiency in judging quality writing, and the community and culture that our instructors are hired into should facilitate the development of contextual and disciplinary expertise as writing instructors. Thus, even though we emphasize the relationship between assessment and professional development, we conceptually distinguish them and take great care to distinguish these from evaluating instructor performance. In fact, part of what we want to argue in this essay is that too often the distinction between assessment and instructor evaluation is not made. Obviously, assessing student writing *in principle* should not coincide with evaluating instruction, but *in practice* a tacit distrust in teachers can often creep into the motives to assess writing. Some of the objections to our insistence on trusting in teacher expertise arise from a perspective shaped by working in institutions where evaluating and developing novice writing instructors is a larger concern. We realize, then, that not all of our claims or the totality of the model we describe here can be imported into any program. Our discussion is situated in the context of a university with a stable pool of writing instructors who are evaluated annually.

Importantly, we do not claim to offer an unobjectionable model of writing assessment. Given the increasing requirement that all academic units perform assessment, and given the belief that reflecting on what we want our students to achieve and how we can help them succeed is valuable, assessment, as flawed as it is, can be productive without overpromising. The problem from our perspective is that "best practices" have created entrenched assumptions sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly grounded in psychometric measurement, and ideas that challenge these practices must simultaneously offer valid and reliable new methods even as they demonstrate how, why, and to what extent validity and reliability limit and possibly undermine meaningful assessment. We argue that all assessment is limited and, given that fact, we should stop working toward perfecting it technically. Instead we should work to ameliorate the damage these limitations tend to produce, including the imbalances of power and status identified by Scott and Brannon (2013) when consensus is valorized over meaningful dissensus in assessment situations. We recognize these labor issues, and agree with

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