

Review

Lynne, Patricia. *Coming to Terms: Theorizing Writing Assessment in Composition Studies*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2004. 193 pages. \$21.95 (paper).

Deb Martin

Patricia Lynne's discussion of writing assessment adds an important voice to the conversation between perspectives published in the past few years by Utah State University Press and reviewed here in recent issues of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*.¹ This text joins Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* (2002) and Bob Broad's *What We Really Value* (2003) as another compelling choice for graduate courses in composition and rhetoric; it would even serve as a useful text for undergraduate courses in teacher education because of the frank and comprehensive way that Professor Lynne frames the writing assessment debate.

Throughout the text, Lynne, herself a compositionist, situates her discussion of evaluation within the established framework of ideas put forth by Huot, Broad, Edward White, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. Beyond the discipline, Lynne demonstrates a familiarity with scholars in educational testing—most notably Roberta Camp and Pamela Moss—and she also draws on the works of scholars in contemporary literacy theory. Using a narrative style, Lynne provides an interesting historical overview of assessment while making a strong case for her premise: We need new words and related concepts on which to build a new theory for writing assessment.

Lynne argues for a radically new vision for writing assessment, one that unequivocally severs its roots from educational measurement theory. Lynne's argument makes sense: if writing, as defined by current theories, is context-dependent, dialogic, and dynamic, why then do the tools designed to measure writing reflect a competing reality, one rooted in an understanding of writing as universal, objective, and ideally uncontestable?

Coming to Terms: Theorizing Writing Assessment in Composition Studies is largely a declaration of an elephant in the room, the incongruence of and incompatibility between educational measurement theory used in large-scale

assessment of writing and contemporary writing theories, as Lynne describes, “a clash between the objectivist paradigm dominant in educational measurement theory and the social constructionist paradigm of composition studies” (6). Neither conceding large-scale testing to the likes of ETS nor co-opting concepts such as *reliability* and *validity* within assessment models more sensitive to postmodern theories of writing will work. According to Lynne, because testing drives curriculum and pedagogy, the ways we assess writing and the ways writing assessment is theorized are fundamental to the way writing skills and strategies are taught and understood.

As the title might suggest, the text is concerned mainly with the lexicon of assessment. The terms *indirect assessment*, *objective*, *subjective*, *validity* and *reliability*, among others, are examined in various contexts. Lynne’s methodology, influenced by Michel Foucault’s study of discourse, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, uses painstaking means to define, trace, categorize, and complicate these terms and their various uses in order to come to a new understanding of writing assessment, one that ultimately tries to reconcile theory, pedagogy, and assessment practices.

Helpful to students and to others new to composition studies is this volume’s historical sketch of American writing assessment from its beginnings in oral disputation, to the first written exams at Harvard in the 1840s, and on through to the present. Central to this narrative is the pivotal relationship logical positivism has had with education in general and with writing in particular. Lynne points out the interlocking connection between shifting cultural values in shaping and reshaping evaluation modalities. In turn, Lynne demonstrates how cultural shifts reflect and indicate some larger paradigmatic shifts in American instructional thinking, shifts that have reframed our notions about writing away from thinking of writing as a medium of expression toward it as an object to be measured. Through a careful weaving of history’s major players and paradigms of thought, Lynne explains the processes by which the discipline of composition studies has come to be so wedded to objective, psychometric examination principles—even when such a marriage does not make sense.

According to Lynne, contemporary literacy theory, as defined by scholars such as Shirley Brice Heath, Deborah Brandt, and Mary Trachsel, has much to add to a burgeoning theory of assessment for compositionists because it is focused on rhetorical and social contexts. In the chapter “Contemporary Literacy Scholarship and the Value of Context,” Lynne summarizes related works and concepts. By making a clear distinction between the competing aims of *literacy* and *assessment* from the past to the present, Lynne examines three related intellectual paradigms—classical, technocratic, and contextual—to demonstrate the history of thought that brings teachers and other

writing assessment professionals to where we are. Discussions of conceptual differences in the seemingly similar terms *literate* and *literacy* and a provocative discussion about the changing perceptions of what it means to be *educated* are where Lynne is at her best. Her analyst's careful attention to the way words and ideas shift with and shape perception is clear and interesting. Her multilayered discussions of terms germane to assessment makes this text a good choice for anyone seeking a better understanding of the complex, socially-influenced environment of writing assessment.

Depending on the professional orientation, the terms *validity* and *reliability* have specific meanings in different scholarly venues. In individual research articles the pair of terms is always defined for clarity and understanding. Psychometricians and compositionists, for example, use the terms, but the disciplines and the authors within these disciplines attach drastically different meanings to the two measurement terms. Lynne draws on Broad's and Huot's perplexing definitions and applications of the terms *validity*, *reliability*, and *validity theory* to demonstrate that the few compositionists who claim a working understanding of these concepts cannot articulate them easily to writing professionals, and even if compositionists could articulate their individual understandings, the application of these concepts to writing within the social-constructivist realm would be suspect.

Lynne wants to replace composition's often unexamined devotion to and use of the psychometric terms *validity* and *reliability* with more theoretically compatible and perhaps more comprehensible counterparts. Her offering of *meaningfulness* and *ethics* as conceptual substitutes is presented in the chapter titled "Theorizing Writing Assessment." Freeing writing assessment of the counterproductive accretion of meanings that are wrapped up in psychometric terminology and taking on new language, claims Lynne, offer "a variety of ways to develop [assessment] alternatives more in keeping with our expertise, our disciplinary knowledge, and our values" (161).

The call for theory, however, is pitched exclusively to postsecondary researchers, presumably because we have the time and the inclination to engage it. After a thorough explanation of the synergy and interrelatedness of theory and practice earlier in the text, it is surprising and a bit disjointed to suggest that theory-making be removed from the classroom or anywhere else that authentic writing and assessment practices may take place. By way of explanation, Lynne takes issue with White's insistence that stakeholders, including teachers, politicians, and administrators, come together as equal partners at a time when "we are seeing plenty of inappropriate decisions made by those without appropriate expertise" (135). Lynne seems to be suggesting that writing assessment theory should be developed by theorists rather than practitioners, at least initially.

One example of a problem inherent in removing theory-building from the classroom is reconciling assessment theory to practice. Although Lynne concedes the larger problem in large-scale writing assessment is political (166)—and, as White before her acknowledges, the power differential between composition and educational testing- mania is not strictly the domain of politicians. Proclaiming the superiority of one first-grader over another is accepted bumper-sticker fare. If writing assessment looks more like description and self-improvement, how are we to rank and compete? Moving beyond the desire for quantification means we have to do battle with our deeply seated need for hierarchy.

Lynne’s work here is not, as the front cover title suggests, “a theory of writing assessment” as much as it is a start in a profitable new direction—a call for theory with an indication of what such a theory might look like.

NOTES

- 1 See *WPA* 28.3 and 29.1–2, Spring 2005 and Fall 2005, respectively.