Commemorating Community: Forty Years of Writing Assessment in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*

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In 1978, Harvey S. Wiener of LaGuardia Community College sent out a newsletter inviting WPAs to participate in a larger network. His aim was the creation of community: to launch a forum for WPAs to address common issues in program administration and help one another solve problems. In this invitation, Wiener describes the need to create "good institutional structure" and acknowledges that WPAs have to learn "how to deal with the bad ones" (3). As stipulated in the December 29, 1977 bylaws of the newly formed Council of Writing Program Administrators, one of the primary goals of this organization was to help serve writing programs by "educating the academic community and the public at large about the needs of successful writing programs" (14). In this work, community formation was key in building professional identity, establishing research traditions, and expanding stakeholder knowledge.

Archival research reveals how writing assessment has been a key presence in the history of writing programs. Over the past forty years, writing assessment has been at the center of identifying structures that advance opportunities for student learning and replacing those that present barriers. In this brief essay, we seek to celebrate writing assessment in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* by providing a taxonomy of seminal studies that remain useful to this day because of their attention to evidential foundations, applications, and theory building.

The Evolution of Writing Assessment in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*

When *WPA: Writing Program Administration* was first issued, Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell had published the only comprehensive edited collection on writing assessment. Published in 1977, Cooper and Odell's *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, and Judging* offered writing teachers an

opportunity to better understand the nature of assessment, specifically how assessment could be used for administrative responsibilities, instructional use, and research purposes. Other popular writing assessment manuals and handbooks such as Edward M. White's classic *Teaching and Assessing Writing* were published after the 1978 inaugural issue of *WPA.* The early history of assessment in *WPA*, therefore, is a record of first-generation WPA research undertaken when little was known—and much was demanded.

In reviewing studies on writing assessment in the forty-year history of *WPA*, we created a taxonomy that identifies seminal articles, their contributions expressed in terms of categories of evidence, and actionable directions. Table 1 is presented in chronological order, with each article classified under three basic categories:

- **Foundations**. These works concern categories of evidence related to validity, reliability, and fairness.
- **Applications**. These works attend to score interpretation and use in specific contexts.
- **Theory Building**. These works strive to align the situated nature of language with the ability to assess written communication.

The last column consists of an actionable direction—an opportunity for WPAs to examine the contribution each article made as well as an invitation to (re)evaluate current writing assessment practices.

As table 1 shows, the first twenty-three years of the journal (1979–2002) were devoted to the foundations and applications of assessment. In reading these articles today, one gets the sense that an unfamiliar terrain was being mapped. General issues in writing assessment were being identified for readers, even as state legislatures increased pressure for educational accountability. Similarly, case studies of large-scale assessments such as those in California were being reported and their impact examined. While placement remained a key concern, other genres of assessment—from research involving the writing studio to the use of portfolios for certification of proficiency—were reported. Similarly, the impact of assessment on student subgroups—especially on learners with diverse race and ethnicity backgrounds, basic writers, and English Language Learners—was an important area of concern. After 2002, scholars in the journal began the process of theory building. Here we see attention to conceptualization: assessment as research rather than administration; the characteristics of leadership; linking assessment to institutional mission; and the situated nature of assessment itself. Retaining the journal's emphasis on impact, recent scholars have attended to the use of universal design for students who

Table 1
Writing Assessment Research in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*

Key article(s)	Categories	Actionable direction(s)
Hairston (1979)	Foundations: Issues in Evaluation	WPAs benefit by knowledge of research design, attention to evidence-gathering, estimation of assessment cost, and comparative program analysis.
White (1980)	Applications: Research on Large-Scale Testing	WPAs need site-specific control over system-wide assessment used for placement. As well, scores for sub-groups may show evidence of differential validity.
Brekke (1980)		As an unintended positive consequence, the presence of an assessment program may result in expanded support and status for writing instruction.
Harris (1981)	Applications: Writing Programs and Writing Labs	WPAs benefit by using writing labs to gain in-depth insight on instruction.
Belanoff and Elbow (1986)	Applications: Portfolios in Writing Assessment	WPAs benefit by experimentation with new forms of writing assessment. Portfolios encourage collaboration among teachers, between teachers and students, and between WPAs and teachers.
Wiener (1986)	Foundations: Validity Writing Assessment Models	WPAs can challenge limited response testing and by locally developed assessments reliant on teacher-developed goals, standards, and scoring processes.
Greenberg (1992)	Foundations: Validity and Reliability	Because writing is a multidimensional, situated construct, WPAs benefit by systematically gathering evidence related to reliability and validity.
Huot (1994)	Applications: Survey of Placement Practices	WPAs benefit by realizing that placement programs are effective if they have institutional validity and account for the variety of influences on composition instruction.
Silva (1994)	Applications: Placement of ESL Students	While placement options for ESL writers vary, graduate programs in rhetoric and composition benefit by providing students with theory and practice of second language learning.

Key article(s)	Categories of Evidence	Actionable direction(s)
Glau (1996)	Applications: Basic Writing Stretch Programs	WPAs benefit by shifting their perception of basic writers and creating programs that allow writers to have more time writing, to produce more writing, and to receive college-credit for their work.
Blakesley (2002)	Applications: Directed Self-Placement	Directed self-placement can yield the unintended positive consequence of reforming institutional contexts and practices while acknowledging student agency.
O'Neill, Schendel, and Huot (2002)	Theory Building: Assessment as Research	Writing assessment should be positioned as a knowledge constructing, rather than an administrative, activity.
Gallagher (2009)	Foundations: Writing Assessment Leadership	WPAs can advance assessment leadership by understanding historical trends, remaining alert to current research and theories, understanding basis measurement concepts, promoting teacher leadership, forming policies that support student learning, affirming cultural and linguistic differences, leveraging appropriate technology use, and working with multidisciplinary teams.
Johnson (2014)	Theory Building: Mission-Driven Assessment	WPAs benefit by considering the alignment of institutional mission with local writing assessment practices.
Dryer and Peckham (2014)	Theory Building: Assessment as an Ecology	Group scoring assessments are best understood as unique ecological events.
Lancaster, Bastian, Sevenker, and Williams (2015)	Theory Building: Assessment as Networked Communication	Network theory allows WPAs to build alliances and disseminate assessment messages through analysis of origins, structure, and weaknesses.
Corbett (2017)	Foundations: Universal Design	WPAs benefit by engaging concepts of Universal Design for Learning to assess the writing of students with learning disabilities.
Estrem, Shepherd, and Sturman (2018)	Applications: Placement Practices	Web-based applications can be used to match students with a writing course based on information they provide. In turn, such applications make visible the context of first-year writing while allowing reconsideration of placement practices.

are differently abled. In these two phases, we see a development somewhat similar to the reporting of experimental work in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. As Charles Bazerman notes, early work is devoted to reports of research that are uncontested and detailed discovery narratives. Only later do studies offer evidence related to claims, qualifications, and generalizations.

Moving from a diachronic framework to a synchronic taxonomy yields equally valuable information. We now situate the studies in terms of their attention to foundations of measurement, applications of assessment, and theory building.

Foundations

From the first, authors publishing in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* recognized that sustainable writing assessments are rooted in concerns related to validity and reliability. As becomes clear in the very early assessment articled by Maxine Hairston published in 1979, emphasis on validity allows WPAs to focus on how assessments are complementing program values. Further, measurements must be consistent, thus providing assurance in the reliability of the assessment process. And, while it is only quite recently that fairness had been added as a center of evidence, the journal has a long history of investigating differences between overall scores and those of diverse student groups.

The direction of actionable history here is clear: WPAs need to continue to examine assessment systems in light of evidence collection. Through that lens, WPAs can identify hegemonic structures and combat writing assessments that fail to consider intersectionality, inclusivity, and accessibility. As this history reveals, WPAs should continue to investigate current writing assessment practices and move toward counter-hegemonic structures that link the situated nature of language to the context of the assessment in terms of score interpretation and score use.

Applications

From the use of scores for placement to interpretation arguments related to student certification and program evaluation, assessment applications are clearly at the center of articles published over the last forty years. Readers of these articles will feel the palpable tension between purchased assessments and those that are locally developed. By 1986, Wiener posited the idea that some assessment models were, in themselves, more valid than others based on shared goals, standards, and scoring processes.

The direction of an actionable history here is equally clear: WPAs benefit by considering writing assessment from a practical application perspective. That is, we should continue to use assessment mindfully to think about our institutional and individual values and reflect on the ways that these values themselves will drive our evidence collection processes. In terms of consequences, we do well to think about our student population first as we consider how to best cultivate and nurture a writing program that will be most effective for all students.

Theory Building

While theory is always implicit in WPA work, it is only in 2002 that WPA scholars begin to work intensively to build theories of writing assessment. Conceptualization of assessment as an ecology—or as a process informed by network theory—holds the potential for alignment of the demands for generalization inferences to the impulse for localism.

In terms of actionable directions for WPAs, we might extend present theories to invite WPAs to continue studying the rhetorical contexts of assessment (Matalene) but do so through a rhetorical genre studies (RGS) framework, potentially through conceptualizations of uptake (Bastian) and memory. WPAs could also extend research in disparate impact using taxonomies of fairness to better understand the impact of writing assessment decisions (Poe and Elliot). The more WPAs study and situate assessment through theory applied in local contexts, the stronger our assessment practices become.

And so, as we commemorate forty years of assessment scholarship, let us be reminded that writing assessment should always be used to improve teaching and learning, and that we need a community of diverse voices in order to create effective writing programs. As origin narratives, let the works identified here, and those related to them, serve as beacons for generations of writing program administrators not yet born.

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