

## (Re)Casting the Spell of Assessment

Huot, Brian *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. Logan: Utah State UP. 2002. 216 pages. \$21.95 (paper).

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I regularly teach courses in composition pedagogy for students in secondary education. They represent a range of experience, but all of them are far more savvy about (and scared by) large-scale assessment than I was as an undergraduate learning to teach English. This is evident particularly when we turn to discussions of what Huot refers to as “assessment as something done because of a deficit in student training or teacher responsibility” and assessment as “the tool of administrators and politicians who [wish] to maintain an efficient and accountable educational bureaucracy” (1). These almost-educators must pass the Washington Educator Skills Test—Basic (WEST-B) and the Washington Educator Skills Test—Endorsements (WEST-E). They must pass these standardized tests in order to become certified; concurrently, they must learn to teach their students to read, edit, and write in ways that satisfy Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and lead to student success on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)—plus AP tests and the SAT and the ACT. Compared to contemporary students’ experience, my education in the art of teaching was acronym free and almost willfully ignorant of high-stakes large-scale assessment.

In *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, Brian Huot speaks to two audiences—scholars and administrators working in assessment and teachers hypnotized by the cobra-like spell of assessment. The clarity of the text is remarkable, given the disparate needs and knowledge of these different audiences, as is the breadth and depth of its coverage. Although Huot explains his own rationale behind this work in chapter one, “(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment,” perhaps the strongest reason for teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition to read the text is articu-

lated in chapter four (“Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment”). Here Huot observes that “writing teachers and scholars feel frustrated by [and] cut off from” the study of assessment, given its technical jargon and apparatus with its roots deep in the measurement community—leaving these outsiders feeling “inadequate and naïve” (81).

As he grounds his work in the history and theory of assessment, Huot’s argument takes some intriguing turns. In chapter two, “Writing Assessment as a Field of Study,” Huot reframes the history of writing assessment as a *multidisciplinary* rather than an *interdisciplinary* area of study, “since it has taken place within various disciplines” rather than across them (25)—with college English and educational measurement identified as the two best-represented groups (29). Huot rereads the three most common views of the history of writing assessment as they are articulated by Edward M. White and Kathleen Blake Yancey, from college English, and Roberta Camp, from educational measurement, with a particular focus on the issues of reliability and validity. The latter topic, Huot argues, can “provide a unifying focus that permits those in different fields to bridge gaps and make connections” (46). The remainder of this chapter is a structured analysis of the concept of “validity and the act of validation as argument” (53).

For teachers, chapters three and five are particularly engaging—chapters where Huot covers “Assessing, Grading, Testing and Teaching Writing” and “Reading Like a Teacher,” respectively. He observes that assessing student writing is “often framed [in our professional discourse] as the worst aspect of the job of teaching student writers” (63). Because of this uneasy attitude toward the activity that consumes the bulk of a writing teacher’s time, testing, assessing, and grading are lumped together, and the theoretical and pedagogical issues facing each issue are only haphazardly interrogated. Rather than marginalizing assessment practices in our discourse and in our classrooms, Huot argues that assessment should “become a more integral part of our pedagogy” (77) and maintains that a shift in practice could and should lead to a tectonic shift in our “beliefs, assumptions and attitudes” (79). Extending the work of chapter three, chapter five focuses the shift for which Huot argues on a single, narrow area: teacher response to student essays. Here, Huot articulates a theory of response designed to create “a dialectic between the way we think about language and teaching and the way we read and respond to student writing” (112).

Chapter six, “Writing Assessment as Technology Research,” presents the notion that “assessment [is] a technology in and of itself” (137). Supporting this view, Huot briefly traces the history of assessment as a “creation of the twentieth century” social scientists geared, in the case of writing assess-

ment, evermore toward the production of “high enough rates of interrater reliability” (137–38). Concern with reliability, rather than validity, guides scholarship and practice. The immediate casualty of this production drive, of course, was the messy act of writing itself, the direct assessment of which fell out of favor (and practice) until the technology of assessment developed enough to allow student writing to be reliably, if not validly, assessed. Driven by concerns about reliability, however, direct assessment of writing caused assessment researchers to focus “on how to create procedures for reading and scoring student writing in which teachers could agree” (144). Like Peter Elbow, Huot argues that the training that produces such reliable scoring creates an unnatural reading environment only dimly related to the normal atmosphere in which reading takes place. Extended to its logical (or illogical) end, the link between reliability and the creation of an unnatural reader and reading has led to the development of computer programs that simulate the scoring of a human reader (144–46). This focus on reliability at the expense of other concerns affects assessment practices and also assessment research—where the focus should be on asking “what we want to know about students” rather than on “the writing of prompts and rubrics, the training of raters, and ultimately the production of reliable scores” (163).

Huot’s final chapter, “Writing Assessment Practice,” is summative, and thus works as a conclusion, but its narrative construction and reflective approach make it perhaps the most engaging section of the book. Considering the regularly posted calls for help with assessment that appear on the wpa-l (a listserv for writing program administrators based at Arizona State University East and hosted by David Schwalm and Barry Maid), Huot argues that in the field of English “there appears to be no cumulative culture about assessment practice, since similar requests are made over and over” (171). Drawing on these common calls for aid and comfort, Huot unpacks and interrogates four broad, general assumptions about assessing and teaching writing and administering writing programs: (1) those who administer writing programs do not consider expertise in assessment important; (2) teaching and administering a writing program exist separately from one another and from assessment theory and practice; (3) writing assessment is generally reactive rather than proactive; and (4) the people who decide when and how to assess writing are generally neither the people who teach writing nor the people who administer writing programs. These four “daunting” assumptions (171–172) allow Huot to summarize the ideas presented in the previous six chapters and lead to his conclusion that “in order to (re)articulate assessment as something controlled by teachers to promote teaching and learning teachers must learn not to avoid it or to leave it in the hands of professional testers or administrators” (190–191).

In the end, I am left with two images: (1) the image of the future teachers whom I train, teachers of writing already steeped in an awareness of assessment as something controlled by, something owned and driven by, outsiders rather than teachers and (2) “the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which the Wicked Witch rubs her hands together with a pensive look on her face cackling, “These things must be done delicately, or you’ll hurt the spell” (190). The two images—the first my own and the second from Huot—contain the lesson of *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*. Teachers of writing (along with the teachers of the teachers and the administrators of writing programs) must think of assessment as something over which they can and must exert some control. Assessment is a technology, not a magical spell whose ingredients are obscure and whose language is arcane. Rather than living under the pseudo-spell of assessment, teachers, scholars, and administrators must (re)cast assessment in a new, more proactive, more productive manner.



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