



## Introduction

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One of the chief purposes for an introduction to an issue of a journal is to characterize what issues, foci, or perhaps even kinds of inquiry or discourse the issue highlights or promotes. Thinking about this issue of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (JWA) and about recent writing assessment scholarship in general, prompts me to wonder about whether discourse on writing assessment has gotten more overtly political and ideological over the last several years. I say more overtly because writing assessment discourse is always political and ideological. Formal (as opposed to the continuous assessment we do when we read anything) writing assessment is about structuring writing and reading to document, categorize, and eventually articulate and justify value judgments and the decisions made on behalf of those judgments. These judgments can have important effects on individuals including admission, placement, and exit in higher education and other programs that constitute opportunity and access. Given the role of writing assessment makes me wonder why this powerful discourse<sup>1</sup> has not always been overtly political.

Although an introduction to an issue of a journal is not the best place to trace in any comprehensive way the historical role of the political in writing assessment discourse, it is possible to talk about the kinds of scholarship and ways of speaking about that scholarship that seem to have dominated during certain historical periods. Such an historical examination might answer some of my questions about why writing assessment discourse has not been overtly political and why it might be moving in that direction. In 1994 I wrote the introduction for the first issue of *Assessing Writing* (AW) and had a similar question about the kinds of articles we were publishing in the first issue. Four years earlier, in my bibliographic essay for the *Review of Educational Research* (RER) (Huot, 1990), I identified the main emphases in the writing assessment literature<sup>2</sup> as textual features and writing quality, task development, and prompt selection and rater perceptions of writing quality. None of the articles we published in the first issue of AW focused on any of those categories. At the time I wrote the AW Introduction, I thought that writing assessment's initial focus on establishing the efficacy of the procedures themselves had shifted to a more critical view, reflected in the fact that all of the articles in the

issue were critical in some way about current writing assessments and many of them promoted new assessments. Obviously, *AW* did not usher in a new, critical discourse of writing assessment. There had been many critiques of writing assessment, most notably several essays in the anthology edited by Greenberg, Wiener, and Donovan (1986).

Although I think my observation at the time about the shifting focus of writing assessment literature was an accurate and interesting way to chart the development of writing assessment, the current turn toward the political in writing assessment discourse gives us a different way to see this earlier development. The turn from a literature of documentation and verification to one of critique can also be seen as a move from the politics of recognizing and promoting holistic and other rubric-related scoring systems as legitimate to an advocacy for new and better writing assessment procedures. Although the initial purpose for writing assessment literature was to herald and support writing assessment<sup>3</sup> as an option, the move toward critique sets its purpose toward improving the new assessments. Ultimately, this tidy narrative of progress for writing assessment literature fails, because the newest wave of writing assessment scholarship seems more pointedly political, focused on the consequences for test-takers, the adequacy of the measures themselves and the role of political figures in assessment design and implementation. For example, in *JWA 1.1* George Hillocks (2003), in his discussion of rhetorical principles and state-mandated writing assessment, examined an anchor paper from the Texas writing test that was given a particular score according to an itemized rubric and discovered that the paper did not match the expectations of the rubric. Hillocks argued that training raters to score a paper for rhetorical principles it does not possess dilutes any value we might ascribe to scores on the Texas writing test. Hillocks (2002), who examined several state-mandated writing assessment programs in *The Testing Trap* (reviewed in this issue), focuses his critique beyond a discussion of assessment procedures, or theories and criticizes a specific state for its legislated writing assessment procedures. Hillocks' work is political in ways that past scholarship is not. In the same vein, Dan Frazier's essay in *JWA 1.2* described and critiqued the Massachusetts Teachers Test, not only for its flawed approach to assessment but because it also represents a failed political attempt at educational reform.

This political discourse for writing assessment has its roots in the 1980s, when education became a popular whipping boy for political debate. Politicians have been increasingly active on issues of education, from charter schools to censorship. One of the hotbeds of political action has been in the use of tests to reform and improve education. Purposes for testing now include a means to institute policy changes. Politicians who want to see more emphases on certain skills or approaches institute legislation that includes serious consequences for low test scores. Superintendents, principals, and teachers have no choice but to prepare schools and students to do well on the tests. The O'Neill et al. article in this issue reviews much of the literature that documents testing as a policymaking device for politicians.

One of the obvious changes in writing assessment over the last decade has been the implementation of tests for nearly all states. This proliferation of testing has spread to 49 of the 50 states. Testing has become a policy arm for educational reform. Elana Shohamy (2001), in her book *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the*

*Uses of Language Tests*, described the shifting discourse on language assessment from a slightly different perspective. For Shohamy, the power of tests is in their use, and the discourse about the technical aspects of test development hides the fact that ultimately “tests are used as disciplinary tools by those in authority, enticing test takers to change their behaviour along the demands of the tests in order to maximize their score” (p. xvi). This state obsession with testing went national in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Gerald Bracey (2004), who has been a persistent critic of the NCLB, noted that by 2014, when 100% of the nation’s students are supposed to be proficient, the California Department of Education has predicted that 99% of its schools will be failing under NCLB. Bracey contended that to understand the NCLB and its straight-jacket regulations that seem to fly in the face of an administration that is supposedly in favor of smaller government and less regulation one needs to understand “the goal of the NCLB is the destruction of public schools, not their salvation. The NCLB sets the schools up to fail and be privatized” (p. 69). If Bracey is right, the NCLB—the granddaddy of testing legislation—has at its core the transformation of our system of public education, much in the same way the current administration attempts to transform social security. In perhaps his most politically charged statement about NCLB Bracey noted, “The law does for the testing industry what Iraq did for Halliburton” (pp. 79-80).

Bracey’s critique of the NCLB seems part of a larger political agenda, because he refers to other political issues with the same administration involving the scrutiny about Halliburton Corporation and the war effort in Afghanistan. Bracey’s critique not only highlights the political nature of assessment discourse, it also illustrates a shifting focus from the creation of better assessments to concern and resistance about the use of these assessments to enact a specific political agenda. There are additional problems with the amount of power and control located in the act of testing. Using assessment as a tool for educational reform combines the content (which is what the tests test) of the reform with an accounting of its effectiveness. In other words, if test scores rise (as they will when test preparation becomes the curriculum) one has to assume that what the tests are measuring has value, a big assumption in some cases given Hillocks critique of the Texas test. On the other hand, the tests themselves have increased the amount of attention spent on writing in the schools. There is some evidence to suggest that students are now writing more. This is especially important if one considers Arthur Applebee’s (1981) findings from the late 1970s that writing had all but disappeared from the high school curriculum. The fact that students are writing more is certainly good news, although there is no way to know if they are writing any better.

Formal assessment has always had as one of its goals the equitable (based on merit) distribution of access and opportunity and therefore has always been political. The current political context for testing, however, lacks a progressive political agenda that recognizes assessment as a form of social action (Schendel, 2000) that can furnish opportunity and access to individuals from disadvantaged groups. This issue’s articles and review are grounded in a political response to testing as educational reform and accountability. The first article, “What Teachers Say About Different Kinds of Mandated State Writing Tests” (O’Neil et al.) reports on the results of a survey sent to teachers in three different states that mandate three dif-

ferent forms of assessment: multiple-choice tests, timed impromptu writing, and portfolios. The picture that emerges from these surveys is interesting and complex. Using statistical tests, the authors illustrate relationships between aspects of the tests and teacher practice that go beyond chance. For example, teachers from Georgia, which uses a timed, impromptu test, report using shorter writing assignments and allowing less time for the completion of writing assignments at a rate that is statistically significant from the responses of teachers in California and Kentucky, which do not use a different timed, impromptu writing test. In addition to quantitative data about the response patterns of teachers in three states, the article also reports qualitative data about teachers' impressions of problems and issues associated with the tests and their teaching. Teachers from all three states report that they are being constrained and demoralized by the constant pressure exerted by the tests. Kentucky teachers also report, however, that the use of the writing portfolio does help students learn to write better, a sentiment not expressed by teachers working under a timed, impromptu or multiple-choice testing format. The results of this study address some of the political issues I raised earlier about the need to be concerned about the nature of the reform a particular test advocates and examines.

Beth Kalikoff's article, "Berlin, New York, Baghdad: Assessment as Democracy," focuses on the importance of educating an informed citizenry and the promotion of free, critical thinking and speech for participation in a "deliberative democracy." Starting with the figure of James Berlin, whose work in college composition fostered the teaching of writing to promote free and informed discourse for citizens of a democracy, Kalikoff whisks the reader forward to the post 9/11 world with its war on terror and emphasis on homeland security and democracy as patriotism. She points out that the events of 9/11 brought America together only to have the government's response polarize the American people into separate political camps, limiting free speech in the name of homeland security. Within this political, cultural, and temporal landscape, the importance of free expression and access to information takes on new meaning and importance. Kalikoff (re)introduces the notion of assessment as a way to inform the teaching of writing and to empower citizens who must be able to write and assess if they are to take part in the complex post 9/11 discourse of democracy. Kalikoff's article is a new form of political discourse about writing assessment that does not fit any of the categories I outline here. Instead of pointing out the political nature of writing assessment or advocating for a specific set of newer and better assessments, Kalikoff assumes the political nature of all discourse and all language pedagogy, encouraging us to return to the altruistic origins of formal assessment as a means not only for social action but as a way to promote a discourse for democracy and the preparation of our citizenry to participate in such a discourse.

In "What Are You Thinking? Understanding Teacher *Reading* and Response Through a Protocol Analysis Study," Anthony Edgington uses protocol analysis to observe how teachers respond to student writing in classes they are teaching. Although the least overtly political piece in the issue, Edgington's focus on the context of instruction and interaction highlight local knowledge and expertise as well as the social nature of teaching and learning writing, linking assessment to teaching. The purposes for the study revolve around answering questions about how context

affects teacher response, if and how teachers reflect while reading student writing, what teachers think about when they read, and the kinds of strategies teachers use when responding to student writing. Edgington's methods attempt to capture the context of teachers responding in the ways they normally do, in the same places and to their own students. His research questions and methodology give us a new window into the response practices of teachers. Edgington learns that teachers often carry on mental conversations with their students while reading and refer to incidents beyond the text to understand student writing. His research refocuses the literature on responding to student writing from the kinds of response teachers write to the ways teachers read and make meaning as they decide on their own responses within a rich context of classroom and personal interaction with individual students.

Susan Callahan's review of George Hillocks' book, *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*, continues the political theme of the issue. Callahan notes that Hillocks found real differences in the effects and consequences of state-mandated writing assessments depending on the form and implementation of the tests. Drawing on interviews with teachers and state officials and an examination of test materials, Hillocks illustrates the many problems these tests continue to have for the states that use them. Callahan recommends the book and an increased attention toward the problems with state-mandated writing assessment for all those who read, write about, and study writing assessment. This review is a strong and fitting statement about an important work on the political nature of writing assessment.

In the introduction to the last issue, I announced that *JWA* would sponsor an annual (if appropriate) award for the best scholarship in writing assessment. With permission from his family, we named the award in honor and memory of Stephen P. Witte whose many contributions to the study of writing included exemplary work in writing assessment. To initiate the selection process, I asked Richard Haswell, a member of the Editorial Board and a senior scholar in writing assessment to oversee the awarding of the first Stephen P. Witte Award for Excellence in Writing Assessment Scholarship. As announced in the last issue, the initial award would be for the 2000–2004 period and subsequent awards would be for 2-year periods. Professor Haswell chose Sandra Murphy, another senior scholar in writing assessment, to assist him in the selection of the first award. They decided to focus only on monographs because of the length of the review period and the unusual richness of the time period in which nearly 20 books about writing assessment appeared.

Haswell and Murphy's report on their work appears after this introduction. Haswell and Murphy's decision to select my book (*Re*) *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* for the first Witte award for writing assessment is a great surprise and honor. It also puts me in an odd position, because I edit the journal that sponsors the award. My decision to accept the award only comes after a lot of reflection and consultation with members of the Editorial Board, members of Professor Witte's family, and my own family and friends. Most of the people I spoke with encouraged me to accept the award, although at first I leaned against it. In the end, I decided to respect the wishes and integrity of the people who chose my book. I believe that (*Re*) *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* honors Professor Witte's commitment to writing assess-

ment as an important venue for the study of writing. Although I accept the award, I do not accept the cash prize that comes with it. Instead, after consulting with a member of Professor Witte's family, I donated the cash prize of \$500 in Professor Witte's name to Nazareth House in Montreal, a downtown ecumenical corporation that ministers to the sick and needy.

In closing, I thank the people at Hampton Press, especially Barbara Bernstein, who continue to support our efforts to maintain a vibrant and insightful literature for writing assessment. I would also like to welcome Patrick Thomas who joins the *JWA* staff with this issue as an editorial assistant. I also acknowledge the contribution of Michael Neal, our managing editor. I would also like to note that the annotated bibliography that is not a part of this issue will resurface in 3.1. We had to delete an installment of the bibliography for this issue because of space constraints—maybe this is because political discourse, as we all know, can get a little longwinded.

### Notes

1. See Howard Berlak (1992) for a discussion of the ways in which “Particular forms of tests and assessments represent particular forms of discourse, that is, they produce particular ways of talking and communicating with others about the schooling and educational practice” (p. 186).
2. I realize that I am now using the term *writing assessment discourse* because it permits me to all of the language, documents, and conversation writing assessment produces including the assessments themselves.
3. I am consciously not using the term *direct writing assessment* because I think it a mistake to continue to recognize any editing or multiple-choice tests as writing tests. They might measure interesting things and have related importance, but they cannot be said to measure writing because it is not a part of the assessment.

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### **Report on the Selection of the Stephen P. Witte Award for Excellence in Writing Assessment 2000-2004**

We began by locating works on writing assessment with a publication date within our range (2000–2004), and then excluded edited collections. That left us with a list a little shy of 20 books. As it turned out, it was easier to reduce that stack to a short list of five than to decide which one among those five should be first:

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments* (SUNY Press, 2004)

Bob Broad, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing* (Utah State University Press, 2003)

George Hillocks, Jr., *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2001)

Brian Huot, *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* (Utah State University Press, 2002)

Sara Cushing Weigle, *Assessing Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Our basic criteria were potential contribution to the field, originality and relevance of the ideas and argument, faithfulness to the complexities of the topic, cogency of expression and arrangement, and use of previous scholarship. We did not consider personal attributes of the authors, such as reputation or seniority in the profession, previous scholarly accomplishment, or involvement with administration or professional organizations.

Only after making our final choice did we think about the possibility that the winner—Brian Huot’s book—might cause the sponsors of the prize some embarrassment, because the author edits the journal that announces the contest. We stuck with our decision, however. We felt that to do otherwise would cut the ground from under the procedure we followed to make it. After all, adherence to a pre-set assessment process is a recommendation that all of these books make.

We chose Huot’s book because of its outstanding scholarship and astute insights into assessment theory. Huot offers a compelling analysis of assessment history as well as principles for assessment that offer the promise of more ecologically valid evaluation procedures. We think his book is essential reading for anyone involved in writing assessment—policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parent alike.

Richard Haswell, Emeritus University of Texas A & M at Corpus Christi  
Sandra Murphy, University of California, Davis