



## Introduction

BRIAN HUOT

*Kent State University*

This issue is different from previous issues because it offers only two scholarly articles in addition to the book review and annotated bibliography. We made the decision to publish two long articles that tackled weighty subjects in a substantive way rather than attempt to fit these pieces into a predetermined page length because our goal is to bring readers the best scholarship on the most important issues, angles, and methodologies for writing assessment theory and practice. In the same way, our last issue did not contain an annotated bibliography because the length of our three articles did not permit the inclusion of the bibliography in that issue. It seems to me that we will continue to be flexible and to play with our overall structure of three articles, a book review and an annotated bibliography in order to ensure that “The Journal provides a forum for the publication of manuscripts from a variety of disciplines and perspectives that address topics in writing assessment” (*JWA Statement of Purpose*). We also welcome any suggestions for features that can be integrated into the journal. Although we still have several segments of annotated bibliographies on writing assessment to publish, we will eventually complete that project and will be looking for other kinds of materials to include in the journal. We are also open to the idea of publishing letters from readers that respond to the articles we publish—we would also include responses from authors to these letters. If anyone has ideas about the journal or about specific features we might consider in the future, please let us know.

Recently, we sent a letter to our distinguished colleagues who sit on the *JWA* editorial board to gauge their interest in continuing. Many of our editorial board members have been serving on the editorial board since Kathy Yancey and I edited *Assessing Writing* together so we wanted to make sure they were willing to continue. I am pleased to say that most of the current editorial board members have agreed to continue. We thank them for their continuing commitment. A list of current editorial board members appears on the inside flyleaf of the journal. Without the continuing support of the editorial board members and the other individuals who review manuscripts for us, *JWA* could not exist as a viable academic venue for writing assessment scholarship. We also wish to thank the reviewers who have decided not to continue with us. Their hard work and commitment to our efforts

have made possible the success of *JWA* and *Assessing Writing* before it. We also want to remember Richard “Dick” L. Larson who passed away this year. Dick’s contributions to the journal and the range of work he did for the teaching and assessing of writing made our profession a richer place. He will be missed.

\*\*\*\*\*

An issue of a refereed journal without an explicit theme always runs the risk of being a hodgepodge that does not make a coherent statement about the field or its important issues. Considering that one of our articles presents the design and results of a quantitative program assessment and the other illustrates how an understanding of Sophistic Rhetoric from Ancient Greece can contribute to the theory and practice of writing assessment validity inquiry concerned me at first. However, our intent at *JWA* is to present a wide a range of scholarship as possible, because writing assessment is an emerging field that is still in the process of defining itself.

So, although I have no doubt that both of these articles not only belong in a serious study of writing assessment but also make a real contribution to our understanding of important issues, the question might be raised as to whether or not they belong in the same issue. Since I have included them together in this issue, my answer for the affirmative should be taken for granted. What has been helpful for me is that in considering whether or not to include these articles together, I have become aware of some insights about writing assessment and its scholarship that finally persuaded me that there were some principled reasons to include these two articles together. The main connection between these articles is that they are both focused on exploring the range of possibilities for validity inquiry in writing assessment. Not only does this common focus give this issue a thematic coherence, it also focuses needed attention on the most important aspect of writing assessment, the validity of the decisions we can make on behalf of our assessments.

Too often, a claim for writing assessment validity is made on the basis of a simple correlation between the measure itself and another valued measure, although since the 1950s validity has meant much more than a simple correlation (Elliot, 2005; Shephard, 1993). Unfortunately, newer ideas about validity that ask for validity arguments that consider a range of factors including the impact of the assessment on students, teachers and other stakeholders (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 2000) are seen as unrealistic or favoring only qualitative approaches to assessment and research. In “Portfolio Assessment: Quantification and Community” Norbert Elliot, Vladimir Briller, and Kamal Joshi address the full range of validity arguments using large data sets and inferential statistics, demonstrating that newer forms of validity do not preclude a quantitative approach. Likewise, in focusing on validity inquiry as argument, Asao Inoue takes us back to classical Greece, to explore the genesis of formal argumentation principles. His argument is that a rich consideration of contextual factors including consequences has strong historical precedents in the Sophistic tradition of formal rhetoric. Inoue extends Cronbach and Kane’s notions of validity as argument by tracing parallel traditions of Greek argumentation to inform and illustrate the ways in which validity and formal

modes of argument can compliment our understanding of validity inquiry to insure the best possible decision making on behalf of writing assessment measure. Both of these articles, then, in very different ways expand our notions of validity inquiry and illustrate how we can use a modern understanding of validity theory to build better assessments and make better decisions based on these assessments.

“Portfolio Assessment: Quantification and Community” by Elliot, Briller, and Joshi presents several years worth of data about the New Jersey Institute of Technology’s writing intensive courses for its undergraduate General University Requirements (GUR). Their data is interesting in and of itself because, as they mention, most college-level writing assessment focuses on first-year writing. This study allows one to see the kinds of progress that students can make in a writing-across-the curriculum context, because the various courses that comprise the GUR are housed in various disciplines and are taught by faculty whose disciplinary homes are not in English or composition. In addition to providing us important information about the ways undergraduates write in a general education context, they also provide a model for program assessment in which various stakeholders across disciplines come together to assess student writing. Focusing on specific educational goals related to writing instruction, this study satisfies the need for outcomes assessment, furnishes the institution with valuable information, and brings together colleagues from across various disciplines in the institution to solidify a community of educators dedicated to the teaching and learning of writing. What is perhaps most interesting and important about the institutional aspects of this study is that it demonstrates how the creation and sustaining of an assessment culture not only satisfies the need for assessment to make informed decisions about curriculum, but it also provides the foundation for important and ongoing conversations about students and programs at a specific institution. Of course, the value of this study goes beyond its use as a strong model for program assessment because it illustrates the power of current validity theory to support a range of assessment models that rely on statistical information and explanations. I have little doubt that this study will make an important contribution to the literature on validity and program assessment.

Inoue’s “Articulating Sophistic Rhetoric as a Validity Heuristic for Writing Assessment” articulates not only the ways in which validity inquiry can be understood as a rhetorical concept and practice but also the value of linking the study classical Greek rhetoric with validity theory and inquiry. Building on the work of Lee Cronbach and Michael Kane, who explore the ways in which validity inquiry is akin to building an argument for a particular use of a specific measure, Inoue expands the conception of validity as rhetorical practice, tracing the kinds of arguments and rhetorical moves validity inquiry encourages and supports. While Platonic and Aristotelian orientations to rhetoric imply the discovery of truth through logical reasoning and syllogism, Sophistic Rhetoric introduces contextual, cultural, and political elements that shape different positions, allegiances, and decisions. Providing a succinct and fascinating picture of Ancient Greece, Inoue describes the process of *agon* (argument) through which Sophists explore various power and social relationships in constructing arguments for the greater good. Understanding Greek terms like *nomos* and *physis* allows us to make important

connections about the kinds of arguments a Sophistic Rhetoric can allow us to make as part of our validity inquiry into all decision-making related to writing assessment. Using what he calls a “neosophistic orientation” to argument, Inoue provides teachers, administrators, and testers with an argumentative heuristic that includes the various consequential criterion and content basis for making important decisions based on writing assessment.

Our book review for this issue is by Bob Broad who looks at Elana Shohamy’s 2001 book *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. Normally, we would not review a book some 5 years after its publication. However, Shohamy works in Israel, and her book and work is not readily familiar to most people working writing assessment in the United States. Although most of Shohamy’s experience is with writing in second languages or languages other than English, she has much to teach us about writing assessment. One of her main arguments is that we concentrate too much on the tests themselves rather than on the use made of tests by educators, administrators, politicians, and other policymakers. Her focus on the uses of tests in various perspectives includes a wide range of personal experiences and empirical research that examines the specific uses of writing and language tests. Regardless of its publication date, this book, as Broad claims, has much to teach those who work in writing assessment.

Of course no introduction to an issue of a journal would be complete without acknowledging all the people who make it possible. I want to thank Barbara and Paul Bernstein for all of their support and help over the last few years and with this current issue. I would also like to thank my editorial assistant, Patrick Thomas for helping me with too-many-to mention tasks that make the publication of this issue possible. Finally, thanks to the readers who make this journal possible and who guide our efforts for the future.