

Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volumes 1 & 2

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and Carl Whithaus

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Editors Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin, and Carl Whithaus have curated a comprehensive list of chapters about the many complex challenges facing the field of writing assessment in their collection *Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volume 1: Technical and Political Contexts* and *Volume 2: Emerging Theoretical and Pedagogical Practices*. This edited collection is part of the “Perspectives on Writing” series of books from WAC Clearinghouse and focuses on articles gathered from the *Journal of Writing Assessment*. Volume 1 offers a wide range of chapters related to the relationship between reliability and validity, the role of politics in designing a program’s writing assessment structure, and the effects of automated scoring on both the assessment of writing and writing itself. Volume 2 dissects many additional challenges related to writing

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assessment, including how fairness complicates and enhances conversations about reliability and validity and a closer examination of the lived experiences of students and educators in an assessment environment. Taken together, these volumes showcase powerful discussions about the current state of writing assessment in the 21st century and will benefit any educator or scholar in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC).

Retrospectives

Each part of this collection is introduced by a retrospective written by a current scholar in writing assessment. These retrospectives serve to capture the past and evolving present of writing assessment as the authors in the collection revisit common issues in the field. For example, David H. Slomp, co-editor of *Assessing Writing*, introduces Part One by looking at the storied history of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* and lauding the critical role it plays in shaping efforts to improve writing assessment. In introducing Part Three, Laura Aull provides an important review of what automated scoring is and the issues it introduces and exacerbates—which are then expanded upon in the section.

Volume 1: Technical and Political Contexts

Part One: Technical Issues in the Assessment of Writing: Reliability and Validity

The authors in the first section of this collection discuss the ongoing struggle between reliability and validity in writing assessment. Reliability in writing assessment is concerned with consistency in scoring—from one student to another, one teacher to another, one school to another, etc. In Chapter 1, “Reframing reliability for writing assessment,” Peggy O’Neill introduces nuance into calls for assessment to be handed over to psychometrics experts in order to improve reliability. O’Neill explains that rather than look at this as a black and white issue—in which either we relinquish total control of writing assessment to the field of psychometrics or separate ourselves from any type of psychometrics-assisted assessment entirely—we must find ground in the middle. By bringing psychometrics experts into the conversation but still maintaining ownership as writing assessors, we can get closer to the reliability that we need. In Chapter 2, “Validity inquiry of race and shared evaluation practices in a large-scale, university-wide writing portfolio assessment,” Diane Kelly-Riley demonstrates the complexity of writing assessment in individual classrooms by examining race as a factor in validity or questioning whether we are assessing what we think we are assessing effectively and accurately. Kelly-Riley reveals through a sequential

regression analysis of student portfolios that an instructor's perceptions of their students influence how they assess their writing in both positive and negative ways. Chapter 3, "Three interpretive frameworks," authored by Norbert Elliot, Andre A. Rupp, and David M. Williamson, continues the investigation into the issue of reliability by examining Common Core curricula in K–12 education. At its most basic, Common Core attempts to create reliability (i.e., consistency) across all schools in the United States. The result, as demonstrated by the authors, reveals the weaknesses of forcing reliability without nuance. Individual students, classrooms, and school districts have different needs and contexts that require human intervention in order to achieve actual reliability. As revealed by the authors, teachers who teach Common Core curricula take part in local adjustments to reach a level of reliability. The authors of this first section of Volume 1 insightfully demonstrate just how complex this balance between reliability and validity really is.

Part Two: Politics and Public Policy of Large-Scale Writing Assessment

The second section of this collection examines the role of politics and the resulting public policy in writing assessment. Chapter 4, "The misuse of writing assessment for political purposes," serves as a succinct explanation of the battle between politics, public education policy, and actual educators. The author, Edward M. White, summarizes, "Political figures love assessment because it allows them to posture about education and pretend to themselves and to others that they are improving education by measuring a simplified version of it" (p. 144). Writing assessment is such a complex ecosystem as to be nearly impossible to systematize effectively, leading us right back to the questions of reliability and validity. As Arthur N. Applebee points out in Chapter 5, "Issues in large-scale writing assessment," from one state to another, we cannot even agree on consistent terminology to be used in assessing writing, let alone the assessment itself by examining the development of the National Assessment of Educational Progress framework in 2011. By closely reviewing this framework, Applebee reveals how complex each component of writing assessment is and explains the detrimental effects that occur for students when assumptions are made during the creation of large-scale writing assessment frameworks. Chapter 6's J. W. Hammond and Merideth Garcia continue the discussion around Common Core curriculum from Chapter 3 in their chapter, "The micropolitics of pathways." As the authors articulate, Common Core ultimately adds additional labor to an already overworked and underpaid population of educators by offering a too-narrow and rigid set of requirements that are neither self-implementing nor self-interpreting. As a result, Hammond and Garcia argue that closer attention must be paid to how instructors

interpret these requirements, referred to by the authors as “micropolitical perspectives.” Chapter 7, “Writing assessment, placement, and the two-year college,” supplies one such example of the ramifications of underinformed public policies regarding writing: the two-year college. Chapter authors Christie Toth, Jessica Nastal, Holly Hassel, and Joanne Baird Giordano explain that the two-year college is a perfect example of how complex issues such as reliability and viability get. They insightfully point out the differing contexts of the students’ arrivals in a given classroom as well as their differing goals, which, when coupled with the “racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of two-year college students” (p. 211), indicate a significant ethical component involved in writing assessment. Part Two of this collection calls upon program administrators to bring writing educators into the conversation in order to create more just and effective public policies.

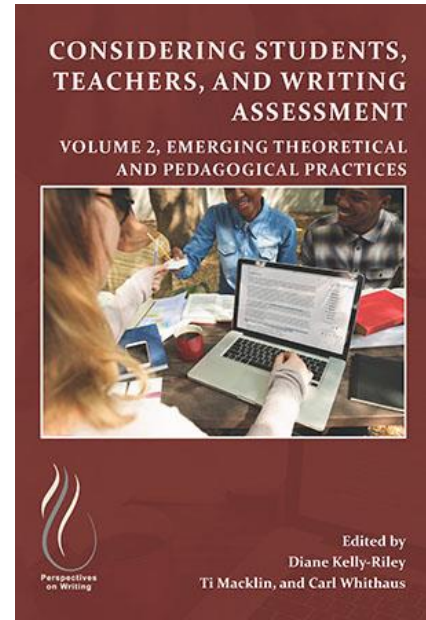
Part Three: Implications of Automated Scoring of Writing

Another component of writing assessment often simplified to the field’s detriment is automated scoring. Michael Williamson in Chapter 8, “Validity of automated scoring,” explains that holistic scoring is traditionally used in writing assessment for a reason—a composition is such a complex entity as to be near-impossible to automate. The authors of Chapters 9 and 10 take a closer look at the effects of automated scoring via case studies. In Chapter 9, “Critique of Mark D. Shermis and Ben Hamner,” Les C. Perelman states clearly and confidently that Shermis and Hamner (2012), an oft-cited unpublished study that points to automated scoring’s reliability, is misconcluded due to the authors’ methodological shortcomings, namely, data gathered that does not evaluate the writing, the bias toward machine assessment, and conclusions drawn without the data to support them. In an effort to push the field toward studies that are more replicable, aggregable, and data-supported, Perelman reveals that some conclusions drawn by Shermis and Hamner are not supported by the data. In Chapter 10, “Globalizing plagiarism and writing assessment,” Jordan Canzonetta and Vani Kannan investigate Turnitin’s push for automated writing assessment. Similar to political leaders pushing for certain policies, Turnitin has a vested interest in automated scoring; if they can establish the rules of the game, their product becomes the de facto solution in automated scoring. Canzonetta and Kannan’s insights are particularly prescient for the field of TPC amid the current flood of AI tools that are reshaping the writing classroom in unpredictable and often detrimental ways. The authors argue for programs to be wary of any company claiming to have the silver bullet solution.

Volume 2: Emerging Theoretical and Pedagogical Practices

Part Four: Theoretical Evolutions: Considering Fairness and Aspiring to Justice

In the first half of Volume 2, the chapter authors discuss fairness in writing assessment, a new dimension in the debate surrounding reliability and validity. As is highlighted in the introduction, forward-thinking scholars such as Peggy O’Neill have been pushing for fairness-minded solutions, such as locally contextual assessment, since 2003. The individual chapter authors offer different approaches to introducing fairness into the equation, such as in Chapter 11, “Moving beyond holistic scoring through validity inquiry,” in which Peggy O’Neill re-examines William L. Smith’s writing placement work from the 1980s and 1990s. O’Neill argues that Smith’s work serves as an important body of work to review to weave fairness into the assessing of writing. In Chapter 12, “Rhetorical writing assessment,” Bob Broad and Michael Boyd offer an analogy of Bohr physics—specifically, the concept of “complementarity”—to better understand the relationship between validity and fairness. Rather than observe them as competing concepts, Broad and Boyd argue, they should be viewed together. In Chapter 13, “Articulating sophistic rhetoric as a validity heuristic for writing assessment,” author Asao B. Inoue extends the analogy exercise of Chapter 12 by looking to the *nomos-physis*—or socially derived customs versus universal customs—concept in rhetoric to understand the place of writing assessment in composition studies. Inoue asserts that writing assessment ought to be more centrally located in conversations about composing to fight for fairness with the same gusto as other social justice efforts. In Chapter 14, “Ethical considerations and writing assessment,” David H. Slomp offers a way to introduce fairness into assessment. According to Slomp, fairness, when introduced correctly, includes sociocultural perspectives, provides access to educational structures, offers opportunities to learn, maximizes construct representations, disaggregates data for classroom-specific analysis, and seeks justice. To become better-informed educators and researchers in TPC, these authors’ expert analyses can serve as a useful guide.



Part Five: Students' and Teachers' Lived Experiences

The final section of this edited collection offers specific examples of how educators can take steps toward the goal of fairness in writing assessment. Though the examples within are for composition classes, the lessons that the authors espouse can easily be extrapolated into the TPC classroom. Take, for example, Leslie Henson and Katie Hern in Chapter 16, “Let them in.” The authors examine a policy shift in California that pushed more writing classes to more students, with a particular emphasis on underserved populations. By simply creating more opportunities for access, there has been a positive impact on racial and ethnic disparity in college completion rates, showcasing that sometimes no new ideas are needed, but instead just a reconsideration of who’s being brought into the classroom. In Chapter 17, “Neurodivergence and intersectionality in labor-based grading contracts,” Kathleen Kryger and Griffin X. Zimmerman push the boundaries of labor-based grading contracts (LBGC) by investigating how neurodivergent students engage with them. Based on their investigation, Kryger and Zimmerman offer ways to improve LBGC to best support a wider range of students including student conferences with students wherein the instructor and student find the ideal grading contract together. Scholars and instructors interested in new ideas in the classroom will appreciate Chapter 15, “Civil rights and writing assessment,” by Mya Poe and John Aloysius Cogan, Jr. and Chapter 18, “Engaging in resistant genres as antiracist teacher response,” by Shane Wood. Both chapters excellently speak to antiracism efforts in the writing classroom, with Poe and Cogan, Jr.’s chapter focusing on the distinction between disparate treatment and disparate impact and Wood’s chapter emphasizing how good intentions—such as in the case of grading contracts—can still have violent consequences.

Conclusion

As a compilation, these two volumes edited by Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin, and Carl Whithaus provide an essential addition to the corpus of writing assessment literature. Touching on prescient concepts in the field such as the push for automated assessment, introducing justice and fairness into assessment, and public policy’s effects on the classroom, any educator or scholar in the field of TPC can find insightful and relevant advice relating to their work. Whether you are an expert in writing assessment or just getting introduced to the field, *Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volumes 1 and 2* is a must-read for those interested in improving the writing classroom.

Author Information

Jordan Dagenais is a PhD student in the Rhetoric, Theory, and Culture program at Michigan Technological University. Jordan's research focuses on writing program administration, the first-year writing and technical communication classroom, and multimodal composition. They have a background in technical and professional communication, and prior to shifting to academia, they gained 10 years of experience working as a technical communicator in the fields of telecommunications, information technology, and medical devices.