Discourses, Rhetorics, Selves: Writing Assessment in the Academy

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Professor, Department of English
University of North Carolina

A lecture presented for the 1997 Colloquium of the
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing

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Preface

In 1997, Kathleen Yancey visited the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota as the keynote speaker for the seventh annual Colloquium. Entitled *Discourses, Rhetorics, Selves: Writing Assessment in the Academy*, Yancey's speech addressed issues of writing assessment, specifically in terms of what she called the "plural commons," the idea that we are all separated by the same language.

At the time of her visit, Kathleen Yancey was a professor of English at the University of North Carolina- Charlotte. Currently, she is a Professor of Professional Communication and Rhetoric at Clemson University. She is co-founder and editor of the only scholarly journal devoted to writing assessment, *Assessing Writing*. She has edited three books on writing assessment, including *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom,* as well as some 11 book chapters and articles on writing assessment. Her most recent articles explore the nature of "reflective practice" among writers and teachers and the rhetoric of electronic literacy.

The Center's Annual Colloquium and Speaker Series contribute to its primary mission of improving undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. These activities, along with faculty development workshops, conferences, publications and other outreach programs, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all members of the university community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,
- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics for writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and

- the status of writing ability during the college years.

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Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
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June, 2003
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Discourses, Rhetorics, Selves: Writing Assessment in the Academy

My assumption is that we don't know where we're going until we know where we've been, which is why I'm starting with "Tripping the Light Fantastic: Thirty Years of Writing Assessment," which I presume to do in five minutes. Then I want to move on to two key concepts that define the field right now. One of them is a stakeholder and the other is validity, which is linked to interpretation.

After that I want to move on to four current and forthcoming issues in writing assessment. The first issue that I want to address is local assessment vs. national assessment. I've set it up as a dichotomy because that's the way it has been constructed; although you might make the argument that what we are doing is moving from national to local. I'll leave that to your judgment. Second, I want to talk about the appropriate role of the self. That's a historical construction that we try to move away from, and I'm going to suggest that what we've done is brought it back to center stage. Third, assessment as inquiry--plural methods for common understandings--has to do with understanding that we have moved from a universal sense of methodology to pluralization. Fourth, multiple discourses/multiple Rhetorics really has to do with the point that Winston Churchill, Henry Gates, and Lisa Delpit all agree on, and that is we are separated by the same language.

That sets me up to make some conclusions on the basis of all this having to do with the new writing assessment. My trope here is the plural commons. The way I got to the plural commons was to think in terms of multiple tasks that took place in the public domain and allowed us to have enough identity so we could talk among ourselves but also permitted difference. I was looking for a place that would represent this. I

wantedsomething that had a public dimension to it because I was thinking of it as an Aristotelian matter, that is, a rhetoric that could be used for purposes of persuasion for the good of the public. That is a trope I'll return to, as you'll see as we go through the trope.

Having said that let me give you a thumbnail sketch of writing assessment in the recent past. As you undoubtedly know, thirty years ago people measured writing through what is called indirect measures. Indirect measures are measures that are not looking at writing: a multiple-choice test, for instance, is an indirect measure. There is a presumed correspondence between the indirect measure and the "domain" or "construct" that you are seeking to sample.

That changed in about the 1970s, and Ed White for one, and the National Testing Network in Writing, including people like Harvey Weiner and Karen Greenberg, were the people who really were responsible for moving us away from objective measures and toward holistic scoring, which is now so commonplace as to not even need a definition. But if we were to define it, we'd say that holistic scoring typically looks at a single text that is written in a timed situation to a specific prompt to which we assign a score: four out of six, or two out of four, something like that.

The move in holistic scoring was toward something that was seen as a more valid measure of writing. There are two concepts in writing assessment that are definitive. One is validity. Validity means that you are in fact measuring what it is you "think" you are measuring. The second is reliability. Reliability means that you have consistency in your scoring; thus, if a student were tested on Tuesday, s/he'd earn the same score that s/he'd earned on Monday. Now this is an oversimplified take on it, but that will give us enough common text to move on.

The move here, in holistic scoring, was toward a more valid sample of writing, and it is focused both on sampling and on the scoring mechanism. So the first change is that you are looking at writing samples, not at multiple-choice tests. It is obvious that if you are looking at a piece of writing, you're going to obtain a better measure of writing than if you are having people fill in bubbles. And people understood that. So to make holistic scoring as "credible" as an objective measure, the question was this: Could you help people (raters) score as consistently as a machine can score? And the answer is no, you cannot, but you can get close enough that it will work; it will satisfy the psychometricians. And that's how Ed White among others made the case for a writing assessment by way of writing, by way of a single text. He also made the case that once you moved to a single text, you saw your students differently, more as people. So changing the writing assessment brought with it a change in ideology; and it let more students into the college classroom.

White also argued, as have several other people, that in writing assessment, we'd get even more valid results if we looked at more than one text: the more texts, the better. That's how you got to multiple texts, which is what happened in about the 80's, and at the same time that you got those multiple texts you started moving to portfolios, which are sets of multiple texts narrated/contextualized by the composer.

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff are among the people generally attributed with the beginning of portfolios--although there is a man in Hawaii who did portfolios in 1970. So finding the first portfolio is an interesting question--I'm not sure it's terribly important. But certainly Elbow and Belanoff get credit for moving us toward not just the multiple texts but also the narration of those texts. The narration is important because all of a

sudden now you have a student speaking to you directly about those texts. So you're not

interpreting those texts all by yourself according to some context that is in your head or

embedded in a scoring guide; you're now interpreting those texts, in part, according to

what the writer wants you to know. What should the writer want you to know is the

question we're still grappling with, and that is part of the focus of this book that I'm

working on now?

But portfolios aren't the only kind of direct measure currently under discussion;

we could try other kinds of direct measures. For instance, Steve Witte did a piece with

some colleagues where he talked about the down side to portfolios and why that wasn't

the measure that it's intended to be. He was looking for something that did more by way

of situating writing as a communal or social exercise focused very clearly within the

public domain. He proposed that you would have a group of writers working together on

a public project that was a real project--let's say looking at causes of pollution in the local

community and ways to minimize them. Students in a senior-level classroom would

investigate this by doing library research and by talking to all kinds of neighbors--

scientists, taxpayers, and local politicians. Students would investigate this problem

together, they would write up the documents together, and they would present it to a local

board—say, a citizens group of public officials.

This is an entirely different way of understanding writing assessment: as a social,

collaborative, publicly focused activity. (And you can see how far we have moved from a

test of writing in this model.) I don't think that this is the way things are finally going to

go, but you should know about it if only because there are a lot of high schools who are

using a version of this model. There is a school reform effort that is located in Brown

University, and that is the way they are going. They are looking at high school

exhibitions that pretty much meet these particular parameters.

Then there are also new direct measures that I am calling electronic and

experimental texts. Electronic texts would be anything from e-mail to web sites, and I'm

going to talk a little bit later about some of the issues that come up with them. It's enough

to say now first, that both of these--electronic and experimental--present non-traditional

kinds of problems in that they are not texts that the academy is very comfortable with.

That is true with any experimental text. The second thing about e-texts is that they are so

new that no one really knows what to do with them. For instance, if you're in a classroom

and you're using e-mail in lieu of a journal, how do you grade it? Do you simply "count"

it, in terms of a grade, according to the number of lines or screens that students have

composed? Do you count it according to engagement with ideas, and how would you

tally that? Do you count it according to how many peer responses they motivated? There

are a lot of ways you can look at this, and it's not clear how we should look at it, and I

haven't even gotten to web pages yet--which opens up a whole other set of questions.

More or less, then, this summary trips the light fantastic through 30 years of

writing assessment. But there's still another way to think about this history, and that's to

suggest that throughout there is a self that increasingly emerges. You've seen those selfs

in a multiple choice test: You have a monological white male who speaks the prestige

dialect, and that is what you are looking for, and the closer you get to that, the better the

writer you are. That's what that test says. By the time you have moved to narrate multiple

texts, however, you have also moved away from this monological writer toward many

different kinds of writers. The role of the self, the role of the writer in writing assessment, is another key issue, then, and we will return to that momentarily.

What I want to do now is talk about the two key concepts that people take to be axiomatic right now: the first is stakeholders, and the second is validity and interpretation. Ed White refers to stakeholders as people who are vested in the process of writing assessment. This can include students, teachers, administrators, legislators, public citizens--everyone who has some commitment to and responsibility for funding for that for the students. That's very useful. We talk about how different stakeholders are in different places. And given where they are coming from, it is no surprise we have such division. An administrator, naturally enough, wants to spend the least amount of money, so efficiency is a value that is very important to an administrator, but it is not necessarily important to other people. All these values come into play when you bring stakeholders together. Ed White is really borrowing from a book called *For the Generation of Valuation.* The idea here is that in order to understand something you get as many perspectives as possible. The more perspectives you have, the better interpretation you can generate.

This leads me to my second point. Brian Huot, in 1990, made the point that reliability was no longer the issue in writing assessment; validity was. And that's where we are now. The reason people have gone to multiple texts and narrative multiple texts is they understand those as a better representation of what people can do. If you want to know what people can write, you ask them to write in a very natural setting. So validity is very much what we're about. But the validity that we're talking about now has another piece to it. And that is it's presumed that a text is no longer considered valid if it is not

used in the service of the learner. That is a key shift from where we used to be. So it's not just the self that's important, it's the function that the assessment will serve in terms of meeting the needs of the students as selves.

The other point that needs to be made is that assessment is seen as a constructivist activity. You're not talking about a positivist notion any longer where you think there is an external reality, and you're just trying to target it. You understand that this is an enterprise where we are creating something, and we are interpreting it. So we are very much a part of the process. If you understand that we are a part of the process, then how we go about doing what we do becomes an important research question. How do we read student texts? Not how good is it, but what conclusions did you draw based on how you read it? And you'll see that some other questions will arise as a consequence of that as well.

On to the current and forthcoming issues in writing assessment. The first one: local assessment vs. national assessment. If you think in historical terms, it is quite clear that national assessment is very much the limit. If you want to go to college you take the SAT exam; if you want to go to graduate school you take the GRE; if you want to practice law you pass the bar. So there are clearly national assessments that play important crucial, determining roles in peoples' lives.

But across the college campuses it is commonly accepted that the way to go is not to look at national assessment but to look at local assessment; that the people at their own institutions understand best what their students can do and can devise some sort of sampling procedure and can read that student work and make a judgment on it. I would not be able to come into your institution and assess your students very well because I

don't have the community base to draw upon. That's the extreme position, and that's pretty close to the position that Brian Huot, who's a good friend of mine, argued in the December issue of *College Composition and Communication*.

At the other end you have what I'm calling the outcomes group. The outcomes group is a group of college faculty who came together on a listserv and decided that if first year writing--first year composition--is a course worth having, then there ought to be some common outcomes and there ought to be some common understanding. This is a two-year effort and I'm part of it, and I'm not sure how excited I am to be part of this to tell you the truth. We ditched the standard, and I think everyone has given up on standards, and I think we *should* give up on standards. I do not think that people at Long Island Community College will meet the same standards as the students at Berkeley. They might, but I don't think so. I feel confident that the students at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte will not meet the standards at Harvard and I'll walk the plank on that.

Now that's not the same thing as being able to create outcomes that would be flexible enough so we could find some differences. That's the challenge and I think it is a challenge worth undertaking. My sense is that we might actually accomplish this.

It's interesting because Brian has made some interesting moves practically, but he's more of a theorist. In a way this local vs. national assessment is a theorist vs. craftist tension, because these outcome people don't know a lot about assessment. They're nice people and do other wonderful things, but assessment is not their thing. So it's interesting to see how this is going to play out. It's also interesting in terms of this plural commons trope, because the commons speaks to the national end of it, the plurality to the local, and

the outcomes group is really trying to do both. Where will it come out? Check with me in a year.

The second issue is the appropriate role of the self. I say, "appropriate" for a good reason as you might imagine. Lester Faigley argued in "Judging Writing, Judging Self," which is reprinted in *Fragments of Rationality*, that when people read writing they are judging selves--they are not judging writing--and he was, as I read it, cautioning us about that and suggesting that maybe it isn't such a good thing. He also made the case, that Jim Berlin had made as well, that this is historically what English departments have done. Historically, English departments have looked for highbrow culture and have rewarded it where they have found it and punished where they did not find it.

Writing assessment is harder when you have fewer tests to judge the self. If I give everyone in this room a piece of paper, I only let you write left handed, and I only let you write 20 minutes, you're going to look much more alike than if I give you two weeks, you choose three texts you like, and write me something. In that second scenario you're going to really look different, I'm going to know much more about you, and there is going to be the opportunity for your selves to emerge.

If that rings true for you at all then the issue is not *whether* we are judging the self, but the question is *how* we are judging ourselves and whether that is appropriate. In other words, the ideology here is a given and we have some evidence to that effect. Let me cite you three contexts because regardless of the context it is the same story. The first one that is listed here is Karen Paley. Karen Paley did a study on college admissions officers reading essays that were written by college students for admission to college. These were reasonably selective colleges, and these admissions officers were quite clear

about what they valued: it wasn't text so much as it was validity. They wanted the students who wouldn't resist too much but produced in ample amounts. There was a kind of insider/outsider position that the successful student did.

Second case in point is a piece of work on portfolios done by Schultz, Durst, and Roemer, who found that when teachers read portfolios they created a whole classroom context that they assumed their students were working in. So when they made a judgment about whether a portfolio should pass or fail, it wasn't based only on their reading of the text, and it wasn't based only on their reading of the student. It was based on their reading of the student as performing in a class that they constructed from their reading of the portfolio. This is an interesting thing. Whether or not that classroom that they're imagining bears any resemblance at all to the classroom that the student was in is an interesting question that needs to be pursued.

Frank Sullivan has a piece looking at placement essays, and he found that, regardless of all the other factors, if you take two essays, one of which has high brow references to it such as to a Shakespearean play, and the other has pop culture references to it, such as *Dead Poet's Society*, the one that mentions Shakespeare will get a better rating even though it is identical in virtually every other way. So what we seem to be rewarding in those placement exercises is cultural capital. It's the student who knows cultural capital, which is problematic.

Now, if you're looking for the multiple writer, which is what Jim Berlin and Pat Belanoff talk about, maybe this isn't a problem because maybe it's not the multiple self that is the problem. Maybe it's only the single self that is the problem. And it becomes particularly problematic when we look at program assessment, which is Chuck Schuster's

point. Chuck is at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, where they do have a portfolio essay, and he looked at the portfolios that were put together by students. He was willing to argue that there are pieces that students include in their portfolio they thoroughly fictionalized. These students were telling us what we wanted to hear: "I love writing, I learned to write, I learned to revise, and here's how I do it." These are not the students that we have here in our everyday classroom.

So his question is, "Is this a problem?" Chuck's argument is that it *is* a problem because assessment should be about accuracy and these are not accurate portrayals. I'm willing to concede that point, but I want to say on the other side that I think one of the ways we become something like a writer or a teacher is by fictionalizing ourselves into that situation. Such fictionalizing is in fact something that we do not want to write about, but in some way that is part of what we do. Now how we want to be part of what we do, whether it's appropriate or not is again a question that needs to be taken up. So, my sense here is that this text that is the self is in fact a commons or a multiple way of seeing.

The third issue in writing assessment is assessment as inquiry: plural methods for common understandings. The first item here is what assessment can teach us. There is a book that Brian and I have edited which really mentions assessing writing across the curriculum. What we looked at in editing that collection and what the people in that collection looked at had to do with understanding what the assessment process had to teach us and what we could learn from it. Almost every contributor in that volume looked at assessment as an opportunity to learn something about their program. That's another emphasis that I would mention: assessment is no longer just about individual methods; it is really about total assessment. Even in cases where you do an individual assessment to

make that work for program assessment is another piece of it. For example, Barbara

Walvord has a really wonderful piece in there when she reviews the literature on WAC.

She was able to talk about it in terms of six kinds of programs so that you can locate your

self relative to the kinds of programs that are available and see how those programs are

generally characterized. That is a very nice piece of work and without that literature we

would be unable to compose such a work.

The second item concerns new methods of learning, which refers to reflective

practice as a way of understanding what we do. Suppose we ask students not *whether*

they have learned what we wanted them to learn, which is a perfectly legitimate question,

but *what* have they learned? That's an entirely different question. Moreover, suppose you

ask students, "What did you learn out of this class and how does what you learned out of

this class connect with what you have learned in other areas of your life, other classes,

other experiences you've had?" When we start asking those other questions, after it's said

and done you'll see students in an entirely different way. So that's a notion of learning

that's connected with assessment that's quite different than a multiple-choice test or a

holistically scored test.

I should include Mike Williamson's name in connection with the third point about

writing as inquiry. He's done a very nice piece that talks not just about ideology of

assessment but in particular about the efficiency of ideology. The key value before the

assessment in the 20th century has been efficiency, and all of the moves in the '80s and

'90s have moved away from that. What you're trying to do then is to change the roles of

assessment placing people's thoughts, which is paradigmatic (?) to put it mildly.

The last item I'm going to talk about in this category is the conserving function of assessment. I use the word "conserving" with which you might take issue. I'm not sure if it's right, but I've done it deliberately. Alyse Estrin has done a project with the Navajo that is ongoing and intended to preserve the Navajo culture. She wanted to do assessment, and she took assessment as a call for re-doing curriculum. It's about the Navajo way of understanding. The assessment model in this case is intended to preserve the spoken and written language and culture of the Navajo.

The final writing assessment issue is discourses: experimental/electronic texts and same language theories—multiple Rhetorics and alternative approaches. Gisa Kirsch has an article in the February [1997] issue of CE where she talks about experimental texts. I think it's a smart article in which she lumps together a lot of texts under the heading "experimental." In her article, Kirsch says that you should require the least of your reader, who is always looking for the path of least resistance. Kirsch's point is that people who engage in the experimental approach are obligated to provide signals to their reader as to how that prose wants to be read. Susan Miller also has a piece for her students, which was written a couple of years ago, that says when you have experimental texts it places a burden on the reader that may be unreasonable. These are interesting points. I would ask how are they current today? That's another question that wants to be addressed.

Same language theories bring us back the point I made before about English separating us. We're back to the self. The suggestion is that the self can read the text. If that's true we can be much more involved with our students as to how creative we are in responding to their writing. I've already indicated the work Estrin has done with multiple

letters and alternate approaches. I'm thinking that I'll go back to Alaska again next year and work again with the Yu'pic to investigate multiple discourses that seem to work with multiple selves.

The new writing assessment then is not your mother's assessment any longer. That would be my thesis. It is always ideological and is on occasion apolitical. It is presumptive and by presumptive I mean a couple of things here. One, our assumption historically has been that students should be consumers. They are consumers of education and we are providers. But I think a change has taken place. I don't think this is just an English classroom. This is a classroom in which students should be producers as well as consumers. We do not want to graduate for obvious reasons merely students. We want to produce in college, and if that is what we want then we have to use an entirely different assessment that will account for that. Because assessment will shape us and our students. So it's important to have an assessment that constructs what it is we want to assess.

All the kinds of questions that I have brought up here have been a function of the plural methodology from the perspective of understanding the assessment that we have now. These questions were not raised in the earlier models because in the earlier models the kinds of questions we were really looking at were how well did the graders grade and what kind of training did you provide the graders. You were not looking at the connection between what you were looking at and what was going on in the classroom. You were not looking at how you read, you were not looking at the effect of what you were doing because you were so totally focused on getting something that would put someone either inside the gate or out. So it's a totally different enterprise today than it was then.