Chapter VI
The Technology of Writing Assessment and Racial Validity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter articulates writing assessment as a technology, theorized with three aspects (power, parts, and purpose), accounting for the ways in which assessment dialectically constructs and is constructed by its historical environment. Seeing writing assessment as a technology provides a full account of assessment as an environment of conflict and social (re)production, but most importantly, it accounts for racial formations existing around it and because of it. This articulation of writing assessment reveals problems with the concept of validity (and traditional validation research), particularly consequential validity. The chapter concludes by offering racial validity, which investigates how our writing assessments reproduce and are produced by the racial formations in and around our schools, classrooms, and writing assessments.

INTRODUCTION

Writing assessment, both classroom and large-scale, perhaps can be best understood as a technology with three aspects: power, parts, and purpose. Writing assessment's history in the U.S. and the social formations created by it not only suggest such an articulation of writing assessment, but demonstrate a need for us to reconceptualize assessment in ways that address more directly the racial formations that assessment technologies produce, which further demonstrates that racial formations in society and schools are not natural, nor inevitable, but engineered, therefore changeable.[1] In this chapter, I begin by offering a brief account of assessment as one way society produces social arrangements, making it a technology in general terms. I trace earlier discussions of

"testing" as a technology, which use the term in a less productive "instrumentalist" fashion. Then I define technology as an environment, and offer a more detailed theory of writing assessment as a technology. For this theory of writing assessment, I draw on Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of power and its disciplinary tactics, Andrew Feenberg's (1991) "critical theory of technology" and his use of Marcuse's (1998, originally published in 1936) discussion of technology and "technological rationality," and George Madaus's original definition of testing as a technology that he began formulating almost two decades ago (Madaus, 1990; Madaus, 1993; Madaus and Horn 2000). My discussion of "technology" is not one, however, concerned directly with computers or new media in writing assessment, although it does not exclude these commonly assumed forms of "technology." Framing these three aspects of technology, I use Antonio Gramsci's (2000) theorizing of hegemony and historical bloc, which provide ways to understand how technology is imbricated in the historical, political, and material, and how power may be the unifying aspect in technology. Throughout my discussion, I use data from my own institution's writing program assessment endeavors in order to illustrate both the technological aspects of a writing assessment and possible racial validity inquiries. I will not, however, engage in any validity arguments in this chapter, only suggest possibilities. In the last portion of this chapter, I argue that by understanding writing assessment as a technology, *racial validity* becomes important as a new organizing concept for validity inquiries.[2] The purpose of this chapter is to articulate writing assessment as a technology that reveals more clearly the racism and racial formations that our practices often produce,[3] articulate clearly racial validity as a distinct inquiry into our writing assessment practices, then offer some strategies for making racial validity arguments from such articulations of writing assessment.

Before I begin, I need to provide some context for the data I'll insert throughout this chapter. My current institution, California State University, Fresno, is in the middle of a five year pilot writing program that uses directed self-placement (DSP) and a program portfolio in all mandatory First Year Writing (FYW) courses. Because of the newest of the pilot, I will not attempt to produce any validity arguments here, only suggest directions for validity inquiries. Our DSP system, like others, allows our students to choose from several options, or paths, to fulfill their university writing requirement.[4] The most common choice is the "stretch" program, which is a year long, two course sequence (Engl 5A and 5B). The other main choice is an accelerated, one semester course, Engl 10. A few students select a course called Ling 6 (offered through the Linguistics Department), which helps them with more extreme native language proficiency issues to get ready to take Engl 5A and 5B.

In the Fall 2007 semester, the second year of the pilot, the university had a total of 1,066 students (mostly first-year) enrolled in the Engl 5A option. There were 30 instructors who taught a total of 60 sections. Most of these teachers were White females and new to teaching (i.e., in their first semester teaching).[5] I gathered data from 625 students from all sections. In the Engl 5A course, as with all of the other writing courses, the program asks teachers to use a portfolio pedagogy of some kind. The program then uses these portfolios, which have common general guidelines, to gather data for program assessment, and to ensure that all students are ready to move on to the next course or finish. Currently, all students must pass the portfolio in 5A in order to move on to 5B.[6] Each midterm and final portfolio is read by two Engl 5A teachers from other classes (i.e., external readers). The judgment asked of readers is a simple distinction: Is this portfolio demonstrating a writer who can obviously move into Engl 5B and do okay? When two readers disagree about a reading, a third, the teacher of

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