Chapter XXII
New Collaborations for Writing Program Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that as primary stakeholders in writing program assessment, students and instructors need to be included proactively in assessment research. However, little research has been done to determine how to accomplish this methodologically even though assessment affects pedagogical practices, student populations, and public opinion about what constitutes good writing. Instead of traditional quantitative, psychometric research, the author argues assessment practitioners need to utilize local opportunities to discover native needs. He presents a program assessment project as an example of assessment research that focuses on local, contingent populations. Focus groups of students and teachers were used to create a dialogic conversation between stakeholders, and the results were used to design a new course in an existing developmental program—one that consciously and methodologically responded to both students' and instructors' needs.

INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of writing studies has ushered in new needs and forms of assessment and assessment theories in recent history. Although this has exposed long-term tensions between national models of assessment and local practices, Elliot (2005) rightly characterizes the shift in the last four decades as a change from "Procrustean" to "Proteus" modes of assessment. In other words, Elliot argues that as populations have changed on college campuses, assessment practices on both national and local scales have had to become malleable. However, as Huot has recently argued, "all stakeholders should [not] have equal claim, since those closest to teaching and learning, like students and teachers, need to have the most input about writing assessment" (2005, p. 2). In most

kinds of assessment, however, there remains one stable truth—student involvement is either passive or nonexistent.

In most writing program assessment, those who have the most at stake—students—are not given active opportunities to contribute. Students have been disavowed of any responsibility or opportunity about how they should be taught in the classroom. Moreover, when widespread changes in assessment do occur, despite best intentions, too often,

students have no 'grace' period, free from the consequences of grades or promotion, during which they can explore the meaning of these changes for themselves. Change for them does not evolve, it is imposed….Neither are they in a position to suggest alternative activities or schedules…nor to become formally a part of the management of the process. (Corbett & Wilson, 1995, p.14; also cited in Spalding and Cummings, 1998, p. 186)

While there is a growing recognition for an increase in local control (Barlow, Liparulo, & Reynolds, 2007; Huot, 2002; Broad, 2003; White, 2005; Yancey, 2004), little research has focused on inviting students to assess the practices that affect them. One reason for this is because researchers have been *reactive* to what has been described as the "audit culture" (Shore & Wright, 1999)—neo-liberal systems of power imposed from national assessment organizations or government programs—rather than *proactive* in connecting students, teachers, and institutions collaboratively.[1]

I would equally argue that student experiences should not by themselves account for the ways local programs evolve, yet a great opportunity for critical insight into pedagogy and programs is missed when student opinions are not sought (Spratt, 2001). Moreover, the assessments many students face at the end of their high school careers and the beginning of their college careers are either for placement or predictive. The obvious problem with these kinds of assessments, especially for basic writers, is that they are rarely used to create improved pedagogy. Assessments such as SAT scores might be able to predict success to some degree, but they do not inform practitioners about how to respond pedagogically to students who are told they don't have the skills to make it as college students. I argue then that as opportunities are either imposed on or created by those invested in assessment, researchers should find significant and creative ways to invite students into their disciplines as collaborators. In writing studies this could mean finding ways to teach with students rather than just to students. Although I will incorporate both students and instructors in this research since both are what I would consider primary stakeholders, my principal concern is with students and will be my focus.

BACKGROUND

Largely because of the impact of psychometric methodology in assessment, there is a strong impulse in academia regarding assessment to "get it right" and be done with it. Disagreement is considered "failure because positivism presumes a stable and independent reality…that humans try more or less successfully to 'measure'" (Broad 2003, p. 7). Newer trends have surfaced among teacher researchers, but the will to "discover" is still a strong impulse in assessment outcome. Furthermore, the consequences of reform frequently rest on individual teachers and schools, often in the form of funding and sometimes even job security, and on students, often in the form of grades and/or advancement (Hoffman, Paris, Salas, and Patterson and Assaf, 2002). Ironically though, those who have the most at stake—teachers and students—often have the least input in change.

Corbett and Wilson (1995) use the terms "beneficiaries" and "participants" to distinguish between how students are usually imagined in relation to change. They suggest that when students