

A Review of Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity

Edited by Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot, 2018. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. [ISBN 978-1-64215-015-5. 438 pages, with notes, illustrations, and bibliographies. Free access (PDF): [https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/assessment/.](https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/assessment/)]

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Assessment has long generated one of the greatest controversies in writing studies. These controversies include subjects like rubrics, e.g., John C. Bean’s “Using Rubrics to Develop and Apply Grading Criteria” (2011), contract grading, e.g., Asao B. Inoue’s “Writing Assessment as the Conditions for Translingual Approaches (2017), and Standard English (e.g., Laura Greenfield’s “The ‘Standard English’ Fairy Tale” (2011) and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s “Should Writers Use They Own English?” (2011)). Some assert that traditional assessment operates meritocratically, insofar as grades, points, and rubrics allegedly hierarchize students according to their knowledge of class material and their overall ability to demonstrate skill proficiency. Critics of these traditional assessments commonly maintain that assessment cannot be meritocratic when external factors like socio-economic status inhibit student performance on coursework, which affects how much time a student can invest into assignments at home. Similarly, race and racial identity affect the experiences and knowledge students apply to their coursework. Socially-conscious writing studies teachers assert that traditional forms of assessment common in writing studies education often favor students with privileged identities as a result of the field’s foundations in a mostly White, Western, straight, cisgender, male tradition of writers and thinkers. *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* presents an ambitious interrogation of how writing teachers can assess writing without reinforcing the educational inequities historically present in both the field and larger society. This valuable contribution sets out to educate its readers as to how they can design more inclusive classrooms while also offering concrete strategies for effective assessment that extend across disciplines. The book’s limitations, however, stem from the editors’ decision to conceptualize social justice in terms that do not account for differences across multiple layers of identity.

Editors Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot frame this project in reference to a tripartite relationship “between practice, theory, and action in the realm of assessment” (p. 5). The collection of eleven core essays is divided into four parts: Historiography, Admission and Placement, Outcomes Design, and Advancing Opportunity Through Teacher Research.

The first major section, Historiography, begins with J.W. Hammond’s “Towards a Social Historiography for Writing Assessment,” which advocates an approach toward writing assessment focused on the students we represent in our assessments, as well as “*how* we represent—or—construct them, the structures they inhabit, and the writing assessments with which they engage” so that pedagogues may “expose structural violences” in their practices (p. 46). The following essay, Sean Molloy’s “Human Beings Engaging with Ideas,” focuses on City College of New York’s SEEK desegregation program to study strategies writing

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programs can use to (1) build new models of “ecological learning and assessment,” (2) explore “the interplay of individual, social, and cultural domains” in student evaluations, (3) craft “a subjective, individualized approach that [empowers] writing teachers and students,” and (4) “openly critique[e] and challeng[e] the tacit, objectivist cultural assumptions that distort[] student assessment” (p. 79). Keith Harms concludes this section with “Assessment’s Word Work,” a history that uses 20th-century US imperialist interventions in the Philippines to argue that “the ‘internationalization’ of composition and writing assessment are not recent phenomena of global capitalism but were...essential [for] enacting the ‘white man’s burden’ of a supposedly benevolent colonialism” (p. 106).

Admission and Placement, the second section of the collection, focuses primarily on praxes dedicated to increasing students’ access to education. Christie Toth’s “Directed Self-Placement at ‘Democracy’s Open Door’” emphasizes that using directed self-placement instead of entrance exams can help counteract educational inequity. Casie Moreland in “Chasing Transparency” advocates for Dual-Enrollment (DE) programs to provide “transparent data” regarding “how assessment is influencing access to DE writing courses” and prevent the “violation of student rights” (p. 172). Mathew Gomes’s “Writing Assessment and Responsibility for Colonialism” focuses on cataloguing the technical details that inform student placement in first-year writing programs, e.g., citizenship (p. 213), to reveal whether or not students placed into Intensive English Programs or English as a Secondary Language writing programs are barred from advancing in their academic career.

Outcomes Design, part three, follows with a collaboration between Josh Lederman and Nicole Warwick entitled “The Violence of Assessment.” Here the authors explore an argument-based approach to writing assessment that draws from Michael T. Kane’s argument-validation model. “Fired Up,” a collaboration between Michael Sterling Burns, Randall Cream, and Timothy R. Dougherty, advocates for “pedagogical improvements, including the inclusion of students in [writing assessment] design and implementation...to more effectively approach institutional change through anti-racist pedagogy” (p. 258). Karen S. Nulton and Irvin Peckham’s “Writing Program Assessment, Attitude, and Construct Representation” concludes this section, emphasizing how teachers can positively impact how their students approach writing through data provided by socio-cognitive assessments.

The final section, Advancing Opportunity Through Teacher Research, focuses more explicitly on using teacher-research to bring about social change. Kelly J. Sassi’s “Bending the Arc of Writing Assessment Toward Social Justice” praises how “when group of teachers work together to assess writing collaboratively” the power “large-scaled writing assessments have...over teachers and students” lessens as expectations raise, teaching practices change, and test materials are modified “to draw on cultural strengths” (p. 318). Nicole I. Caswell and William P. Banks’s “Queering Writing Assessment” ends the section by advocating for a “queer turn in writing assessment” to provide “a socially just writing assignment agenda that privileges the intersections between queer rhetorics and writing assignments” (p. 354).

In place of a twelfth essay, the collection concludes with “The Braid of Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and Advancement of Opportunity,” a collaboration between all three editors and the sixteen researchers whose work comprises the eleven core chapters. This collaboration allows each contributor to reflect on how their chapter participates in the larger dialogue of socially-just assessment in writing pedagogy, while also serving to inform eighteen assertions on writing that function as the collection’s manifesto on revolutionizing writing assessment. These standards provide praxes that call readers’ relationships with assessment into question, e.g., “2. Social justice historiography reveals normative functions and yields reflective engagement,” and outline baselines for effective applications of these praxes, e.g., “7. To advance justice and opportunity, the articulation of writing outcomes should be based on robust writing construct models that are informed by current sociocognitive and sociocultural research” (pp. 380-81). The concluding chapter thus serves as a reference guide for the book’s core ideas that readers may consult if they lack the time to fully revisit individual chapters.

While *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* provides diverse insights into socially-just assessment, limitations in the text emerge through the editors' decision to draw their conceptualization of social justice from "the influences of John Rawls's work in *A Theory of Justice* (1971/1999) and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001)" (Poe, Inoue, & Elliot, 2018, p. 4). Poe, Inoue, and Elliot assert that the Rawlsian definition of justice elicits "a contractarian theory in which maximum liberty is pursued under realistically constrained conditions necessary to maintain the compact each of us has with society" (p. 10). However, scholars familiar with Charles W. Mills' *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (2017), or older texts such as Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race, & Class* (1983), Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989), Trihn T. Minh-Ha's *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), and Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Ground* (2006)s, may take issue with the editors' joint decision to base *Writing Assessment* upon Rawls's social justice theories, as Rawls's work advocates for a kind of colorblindness that most of us who are invested in critical race theory recognize as problematic. Furthermore, Rawls's social justice theories are limited beyond race. Rawls's views on social justice argue that justice can only be discernible if we ignore the individual—as well as the body—and focus on the problems that individuals experience in isolation of other factors, as, per Mills, "The Rawlsian ideal...is a society with no history of racial (or any other kind) of injustice" (p. 157). Consequently, facets of identity like sexuality, class, and gender are altogether removed from social justice discourse in Rawlsian theory. This means a praxis informed by Rawlsian theory potentially decontextualizes student experiences, treating common student experiences—such as difficulty meeting deadlines or performing well on specific essays—as irrelevant to students' individual identities. The data collected from such a praxis presents all information into homogenous categories—e.g., when Nulton and Peckham use student as a catch-all category in their classroom surveys (p. 301-5). This praxis subsequently undermines teacher-researchers' ability to locate the most marginalized students within their data sets and allows inequalities among students to evade notice.

Arguably, the majority of contributors' chapters do not follow a strict adherence to Rawlsian theory. For example, Hammond asserts "Color-blind historiography will not do" as meaningful praxis for identifying structural inequalities in assessment (p. 43). Hammond's argument—that researchers must pay attention to race when viewing history—is altogether antithetical to a view of social-justice that dismisses race as irrelevant in teachers' pursuit of social justice. Similarly, Toth considers directed self-placement in relation to multiple student identities, such as "college students who identify as African American, Hispanic, Asian America, Pacific Islander, or Native American/Alaskan Native...low-income, working-class, and first-generation...women, older/returning students, [and] veterans" (p. 141). Toth's claim—that specific diverse students benefits from a given policy—likewise does not adhere to a Rawlsian view of justice that isolates experiences from individual identities when evaluating assessment. These contributors' claims modify Rawls so as to avoid the fallacy that identity is irrelevant in the reader's pursuit of social justice.

The problematic influence Rawls's view of justice instead emerges in the text from contributors applying approaches to socially-just assessments that follow Rawls in overgeneralizing identities. For example, Caswell and Banks make claims "that LGBTQ students experience writing assessments in structurally different ways from their non-LGBTQ-identified peers," yet their study involves only "two focus groups with a total of five students who identify as gay" (p. 353). Consequently, Caswell and Banks apply claims about one subset of people within the LGBTQ umbrella of identities as if these claims are common across all subsets of LGBTQ identity. Likewise, Lederman and Warwick—who recognize that identities related to class, gender, and race allow teacher-researchers to identify forms of violence that might otherwise evade notice (p. 235), advocate for a praxis that ignores differences in student identity to argue for a specific strategy that benefits all students: "An actionable way forward...[that] would entail more explicit statements of the types of the unintended consequences that would be unacceptable results of assessment program or practice—statements included in the very design of the assessment" (p. 235). While Lederman and Warwick's praxis can be adapted to focus on particular identities so as to prevent exposing particular

students to structural violence, because their analysis mostly excludes differences amongst identities—focusing instead on more abstract notions like validity and the concept that “there is no way to establish a norm *a priori* that is politically neutral” (p. 245-6)—the praxis they endorse in the text’s conclusion implicitly suggests that teachers who include statements specifying unintended consequences in their assessments will provide a universal benefit for students. This praxis, as Lederman and Warwick present it, does not account for differences in student identities that impact learning. Consequently, teachers who seek to apply this praxis without understanding the specific combinations of identities their students bring into the classroom still risk assigning assessment that marginalizes already vulnerable students.

The omission or misrepresentation of intersectionality is another source of overgeneralization in some chapters. In Crenshaw’s work, the term originally specifies instances where multiple identity markers—especially race and gender—work together to marginalize and/or privilege a person. Rather than focus on one aspect of identity at a time, like race—e.g., Burns, Cream, & Dougherty’s interrogation of “the white habitus” at their institution (p. 267)—or ethnicity—like Harms’ centralization of Filipino identity in his analysis of U.S. imperialism’s impact on assessment (p. 105)—intersectionality suggests teacher-researchers should analyze the interplay of multiple identities in their research. Intersectionality is essential to effective social justice pedagogy, as students enter into the classroom possessing simultaneous identities that impact their existing literacies, their ability to resonate with and comprehend new material, and their languaging. Furthermore, as work on intersectionality has since expanded the term to include other identity markers (e.g., class, disability, and sexuality), approaches to teacher-research rooted in intersectionality enable teacher-researchers to access more accurate understandings of student privileges in both classrooms and writing programs so that assessments may be better tailored toward student equity. While students arguably possess far more identities than a teacher-researcher may realistically code into data, even a triaged approach to intersectionality can reveal patterns in data that analysis focused on a single dimension of identity would otherwise miss.

Writing Assessment’s treatment of intersectionality is complicated. The collection’s approach to intersectionality may not always seem odd to someone familiar with the term’s inception. For example, Hammond explicitly incorporates intersectionality into the historiography he advocates by emphasizing that “social justice historiography methodologically requires [that] we (re)examine history through analytic lenses calibrated...along one—or—more social axes (e.g., theoretical perspectives on class, decoloniality, disability, gender, race, sexuality, and intersectionality)” (p. 47). Similarly, Moreland invokes intersectionality in a call for data transparency regarding the demographics of students enrolled in dual-credit programs. Moreland notes, “The lack of transparency in data is, like intersectionality, mutually constructed by ‘unjust systems of power’” (p. 193). Intersectionality in both instances is presented as a means for making the invisible forces marginalizing students discernable by coding data across multiple identities. These chapters present praxes based on intersectionality as essential for understanding how writing assessment across the disciplines marginalizes particular groups of students more than others in ways that may not always be immediately apparent to teachers. However, a chapter like Burns, Cream, & Dougherty’s “Fired Up”—which addresses cases where intersectionality is used to avoid talking/writing about race (p. 284)—may give readers the impression that intersectionality fails to help teachers implement more inclusive forms of assessment, especially since Burns, Cream, & Dougherty do not acknowledge that intersectionality is supposed to place race in conversation with other aspects of a person’s identity. This critique is not meant to dismiss the inclusion of “Fired Up,” but the chapter could be clearer in drawing the distinction between flawed approaches to intersectionality that ignore race and those that are based on the term’s initial conception.

These minor flaws notwithstanding, the collection as a whole is a worthwhile resource for educators seeking to re-assess how they evaluate writing in their classroom(s). Though there may be flaws in both how this collection and a few of the contributions are framed, there is much to praise here, starting with how the entire project is an open-access scholarly collection in both PDF and eBook form. J.W. Hammond’s essay

on “Progressive Era Assimilation [Education] Initiatives” clearly demonstrates how social justice historiography can help us better understand the ways assessments are designed to benefit socially-privileged students (p. 41). Though some of what Hammond claims about historiography and master narratives may not be as revolutionary to scholars familiar with Cheryl Glenn’s *Rhetoric Retold* (1997) and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Hammond provides readers useful insight regarding how socially-conscious teachers may adapt the theory informing these monumental texts to help delineate the problematic influences informing contemporary assessments. Keith L. Harms’s “Assessment’s Word Work” represents another of the collection’s strongpoints. By studying the Monroe Report, a 1925 document containing “over 200 pages of analysis of large-scale assessments administered across the entire colony of the Philippines,” Harms explores composition and writing assessments’ complicit relationship with “benevolent colonialism” (p. 106), highlighting writing studies’ complex positionality in ecologies that have been shaped by colonialism and calling attention to how we as educators shape our own writing ecologies through assessment.

Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and Advancement of Opportunity has value both for those who are questioning how to make assessment more inclusive and for scholars who specifically study assessment. However, given this collection’s orientation towards social justice, the reader who looks to this book to help them redesign how they approach assessment may need a background in critical race studies and/or intersectional feminisms in order to circumnavigate the book’s occasional problematic implications. Readers who lack this background may find this text useful for imagining how to rethink modes of assessment used in classrooms, admissions, and writing programs, but the collection’s blind spots limit the ability of such readers to create socially-just forms of assessment most useful for advancing student opportunity. Readers who do not know what identities to look for when evaluating assessment risk creating data sets that allow the most marginalized students to remain invisible. For example, readers might identify that low-income Black students consistently perform poorly on assessments that evaluate MLA formatting skills yet also overlook that low-income Black male students struggle more frequently than low-income Black female students on these assessments. The more student identities readers know to account for when evaluating whether a writing assessment or program is socially just, the stronger an understanding those readers will have of that assignment/program, allowing readers to better tailor intervention strategies and revisions to assessment criteria to ensure their classrooms remain inclusive sites of student success. *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and Advancement of Opportunity* may be an imperfect text, but the collection’s embrace of historiography, collaboration, and teacher-research specifically creates a template teachers and administrators may reference when designing and reevaluating assessments across the disciplines. Administrators specifically may find this template useful for designing data-driven programs that promote equity.

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