CHAPTER 12.

RHETORICAL WRITING ASSESSMENT: THE PRACTICE AND THEORY OF COMPLEMENTARITY

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Writing portfolio assessment and communal (shared, dialogical) assessment are two of our field's most creative, courageous, and influential innovations. Because they are also relatively expensive innovations, however, they remain vulnerable to cost-cutting by university administrators and to attacks from testing corporations. This article lays a theoretical foundation for those two powerful and valuable practices in teaching and assessing writing. Building on the concept of "complementarity" as developed in the fields of quantum physics (Bohr, 1987; Kafatos & Nadeau, 1990) and rhetoric (Bizzell, 1990) and adapted for educational evaluation (Guba & Lincoln 1989, 2000), we provide some of the "epistemological basis," called for by Huot (1996, 2002), on which portfolio and communal assessment are based and by which those practices can be justified. If we must look to science to validate our assessment practices (and perhaps we must), we should not settle for outdated theories of psychometrics that support techniques like multiple-choice testing. Instead, from more recent scientific theorizing we can garner strong support for many of our best practices, including communal and portfolio assessment. By looking to the new science—including the new psychometrics (Cronbach, 1988; Moss, 1992)—we can strengthen and protect assessment practices that are vibrantly and unapologetically rhetorical.

The past 20 years has brought many remarkable innovations to the forefront of writing assessment. Among the most prominent of these developments are writing portfolios and communal writing assessment (CWA). The rise of portfolio assessment has been especially dramatic: dozens of writing programs (including Miami

University, State University of New York- Stonybrook, University of Cincinnati, Washington State University) now use portfolios to place students in composition courses or to certify students' writing competency, and the trend appears to be growing. CWA has grown with somewhat less fanfare; no books or conferences have yet focused on the nuances of group evaluation as many already have on portfolios. Nevertheless, the dynamics of CWA have attracted significant attention in recent journal articles and books (Allen, 1995; Broad, 1997, 2000, 2003; Huot, 2002).

Proponents of both these practices claim they afford sweeping benefits to students' learning and instructors' professional development. Literally dozens of articles and books trumpet the glories of portfolio assessment. Although CWA has not yet received this kind of attention, the scholarship just cited strongly advocates what Allen (1995) calls "shared evaluation" for the sake of improved validity and ethics in assessment decisions as well as the professional growth of instructor-evaluators. Broad (2003) claims that dialogical group judgment has fostered a "new [democratic] politics of inquiry" in writing assessment.

This is the good news. The potentially bad news is that both CWA and portfolios are expensive practices, and expensive practices tend to disappear once the initial flush of enthusiasm has faded from their practitioners' faces. As Mike Williamson (1994) has pointed out, educational assessment practices in the 20th century United States were less likely to be educationally beneficial and theoretically sound than to be quick and cheap. Thus, the ongoing dominance of the cheap and quick method par excellence, the multiple-choice test (Williamson, 1994), despite nearly universal condemnation of such tests from every corner of assessment scholarship and practice. Now that teachers of writing have developed, nurtured, and propagated the more educationally fruitful approaches of employing multiple evaluators (CWA) to judge multiple performances (portfolios), how can we better understand these two innovations in writing assessment and protect them from the omnivorous shredding machine of efficiency ideology? To support these sophisticated and vulnerable assessment practices, we need to look to ascendant theories of language, knowledge, and value. The difficulty is that writing assessment practice historically has shown excessive timidity and even loathing toward theory and philosophy. But what if neglecting theory also meant losing the two most exciting and productive innovations in a century of writing assessment? Perhaps in that case theorizing these practices would rate a second look.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF THEORY IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

In his 1993 "An Introduction to Holistic Scoring: The Social, Historical, and Theoretical Context for Writing Assessment," Williamson dared to dream of a

new paradigm in writing assessment distinguished by its, "tearing itself loose from the theoretical foundations of psychometric theory and establishing itself with a foundation based in a theory of writing." (p. 38) Surveying the competing interest groups who vie for control of writing assessment, however, Edward M. White (1996) subsequently wondered whether Williamson's prophetic vision was "perhaps too hopeful." In "Power and Agenda Setting in Writing Assessment," White voiced considerable skepticism that we could ever persuade government officials or testing agencies to explore new theoretical possibilities, stating flatly that "it is a waste of time to urge commercial testing firms to accommodate poststructuralist theories of reading" (p. 23).

If Bernard E. Alford (1995) is right, however, we ought not to dismiss too quickly Williamson's prediction that theory might transform our practices.

> In the theories of language that have emerged in this century,
> English has the tools to challenge rather than run from the
> hegemony of science. It has the tools to reclaim from positiv-
> ist and supposedly objective discourses the right to critique
> and define what it means to know something. (p. 64)

Alford strongly suggests that at the start of the 21st century, the moment may indeed have arrived for an end to the "hegemony of science" in writing assessment practice and the establishment of a new, rhetorical, approach.

As a matter of historical fact, the entire (presumably hopeless) project of "persuading" the resistant group White invokes may prove superfluous. No doubt White is correct in stating that the eyes of those employed by testing corporations would glaze over if we urged them openly to embrace poststructuralist or postmodern theories of language meaning and value. However, while we writing assessment specialists have wondered anxiously about when, whether, and how a poststructuralist, postmodern theory of writing assessment would ever arrive, it quietly entered the scene without our even noticing. The widespread implementation within the past decade of two distinctly rhetorical writing assessment practices—portfolios and CWA—preceded any sustained articulation of the rhetorical theory for which Williamson called.

This practice–theory time delay should hardly surprise us. Brian Huot (1990) pointed out more than a decade ago that theoretical awareness in writing assessment usually lags behind practice.

It is not unusual to find assessment techniques used before they have received proper theoretic research attention. Faigley et al. have noted that, "of necessity, practice has far outrun theory in writing assessment" (p. 205) and Gere has observed that "the theoretical basis of evaluation remains unarticulated." (p. 201)

At the close of this article we return to Huot's analysis of the temporal gap between practice and theory in writing assessment. For the moment, it will suffice to note that we have all been tapping into a new theory of writing assessment for years but are only now beginning to grasp its scope and character. If Alford (1995), Huot (1990, 1996, 2002) and Williamson (1993) are correct, we need not invent a new theory of writing assessment. It already exists, and has already been put to use. What we now urgently need to do—what this article helps to do—is further develop and strengthen that new paradigm through study of its theoretical roots and of the specific assessment practices that enact it.

Fortunately, much of the groundwork for naming and developing a theory of rhetorical writing assessment has already been laid. Huot's (1996) "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment" examines descriptions of five assessment programs and draws from their practices five shared principles of rhetorical writing assessment. Huot reveals that a rhetorical theory of writing assessment calls for practices that are: site-based, locally controlled, context sensitive, rhetorically based, and accessible.

The crucial question Huot's (1996, 2002) investigation leaves unanswered is the specific epistemological basis (Huot's term) on which these new principles and procedures are built. Part of our project is to connect Huot's (1996, 2002) analysis of principles and programmatic practices to their epistemological bases, and answer the urgent question: "When we leap from the theoretical foundation of positivism, on what, if anything, do we land?" The resounding answer offered by Alford (1995), Guba and Lincoln (1989), and Bizzell (1990) (discussed later) is complementarity, a rhetorical and democratic process for establishing knowledge, truth, value, meaning, and everything else for which we once relied on positivism and foundationalism.

Once we have traced the theoretical roots of rhetorical writing assessment, we then want to examine some of its fruits. We explore how portfolio assessment and communal writing assessment already embody the new theory of writing assessment to which Huot (1996, 2002) recently called our attention. These two practices enact the very break with traditional psychometrics and the shift toward a rhetorical conception of writing assessment for which Williamson (1993) called. Borne of writing teachers' and administrators' frustration and anger at the damage psychometric testing did—and continues to do—to students, teachers, and learning, compositionists quietly developed and institutionalized alternative assessment practices more to their satisfaction. Without announcing it, they ushered in a new paradigm in writing assessment, which has been propagated across the country by such scholar-practitioners as Haswell (2001), Smith (1993), Yancey (1992, 2004) and others.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPLEMENTARITY

Niels Bohr's 1958 essay entitled "Quantum Physics and Philosophy: Causality and Complementarity" (Bohr, 1987) describes the theoretical differences that were beginning to emerge between classical physics and quantum physics. "Within the scope of classical physics," he claims, "all characteristic properties of a given object can in principle be ascertained by a single experimental arrangement" (p. 4). Under the new paradigm of quantum physics, the central tenets of classical physics are problematized:

> In quantum physics . . . evidence about atomic objects obtained by different experimental arrangements exhibits a novel kind of complementary relationship. Indeed, it must be recognized that such evidence which appears contradictory when combination into a single picture is attempted, exhausts all conceivable knowledge about the object. Far from restricting our efforts to put questions to nature in the form of experiments, the notion of complementarity simply characterizes the answers we can receive by such inquiry, whenever the interaction between the measuring instruments and the objects forms an integral part of the phenomena. (p. 4)

The theoretical differences between classical physics and quantum physics stem from the epistemological problem Bohr describes in this essay. Although classical physicists were convinced that adequate data and knowledge about a particular object or phenomena were ascertainable from the results of a single experiment, quantum physics complicates this notion by claiming that the "measuring instruments" have as much impact on the measurement as the phenomena being measured. The dichotomy evoked here is one of determinism and indeterminism.

Quantum physics, in opposition to the classical version, accepts that ultimately all knowledge is indeterminate because the methods we use and the vantage points from which we obtain evidence substantially alters the evidence itself. Bohr even alludes to "the irrevocable abandonment of the ideal of determinism" (p. 5), before attempting to predict what new practices scientists will employ in order to adequately represent the situations they study.

Because "measuring instruments" impact the object of study, Bohr predicts that "multivalued logics [are] needed for a more appropriate representation of the situation" (p. 5). More succinctly, Bohr claims, "a completeness of description like that aimed at in classical physics is provided by the possibility of taking every conceivable experimental arrangement into account" (p. 6). Not only does

Bohr's theory of complementarity recognize the role of subjectivity in the collection and interpretation of data, it also abandons an obsession with reliability by acknowledging that differing experimental arrangements will sometimes yield contradictory evidence.

Studying the behavior of atomic particles is different from studying the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of written texts or a reader's ability to evaluate those texts. Nevertheless, both fields share parallel epistemological problems as well as solutions. In both cases, the theory of complementarity can help to make meaningful and useful a body of data that preceding paradigms would have viewed as contradictory or chaotic. Bohr's theories substantially altered the practice of atomic physics; they have also influenced the field of writing assessment.

Two texts portray the principle of complementarity as directly relevant to the field of writing assessment. Egon Guba and Yvonne S. Lincoln (1989) draw on complementarity in developing the multiperspectival, highly contextualized, and continuously evolving method of evaluation named in the title of their book, Fourth Generation Evaluation. Their work emerges form the field of education and organizational evaluation and measurement. The other text on which I draw here is firmly rooted in English Studies. Alford's (1995) Modern English and the Idea of Language: A Potential Postmodern Practice disentangles weak and strong versions of postmodernism to present a transformative and coherent postmodern theory and pedagogy of literacy. Like Guba and Lincoln, Alford extensively draws on—and further develops—Bohr's analysis.

For Guba and Lincoln, the principle of complementarity serves chiefly to remind researchers and evaluators that the act of inquiring unavoidably shapes the outcome of any inquiry:

> The Bohr Complementarity Principle . . . argued that the results of any study depended upon the interaction between inquirer and object. . . . That is, the findings depended as much on the nature of the questions asked . . . as on any intrinsic properties of a "real" reality "out there." (p. 66)

Like most post-positivist critique, this analysis helps to show the weakness of foundationalist and objectivist approaches. Guba and Lincoln move on to develop their method of "fourth-generation evaluation" as a way of practicing evaluation without assuming or claiming access to context-free or pure truths. Whatever truths their approach to evaluation yields will be contingent—partial, positioned, and rooted in belief as human knowledge must be, but also multiple and diverse. Thus, multiplicity and difference within community provide the

legitimizing process and features of fourth generation evaluation.

Alford (1995) helps to develop and clarify why difference and multiplicity within community (i.e., complementarity) are so important to postmodern claims to truth. It is not enough to throw out objectivism, for human communities (e.g., schools and universities, for-profit organizations, and governmental units) still need a public process for sorting out competing claims on truth and value. Even under postmodernism, we still need to make judgments that can be documented and supported. Subjectivism is typically offered as the necessary and only alternative to objectivism, but few among us feel confident implementing high-stakes judgments labeled "subjective," although in truth the process of reading and therefore evaluating texts is always subjective, because it is based on an individual's ability to construct the text she is reading. Drawing on work in postmodern theory and complexity theory in the physical sciences, Alford (1995) conclusively moves the important debate about truth claims beyond the tired objectivist–subjectivist dichotomy:

> Alford draws on the work of quantum physicists Menas Kafatos and Robert Nadeau (1990) to focus our understanding of the principle of complementarity. Alford (1995) explains the following: Kafatos and Nadeau use the principle of complementarity . . . as a way of explaining how categories that exclude each other in any particular action or example (particle/wave) are still linked in any understanding of the whole system at work. (p. 86)

In other words, a particular category or perspective offers its own distinct value in understanding or assessing any object of inquiry. If we wish to strengthen and verify that understanding, however, we need to introduce one or more categories or perspectives that are not merely additional to the first but also radically different from it. Alford goes on to quote Kafatos and Nadeau directly:

> One [category or construct] excludes the other in a given situation or act of cognition in both operational and logical terms, and yet the entire situation can be understood only if both constructs are taken as the complete view of the situation. (cited in Alford, 1995, p. 86)

Alford shows that by moving beyond objectivism and subjectivism, we can verify postmodern claims to contingent truths through a process of bringing radically distinct constructs into dialogue with each other within established human communities. (For further useful discussion of such paradigmatic issues of validation, see Guba & Lincoln, 2000.)

Before we examine how portfolios and CWA enact complementarity, we need to clarify an important link between the principle of complementarity and the field of contemporary rhetoric. Specifically, we need to explain why we have referred to writing assessment that embodies complementarity as rhetorical writing assessment:

> In "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority: Problems Defining 'Cultural Literacy,'" Patricia Bizzell (1990) wrestled with the challenges of antifoundationalist and postmodern processes for assessing truth claims. Her analysis yielded a process of judgment that looks a good deal like Guba and Lincoln's and Alford's. Bizzell, however, named her alternative process "rhetoric" and its outcome "rhetorical authority." We must help our students, and our fellow citizens, to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good. (p. 671)

According to Bizzell, we need not panic as the house of foundationalism crumbles before our eyes. For once we have dispensed with foundationalism we will rely on what we have, in fact, always relied upon: persuading one another through a process of disputing conflicting truth claims and negotiating contingent, communally sanctioned truths through discourse. In other words, we will rely on rhetoric. Let us now turn to the two practices we mentioned at the outset and explore how they both enact a rhetorical theory of writing assessment rooted in the principle of complementarity.

PORTFOLIOS AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Portfolios in classroom settings mark a significant but not radical departure from the practices they displaced: grading several discrete writing performances over a semester or year (Yancey, 1992). In most writing classrooms, students already compose a variety of texts for a variety of audiences, and they take each piece through processes of drafting, response, research, revision, editing, and publication. The movement in such classrooms to portfolio assessment adds "collection, selection, reflection, and projection" (Yancey, 2004) to teaching and writing—a significant, but not radical, shift in pedagogy.

Portfolios are a more dramatic departure from past practices in the area of large scale writing assessment. Most often to certify "writing proficiency" and somewhat less often to determine appropriate placement in composition courses, large-scale assessment has over the past two decades moved steadily away

from assessment of single writing performances, usually the "timed impromptu" (White, 1995), and toward diverse collections of writing performances, that is, toward portfolios. The move from single to multiple artifacts or perspectives is often represented as a postmodern move (Berlin, 1994). However, multiplicity alone does not necessarily constitute a theoretical shift. When combined with the positive valuing of differences and diversity, however, multiplicity becomes potentially transformative. It is the combination of multiplicity and difference in what portfolios present that connects them with the principle of complementarity. Along with multiplicity, portfolios call for difference both within and among collections of students' rhetorical performances.

Timed impromptu tests strongly imply a single quality or characteristic in a writer called writing ability (Purves, 1995). Much of the elaborate process of developing, piloting, and refining prompts for writing tests centers on the goal of eliciting the single performance that will most accurately represent the test-taker's writing ability. Portfolio assessment, because it requires not only multiplicity of, but also differences among, the performance(s) to be assessed, highlights the speciousness of the singular conception of writing ability.

In fact, portfolios make it difficult for anyone—writer or evaluator—to overlook that there is no single writing ability. Instead, we expect different writers to bring different strengths to different rhetorical efforts. At Miami University, for example, incoming students submit a portfolio of four pieces so they may be placed on one of three institutional tracks related to first-year composition. Portfolios for placement at Miami include the following:

- a reflective letter
- a story or description
- an explanatory, exploratory, or persuasive essay, and
- a response to a written text

Indeed, as in most places, students at Miami University are awarded a single score and their academic fate depends on that score. The assessment outcome therefore remains strikingly singular. The assessment process, however, deconstructs the fiction of writing ability and acknowledges that the university cares about and is responsible to each student as multiple rhetors: the supplicant to the university bureaucracy (in the reflective letter); the rhetorical aesthete who will entertain her readers and/or stimulate their senses and imaginations (in the story or description); the presenter and interpreter of information and the changer of minds (in the explanatory, exploratory, or persuasive essay), and the master of literary interpretation and taste (in the response to a written text). Reflecting on all this proliferation of rhetorical roles in "The Subversions of the Portfolio," James Berlin (1994) credits portfolios with deconstruction of

"the unified, autonomous, self-present subject of liberal humanism," one of the key features on the basis of which he claims that "the portfolio is a postmodern development."

In the same essay Berlin applauds the "de-standardizing" effects of differences among students' portfolios. In composing portfolios, students undertake projects whose topics and angles they chose and shaped; they are not submitting to "standardized" assignments. The same writing "assignment" (e.g., public, persuasive nonfiction) can be fulfilled through two or more dramatically different choices of genre, data, tone, and topic. This variability among portfolios based on writers' knowledge, needs, interests, and choices can make writing assessment decisions more valid, for we are assessing rhetorical performances that authors not only choose and shape but about which they therefore have the opportunity to care. Isn't that what we really want to know when we assess a writing performance? Not how someone writes when she doesn't know or care, but when she does. In this way, we can argue that anything less than self-initiated, self-selected multiple texts underrepresent the ability to write (Cherry & Witte, 1998). This quality of investment and caring is necessarily scarce in standardized tests of writing, for test takers play a drastically diminished role in shaping their responses to a test. And test makers, for their part, work to ensure that every test taker's level of interest in the testing prompt is low, because high-interest topics often generate texts that evoke diverse, therefore "unreliable," scores from evaluators.

Recognizing the necessary inadequacy of gauging writing ability in response to a single performance, compositionists championed portfolios. They called for students to shape the diverse contexts and contents of those portfolios, and they required students to demonstrate their abilities playing multiple rhetorical roles. The conscious and stated reasons for this movement are summed up by Peter Elbow (1991):

> We all sense . . . that we cannot trust the picture of someone's
> writing that emerges unless we see what he or she can do on
> various occasions on various pieces. (pp. xi-xii)

Teachers and scholars of writing sensed their own unease with the constraints placed upon writing assessment by psychometricians, and—despite repeated warnings from influential voices in our field—we embraced portfolios, a technology that shrugged off those constraints. The danger is that the warnings of doom for portfolio assessment could prove true after all. For the complex and expensive practice of portfolio assessment to survive, it will likely not be enough to refer to our sense of what we can and cannot "trust" in evaluating writing. We will need to articulate the "epistemological base" to which Huot (1996, 2002)

refers. Complementarity provides that base, and thus provides theoretical and political shelter for portfolio assessment.

COMMUNAL WRITING ASSESSMENT AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Even more dramatically than portfolios, the growing practice of CWA enacts the transformative power of rhetorical writing assessment and the principle of complementarity. As in the case of portfolios, the move from the single judge of writing performance to multiple judges is only the first step in the theoretical and practical transformation. The more radical shift is away from seeking and valuing homogeneity among judges to seeking and valuing diversity; however, before we look at this radical shift as it is enacted in CWA, we need to examine how similar shifts are taking place in psychometric approaches to writing assessment.

In the history of large-scale writing assessment, multiple evaluators have long been a key to ensuring the validity of the measure (Diederich, French, & Carlton, 1961; White, 1994). Note, however, the difference between the psychometric uses of multiple homogeneous raters—to ensure accurate detection of the "true score" for each performance—and the rhetorical uses of multiple and diverse readers. Within traditional psychometric assessment, multiple evaluators were urged, indeed required, to produce identical scores. Standardization procedures attempted to make each evaluator's judgments identical; those who could not make their judgments homogeneous were excluded from the process. Although many psychometricians choose to ignore innovations in their own field, postmodern and antifoundationalist theory is continuing to impact the field of psychometrics. For instance, Pam Moss (1992) points out that some psychometricians have expressed "philosophic concern with the epistemological foundations of positivism" (p. 233). Moss even quotes Cronbach, a psychometrican, with claiming that "it was pretentious to dress up our immature science in positivist language" (cited in Moss, 1992, p. 233).

Moss also reveals a movement within the field of psychometrics to "redesign" its approach to writing assessment. This new design, developed by Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, and Gardner (1991), proposes assessment practices that "promote serious thought" by abandoning rubrics and considering the "possibility of multiple paths to excellence" (p. 63). They also proposed a revision to "our notions of high-agreement reliability as a cardinal symptom of a useful and viable approach to scoring student performance" (p. 63). One interesting thing about Wolf, et al.'s redesigned approach to assessment is that it begins to move in the direction of rhetorical writing assessment and away from the impulse to ensure that

evaluators make identical judgments. Cronbach himself articulates even more succinctly this trend within psychometrics toward rhetorical and discursive approaches to assessment. "Cronbach (1988) suggested that readers think of validity inquiry as the building of an argument that 'must link concepts, evidence, social and personal consequences, and values' (p. 4)" (cited in Moss, 1992, p. 242). What is encouraging about Moss' discussion of the "shifting conceptions of validity" in the field of psychometrics is the realization that psychometricians are abandoning their obsession with foundationalist, positivist science and looking more toward rhetorical strategies in creating, using, and interpreting assessments. What is less encouraging is the fact that most practicing psychometricians have completely ignored these most recent advances in their field. Moss (1992) claims that "the practice of validity research typically has not done justice to the modern views of validity" (p. 245). Having taken into account some psychometricians' refusal to acknowledge progress in their own field, we can now turn to our examination of CWA and rhetorical writing assessment.

Recent innovations in CWA radically overturn the homogenizing impulse of traditional psychometric assessment. Certain assessment programs actively seek out variations among evaluators' backgrounds and frames of knowledge. One of those is the first-year English program at "City University" documented and analyzed by Broad (1997).

According to Broad, faculty at City University did what old-school psychometricians would consider foolish: they juxtaposed evaluations of judges who, by virtue of their distinctive positions within the university and the profession, are sure to assess students' writing differently each from the other.

- *Administrators* bring to assessment discussions their special concerns regarding "rigor" and "standards" within the program. They also wield considerable disciplinary knowledge, citing from the scholarly literature during "norming" sessions.
- *Teachers* bring their strong commitments to teacher autonomy in writing assessment and their richly contextualized knowledge of students' efforts, progress, and attitudes. Holding as it does many secrets of the teacher–student relationship, their "Teachers Special Knowledge" places them in a position in the program at once powerful and suspect.
- *Outside evaluators* bring their knowledge based on teaching the same course, but with no knowledge of the particular student whose writing is under discussion. Outside instructors' judgments are known and valued at City University as "cold readings."

Weaving these three distinct perspectives into the same assessment program makes for some volatile evaluative dynamics. It also makes for a more

trustworthy, more democratic truth than the old model of evaluative orthodoxy could provide.

City University's reciprocal authorities find justification in the principle of complementarity. Recall that, according to Kafatos and Nadeau (Alford, 1995), under complementarity "the entire situation can be understood only if both constructs are taken as the complete view of the situation." Instructors and administrators at City University found that a "complete view" of students' writing proficiency required not two but three constructs, each of which to some extent "excluded each other." Also significant is that they answered Bizzell's (1990) call for "a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good." The rhetorical processes found in the extensive, sometimes fiercely conflictual, talk of norming sessions and trio sessions at City University enacted just such a rhetorical process for writing assessment.

A VELVET REVOLUTION IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

In 1990, Brian Huot pointed out in "Reliability, Validity, and Holistic Scoring: What We Know and What We Need to Know" that, contrary to the claims of several prominent commentators, the dominant practice of holistic scoring in writing assessment had a clear theoretical base: positivist psychometrics. At that time, Huot (1990) also introduced questions regarding where writing assessment—and its rhetorics—might go next. In 1996, he surveyed a cluster of assessment programs and articulated a set of patterns or themes that characterized contemporary assessment practice and, Huot (1996) claimed, pointed "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment." What remained was to explicate the "epistemological basis" of this new theory and to explore ties between that theory and the face-to-face, moment-by-moment practices supported by it.

Perhaps it is the destiny of writing assessment always to practice first and theorize last. Indeed this may be a good thing. Advocating what he calls a "post-intellectual" practice of teaching English studies, Alford argues that practice belongs first.

This [post-intellectual] approach would signify a change in the relationship between theory and practice because it would put practice first and return theory to a reflective role. That is, instead of predetermining the order of events and the priority of focus, this approach would emphasize the performative aspect of culture, the point at which identity and understanding are constructed (Alford, 1995, p. 138).

This article has reflected on a particular "performative aspect" of the culture of teaching and assessing writing. Compositionists felt a need for new approaches to assessment, and met that need by developing writing portfolios and

communal writing assessment, among other practices. Later, the theory they enacted could be named, contextualized, and developed.

The stakes are higher, however, than deciding or documenting whether theorizing precedes or follows practice. Without the intellectual work of theorizing, practices like portfolios and communal writing assessment remain vulnerable to critique from those wielding well developed and thoroughly institutionalized discourses such as those of positivist psychometrics. Let us not dismiss lightly Edward M. White's (1996) warnings regarding reactionary testing corporation employees and legislators. We would like to think that the new practices are well enough entrenched to withstand the storms of efficiency ideology and scientism that are likely to rage against them when the money gets tight or when people catch on to their full implications. History suggests otherwise, however, so we have endeavored to connect Huot's (1996, 2002) framework for a new theory of writing assessment with its theoretical roots and its practical fruits.

If we, the scholars and practitioners of writing instruction and writing assessment, hesitate further to develop and defend the epistemological base of these two practices, they will remain vulnerable to rear-guard actions by those still working within a positivist, a reactionary, or simply a budget-cutting framework. Note, for example, Huot's alert that statewide portfolio programs in Vermont and Kentucky have struggled for years to meet demands for interrater reliability and other questionable psychometric requirements of "standardization."

It is imperative that we at the college level continue our experimentation and expand our theorizing to create a strong platform for new writing assessment theory and practice, so that we can see the emergence of rhetorical and contextual writing assessment for all students. (Huot, 1996, pp. 563-564)

This article has expanded our theorizing in support of our two most creative, courageous, and influential assessment experiments. If as a result our political vulnerable parts are now better protected, then we can proceed with new experiments and move forward with the project of rhetorical writing assessment.

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