3. Assessment

Norbert Elliot
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Since its appearance in 1956, the term *assessment* has been straightforward in definition and contested in use (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Harold Loukes of Oxford University first used the noun in his 1956 study of British education, *Secondary Modern*, in which the Quaker educationist was trying to understand how well a selection system was serving students. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the Ministry of Education established secondary modern schools in 1944 for students between 11 and 15 years old who failed to earn high marks on the 11–plus examination. As a contemporary of Loukes saw it, these were schools whose “job it was to cope with all the nation’s dull children” (Dent, 1958, p. 31). For Loukes (1956), a way out of this caste system was to find “a new means of assessment” (p. 112), one that would allow secondary modern schools to “find their own place” (1959, p. 139), as he later put it, especially in terms of the value for vocational education.

And so we discover, in the very first use of the term, an enduring tension between the definition of assessment (as “a systematic process to measure or evaluate the characteristics or performance of individuals, programs, or other entities”) and complexities surrounding its use (“for the purpose of drawing inferences”) (American Educational Research Association [AERA], American Psychological Association [APA], and National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 2014, p. 216). Administrative leadership can readily identify a systematic process that will yield findings about students and instructional programs. It is another matter to draw inferences from the findings and have them accepted by stakeholders embedded in complex rhetorical situations in which cultural and linguistic diversity are of paramount importance (Gonzales & Baca, 2017).

When we talk about assessment in technical and professional communication (TPC), we carry forward this 60-year-old genealogy of complexity. In their foreword to *Assessment in Technical Communication* (2010), the first and only edited collection on the topic, Margaret N. Hundleby and Jo Allen observe that assessment in our field has suffered from irregular attention, uncertainty about authentic strategies, and muddled identification of aims. Recently, Geoffrey Clegg and colleagues (2020) argued that the field of TPC is only now buttressing programmatic student learning outcomes—the objectives upon which an assessment is based—with field-wide data from undergraduate degree programs across the US. An enduring tension—rising in the gap between the straightforward definition of assessment and the complexity of inferences drawn from it—remains.

Today, TPC researchers acknowledge this tension, view it productively, and use it as a means to create innovative assessment programs (St.Amant &
Nahrwold, 2007), equip researchers for socially just work through transformative paradigms (Phelps, 2020), and introduce interstitial pedagogical practices that engage diversity (Lane, 2021). Researchers acknowledge that assessment is a situated rhetorical activity that exists on a continuum of rhetorically situated aims. As a situated rhetorical activity, the TPC assessment exists in a sociocultural and sociocognitive environment. Here, John M. Swales’ (2017) sociocultural concept of discourse communities as centers of professional identity resonates well with Robert J. Mislevy’s (2019) depiction of sociocognition as community discourse practices revealed in linguistic, cultural, and substantive language patterns. Once the deeply situated nature of language is acknowledged, it is then easier to get to the harder realization: that our inferences from assessment are also rhetorically situated and, as such, filled with values both apparent and tacit.

Following acknowledgement of situated language use, assessment stakeholders often adopt two productive strategies for TPC assessment. Each has come into consideration in the 21st century. While one has demonstrated the ability to inform critical research, the other is best considered as a needed reconceptualization.

The first strategy involves reconceptualizing evidence. In 2006, Michael T. Kane proposed that traditional evidence categories of validity (evidence used to support a given interpretation) and reliability (evidence used to support consistency) be understood in terms of interpretation and use. Arguments about interpretation and use, he proposed, allow us to draw inferences and make claims about a given assessment. Gone were totalizing statements (“a given assessment is valid”); present were precise claims supported with evidence (“a given assessment demonstrates evidence of construct validity”). As part of the process of validation, construct validity—evidence that the characteristic the assessment was designed to measure is sufficiently present—was central to a given validity argument. As Kane wrote, “It is the plausibility of the proposed interpretations and uses that is to be evaluated” (p. 23). By 2013, he shifted his terminology to emphasize the interpretation/use argument (IUA)—“the network of inferences and assumptions inherent in the proposed interpretation and use” (p. 2).

This shift was profound and signaled a new era for TPC assessment. As Julia M. Williams (2010) recognized in her explication of the RosEvaluation assessment system, first used at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in 1998, identification of outcomes shifted institutional focus from identifying resource inputs to defining goals for student learning. With outcomes established, in this case by Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET, 2016), evidence of student learning could then be systematically collected (For current criteria, see ABET, 2022.). In turn, this information could be used to advance opportunity to learn (Moss et al., 2008). As Williams (2021) observed in reflecting on the over-two-decade-old RosEvaluation assessment system, one of its notable achievements has been dissemination of communication pedagogy among technical faculty members to inform the way they use the language of rhetoric in
their technical courses. Through discussions of curricular objectives, faculty express willingness to reinforce and extend students’ communication development in their classes. Because instruction and assessment are reliably extended across the curriculum, stakeholders see these activities as complementary.

Evidence-based approaches have been accompanied by attention to a category of evidence techniques for the TPC assessment. In 2015, Edward M. White and colleagues designed the first assessment system specifically designed for writing studies. Using the federal Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) for rhetoric and composition/writing studies, White and his colleagues designed a system in which programs in technical and business writing (CIP 23.1303) and programs in rhetoric and composition (CIP 23.1304) could equally benefit by a unified evidential approach: Design for Assessment (DFA). DFA invited assessment designers to focus on traditional evidential forms of validity and reliability while adding other categories of evidence: consequence (unintended and intended positive and negative impact), theorization (development of ideas concerning a given construct), standpoint (situated perspectives), research (foundational knowledge), documentation (evidence gathering), accountability (demonstrated responsibility), sustainability (mission-related resource allocation), process (actions related to program success), and communication (providing information to stakeholders). In a survey approach, these evidence centers have been used by Nancy Coppola and colleagues (2016) to examine TPC program outcomes (Ilyasova & Bridgeford, 2014) and plan evidence-based revision of them. Coppola concludes that evidence models including IUAs provide stakeholders with a principled way to undertake programmatic research. An alternative evidence model for continuous curricular improvement—dedicated to making visible “all of the interrelated work and perspectives” of TPC to ensure that instructional programs continue to “grow and address stakeholder needs in a sustainable way”—has been proposed by Joanna Schreiber and Lisa Melonçon (2019, p. 275). In this model, evidence was collected beyond the program objectives and interpreted by perspectives beyond those of the program administrators.

The second strategy for TPC assessment involves reconceptualized assessment aims. While we have seen research related to evidence-based approaches become significant, we are late to reexamine assessment aims and have yet to witness assessment strategies in our field that are centered on fairness. While no detailed history of assessment in the field of TPC has been written, Elliot (2010) proposed a conceptual history in which modernism (assessment as an artifact of scientific objectivity) receded as postmodernism (assessment as a contextualized activity) advanced. In general, these phases parallel pedagogical developments in TPC in which instruction dominated by an emphasis on style and correctness was replaced by social constructivist perspectives on writing (Rude, 2015). Accompanying the move from language objectivity to contextualism, educational measurement researchers have begun to attend to fairness as a category of evidence equal to validity and reliability (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014). To establish evidence of fairness,
researchers collect and interpret information in these areas: fairness during the assessment process in areas such as accessibility for all learners through universal design; measurement bias toward student subgroups in terms of gender assignment and identity, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic characteristics, and other relevant categories and their combination; and access to the constructs being measured through educational opportunity (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014). In TPC, calls for evidence of fairness have been accompanied by attention to social justice research—a collective and active effort to “reveal, reject, and replace” oppression (Walton et al., 2019, p. 50; see also Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022, Inoue, 2015; Jones, 2016; Poe et al., 2018; Walton & Agboka, 2021). As Mya Poe (2023) and her colleagues have suggested, even the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, while necessary, may be insufficient to achieve social justice.

This shift towards reconceptualization of assessment aims must now be accompanied by a fairness approach for TPC assessment. In her guide to mapping institutional values to the technical writing curriculum in order to contextualize assessment, Allen (2010) reminded researchers to consider “the heritage [emphasis added] that inspires the institution’s traditions,” such as that of historically Black colleges and universities and the founders’ motivations and vision for women’s colleges (p. 41). Advancing this idea of contextualization, Michelle F. Eble (2020) has called for “de-colonial and critical race theory, feminist and queer, and other community participatory approaches” to instruction in technical communication” (p. 40).

In transferring theory into TPC assessment practice, however, researchers have not yet realized the gains associated with evidence of fairness. Here we realize the truth of Miriam F. Williams, our field’s first Black Association of Teachers of Technical Writing Fellow, that there is little research that addresses “the unique ways that historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups within the U.S. created or responded to technical communication” (Williams, 2013, p. 86). Put straightforwardly, the consequences of our TPC assessments are unknown in terms of their intersectional impact (Crenshaw, 1991). If assessment is to be a meaningful keyword in our field, then stakeholders will have to use theoretical concepts of diversity such as Black Feminist Theory to generate sources of evidence related to fairness (Collins, 2000). Following Loukes, we need a new means of assessment—an innovation focusing on fairness and consequences as sources of evidence—if we are to advance opportunity to learn and achieve universal justice for all our students.

References


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