

Book Review of Kelly-Riley, D., & Elliot, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Improving outcomes: Disciplinary writing, local assessment, and the aim of fairness*. MLA Press.

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I start with two scenes about writing assessment from early in my teaching career:

I'm interviewing for a position as a college writing teacher. In my second semester in an MA program in English/Creative Writing, I have no teaching experience, just one class on the teaching of writing the previous term. Still, I needed a job and made it to the interview round. I'm asked about grading my students' writing, about how I'd balance the language-level errors they might make (in a population with a majority of non-native English writers) with larger goals of making clear and convincing arguments. I say that I'd want to be fair to students less prepared for writing in college, and that I'd give them two grades: one for mechanics and one for everything else. When one of my interviewers asks how I'd reconcile two grades when it comes time to submit a single grade to the registrar, I mostly see the gleam in her eye, that "gotcha!" moment that reveals me as a newb with little clue as to the realities of student assessment. And she's right.

A couple of years later, I'm teaching developmental writing in a rural community college in Maryland. My students are either adults in the workforce in lousy, low-paying jobs trying to leverage education to improve their professional prospects or 19-year-olds fresh out of high school where they were in the non-college track and thus largely denied much meaningful instruction and learning on how to write. My course is at the first of three levels of developmental writing, all pass-fail and non-credit, i.e., progressively taller hurdles for my students to overcome before they can enroll in "regular" first-year writing. It's clear that some students are so ill-prepared, no matter how eager, that I'll have to fail them, consigning them to take the course over. I remember conveying this message to one student—a woman older than I

was at the time—enrolled in a nursing assistant program. We were in a utility room with a photocopier and stationary supplies—adjunct instructors did not have offices though I was teaching three sections of writing at that college. When I told her the bad news, she burst into tears and crumpled up a sheet of fresh white photocopy paper to dab her eyes (no tissues in sight).

The fact that I remember these two stories, occurring over 40 years ago, is testament to the roles of assessment and fairness in my development as a writing teacher and likely for many other writing teachers. I had to give grades—the institutions demanded it. I had to base those grades on some sense of expectations, usually handed to me in a packet of orientation materials or pre-made syllabi when I started a new adjunct assignment. And I wanted to enact some sense of social justice in my classes, despite the imperatives of assessment. I truly believed, then and now, in higher education’s transformative potential for my students, despite its long history of largely regulating language and cultural behavior, particularly for minoritized students.

The editors and contributors of *Improving Outcomes: Disciplinary Writing, Local Assessment, and the Aim of Fairness* clearly share that belief in the transformative potential of higher education, particularly when it comes to writing classes, but they are also quite sanguine about the long histories of oppression to overcome, and the long use of testing as a means to sort the haves and have-nots, of “fairness” as an excuse to rely on standardized assessments created far from the contexts in which they are applied.

I focus on fairness here because co-editors Diane Kelly-Riley and Norbert Elliot tell us that “within this collection, fairness operates as an integrative principle” (p. 1). That integration, according to the co-editors, provides a lens to understand and to evaluate student, classroom, program, and institutional assessment efforts, and also one that has essentially created its own disciplinary field: “Made manifest by contexts, individuals, and aims, fairness becomes a concretizing principle that shifts across time yet yields a demonstrable end through solidarity” (p. 4).

The theme of fairness in assessment and the solidarity that contributors create on their campuses, in their programs, and with each other is clear in this book. As the co-editors describe,

Our authors return time and again to the desire to improve outcomes, the willingness to explore writing in the disciplines in order to identify academic and professional opportunities for students, and the courage to use local assessments to ensure students are evaluated in meaningful ways. In all these efforts, the aim of fairness provides a unifying concept that reminds us of what we are doing and why, and for whom our efforts are undertaken in the first place. (p. 5)

At this point, you might just be wondering what fairness in writing assessment actually looks like. Enter my colleague Mya Poe in the first chapter to define some terms. Poe first offers Norbert Elliot’s definition: “In teaching and assessing writing, fairness may be defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum representation of varied writing constructs as they are used in various disciplinary settings” (p. 24). She then adds,

Elliot’s definition is valuable because it draws attention to four features of fair assessment: defining the construct of writing; ensuring there are multiple instances of writing to be assessed; ensuring the construct is sufficiently broad to obtain a meaningful measurement of writing; and identifying teaching support, institutional resources, and structure that might complement assessment decisions. (p. 24).

Those four features nicely describe the efforts contributors to this collection make, drawing from a variety of U.S.-based institutions—two- and four-year, public and private—and demonstrating approaches to student, classroom, program, and/or institutional assessment that are useful and usually not entirely straightforward in terms of “success.” The efforts we read about that leverage particular theoretical lenses, whether disability studies (Osorio), decolonial approaches (Carlson & Ryan), culturally responsive pedagogies (Montenegro), or sociocognitive framing (Mislevy), offer helpful grounding to show the underlying basis for much of our writing assessment efforts and to explain why they might succeed or fail. Portfolios (Benander & Refaei, Buyserie, et al., Whithaus) and technology (Hart-Davidson & Meeks) also play a strong role in this collection, a blend of old and new tools to better understand student performance, to inform faculty development efforts, and to target needed change. The section on “Disciplinary Writing” was also a welcome departure from collections that solely focus on first-year writing and assessment. Instead, we learn about a program to prepare high school teachers to work with their students on “college-ready” skills (Farris), about writing reform in architecture (Hogrefe & Briller), in nursing (Maneval & Ward), and in engineering and computer science (Williams).

All told, there’s much to like about this collection, and readers will learn a great deal from the efforts described. In addition to Poe’s framing introduction, I found from my perspective (an English department chair often engaged with curricular and programmatic assessment, a former writing program administrator, and long-time writing classroom teacher) particularly useful the chapters that offered fresh lenses through which to view assessment. In this category, I’d put Ruth Osorio’s “A Disability-as-Insight Approach to Multimodal Assessment,” Robert Mislevy’s “Assessing Writing: Construct Representation and Implications of a Sociocognitive Perspective,” and William Hart-Davidson and Melissa Graham Meeks’ “Feedback Analytics for Peer Learning: Indicators of Writing Improvement in Digital Environments.” Each of these chapters describes specific and conceptual ways to understand and undertake writing assessment that truly pushes the field toward new understandings and exciting new possibilities. That’s not to slight other chapters that describe assessment as collaborative and theoretically informed institutional efforts. If anything, the emphasis on writing assessment as the responsibility of far more than individual classroom teachers (which I certainly did not feel in those two anecdotes with which I opened this review) is a strong theme throughout and a key takeaway for all readers.

I also need to note that the publisher is the Modern Language Association, an organization that’s been increasingly making room for writing studies in publications and conferences (e.g., see volume 3 of *The Journal of Writing Analytics*: <https://wac.colostate.edu/jwa/archives/vol3/>)

but one that's still largely associated with the study of literature. My point here is that the contributors to this volume likely needed to describe their work broadly for a variety of audiences—not simply those engaged in writing assessment or writing research or teachers of writing in U.S. higher education but those who might be coming to assessment from many entry points. As I've learned from many years in this business, assessment of writing is often seen as the “easy” path toward conducting institutional assessment, whether driven by accreditors' mandates or internal self-study. *Improving Outcomes* offers an effective primer for those audiences, both in larger conceptual issues behind ensuring fairness and in the actual practices of writing assessment.

That said, as befitting the genre of the review, I now turn to a few nits I need to pick.

While it's clear that fairness is the operating construct driving the efforts described in this collection, for some chapters, the definition of the term is more clear than others. Every chapter's authors make claims that their assessment approaches are “fair,” but sometimes that seems to merely mean “accurate.” In other cases, it seems to mean “visible.” And yet in others, fairness is largely a consequence of buy-in from faculty colleagues. I worry that if a term is stretched that thin, it is in danger of breaking.

Most troubling to me is that largely missing from most of these accounts are students themselves, that assessment is something *done* to students, rather than having students as active participants in those assessment activities. As I read descriptions of faculty reading student work to develop course-level goals and rubrics to assess achievement of those goals, I wondered about the missed opportunity to have students in those rooms, too. In short, to hear from students at any level and in any discipline what they want to write, how, and why, and how writing might be meaningful would greatly contribute to the efforts these authors describe. What I call for here is an assessment-focused version of Students as Partners (see <https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/resources/students-as-partners/>), whether co-constructing rubrics or learning goals or assessment practices with students. Such an approach would ensure that “fairness” is not yet another concept done to students, but instead one that takes into account what Juan Guerra (2008) describes as students' “incomes” rather than merely charting outcomes.

It also seems inevitable in collections such as these—ones in which contributors are describing reform efforts to make their classes, curricula, programs, and institutions more responsive to students' needs and more fair to students often marginalized in mainstream approaches—that everything is a smashing success. In short, we get lots of claims about program improvement, but not a lot of evidence to support those claims. Perhaps that's a different kind of collection, one that would not necessarily be of interest to MLA Press, but, still, with a few exceptions, there's very little empirical work being reported on here, the kind of work that program reform needs to be built on, not merely anecdotal accounts.

Overall, I'm grateful for this collection, hopeful that it will inform new teachers of writing and new writing program administrators in ways I wished I had been informed when I started my

teaching career, and feel it augments the growing body of work on writing assessment in multiple contexts. If assessment itself can be seen as a means to achieve fairness, social justice, and equity in our classrooms and in our institutions, the results will be quite powerful.

### **Author Biography**

**Neal Lerner** is Professor and Chair of the English department at Northeastern University, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on writing development, writing research, and creative nonfiction.

### **Reference**

Guerra, J. (2008). Cultivating transcultural citizenship: A writing across communities model. *Language Arts*, 85(4), 296-304.