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CCCC Position Statement

A statement on an education issue approved by the CCCC Executive Committee

Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

Conference on College Composition and Communication

November 2006 (revised March 2009, reaffirmed November 2014, revised April 2022)

Introduction

Writing assessment can be used for a variety of purposes, both inside the classroom and outside: supporting student learning, assigning a grade, placing students in appropriate courses, allowing them to exit a course or sequence of courses, certifying proficiency, and evaluating programs. Given the high-stakes nature of many of these assessment purposes, it is crucial that assessment practices be guided by sound principles that are fair and just and specific to the people for whom and the context and purposes for which they are designed. This position statement aims to provide that guidance for writing teachers and administrators across institutional types and missions.

We encourage faculty, administrators, students, community members, and other stakeholders to reflect on the ways the principles, considerations, and practices articulated in this document are present in their current assessment methods and to consider revising and rethinking their practices to ensure that inclusion and language diversity, teaching and learning, and ethical labor practices inform every level of writing assessment.

Foundational Principles of Writing Assessment

This position statement identifies six principles that form the ethical foundation of writing assessment.

1. Writing assessments are important means for guiding teaching and learning. Writing assessments—and assignments to which they correlate—should be designed and implemented in pursuit of clearly articulated learning goals.
2. The methods and criteria used to assess writing shape student perceptions of writing and of themselves as writers.
3. Assessment practices should be solidly grounded in the latest research on learning, literacies, language, writing, equitable pedagogy, and ethical assessment.
4. Writing is by definition social. In turn, assessing writing is social. Teaching writing and learning to write entail exploring a range of purposes, audiences, social and cultural contexts and positions, and mediums.
5. Writers approach their writing with different attitudes, experiences, and language practices. Writers deserve the opportunity to think through and respond to numerous rhetorical situations that allow them to incorporate their knowledges, to explore the perspectives of others, and to set goals for their writing and their ongoing development as writers.
6. Writing and writing assessment are labor-intensive practices. Labor conditions and outcomes must be designed and implemented in pursuit of both the short-term and long-term health and welfare of all participants.

Considerations for Designing Writing Assessments

Based on the six foundational principles detailed in the previous section, this section enumerates key considerations that follow from these principles for the design, interpretation, and implementation of writing assessments, whether formative or summative or at the classroom or programmatic level.

Considerations for Inclusion and Language Diversity

- *Best assessment practice is contextual.* It is designed and implemented to address the learning needs of a full range of students in the local context, and involves methods and criteria that are locally developed, deriving from the particular context and purposes for the writing being assessed. (1, 2)
- *Best assessment practice requires that learning goals, assessment methods, and criteria for success be equitable, accessible, and appropriate for each student in the local context.* To meet this requirement, assessments are informed by research focused on the ways assignments and varied forms of assessment affect diverse student groups. (3)
- *Best assessment practice recognizes that mastery is not necessarily an indicator of excellence.* It provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their strengths in writing, displaying the strategies or skills taught in the relevant environment. Successful summative and formative assessment empowers students to make informed decisions about how to meet their goals as writers. (4, 5)
- *Best assessment practice respects language as complicated and diverse and acknowledges that as purposes vary, criteria will as well.* Best assessment practices provide multiple paths to success, accounting for a range of diverse language users, and do not arbitrarily or systematically punish linguistic differences. (3, 4, 5)

Considerations for Learning and Teaching

- *Best assessment practice engages students in contextualized, meaningful writing.* Strong assessments strive to set up writing tasks and situations that identify purposes that are appropriate to, and that appeal to, the particular students being assessed. (4, 5)
- *Best assessment practice clearly communicates what is valued and expected of writing practices.* It focuses on measuring specific outcomes defined within the program or course. Values, purposes, and learning goals should drive assessment, not the reverse. (1, 6)
- *Best assessment practice relies on new developments to shape assessment methods that prioritize student learning.* Best assessment practice evolves. Revisiting and revising assessment practices should be considered periodically, as research in the field develops and evolves, and/or as the assessment needs or circumstances change. (3)
- *Best assessment practice engages students in the assessment process, contextualizing the method and purpose of the assessment for students and all other stakeholders.* Where possible, these practices invite students to help develop assessment strategies, both formative and summative. Best assessment practice understands that students need multiple opportunities to provide feedback to and receive feedback from other learners. (2, 4, 5)
- *Best assessment practice helps students learn to examine and evaluate their own writing and how it functions and moves outside of specifically defined writing courses.* These practices help students set individualized goals and encourage critical reflection by student writers on their own writing processes and performances. (4, 5)

- *Best assessment practice generates data which is shared with faculty and administrators in the program so that assessment results may be used to make changes in practice.* These practices make use of assessment data to provide opportunities for reflection, professional development, and for the exchange of information about student performance and institutional or programmatic expectations. (1, 6)

Considerations for Labor

- *Best assessment practice is undertaken in response to local goals and the local community of educators who guide the design and implementation of the assessment process.* These practices actively seek feedback on assessment design and from the full range of faculty who will be impacted by or involved with the assessment process. Best assessment practice values individual writing programs, institutions, or consortiums as communities of interpreters whose knowledge of context and purpose is integral to assessment. (1, 6)
- *Best assessment practice acknowledges how labor practices determine assessment implementation.* It acknowledges the ways teachers' institutional labor practices vary widely and responds to local labor demands that set realistic and humane expectations for equitable summative and formative feedback. (4, 6)
- *Best assessment practice acknowledges the labor of research and the ways local conditions affect opportunities for staying abreast of the field.* In these practices, opportunities for professional development based on assessment data are made accessible and meaningful to the full range of faculty teaching in the local context. (3)
- *Best assessment practice uses multiple measures to ensure successful formative and summative assessment appropriate to program expectation and considers competing tensions such as teaching load, class size, and programmatic learning outcomes when determining those measures.* (2, 6)
- *Best assessment practice provides faculty with financial, technical, and practical support in implementing comprehensive assessment measures and acknowledges the ways local contexts influence assessment decisions.* (5, 6)

Contexts for Writing Assessment

Ethical assessment at all levels and in all settings is context specific and labor intensive. Participants working toward an ethical culture of assessment must critically consider the conditions of labor, as well as expectations for class size, participation in programmatic assessment (especially for contingent faculty members), and professional development related to assessment. In addition, these activities and expectations should inform all discussions of workload for assessment participants to ensure that the labor of assessment is appropriately recognized and, where appropriate, compensated.

Ethical assessment does not only consider the immediate practice of faculty engaging in classroom, programmatic, or institutional assessment, but it also builds on the assessment practices students have experienced in the past. Ethical assessment considers how it will coincide with other assessment practices students encounter at our institutions and keeps in sight the assessment experiences students are likely to experience in the future. A deliberately designed culture of assessment aligns classroom learning goals with larger programmatic and institutional learning goals and aligns assessment practices accordingly. It involves teachers, administrators, students, and community stakeholders designing assessments grounded in classroom and program contexts, and it includes feeding assessment data back to those involved so that assessment results may be used to make changes in practice. Ethical assessment also protects the data and identities of participants. Finally, ethical assessment practices involve asking difficult questions about the values and missions of an assignment, a course, or a program and whether or not assessments promote or possibly inhibit equity among participants.

Admissions, Placement, and Proficiency

Admissions, placement, and proficiency-based assessment practices are high-stakes processes with a history of exclusion and academic gatekeeping. Educational institutions and programs should recognize the history of these types of measures in privileging some students and penalizing others as it relates to their distinctive institutional and programmatic missions. They should then use that historical knowledge to inform the development of assessment measures that serve local needs and contexts. Assessments should be designed and implemented to support student progress and success. With placement in particular, institutions should be mindful of the financial burden and persistence issues that increase in proportion to the number of developmental credit hours students are asked to complete based on assessments.

Whether for admissions, placement, or proficiency, recommended practices for any assessment that seeks to directly measure students' writing abilities involve, but are not limited to, the following concerns:

- Writing tasks and assessment criteria should be informed and motivated by the goals of the institution, the program, the curriculum, and the student communities that the program serves. (1, 2)
- Writing products should be measured against a clearly defined set of criteria developed in conversation with instructors of record to ensure the criteria align with the goals of the program and/or the differences between the courses into which students might be placed. (1, 2)
- Instructors of record should serve as scorers or should be regularly invited to provide feedback on whether existing assessment models are accurate, appropriate, and ethical. (4, 6)
- Assessments should consist of multiple writing tasks that allow students to engage in various stages of their writing processes. (4, 5)
- Assessment processes should include student input, whether in the form of a reflective component of the assessment or through guided self-placement measures. (5)
- Students should have the opportunity to question and appeal assessment decisions. (5, 6)
- Writing tasks and assessment criteria should be revisited regularly and updated to reflect the evolving goals of the program or curriculum. (1, 3)

Classroom Assessment

Classroom assessment processes typically involve summative and formative assessment of individually and collaboratively authored projects in both text-based and multimedia formats. Assessments in the classroom usually involve evaluations and judgments of student work. Those judgments have too often been tied to how well students perform standard edited American English (SEAE) to the exclusion of other concerns. Instead, classroom assessments should focus on acknowledging that students enter the classroom with varied language practices, abilities, and knowledges, and these enrich the classroom and create more democratic classroom spaces. Classroom assessments should reinforce and reflect the goals of individual and collaborative projects. Additionally, classroom assessment might work toward centering labor-based efforts students put forth when composing for multiple scenarios and purposes. Each of the six foundational principles of assessment is key to ensuring ethical assessment of student writing in a classroom context.

Recommended practices in classroom assessment involve, but are not limited to, the following:

- Clear communications related to the purposes of assessment for each project (1, 2)
- Assessment/feedback that promote and do not inhibit opportunities for revision, risk-taking, and play (4, 5)
- Assessment methodologies grounded in the latest research (3)
- Practices designed to benefit the health and welfare of all participants by respecting the labor of instructors and students (6)
- Occasions to illustrate a range of rhetorical skills and literacies (3, 4)

- Attention to the value of language diversity and rejection of evaluations of language based on a single standard (5)
- Efforts to demystify writing, composing, and languaging processes (3, 4)
- Opportunities for self-assessment, informed goal setting, and growth (5, 6)
- Input from the classroom community on classroom assessment processes (5, 6)

Program Assessment

Assessment of writing programs, from first-year composition programs to Writing Across the Curriculum programs, is a critical component of an institution's culture of assessment. Assessment can focus on the operation of the program, its effectiveness to improve student writing, and how it best supports university goals.

While programmatic assessment might be driven by state or institutional policies, members of writing programs are in the best position to guide decisions about what assessments will best serve that community. Programs and departments should see themselves as communities of professionals whose assessment activities communicate measures of effectiveness to those inside and outside the program.

Writing program assessments and designs are encouraged to adhere to the following recommended practices:

- Reflect the goals and mission of the institution and its writing programs. (1)
- Draw on multiple methods, quantitative and qualitative, to assess programmatic effectiveness and incorporate blind assessment processes of anonymized writing when possible. (1, 3, 6)
- Establish shared assessment criteria for evaluating student performance that are directly linked to course outcomes and student performance indicators. (1, 2)
- Occur regularly with attention to institutional context and programmatic need. (3, 6)
- Share assessment protocols with faculty teaching in the program and invite faculty to contribute to design and implementation. (4, 5, 6)
- Share assessment results with faculty to ensure assessment informs curriculum design and revisions. (1, 2)
- Recognize that assessment results influence and reflect accreditation of and financial resources available to programs. (6)
- Provide opportunities for assessors to discuss and come to an understanding of outcomes and scoring options. (4, 5)
- Consider faculty labor:
 - Faculty assessors should be compensated in ways that advantage them in their local contexts whether this involves financial compensation, reassigned time, or recognized service considered for annual review, promotion, and/or merit raises. (6)
 - Contingent instructors are vital to programs and, ideally, their expertise should be considered in assessment processes. If, however, participation exceeds what is written into their contracts/labor expectations, appropriate compensation should be awarded. (6)

Conclusion

There is no perfect assessment measure, and best practices in all assessment contexts involve reflections by stakeholders on the effectiveness and ethics of all assessment practices. Assessments that involve timed tests, rely solely on machine scoring, or primarily judge writing based on prescriptive grammar and mechanics offer a very limited view of student writing ability and have a history of disproportionately penalizing students from marginalized populations. Ethical assessment practices provide opportunities to identify equity gaps in writing programs and classrooms and to use disaggregated data to make informed decisions about increasing educational opportunities for students.

Individual faculty and larger programs should carefully review their use of these assessment methods and critically weigh the benefits and ethics of these approaches. Additionally, when

designing these assessment processes, programs should carefully consider the labor that will be required at all stages of the process to ensure an adequate base of faculty labor to maintain the program and to ensure that all faculty involved are appropriately compensated for that labor. Ethical assessment is always an ongoing process of negotiating the historical impacts of writing assessment, the need for a clear portrait of what is happening in classrooms and programs, and the concern for the best interests of all assessment participants.

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Acknowledgments

This statement was generously revised by the Task Force to Create CCCC Guidelines for College Writing Assessment: Inclusive, Sustainable, and Evidence-Based Practices. The members of this task force include:

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