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## Discussing Assessment: A Review of Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning by Tialitha Macklin

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Brian Huot (2002a) contends writing assessment is a social action that is also "a positive, important aspect of designing, administrating and theorizing writing instruction" (p. 7) and yet, the "positive potential [of assessment] remains, to a large degree, unrealized - both by individual writing specialists and by composition and rhetoric at large" (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009, p. 2) as assessment stakeholders resist entering into conversations on the subject. In fact,

even when writing program administrators and faculty are invited or encouraged to design and facilitate assessments locally, they often hesitate because of unfamiliarity with possible approaches to large-scale assessment as well as the key concepts, documented history, and recorded beliefs associated with various approaches (Moore, O'Neill, & Huot, 2009, p. W109).

Moore et al. suggest, despite this hesitancy, "WPAs and other writing faculty must find ways to participate, wisely and well, in this powerful activity" (2009, p. W110). It is these notions of activism and participation in writing assessment that Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill respond to in their 2010 book, *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*.

This text specifically responds to the growing concerns that "assessment is done to us (teachers, students or programs) by *them* (experts, upper administration or governing boards) contributing to an overall sense of surveillance or dominance" (O'Neill, Schendel, & Huot, 2002, p. 17) and that assessment is often seen as a negative force in higher education, as Brian Huot claims, due partially to the absence of teacher contribution to discussions that surround assessment (2002a, p. 18). This problem, according to Adler-Kassner and O'Neill, stems from the notion that the stories of those of us in writing assessment ultimately shape the larger, grand narrative of the field and, in many cases, we have relinquished control of these stories to others to interpret as they please. In her 2008 book, *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers*, Adler-Kassner lays the groundwork for *Reframing Writing Assessment* when she explains that these stories "shape every aspect of our working lives. If we want to have a voice in the discussion about those lives, then we need to think about frames and the stories that emerge from them" (p. 15).

As someone who is not new to teaching composition but who is new to formal dialogues surrounding writing assessment, this text provided me with insight into the complex relationships and politics that surround the discipline. While I am comfortable with my knowledge in composition history and theory and in my role as a composition practitioner, I am less than confident in my abilities to hold meaningful discussions about assessment and I am quite certain that a number of my peers have similar trepidations. *Reframing Writing Assessment* responds to our apprehension by providing a history of writing assessment and a call to action for everyone concerned with writing assessment, but especially those who are new to the field, to become more involved in the discussion on this subject.

### The Framework of the Text

Such discussion begins in *Reframing Writing* as the authors open the first chapter with a story from the WPA listserv where a writing program director becomes aware of a potential university-wide writing assessment, actively engages the assessment committee and administrators via a well-articulated memo voicing her concerns and expertise, and ultimately winds up completely ignored by the other stakeholders. The authors' solution to this common problem is to provide readers with a better understanding of the various frameworks at play in writing assessment in order to open a meaningful dialogue amongst assessment stakeholders, which is especially essential for faculty who are new to the field since they often lack the expertise and/or confidence to participate in these discussions. The overall goal for the text, then, is to provide faculty with "the necessary knowledge for engaging in these discussions" (p. 10) by "offer[ing] a theoretical framework, concrete illustrations, and suggestions for action for all of us who care deeply and are invested in postsecondary writing instruction" (p. 12). Adler-Kassner and O'Neill achieve their goal quite successfully through the use of an extended metaphor of framing and reframing.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's frame definition is clearly influenced by sociologist Erving Goffman's classic frame analysis where he explains that "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organization which govern events [...] and our subjective involvement in them" (1974, p. 10), thus situating their conversation in a long line of discussions where frames are seen as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001, p. 11). This building metaphor allows the authors to construct an understandable and accessible foundation for their discussion by explaining that initial framing is "generating ideological structures that shape understanding" (p. 19) while reframing is creating new ideologies and new structures that change our understanding of the previously existing frame.

Chapter 2 focuses on the history of the frame of the current American education system. The authors contend that, while it is the traditional framework that current K-12 teachers must abide by (since they have not necessarily actively joined in assessing themselves), postsecondary teachers still have some influence to potentially reframe this view and that it is our responsibility to participate in rebuilding these stories. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's call to action is very much akin to Barbara Walvoord's suggestion that "the answer is not to ignore assessment, resist it, or leave it to others" (2010, p. 3) but to actively seek out and engage in such essential discourse. As a complement to Adler-Kassner's 2010 chapter in *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement*, which positions WPA's as only one voice within a larger conversation of stakeholders (p. 223), Adler-Kassner and O'Neill begin to show the reader that assessment has many stakeholders both in and outside of the academy. They argue that to build a meaningful frame for assessment dialogue, and "to reframe writing assessment, we must work to situate these efforts in relation to one another, rather than in *opposition* to one another" (p. 39).

The authors go on to describe the more specific frames of composition and assessment by providing a chronicle that spans from English A at Harvard in the 1800's to current theory surrounding portfolios, timed writings, and standardized tests. When stakeholders have a better understanding of how and why frames were initially built, the authors argue, they can more easily use today's constructivist views to reframe them.

Once the foundational frames are explained, Chapters 4-6 provide the means for reframing existing composition and assessment ideologies. The authors begin by focusing on building alliances both within and outside the university through increased audience awareness as well as on encouraging meaningful, local assessment and reframing. Here, the authors expand their discussion of the multiple stakeholders whose interests lie in assessment, including students, teachers, administrators, and future employers. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill provide real world examples of alliance-building through the explication of five case studies in two- and four-year institutions and through detailed interviews with two composition professors. These examples are not necessarily tidy "how-to manuals" for reframing assessment ideologies, however. Instead, the authors provide a realistic representation of the difficulties in creating alliances, maintaining them, and then extracting something meaningful from these newly formed partnerships. The resulting frames aren't always structurally sound but, the authors argue, they are a meaningful beginning.

The last chapter of the book ties the discussion of the other chapters together while reminding the reader that "dominant frames and stories become so 'common sense' and naturalized so that we often aren't able to see them for what they are... the dominant values and ideologies associated with and perpetuated by the frame" (p. 179). Here, the authors offer the metaphors of honeycombs and networked infrastructures as potential tools for reframing. These metaphorical suggestions, while interesting, are brief and a bit underdeveloped, leaving the reader wondering how to actually apply them using the various strategies discussed in the text. This is especially confusing given the painstaking efforts of the authors in earlier chapters to ensure reader accessibility. But, despite these confusing metaphors, the authors close the text on a positive note, reminding the reader that "reframing writing assessment, like writing, is a process that improves with revision and practice" (p. 191), thus encouraging the reader toward actively participating in the larger assessment conversation.

### **Building Confidence in Our Foundations**

This tone of enthusiasm and positivity that permeates the book ultimately sets it apart from other related texts and makes it an essential read. If we are going to "create a new, shared discourse for understanding assessment as a positive force for the teaching of writing" (Huot, 2002b, p. 165), then believing that we can make a difference by choosing to reframe the stories of the discipline is a great first step. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill encourage the reader to seek out "'aha!' moments" as "genuine participants" in the discourse of assessment as both teachers and researchers (p. 190), thus empowering us to recognize the value of our own experiences and stories in preparing us to participate in assessment conversations. The authors even go so far as to recognize the potential reticence of newcomers: ... as veterans of this work, we know it can be challenging in the best and most difficult ways. But we also believe that if we are to continue contributing to the ways students' educations are shaped--and, therefore, to what we can do in the classroom--it is some of the most important work that we do. (p. 12)

As such, *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning* is a useful text to anyone in the assessment field, but it is especially helpful to those new to the discourse of writing assessment. The authors provide readers with a fairly extensive history of both composition and assessment, thus serving as a sort of primer to the fields, all while successfully encouraging readers to get involved with assessment on our own campuses. In fact, when paired with O'Neill, Moore, and Huot's 2009 *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*, *Reframing Writing Assessment* becomes a crucial introductory read for anyone new to writing assessment.

As a relative newcomer to assessment conversations, I found Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's explanations and rallying cries to be motivational since the authors clearly meet their stated objective of providing the reader with enough background to successfully begin a conversation with nearly any potential stakeholder in assessment. I finished the text with the confidence that, after reading this book, I am better prepared to deal with issues like the cautionary tale of the WPA in Chapter 1 than I was before and believe that I am, overall, more qualified to participate "wisely and well" (2009, p. W110) in writing assessment.

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