

Finally, the understanding of intellectual styles as a concept for both individuals and groups has far-reaching implications for practitioners in education and researchers in cross-cultural psychology, multicultural education, organizational behavior and work performance, and many other academic disciplines. I would recommend this book to students and practitioners of education, psychology and the allied fields.

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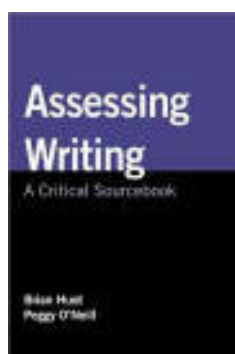
Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook

Brian Huot & Peggy O'Neill (Eds.). (2009)

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By *Praveen Singh*



This is a collection of already published papers (twenty-four) aimed at researchers and teachers of composition/writing and (writing) assessment. The editors discuss the need for and the challenges of writing assessment. They notice that even though no one denies that assessment is a critical component of teaching writing/composition, there exists a paradox. While on the one hand it is important that an effective writing teacher knows the writing assessment needs of the students, faculty and institutions, on the other hand some view it as a “punitive force”.

The papers in this book aim at helping the audience “understand the theory and practice

of writing assessment” (p.1). The contributions range from scholars who are part of the academic setup to those who bring fresh insights as administrators or executors of the findings within the field. This volume, however, does not concern itself with the “assessment [that] writers do as they write” and even “the responses and classroom evaluation” have [also] been left out (p.1).

The book is divided into three sections, Foundations, Models and Issues. Here I discuss some of the papers.

The first three articles in the “Foundations” may be seen as a dialogue on some of the common goals. The first paper discusses the “differences between holistic, analytic and primary trait scoring”, helping one to understand and compare common writing assessment procedures. The second paper offers a strong argument *for* holistic scoring and the third paper discusses the “reliability issues in holistic assessment”. Therefore, these help the reader understand at least one of the major approaches in writing assessment.

Moss’s paper titled “Can there be validity without reliability?” is an interesting read. Moss argues for a more flexible understanding of reliability as a measurement concept and challenges the traditional notions of it. Camp’s paper on the “development of writing assessment from an educational measurement perspective” offers a perspective on the act of balancing the requirements of Reliability and Validity and concludes by “moving toward the new models of writing assessment”(p.122). Yancey discusses the developments of writing assessment in “over a fifty-year period” as different waves where the first three take the form of “objective tests”, “the holistically scored essay” and “portfolio assessment and programmatic assessment”. In the final wave, Yancey hopes, assessment programs will focus on individual assessment and also include “topics that are only now forming” (p. 146).

Among the papers in the “Models” section, the study by William L. Smith discusses how writing assessment requires that the raters be equally well-trained if they are to do justice. Durst et al.’s model allows for “exit testing” in which three-teacher teams read student portfolio and make “discussion about students’ written work” central to assessment (p.218). It makes them “open to interrogation” (p.218) and allows them to see how discussions lead to “new interpretations” and also to “attitude entrenchment” (p.228).

Royer and Gilles’ paper on “Direct Self Placement” shows how the students may be allowed to choose from the courses. Royer and Gilles’ confession that “writing ability... is far complex to measure so quickly and easily” is every evaluator’s dilemma (p.234). The paper describes why and how they arrived at the strategy. The model can be used advantageously by others caught in a similar fix.

Among the papers in the “Issues” section, Freedman’s paper raises the rare question about the influences that affect the evaluators. She discusses the factors and sets up three variables, i.e. essay variables, reader variables and environment variables, for a collection of sixty-four essays at four different colleges. The findings suggest that the “raters were the chief influence on student’s scores”. There are three other papers in this section that sensitize the reader about “Portfolio Scoring” by drawing their attention to many of the assumptions behind such assessment measures.

Hamp-Lyons’ paper may appear a bit outdated since a lot has been published on the challenges of assessing the writing of non-native speakers of English; nevertheless, it is a good introduction to more recent literature. Ball argues for including the voices of teachers from different cultures as it can help “not only to inform, but also to reshape current assessment practices, research priorities, policy-debates ... as they relate to diverse populations”(p. 357). The study by Has well and Has well raises alarm as it

shows how the knowledge of gender affects the rater’s evaluation. This has implications for a country such as India which is still trying to come to grips with inequalities in almost every sphere of life.

Overall, this book offers a panorama of different studies that the teachers and researchers in the field of language teaching, in general, and writing assessment, in particular, would like to be exposed to. It offers various models that can be used to check whether the analyses are at par with the latest standards. It not only informs us about many assessment issues and approaches but also urges us to rethink some of the unexamined assumptions that have long been part of our evaluation system.

Some caution nonetheless is warranted. The book is largely US-centric, i.e. it has studies that focus on the issues, raters and students from the US where the language being assessed and studied is English. There are a few papers that seem to go beyond such limitations but that does not make up for the English-centricism. A non-U.S. reader might feel that the book is not for her. However, one must remember that such studies offer windows to newer insights and can be adapted to suit one’s context. Given the Indian multilingual contexts, there is a lot of potential for a dialogue and research in the area of Writing Assessment. The results and interpretations even if different, would only take us a step closer to the reality of writing and writing assessment in the country.

This book successfully shows that writing assessment is much more than an act of scoring to strings of scribbles. I would recommend this book to researchers, language teachers and policy-makers in the assessment field.

Praveen Singh is a professionally trained English language teacher. He has an M.Phil. in Linguistics and looks forward to exploring further areas in Micro-Linguistics to get an understanding of the workings of Language.

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