Chapter XIX
Redefining Writing Reality with Multi–Modal Writing and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps due to its applicability as a performance of skill sets in virtually all disciplines, writing as a mechanism for measuring student success is more persistent than ever. New technologies, such as computerized scoring and distanced assessments, make these writing assessments readily available, affordable, replicable, and transferable. However, determining the value of the texts produced with new technologies is difficult. Therefore, this chapter introduces a variety of multi-modal writing assessment methods and discusses potential ways to determine the value of the student texts produced in them.

INTRODUCTION

"Assessment of writing can be a blessing or a curse, a friend or a foe, an important support for our work as teachers or a major impediment to what we need to do for our students. Like nuclear power, say, or capitalism, it offers enormous possibilities for good or ill, and, furthermore, it often shows both its benign and destructive faces at the same time."
—Edward White, Teaching and Assessing Writing, 1994.

When Ed White penned these words, writing assessment—indeed, the term assessment itself—was fast becoming the curricular and practical focus of education everywhere. As an institutional practice, assessment has mushroomed even further in the nearly fifteen years since White's important text was first published, and its emphasis on student writing is greater than ever. What he may not have imagined were the increasingly progressive means by which teachers of writing would both assess and instruct writing or the now global ways in which such assessment and instruction might be viewed. Online writing placements, electronic portfolios, and "blogs," have in many institutions replaced more traditional assessment methodologies. Where once virtually all assessment of student writing had to be done face to face, new media tools make writing assessment "virtual" and available to anyone with internet access. Similarly, where formerly institutions used paper and pencil to determine student placement and student progress, internet accessibility makes the concepts of placement, instruction, evaluation, revision, and publication a now "World Wide Web" of possibilities and the overall impact of new technologies on assessment cannot be overestimated.

This chapter's goal is to discuss new technologies as potential means for:

a. distanced assessments via digital directed self-placement, SAT writing tests, and other online writing assessments;
b. machine-scoring of student essays;
c. digital portfolios and the multi-modal artifacts they can store;
d. digital "webblogs," wikis, podcasts, hypertext;

We will also problematize these somewhat by discussing these technologies' potential misuse and misapplication, mirroring as they do White's statements of the good and bad, the danger and the benefit of writing assessment.

We begin our chapter with a brief history of standardized assessments in the UK and in the U.S., as these two distinctly different sets of practices have informed educational systems around the world; as a result, standardized testing is a nearly global practice. Additionally, we will discuss the connections between these assessments and placement of students in institutions of higher education. While virtually all institutions of higher education participate in placement assessment in some form, as D. Blakesley (2002) puts it, we "may have greatly underestimated the ethical and moral complexity of writing placement, even as we have worked so hard to ensure that students take the course that will best help them become successful writers in the university and beyond" (p.10). As more and more institutions compete for students—both local and international--and as open admissions policies become more widespread in an effort to provide more access and more full-time enrollment, the spectrum of student preparedness for college-level study broadens, making effective placement decisions more elusive than ever.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT: A BRIEF HISTORY AND SOME OPTIONS

In the United States and elsewhere, matriculation writing-placement systems are longstanding—some more than a century old—some older than the courses they still support. For example, in the United States in 1874, for the first time in their entrance examinations Harvard University asked students to show writing proficiency by composing a short essay (read by teachers). Ten years of poor performance on this exam finally prompted the establishment of the first freshman composition course as we now know it (D. Russell, 2002). According to J. Berlin, this examination was based on the assumption that students should enroll already competent in writing, a feeling still shared by

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