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Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom

Brian Huot

As Kathleen Yancey points out in her history of writing assessment, evaluation in some form or another has been an important part of college writing courses for over fifty years ("Looking"). Yancey's history recognizes the often conflicted nature of assessment for the teaching of writing. Although most writing teachers recognize the importance and necessity of regular assessment, they are also rightly concerned about the adverse effects assessment can have on their classrooms and students. This essay focuses on the kind of assessment (I use the words assessment and evaluation interchangeably, distinguishing both from either testing or grading) that takes place within a classroom context, and therefore looks at assessing, grading, or testing writing, since when we talk about classroom assessment we talk of grades and tests, at times using all three terms interchangeably. This slippage of assessment, grading, and testing as interchangeable provides a discourse about assessment that is often critical and unexamined.

The result of these strong connections among grading, testing, and assessing writing is that any possible connection between the teaching and the evaluating of student writing is seldom questioned or discussed. This has led us as a profession to believe that assessing student writing somehow interferes with our ability to teach it. There are of course some notable exceptions. For example, Edward M. White's germinal text is called *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, and he includes the ways in which formal assessments such as holistic scoring can benefit classroom practice; but even White divides assessment and teaching into separate entities that can affect each other. Certainly portfolios have been constructed by some (Elbow, "Foreword";

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Camp and Levine) as ways to link assessment and teaching, but they have also been constructed as better off without any evaluative element at all (Hamilton; Sunstein).

Even in our consideration of how students assess themselves, we have focused primarily on a discourse that links one's progress in writing with one's grades or success in school. The ability of students to assess themselves has long been an important pedagogical (Beaven; Marting and others) and research (Beach; Beach and Eaton and others) concern in composition. In fact, the reflective writing often included in portfolios has also been seen as an important tool for student self-assessment (Armstrong; Mills-Court and Amiran; Yancey, *Reflection*). While self-assessment is certainly an important ability for the developing writer and is related to a student's ability to use assessment to write (Smith and Yancey), it is often focused on how well students measure their progress in a particular class (Beaven) or how well or much they have revised (Beach; Beach and Eaton). There is a limited amount of research on how students and other writers evaluate writing. Thomas Hilgers reports on two studies of young children, grades 2 through 6, and their ability to evaluate writing quality ("How"; "Toward"). In both studies, Hilgers notes, the ability to assess writing is related to the ability to write and appears at those early ages to be part of a developmental process. Susan Miller found through interviews and surveys of college-age and professional writers that most writers did not want to evaluate themselves. Student writers were most influenced by teacher evaluations; on the other hand, the majority of professional writers reported not being influenced by others. More recently, Richard Larson writes about the connection of assessment to the ability to revise one's prose.

We have evolved pedagogies that conceive of teaching as a coaching and enabling process, while holding onto conceptions of evaluation as a means for gatekeeping and upholding standards. Assessment practices that use grades and teachers' written comments as ways to "sort" students or demand mastery of certain "skills" outside the context of a specific piece of writing remain at odds with a pedagogy that recognizes students' socially positioned nature as language users. These practices ultimately deny that linguistic, rhetorical, and literate capabilities can only be developed within the context of discovering and making meaning with the written word. We have yet to create in any substantive way a discourse that links the teaching and assessing of writing.

In this essay, I examine in some detail what we mean by grading, testing, and assessing student writing and use the analysis to suggest alternative language and practices that recast assessment's role in the writing classroom. I hope to unpack the beliefs and assumptions that support these practices in order to bring to light the often unexamined and untheorized ideas that inform our current assessment practices, for only if we examine and interrogate our underlying theoretical positions can we ever hope to alter classroom practice in any substantive way. My primary

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purpose, however, is to create a new, shared discourse for understanding assessment as a positive force for the teaching of writing. Harold Berlak reminds us that "assessments are a form of schooling practice and a form of discourse about schooling practices. [. . .] Particular forms of tests and assessments represent particular forms of discourse, that is, they produce particular ways of talking and communicating with others about the schooling and educational practice" (186). According to Berlak, we not only have a discourse of assessment, but assessment itself produces its own discourse. Examinations, scores, grades, and even some bumper stickers are all discourses produced by assessment. In examining our discourse about assessment and the discourse that assessment produces, it is important that we look for ways to share such discourse not only with our professional colleagues but with our students, so that they, too, can learn to differentiate among grading, testing, and assessing, ultimately learning to harness the power assessment holds for an effective writer.

Two main assumptions about assessment and the teaching of writing undergird my approach. One assumption is that in literate activity, assessment is everywhere. No matter what purpose we have for the reading and writing we do, we often evaluate what we read and write on a fairly continuous basis. The second assumption is that being able to assess writing is an important part of being able to write well. Without the ability to know whether a piece of writing works or not, we would be unable to revise our writing or to respond to the feedback of others (Larson). This essay, however, marks a distinction between grading or testing students and using assessment to help students learn to work as writers. I believe we need to conceive of writing assessment as a necessary, theoretical, authentic, and practical part of the way we teach students to develop the complex tasks inherent in literate activity. When I talk about theory, I am not talking about the creation of a grand scheme with great explanatory value, what I call Theory with a capital T. Instead, I am concerned with the beliefs and assumptions that inform our practices, what I call theory with a small t, what Gary Olson calls "theorizing." My idea of theory is best articulated by James Zebroski:

> Theory is not the opposite of practice; theory is not even a supplement to practice. Theory *is* practice, a practice of a particular kind, and practice is always theoretical. The question then is not whether we have a theory of composition, that is, a view, or better, a vision of ourselves and our activity, but whether we are going to become conscious of our theory (15).

Consequently, it is important that we become more conscious of our theories concerning assessment and how they affect not only our assessment practices but the entire act of teaching writing. Louise Phelps's practice-theory-practice (PTP) arc describes the way in which practice and theory work dialectically to move forward both our practice and the theories that guide us as writing teacher-practitioners. In

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Phelps's PTP arc, a practitioner starts with a specific practice (the first P) that she is unhappy with. Her goal is to arrive at a practice (the last P in the arc) with which she is more comfortable. However, before she can really change her practice, she must also confront the practice on a theoretical level. Donald Schon's notion of "reflection in action" frames practice as a knowledge-and-theory-building enterprise so that when the practitioner "reflects- in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context" (68). For Schon, framing the problem for reflection and reflective action is crucial. If we assume that testing, grading, and assessment are automatically problematic, then there is no reason to examine these practices or our beliefs and assumptions about them. The problem is not in our thinking or practices; the problem is with assessment itself. On the other hand, if we assume "that in literate activity, assessment is everywhere," then we need to begin a reflective inquiry to examine the problem with the practices we now use in assessment and to suggest practices that are more consonant with our theories. Phelps's arc represents the ways in which reflection can propel practitioners toward new and better practices.

The discourse of assessing student writing is often framed as the worst aspect of the job of teaching student writers. Pat Belanoff describes grading as "the dirty thing we have to do in the dark of our own offices" (61). Belanoff's lament about the dearth of material devoted to grading student writing appears to have been heard, since there are two recently published books about grades and college writing (Allison, Bryant, and Hourigan; Zak and Weaver). These volumes are invaluable for those of us interested in grading, since the essays cover a wealth of issues including but not limited to power and grades (Bleich; Elbow, "Changing"), gender and grading (Papoulis; Shiffman), and historical perspectives on grades (Boyd; Speck and Jones). Despite the richness of these volumes, however, none of the essays discusses the subject of grading in terms of its connection to wider issues of assessment and testing and their connections to teaching. Since grades and assessment signify what we value in instruction, connecting how and what we value to what we are attempting to teach seems crucial.

Traditionally, we have not attempted to distinguish among assessment, testing, or grading, lumping them altogether under the heading of writing assessment. The classic definition of writing assessment, from Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy and still in use, certainly makes no attempt at such a distinction: "An 'assessment of writing' occurs when a teacher, evaluator or researcher obtains information about a student's abilities in writing" (qtd. in White, Lutz, and Kamusikiri 1). In fact, we might think that there is a deliberate attempt to connect the three, since the definition links teachers with evaluators or researchers, assuming that all three would want similar information about "a student's abilities in writing" or would go about getting this information in similar ways. There is also the assumption that assessment is always directed toward the abstract concept of "a student's ability in writing." At the heart

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of our profession's discourse about and toward assessment is a conception of it as a summative, generalized, rigid decision about a student writer based upon a first draft or single paper. It is necessary to distinguish between a judgment we might make about a text and the articulation of that judgment. Giving students an A or even a B, even when we suggest revision, probably doesn't encourage them to revise, because the grade itself carries more weight as an evaluation than what we can say about the need to revise. While we may give a grade for many different reasons, what ends up getting articulated becomes a part of a larger system of value that has weight and influence far beyond the evaluative judgment we have made. This idea of paying close attention to the type of statement made on behalf of a specific judgment can be seen in Peter Elbow's exhortation to do less assessment, but do it better ("Writing"). It can also be seen in alternative grading procedures such as portfolios or contract grading, in which we substitute more local, specific assessments of student achievement for the more formal and codified standard grading system. Grades and test scores express highly formalized articulations of an evaluative judgment that connect our judgments with specific cultural beliefs and assumptions that affect both group and personal identity beyond our classrooms.

Assessing and Teaching

Our inability to distinguish among testing, grading, and assessing or evaluating is one of the main reasons that teachers and students have misunderstood and devalued the pedagogical importance of writing evaluation. We can forget how important it is to be able to understand and appreciate the value of written expression and instead focus on testing and grading student ability, practices that require an inference between the textual quality of the writing and the ability of the writer. In other words, a grade or test exists beyond our assessment of a particular text and any commentary or instruction on how actually to improve the writing we are basing our judgments on in the first place. The purpose of grades or tests is to ascertain what a student knows or can do at a particular point and thus involves little or no learning or teaching. For example, most summary comments on graded papers attempt to justify the grade (Connors and Lunsford). Consequently, grading and testing are associated with assessment as an activity with no value for teaching or learning. This kind of assessment, existing outside of a context in which a student might improve his or her work, can be labeled summative, whereas those judgments that allow the student to improve are called formative. Grades and tests, for the most part, are summative rather than formative because they consider a student text finished and its value fixed.

This is a far cry from the type of judgments a teacher makes in reading student writing within an individual classroom—judgments based upon the context of the

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teaching moment in conjunction with the environment of the class and the history of his or her relationships with the student writers and their writing. Much of our evaluation or assessment as teachers, writers, or editors is often open, fluid, tentative, and expectant, that is, formative, as we work with a writer toward a potential text, recognizing the individual, textual purpose(s) of the writer. The type of judgment we know as grading has little relationship to the type of evaluation writers constantly make in the drafting of a particular piece of writing. Most of us would agree that to grade individual drafts on a weekly basis misrepresents the process of writing as a cut-and-dried linear progression of publishable texts, without the reflection and recursion necessary for the creation of effective writing. I contend, nonetheless, that separating assessment from the process of composing equally misrepresents the writing process, since all of us who write have to make evaluative decisions and respond to others' assessments of our work (Larson).

To illustrate the contrasting sets of assumptions our practices hold, let's begin with some current traditional assessment practices and the assumptions behind such practices, contrasting them with some practices common in contemporary composition classrooms. Current traditional pedagogy emphasizes students' written products, which the instructor grades on a regular basis and averages into a course grade that reflects students' ability as writers. In a course in which students write papers for individual grades, even when revision is encouraged, the instructor is completely responsible for assessment. When grades are equated with assessment, and this happens because of the power of grades in society and because grades are often the only evaluation students receive, then assessing the value of writing is completely erased from the student writing process. Why struggle with assigning value to your work when it will be thoroughly and often mysteriously judged by someone else? Even in the way we have constructed student self-assessment, such assessment has been focused on their grades or their progress within a specific course. David Bleich, in "What Can Be Done about Grading," illustrates the bureaucratic role grades have always played. Unfortunately, this bureaucratic role has by default been assigned to assessment as well. The context for revision, growth, and self-evaluation has always been the framework of being graded.

Returning graded and marked papers to students eliminates the need for response or defines it in very narrow, perfunctory terms, oftentimes encouraging students to rather perfunctory revision. Instead of focusing on questions involving the improvement of a piece of writing, students are often focused on what will get them a desired grade, whether they think the revisions improve the writing or not. Writing papers for a grade creates a role for the student in which assessing the value of writing is secondary or moot and the attainment of a specific grade is everything. In this kind of assessment, students are accountable rather than responsible, because grades come from a bureaucratic higher authority over which they exert little or no

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control. Further, grades contextualize the evaluative moment. Instead of focusing on text, this kind of assessment focuses on students' ability to achieve a certain grade, which approximates an instructor's evaluation of their work rather than encouraging students to develop their own assessments about what they are writing. For students, then, writing can become an elaborate game of getting the words right.

Of course, the deleterious effects of writing for grades is not news. From Janet Emig's "school sponsored writing" to James Britton and his colleagues' "teacher as examiner," we have attempted to safeguard against the narrowing of literate activity to a meaningless school exercise. However, we have yet to frame our understanding in terms of assessment itself. Unless we teach students how to assess, we fail to provide them with the authority inherent in assessment, continuing the disjuncture between the competing roles of student and writer. This conflict between the authority necessary to write well and the deference necessary to be a good student is nicely illustrated in a research study in which professional writers received lower holistic scores than students because professional writing violates the expectations teachers have for student work (Freedman). Melanie Sperling and Sarah Freedman's study of the "good girl," too, demonstrates that in many writing classrooms the role of student consumes that of writer, with the student completing revisions she has no role in creating and effectively not learning how to make her own decisions about her writing.

Of course, newer models for teaching student writers attempt to decenter the writing classroom away from the teacher and toward the student, so that he or she does, in fact, have the space and authority to work as a writer, reflecting the effort necessary to use the written word to make meaning. Typical classroom practices in contemporary classrooms include peer review, teacher-student conferences, and portfolios. While each of these classroom activities gives students more responsibility and authority, they also require that students are able to assess text, their own and others', and are able to respond to the assessments of others for revision. However, many students are ill-equipped to make the kind of evaluative decisions about writing that our pedagogy expects and often enter college composition courses with strict, text-based notions of how to judge writing. A crucial missing element in most writing pedagogy is any experience or instruction in ascertaining the value of one's work. It is common for teachers to have to make sure that initial peer-review sessions not focus entirely upon mechanical correctness. It is also common for students to hand in their first papers for response with a brave "Rip it up," or to insist that teachers tell them which papers should be revised or included in a portfolio. These common classroom scripts illustrate a gap between the kinds of evaluative abilities our pedagogy expects and those our students bring with them. These scripts also illustrate the serious gaps between our theories and practices for assessment and some of the more common practices for the teaching of writing. Current classroom

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practices require evaluative skills from students that we do not, for the most part, teach.

The lack of a conscious and critical understanding of the value of assessment appears to drive an overall misunderstanding about the role of assessment in teaching writing. Our students carry with them many of the negative, critical, correctness-centered notions of evaluation that are so prevalent in society and among us, their writing instructors. Students' emphasis on the connection of evaluation to surface-level correctness in writing might be related to their focus on mechanical concerns in revision. The discourses of assessment, grading, and testing have often overemphasized the importance of correctness, while at the same time ignoring the importance of rhetorical features. Certainly, most writing teachers see the need for instruction and emphasis on both grammatical and rhetorical aspects of writing. However, what we assess, grade, or test ultimately determines what we value. It is not surprising, then, that most student revision centers on correctness, since the value of correct writing has been emphasized over and over again in various assessment, testing, and grading contexts. We need to recognize that before students can learn to revise rhetorically, they need to assess rhetorically. Certainly much current writing instruction focuses on rhetorical concepts, but there is no clear evidence that our assessment of student writing focuses on these same criteria. In fact, large-scale research into teacher response (Connors and Lunsford) as well as classroom-based research (Sperling) seems to indicate that teachers do not respond and evaluate student writing rhetorically. Assessing student writing rhetorically and teaching students to assess rhetorically does not seem to be an insurmountable task, but it will require a more conscious effort to focus our evaluations on how students attend to rhetorical concepts in their writing. Just as we have had to rethink the teaching of writing as a process, we also need to rethink what it means for our students to evaluate the way writing works and to relate these decisions about writing quality to the process of writing itself.

This rethinking requires that we begin a discourse of assessment with our students about their writing and the choices writers make. Assessment as a way to teach and learn writing requires more than just feedback on writing in progress from a teacher or peer group. It is common to distinguish between summative evaluation given at the end of the writing process and formative evaluation given while a writer is still working. What I am calling for can probably best be labeled instructive evaluation, since it is tied to the act of learning a specific task while participating in a particular literacy event. Instructive evaluation involves students in the process of evaluation, making them aware of what it is they are trying to create and how well their current drafts match the linguistic and rhetorical targets they have set for themselves, targets that have come from their understanding of the context, audience, purpose and other rhetorical features of a specific piece of writing. Instructive evalu-

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ation requires that we involve students in all phases of the assessment of their work. We must help them set the rhetorical and linguistic targets that will best suit their purposes in writing and then help them evaluate how well they have met such targets, using this evaluation to help them reach additional targets and set new ones. While the conscious setting of such targets requires the ability to understand the rhetorical nature of literate communication, the attainment of these rhetorical aims requires the ability to assess specific language forms and be able to create those forms to which writers and their audiences assign value.

Instructive evaluation requires that students and teachers connect the ability to assess with the necessity to revise, creating a motivation for revision that is often difficult for students to feel. Many aspects of writing, from the initial planning stages of audience assessment to deciding upon the right word during editing and proofreading, depend upon our ability to evaluate. Being able to assess writing quality and to know what works in a particular rhetorical situation are important tools for all writers. A classroom pedagogy that encourages and highlights the evaluative decisions of writers, teachers, and peer-review groups can help foster a new, shared discourse for assessment and the teaching of writing. Sandra Murphy, for instance, provides examples of such a practice from three K–12 classrooms ("Teachers" 86). In one classroom, students evaluate samples of writing, ranking them and providing criteria for each ranking. The discussion is synthesized on a handout given to students. In another classroom, students create wall charts of features of good writing, revising them throughout the year as their ideas about writing evolve. And finally, students and teachers generate lists of statements about what makes good writing, and this list is used by students selecting pieces for their portfolios. In each of these scenarios, students learn to write by learning how to assess. The ability and responsibility for assessment is something that good writers understand, and it is something all successful writers need to learn. Instructive evaluation casts the act of assessment as an important component of learning critical aspects about the process of writing. Instructive evaluation also requires a different kind of classroom and professional discourse, in which all assessments are linked to helping writers improve.

Portfolios

Of all writing assessments used in and outside of the classroom, none has generated more interest and enthusiasm among writing teachers than the portfolio. Portfolios have the potential to disrupt the prevailing negative discourse of assessment and its adverse effects on teaching and learning. They are one of the few assessment practices that have their roots within the classroom, potentially providing students with a more representative and realistic concept of writing evaluation and helping them

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to acquire the types of assessment skills important and necessary for evaluating and responding to suggestions for revision. If we use portfolios in a conscious attempt to combine teaching and assessment, they can work to provide a new discourse about assessment in and about the writing classroom. However, unless we exploit and recognize the shift in assessment theory that drives portfolios, they will end up being just another tool for organizing student writing within the classroom, a sort of glorified checklist through which students are judged according to the number of texts produced at certain times throughout the semester. In other words, if we continue to see portfolios as just another way of testing, grading, or even teaching writing, then their potential to fundamentally transform assessment in the writing classroom will be lost.

A primary consideration for portfolios is that they help us to see assessment in a new light, one that connects discourse about teaching and assessment. Just as we must learn to use assessment in our teaching, we should not ignore the assessment properties of portfolios. Because portfolios can alter the relationship between grading and evaluation in the composition classroom, it is imperative that we become conscious of the theoretical consequences involved in grading student writing before it has the opportunity to become part of a portfolio. Portfolios are part of a tradition in the visual and performing arts that looks at multiple products and processes, hoping to discover and document the progress of an individual student or learner. The theory driving the shift to portfolios demands that we think differently about evaluation. Portfolios undermine the current assumption that it is possible to ascertain a student's ability to write from one piece of writing, or that writing or a writer's development can be inferred incrementally through the evaluation of individual products or an aggregate of individual evaluations. In fact it is fair to say that collecting, selecting, and reflecting, three of the major activities involved in portfolio compilation (Yancey, "Portfolios"), are also acts of assessment, since students make decisions based upon their assessments of their own writing.

Certainly, the assumptions behind grading and testing are that student ability can and should be measured by the sum of the scores received on individual tasks or assignments. Portfolios, on the other hand, provide the student and the teacher with a variety of writing samples that can only be understood and evaluated in context and relationship with each other. A judgment based on a student's portfolio can radically differ from a judgment based on an individual student text because it includes a range of contextual factors including but not limited to the other texts in the portfolio, the act of selecting pieces for inclusion, the act of writing about texts, and the process of writing and compiling the portfolio. The variety of texts within a portfolio exemplifies the progressive, developmental, and fluid nature of written language acquisition. The texts in a portfolio typically devoted to reflection and writing about writing focus not only on the product of writing but on the process as well, illustrating what the student writer knows about the product and process of

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writing within his or her own experience as a writer. Thus, the act of writing and the ability to talk about that writing promote a pedagogical discourse that emphasizes not only the writing the student produces and the process that generates that writing but also the student's development as a writer.

For the most part, the scholarly literature has focused so far on what constitutes a portfolio, what it looks like. However, Sandra Murphy ("Portfolios") and others have reminded us that the way portfolios are used is a key feature for harnessing their potential. For example, it is possible to use portfolios within the same theoretical framework that underlies testing and grading by continuing to assign separate numbers or letters to individual papers within a portfolio. This is a common practice, because while it is relatively easy to switch to portfolios it is much more difficult to alter the assumptions behind our practices. If, however, we want to conceive of portfolios as a viable way to improve the way we assess student writing, then we need to consider them as discrete units to which we can assign value in their entirety.

Grading, even in a portfolio, freezes student work and teacher commentary. Ungraded but responded-to writing in a portfolio directs the articulation of judgment toward the evolving written product rather than toward the student writer, giving students an opportunity to explore, experiment, and compose across a body of work without receiving a summative evaluation of their efforts. This redirection of teacher judgment can shift students' focus away from their grades and their current identities as students and toward their writing and the writers they can become. Portfolios reduce the number of moments within a course when teachers test or grade their students' work. This reduction in the number of times teachers have to grade not only frees them to do more teaching but also alters their roles within the classroom, making them more responsive and editorial and less judgmental and adversarial. Introducing grades into the process of creating portfolios can fracture their underlying theoretical assumptions and undermine an essential tenet of portfolio theory: that works cannot be judged individually, incrementally, and outside the context of other texts with which they were written.

To harness the transformative power portfolios can furnish, students should only be graded at the end of an appropriate instructional period designed by the instructor, and these grades should take into consideration their ability with a range of rhetorical and linguistic tasks. As an assessment device, portfolios can exist outside current traditional assessment theory and practice only if they disrupt the practice of automatically assigning grades to each paper. Recognizing the portfolio as a unit of assessment requires that no judgments be made until the portfolio is complete or at a juncture when an instructor has made a conscious decision to give a grade to a specific amount of student writing. What seems to be important in using portfolios is that an instructor consciously decides when a student should receive graded feedback and that this decision should be a part of the instructional goals of the course, whether the grade(s) come at the end, the middle, or some other time

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during the semester or quarter. In this way, portfolios provide a means for separating the discourses of grading and assessment, furnishing the potential for truly transforming assessment as it works to dispel prevailing beliefs and assumptions that link testing, grading, and assessing writing. Instead of all teacher judgment being coded as grades, with the plethora of personal and cultural baggage they carry, students receive teacher judgments as responses directed toward specific rhetorical and linguistic features of their writing.

In contrast to approaching the evaluative properties of portfolios through the same lens that guides more traditional notions of grading and testing, portfolios have also been seen primarily in terms of their ability to promote the teaching of writing, keeping intact the notion that assessment is detrimental to the teaching and learning of writing. The move to separate portfolios from the assessment of student writing is symptomatic of the larger, problematic relationship between the teaching and assessing of writing. This separation allows composition practitioners to continue to ignore an examination of the "dirty thing we do in the dark of our offices" (Belanoff 61). Making us more conscious of our theories about assessing writing, and establishing assessment as a necessary component for effective composition curricula, nonetheless, are some of the most important contributions portfolios can make to the teaching of writing. This role for portfolios might be better conceived in terms of the overall role of assigning and valuing student writing within English studies. As Richard Miller reminds us, "Learning how to solicit, read and respond to the reading and writing done by the student populace [. . .] has been and continues to be the most pressing challenge confronting those who work in English Studies" (179).

To conceive of portfolios separately as instruments for teaching and as a means for assessing not only ignores our most "pressing challenge," but it also promotes the continuing rift between the way we assess and the way we teach. If portfolios are going to be more than another educational fad (Elbow, "Writing"; Huot), we need to do our best to link the theories behind their use with our practices in the classroom. Portfolios furnish the pedagogical context in which teachers can evaluate student writing as part of the way they teach. Most important, portfolios allow the possibility not only of changing teachers' grading and assessment practices and the discourse they produce but of altering the theoretical foundation that informs such practices, providing a discourse for assessment free of grading and testing.

Possibilities

Although composition teachers are often urged to be less evaluative of their students, Peter Elbow ("Ranking") points out that it is not evaluation per se that is the problem, but rather the type and frequency of the evaluative decisions we make

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about students' writing. Elbow points out for us that there are many ways to look at assessment, drawing our attention to the multidimensional nature of evaluation and arguing that we as teachers need to pay more attention to describing and liking student writing than to ranking it against the efforts of others. Elbow's ideas for changing teacher practice recognize the different kinds of assessment decisions a teacher can make and the complexity involved in arriving at decisions concerning the value of student text. For some, like those who advocate "authentic" assessment, the often-condemned practice of teaching to the test is only wrong because of the nature of our tests (Wiggins).

Elbow's practical advice and other congruent practices are supported by a range of theories about assessing and assigning value to texts, most of which come from the educational literature, which is why they might not be familiar to those of us who teach college writing. As it is for Elbow, for Grant Wiggins the answer is not to eliminate assessment from the curriculum but to change the way we assess. Wiggins's ideas are part of a movement in educational assessment that recognizes the importance of evaluation in education and the lack of relevance and value in much of the way we now evaluate student ability. According to Pamela Moss, this movement, which includes "performative" assessment, comprises "extended discourse, work exhibits, portfolios or other products or performances" (229). Moss goes on to say, "This expanding interest in performance assessment reflects the growing consensus among educators about the impact of evaluation on what students learn and what teachers teach" (229). It should be noted that although "performance" and "authentic" assessment are often used interchangeably, they do point to two distinct sets of practices (see Black, Helton, and Sommers for definitions and discussions of these two movements).

Other alternative assessment theorists, such as Peter Johnston, question the notion of objectivity, contending that the personal involvement necessary for successful learning can never be appreciated through so-called objective means of assessment. Patricia Carini, who has been pioneering alternative assessment for over a quarter of a century, questions the whole apparatus of assessment, emphasizing the importance of describing rather than evaluating student progress ("Dear"; *Starting).* Carini draws upon theories of phenomenology and hermeneutics, suggesting that it is only through communal and shared reflective discourse that we can truly appreciate student progress and therefore learn to find where students are available for instruction. Lester Faigley provides us with a dramatic illustration of subjectivity and the difficulties of assigning value in a postmodern world by comparing the type of decisions made by College Entrance Examination Board evaluators in the 1930s with judgments made by compositionists in the mid-1980s. Although judgment issues can vary widely, according to Faigley what remains the same is the construction of a particular, valued self for students who receive favor or condemnation. These

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various positions concerning assessment complicate the power of any central authority or standard to ascertain the "real" value of a student text or writer. They also open up the possibility of seeing assessment as something that can be shared, as a group of involved people search for values and meaning through group interpretation (see Barritt, Stock, and Clark; Carini, *Starting;* Durst, Roemer, and Schultz; and Himley for examples of communal assessment practices).

To harness peer review, portfolios, or any classroom activity to teach and to promote students' ability to critically evaluate writing, we must make assessment an explicit part of the writing classroom. While portfolios can be used to encourage students to write and reflect about the decisions they are making about their writing, an emphasis on assessment attempts to make this process more conscious and visible. Ask most student writers why they did or did not make certain initial decisions or revisions, and you're not likely to receive a very well-developed or thoughtful response. Without an understanding of the ways in which good writers assess the progress of their writing, our students are ill-equipped to make the kinds of evaluative decisions necessary for good writing. While more current approaches to the teaching of writing give students freedom in choosing topics, getting feedback, and working through a process they can control, they also generate more responsibility for students, who must be able to assess their progress at various junctures.

There are, however, many ways in which assessment can become an integral part of our pedagogy. For example, reflective material for a portfolio could focus explicitly on assessment criteria and the entire process of evaluating specific pieces of texts. Students would use those judgments to make further decisions about revision, articulating and becoming conscious of the values they hold regarding effective communication. This individual reflection could lead specifically to a classroom discourse about what features make effective writing. Many teachers develop with their students scoring guidelines like those used in holistic scoring sessions, so that students know what to look for and expect from teacher assessment of their work. Individual students can be helped to develop specific assessment criteria for each piece they write, and student-teacher conferences can focus on passages of student writing that they identify as strong or weak. Using assessment to teach requires the additional steps of having students apply discussions of writing quality to their individual texts or compile criteria for individual papers that they can discuss with a teacher or peer group. Students can only learn the power of assessment as they do other important features of learning to write, within the context of their own work. Learning how to assess entails more than applying stock phrases like unity, details, development, or organization to a chart or scoring guideline. Students and teachers can use these ideas to talk about the rhetorical demands of an emergent text, so that students learn how to develop their own critical judgments about writing. This creation of a classroom discourse of assessment should provide students with a clearer

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idea about how text is evaluated and work against the often nebulous, undeveloped, and unarticulated ideas they have about why they like a certain piece of writing or make certain revisions.

Using assessment to teach writing means more than highlighting evaluative decisions about texts. It means teaching students the process of assessment, and this means teaching them how to read and to describe what they have read. Carini's method for reflective conversation involves an initial descriptive stage in which readers must paraphrase and describe what a text attempts to convey ("Dear;" *Starting)*. This ability to describe is something students often find quite difficult, as they often attempt to move prematurely and uncritically to an evaluative decision about a text. When I have limited students to descriptive comments in commenting on either a published piece of writing or an essay written by a student in class, I have usually had to explain more than once that no comment with any evaluation included is acceptable. Students often have trouble eliminating evaluative language from the commentary, since phrases like "like," "good," or "didn't like" are often an unconscious part of the ways our students think and talk about writing. Once students learn to voice other kinds of comments, nonetheless, they often find themselves reading more deeply and precisely, finding things in a piece of writing they might otherwise have missed. Having students describe a text before giving the writer feedback often improves the quality and the kinds of comments they can make. Richard Larson notes the difficulty writers have in seeing their own texts as genuine sites for rethinking and revision. Having students learn to describe their own texts during the process of revision helps them achieve the often elusive objectivity writers struggle with in rewriting. Learning to describe what one sees in a text is an important part of being able to develop the critical consciousness necessary for a developed evaluative discourse about writing. Seeing the ability to assess as a process links it to the writing process and embeds assessment within the process of learning to write.

Conclusion

Creating a shared discourse for grading, teaching, and assessing student writing is an ambitious goal. Any substantive change in the way we think about, talk about, and practice assessment demands a change in our beliefs, assumptions, and discourses concerning assessment and its role in the classroom. Facing the reality that assessment is an important part of writing and its teaching leaves us little choice but to learn to use assessment in new ways, helping students to assess their writing as they learn to write in various and demanding contexts. This new discourse of assessment and its attendant practices will distinguish among grading, testing, and assessing writing and find ways to use the portfolio for assessment and teaching. I hope this essay draws us into new conversations about assessment and the teaching of writing,

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conversations that eventually help us to put assessment in its proper place, focusing both the student's and teacher's attention on the development of texts and on students as writers.

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