FOREWORD

The Assessment Landscape in Technical and Professional Communication: Evolutionary Thinking and Practice in an Emerging Imperative

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The purpose of this book is straightforward: to address the state of assessment of learning in Technical and Professional Communication. On the one hand, writing has played such a crucial, universal role in assessing all sorts of student learning outcomes that we bear some legitimacy from a sense of history and longevity. We know about assessment, in other words, because our students' work has been such an integral part of both the documentation and the demonstration of learning—both the intellectual and physical evidence, as it were. On the other hand, however, assessment in our field has suffered both from irregular attention to its status in our overall practice and from uncertainty about productive and authentic strategies. Like our near kin in composition programs, we still face a number of unanswered questions about *why* we do as we do. An even greater number of questions exist about *how* we assess the work of our students to foster the success of our programs.

These conditions stem partly from the customary status of assessment as the stepchild of pedagogical activity, tended to after the more important members of the instructional family—curriculum design, instructional technology applications, course delivery—have been nourished. A second difficulty arises in the somewhat orphaned condition of technical and professional communication; standing in line behind mainstream composition, it is often seen as something of

an add-on in English studies and, therefore, without even the benefit of concern for maintenance and improvement of a core requirement.

Despite the distinctive progress made toward establishing Technical Communication as a recognizable, stable, and highly able field—especially in recent years—we have not developed the fully functioning assessment practices that would mark our ability to explain our discipline and our practices to the rest of the academic world or commercial enterprise, or to demonstrate our efficient and effective use of resources in a knowledge-making society. Not least because these moves ensure access to a highly desirable, even necessary, legitimizing of status in and out of the academy, we need urgently to begin the process of shifting the status of our assessment practices to a level commensurate with the effort we are putting into building the status of the field, which arguably will be diminutive until we address the assessment component. As such, it must become more "front-loaded" into our thinking and planning, even driving the other processes that build the curriculum and, thus, the discipline.

GETTING TO MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT

Very little material is available to help us understand exactly what we need to do to begin this work. As a rule, we tend to borrow general methodologies from Rhetoric and Composition, which have in turn borrowed them from Educational Assessment (Lynne, 2004). Originally an approach depending heavily on measurement theory, writing evaluation historically used a constrained-response format such as multiple choice questions, testing devices that did little more than satisfy the most elemental expectations of measurement theory; especially because the main purpose was that of rating writing abilities efficiently across a population that had to be categorized for global decisions such as placement. Subsequently, composition scholars interested in direct assessment undertook to establish holistic scoring as a replacement methodology, arguing not only that this means establishes a reliable way to rank students, but also that it has a strong relational effect to teaching and learning writing and could serve as a useful means of helping teachers understand how assessment justifies their pedagogical practice (Cooper & Odell, 1977; Godschalk, Swineford, & Coffman, 1966; White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1986).

As Brian Huot (2002) notes, however, any goal-directed approach that attends solely to solving technical problems can backfire by narrowing the scope of the assessment so that it merely lines up with the decisions that will be made by the assessment sponsors—whether they know anything about the substance and character of the discipline under scrutiny or not. We need, Huot suggests, to distance ourselves from the narrowly conceived concerns of standardized assessment that focus on attaining mere technical efficiency. But even more centrally, we need to be aware that any assessment practice is underpinned by

theory, or principles, that either already motivates our practices or enables us to create new ones "more consistent with the theories we hold or want to hold" (p. 168). Presumably, also, we will be able to gain the outcomes we want to gain, take back the authority of our own practice, and reconceive the meaningfulness of assessment on the basis of what we value as necessary and functional to literacy.

While the story of the development of writing assessment current in mainstream composition is inevitably one of twists, turns, and byways, it also shows a remarkably steady movement along a path that is of considerable interest to Technical Communication—the characterization of writing instruction as dependent on the social construction of knowledge. In company with Huot, most theorists working on writing or assessment or both during the late 1980s and across the 1990s have incorporated social constructivism into their analysis and discussion as the key element in what is concluded to be the authentic, productive, and coordinated practice of teaching and assessing writing (Huot, 2002; Lynne, 2004). This viewpoint predicates two fundamental concerns: one is understanding the existence of multiple literacies—"the diversity of the reading and writing abilities necessary in various circumstances . . . [along with] the notion that different situations exhibit different values" (Lynne, 2004, p. 57)—which requires that any assessment effort places both the assessment and the work assessed into its context of operation; the other is acknowledging the substance of the assessment, combining "the content or subject matter of an assessment . . . [with] the reasons for and the object(s) of assessment" (p. 122)—a task that similarly requires taking account of the disciplinary expectations for what counts as both knowledge and literacy within its terms of definition.

Taking these concerns into account makes it crucial to ground any approach in an appropriate disciplinary locus. In other words, meaningful practice is possible if, and only if, an established body of knowledge guides identification, analysis, and interpretation of the information generated in the process of assessment. Doing so permits us "to claim the authority to define the principles by which to describe, evaluate and re-imagine what evidence of literate ability—as well as assessment itself—looks like" (Lynne, 2004, p. 168); but it also carries us well beyond routines of agreement on what criteria to use to evaluate an assignment, curriculum, or program. Deeply reflective practice yields three consequences: the first is the necessary abolition of the notion that a set, and static, methodology can be invoked at all times; the second is that renovating expectations for assessment provides a starting place for Technical Communication to think about the overall state of its pedagogy; the third is that questioning what is germane to the epistemic conditions and knowledge consequences informs the specifics of both our instruction and evaluation practices. Getting to meaningful assessment results in new power and authenticity for Technical Communication—and in an equal burden of responsibility for establishing and maintaining its practice.

ACCOUNTING FOR EPISTEMIC VALUES

Inherent in the renovated view of assessment we are considering here is the responsibility we all now share for ensuring that our pedagogical practices are based on an understanding of the epistemic values that characterize our discipline. If we don't know what has value in our practice, we can't teach it adequately or assess for it authentically. From the early years of asking "What's Technical about Technical Writing?" (Dobrin, 1983), we have necessarily been concerned with exactly what it means to communicate for technical and professional purposes. One of the most fundamental reasons for this concern is simply that a major disciplinary expectation is being able to understand and apply new strategies—whether graphic, verbal, or media-related. This situation places us well ahead of our composition colleagues in seeing the need for a thorough understanding of multiple literacies and the resulting responsibility to operate within the frameworks of their distinctive discourses. Similarly, we have participated in the reality of being required to acknowledge and work with the context-specific character of communication undertakings. From the early days of discourse and genre theory situated vis-à-vis communication practices for technical and scientific purposes (Anderson, Brockmann, & Miller, 1983; Bazerman, 1988) to later studies of rhetorical and cultural concerns within the field (Bolter, 2001; Star, 1995), we have understood how context affects both the configuration of our epistemology and the epistemic character of our practices. Thus, both the concept of multiple literacies and the comprehension of the significance of contextualization figure as central principles in constructing the authority necessary to reclaim for ourselves the practice of meaningful assessment.

A second factor in determining epistemic values in our field as we aim for assessment that is both authoritative and meaningful is the effect on the characterization of Technical Communication's substance that derives from the Social Study of Science and from the correlated work of Activity Theory. Scholarship in these areas investigates both the motivation and consequences of doing the work of science and technology. This understanding of practice contributes to our coming to terms with the purposefully constructed character of the work we write about, as Dorothy Winsor (1987) delineates in *Writing Like an Engineer*. Even more importantly, these approaches take seriously the contribution of Technical Communication to the accomplishment of the work: through visual as well as verbal formats, we represent how the work takes place and thus increase the opportunities for identifying what the actual processes are, exactly why they proceed as they do, and whether or not the outcomes support any claims to significance (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Latour, 1987; Lynch & Woolgar, 1991). Undertaking to write, speak, or otherwise represent work as purposeful activity in support and furtherance of desired outcomes—development and discovery in science settings, say, or problem solving in engineering and technology—forms

for us an equally purposeful activity of making the knowledge available and readily comprehensible. The most telling part of this arrangement is that the relation is reciprocal: first, an exchange of benefits occurs between science/technology and communication as they share mutual interests in substantive knowledge-making. Additionally, there is the influence-building between substance and context resulting from developing representation of any instance of work and examining the implications of its constituent activities. As a result, we gain an increased sense of the purposefulness of undertaking the task of communicating about science and technology, but we also acquire a new responsibility for developing the standards and values crucial to conducting the meaningful assessment that will support Technical Communication's ongoing development.

CONDUCTING A NATURALISTIC INQUIRY

In order to come to terms with the gaps we see in assessment undertakings for the field, we have chosen to adapt the advice for educational evaluation presented by Guba and Lincoln in their development of what they call "responsive" or "fourth generation" evaluation (1981, 1989). This work supports and extends the general viewpoint on developing meaningful evaluation that both Huot and Lynne advocate, but also most importantly provides a means of locating the principles and goals within the locus of participation. Guba and Lincoln argue for a two-part process: first, taking account of the needs and expectations of the participants—both evaluators and evaluands—and second, designing the procedures to ensure usefulness of the outcomes in local as well as global terms. Calling the approach "naturalistic inquiry" (1981), they advise building an inventory of criteria that fit the situation and goals of assessment and avoiding predetermined, fixed processes to concentrate on what the outcomes and significance of the outcomes are.

The orientation found in Guba and Lincoln's work fits neatly with Patricia Lynne's (2004) observation that writing assessment needs to be aware of the central role played by defining its own standards and values based on our obvious possession of expert knowledge, particularly paying attention to their being "the product of an ongoing community discussion that incorporates the concerns of interested parties" (p. 70). To benefit and integrate both sets of advice, we have undertaken to provide a starting point for discussion of the possibilities of outlining assessment practices with a high degree of "fit" to Technical Communication by setting up a naturalistic inquiry, and by initiating what we would like to offer as a national conversation on the topic. Indeed, this book may be understood as a vehicle that will lead to conversations began for pointed reasons of the sort that we encounter repeatedly on discussion lists such as those for the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing or the Council of Programs for Technical and Professional Communication, and at conventions, during committee meetings, and even in hallways and offices. This motif is no surprise in a

field characterized by being public and collaborative, but it is also notable that such a conversation promises to be meaningful and applicable for the circumstances of teaching and practices that are its substance.

The conversation does not aim particularly at theorizing assessment, nor is there a particular focus on creating models—though at least one formal model and a number of suggestions for rubrics are included. Instead, we are seeking to capitalize on the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice in most literacy efforts. In reading the following chapters, we want readers to think about practice as they look toward theory, and to think about the theoretical underpinnings that begin to emerge as they examine the results of day-to-day assessment practice. Besides acknowledging the fundamental relationship between the two elements, the chapters together and separately aim at inviting all teachers/assessors to think about "fit" for the context in which they operate, both local and global. This approach, we believe, underscores the interconnectedness between all possible pairings of concepts and practitioners that formally define our field.

Our selection of contents also reflects a conviction about areas that, frankly, need the most attention at this initial stage. These have been chosen for their resonance with Technical Communication practice as we know it and with an eye to drawing on the experience of a number of our colleagues who have been doing this work over a sustained period of time. Contributions have been requested from people with specific experience in the substantive areas selected. They all have practiced their art in a wide variety of settings and have been willing to share their self-awareness as well as outcomes naturalized in contexts familiar to—if not necessarily, or even probably, a replica for—the ones each of us experiences. The result is that we have been able to assemble a wide-ranging conversation that foregrounds what strategies often work, what outcomes can usually be expected, and what further implications are likely to appear—the most natural possible benefit of naturalistic inquiry.

JOINING THE CONVERSATION

What you can do with this volume will depend on what you need to take up in the context of your own work and goals. In reviewing the conversation—and taking advice, again, from Guba and Lincoln (1981)—we find a number of different kinds of strategies offered: some fall into the "operational" category, where you will find conversations about both formative goals—developing course content, modifying and improving design, and fitting work to the local context; and summative approaches—valuing outcomes, warranting entities, and certifying for local use. Others fall into the "evaluative" camp, including exchanges on determining merit, or global (disciplinary) sufficiency/degree and on determining worth through local (course and program) valuation. All go well beyond the consideration of evaluation and assessment as "audit" undertakings,

limited to taking an inventory of what is present. Instead, they exhibit a well-grounded understanding of the continuing need for situated interaction and informed negotiation that "treats social, cultural and political features as the properties of all human circumstance" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 253) and makes them a central part of the evaluation process.

To maintain the dynamic of conversation while recording the outcomes of the evaluation inquiries featured here, we have emphasized "pairing," though not necessarily actual dialogue. The first section features the most complicated instance of this arrangement, consisting of two chapters each, with a single essay giving an account of both the specific activities and the specific complexities that underlie the daily round of evaluating students. Taken separately, each explores the scene and actions of a major evaluation project. Taken in tandem, the pair provides a multidimensional look at how the ultimate operation and value of assessment depends on the viewpoint(s) established, the actors involved, and the outcomes sought. Seeing the two discussions in proximity, we have the opportunity to build historical awareness of our roles as agents, of the consequences of our actions in using given techniques for evaluation, and of the overriding need to be aware of the purpose of what we are doing, as we do it.

Following this very Burkean (1969) beginning, the subsequent sections are organized as a single chapter each, but as ones containing two accounts that form a reciprocal pair: one initiates the conversation by addressing a topic from a chosen viewpoint, and the other may respond, extend, extrapolate, redirect, or otherwise react to what has been articulated—all in the spirit of conversing on the topic of assessment. In the first of the chapter pairs, for example, Jo Allen and Paul Anderson draw on their individual and collective wealth of experience to reinforce observations on the role of assessment in institutional accountability. Similar questions of assessment as part of both internal and external accountability—Cargile Cook/Zachry and Dubinsky on portfolios and Carter and Youra on, respectively, an accrediting agency and professional governance—highlight the importance and impact of accounting for the context of the assessment and the purpose of its proceedings. Whether the pairs are closely aligned, as in Jablonski/Nagelhout's and Hart-Davidson's presentations of how assessment acts as a "spinal column" for the design of program conduct and content, or diverge as widely as do Coppola/Elliot's account of their empirical study of assessing graduate students and Savage's observations on the intellectual and political implications inherent in a seemingly straightforward undertaking.

The last section examines assessment undertakings not so much by direct exchange as by parallel accounts of the action carried out from different, and distinctive, viewpoints. Thus we have Starke-Meyerring/Andrews and Bosley's documentation of the opportunities and pitfalls of conducting assessment across cultural divides. One occurs between the United States and Canada, where a

North American orientation draws students and faculty together in terms of operation, but also questions the character of expectations for outcomes. The other, set between the United States and France, emphasizes the effect of differences in procedural concerns, while aligning fairly closely on what their consequences will be. And finally, in the Afterword, Dragga explores the often-overlooked ethical aspects of our work, with "[its] fluidity of data, the sifting of information, and the dynamics of practice," as we are challenged to make meaningful judgments about it.

Although the coverage is hardly exhaustive, and participation is designed to be representative rather than iconic, the conversation initiated here will, we believe, make it possible to enter into and continue the serious consideration of assessment in Technical Communication that has needed attention for quite a while. To do so in conversation with friends and colleagues will make it even more likely to open up further possibilities for an improved understanding of the evaluation as a process with distinctive consequences and a heightened appreciation of our own roles as participants in making meaning through that process.

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