

ENWR600 WRITING SEMINAR: APPROACHES TO WRITING ASSESSMENT SPRING 2008

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Course Description:

This course, aimed at Writing Studies students, current teachers and others who are considering a career in teaching English or language arts, has two major threads. First, we will explore theories and practices for teaching, responding to, grading, and assessing student writing at various grade levels. Second, we will look into the politics or business of writing assessment, for example, exploring the conditions that inspired "No Child Left Behind" as well as the implications of the legislation. Is "assessment" about testing students or testing teachers? What is valid? What is needed? And most difficult, what is possible? Broadly, our aim is to go beyond gut reactions to working to understand the impulse that has given rise to testing fever and to evaluate the effect of these initiatives.

Like all courses in the Writing Studies emphasis, students will be asked to write frequently, both formally and informally, in response to reading and class work. Students will write two short formal essays and a larger research paper on a subject of their own choosing. Most writing will be shared with peers and written in drafts.

On a personal note, I have been thinking about teaching this class for a few years, but have kept putting it off. I'll admit that assessment isn't a word that evokes my passions, but I have come to see it as important, nonetheless. When I first became aware of testing fever in writing some ten years ago my reaction was to think fairly selfishly: "Thank God that's not a reality at my institution." And indeed, that's still the case. But a few years ago Kathy Blake Yancey wrote a post on the WPA listserv (a great resource, and there's a database of past posts, too) that gave me pause. To paraphrase quite loosely, she said that if only those who LIKE testing are engaged in teaching about it and in writing the tests, we're going to have some lousy teaching and testing. I think that's right. I care about teaching students, about helping them succeed as writers, and about helping teachers become thoughtful and effectively literacy instructors and, whether I like it or not, assessment is a part of all of that. I invite you to join me in taking this subject seriously, as I am, even though I will say that assessment is typically not immediately interesting to most of the passionate and engaged teachers that I know. Let's see what we can do.

This course aims to be both practical (i.e., How do we assess well? How do we cope with testing demands?) and reflective (i.e., How do we account for testing fever? What is the function of assessment?).

Required Texts:

Hillocks, George. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. NY: Teachers College Press, 2002.

Huot, Brian. (Re) *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2002.

Underwood, Terry. *The Portfolio Project: A Study of Assessment, Instruction, and Middle School Reform*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.

Gallagher, Chris. *Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007.

Articles, available on Blackboard.

Requirements:

Reading Leader: 10%. For most of our class sessions a class member will lead discussion of the readings. As a discussion leader you will need to make decisions about how much of the reading to fully "cover" – go through by lecture or by soliciting responses to specific questions – and what key points to focus on. As a discussion leader you have a point of view, of course, but your job is to be the teacher, to adequately "serve" the reading. Plan on 30 minutes. I will assess your work as discussion leader by how well you:

- balance coverage and focus
- understand and communicate the material
- engage your audience.

Reading Respondent: 10% This is the more fun job. As reading respondent you get to have a point of view, and really tell the class and, in your mind, the writer, what you are thinking in response to the reading. Reading respondents will write paper of 4-5 page length, and also speak for about five minutes when invited to by the Reading Leader. In general these papers will be due on the day of the assigned reading, but for the first several weeks I'll hold off so you have time to get your bearings. For this assignment you will be assessed on:

- Line of Development: The extent to which you articulate, develop and maintain a clear and engaging argument
- Complexity: The extent to which you succeed in critically analyzing the text and issue that you are discussing.
- Organization and Style: The extent to which you are successful in making choices about organization (arrangement) and language; your overall clarity of prose.

Blackboard Discussion: I'd like to experiment with having Blackboard entirely voluntary. I have discovered that students feel burdened by Blackboard, yet I think it has some unique values, principally that it allows students to raise and think through issues that don't come up in class, or which, upon reflection, are usefully revisited later. But writing out of duty doesn't produce a very interesting discussion, so let's just see how it goes as a voluntary activity.

Attendance and Participation: required.

Reading: 20%. Much of the work of this class is the reading, and so I will evaluate you on your engagement with the readings, as is evidenced by your participation in class or, if it turns out to be the case, on Blackboard.

Assessment Reflection Paper: 20%. For this assignment I want you to critically reflect on an issue of assessment that you have some experience with and which one or more of the readings help you think about further. For example, if you're a teacher, you could write about your experience with a particular test preparation experience. If you're a student you could reflect on an experience you had with assessment. Although I am asking you to write about your experience – and you should summarize and explain your experience – I want to warn you to push yourself to move to analysis of that experience and then exploration of the larger implications of that experience for the field of writing/teaching/assessment. The point is to use your experience as a starting point and then to use your abilities to analyze, coupled with some insights gleaned from your reading, to come out with something useful and important for both you and your imagined audience: teachers who care about assessment. You will be assessed as follows:

- Line of Development: The extent to which you articulate, develop and maintain a clear and engaging argument
- Complexity: The extent to which you succeed in critically analyzing the issue that you are discussing, and in using appropriate reading(s).
- Organization and Style: The extent to which you are successful in making choices about organization (arrangement) and language; your overall clarity of prose.

Research Paper: 40%. This is your term paper, and the topic is your choice. I anticipate these papers to be about 15 pages in length, and to address a question on writing and assessment that you have developed. I encourage you to take the opportunity to pursue an area of focus that you will have real value for you. We'll work on this in pieces, starting with a proposal and then a draft that I will review for you. I anticipate that you will have between 8 and 10 sources.

Expectations and Evaluation:

First and foremost I am looking for a claim or organizing question on some aspect of writing and assessment. Well made claims/focused questions are not necessarily made most obviously (i.e., announced as such, in the opening paragraph), but they come through clearly in the entirety of the paper. What is more all of the points made in the paper speak to and come back to that central claim or question; in other words, the paper is focused. These claims or questions are developed and supported through citation and discussion of the theoretical texts and through logical, persuasive discussion of a more general sort.

Secondarily I am looking for sophisticated analyses of the texts and the topic under discussion: is the writer treating the topic with deep understanding of nuance and complexity? More simplistically, has the writer understood the texts under discussion?

Thirdly, I read through these papers rhetorically: for logical organizational structure and style. By style I mean rhetorical effectiveness.

Fourthly, I will make sure the paper meets general expectations: appropriate citing practices, on topic, and in keeping with the directions.

Course Schedule

Please note that the following schedule is subject to some change as I assess our progress and your needs.

January 24 : Introduction

Brownwyn Williams, "Standardized Students: The Problems with Writing for Tests instead of People." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49 (2005): 152-58.

January 31: History

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment." *College Composition and Communication* 1999 (50): 483-503.

Huot, Brian. "Writing Assessment as a Field of Study." Chapter 2 (*Re*) *Articulating* 21-58.

Elliot, Norbert. "Chapter 5. Lone Wolves, 1966-2005." *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. 183-256. (can skim a bit)

February 7: The National and Public Picture

"The Neglected 'R'" Report of the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges." (Blackboard)

Emery, Kathy and Susan Ohanian. "The Words That Bind." *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004. (Blackboard)

Lewis, Jill and Gary Moorman. "Federal and State Literacy Mandates for Secondary Schools: Responding to Unintended Consequences." *Secondary School Literacy: What Research Reveals for Classroom Practice*. Ed. Rush, Eakle, and Berger. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2007. 262-88. (Blackboard)

February 14:

Kohn, Alfie. "What Does It Mean to be Well-Educated?" *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004.

Hillocks, George. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*

February 21

Hillocks, George. *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*

February 28

Huot, Brian. (*Re*) *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*.

Term Paper proposals due. To share with classmates and submit.

March 6:

Huot, Brian. (*Re*) *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*.

March 13

Gallagher, Chris. *Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda*.

March 20 – Spring Break

March 27:

Underwood, Terry. *The Portfolio Project: A Study of Assessment, Instruction, and Middle School Reform*.

Elbow, Peter, and Pat Belanoff. "Reflections on an Explosion: Portfolios in the '90s and Beyond." *Situating Portfolios: Four Perspectives*. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Irwin Weiser, ed. Logan: Utah State UP, 1997.

Teacher Highlight: Class members who are teachers or tutors bring in one-page "best practice" materials for responding, grading, or assessing student writing for best learning.

April 3 – No Class (Conference on College Composition and Communication)

Draft of term paper due to peer. Peer writes comments and returns to writer

April 10:

NJ Core Curriculum Standards: Language Arts Literacy. (focus on 9-12).
http://education.state.nj.us/cccs/?list_cpi;c=3;s=2;g=12

Assessment Reflection Paper due

April 17:

Draft of term paper due to instructor. Submit peer's comments along with paper.

April 24: Commenting and Assessing for Learning

Sommers, Nancy. Rethinking Nancy Sommers' 'Responding to Student Writing,' 1982." CCC 58:2 (2006):
246-266.

In-class presentation of approaches to commenting and grading (Emily)

Again: a little more rethinking, rewriting, of your term paper.
Very short class presentations on term papers.

May 1: Last day of class

May 8: Last day to accept term papers.

Notes on research in composition:

Research in composition does not typically begin with the MLA. As you look at the standard databases—JSTOR, ProjectMUSE—work on your key words and also narrowing the field. The idea is to look in searches that focus on composition, possibly rhetoric, education, writing, language, possibly teaching, assessment, etc. Check out the research links from my web site: English.montclair.edu/Isaacs.

Also, as members of the English Department, you have full access to the NCTE web site of journals (*College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *English Journal*, *Research in Teaching English*, *English Education*, *Voices from the Middle*, *Language Arts*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*). The library databases tend to be 2 years or so behind, but the NCTE web site is up-to-date. I'll share the login and password in class.