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Assessing Basic Writers:
Perceptions, Expectations, and Agency

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The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Abstract

If assessment is about improving learning and facilitating better teaching through research and helping students learn what higher education purports to value, then the often-invisible institutional barriers that do not always embrace the ways in which classroom assessment can teach an institution about student learning within individual courses—and even individual sections of courses—need to be examined. This occasional paper focuses upon connections between institution-level and classroom practice as related to basic writers and basic writers' perceptions of agency, assessment, and their own writing. While faculty in higher education consistently lament inadequate student writing, this paper explores whether students are even aware that their writing is an issue. The paper explores if institutions would benefit from asking students what they understand of and think about the ways in which their writing is assessed, or if they are even aware that their writing is being measured against a set of criteria or learning outcomes. In other words, should composition specialists engage with students to better understand their perceptions of how their writing is assessed? And would this sort of investigation be a productive means to help students succeed? By asking a group of basic writing students what they thought and how they felt about the ways in which their writing was evaluated, the paper explores student agency in the writing process and argues that instructors will need to design their courses—including those that use remote teaching technologies—in ways that strengthen individualized student-to-teacher interaction and see students as individuals with unique strengths, challenges, and perceptions.

Assessing Basic Writers: Perceptions, Expectations, and Agency

Susan Wood

Chris Sharma is a world class rock climber. In an interview with NPR's Melissa Block (2007) Sharma described climbing a 25-foot schist named for Herb Conn, who, after many attempts, climbed it for the first time in 1942. Sharma climbs it with ease and suggests that the reason it is easier for him than it was for Conn is because rock climbing is an evolution "where the standards today are the combination of the efforts of all of us who are climbing right now and all the people before us ... standing on each other's shoulders." I have an image of Sharma learning how to be the best at something through the process of evaluating the past combined with reflecting on the present—reflecting on his own performances. I imagine him trying to climb something difficult, falling and then thinking about what he could do differently to succeed the next time.

The process Sharma speaks of with conviction sounds a lot like assessment. The difference, however, is that for him the process is simply a necessary part of what he does to become better at what he loves. Assessment in the academy is also a necessary part of improvement, but, unlike Sharma's experience, it seems to be anything but simple to carry out. Barbara Walvoord (2004) in her handbook on assessment practices defines assessment of student learning "as the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning" (p. 2). This definition is straight forward, and on the surface, it does not seem too difficult to manage. Isn't this definition basically describing a research methodology that can help teachers learn how to better facilitate learning? And isn't doing research and helping students learn what higher education purports to value?

Barriers to assessment are often invisibly embedded in institutional cultures that do not always embrace the ways in which classroom assessment can teach an institution about student learning within individual courses—and even individual sections of courses—as well as across a campus.

Walvoord claims that good teachers are already doing a lot of assessment. She explains that "every good teacher continually examines student work not just to give a grade but to improve teaching" (p. 6). The concern, she argues, is that what teachers learn from classroom assessment is seldom "systematically aggregated and fed back to the general education program as a whole" (p. 6). Institutions experience a series of barriers to assessment that impede actions and activity that on the surface seems relatively straightforward and valuable. The barriers are often invisibly embedded in institutional cultures that do not always embrace the ways in which classroom assessment can teach an institution about student learning within individual courses—and even individual sections of courses—as well as across a campus.

In 2011 while doing research for my dissertation, I had a frank conversation with a group of students in a basic writing class. I explained to them that at our institution there is a faculty listserv; faculty members post messages to this listserv about a number of topics in hopes of engaging other faculty in conversation. A thread of conversation that repeats itself is some version of "why can't my students write?" It is the same message that has been printed in editorial pages in various publications in this country for the past 40 plus years. In fact, it is a lament that was formalized in the late 1800's when Harvard decided that their incoming freshmen were not prepared to write in the academy. And if we want to go even further back in history, we will find that student writing has seldom measured up to educators' expectations.

This complaint is not new – at least not to educators; however, the idea of the complaint was new to this group of students. They seemed genuinely confused and surprised that their writing was the topic of conversation among faculty. They asked me, quite sincerely, why professors would expect them to write well given their status as students. Weren't they, they pointed out, students? And wasn't the point of being in college to learn how to do things like write for the academy? It was revelatory to me, an English as a Second Language and basic writing teacher, that they had not placed themselves personally at the center of this perennial gripe. It was clear from their comments, their demeanor, and their body language that this group of students felt shame, embarrassment, and anger that there were expectations of them that they did not—and felt could not—meet at that given moment, hence, their registering for a basic writing class. They clearly articulated their opinions about how they were being assessed, and argued that these complaints/assessments were unfair, yet they were not defensive; they wanted to understand and asked several clarifying questions of me.

I wonder, given my interest in the assessment of student writing and how students themselves could and/or should be involved in this endeavor, if institutions would not benefit from asking students what they understand of and think about the ways in which their writing is assessed, or if they are even aware that their writing is being measured against a set of criteria or learning outcomes. While institutions of higher education now require that course syllabi list outcomes to comply with accreditation mandates, it is not clear if basic writing students—who are often unfamiliar with the language of the academy—understand the purpose or connection of these outcomes to their own writing, or how their grades are connected to their successful demonstration in their writing that they have met the outcomes. They may not understand how to judge accurately IF their writing meets the outcomes. Would a better understanding of student perceptions and expectations help composition specialists understand and then address assessment barriers that worry practices of assessment of student writing, especially those of students who are labeled by the academy as *basic writers*? In other words, should composition specialists engage with students who have been assessed as academically under-prepared, and therefore deficient and needing remediation, to better understand their perceptions of how their writing is assessed? And would this sort of investigation be a productive means to help this group of students succeed?

With these questions in mind, I asked a group of basic writing students what they thought and how they felt about the ways in which their teachers evaluated their writing. My findings indicated that students in basic writing classes accept their teachers' evaluations without asking for much justification. They see assessment as a way of getting information about whether or not their writing is improving and meeting the expectations of the teacher—and not so much about if their writing is meeting their own expectations or what those expectations might be. And while they reflect on and make changes to their own texts based on faculty feedback, they do not actively resist the faculty as authority even when it seems they might not understand the faculty member's evaluation or expectations.

Further, students reported valuing different modes of feedback differently; for example, while feedback from rubrics is valued, it is not as highly valued by basic writing students as personalized feedback from their teachers in the form of written comments and/or student-teacher conferences. In light of COVID-19 and the advent of many classes going

online, the results seem to have particular importance in 2020 and may resonate with basic writing instructors. If we are to listen and respond to students—and basic writers in particular—and at the same time move classes to an online environment, what will be the implications to assessment of student learning? How can we encourage students to use their agency in the assessment process? I argue that instructors will need to design their courses—including those that use remote teaching technologies—in ways that strengthen individualized student-to-teacher interaction, and not rely entirely on automated assessment tools, like rubrics. I do not argue against rubrics—they are a useful and productive tool, but, I assert, they are not sufficient on their own. Students are more able to exercise their agency in their own learning after they are *seen* by their instructors as individuals with unique strengths, challenges, and perceptions.

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Basic Writers as Agents in their Own Learning

Not many educators argue against the idea of improving student learning through assessment, but there are still plenty of questions about how to do it well and effectively. An important question that needs to be asked is how individual students understand what it is their teachers are doing when they put marks and comments on a writing assignment submitted for a grade. Furthermore, if a teacher uses a rubric to assess the student's learning instead of or in addition to comments, how do students make sense of this assessment tool and the way it is applied to their work? Can they act on the information provided solely from a rubric? In other words, is space created for them to exercise agency if they do not understand how to translate the information from a rubric into a revision of their unique text?

Kathleen Yancey (1999) argues that in the past, writing classrooms were a "technology of testing" (p. 485); that is, writing classrooms were places that students were moved into and out of based on tests. Writing assessment was about placing students into courses based on test results. In the 21st century, writing assessment has taken on a new face—one that acknowledges the complexity of writing, the writer, and the writing classroom. Yancey calls for the field of composition studies to acknowledge that assessment is not just about testing but is a knowledge-making endeavor. If given the opportunity, students, too, can participate in this knowledge-making endeavor. It follows, then, that by examining writing assessment practices, the field of composition studies will become better informed of the ways in which basic writers can become proficient writers. Individual instructors as well as writing programs should assess the efficacy of their assessment practices to determine if their methods are successful at communicating to students about their growing writing ability and how *they* can continue to improve.

The value of assessment when seen through this rhetorical lens allows assessment practices to accomplish more than just placing students into classes or providing end-of-course grades; it allows for, or even calls for assessment to create an environment for students to understand how to improve as writers—and if they are improving. Students, particularly college students, can be and should be recognized as experts in how they learn—what teaching methodologies are effective and what ones are not effective. They can and will demonstrate their emerging expertise if given the opportunity to reflect on their writing as a knowledge-making endeavor and whether or not their texts communicate to readers the knowledge they are attempting to create.

Furthermore, when basic writing students submit their writing assignments, they may not have a clear sense of its academic merit. They may guess that it is acceptable and clear, and then likely hope that they are not asked to revise; that said, they are not necessarily able to predict the grade they will receive with any degree of certainty. And if students are asked to revise, it is not clear that they will know what it means to revise—or what that would look like in the end—in this new academic environment of which they are now a part. Knowing how to revise a text in the academy is a complex element of academic literacy, an element with which many students are unfamiliar. Yancey (1998) argues that composition specialists should ask students to reflect on their own literacy, "how they define it," and "what it represents to them" (p. 182). If we want basic writers to share in political and conceptual parity and be agents in their learning, then it is important for composition specialists to ask students what they believe about assessment, what their concerns are, how they perceive assessment of their writing, and what writing teachers can do to help them better understand what it means to revise or work through the writing process.

But basic writers' perceptions of higher education are not readily available or accessible. They are not often asked to reflect on their degree of literacy or their experience in college, let alone how they perceive the ways in which their work is evaluated. As I have pondered this problem, I have come to the conclusion that students perceive that assessment of their writing is something that is "good for them" and a necessary part of justifying the grade they receive for their effort. Their lived experience, they report, is that the key to improvement is teacher feedback on their writing in the form of written comments or face-to-face conversation. They view assessment tools or technologies, like rubrics, as helpful, but rely more on their teachers to help them understand what needs to be revised or changed to better communicate what it is they want to say. In fact, they see the value of rubrics not only as a tool to help them understand their grade, but when paired with teacher comments, as a decoder of their teachers' comments on their writing.

Treglia (2008) draws a similar conclusion to a study she conducted at a community college in a first-year composition course. She explains: "Students found most helpful the [teacher's] commentary that, in addition to indicating some acknowledgment of their work, offered specific suggestions and provided choices. In other words, the overwhelming majority of students wanted to be guided and shown how to, instead of simply being told what they needed to do" (p. 129). Using a rubric to record comments, teachers can accomplish both tasks—provide positive reinforcement (criteria are checked off if the student has met them) and provide guidance on what areas need work (criteria are identified that have not been met).

The following anecdote illustrates how the field of basic writing pedagogy might think about including basic writers in conversations about the assessment of their work. Dr. Donald Berwick, administrator of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), spoke in a radio broadcast to the Commonwealth Club in January of 2011 (http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/commonwealth-club-radio-program/id113721208) about affordable health care. Dr. Berwick told of a 15-year-old boy named Kevin who had been in a children's hospital for short bowel syndrome 30 times. He asked Kevin, given his expertise as a consumer of the hospital's healthcare, what the hospital could do to improve the quality of care. Kevin said three times that everything was great—nothing needed to change. Dr. Berwick pushed him to write down three suggestions the hospital might

consider. Kevin wrote down these three suggestions:

1. "Please tell me what you are going to do before you do it to me."
2. "Please talk to each other." (referring to the team of health care providers who looked after him)
3. "Please ask me what I think. Maybe I could help."

Toulmin (2001) wrote about the medical profession in his 2001 book *Return to Reason*. He claimed that non-medical persons who have a stake in a patient's welfare should be given the chance to submit their particular point of view because they see the patient's illness from a different perspective. He wrote: "Sometimes, the best course is to hand the resolution of painful issues back to the patients and their families, supported by their spiritual advisers and other non-medical counsel" (p. 121).

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Berwick, making an argument about coordinated health care, and Toulmin, making an argument for listening to all stakeholders in a patient's healthcare, have helped me think about how basic writers in higher education could more fully participate in their own education. By calling out Berwick's and Toulmin's arguments about medicine I do not mean to suggest that basic writing students are diseased and need to be healed, but rather that they are like patients in that the system meant to serve them often pays them little mind. For example, higher education has a track record of making decisions for college students—adults—asserting that "we know best"—what classes are "best" for them to take; what schedule is "best" for them; whether they should be full or part-time students; what careers they should pursue; and the list goes on and on. If composition specialists for a start were to acknowledge students as experts in their own learning and ask them what they think and how they perceive assessment, they will likely discover that students want feedback that allows them to act as agents in their own learning. They have opinions, interests, legitimate responses that if asked and then listened to might be willing to share.

I like the idea that by treating basic writing students as Kevin asks to be treated, teachers and students could team up to create environments that allow for knowledge-making, the exercise of agency, and clear communication of expectations. Let us keep this in mind as we transition many basic writing classes that rely on face-to-face communication to an online environment. The temptation may be to rely more on assessment technologies, such as rubrics, but let us not let that overshadow the importance and value of more authentic and individualized feedback that students value, but may not ask for.

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About the Author

Susan Wood has 30 years' experience in higher education. She earned her BA in Russian from the University of Utah in 1988, her MA in Linguistics with an emphasis in TESOL in 1990, also from the University of Utah, and her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication from NMSU in 2012. Susan directed ESL Programs at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, and at the University of Texas at El Paso. She worked at Doña Ana Community College in Las Cruces, New Mexico, from 1996 to 2020 as a faculty member and later as an administrator. Currently she is serving as the Vice President for Academics and Student Affairs at Eastern Arizona College in Thatcher, Arizona.

Dr. Wood has regional and national experience in assessment and accreditation. She serves the Higher Learning Commission as both a mentor in the Student Success Academy and as a peerreviewer. She has served on several HLC teams for both AQIP and Pathway reviews. Susan served as the conference director of the New Mexico Higher Education Assessment and Retention Conference from 2014 to 2020, and as a member of the New Mexico Education Assessment Association Board. She also served on the board for the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education from 2010 to 2013.

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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