A CEA Forum Roundtable

Moving Forward in Writing Program Assessment Design: Why Postmodern Qualitative Assessment Makes Sense

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An examination of postmodern grounded theory and narrative research methodology philosophies should make us rethink foundational issues in writing assessment design. Postmodern approaches emphasize interpretation and meaning-making, arguing that truths are made rather than found. In fact, many postmodern researchers emphasize the impossibility of objective, reliable results, especially in human research. In a communicative field such as teaching writing, this makes particular sense—the myriad of factors involved in a student writer's progress and in a teacher's ability to facilitate writing development cannot be isolated from each other.

As Jeff notes, the Art Institute of Pittsburgh was working in the direction of qualitative assessment even before I had been hired. I helped word our reasons for qualitative assessment based on my experiences with qualitative research, but my predecessor April Sikorski was my inspiration, as was Jeff in his explanations of his previous departmental professional

development experiences, which I noted could be reworked a tad to create a qualitative research format. This led me to ask: is assessment research? What is changed by looking at assessment as research? I must answer these questions here briefly before I continue discussing our postmodern turn.

Assessment as Research?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the fifth definition of assessment is "estimation, evaluation" with a sub-definition of "the process or means of evaluating academic work; an examination or test" (OED online). Definitions one through four, which are preoccupied with numbers, perhaps influence definition 5b, which describes educational assessment, as educational assessment has a long history of being preoccupied with numeric representations of evaluation.

There is a whole field of writing assessment that is rich with history and methodological developments put forward by passionate and brilliant compositionists as outlined by Kathleen Blake Yancey and by Brian Huot and Peggy O'Neill. As I read about assessment, I saw correlations between assessment work, "the process or means of evaluating" academic progress, and the reading I had done on research methodologies; for example, both fields included discussions about criteria of evaluation, validity, and what questions were important to ask. However, that does not make research and assessment the same thing.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a definition of research is "a search or investigation directed to the discovery of some fact by careful consideration or study of a

subject" (OED online). The first definition of research, then, involves searching carefully for a person or thing. So while assessment deals with evaluation, research has us investigating toward a discovery. Those are two very different goals. Evaluation seeks definite answers, like whether certain goals are being met. Investigation more broadly tries to see what is happening in a situation. Still, adding the word qualitative to assessment changes the game because it adds to the mix the questions of why and how. As Shaun R. Harper, editor of the *New Directions in Institutional Research* special issue on qualitative assessment, elaborates:

> qualitative techniques can uncover the hidden forces that drive behaviors, shape experiences, and influence outcomes on college campuses. Finally, qualitative assessment methods can illuminate the voices of various groups and individuals throughout institutions of higher education. One of the key advantages of qualitative research is its ability to allow participants to construct meanings and insightful interpretations of their own experiences. (3)

Note how in this quote, when referring to qualitative assessment, the words research and assessment seem interchangeable. This is largely because qualitative assessment involves both evaluation and investigation. Rubric assessment, while it has qualitative descriptions, primarily answers narrowly defined questions. It does not answer the questions why or how, so much as it answers what happens, like quantitative assessment, and that is when rubric assessment works well. This is one reason why the AiP English department struggled with it. Qualitative assessment would by definition answer more than the question of whether certain goals are met. It would investigate *why* goals are met or not. Harper and George D. Kuh argue that qualitative

assessment "can help answer some of the complex, vexing questions that concern various

stakeholders in higher education" (6). In order to answer a complex question like why,

assessment would need to incorporate a research methodology that investigates more generally

what happened in a course. Thus, assessment and research are merged. An evaluation of how

well a course works across a department is conducted as research, and the investigation's

documentation functions as an assessment of a course. In fact, Bob Broad's study of writing

assessment shows how qualitative investigations can not only evaluate a program's work but also

provide the researchers, the subjects, and the stakeholders with a better understanding of

strengths and weaknesses in a program.

Realizing that qualitative assessment was an investigation and an evaluation led me to the

conclusion that in order to do qualitative assessment well, we needed to treat it as a qualitative

research project. I warned the faculty that in my experience, qualitative research required a lot of

work, from finding and defining a theoretical stance, to developing a methodology, to conducting

the research, and then analysis and writing. Together, we began to read various qualitative

research books, including the four volume set *The American Tradition in Qualitative Research*,

edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln.

Choosing a Theoretical Framework

As we refined the theoretical stance for our research, the faculty found themselves drawn to

postmodernism, especially postmodern grounded theory as described by Adele Clarke in her

book, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. We liked grounded

theory, for as Katie notes, we were only beginning to understand ourselves as a department and we barely knew what questions to ask. We liked Adele Clarke's movement of grounded theory around the postmodern turn because it emphasizes the importance of open questions, complex and uncertain answers, and contextuality. Furthermore, it embraces the continuity of researcher and researched. Postmodern grounded theory pushes against simplification and emphasizes an understanding and acceptance of complexity and it encourages multiple voices and perspectives. We were intrigued by how Clarke's theory strove to not be conclusive, but instead "tentative, open, jarring, troubling" (32). Arguments among the group ensued over this—didn't we want to be conclusive? What was lost by conclusiveness? Ultimately, we decided that it was the conclusiveness of rubrics that troubled us and that we were open to trying more tentative contextual answers as it was more honest.

In fact, it started to become apparent that another key part of our faculty's dissatisfaction with the previous assessment method occurred because the core beliefs of most of the faculty, whether consciously or not, were either rooted in a postmodern mindset or conflicted. Either way, searching for codified answers proved unsatisfying and antithetical to teachers who used practices that valued creativity and subjectivity, as is discussed by Katie and Karen. As Katie reveals, postmodern theories made a lot of sense to us as writing teachers, especially, perhaps, because we worked in an Art Institute. Art is contextual, open to interpretation, and lacks absolute conclusive strictures. In art and writing, rules can be bent or broken, provided the correct application and context. This was something our rubrics could not sufficiently address. It makes sense that teachers who work with artists and have observed changes in fashion and social

expression can appreciate postmodern thought and agree with Shirley K. Rose and Margaret J.

Finders when they say that postmodern education "acknowledges the instability, provisionality,

and contingent nature of what constitutes good teaching practices [...and] that seeks not closure

and definition but a commitment to keep thinking together" (85). We agreed that assessment of

our courses should do the same. An evaluation of a postmodern course should provide a record

that acknowledges and reflects such openness and collaborative searching for a complex and

nuanced understanding of departmental practices.

Our Methodology

A postmodern qualitative approach could allow for a co-created and co-conducted research

methodology, where we were simultaneously researchers and the researched (Kuhn and Woog;

Nora), so we chose to study ourselves as a focus group and to together discern how and why

students earned the grades they did in our classes. We asked the question "What does an A, C, or

failing paper and portfolio look like in my class?" and provided sample portfolios from our Fall

2007 term to show as examples. We had the quantitative data of our students' grades that were

recorded each term already, but we wanted to understand how each instructor graded and the

reasoning for that grading process. Thus, we would better understand if departmental objectives

were being met, and if not, why? We were not only finding out if an instructor focused on certain

objectives more than others, and why, but giving each other the benefit of the doubt that there

perhaps was a reason if, for example, Standard English (one of the course objectives) was not

being taught and assessed.

The conversations we had about our portfolios were recorded and transcribed so that we could later refer to them as a record of our discussions about how and why we grade as we do, including all the messy blurry issues that would be missed in a summary. Before deciding on an analysis method, we read through the transcripts once and then met to discuss them. We agreed that we saw key themes surfacing, so we chose to use an analytical narrative research methodology, categorical content analysis, as described by Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilbur in their book *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*. We chose this because we noted categories of discussion that emerged as we talked about the portfolios, and we wanted to be able to closely examine our discussions and assumptions in each category. Especially important was to ascertain what were the most important questions that arose so that we could continue to come back to them in future research/assessment. We did not limit ourselves to our original question because we sought, "not closure and definition but a commitment to keep thinking together." So we coded the transcripts on our own to come up with general categories, then collectively named the categories:

1. the nature of English 095

2. evaluation of English 095 papers

3. the composition course sequence

4. student and instructor issues

5. tensions between discourses

6. language issues in writing

7. writing across the curriculum

We also noted an eighth category, which marked self-reflective moments where we discussed, in the midst of the assessment, how the qualitative assessment was changing how we viewed ourselves, our department, and how we grade. In total we did three levels of coding. We coded the transcripts again according to the eight categories, adding in a multitude of subcategories. Then we checked each other's coding for each individual category. We noted as we worked that not only was qualitative assessment going to provide us with answers about how and why we graded as we did, it was also changing the future answers to those questions as it was being conducted. Finally, we wrote a report of our assessment, explaining the theory and methodology, and analyzing the results in each category, which ended up being about fifty pages long.

One of the benefits of our assessment was that we could no longer hide behind pseudo-anonymity. Each faculty member was responsible and accountable for how he or she graded assignments, for defending his or her theories that led to certain forms of grades, and for explaining exceptions. All of this was done on public record, transcripts of which would later be analyzed and possibly quoted. These transcripts, as well as the copies of the portfolios and the analytical report, would be kept for future reference and possible research. These materials made the departmental administrators aware enough of instructors' individual assessment practices to be able to explain, and be accountable for, how each course and the courses as a group were taught and assessed. Accountability was localized and contextualized. However, the picture of the departmental assessment practices for English 095 in Fall 2007 could only be provisional and contingent upon the individual instructors teaching that semester. We took our cue from Shirley

K. Rose and Margaret J. Finders, integrating their explanation of postmodern education with our explanation of our assessment: through evolving methodologies designed to suit the specific place and the specific time, postmodern qualitative assessment can provide a rich, descriptive record of how a department continually evolves in its acknowledgement of the instability, provisionality, and contingent nature of what constitutes good teaching practices, seeking not closure and definition but a commitment to keep thinking together.

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