

## Writing Assessment: Emotions, Feelings, and Teachers

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Acknowledging the role of emotion within and surrounding writing assessment, from both the students' and teachers' perspective, can help teachers revamp their pedagogical assessment practices, strengthen their assessment proposals, understand their positive and negative emotions, and then use that understanding to empower themselves for change. If teachers analyze their emotions within specific contexts and gather data on such analyses, scholars may be able to develop a sophisticated understanding of why teachers do writing assessment the way they do. Assessors will be able to explore the emotions behind their theoretical and epistemological positions, which will allow them to have a clearer idea of what drives their practices, if they accept that their emotions are a part of their writing assessment practices.

For my purposes, I approach writing assessment as more than just grading or responding to a set of student papers within a classroom context. Instead, I look at writing assessment as a complex act that links to teaching and learning, that affects the educational environment and students, that acknowledges the consequences of the assessment, and that reflects what the assessor values and how to get to that value. Beginning with an overview of emotion and feelings and moving to an overview of writing assessment as an emotional practice, this article shifts to discuss how emotions and feelings relate to writing assessment. Then, I focus on ways scholars could use emotions and feelings to further theorize writing assessment work—mostly to

understand how emotions shape decisions. Through this theorizing, I hope to move away from the *what* teachers do during the act of assessing student writing, to the *why*. My aim is to provide a vehicle for getting at the emotional aspects of why.

### **Emotion and Feelings**

One way to understand teachers' emotions during writing assessment practices is for the field of rhetoric to focus on more interdisciplinary notions of emotion. Emotion research is an interdisciplinary field (psychology, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience), but the field of rhetoric focuses more on disciplinary notions of emotions, especially those of classical rhetors. Focusing the field's discussion of emotions within the interdisciplinary research of emotions will strength scholars' ability to understand the role of emotion as it relates to teachers' writing assessment practices.

According to Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist whose theory of emotion and feeling has been used in the field of education, emotion has a biological and neurological emphasis. Damasio's construction of the "emotional episode" fits into writing assessment if scholars approach writing assessment as a stimulus. Then, the questions become: 1) What emotions does the assessor experience?; 2) How do assessors reflect on their feelings (triggered by writing assessment)?; and, 3) To what actions are assessors led by their feelings?

Damasio locates emotions as a component of the central regions of the brain structure. Specifically, the brain induces emotions from the subcortical, which is located below the cerebral cortex: "neurons located in the hypothalamus, basal forebrain, and brain stem" release chemicals to change the state of the body (Damasio 60). Emotion is a chemical change in the body that is

induced in one of two ways. Emotions can be induced by 1) a human processing something from his/her surrounding with one or more of his/her senses or 2) a human recalling a memory. After emotion(s) is induced, the brain sends a command in one of two ways: 1) the bloodstream (a chemical command), or 2) neuron pathways (an electrochemical command) (Damasio 67). The command from the brain is what causes the change in the body. These changes could be the release of tears or other facial expressions, skin blanching or flushing, shift in body posture, sweaty/clammy hands, or a change in heart rate (racing or slowing)—changes that others are able to become aware of (Damasio 59)—or the changes could be less noticeable, such as the release of different chemicals (monoamines or peptides) or a shift in the muscle fibers (Damasio 68). Emotions are the biological, neurological, internal changes.

Feelings, on the other hand, are linked to consciousness and awareness: Damasio writes, “We know that we have an emotion when the sense of a feeling self is created in our minds” (279). Unlike the in-depth neurological and biological activity with emotion, “feeling an emotion is a simple matter” (280). According to Damasio, when mental images arise in individuals’ consciousness, “from the neural patterns which represent the changes in the body and brain that make up an emotion” individuals are “feeling” the emotion (280). Feelings are the awareness of the emotion whereas emotion is the physical bodily changes. Damasio takes this even a step further to posit that “having a feeling” is different than “knowing a feeling,” where “having a feeling” is what is described and “knowing a feeling” is when an individual reflects on the emotion/feeling experience. The difference between having a feeling and knowing a feeling is similar to the difference between awareness and reflection. Feelings make an individual aware of the changes within his/her body—because of the emotion—and feelings encourage the individual

to “heed the results of emotion” (either counteract the negative or enhance the positive) (Damasio 284).

The emotional episode, according to Damasio, starts with a stimuli, something inducing the biological emotion response. It moves to having a feeling, where the individual recognizes the bodily response. The individual then responds to the feeling (the leading to action), and then, the individual can know the feeling by reflecting on the experience. The complete course of emotion to feeling is five steps: 1) individual faces trigger/inducer of emotion; 2) individual uses senses to process trigger/inducer; 3) individual’s brain sends out commands (emotion occurs); 4) individual recognizes shifts in body (feelings emerge) and 5) individual reflects on feeling leading to action. We can use Damasio’s emotional episode as a starting point for understanding how emotion functions within writing assessment.

### **Emotions and Teaching**

The interest in emotion has focused on classroom teaching to understand what emotions teachers experience in the classroom, but little scholarship has looked at the emotions teachers experience during writing assessment, let alone large-scale writing assessments that occur outside the classroom (see Hargreaves; Schutz, Hong, Cross, and Osborn; Sutton and Wheatley; and Winograd). It seems safe to claim that writing assessment creates an environment that draws out the positive and negative emotions from all involved parties: students, teachers and stakeholders, intended or not; though, most of the research done on emotion and writing assessment has been on the emotions students experience, such as test anxiety (see Stough and Emmer; and Zeidner). Though students’ emotions are important, it is also important for teachers

to understand their emotions if they are interested in improving their pedagogical practices with regard to writing assessment, especially since, according to Steinberg, “assessment decisions are not ‘neutral’ but involve teachers’ emotions, which are interwoven with their beliefs” (42). And, if emotions are intertwined with power and status, as well as beliefs, teachers need to understand how emotions are working within their professional activities, such as responding to student writing.

### **Writing Assessment as an Emotional Practice**

Steinberg uses Hargreaves’ framework of teaching as an emotional practice to posit assessment as an emotional practice. More specifically, she writes that “teachers have intense emotions about assessment, and these emotions colour their planning for and practice of assessment” (44). Hargreaves works from the premise that teaching, as an emotional practice, “activates, colors, and expresses teachers’ own feelings, and the actions in which those feelings are embedded” (838), and that teaching cannot, and should not, be reduced to “technical competence or clinical standards” (850). Emotions are behind teaching, and embedded within teachers’ actions are feelings/emotions. Writing assessment, as a social practice, cannot be reduced to scores, grades or placement. If researchers think about the work teachers do with regard to responding to student writing, it seems reasonable that writing assessment, like teaching, is an emotional practice.

Some of the emotions that seemed to be highlighted in Hargreaves’ research done on teaching as an emotional practice include caring, passion, thoughtfulness, tact, hope and emotional intelligence, perfectionism, possessiveness, anger, dissatisfaction, jealousy, frustration

and fear. Understanding what happens during the act of assessing writing when teachers are experiencing these emotions will help improve teachers' practice; but, before scholars can make the jump to writing assessment as an emotional practice, scholars need to understand the function of emotions in different writing assessment practices. To begin to approach writing assessment as an emotional practice will give assessors a more complete picture of the intricacies that surround such practices.

Linking Hargreaves' understanding of teaching as an emotional practice with Damasio's distinction between emotion and feeling, and between having and knowing a feeling, can help move researchers toward an understanding of how emotions work in writing assessment. One way to do this is to develop a framework to analyze emotions, which will help teachers understand how emotions are working within their own practices.

For Damasio, the bodily response, or emotion, occurs when a stimuli is present. If scholars understand what happens to individuals when a writing assessment stimuli is presented, they will be able to better understand how emotions work. To start to understand how emotions work, I suggest a reflective framework based on Damasio's approach to emotion and feeling. For example, individually, as teachers assess student work, teachers could keep track of what feelings, or strong reactions, they have with particular papers, and then also what their response is to those feelings. Charting what teachers react to, with what feelings and with what responses, will develop a working framework. At the beginning, it may be difficult to know what the emotion is, since emotion is a biological response which is not always recognized; however, Damasio's approach to feeling is valuable. The difference between having a feeling and knowing a feeling will help to flesh out the framework. The beginning framework asks teachers to reflect

on, and chart, their feelings (or strong reactions) toward writing assessment stimuli (such as an individual paper), as well as their response to those feelings. The table (illustrated in Table 1) begins to mirror the emotional episode. In column one, teachers would indicate what triggered an emotion: a particular paper, section of paper or assignment. The next column asks teachers to chart their feelings or strong reactions to the stimulus. And, the final column asks teachers to list out what their response was to those feelings.

Table 1: Beginning Teacher Emotion Reflection Chart

Stimulus (Papers/ parts of papers)	Feelings/Strong Reactions	Response to feelings/reactions
Example 1		
Example 2		

By using Damasio’s understanding of emotion, assessors can begin to understand emotions within any writing assessment practice. The stimuli can be anything from a particular paper to a writing assessment practice to a teacher’s response to a practice. Damasio’s model allows assessors to look at everything that surrounds writing assessment and the responses that individuals have with regard to that stimuli. Using this model to develop a taxonomy will help assessors understand how they react to assessment, and how those reactions lead to writing assessment actions—which have positive and negative consequences for others. Assessors

should also understand the emotional response of all who have a stake in writing assessment: students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. After understanding assessors' emotions, the next step would be to understand the emotional response and action of each stakeholder. Then, researchers can theorize about emotions—to further the understanding of writing assessment as an emotional practice—by looking at all of the emotions of the participants: assessors and stakeholders.

For example, if the stimuli is a plagiarized paper for a first-year writing course, the bodily response, feeling and action will be slightly, if not completely, different than it would be if the stimuli was a plagiarized paper from a senior-level capstone course because of the expectations a teacher has for each course. For both stimuli, the bodily response may be similar—an increased heart rate, sagging shoulders, and throbbing temples. Yet, the emotional response, feelings and actions would, more than likely, be different. With first-year students, teachers may question their classroom as a learning environment—“Did I cover this topic?”—whereas with a senior-level class the understanding of plagiarism is assumed. The emotional responses lead to varying actions on the part of the teacher: giving the student the option to revise, giving the student a zero on the assignment, failing the student for the course, or sending the student for further sanctions by university policy. It is unknown how strong of a role emotions play in the varying actions, but two different emotional responses will more than likely equate to two different judgments. The emotion anger may led to the action of giving a zero for the assignment, and the emotion disappointment may led offering the student a revision option. Because of the different emotional responses to similar stimuli, assessors need to contextualize the emotions and response. Therefore, I would add another two categories (see Table 2) for teachers to fill out



before the stimulus. The first column, then, would describe the environment where the assessment is taking place. Is the writing assessment based in the classroom? A large-scale placement assessment? An exit exam? The second column is where the teacher describes the assessment. What is the prompt? The goals of the assessment? These additional columns would allow the assessment practices to be further contextualized within the individual teachers' practices and methods.

Table 2: Contextualized Teacher Emotion Reflection Chart

Assessment Environment	Assessment Description	Stimulus (Papers/parts of papers)	Feelings/Strong Reactions	Response to feelings/reactions
Example 1				
Example 2				

Using Damasio's model to explain the reactions to a plagiarized paper, or other papers in the classroom, seems valuable. Huot calls for writing assessments that are local and contextual, and also points out the link between theory and practice within assessment. Having teachers document their emotional reactions to papers as they are grading, and their actions (such as particular grades assigned) would be one place for teachers to start to develop a taxonomy that looks at their local, contextual practices. Then, teachers could analyze the documented reactions and actions to see if patterns exist. If teachers find patterns, then they could determine, by using other models or research, how successful those actions were, how ethical they were, how

consistent they were, and so forth. Thus, acknowledging, and hopefully reflecting, on their theories and practices. Charting could also lead to a further understanding of the assessment practices and the values and beliefs intermixed with those practices for individual teachers, as well as a possible look for the larger field's values and belief.

By looking at the emotional responses of particular stimuli, teachers may find action/judgment trends emerging that will help assessors and teachers with their teaching. This is not to suggest a cause and effect between an emotion and the response, but an awareness of what is happening in particular environments. This framework could then be expanded to other aspects of writing assessment—such as re-analyzing Susan Callahan's study from the role of emotions in the Kentucky Portfolio readings.

Callahan presents a case study of teachers scoring student portfolios for the Kentucky portfolio system in a recent article. Within the Kentucky portfolio system, students in grades 4, 8 and 12 were required to submit writing portfolios. The portfolio system was an accountability instrument for individual schools—a move beyond multiple-choice exams for students (Callahan). All writing portfolios, across grade levels, were “expected to meet similar content requirements,” and were scored with a common rubric (Callahan 181). Her study is focused on the ethical conflict teachers found themselves in when the teachers could not be equally just and truthful toward all stakeholders: fellow teachers, students, school districts, administrators, and parents. Using Callahan's article as the source of information, I could chart out some beginning emotions and reactions (see Table 3).

Table 3: Emotions in the Kentucky Portfolio Readings (charted through Callahan’s article)

	Assessment Environment	Assessment Description	Stimulus (Papers/ parts of papers)	Feelings/ Strong Reactions	Response to feelings/ reactions
Example 1	“High Stakes”/ State Mandated	Teachers reading student Portfolios	Individual student portfolios	Caring, disappointment, worry, concern, fear	Aim: balanced decisions

Having not participated in the study myself, there is some of the contextual information that I do not know. But, what this demonstrates is that in large-scale assessment practice, emotions are playing a role in decisions. Callahan felt that teachers aimed to make balanced decisions between being “just, caring, and truthful” to everyone who would be affected by the decision: “Even though they did not generally use the terms just, caring, and truthful in their discussions, the situations that caused them to worry about making the right decision all contained the potential for conflict among these three values” (190) which are also embedded within an emotional response to writing assessment.

### Classroom Implications

With my research interest being emotion, I have a heightened awareness of when I begin to feel different emotions while reading student writing. This awareness, and reflection on what triggered my emotions, led me to reconsider what assignments I was giving to students. One way

teachers can use this emotion chart in their work is to chart out their emotions after responding to a particular assignment. Charting after an assignment could help teachers decide if the particular assignment is triggering emotions. Or, are certain topics students are writing on triggering different emotions? There are topics I do not let students write on because I know, through my own emotion reflection, that I would respond (or grade) more from emotions than anything else. In essence, my “banned topic list” is a reflection of what triggers my emotional responses. Teachers may also find that the context they respond in triggers different emotional states—the calm, quiet home office; the tense work office; or the bustling coffee house.

If teachers are engaging in reflective practice, particularly focused on writing assessment, charting out their emotions is one way to do so. Laura Micche, in reference to WPA work, believes it is important for scholars of rhetoric and composition to understand how emotions play into their work, “because emotions express the valuations of a community” (452). What do we value in student writing? And, how much of what we value is driven by our emotions? If writing assessment is a powerful discourse that has positive and negative consequences for students, and as Micche suggests, emotion is “intertwined with issues of power and status in the work world” (452), then teachers need to take the time to reflect on how emotions are shaping the work they do within the classroom. I am not suggesting that emotions drive writing assessment practices, but that emotions are a part of writing assessment practices. Every participant involved with assessment has emotions, and with an understanding of the emotions surrounding writing assessment practices, research can focus on ways to use that understanding to further professional development. Even if teachers cannot chart out each and every student’s individual paper—although I think engaging in such activity would be fruitful for professional development

if time would allow—having teachers reflect and locate the emotional aspect of writing assessment after assignments allows teachers an opportunity to revamp their pedagogical assessment practices.

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