

**REVIEW ESSAY**

**IN-FIELD SCHOLARSHIP AND  
DEGREES OF TRANSPARENCY:  
HOLLYWOOD MEETS *A GUIDE  
TO COLLEGE WRITING  
ASSESSMENT***

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O'Neill, Peggy, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot. *A Guide to  
College Writing Assessment*, Logan, UT: Utah State UP,  
2009.

Uncharacteristically, I am in the mood for discretion. So allow me to leave in peace the taboo topic of the low volume of scholars outside the field of composition reading our scholarship. And also allow me to keep under the counter the even more taboo topic of the poor record we ourselves have in reading our scholarship. Instead let me unwrap a different but related issue, namely the problem that one part of our field has in talking to another part. Apparently it is a question we also don't much want to ask. How well do historians of rhetoric talk to personnel in writing centers, second-language experts talk to advocates of creative writing, linguists talk to FYC (First-Year Composition) teachers?

It seems this topic begs more for discretion than the other two. Discretion, however, may be just a cowardly name for cowardice, as Prince Hal suggests. So a fig to it and into the fray.

O'Neill, Moore, and Huot's recent *Guide to College Writing Assessment* lies open on my desk. As we will see, it is addressed to

colleagues, any one connected with college composition who lacks advice about over-the-counter bubble exams, technology-dazzled deans, alien statistical procedures, and other hazards of the current writing-assessment scene. I would like to calculate the chances of this scholarly monograph in convincing the readers it wants to convince.

It is lucky that there is little in the scholarship of the book that I cannot admire. The authors are deeply versed in their subject and write with honesty, command, and lucidity. So by and large I can set scholarly questions aside and instead focus on a rhetorical one. What is the communicative prospects, in house, of this scholarly book about communication? It is an issue that well might make scholars in any field squirm. Taboo is not too strong a word.

### **Scott Robert Olson on Narrative Transparency**

It is also lucky that on my desk alongside O'Neill, Moore, and Huot lies a second book, Scott Robert Olson's *Hollywood Planet: Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency* (Erlbaum, 1999). Olson asks why certain films are popular with cultures outside the culture that produced them. How did movies such as *The Lion King* and television shows such as "Dallas," which proved wildly popular with international audiences, manage to cross cultural boundaries when others did not, such as the Danish, Oscar-nominated *Breaking the Waves* or the Polish television show "Polski Zoo"? For Olson the answer lies in the discursive function of *transparency*. A production is transparent when it allows viewers room for the myths that are specific to their culture, and opaque when it closes off that space. Olson defines transparency as "any textual apparatus that allows audiences to project indigenous values, beliefs, rites, and rituals into imported media" (5). For my project, the value of Olson's book is the way it breaks down that "textual apparatus" into specific textual devices, which I can project into *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*. How transparent is O'Neill, Moore, and Huot? How opaque is this effort of the disciplinary culture of assessment to speak to other cultures within the composition field?

Admittedly, Olson is not interested in the strictly informational. The base of his analysis is what he calls “mythotypes.” Functioning myths always arise distinctively from their culture. *Mythotypes* are the universal intuitive and affective responses that undergird culture-specific myths. Olson locates five basic mythotypes.

*Awe*—the sense that “things are bigger than you”

*Wonder*—the “marvel at uncanny occurrences and eternal questions”

*Purpose*—the intuition, nevertheless, of your personal significance in the larger scheme of things

*Joy*—the delight in the underlying goodness and beauty of the world

*Participation*—the belief that you are an “active agent” in something important (92-93).

These mythotypical beliefs and intuitions counter, hold at bay, the equally universal fear that the world is vast, material, meaningless, and in ultimate control, a fear of what Olson calls “the absolutism of reality” (92).

Unlikely as it might seem, these mythotypes will be important in my analysis of the in-house transparency of *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*. Equally important will be Olson’s list of specific textual devices that allow mythotypes to connect home myths with alien myths.

*Openendedness*—resistance to closure

*Virtuality*—creation of a psychologically convincing fictional reality

*Negentropy*—creation of a meaningful and lasting order

*Circularity*—establishment of a beginning and end that join

*Ellipticality*—omission of living details so that viewers can fill in with their own

*Archetypes*—creation of characters of universal import

*Inclusion*—fostering of the sense that viewers can participate

*Verisimilitude*—creation of the feeling of naturalness or realness

*Omnipresence*—use of a media technology that creates an outlet for myths

*Production*—fabrication of a sense of spectacle (93-113).

Olson's Propp-like "morphology" of myth in film viewing is too elaborate for my few pages, and I will be exercising only some of these mythotypes (in particular, *participation*, *purpose*, and *wonder*) and only some of these mythotypic textual devices (in particular, *inclusion*, *negentropy*, and *archetypes*).

Olson's argument itself, however, is not elaborate and in no way opaque. Transparency happens when the textual devices facilitate the mythotypes. A film is successful with other cultures when, for instance, its ordinary neighborhood protagonist acts like the universal hero who outwits more powerful evil forces (*archetypes*), or when its ending leaves the future success of the marriage unfilmed (*openendedness*). These cinematographic tactics allow international viewers to feel the possibility of personal agency (*participation*), for instance, or the sense of underlying goodness (*joy*). In turn their response allows them to read their own value and beliefs (*myths*) into the films. My own argument will be equally transparent. A scholarly monograph that neglects the tactics that would access the mythotypes blocks off the chances of a different contingent of the field finding space and play for its own "values, beliefs, rites, and rituals."

Scholars in composition studies will protest. Tacitly our serious scholarship probably communicates value and belief, and no doubt narrative structures underlie much of what we compose, but rite and ritual are not part of our game. We don't truck with myths, except occasionally to analyze somebody else's. Analysis of our own work is fair enough, but mythotypes and mythotypic devices will not serve since we are involved in the transfer of information, not in the transfer of myths and suchlike mysteries. We don't produce fictions and fantasies to sell box-office tickets.

To this expostulation there are two reasonable replies. First, how can one determine that on some level a serious piece of academic scholarship does not operate as rite or ritual, or at some point does not participate in the transfer of cultural myth? Fantasy-theme analysis, which deals with rites and rituals much as do Olson's mythotypes, has tackled a range of discourse, from letters to the editor, militia-movement websites, Puritan sermons, and environmental tracts all the way up to scholarly social-science articles and historical monographs. On what grounds does composition scholarship excuse itself? Second, why can't Olson's mythotypes and mythotypic devices apply to communicative dynamics other than myth and to discourse genres other than film? Into discourse everywhere readers bring joy, participation, and awe in Olson's sense, and discourse everywhere utilizes openendedness, circularity, and inclusion in Olson's sense. I'm just happy to find some place elsewhere than jargon, genre, and other textual gymnastics to account for the transparency or opacity of scholarly texts.<sup>1</sup>

### **Transparency in *A Guide to College Writing Assessment***

O'Neill, Moore, and Huot, whose credentials as theorists and experience as practitioners of writing assessment can hardly be bettered, are perfectly aware that they face a tough audience.

We seek to meet the needs of a wide range of colleagues—those who direct (or help direct) writing programs and those who teach within them, those who are resistant to assessment generally and those whose prior experience with poorly conceived or inappropriate assessments has made them suspicious or cynical, and those who want to participate in—or even lead—large-scale assessment efforts but don't possess the knowledge to do so confidently or well.

Less urbanely put, *A Guide* hopes to bring around compositionists whose past encounters with formal writing assessment, where they have been aware of it, has involved legislation and policy decreed by national or state bureaucracies with whom they have never had direct contact; unwieldy masses of students they see sometimes numbering into the thousands; statistical maneuvers they find utterly cryptic; writing criteria they have to apply that they didn't help make and can't help disliking; students herded into their classes based on essay evaluation performed by machine or on fill-in-the-blank tests they are forbidden to see; and so on. At least these make up the majority of compositionist I have known, whose main challenge concerning formal writing assessment is to find ways to steer clear of it.<sup>2</sup>

In short, for the "wide range of colleagues" whom I know, the phrase "absolutism of reality" perfectly describes the threat and machinery of formal assessment. How well would *A Guide* help these readers challenge this reality? O'Neill, Moore, and Huot say,

Our aim is not to minimize the challenges associated with assessment (there are many) but to help readers confront and contextualize these challenges so they will feel able to design and facilitate assessments that support the educational goals of their institutions. (3)

That's the right scholarly program, honest about the realities and helpful about faculty involvement, a program I am behind one-hundred percent. Notice, however, the tacit displacement of "challenge" from inner to outer. The proactive challenge that one feels impelled to issue to the world becomes an outside challenge one needs to "confront" reactively. *A Guide* similarly displaces the idea of "needs." The "needs of a wide range of colleagues" mentioned above, an inner imperative to take up the good assessment cause, switch to a spectrum of outer obligations that must be met to further that cause. As I have said, Olson's mythotypes are the inner drive of people to counter "the reality of

absolutism,” and his mythotypic tactics allow people to deal with it. What do we see of these tactics in *A Guide*?

### ***Participation and Inclusion***

One of the major appeals of *A Guide*, repeated throughout, is the mantra of “local assessment.” The book argues, for instance, that the history of writing assessment asks local WPAs (Writing Program Administrators) and teachers to wrest control from national testing corporations such as the CEEB and ETS (33-34). They are encouraged to trash outmoded theories of reliability by building site-based and locally controlled assessment practices using experts—local teachers—as readers (57). They are prompted to apply the postmodern focus on contextuality and put assessment under the control and design of administrators and teachers in the program being assessed (59-79). In Olson’s terms, these arguments operate as tactics of *inclusion* that might allow “suspicious or cynical” colleagues to write their yearnings for participation into the book’s narrative. Yet at the same time, whenever the book approaches the ground level of concrete action, it seems to send a contrary message. Assessment programs are already so entrenched there is little room for local choice. Since CLEP exams are mandated, the faculty who wish to have some on-site control have only one option, to choose the form of the exam that has a 45-minute essay scored by local faculty (102). Ideal systems evaluating faculty performance, “site-based” and “locally controlled,” are described in fact as “controlled by the local program and institution, which is responsible for managing, revising, and validating the process of faculty review according to stated personnel policies as well as professional standards” (139). The individual teacher reading this book may feel little opening here for *participation*—probably as little as I used to feel every semester when I had to give my students a silly and uninformative teacher-evaluation form, indeed once locally designed but now with no hope of being changed.

### ***Purpose and Negentropy***

One of the great strengths of *A Guide* is the detailed description of the social and historical processes that give shape and meaning to the assessment of college writing. Especially compelling is the history of evaluation (14-34), the struggle among theorists over the definition and use of reliability and validity (43-53), the complicated and fluid contextual nature of students, teachers, and administrators (64-76), and the methods available for teacher evaluation (143-151). This strength carries with it, however, a danger. The more detailed and dense the description of the process, the fewer opportunities newcomers may see for their personal significance (*purpose*). The processes won't appear to them as meaningful orders that are changing for the better (*negentropy*) but as heavy-handed entities that trudge headfast on their own way, more like juggernauts than negentropes. Early on *A Guide* faces this problem in its conclusion to the history of writing evaluation: "it appears that in writing assessment, as in most human endeavors, the more things change, the more they remain the same" (31). Noted, for instance, is CEEB's early devaluation of teachers, a tactic of entrepreneurial and political standardized testing that has continued from 1900 to today. Admitting that this history is "certainly not uplifting news" (31), *A Guide* suggests that when new calls for accountability arrive, faculty and administrators can argue that their evaluations of students "never received the attention they deserve, making calls for locally based assessment stronger" (31). But how convincing would this argument appear to those stakeholders who have their hands on the till?

The whole history of writing evaluation just does not come across as an appealing order into which a colleague in pedagogy or cultural studies might wish to join. Consistently *A Guide* makes the processes involved with assessment, dense with the contexts they bear, appear unmovable, driven internally more toward stasis than change. So in discussing teacher evaluation, O'Neill, Moore, and Huot take the position that summative evaluation is high-stakes, an enterprise by which, for example, "new teachers may be

evaluated at the end of a semester or the end of a year to determine if they will be renewed,” and that formative evaluation is low-stakes, evaluation that “will not be used for conferring rewards or sanctions” (140) but rather used only by teachers, even new teachers we have to presume, to acquire information that will make them better teachers in the future. From the negentropic viewpoint of an individual deciding whether or not to design or join a teacher-evaluation initiative, however, no stakes may be higher than personal improvement over time.

### ***Wonder and Archetypes***

One of the most compelling virtues of *A Guide* is its refusal to forget that writing assessment, at all levels, is composed of people. The authors almost totally avoid the lure of hypostatization, under which a number placed in four minutes on an essay by an undergraduate sweating out a summer job for a standardized testing firm magically turns into a “passing essay,” or a jumble of individualized writing courses taught by a mélange of singular teachers turns into a “writing program.” Some of the most informative parts of the book focus on participants, for instances where it narrates individual struggles within assessment situations (e.g., Cindy Moore, 6-8, or William Smith, 28) or individualizes different stakeholders involved in program validation (110-126). It seems, however, that a strength again brings with it a weakness. The more the book centers on individuals operating within particular assessment contexts, the less it brings out the motivations that might have led them there. WPAs and teachers are presented as agents in institutional systems who respond to demands for assessment, answering to chairs, deans, outside evaluators, and sometimes the needs of the program they run. What is missing are WPAs and teachers who might take up assessment out of Olson’s *wonder*, perhaps out of an interest in the curious, amazing, or uncanny things that can be found there, or out of a researcher’s drive to find the truth of the matter or to dispel the myths about the matter, or even out of a resistance to demands for assessment, especially bad assessment. Largely absent

are portraits of heroes, *archetypal* figures that might attract the newcomer and the novice because they call for emulation.

### **The Transparent and the Obligatory: An Unresolved Dilemma for Disciplinary Literature**

“Administrators charged with assessment,” says *A Guide*, “need to conduct research into the assessment . . . to determine if in fact the benefits expected are being realized and if unintended consequences are compromising these benefits” (108). True enough. But instead of “need to,” why not “are excited to,” “yearn to,” or “dare to”? In fact, the phrase “need to” dominates this book, and appears with its synonyms on every page, often multiple.<sup>3</sup> The last heading of this book is called “Challenges” (152-156). It’s the kind of word that might attract people into assessment, suggesting derring-do and heroic resistance. But it turns out the challenge is for WPAs to deal with the anxieties and apprehensions that arise once their new assessment apparatus is put into place. When faculty resist, according to *A Guide*, WPAs should replace the resisters if the supply of teachers exceeds the demand, and if there is no surplus WPAs must “tolerate” the resistance (152). As I have noted, throughout this book “needs” are heavily construed not as internal but external. First circumstances impose, then action is required. This dramatizes professional activity in a thoroughly postmodern way, as swinging between two poles, the “needs to” and the “depends upon.” The result is an equally postmodern contradiction between the determining context and the undetermined options that emerge from the fact that all contexts are different. It’s the dilemma between loss of foundations and freedom of options that can’t be exercised because there are no foundations on which to base a choice. So O’Neill, Moore, and Huot lucidly describe different kinds of placement testing, proficiency testing, and teacher evaluation systems, but provide no guidelines on how an administrator can choose among them. Hardly an advertisement

for colleagues “who are resistant to assessment generally” to take up assessment.

I am applying what our colleagues in the communications department call a use and gratification model. Assuming that an audience is active and self-serving, the model judges a piece of discourse by the personal benefit its readers imagine they will get out of it. Discursive appeals to gratification assume the guise of romance, adventure, excitement, fun, empathy, profit, an endless train. Olson adds awe, wonder, purpose, joy, and participation. It is only through such appeals does one culture beckon to another, whether those cultures are social, generational, gendered, or disciplinary. Within English studies, the literature side has a long history of writing such appeals. The composition side has produced nothing comparable to Richard D. Altick’s *The Scholar Adventurers*, Catherine Drinker Bowen’s *Adventures of a Biographer*, or Robert Coles’s *The Call of Stories: Teaching the Moral Imagination*. And within composition studies, appeal to self-satisfaction, where they can be found, seem largely confined to teaching and technology. Writing assessment seems content to present itself as lack-luster, no-nonsense, nose-to-the-grindstone, and utilitarian, not unlike the student writing it sometimes elicits in order to apply its particular knowledge and procedures.

*A Guide to College Writing Assessment* is a compendium of useful knowledge about formal assessment and the college writing scene, admirably clear and relatively free of jargon. Its chapters cover history, theory, context, placement, proficiency, program validation, and teacher evaluation. It constantly drifts toward the utilitarian, understandably, as can be seen in the appendices, which include scoring rubrics, classroom observation forms, portfolio reading guidelines, and other nuts and bolts of evaluation. This is the book—with its full and cutting-edge coverage of the *needs-to*—that I will recommend when I learn that a colleague is ready to take up assessment. But for the book that creates the *ready-to*, that opens up the culture of writing assessment to other cultures within our field, that creates openings for the human yearning to challenge the gods of testing

and to do good deeds—in short the book on the adventure of writing assessment—that book is yet to be written.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In-house complaints about the senselessness of compositional jargon go back decades (e. g., Robert A. Bennett, 1972). Too often critique of scholarly vocabulary ends up with the skillet calling the kettle black. So social critic Chris Hedges, trained as an academic, bemoans academics who use “obscure code words as a way to avoid communication” (96), and this on a page that unapologetically uses phrases such as “inherently centralizing,” “self-justifying system,” “specialized, impenetrable verbal enclaves,” “corporate power structure,” and “exclusive dialects.”

<sup>2</sup>A few years ago I communicated by email with composition faculty at a number of universities that had a rising-junior writing examination in place. I was taken aback by the distance most of them put between themselves and the testing. “We try to pay as little attention to the test as we can.” “We don’t consider these tests as our business” (Haswell 2001, 141-142). What chance these good colleagues will open the pages of O’Neill, Moore, and Huot?

<sup>3</sup>The phrase “need to” appears 95 times in 156 pages, three times in the ultimate paragraph alone. This frequency count does not tally variations such as “needs to” or “needing to” or synonymous expressions such as “must,” “have to,” “will,” “it is critical that,” and so on. No doubt the obligatory is a mode endemic to any book that calls itself *A Guide*, but I must confess that this guide, despite the constant admiration I felt as I read it, sometimes reminded me of the slogan T. H. White attaches to the ant colony in *The Once and Future King*, “Everything not forbidden is mandatory.”

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