REVIEW ESSAY

ON READINGS, REVIEWS, AND PHOROPTERS

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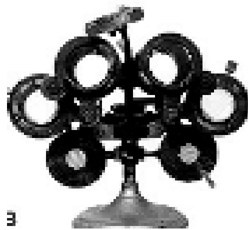
Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Peggy O-Neill. ***Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*** **Logan: Utah State UP, 2010.**

I desperately wanted glasses when I was in seventh grade. I blame the 80s in general and my very hip, bespectacled best friend in particular. Whatever the reasons, I would fix my gaze unblinkingly into the distance until my otherwise perfect vision became blurry enough to justify asking my mother to take me to the ophthalmologist's office. There, I found a new object of fixation: an antique phoropter, a medieval-looking headpiece of multiple lenses that wheeled and clicked into place.[1]



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Given my adolescent fascination, perhaps I can be forgiven a major miscue when reading Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill's new book, *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Despite the cover photograph of the naked wood frame of a house, the word "frame" in the title made me

think of lenses. I was well into the discussion of framing in Chapter 2 before I realized my mistake.

This seems a trivial and perhaps petulant note to sound at the beginning of a review essay: *I thought they were talking about eyeglass frames but they were really talking about a house frame!* However, in trying to understand my resistance to the authors' construction metaphor, the image of the phoropter helped me understand my conflicted reading of a book I wanted to like almost as desperately as my seventh grade self wanted glasses.

Before I explore my conflicted reading, let me provide a brief overview of the book, which is divided into three sections.

In the first section, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill assert the importance of conversations about writing assessment. Compositionists often find themselves embroiled in these conversations at the local level when administrators institute writing assessments in order to send a message about demanding or maintaining "rigorous" standards or to make admissions, placement, funding, or staffing decisions. At the national level, the accreditation process often pushes issues of writing assessment center stage, as programs assess their progress towards self-determined standards to secure federal funding. The authors warn that compositionists' control over these local assessments–if they had any to begin with–is tenuous. The recent Spellings Report recently called for more accountability in postsecondary education by recommending that accrediting bodies set and impose programmatic standards across institutions nationally, a plight that has already befallen Schools of Education. This effort failed, but only barely.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill argue that to participate in these important discussions of writing assessment, writing instructors and program directors need to understand the frames that have shaped our views of American education, educational measurement, composition studies theory, pedagogy, and writing assessment. After introducing the concept of framing and reframing, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill describe the efficiency, behavioralist, technocratic, "college and career readiness,"

positivist, psychometric, and instrumental frames. They assert that these frames are often at odds with the frames that have shaped composition studies pedagogy and assessment: the rhetorical, process, and sociolinguistic frames. Understanding all these frames–when they're at odds and when they're not– will help us reframe writing assessment "to improve teaching and learning."

In the second section, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill outline three community activist strategies we could draw on in our reframing work. In interest-based alliance building, compositionists would work with others to identify their interests and passions, figure out where these interests overlap, and then work together to change an issue that motivates the group. In values-based alliance building, compositionists might articulate their own values, ask others to do the same, identify issues that represent these values, and then work together to make changes around these issues. In issue-based alliance building, which the authors recommend, compositionists would first identify common interests and passions, but then use these interests to develop discussions around values that lead to work around more values and issues.

In the third section, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill describe the real-life efforts of four compositionists to reframe writing assessment at their institutions. They discuss these four case studies using the terms (interest, value, and issue-based approaches) they introduced in earlier chapters. Finally, they offer two possible metaphors for reframing education: a honeycomb, in which each discipline determines its boundaries of practice and assessment questions, methods, and purposes; and a networked infrastructure, in which disciplines also determine their own boundaries and assessments questions, methods, and purposes, but the connections between disciplines are looser and more flexible, responsive to changing needs.

Now a note about the nature of this review and your reading of it, which will lead us forward to assessment at the same time that it will bring us back (surprise!) to phoropters.

This review–my narration of my reading experience–is an act of writing assessment. To make matters deliciously complex, then, you are reading an assessment of a piece of writing about writing assessment. Things don't have to be this complex: you could simply read the book yourself. But you are reading this review to engage in an act of quintuple refraction: you are viewing my view of Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's view of the views that shape our views of writing assessment. In other words, you're reading this review because you, too, are fascinated by phoropters.

And here's why we're all so in love with these mechanical marvels: amidst this complexity of overlapping views, the phoropter affords us clarity through dexterity. By moving each lens in and out of our field of vision, we can determine which lens or combination of lenses we find most interesting, promising, or problematic.

Which leads me to my assessment of *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning:* it is this clarity–and the dexterity with lenses that allows it–that is most sorely missing from Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's work. The authors begin an important discussion of the frames that have shaped education, composition studies theory and pedagogy, and writing assessment. However, they fail to see or acknowledge that most writing assessment scholars have worked solidly within the behaviorist lens that brought writing assessment into focus in the first place. Composition Studies has never actually reframed writing assessment. This fundamental oversight–illustrated or perhaps enabled by the authors' use of a construction metaphor rather than a visual metaphor to explain the concept of framing–undermines the potential of the community organizing strategies offered later in the book.

My reading began amiably enough. In fact, I was giving Adler-Kassner and O'Neill mental high fives when they call on compositionists to get involved in conversations about writing assessment, claiming that they are ". . . not just important, but the most important discussions happening on our campuses (and even

beyond) today" (4). I began my teaching career with no special interest in assessment, but quickly learned that certain assessment practices and procedures could undermine what I was trying to do in the classroom. In my attempt to figure out why, I learned much from O'Neill's work with Brian Huot, and from Linda Adler-Kassner's work with Bob Broad. I was excited, then, by the authors' promise that their book would facilitate our involvement by educating us about the frames that often shape assessment and by showing the potential of community organizing strategies for our reframing work.

The trouble began for me as Adler-Kassner and O'Neill set up their discussion of framing. In retrospect, my phoropter fixation isn't entirely to blame for my confusion about frames in Chapter 2. Before introducing their construction metaphor, the authors invoke at least eight visual metaphors and terms to explain the power of a frame to shape what we see, understand, and say. First, they liken a frame to William Hanks' concept of a "galaxy" (5), returning in Chapter 4 to Hanks' description of the galaxy's "'infinity of assumption'" which stretches out before us like a horizon or night sky, determining the boundaries of what we see and perceive, familiar to the point of being "'unnoticed'" (81). Second, they explain a frame as a "*perspective* that shapes understandings of situations or circumstances" (15, emphasis mine). Finally, in a single sentence containing six additional visual terms, they cite Lee Bolman and Terence Deal: "frames are like '*windows*, maps, tools, *lenses*, orientations, [or] perspectives'–they shape an individuals' or a group's *perceptions* of what is and is not plausible/in the picture/focused/visible (2003, 12)" (16, emphasis mine).

These visual terms and images, it seems to me, have enormous potential not only for helping us frame the arguments we make about writing assessment, but also for influencing how we frame writing assessment for ourselves. Consider just one of these terms, the word *perspective*–what you see from where you stand, what comes into your view from your physical, mental, emotional, or historical position. We could use this word to frame

what is involved when you read something that someone else has written, a moment and act so fundamental to writing assessment that we could call it writing assessment's unnoticed night sky. What comes into your view, then, when you read a text? And where are you standing and why?

This moment, these questions, have profound implications for how we might understand writing assessment. Psychometric testing theory, in fact, treats this moment as a problem, and we have spent much time seeking not to understand this moment, but to standardize it through calibration sessions that dictate a universal perspective, reified in a scoring guide or rubric. A frame that treats this moment as a problem to be solved, it seems to me, is the wrong frame altogether. What would happen if we described rather than prescribed this moment? What if we reframed writing assessment by putting this moment–rather than the institutional imperative to quantify, rank, and sort–into focus clearly at the center of our frame? The possibilities I saw in these terms and images were exciting, and I was eagerly awaiting Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's exploration of them to help us reframe writing assessment for ourselves and for those outside our field.

Such an exploration never came. In the middle of Chapter 2, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill abruptly drop the visual imagery employed by Hanks, Terrence, and Deal, declaring instead the usefulness of a construction metaphor: "Perhaps the most effective way to consider the importance of a frame (an object) and framing as a process (an activity) is to think about the frame of a house" (16). The result is a Stephen North-style House of Education that we all inhabit, with a sub-basement constructed of ideas about how education prepares students for varying conceptions of productive citizenship (21) and a first floor built from a technocratic view of education as service bought and sold for private advancement (25).

I would willingly have followed Adler-Kassner and O'Neill into this house, wielding my pickax for deconstruction and my hammer for reconstruction, if they had made a compelling case that the construction metaphor was, indeed, an "…effective way

to consider the importance of a frame…" (16). But they barely make a case for their metaphor at all. In fact, I couldn't concentrate on their important discussion of the conflicting definitions of productive citizenship that make up the sub-basement, because I was trying so hard to understand not only how the construction metaphor was more useful than the lens metaphor, but also how it was useful at all.

While the construction metaphor opens up the possibility that we can build new rooms (as long as they are structurally linked to the old frame, a point we will linger on later), frames are supposed to help us understand the shaping power of difference–how different ideas, attitudes, and values shape our observations, interpretations, and experience of reality. The construction metaphor, however, doesn't help us understand these differences in perception and experience. Even if we succeed in building a new room in the old house, there is no reason to think that the experiences of those who walk into our new room will be systematically or predictably different. A room is a room, and different people can have remarkably different experiences in the same room, or remarkably similar experiences in different rooms.

In fact, every phenomenon Adler-Kassner and O'Neill explain through the construction metaphor is better explained through the lens metaphor. For example, they assert that "…frames enable us to make and tell stories…" (17). However, the shape of the room you stand in doesn't have much to do with the stories you tell. But the lens metaphor beautifully explains how different lenses produce different stories: stories depend on description, a narrator only describes what she sees, and what the narrator sees is determined by what is visible through the lens she looks through. Different lenses, then, produce or allow different observations, which lead to different stories.

More importantly, the lens metaphor allows us to understand our dexterity with frames. We often apply various frames selectively to different realms of our lives, looking through a new lens at an old phenomenon, or choosing *not* to apply a

particular lens to a particular realm. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill often refer to the "behavioralist" or "behaviorist" frame. Let's consider our selective dexterity with frames by thinking about when this behaviorist lens was applied to education for the first time. When a new lens is used to look at an established field, everything visible through the old lens must be re-defined by the new one. Raymond Callahan gives us this very moment of re-definition in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. A group of New York City public school teachers formed a committee in 1911 to examine "Efficiency in the High Schools through the Application of the Principles of Scientific Management" (55). Their report, published the following year in a bulletin, redefines the purposes of education and the roles of its participants:

> A. Purpose or object of "Scientific Management."
> 1. To increase the efficiency of the laborer, i.e., the pupil.
> 2. To increase quality of the product, i.e. the pupil.
> 3. Thereby to increase the amount of output and the value to the capitalist. . .
>
> E. Difficulties in the way of making exact applications of scientific principles. . .
> . . . poor raw material (the student) cannot be exchanged for good. . . (47, cited in Callahan, 58)

We can almost hear the behaviorist lens click into place as we imagine these teachers selecting this shiny new frame from the world of the factory, holding it up in front of their eyes, then pivoting until they face the schoolhouse. Watch that same old school and those same old student themes and math problems come into focus now as *factories* and *products of learning!* These redefinitions–students as *laborers, products*, *raw material,* the public as *capitalists*, along with their modern day incarnations, students as *consumers,* the public as *stakeholders,* the educational system of *accountability,* in which *standards,* and *outcomes* are the basis for *data-driven instruction* –have become our unnoticed educational

horizon. But imagine how novel these terms must have been when they first came into focus! If these teachers had known that they would soon be redefined as the laborers accountable for the quality of their student-products, perhaps they wouldn't have so quickly picked up that particular lens in the first place. But that's another lament.

While we can shift a lens from one realm of our lives and apply it to another, we can also choose, intuitively or consciously, *not* to. Many of us, happy to use that behaviorist lens when looking at business, refuse to apply it to our personal relationships. With the behaviorist lens trained on business, we might see only the *bottom line* and what can be *produced* and *measured*, while the inherently stable and efficient market *rewards* and *punishes* the *efficiency* and *innovation* of the corporation, which, in turn, *rewards* and *punishes* the *efficiency* and *innovation* of its workers. But when it comes to our relationships, we might apply this lens momentarily, as a joke: "*Maybe I need a reinforcement schedule to get my husband to take out the trash without being asked."* But the joke proves the rule. When it comes to relationships, we care deeply about matters of the *mind, soul*, and *heart*, even when our relationships aren't particularly productive, efficient, measurable, or controllable. The most troubling exception to this rule involves the relationship between parent and child, where usual hesitations about controlling other people fly out the window. John B. Watson, the Father of Behaviorism, applied the behaviorist lens to parenting in 1928, redefining mother love as a "dangerous instrument" (87). We've been flirting with behaviorist parenting techniques ever since.

The construction metaphor cannot account for our selective dexterity with frames. Do we stand in the behaviorist room when discussing business, but then move to the humanist room when thinking about our relationships? Did the NYC teachers collect all thoughts of education from the humanist room and drag them into the behaviorist room like so much furniture? The lens metaphor illustrates our selective dexterity effortlessly: we pivot to look at whatever is around us, picking up or putting down lenses at whim or will.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill are thoughtful scholars and careful writers. I didn't think they had accidentally missed the potential of the lens metaphor. While they never discuss their reasons for employing the construction metaphor, I had a hunch that it would be useful to them, eventually–by allowing them to make a move I've seen O'Neill and Brian Huot make before: to argue that compositionists don't need to break from the psychometric educational measurement frame that brought writing assessment into focus in the first place. And, in Chapter 3, that is exactly what they do. They claim that recent work in psychometric theory–specifically, work on validity theory–is the frame to which writing assessment could attach its new room. The construction metaphor, then, allows the authors to think of working within the dominant frame as reframing.

I'll put aside, for now, the questions I ask every time I hear the assertion that compositionsists don't need to reject the psychometric frame based on the work of a few theorists on validity theory. For instance, I won't ask how often the validity inquiry described by the authors (76) has actually been conducted at an institutional level. I won't ask why educational institutions would sanction, let alone commission, time-consuming and nuanced validity inquiries, when those inquiries would undermine the basis for the quick, clear decisions that psychometrics originally offered educational institutions as a dowry for their most perfect union. And I won't even ask the question that the authors answer affirmatively: is the psychometric testing frame–and the terms, questions, and concerns it brings into focus, including validity–compatible with our values as compositionists? I don't *know* the answer to this question. But I don't think that Adler-Kassner and O'Neill can know, either. I question the truncated exploration, analysis, and application of frames that lead to their answer.

Without moving the dominant behaviorist lens fully out of the way–as the phoropter so conveniently lets us do–and looking clearly through a variety of alternate lenses at writing assessment, we can have no idea if keeping the psychometric lens in place is

the best way to bring our concerns, interests, and values into focus. Unfortunately, the authors haven't looked very closely at any of the frames they mention. They introduce a confusing number of frames–efficiency, positivist, psychometric, mechanistic, technocratic–mentioning other scholars' discussion of them without sustaining an extended exploration of their own. However, I believe that many of what Adler-Kassner and O'Neill present as frames are simply different realms viewed through the same dominant, behaviorist lens. For example, psychometrics is the realm of evaluation viewed through the behaviorist lens, while efficiency is the realm of labor viewed through the behaviorist lens. The authors' failure to distinguish between these terms–or to figure out their relationship to one another–points to the lack of exploration and clarity that plagues the book.

Ultimately, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill don't move the behaviorist lens out of the way because, hampered by their construction metaphor, they don't look at it clearly. But I don't think that anyone else in writing assessment has yet done this work. The exception is Patricia Lynne, whose call for alternate terms (meaningfulness and ethics) is *never* explored or elaborated by other scholars but frequently cited (including in this book), citations that are invariably followed by Huot's contention that this call for new terms isn't necessary. In other words, the authors' failure of clarity is representative of the field. I don't think that we have successfully reframed writing assessment for ourselves, let alone for wider audiences.

There is a danger in this book, then, beyond its lack of clarity. Nothing works against the doing of difficult work like the delusion that it has already been done. This book perpetrates the delusion that we have fully explored and applied alternate frames to writing assessment, making it less likely that we'll do this work in the future. I'm not implying that we'll need to accept these alternate frames. But we should at least make, borrow, or steal them, looking through them carefully to see what we can see before rejecting the views they afford.

The authors would protest that they *do* look at writing assessment through frames that reflect compositionists' values in Chapter 3: the sociolinguistic frame, the process frame, and the rhetorical frame. But these three alternate frames have only changed the way we answer the questions posed by the behaviorist frame. They haven't been used to pose another set of questions and terms for writing assessment, which tells me that they aren't truly being used as alternate frames.

Each frame (lens) brings its own concerns and terms into focus, materializing as frame-specific questions. The first step in identifying a dominant (and thus invisible) frame might be to identify the questions it poses. What questions does the behaviorist frame pose about writing assessment?

1. What *observable, measurable products* of learning should be gathered?
2. Who should gather them?
3. Under what *conditions* should they be gathered?
4. How will these *products* be *scored*?
5. What *process* will be used to generate the *criteria* used to score these *products*?
6. Who will *generate* these *criteria*?
7. Who will *score* the *products*?
8. What will be *done* with these *scores*?

Note the italicized behaviorist terms that constitute these questions. While it may be possible to use some of these terms outside the behaviorist frame, taken together, they remind us that these lenses are, as Adler-Kassner and O'Neill point out, much like Burke's terministic screens.

Composition studies may have answered the questions about assessment posed by the behaviorist frame slightly differently than the psychometric testing community. But *we have still answered all of the same questions.*

Questions posed within/by the behavioristic frame:	**Psychometric testing theory answers:**	**Composition studies answers:**
1. What observable, measurable products of learning should be gathered?	Grammar ability, via multiple choice grammar tests. Writing ability, via essays written to a common prompt.	Essays written in class, with access to various processes of revision, Evidence of process (drafts), Reflection on process and product.
2. Who should gather these products?	Testing companies.	Teachers, Students, Writing Programs.
3. Under what conditions should they be gathered?	Controlled testing situations.	In the classroom, over the course of a semester/year (portfolios).
4. How will these products be scored? (What tools or technology will be used to score these products?)	Analytical scoring, Holistic scoring, Rubrics, Scantron, Computer scoring based on analytical human scoring.	Analytic scoring, Holistic scoring, Rubrics, Pass/Fail.
5. What process will be used to generate the criteria used to score these products?	Quantitative Research.	Dynamic Criterion Mapping (DCM), Department conversations, Classroom conversations.

6. Who will generate these criteria?	Psychometric Experts, ETS.	Writing Programs, Instructors, Instructors in collaboration with students, community, instructors from other programs, etc., Students.
7. Who will score the products?	Calibrated, disinterested raters, Computers.	Calibrated, interested readers (instructors within a Writing Program), Individual Instructors, Students.
8. What will be done with these scores?	Allocation of funding, Declarations of educational crises, Impetus for "reform" and more testing. Control over curriculum, teaching, and learning.	Programmatic decisions, Student placement, Student promotion/ retention, Program-wide conversations about writing and teaching, Instructional decisions, Improvement of curriculum, teaching, and learning.

The only substantive difference between the two lists of answers is that compositionists tend to answer the questions posed by the behaviorist frame more "locally"–we would more often use programs, instructors, or even students to administer the frame. But localization just shifts and redistributes the power within the frame without fundamentally challenging it or moving it out of the way.

And when we don't fundamentally challenge the frame, it fundamentally changes us. In fact, when Adler-Kassner and O'Neill discuss the rhetorical frame's influence on writing assessment, they bring into focus the aspects of the rhetorical frame most compatible with the behaviorist frame, leaving the internal, immeasurable phenomenon implied in the rhetorical frame obscured and blurred. They explain that the rhetorical frame,

> . . . acknowledges that writing is a form of communication governed by the writer's purpose, the message to be delivered, the audience to be addressed, and the context surrounding the writer, audience, and text. (56)

There is no obvious reason to pause at this explanation of the rhetorical triangle we all know and love. The authors are right: the rhetorical frame has great potential to challenge the behaviorist frame of writing assessment. The internal, shifting, individual and often invisible realm of "writer's purpose" can be difficult, if not impossible, to articulate as an outcome or standard and then measure.

However, because Adler-Kassner and O'Neill haven't removed the behaviorist frame, the rhetorical triangle begins to look curiously deterministic through their eyes. Note first how communication is "governed" rather than "created" by the writer's purpose. But more importantly, consider their explanation of how the concept of "writer's purpose" frames writing assessment: "rhetorically and linguistically influenced prompts specify a particular topic to be addressed for a particular audience and

purpose" (63). The writer isn't even a player in this sentence, and her purpose comes at the end of a strange passive construction: *particular topics are to be addressed for a particular purpose.* The real player in this sentence is the prompt itself, which specifies and, well, *prompts.* In other words, the rhetorical frame plus the behaviorist frame equals writing prompts that specify the purpose for test-takers, I mean, writers.

Similarly, the concept of "audience to be addressed" has great potential to challenge the behaviorist frame's emphasis on observable products, since the audience's response first happens in the hidden realm of individual minds. But with the help of genre theory, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill lump individual readers into groups, thus minimizing their challenge to the behaviorist frame, which has a difficult time dealing with individual experiences of the text. A group has no internal or unique experience of the text to complicate the scoring of essays, having, as it were, no individual mind of its own.

This grouping of audiences–or a depersonalization of readers–serves to control both the writer *and* the reader. The writer in this behaviorist rhetorical triangle groups the readers into an audience, fixing and generalizing them in order analyze them before writing. Not to be outdone in the control department, this group audience then dictates the writer's "appropriate choices" (57) during writing. Finally, readers use the concept of appropriate choices to assess the writing's effect–not the actual effect of the writing on *themselves* as readers, but the hypothetical effect on a generalized *group* audience. Neither the writer nor the reader in this picture is a unique and powerful player. Instead, the writer is governed by a mindless but analyzable audience that dictates and then evaluates socially-constructed, appropriate choices.

This formulation of the rhetorical triangle has become so familiar to compositionists that we may not immediately see and resist its depersonalization of audience. However, in their survey of the phenomenology of authoring, Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell remind us that writers themselves resist this concept of a group audience, citing Graham Greene who asserted, "…authors

who write to an unknown audience are just short-order cooks (1983)" (21). Instead, Haswell and Haswell point out that authors more often report "…the sense of writing to a single person or to a select group of people" (21), people that are individually known to the writer. Of course, the behaviorist frame prefers short-order cooks and identifiable groups. It isn't capable of bringing into focus the *relationship* implied by the interaction between a single writer and a single reader–the *transaction* that Louise Rosenblatt spent her career exploring. Writing assessment, having more in common with Watson than Rosenblatt, denies the single reader in theory and in practice, regularly removing the reader who dares to exhibit a singular reading in essay scoring sessions.[2]

Accordingly, no dynamic *relationship* emerges from the interaction between the text, writer's purpose, audience, and context in Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's version of the rhetorical triangle. Instead, we have a rhetorical triangle that governs, dictates, and determines. I ascribe no behaviorist tendencies to Adler-Kassner or O'Neill personally. But when the behaviorist and the rhetorical frames overlap, as the authors allow them to do, the dominant behaviorist frame always wins out, redefining even the concept of "writer's purpose" and "audience addressed" as opportunities for assessors and audiences to control writers.

Once you realize what the behaviorist frame tends to bring into focus, you start seeing its mark all over our thinking about writing assessment. For instance, take the seemingly innocuous second half of the title, *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*. This phrase–*to improve teaching and learning*–sounds so much like a mantra I first encountered in Brian Huot's *(Re)articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* that I didn't pay attention at first to the crucial difference: assessment is no longer *for* teaching and learning, but used to *improve* teaching and learning. The word *improve* cloaks its controlling impulse in progressive-sounding positive spin, but it still looks suspiciously like the impulse that led to the No Child Left Behind Act. Politicians know how difficult it is to control teaching and learning, but they've figured out that they can control

assessments. Therefore, assessments in this behaviorist legislation–and the structure of rewards and punishments that surround them–are used in an attempt to control teaching and learning.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill are not advocating rewards and punishments, of course, but I still see a distressing bit of behaviorist hubris in this phrase. Is it desirable to control teaching and learning through assessment? It is one thing to say, "If you're looking to collect student writing in a way that supports the drafting process, try portfolios." It is another thing to imagine that instructors who don't believe in the pedagogical importance of drafting will become converts when they're forced to use portfolios. More likely, portfolios will become unrecognizable in their hands.

If we're concerned with an instructor's pedagogy, it seems deceptive and manipulative to try to "improve" his pedagogy through assessment. *I'm not going to tell you how to teach, but we've got to do this program assessment–sorry, don't shoot the messenger!–and, by the way, the assessments we've got to do are going to make you teach how I would have told you to teach if I were the kind of person who tells others how to teach.* Instead of using assessments to improve or otherwise control teaching and learning, I propose that we adopt the Do No Harm Rule of Assessment. We would agree to adopt no assessment that harmed or undermined teaching, learning, or writing. Figuring *this* out would be no simple matter. We'd have to put teaching, learning, and writing clearly in focus at the center of our frames before we'd pick them up to view writing assessment again.

In effect, we'd have to declare a moratorium on assessment while we explored these frames and the questions about assessment they bring into focus. We may not be able to declare this moratorium in practice. The behaviorist lens is firmly in place in our institutions, so the accreditation report still needs to be written and the portfolios on the desk still need to be scored. But surely we can continue to work within the institutional frames in practice while we figure out, through our scholarship, a frame or set of frames worth arguing and taking a stand for. After all, when

it comes to frames–with the help of the phoropter or without it–
we have the ability to be both selective and dexterous.

Note

[1]from <http://industrialanatomy.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/678/>.

[2]For a provocative and moving meditation on the concepts of singularity and potentiality and their implications for composition theory and pedagogy, see Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell's Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession on Potentiality and Singularity (2010).

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