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INTRODUCTION

On July 26, 1602, a play entitled *The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark* was entered in the Stationers' Register by the printer James Roberts. The play was printed in 1604, most probably from the author's own manuscript. The existence of an unauthorized text published in 1603 written by "William Shake-speare" gives a clue to the first performance of the play in 1601. That text's reference to children's acting companies, then in great popularity, also provides some evidence for the play's completion by mid-1601, with performance soon following (Edwards 1985).

The series of tenuous claims about the date of completion and performance of *Hamlet* are accompanied by nuanced arguments about the meaning of the play. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson despised the "useless and wanton cruelty" Hamlet shows toward Ophelia, daughter of the digressive Polonius and young woman in waiting to be the wife of the Denmark's tragic prince (Furness 1877, 145). In the nineteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge found in Hamlet someone who, although he knows Uncle Claudius has murdered his father and married his mother by the end of the first act, is incapable of revenge. Four acts and two scenes worth of contemplation by Hamlet on being and not being preceding the murder of Claudius led Coleridge to characterize Hamlet as a character of "great, enormous intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action" (155). For William Hazlitt, Hamlet's thoughts are "as real as our own thoughts. . . . It is *we* who are Hamlet" (155).

In the twentieth century, Oxford University's A. C. Bradley (1949) published *Shakespearean Tragedy*, thus beginning a new tradition of literary studies: authoritative analysis by men employed in newly created departments of English to tackle the job of professional criticism.

Under the direction of literary scholars throughout the twentieth century, attention turned from historical criticism to formalism, from psychoanalysis to poststructuralism, as various forms of criticism emerged. In the twenty-first century, other voices guide us, such as Margaret Litvin (2011) and her analysis of *Hamlet* as an Arab political text embodying a global kaleidoscope of frustration and hope. There is also the singular

voice of the great Longinian critic Harold Bloom (2011). Reminding us that we turn to literature to learn lessons of our better selves, Bloom finds that Hamlet's consciousness "turns even more inward, away from credences and into the labyrinth of questionings" (87). For the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, celebration of the sublime serves as the "supreme aesthetic virtue," one associated with "a certain affective and cognitive response" (16). And so it is, for Bloom, that Hamlet's soliloquies are masterpieces of Shakespeare the thinker.

The three authors of the book you are about to read earned doctorates in literature in departments of English at Harvard University (White), the University of Tennessee (Elliot), and the University of California, San Diego (Peckham). The voices they hear are similar to those heard by Bloom. With AARP cards embedded firmly in their wallets, the three seniors, formally educated in literary studies, selected a passage from *Hamlet* for the title of this book. Here, they follow Bloom in believing that the Age of Resentment is limited in its ability to advance our thinking and that attention to the particular—in both its familiarity and sublimity—is a good way, in Bloom's words, to transport and elevate readers (Bloom 2011, 16). From act 3, scene 2, here is the passage from which we take our cue:

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS. By t'mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

HAMLET. Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS. It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET. Or like a whale?

POLONIUS. Very like a whale. (Edwards 1985 3. 2. 340–45)

Everything is best understood in context. By this point in the play, Hamlet has returned from his studies in Wittenberg to find chaos unleashed in his home; has met the Ghost of his dead father; and has witnessed his uncle's guilty behavior. Later in the scene, Hamlet will kill Polonius mistakenly, believing he is Claudius hidden behind a curtain in his mother's private apartment. The brief scene between Hamlet and Polonius occurs at a turning point in the play, one in which past and future swirl into that labyrinth of questions.

There is surely some sycophancy in the exchange between archetypal Western intellectual and court bumbler, as Phillip Edwards (1985) points out in his edition of the play. But there is also both transience and indeterminacy. "A cloud is whatever you think it to be," Edwards

writes,” and, like the authenticity of the Ghost, one’s view of it changes all the time” (180).

Complexity and contingency, irony and indeterminacy—the perfect passage indeed for a book about action that must be taken in uncertain times, in which claims are tenuous and logic nuanced, in which language must be fluid to encompass new ideas.

OUR AUDIENCE

The topic of this book is the assessment of writing programs in postsecondary American education. This is a book written for those who design, redesign, and assess writing programs. It is for teachers of writing and writing researchers, those we have often found to be one and the same person. By centralizing the writing program as integral to the fulfillment of an institution’s mission, ours is a book written to end the too-often terrible isolation and disenfranchisement of individuals and the programs in which they serve (Dryer 2008; Micciche 2002). Written with the firm belief that writing program administrators are among the most important people on any campus, we will present new models, strategies, and language that will continue to empower our profession through the unique lens of writing program assessment. Inevitably, we will be dealing from time to time with the vexed issue of writing assessment, but that is a somewhat different topic, now dealt with in the many recent books and articles we will reference in the following five chapters. The assessment of student writing may be and usually is part of a program assessment, but only a piece of the puzzle. As a distinct genre, we define writing program assessment as the process of documenting and reflecting on the impact of the program’s coordinated efforts. As a proposed innovation, we believe this assessment is best done by those who share and contribute to the program.

Because a new era of assessment has begun, we believe that new conceptualizations—shown in the thirteen figures and seventeen tables we present throughout the book and the new vocabulary we use in our glossary—are needed. As a service to our profession, this book seeks to make clear and available recent and important concepts associated with assessment to those in the profession of rhetoric and composition/writing studies. In the chapters that follow, we provide strategies that will allow readers to gather information about the relative success of a writing program in achieving its identified program goals. Ever attentive to audience, we firmly believe writing programs must provide valid evidence that the program is serving students, instructors, administrators, alumni, accreditors, and policymakers.

Lofty aims indeed. How to get such dreamy stuff in play for the deliberation that will surely follow as you read this book?

Imagine running into the three authors, alone or together, between sessions at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Or, perhaps, at dinner after a summer meeting of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Or over late-night coffee and drinks after a winter meeting of the Modern Language Association. Here we find the most immediate audience and tone for our book: chatting with colleagues and students. Let's imagine just such a conversation:

YOU. So, how are you three? I hear you have a new book on writing assessment.

US. Men of our age flock together; we are birds of a feather, as the old proverb says. At our meetings the tale is common: We cannot eat. We cannot drink. The pleasures of youth and love are fled away. There was a good time once, but now that is gone, and life is no longer life.

YOU. Sounds dreadful.

US. Not really. It's just amusing to recollect the enduring wisdom of *The Republic*. But, to your observation that we have a new book on writing assessment, we do not. We have a new book on writing program assessment.

YOU. What's the difference?

US. Writing assessment is an event—something undertaken at a particular time for a particular purpose. Writing program assessment is a longitudinal process of accountability—of documenting all the efforts a writing program undertakes to create important consequences for its many constituencies.

YOU. Be specific.

US. A writing assessment episode produces student scores. A writing program assessment uses those scores and many other sources of evidence to demonstrate how the program serves its community.

YOU. More specific.

US. A writing assessment episode may be documented in a table of scores, disaggregated according to important student populations, including mean, standard deviation, and range. Assessment of a writing program certainly includes such tables; however, the assessment might also include evidence such as a table in which the salary and benefits of those who work in the program are compared to data from the American Association of University Professors annual report on the economic status of the profession.

YOU. Big difference. So, this new book is about justice?

US. It is about the kinds of evidence needed to argue for a variety of aims, justice included. As ethics goes, our position is more deontological than not.

YOU. What's with the vocabulary? First, there were the statistical terms. Now, there are the philosophical ones. Why not just speak simply?

US. We are speaking as clearly as we can to try to capture the complex concepts involved with writing program assessment. But we cannot always speak simply because the cultural, social, and economic circumstances surrounding writing programs are not simple. We must embrace fluidity.

YOU. Example?

US. When we teach and assess writing, we are imagining a certain embodiment of writing. A long history of measurement tells us the best way of talking about such an embodiment is to refer to the construct of writing. Once that vocabulary is in place, we can then talk about how the construct is modeled for students and measured in research regarding their performance. We can then use that knowledge to improve the program and those it serves.

YOU. And what is your evidence that any of this is going to work? Isn't this all just the trademark of positivism?

US. Accountability always works. The more we communicate what we do, the better for all of us. That communication can take place in many ways, and some of those ways are going to be empirical.

YOU. We'll be the judge of that.

US. Thus shall we live dear to one another.

Any tendency toward querulousness will be overcome, we promise, by the good-natured banter of such conversation and the sincere desire to advance new ways of thinking about writing program assessment.

OUR FIELD

When the three authors were in school, the field we now belong to did not exist. Setting out with a bit of reflection about our field will help us map out the voyage.

The successful efforts of the Visibility Project, begun by the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition in 2004, led to a presence for our field in the National Research Council's taxonomy of research disciplines and the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP). In the former, the term *rhetoric and composition* designates a single phrase for our field. More comprehensive is the series of terms used in

the CIP, so we provide them here and will return to them from time to time in the book:

- 23.13 rhetoric and composition/writing studies;
 - 23.1301 writing, general;
 - 23.1302 creative writing;
 - 23.1303 professional, technical, business, and scientific writing;
 - 23.1304 rhetoric and composition;
 - 23.1399 rhetoric and composition/writing studies, other

Classified as part of CIP code 23—English language and literature/ letters—the new code (23.13) was parallel with literature (23.14) and established for us a room of our own. In their description of what Louise Wetherbee Phelps and John M. Ackerman term the “epideictic moment of 2010,” the 23.13 series was approved for coding within the CIP system and is now firmly in place. Here practitioners can express “dynamic multiple identities,” Phelps and Ackerman write, “capturing the variance and differentiation of the field as represented in its instructional programs, both general and specialized” (Phelps and Ackerman 2010, 200). There is even a code for “other” that will allow the field to emerge as changes occur in the curricular environment, advances are made in research and theory, and multidisciplinary collaborations arise. When we use the term *our field* in this book, it is to these CIP codes—and all they contain—that we proudly refer.

Within the curriculum of the institutions of the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, students of seminars with titles such as Research Methods in Rhetoric and Composition—with their emphasis on empirical methods—surely constitute an audience for our book. But, at present, that audience is small, and it is our hope that the ideas advanced in this book will encourage all degree programs in rhetoric and composition/writing studies to require courses in quantitative and qualitative empirical methods. Because assessment is a field related to so many others in both research and theoretical developments, readers may also be found within these fields of study included in the CIP: applied linguistics (16.0105); business administration and management (25.0201); cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics (42.2701); computer and information sciences (11.0101); educational assessment, testing, and measurement (13.0604); and psychometrics and quantitative psychology (42.1901). In addition, academic administrators interested in integrating writing programs—often one of the most accountable instructional programs on campus—into the accreditation processes of degree programs and

institutions themselves will find this book helpful. Administrators will find that investment in a writing program is one of the best investments they will ever make.

OUR ORIENTATION

Important advances in research and theory have taken place since the publication of *Evaluating College Writing Programs* by Witte and Faigley (1983) and Edward White's (1989) *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*. In a review of books about writing program administrators, Shirley Rose (2012) notes the significance of understanding writing program administration as a unique field. Specifically identified in CIP 23.1304, the field of writing program administration advances as it extends its influences, develops its history, and prepares its practitioners, just as Rose suggests. The conclusion of Rose's review is particularly important: "We fail in meeting our responsibilities to our graduate students in rhetoric and composition studies if they finish their degrees without coming to an understanding—whether it be through WPA [writing program administrator] course work, internships, or apprenticeships—that much of their work in the field will be managerial, either in formal WPA positions or in informal managerial positions as teachers in writing programs and/or writing researchers" (229). Our orientation in this book is aligned with that position: we meet our responsibilities to all key stakeholders—advisory boards, administration, faculty, parents, professional organizations, students, and the public—if we ensure that writing programs embrace research and management as equal and interdependent, a position taken in the integrative approach of *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* (Malenczyk 2013). We hope readers will discover that the main purpose of this book—to advance the concept of writing program assessment as a unique genre in which constructs are modeled for students within unique institutional ecologies—will help a wide range of audiences meet those responsibilities.

Our experience with writing program assessment convinces us that it needs to be an expansive and inclusive effort, one based in the local campus environment yet designed for comparative reporting. Such assessment encompasses documentation, including representation of student work, acknowledgment that students learn about writing in many ways within and beyond the curriculum, awareness of the digital context within which we all now function, and attention to the diverse audiences that will read and respond to the information writing

program administrators produce. We therefore advance a powerful genre of research using methods and methodologies best begun and refined locally, with the results reported in formats that allow collaboration and accountability to be built within and among campuses.

Writing the foreword for Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley's volume thirty years ago, Lee Odell (1983) began with the realization that "it becomes clear that we may no longer assume that evaluating student writing is the same thing as evaluating a composition program" (ix). He then proceeded to pose questions as relevant now as they were then: What do we need to find out when we evaluate a writing program? How do we determine whether a program is all it should be? Indeed, do we, in fact, have a writing program? If we do, how stable will it prove over time? Is the program to have any long-term influence on students' writing?

To answer these questions, and some of our own, we designed our book to be informed by the lessons of history, case study, best practice, evidence-based inquiry, and theory.

What, we ask, does the history of program assessment and writing assessment tell us about current practice? In chapter 1, we trace historical trends and conceptual developments in writing program assessment and the larger related field of program assessment. To document the symphonic efforts of the writing program, we offer a model of the ingredients of a contemporary writing program, a model that extends from preenrollment through graduate-school and workplace preparation. So that the writing program remains in resonance with regional and other programmatic assessment, thus leveraging its stability over time, we position an institution's writing program as a distinct genre dedicated to modeling writing constructs—that is, the concepts of writing used by our profession—within a distinct, local environment. Figure 1.1 depicts the new era of assessment that has now begun.

In chapter 2 we address lessons learned from collective case studies of two writing programs. In a frank examination that finds that neither program is really what it should be, we are able to use these lessons from the field to establish categories of evidence—what we need to find out—as we assess our own writing programs. In establishing an assessment system that will produce categories of validity evidence, this chapter emphasizes the importance of writing program design. Two essential elements—construct modeling and construct span—are shown in Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4.

Informed by historical and case-study analysis, we turn in chapter 3 to a best-practice approach for anticipating evidential categories,

gathering validity evidence, and mapping construct models to individual classroom tasks. Because student performance remains of paramount importance to all who prepare and review assessment results, we propose a trait-based model of assessment—Phase 2 ePortfolio assessment—as a vehicle that expresses the many ways the institution models the writing construct. As a planned expression of local agency, Phase 2 ePortfolio Assessment allows writing to be collected and evaluated across time and circumstance so evidence of the long-term influence of the writing program can be gathered. While we have focused on assessment of the writing construct because it is at the center of writing program assessment, a brief look at Table 3.3 reveals the many sources of evidence integral to program assessment. A look at Figures 3.1 and 3.2 shows how the sources of evidence can be used to improve the writing program in the process of assessing it.

Are there key measurement concepts, we wondered, that are helpful in writing program assessment? In chapter 4, we present a series of empirical reporting guidelines we believe are essential to those engaged in evidence-based research involving writing programs. Ranging from quantitative descriptive statistics to qualitative content analysis, these reporting practices allow in-depth knowledge about a specific program and yield comparative information about other programs similar to it. These practices are shown in Figure 4.1.

In chapter 5, we present our conceptual overall model, termed Design for Assessment (DFA) and depicted in Figure 5.1. Designed to capture evidence from the writing program's many activities, DFA establishes assessment aims—from consequence to communication—to assure that, in advance, those responsible for the writing program anticipate evidence collection and widespread participation as part of the assessment cycle.

In advance. That phrase suggests one of two key concepts driving our vision of writing program assessment. The first is that those responsible for writing program design anticipate accountability demands and work to address them in the design of the program itself. External evaluators from regional accreditation agencies such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and program accreditation agencies such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology are a permanent part of postsecondary education for the foreseeable future. Yet there is no mandate that the occasion for an external evaluation—the limited time a visiting team spends on campus and its brief analysis—should be the only reporting that matters for an institution. Local reports to administrators, later refined and delivered at conferences

and published in journals, provide an excellent guide to external evaluators when they arrive on campus. As such, this book is offered to support all those involved in the difficult and complex work of designing, and redesigning, writing programs. The second key concept, related to the first, is that we firmly believe in the importance of localism. What we seek in this volume is a way for writing program administrators to signify to all stakeholders that the institution's writing program recognizes its wide responsibilities and has taken the time to apply the best knowledge from our field for the benefit of the individual student. As we will demonstrate time and again, value dualisms and value hierarchies—such as the needless disjuncture between constructivism and positivism that so often interrupts important assessment research—need not prevent us from comparing and contrasting our unique programs with those of others to help students and increase knowledge. Isolationism is the logical outcome of separation; resonance within the field is the hallmark of community, which does not disallow the special circumstances of local contexts and traditions.

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A NOTE BEFORE BEGINNING

In *Going North Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction*, Irvin Peckham (2010a) stresses the need for deeply contextualized understanding as part of writing instruction. Pedagogical emphasis on the vague concept of critical thinking and the remorseless pursuit of persuasion combine to present barriers, unwitting though they may be, to diverse groups of students. Such stratification may, in turn, limit their abilities to work meaningfully with language. For Peckham, as for his coauthors in the book you are about to read, there is no such thing as “just writing”—that derogatory phrase suggesting that the pursuit of competency in many genres of writing is merely a working-class notion of literacy (Linkon, Peckham, and Lanier-Nabors 2004; Unruh 2012).

How to begin? As teachers, Peckham (2010a) tells us, we should investigate our students’ “literacy skills and goals, honor them, and work with them to help them improve their skills and reach their goals, even though their goals may be quite different from the ones teachers had in mind” (101). At the same time, we need to assist them, and evaluate their progress, toward goals they may not have or may not be able to articulate at the start of their studies. If we approach this task with the sensitivity and professionalism it demands, both the curriculum and its assessment become much more complicated than they have seemed to be in the past. Perhaps some of our colleagues will see this work as a departure from the humanistic enterprise, but we see it rather as an expansion of it. The questions we provide at the end of each chapter reveal our dedication to the sense of inquiry that is the very essence of the humanities.

That is a pretty good place to start—with an eye on the pragmatic and a willingness to honor context. Here is a cloud we can watch take shape.