TEACHING AND ASSESSING WRITING:
Recent Advances in Understanding,
Evaluating, and Improving
Student Performance
by Edward M. White
Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985

Several years ago I found myself in charge of creating a writing test for my district’s state mandated minimum competency writing test. Because I was then a high school English department chairperson and because I had long been involved with writing, the district assumed I assumed that I was qualified to write and administer the “simple” test using the state’s handbook. The pilot test results were catastrophic.

Since that time I have been involved as a chief reader and have worked with teachers in holistic assessment in districts from West Germany to Panama to California. Sometimes the assessments proceeded magically and easily; but at other times the scoring went slightly awry and I felt I never knew exactly why. Now, thanks to Dr. White’s comprehensive book on teaching and assessing writing, I know why things went wrong and also know how to avoid some of the pitfalls of holistic testing: pitfalls concerning topic selection, reliability, and validity; pitfalls concerning using holistic scoring at the wrong time for the wrong purpose.

The way we assess writing can, in many ways, determine the parameters of the curriculum. If we test writing with multiple-choice questions, then we will encourage the use of multiple-choice questions in our classrooms. If we test through essays, in contrast, then we will teach students to write the kinds of essays asked for in the tests. Thus, teachers who want control of their own curriculum must become involved with district or university test development, and there is no better way to become involved, whether novice or experienced in teaching, than by becoming acquainted with the ideas in this excellent book. And although some may differ with White’s distinctions among holistic, analytic, and primary trait scoring or with other smaller matters, this book will be the definitive book on the subject for both classroom teachers and test administrators. Certainly, any teacher involved in testing will find Dr. White’s book invaluable. Moreover, teachers involved with writing can use the book to develop a classroom writing curriculum which makes explicit for students the criteria used for evaluating essays. White states that the testing of writing must be a professional concern of all teachers involved in the teaching of writing and that an understanding of the issues behind even large-scale testing will improve every teacher’s ability to work in the classroom. Thus, by combining theory and practical applications, this book should be useful in a way that books devoted only to theory or only to pedagogical practice seldom are.

Following these opening remarks and the first chapter on linking teaching and the assessment of writing, chapter two discusses the “development and uses of holistic scoring.” White explains that through holistic scoring we measure writing “as a unit of expression rather than as a series of isolated skills.” For those assessing programs and for classroom teachers, he discusses in clear and concise language the need for developing precise writing assignments or “prompts,” and recommends six procedures which help develop high reliability for holistic scoring, procedures which can also be adapted to the classroom: (1) controlled essay reading, (2) creating a scoring guide or “rubric” for teachers and scorers of papers, (3) using sample or “anchor” papers, (4) checking the scoring while the reading is in progress, (5) using multiple-independent scoring, and (6) evaluating and record keeping procedures. These procedures are discussed in detail throughout the book, but White also warns us of the limitations of holistic scoring: while efficient, economical, and reliable rank ordering is a great deal more than we had in the past, it is still only rank ordering. That is, a holistic score is like a percentile rating; it has meaning only in reference to the group that was tested and the test criteria embodied in the scoring guide for that particular test. This means, on the one hand, that the usefulness of holistic
scores is limited and, on the other, that we cannot regard a holistic score as an absolute value.

In addition, three other limitations are discussed: (1) a holistic score does not give us meaningful diagnostic information, (2) because a score is connected only to its particular test group, scores from different tests using different questions and different students are not equivalent. This is an important point because some testers behave as if scores from different tests have absolute values in themselves. A third limitation mentioned is what Dr. White calls the overestimation of the reliability of the scores reported.

A few chapter headings can give the scope of the text: “Measuring Writing Ability by Using Proficiency Tests,” “Selecting Appropriate Writing Tests,” and “Avoiding Pitfalls in the Testing of Writing.” Each chapter, gracefully written, offers information for both teachers interested in using holistic scoring in their classrooms and test administrators wishing to avoid problems in testing writing.

One chapter, “How Theories of Reading Affect Responses to Student Writing,” is my personal favorite because it presents a particularly intriguing discussion on holistic scoring, some theories about reading, and the concept of the "interpretive community." It also reaffirms, I believe, that the teacher’s task is not to judge a student’s text as if it were an unacceptable essay by Montaigne, or as Dr. White puts it, “as if every student composition were a failed Shakespeare sonnet,” but rather to treat student texts in terms of the student’s intentions and in terms of how well those intentions appear to have been met. White sees a need to change the present interpretive community that shapes not only how we read but also shapes how we will write, and he sees the possibility of change in holistic scoring sessions where professionals communicate ideas and, hopefully, develop more productive ways of viewing writing. He states: “One way to think of what this book is trying to do—and what many of the process-oriented programs for writing teachers are trying to do—is to shake up an out-of-date interpretive community, to revise what we ask for—and thus what we get—from student writing.”

In the last chapter: “Helping Students Improve Their Writing: Some Practical Approaches for the Classroom,” Dr. White presents a series of writing lessons which take student writers from a first draft to a revised draft, from writing about personal experiences to writing analytically. In doing so, he also illustrates clearly the relationship between testing and writing. Moreover, the series of superior lessons in the chapter, though created for older students, could serve as a model for developing lessons at all grade levels. The lessons involve students in discussions, in planning and setting goals, and in developing a scoring guide to help students evaluate their own success. Finally, the lessons are completed in group work and in student reading of professional and successful student models of the assignments; and for those interested in evaluating classroom writing, White explains how and why he gives a holistic score for first drafts and a grade for final revised drafts. In short, the last chapter is a mini-lesson in how to teach and evaluate students at all grade levels. Much of good teaching makes explicit what was hidden or concealed unintentionally because it was assumed that the student had background knowledge or rhetorical models similar to the teacher’s. By creating a series of steps which guide students explicitly through the writing assignments, White models a process approach and insures student success. For teachers of writing, this chapter alone would be worth the price of admission.

In summary, Dr. White presents a clear exposition of holistic scoring procedures along with an excellent discussion concerning the relationship between reading theories and writing. In addition, he convincingly illustrates how the entire procedure for holistic scoring which involves selecting a topic, developing a scoring guide, and creating an interpretive community, can lead to better testing procedures, better teaching, and better writing. Most importantly, Dr. White convinces us that the three are inextricably interwoven like threads in a tapestry.

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