

Our Better Judgment

TEACHER LEADERSHIP FOR WRITING ASSESSMENT



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Principles
in Practice
LITERACY ASSESSMENT

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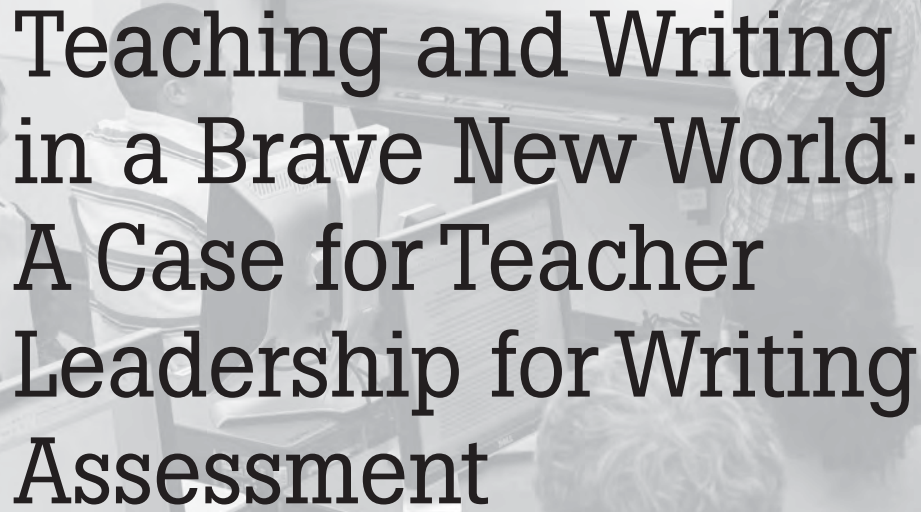
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Teaching and Writing in a Brave New World: A Case for Teacher Leadership for Writing Assessment

In the past 30 years, research has produced revolutionary changes in our understanding of language, learning, and the complex literacy demands of our rapidly changing society.

—IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Rev. ed. (1)

*How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't!*
—Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (act 4, Scene 1)

The *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, produced by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), make one thing perfectly clear: we teachers find ourselves in a brave new world. Research and experience over the past few decades have changed our fundamental conceptions of reading, writing, language, learning, assessment, and schooling:

- Once understood as discrete decoding and encoding skills, reading and writing are now understood as complex personal and social processes of meaning-making that take place over time and across a wide range of forms and media.

- Once conceived as a neutral tool for communicating information and ideas, language is now conceived as a cultural practice that mediates—indeed, constructs—our experience of reality.
- Once seen as the acquisition of transmitted knowledge, learning is now viewed as a contextualized, interactive process of inquiry.
- Once practiced only as a summative check on learning, assessment is now practiced as a highly contextualized, often communal, formative component of teaching and learning.
- Once charged with teaching the “3Rs,” schools have become the primary caretaker of a complex multicultural and multilingual society, responsible for teaching not only “the basics” but also citizenship, life skills, creativity and innovation, character, information and media literacy, entrepreneurialism, sex education, global awareness, ethical responsibility, emotional intelligence, collaboration and teamwork, and much, much more.

Many of the concepts in this last laundry list fall under the heading “Twenty-First-Century Skills.” There is widespread agreement that our historical moment, and in particular the proliferation of information and communication technologies, places special demands on literacy—or, more properly, literacies. In its “Definition of 21st Century Literacies,” for instance, NCTE claims that “a literate person” must now possess a range of “multiple, dynamic, and malleable” literacies that allow her or him to do the following:

- develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts
- attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

Turning back to the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* (SARW), we can see that these increasing and ever-changing literacy demands place special demands on teachers of reading and writing. According to the SARW,

we must be concerned about the stances and practices involved in taking an idea presented in one modality (e.g., print) and transcribing or transmediating it into another (e.g., digital video), and we must consider what possibilities and limitations a particular mode offers and how that relates to its desirability over other modes for particular purposes and situations. (5)

Further, “[s]tudents need to acquire competencies with word processors, blogs, wikis, Web browsers, instant messaging, listservs, bulletin boards, virtual worlds, video editors, presentation software, and many other literate tools and practices” (18).

As if all this weren’t enough to make us feel downright Miranda-like—untutored, unsure of what’s in store, maybe even wide-eyed in amazement—the standards also place *assessment* in the hands of teachers. According to Standard 2, “The teacher is the most important agent of assessment” (13). Though the authors of the standards are careful to indicate that responsibility for assessment is shared among educational stakeholders, they insist that teachers play a leading role in shaping “communities of inquiry” in their schools and communities. In the end, they write, “as agents of assessment, teachers must take responsibility for making and sharing judgments about students’ achievement and progress. They cannot defer to others or to other instruments” (14).

Brave new world indeed. Mention assessment and many teachers might be put in mind of that *other* “brave new world”: Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel by that name. In Huxley’s imagined world, a World State administers life to docile people who have been robbed of their identity and humanity through advances in biotechnology. We doubt most teachers’ anxieties about assessment extend quite *that* far, but for many teachers, assessment is a technical practice they don’t feel they understand very well, wielded by people with more power than they have (administrators, policymakers, the testing industry) in order to control their professional work. In this age of “accountability,” teachers have been treated as targets of assessment rather than agents of it; assessment is something that is done to teachers, not something they do.

And now here come the SARW, adding assessment to teachers’ already full plates. Why, we might reasonably ask, should we commit ourselves to this work that has so often been used by others to rank and sort our students, control our teaching, and punish our schools? And where will we find the time and energy for more work on top of everything else we’re doing as the literacy ground shifts under our feet?

As a high school English language arts teacher (Eric) and a college writing teacher (Chris), we take these questions seriously. We know it is not self-evident that teachers should, or even can, take on the roles and responsibilities assigned to them by the SARW. We recognize that some teachers wish to reject this brave new world. Still, we’re determined to join with the authors of the SARW and do our best to convince you that it is incumbent upon all teachers who have anything to do with student writing—and we hope that’s most teachers!—to embrace writing assessment. We urge you not only to become “literate” in writing assessment, but also to develop expertise in it and even to provide leadership for it in your classroom, school, community, and perhaps beyond.

But this book is more than just an argument; it's also a resource devoted to helping you learn *how* to gain writing assessment literacy, develop writing assessment expertise, and practice writing assessment leadership. In keeping with the aims of the Principles in Practice imprint, we provide numerous illustrations drawn from classrooms and communities. Each chapter after this one provides a mix of discussion and examples of colleagues engaged in writing assessment as practitioners, experts, and leaders. We also point you to other resources to support you as you become the “agent of assessment” the SARW encourage you to be.

But if you are still wondering *why* you should invest your precious time and energy in this work—or perhaps how you can convince your colleagues to do so—we begin with our case for teacher leadership for writing assessment.

Our Case

Here is the crux of the case we want to make: *A brave new world of literacy is upon us. Teachers can either lead the way by helping our students navigate this exciting if sometimes perilous environment, or we can leave students to their own devices and those of “reformers” and their “experts” who may not understand teaching, learning, or writing—and certainly don’t understand them in the intimate way teachers do.* The former is a daunting challenge but full of exciting opportunities; the latter would be disastrous for students, education, and our democracy.

If this framing of the case seems melodramatic, consider the following propositions, which we explore and defend in more detail in the following sections:

1. Young people today are writing more than ever before, and they will continue to do so—in many forums and media and with various consequences—whether their teachers are there to guide them or not. We must learn to read, assess, and respond to the diverse ways of writing they are inventing because this writing is both exciting and dangerous. As teachers, we must lead by helping to shape how our students value, participate in, and create the brave new world of writing in the twenty-first century.

2. Even as the means of writing production have been opened up to young people—if they have access to a computer and an Internet connection, they can publish their writing with a few clicks—most of them do not feel they have a *meaningful* and *consequential* public voice. Their writing outside of school, while *potentially* public, functions mostly (if paradoxically) as privatized public discourse. Meanwhile, their writing in school is often produced for the purpose of closed-circuit assessments (they write to be evaluated, not to be read). For all the unprecedented writing they are doing—much of it online—they have precious few public spaces available to them in which they can influence others, especially adult decision-makers. As teachers, we must lead by teaching and assess-

ing writing in ways that open up meaningful and consequential opportunities for young writers.

3. Like young people, teachers have a difficult time gaining a meaningful and consequential public voice. Curriculum and instruction are largely and increasingly imposed on schools by policymakers and technical experts who are not themselves educators and who do not recognize or value local contexts of practice. Meanwhile, teachers are being made scapegoats of an underfunded public school system and are often cruelly vilified as incompetent public servants. As teachers, we must lead by teaching and assessing writing in ways that publicly proclaim and honor our professional judgment.

Now let's slow this down a bit. We begin with the brave new world that has opened up for (and is being opened up by) young writers.

Writing 2.0

We would like you to meet Chris's daughter Erin. Erin is a smart, spunky eleven-year-old who spent her first nine years in Nebraska and is now living with her parents and older sister near Boston. She is also a writer. To put a finer point on it, Erin is an almost obsessive self-sponsored writer. She composes poems, short stories, plays, songs, diary entries, letters, emails, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, webpages, blog entries, iMovies, and more. She's also working on a science fiction novel and she is the publisher of her own independent newspaper, *The Town Herald* (circulation appx. 30). As you can see from this list, Erin is an avid and competent user of a wide range of writing technologies, including those we call "Web 2.0." These interactive technologies have allowed her to remain connected to her Nebraska friends via email, instant messaging, and video chatting (sometimes all of these at once). She uses the Internet to exchange photographs with these friends and she makes e-cards, slide shows, and home movies for them. Because she has access to computer technology and the (mostly self-taught) literacy abilities to use them effectively, she is able to communicate with and express herself using multiple modalities and in various media.

To be sure, Erin is unusually prolific, and she is a child of considerable privilege. Still, the range and complexity of her literate life, and the increasing demands that will be placed on it as she nears and enters adulthood, are not altogether unusual. Consider, for instance, Kylene Beers's depiction in *Adolescent Literacy* of Colin, the failing, near-dropout high school student who ducks out of English class to work on his blog, on which he explores environmental issues (Beers, Probst, and Rief). Students nearly everywhere, as Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests,

write words on paper, yes—but . . . also compose words and images and create audio files on Web logs (blogs), in word processors, with video editors and Web editors

and in e-mail and on presentation software and in instant messaging and on listservs and on bulletin boards—and no doubt in whatever genre will emerge in the next ten minutes. (“Made Not Only,” 298)

Kids and adolescents are using Internet-enabled writing technologies to engage in a wide variety of collaborative activities, including—to choose just a few random examples—playing role-based games, writing fan fiction and making fan films, standing up to standardized testing, bullying peers into suicide, or supporting one another’s quests to become or remain anorexic. Moreover, as NCTE’s “Definition of 21st Century Literacies” suggests, and as numerous reports and vision statements on 21st century literacies confirm, new and emerging information and communication technologies entail ever-rising literacy demands. (See, for instance, NCTE’s *21st Century Literacies: A Policy Research Brief*; The Partnership for 21st Century Skills website; and the Center for Media Literacy’s “Literacy for the 21st Century.”)

Again, brave new world. What’s “new” about new media is that it allows virtually anyone not only to consume information and ideas but also to share and publish them (see Shirky). As a result, for better *and* for worse, young writers are not waiting for adults to provide forums for their writing; they are creating those forums for themselves. They are citizens of what Yancey calls an emerging “writing public,” the defining feature of which is that “*no one is forcing [it] to write*” (“Made Not Only,” 300; emphasis in original). In other words, this writing—like most of Erin’s writing, or at least the writing that matters most to her—is taking place largely outside of school.

Does this mean teachers need to learn and teach every new communication and information technology that comes along? Absolutely not. We are not technology trainers. Nor does it mean that we should seek to replicate in our classrooms the kinds of new media composing that Erin and her peers are doing. Though certainly teachers are making excellent uses of Web 2.0 writing tools in their classrooms (see Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran, for example) and should continue to do so, the point is not to make classrooms mirror *other* literacy environments. In classrooms, we want students to do particular kinds of reading, writing, and thinking that we value, which may or may not be abundantly available to young people in other places. Our goal should be to help students value, reflect critically on, and practice their various literacies across multiple contexts.

What does this have to do with writing assessment? Everything, as it turns out. New ways to write and new kinds of writing require new ways of reading and evaluating. As teachers, we need to help students make sense of their expanding literacies and the texts and images they produce—and we need to make sense of these ourselves. To take a simple example, writers of Web-based texts do not build their credibility in the same ways that writers of print texts do; in fact, writers of

Web-based texts are often corporate or anonymous composers—compilers—of texts that are fragmented, associative, and often made up of texts or objects that already existed in other contexts. How can we help students think through issues of authorship, credibility, and source use and citation in these kinds of environments? What new kinds of criteria will we need to assess the value of these texts?

Even if we do not share all of our students' proliferating literacies, we can take advantage of them as we help our students write in meaningful and responsible ways in all facets of their lives. There is no question that our students will write, whether we tell them to or not. The only question is whether we will be there when they do, ready to be responsive conversation partners as they create their own brave new worlds with their words.

Privatized Public Writing

But there is a curious paradox about all this public writing: relatively little of it is meaningful and consequential in the adult world of decision-makers. Certainly few young people think so. The chief finding of the 2008 National Commission on Writing report *Writing, Technology and Teens* is that teens write a lot—almost constantly—but they do not consider much of this activity, especially the large portion of it they do online, as “real” writing. As the authors of the report write, “[t]he act of exchanging emails, instant messages, texts, and social network posts is communication that carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings” (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Rankin Macgill i).

And no wonder: at the same time that many young people are “going public” with their writing, we are seeing public spaces for writing shrink and disappear. We realize this might sound like a strange claim in light of all we've said about the Internet and young people's proliferating literacies, but let's go back to Erin for a moment. It is clearly the case that Erin is growing up in a world of what cultural theorists call time-space compression (see Harvey). Her use of new media technologies has obliterated the time and space between the Midwest and the East Coast of the United States. But for all this frenetic communicative and expressive activity, it is essentially private. In all the forms of writing we've mentioned, Erin is writing only to people she knows about the same topics she would—and does—discuss with friends in person or in letters sent by post: weather, school, friends, books. Even her “newspaper,” which treats a broader range of topics (politics, sports, advice, etc.), is written and read only by people she knows well about topics of mutual interest. Similarly, her webpages and blogs are not public to anyone she does not invite to view them. All of this wonderful writing is enormously meaningful to her and to those of us lucky enough to read it, but it is not in any meaningful sense “public” writing.¹

Of course, some young people *are* using electronic communication and information technologies in publicly consequential ways, as some of our previous examples—the antitesting activists, the “pro-ana” (anorexia advocates)—suggest. But these are the rare exceptions. For most young people, their online writing is only nominally “public”; it doesn’t function in any meaningful way *as* public writing.² Some of this writing may happen in public, but even then, like many phone calls and hallway greetings (or gossip), it is engaged as a private exchange without a public dimension. Of course, it is possible that virtually anyone *could* listen in on online conversations, as we rightly warn young people. But the stories about Internet predators and prospective employers learning embarrassing things about would-be employees are exceptions that prove the rule: almost all the time, almost all the so-called public writing on the Internet has no audience beyond a very limited affinity group. What these stories really demonstrate is just how private that writing is intended to be: the concern here—reasonably enough—is that people will inadvertently reveal compromising information about their *private* lives.

Our culture might offer young people free blogging tools and Twitter accounts, but it doesn’t provide even the most privileged among them with forums in which to deliberate, formulate considered opinions, and weigh in on matters of public significance. As teachers interested in public writing quickly come to learn, there are few venues to which a student of any age can send her writing with the realistic expectation that serious adults in positions of power are likely to read it and deliberate over its ideas. Many of us have helped our own students laboriously design websites that get only a handful of hits, Facebook groups that collect only a few members, and blogs that garner only a comment or two (usually from a friend).

Strangely, even as information and communication technologies proliferate, the public sphere is actually getting smaller, thanks to the privatization of so much of what used to be public space—public lands, public bandwidth, community airwaves—not to mention the overwhelmingly swift and comprehensive consolidation of corporate media outlets (see Welch). Instead of engaging in robust public deliberation, we have created a culture—at least hinting at Huxley’s imagined administered world—in which most important decisions are made by those who own these previously public resources and their bands of “experts”: people with specialized, often technical, knowledge. This culture leaves little room for ordinary people, including most young people, to write in ways that are likely to affect decision-makers. Part of what it means to be there for our students as writers in this brave new world, then, is to help them create public spaces *for* their writing and *with* their writing.

Privatized Teaching

But teachers will not be able to help create public spaces for students unless we also create public spaces for our own work—because teaching, too, has become privatized. As Michelle Comstock, Mary Ann Cain, and Lil Brannon suggest, “with regards to teachers of writing, privatization is also about privatizing expertise and decision-making so that the people who are most impacted by such policies are permitted no place and no authority to speak on their own behalf” (9). In other words, important educational decisions are rarely made by those who actually spend their days in classrooms; instead, they are made by “experts” remote from scenes of instruction.

Given our focus on assessment in this book, it is important to recognize that standardized testing has played a major role in the privatization of teaching. It has been used as a tool by policymakers and the testing industry to control curriculum and instruction from outside of schools (as we hear so often, “what we test is what we teach”). It has provided fodder for continuous, manufactured educational crises, which propagate the idea that teachers (unlike “objective” measurement experts) cannot be trusted (see Berliner and Biddle). It has put schools in competition with one another, much as businesses are put in competition in private-sector markets. And it has brought an army of private vendors—test and textbook makers, off-the-shelf curriculum providers, test-prep companies, purveyors of a wide range of “supplemental services”—into the schools.

Though the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law is widely credited with (or decried for) underwriting these developments—and surely it did—recent policy developments promise to remove teachers even further from educational decision making. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), coordinated by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), is an effort to provide a single set of standards for the nation (though it is adopted by individual states—forty-five, at last count). According to the initiative’s mission statement, the purpose of the CCSSI is to “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them” (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Notice that teachers are the *targets* of the standards, not their originators: the standards “provide” them with “understanding.” We can argue the pros and cons of the standards themselves, the very idea of national standards, and the heavy-handed way the federal government is ensuring states adopt them (by tying Race to the Top funding to their adoption by states). But what seems incontrovertible is that the process used to develop the standards was top-down and largely excluded teachers.

The English Language Arts Work Group for the CCSS, for instance, consisted of fourteen members, ten of whom were associated with ACT, Achieve, or the College Board (these members had titles such as Senior Test Development Associate; Assistant Vice President, Educational Planning and Assessment System Development, Education Division; and Senior Director, Standards and Curriculum Alignment Services). The group also included representatives of three companies: America's Choice (an educational "solutions provider" owned by Pearson); Student Achievement Partners, LLC; and VockleyLang, LLC (a marketing firm). Rounding out the group was a lone retired English professor, well known for her work on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Exactly zero practicing teachers served on this work group.

Meanwhile, teachers' professional organizations such as NCTE were relegated to the sidelines. As NCTE President Kylene Beers repeatedly reminded members of the organization in a series of open letters, NCTE's role was that of "independent critic." "NCTE was not invited to help author or provide feedback as standards were formulated," Beers noted in her letter of September 21, 2009, "however, in July, NCTE was invited to provide a response to [the first drafts of the standards]." NCTE assembled a Review Team that issued responses, which by all accounts were taken seriously by the NGA and CCSSO. But the fact remains that NCTE was invited only to *respond*; it was not a major player in the CCSS. Instead of turning to professional organizations and classroom experts who spend their days with children, the NGA and CCSSO turned primarily to the private sector, recruiting high-ranking employees and managers in education "solutions" organizations and companies to create curricular standards.

Predictably, we are now seeing the emergence of a marketplace for curriculum and instruction professional development tools and "scalable educational technology solutions" based on the Common Core standards. The Gates Foundation and Pearson Foundation recently announced "a partnership aimed at crafting complete, online curricula for those standards in mathematics and English/language arts that span nearly every year of a child's precollegiate education" (Gewertz, "Gates"). (The Gates foundation has also awarded the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD] \$3 million to promote the Common Core State Standards among teachers and contributed to the \$7 million awarded to technology programs related to the Common Core standards by the Next Generation Learning Challenges initiative; see Nagel.) They will develop twenty-four courses, four of which will be available online for free, with the whole suite available for purchase—presumably from Pearson, the for-profit international media, publishing, and test-making corporation that operates the Pearson Foundation. While critics worry about the prospect of turning the nation's curriculum over to rich individuals and for-profit "entrepreneurs," the Obama administration apparently

welcomes this development. Here, for instance, is US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's Chief of Staff, Joann Weiss:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.

Meanwhile, two consortia are designing common assessment systems based on the Common Core State Standards. Because these consortia will be enormously important in the years to come, it is worth considering how they have operated thus far. Allocated \$350 million in Race to the Top funds, the consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—represent all but a handful of states and the District of Columbia. In a white paper titled “Designing Common State Assessment Systems,” the NGA and CCSSO explain that these consortia are charged with designing “one or two” summative tests. (It is implied that the organizations would have preferred one consortium, but the states could not come to consensus on a single vision; for now, the organizations are settling for two, with the hope that they will merge in the future.)

PARCC, as its name implies, is focused on preparing students for college and work and on creating a streamlined, cost-effective system. SBAC includes emphases on professional development for and participation by teachers and computer-assisted assessment.³ But both consortia, like the CCSSI, are top-down efforts devoted to designing educational programs *for* teachers and students. The PARCC governance structure, described in the white paper, and the SBAC organizational chart, provided on its website, are heavily skewed toward policymakers, state officials, and private technical and management partners. The PARCC governance structure doesn't mention teachers at all; the SBAC organizational chart includes “educator professional organizations” among a set of nine stakeholder groups at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

So teachers are being removed further and further from their central location in education, and assessment—standardized testing, in particular—is the primary means of this displacement. Comstock and her colleagues urge writing teachers to claim and create public space in and beyond our classrooms. They warn that “[w]ithout adequate representation of their expertise in the decision-making process of schooling, the public spaces available for teachers and students to speak will continue to shrink until the remaining public spaces become indistinguishable from the private interests that seek to dominate and control public space” (5). We agree.

Our Better Judgment

We hope to have convinced you that there is too much at stake for teachers *not* to assert our leadership in this brave new world of literacy. We hope you share our belief that teachers need to work together to help create public spaces for writing and teaching.

But teacher leadership for writing assessment need not be only a defensive gesture: we believe teachers have much to gain by moving writing assessment to the center of our professional practice. Consider again our earlier point about how notions of credibility are changing in a new media landscape. One of the questions we asked was, “What new criteria will we need to assess the value of these texts?” As this question suggests, assessment is rooted in *values*. Any serious exercise in educational assessment focuses our attention on “what we really value” (Broad). It allows us to clarify our goals and to align our practices with those goals. And it allows us to hone our individual and collective judgment, which is the very lifeblood of our profession.

Why is teachers’ professional judgment so important? *Judgment* has a few relevant meanings. In everyday parlance, it is an evaluation based on information or evidence. Clearly, teachers make judgments all the time, every day—about which activities to engage students in, about whether to challenge an unruly student on his behavior or let it go for now, about whether to review or move on to new material, about when a class is ready for an assessment . . . the list goes on. Second, in legal terminology, a judgment is a finding: a result, a decision. In law as in education, the best and most reliable judgments are those informed by intimate knowledge of a situation and its participants. And those who have extended, sustained experience in a field and are able to reflect on and learn from it are said to have judgment in the third sense: discernment, wisdom. Good judgment is earned through understanding situations in which decisions have impact: *to discern* means to see, recognize, comprehend. Wisdom and discernment are always rooted in shared values, forged by experience, and informed by inquiry.

Because we are *inside* the teaching and learning relationship with students on a daily basis, teachers’ best judgment is shaped by shared school values, experiences with students and fellow teachers, and inquiry into teaching and learning. Unfortunately, some proponents of standardized tests believe they can do an end-run around this messy business about values, experience, and inquiry. But any serious person will conclude that these are not hindrances to meaningful education; they are its beating heart. They are also the heart of a functioning democracy, which requires careful, public deliberation. It is no coincidence that the citizens of Huxley’s World Government are stripped of their ability for individual and collective judgment; without that, they are susceptible to being controlled by others.

What we're calling "our better judgment" is not a natural result of being placed in a classroom. Our judgment is only better than that of outsiders if it is informed by active and critical *inquiry* into reading, writing, language, learning, assessment, and schooling. Inquiry, as the authors of the SARW suggest, is both a problem-posing and a problem-solving activity that anchors effective assessment. The defining feature of any profession is that it inquires into and assesses its own values, procedures, and practices, and teaching is certainly no exception. If we are not inquiring into and assessing our work and the work of our students, we might be instructing, but we are not truly teaching. This is why teachers should embrace assessment-as-inquiry as a core, indispensable part of their daily work and their profession.

Yes, We Can

But even if teachers' professional judgment *should* be at the center of education, can we pull it off? *Can* teachers take the assessment reins and lead into the twenty-first century, considering our already busy, sometimes overwhelming, professional lives?

This book answers, resoundingly, *Yes, we can*. Why? Because assessment-as-inquiry—an idea offered by the SARW and elaborated throughout this book—is not something we do *in addition to* our work as teachers; it is an integral part of that work. To be sure, assessment has some technical dimensions, and we need to learn about them. But assessment is fundamentally a part of teaching and learning and thus falls well within our professional purview. In fact, because it helps us articulate our values and make sense of and coordinate the various components of our practice, assessment-as-inquiry has the potential to make our work easier, more manageable. We know that effective formative classroom assessments lead to significant learning gains for students, especially those who are "at risk" (Black and Wiliam; Guskey; Hughes; Wiliam). We're just coming to understand how assessment-as-inquiry supports *teacher* learning as well. We've also just begun learning how assessment can help teachers to inspect our own and our communities' values, to (re)invigorate our commitment to our work, and to help us gain more control over our profession.

But we won't ask you to take our word for it. Instead, in the chapters to follow, we introduce you to many of your colleagues who are using assessment in just these ways. We answer the "how" question by showing you how practicing teachers are doing the work of writing assessment.

One final word about the arc of this book. Chapter 2, on writing assessment literacy, is designed to help you understand and use writing assessment in your own classroom. Chapter 3, on writing assessment expertise, is designed to help you

participate as a knowledgeable professional in your school's assessment activities. Chapter 4, on writing assessment leadership, is designed to help you shape assessment cultures and policies in your schools, districts, communities, and perhaps beyond. At each point in this arc, we imagine your assessment knowledge becoming deeper and its sphere of influence becoming broader. Of course, we recognize the dangers of appearing to lay out a rigid, linear trajectory comprising seemingly mutually exclusive categories. Our intent in proposing the arc is not didactic, but rather explanatory: we think it offers a useful way to describe various orientations and roles teachers take vis-à-vis assessment. We recognize that all teachers must work with and within the affordances and constraints of their situations. We all must begin where we are and do what we can. That said, it would be disingenuous to suggest that our goal with this book is anything less than helping *all* teachers—yes, including you!—to become assessment leaders.

Notes

1. As this book goes to press, Erin, motivated in part by the Occupy movement, has embarked on a new, public blog project—while still taking the necessary precautions, under her parents' watchful eyes, to protect her privacy—in which she takes on a range of political issues, from digital piracy legislation to transgender rights. She is slowly gaining more readers, including some strangers.

2. While some media and communications experts hail a new age of public participation (Shirky; Warnick), others suggest the digital “public sphere” harbors *anti*-social tendencies and lacks “clear frameworks of social obligation and political responsibility” (Keren 16).

3. SBAC's narrow definition of *assessment literate* teachers is telling; according to the SBAC website, these teachers have gotten “inside” the Common Core State Standards, have taught and measured them, and have learned how to intervene in students' learning if they have not mastered the standards.

“In this age of ‘accountability,’ teachers have been treated as targets of assessment rather than agents of it; assessment is something that is done to teachers, not something they do.”

And this state of affairs, argue Chris W. Gallagher and Eric D. Turley, must not continue if we want our students to develop the skills that will enable them to succeed in this brave new world of technological and global literacy. Teachers do have a role in writing assessment, the authors suggest, and we have much to gain if we move assessment to the center of our professional practice, especially if we approach writing assessment through an inquiry framework that allows us to collaborate with students, other teachers, and community members to build our own assessment literacy, expertise, and leadership.

Based on the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Revised Edition, this book brings us inside teachers’ local contexts—classrooms, schools, and communities—to illustrate how teachers are taking the reins of writing assessment, guiding and improving the writing and literacy practices of their students while simultaneously reflecting on and revising their own instructional practices.

As part of NCTE’s Principles in Practice imprint, *Our Better Judgment* shows us what is possible when teachers practice leadership in writing assessment and challenges us to speak out about what our students really need.

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