In the national debate surrounding the efficacy of standardized testing, specialists in writing instruction are focusing on a key element seldom discussed in mainstream media and often overlooked by school leaders. What, these scholars ask, are the ethical considerations in the development of fair and meaningful assessment of a student’s writing ability?

In a recent interview, Norbert Elliot, Professor Emeritus at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, spoke with equal parts clarity and passion. “When we talk about ethics in writing assessment, we’re talking about fairness,” he explains. “The key question is, ‘Should we do any kind of assessment in which groups of students are demonstrably disenfranchised from the process?’” His answer, of course, is a firm “no.”

Elliot notes that different groups of students experience markedly different results on national tests. “It might be because the students have a curriculum that is not aligned with the test’s contents,” he says. “But it might also be about the form or the structure of the test itself. If it’s because the test poorly represents the writing construct, we shouldn’t be giving the test, and certainly shouldn’t be making decisions about students based on the test.” He adds, “If these tests served white populations as poorly as they serve other populations, we would have gotten rid of them four generations ago.”

Mya Poe, of Northeastern University, addresses the ethical dimension of writing assessment with a reminder that statistics are not the end goal. “These tests are about people,” she says. “We’re making decisions about people, about students. The consideration of ethics should be the first requirement in the process.”

To ensure the fair development and administration of writing assessments, Poe calls for greater “assessment literacy” from all involved. “It means ensuring that teachers have a working understanding of different evaluation methods,” she explains. At the center of that understanding lie core, guiding questions: What are the different methods available for evaluating different kinds of literacy? What, precisely, is a given assessment attempting to measure? How is the construct of writing being captured on that assessment? Poe adds a further question that

ABOVE: In a program designed to improve assessment literacy, Masters of Education students in David Slomp’s class share and critically reflect upon their construct maps—a foundation of ethical assessment design.

PHOTO: Rob Olson (www.robolsonphoto.com)
is seldom asked. “I want teachers and administrators to ask, from the beginning, ‘When are we going to conduct a formal review?’” she says. “Will it be every three years, every five? When will we look at our practices to determine their effectiveness?”

There seems no question that an ethics-based approach to writing assessment poses a direct challenge to standardized tests currently in use. “No one at any level today is going to get on board and say that limited-response tests are going to tell us if kids can write,” Elliot says. “They might tell you if a student can edit, maybe. The truth is that these tests consistently devastate groups of students, but we just keep using them.”

David Slomp, of the University of Lethbridge, Canada, is exploring ethical alternatives by reaching beyond the testing of discrete skills to assess the student’s awareness of how those skills are applied—and how they were acquired. The focus, thus, turns to metacognition rather than final product. Working with teachers of children ages 12 through 16, Slomp recently oversaw a five-month unit in which the young students researched, drafted, and completed grant applications for real-world community enrichment initiatives.

“We’re teaching students how to problem-solve writing tasks,” he explains. “We’re teaching rhetorical and genre analysis. We’re also asking students to understand the audience in a deeper way than they’re used to.” In addition to submitting their final proposals to the grant agency, students maintained portfolios that ranged from class notes to letters addressed to potential partner organizations. In addition, they kept journals that reflected on their progress. “It all goes in the portfolio,” Slomp says. “You end up with weeks of work, and with reflection on that work.”

And yet, the portfolio was not the final assessment. “The kids have to do a visual analogy assignment,” Slomp explains. “That’s the major assessment. They have to capture in some sort of visual way what they’ve learned about writing. They then pair that visualization with a written piece that explains the finer points of the visual analogy.” Noting that the written element could be an oral presentation or a podcast, Slomp says, “It’s about getting them to think about what they’ve been learning.”

Echoing Poe’s call for assessment literacy, Slomp recognizes the potential value in students preparing for a standardized test. “An exam could be just another rhetorical context that the kids can analyze,” he points out. “For too many teachers, though, the format and skills of the exam become the end-all and be-all. Then the kids think it’s the only skill set they need as a writer. And the exams don’t encourage kids to revise in a deep manner, or to analyze thought. So some come out of high school not prepared for any kind of meaningful writing.”

While admitting that the complexity of writing is impossible to capture on a standardized test, Slomp is looking at ways to combine the portfolio approach with formal assessments that can provide a picture of student achievement across a region. “Students might gather a portfolio over the course of a school year,” he says, “then use that portfolio as evidence to support their claims on an exam essay that requires a metacognitive reflection on what they’ve learned as writers.”

When Bob Broad of Illinois State University speaks of ethical writing assessments, he looks first for a renewed commitment to public schools and to teachers, and for a rejection of corporate test-makers.

“We have private industry out there committed to making money,” he says. “I have no objection to that, depending on the consequences.” He details a recurring pattern in which commercial testing organizations persuade administrators and legislators to invest in their product, followed by the discovery of that product’s failure over a long period of usage. “Over the course of those years,” Broad explains, “billions of dollars end up in the bank accounts of these testing companies, dollars that could have ended up in the schools, and in teacher development.”

Like his colleagues, Broad is keen to invest in teachers. “The one successful program is to invest in teachers and students and schools.”

—Bob Broad

You can hear these educators talk more about issues relating to ethics in writing assessments in the archived NCTE On-Air Web seminar “No Test Is Neutral: Writing Assessments, Equity, Ethics, and Social Justice,” hosted by Journal of Writing Assessment editors Diane Kelly-Riley, University of Idaho, and Carl Whithaus, University of California–Davis. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7gHY9BZrA4

If you’re interested in this topic, keep an eye out for the Spring 2016 issue of The Journal of Writing Assessment (http://www.journalofwritingassessment.org/), a special issue devoted to ethics in writing assessment.

To view a video clip from the graduate course in which David Slomp piloted the assessment design process that he discusses in this article, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF1zuJEGEL0
and students and schools,” he insists. “We need to have teachers pursuing graduate courses, and pursuing professional development in a sustained way, not just a few days a year.” Obtaining such an investment can be an uphill battle. “Teachers are on the ground doing the work, but they’re not trusted with the assessment piece,” Broad says. “‘Don’t Trust Teachers’ is a marketing slogan that has enriched private assessment-making companies. The fault, though, lies with legislators and with others in power who are being persuaded by these companies.”

To bring assessments back into the hands of teachers, Broad has developed what he calls Dynamic Criteria Mapping, an idea detailed in his book *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. The process begins with faculty gathering to read and discuss their students’ work. A subgroup then analyzes that conversation to ascertain the elements of writing most valued by the teachers. “It could be anything from the use of humor to the effective use of resources,” Broad says, adding, “In my study of one university’s writing program, I identified 89 unique, substantial values held by teachers of writing.”

“A typical rubric has five or six values in it, and they’re things we’ve all accepted,” Broad says. “But reading and judging texts is more complex and more dynamic than a traditional rubric can allow for.” He stresses the importance of faculty coming together around the key question: What do we value? “The answer is then shared with students, parents, and legislators,” he explains. “Everyone benefits from that shared knowledge.”

All four scholars agree that standardized tests alone can’t fairly represent a student’s ability as a writer. “What they’ve done over the history of standardized testing is flatten out the whole construct of writing and of assessing writing to make sure the scores are consistent,” Broad says. “They sincerely believed that was the right thing to do. What we’ve discovered, though, is that it leads to a very diminished concept of writing and of how to teach and assess writing.”

Poe notes the challenge of bringing together scholars in disparate fields of study. “People who do literacy research are often in one sub-area of a university and people who do measurement research are often in a different sub-area,” she points out. “It’s important that the research on writing instruction be recognized as valuable and scientific, and that it become key to informing assessments.”

The goal, she feels, is flexible assessment processes that provide more than a mere snapshot of a student’s ability. “The measurement community thinks about always narrowing [the view] to get the accurate result,” she says. “But we must understand that writers don’t all come to that same, narrow place. We need to make evaluations that are capacious and innovative.”

For Elliot the issue comes down to a distinction between opportunity and exclusion. “When you ask why a standardized test is being given, you get some good answers,” he admits. “It’s to place students properly, to check their skills before moving them on to the next course. These are good things.” The end result, though, is often an exclusion of students from key opportunities, and a superficial portrait of their abilities. “We’re trying to advance the opportunity structure,” Elliot says of the struggle toward ethical assessments. “When we ask, ‘Is a student prepared?’ we shouldn’t be trying to screen a student out, we should be looking for ways to structure opportunities for that student to succeed.”

He recognizes the potential for change in recent legislation, which makes accountability regional rather than national in scope. “When we need information beyond what we learn from teacher observations, we can develop a deeply important local assessment with scores from which we can make responsible inferences about our students’ abilities,” he says, emphasizing the role of teachers in that process. “But that doesn’t mean it’s going to
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Norman Allen is a freelance writer and playwright based in Washington, DC. His essays and commentary have appeared in the Washington Post and in Smithsonian and Yes magazines. Follow him on Twitter: @WriterNorm.

happen. We have a very limited window here, and they won’t stop these tests unless there’s a good reason to do it.”

Elliot sees the post-No Child Left Behind period as one in which prime real estate is suddenly on the market again. “If we don’t move and make our points clear to the public, then large-scale, standardized assessments will simply make a return,” he warns. “We need to move quickly and put in the hard work to develop these local, ethical assessments. Otherwise, others will move into this real estate. There’s nothing to stop that from happening—except us.”

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