Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future

In Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future, Asao Inoue provides both theoretical framework and practical discussion to help implement antiracist writing assessment practices in individual classrooms. In so doing, classroom instructors can better realize their goals and commitments to social justice rather than evaluating student writing in ways that privilege a white, monolingual embodiment of language. Inoue resists engaging with the psychometric language consistent with assessment research from other fields. His discussion of assessment focuses on individual instructors in individual classrooms, advocating what might be seen as a “building block” approach to changing programmatic and institutional assessment practices. While his concerns are less about teaching labor than student labor, the pedagogical tactics he advocates, such as contract grading to value labor over quality and to decenter the teacher’s authority in the classroom, may help alleviate some of the material realities of nontenured and adjunct instructors in addition to reframing ideas of success in first-year composition (FYC) classrooms.

Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies is divided into five chapters that develop Inoue’s argument for more just forms of assessment in composition classrooms. He begins with background framework for why antiracist writing assessment ecologies are needed. From this background, he delves into race as a topic missing from current writing assessment work to account for why minority students do not achieve the same success as their white peers. By not discussing race explicitly, the field of writing assessment reinforces what Inoue calls the “white racial habitus,” embodied by the “objective standard” of writing assessments. Individuals new to writing assessment research will find his work informative and valuable as he challenges the existing research while also building on it. From this discussion, he builds on the implications of existing scholarship’s erasure of race by articulating what an antiracist writing assessment ecology is by engaging with Freirean, Buddhist, and Marxist theories. He articulates seven aspects to this framework: power, parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places. The ecological framework he advocates will allow students and instructors to consider how their interconnectedness affects their writing and reading practices. An example here may be helpful: a composition instructor elects to use portfolio grading. The instructor, his or her students, and the department-level administrators are all people in this writing assessment ecology. The portfolio is a part of the ecology, written for specific purposes that might vary depending on the people involved. An instructor who works in antiracist ways might explain that he or she sees assessing writing as a process, and in this discussion the instructor helps negotiate power in his or her classroom, which is one place in this assessment ecology. The products are the results of the processes in the ecology, like the judgment made about the portfolio. In the ecology Inoue

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advocates, this “judgment” is not a letter grade (which is not a result of the portfolio itself) but is a set of reactions to the portfolio, written as a product of the labor of assessing the portfolio by a variety of people in the ecology (156). These seven elements of a writing assessment ecology must be explicitly designed in antiracist ways.

Inoue elaborates on each of the seven aspects of an antiracist writing assessment ecology and emphasizes their interconnectedness. These pieces are reliant on their interactions to understand how they exist. This ecological framework reminds us that antiracist writing assessment is highly contextual, and one class’s experiences may be drastically different from another class taught from the same framework, even within the same institution and by the same instructor. In the final chapter, Inoue presents his own attempts to implement such strategies in an advanced composition course. He explains how he implemented and negotiated a grading contract with his students, and he shares their perspectives on how this worked. Generally, he identifies that a variety of students seemed to appreciate that their labor would be valued, even when those same students might have struggled with balancing Inoue’s feedback with their peers’ feedback. Students often identified Inoue’s qualitative assessments of their work as more valuable (or having more power) than their peers’, even though those qualitative assessments were not factored into their grades (250). Inoue is quick to critique his own approach, noting that the rubric developed with his students in the course might have contributed to some of the angst students felt while receiving feedback from a variety of individuals. He also explains that students read and evaluated work in writing groups the entire semester, and that each group approached the required tasks in slightly different ways. This writing group approach allowed them to build familiarity with those who would be reading their work, but it also meant that different students in the class may have encountered slightly different writing ecologies based on their writing groups.

Inoue identifies six kinds of labor that occurred in his sample ecology: reading, writing, reflecting, labor journaling, assessing, and projecting (181–84), all of which he outlines in the grading contract used with his students. Labor journaling is particularly important to his ecology: at the beginning of classes, students would spend a few minutes freewriting “about the labor for our course that we did just before that class session,” with the goal being to “help [students] determine whether the labor they were doing was enough and what its nature was” (183). Inoue also says he hoped to “develop their labor habits into more intense, effective, and productive behaviors” (183). This one pedagogical tactic seems to cut across all the other types of labor Inoue articulates and seems easily adaptable to a variety of settings. Labor journaling, like the rest of the course, is also predicated on trust. By trusting students, by believing that they are doing the work they say they are doing, Inoue shows as an instructor that he values the work students are putting into his course.

The students Inoue discusses in his sample assessment ecology also echo this idea of trust. They mention fair-
ness of the grading contract, knowing what they need to do to get the exact grade they want, and having freedom to write without being compared to others (195–97). Because Inoue has attempted to decenter himself as the sole evaluator by having student writing groups assess each other’s work, he seems to have established a relationship of trust with his students. In his own discussion, he says students favored the “predictability” of grading that came with the contract (198). Grading based on quality of work becomes positioned as “unpredictable” or “subjective.” In comparison, grading based on student labor creates a sense of trust that may help work against common critiques of grading in composition classrooms.

Inoue offers a starting point for adapting antiracist assessment approaches in individual classrooms, rather than a model that will work for all instructors at all institutions. Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies provides a radical shift in how we evaluate writing with the potential to empower both students and instructors, but writing instructors, especially those who teach at institutions serving populations similar to the ones Inoue discusses, might overlook this text for a variety of reasons, including a lack of time and a title that positions it as a book solely focused on assessment rather than individual teacher practices in the classroom. While Inoue personalizes this work with his and his students’ experiences, it engages with highly theoretical ideas that may conflict with his goals of developing new teacher practices.

As a former full-time, non-tenure-track instructor of ten classes and 250 students a year, I see potential for implementing Inoue’s ideas into first-year composition courses. Assigning students to semester writing groups and including more reflective, self-assessment-based work, like labor journaling, are minor but helpful tactics that could be adapted to a variety of classroom approaches. A shift to using grading contracts is more radical, and instructors in nontenured positions may lack the authority to make such radical changes in their writing assessment practices, especially if their writing programs will continue to assess student work based on the standard academic English Inoue critiques. Inoue’s overall discussion places this book firmly in the contact zone between what instructors value and what programs value. In a perfect world, a program will grow to value what the instructors in it value—but higher education is far from a perfect world, and many instructors with goals to teach in antiracist ways to socially just futures may not be able to implement these practices. While this bottom-up approach may work at some institutions, writing program administrators should also heed Inoue’s call for antiracist writing assessment ecologies that function not only in individual classrooms but across programs and departments.

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