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## Book review

### ***Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity.***

Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot (2018). Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and University Press of Colorado, 429 pp., ISBN 978-1-64215-015-5

Reviewed by Qiudong LI & Longxing LI

Social justice is about the fair relationship among individuals and the equal distribution of resources in social systems, including educational systems (Poe & Inoue, 2016). If social systems 'work against entire groups of people to maintain the unequal distribution of opportunity, wealth, and justice' (p. 3), social injustice will occur. Take writing as an example, if it is assessed in a system which subverts students' opportunity to learn due to race, gender, language background, and other social axes, marginalized students will suffer unjust assessment. While some myopic studies are blind to the unequal social systems which resulted in minority students' failure in writing, Poe and Inoue (2016) have taken the first step to make voices for justice-oriented assessment heard in their guest-edited special issue of *College English*, enacting the social justice turn in writing assessment scholarship. Following this endeavor, Poe, Inoue, and Elliot's newly edited volume *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* is another recent action taken to address the question of 'How can we ensure that writing assessment leads to the advancement of opportunity?' (p. 4, emphasis original). Understanding better what unjust social systems are and how to eradicate social injustice in writing assessment, writing program administrators (WPAs), writing assessment scholars, writing instructors, and research students in this field may find this book thought-provoking and forward-looking.

This volume, aside from editors' introduction at the beginning and contributors' assertions and commentaries on writing assessment at the end, contains four main parts with the common goal of advancing social justice and opportunity through historiographic studies (chapters 1-3), justice-focused applications in admission and placement (chapters 4-6), innovative frameworks for outcomes design (chapters 7-9), and teacher research and professional development (chapters 10-11).

Since social justice historiography offers ‘a window to the nature and origin of injustice’ (p. 49), Part 1 brings together historiographic studies on racial injustice and writing assessment to provide a perspective on the ubiquity and diversity of injustices. Chapter 1 delves into classroom writing assessment articles in early editions of *The English Journal* (1912-1935), which were influenced by progressive racism (i.e., assimilation and Americanization interventions on immigrants’ language use to eradicate racial differences). It is found that the racial standard of assessing student language errors based on ‘not just what students write but who they are’ (p. 62) plagued minority students with unjust assessment. Hammond’s historiographic account, though partial, helps excavate injustices behind assessment practices in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the future, a more inclusive understanding of the historical relationship between writing assessment and social justice is needed from a wider range of critical perspectives.

Different from the unjust practices revealed in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 reviewed a pedagogical writing and assessment model in the fight for racial and social justice, i.e., the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge program. The program was launched in the 1960s to prepare colored students to succeed in white mainstream colleges by providing holistic support: financial, academic, psychological, and even employment service. As an essential part of this desegregation program, the writing course emphasized students’ writing confidence and fluency and teachers’ respect for learners’ sociocultural background. More importantly, for social-justice purposes, teachers adopted a subjective and individualized assessment methodology in grading writing. This seminal program offers a precursor example in pedagogy and assessment; thus a fuller account of this program is called for by the author.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Monroe Report, a 1925 report with more than 200 pages of analysis of large-scale writing assessments administered across the entire Filipino school system during the colonial period. American colonial administration instituted the English Only policy only to solidify their power, without addressing Filipino students’ educational needs. The tension between Filipino language ecology and colonists’ intention is definitely “related to the perceived social justice mission of American colonialism” (p. 130). Investigating the writing assessment during that period can tell us about the racist assumptions in our current assessment practices.

To ameliorate admission and placement assessment, Part 2 elaborates on the issue of transparency in first-year writing (FYW) assessment practices. Chapter 4 strives to fill the research gap of applying directed self-placement (DSP) to community college writing assessment practices. The qualitative study found promising consequences of DSP since it empowers students to make decisions and take responsibilities for themselves. However, no disaggregated DSP outcomes data was provided to determine whether DSP also demonstrates disparate positive consequences for student groups of different races, classes, and languages. Hence, the contributor calls for more research to investigate DSP impact on diverse student groups, especially those disadvantaged by the standardized tests for writing

placement.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, Moreland examines the consequences of a standardized test for different student groups to determine their placement into a dual enrollment (DE) FYW course in a community college. While using disparate impact analysis, a validation tool for assessment practices to determine unintentional consequences specific to disparate impact, Moreland had much difficulty in accessing test-score data disaggregated by the institution. She argues that the absence of data caused by bureaucratic action is a salient “violation of students’ civil right” (p. 192) and a standard of fairness and transparency of assessment genres that determine student placement has to be explored in further research.

Chapter 6 examines the FYW placement process model at a doctoral-granting university. The thought experiment evidenced that English linguistic imperialism, a kind of “colonial phenomenon in which colonial states assert their legitimacy through language” (p. 206), flourished in the model. The theoretical problems within the placement model posed to international students colonial risks, including economic exploitation, marginalization of international student labor, linguistic containment and English linguistic imperialism, and suppressing student agency. Based on Young’s (2011) social connection model of responsibility, the contributor proposes that the writing programs bear the shared responsibility for undermining linguistic imperialism and promoting linguistic equality.

Part 3 is dedicated to advancing social justice and opportunity by adopting innovative construct models from other disciplinary theories to articulate writing outcomes. In Chapter 7, writing assessment is interpreted within Galtung’s (1969) framework of structural violence, a less interpersonal or visible violence in social structures imposed on the disadvantaged. The criteria for interpreting writing assessment as violent (unjust) are built on three constructs of the framework: (a) potential-actualization distance (i.e., the distance between the possibility of actualizing the potential and the potential achieved), (b) a zero-sum cost-benefit relation (i.e., a relationship in which one suffers and another benefits), and (c) the avoidability of the harm (i.e., the extent to which harm caused by certain assessment practices is avoidable). To demonstrate how violence relates to unjust assessment, the contributors discuss at length two types of violence that enacted injustice on three long-term American immigrant students: representation and normalization. The former means that marginalized students are represented or described by those with more social power in assessment scores and decisions, and the latter is one that favors proximity to predetermined assessment norms. In the case study, the three subjects who graduated with distinction from high school were violently placed by a standardized multiple-choice test into the college’s ESOL program because their identity was represented as immigrants (representation) and their circumstances of birth were far from Americanness (normalization). Since representation and normalization subverted students’ learning opportunity, the contributors recommend adopting Kane’s (2013) argument-based validation model with emphasis on evaluation of score uses and interpretations to identify and disrupt structural violence.

Set against the background of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, Chapter 8 attends to the prevalent white habitus across American institutions, which refers to a racialized socialization process of producing whites' racial perceptions through repeated practices in institutional contexts. To dismantle white habitus and change hostile institutional climate, the contributors employ the lesson study model—"a collaborative and recursive model of teacher research developed in Japan that places focus on learning problems and responsive lesson planning" (p. 257)—to plan an antiracist lesson. After one class period's learning intervention, the assessment of students' pre- and post-lesson writing artifacts demonstrated statistically significant improvement in learning outcomes; however, the lesson study failed to inspire enthusiasm among students to challenge institutional racism due to inflexible and incurious pedagogies. Hence, the contributors suggest students being involved as researchers and evaluators in the lesson design so as to empower them to take actions.

Based on the assumption that attitudes towards writing are closely related to students' engagement in writing, Chapter 9 takes into account the intrapersonal domain (i.e., student attitude) of sociocognitive research as an assessable program component. The contributors examined the portfolio assessment process of the FYW program at a racially-diverse university and found that the assessment, without incorporating intrapersonal domain, failed academically-marginalized international students. Through implementing a curriculum that emphasized writing about personal experiences as communication with readers, the contributors found that students' attitudes towards school writing shifted from negative to positive. However, the correlation between student attitudes and their writing performance has not been elucidated and needs continuing research.

As one of the few attempts to focus on vulnerable groups, Part 4 aims to advance opportunity for Native American students (Chapter 10) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students (Chapter 11) through teacher research. Chapter 10 reports on a two-year study of writing instructors' professional development focused on justice-oriented writing assessment at a Native American college. What makes this professional development distinctive was the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogy to gain sovereignty, or "the right to determine how writing is assessed". Culturally responsive professional development is informed by four dimensions of social justice instructions: (a) analysis of structural inequalities in families and communities, (b) development of reciprocal relations with students, families, and communities, (c) teaching to high expectations based on students' culture, identity, language, and experience, and (d) integration of marginalized perspectives into curriculum (Sleeter, 2014). By adopting culturally relevant prompts, students' writing scores improved and teachers' professional development around writing assessment leading to social justice outcomes was also demonstrated. This case evidences writing teachers' successful professional development, and the key to the success is to know the local cultural values, particularly as an outsider.

Against the backdrop of human rights improvement for LGBTQ groups, Chapter 11 pushes forward the development of justice-oriented writing assessment by including sexuality in the process of designing college-level writing prompts and tasks. Using focus-group methodology, the contributors depict how LGBTQ students struggled with writing about homophobic topics and how their writing abilities were constrained by these negative affective aspects. Therefore, to ensure that LGBTQ students feel safe to write on any topics even related to their sexual orientation, the contributors call for joint efforts from writing teachers and assessment researchers to analyze queer rhetoric and student narratives and incorporate affective aspects into assessment construct and design.

As the title suggests, three principles inform this collection. First, both large-scale standardized assessment and classroom assessment are attended to within an ecological framework. Second, social justice theory is adopted as the foundational framework. Third, a focus on the advancement of opportunity is to identify opportunity structures leading to additional learning opportunities. By connecting writing assessment, social justice theory, and the advancement of opportunity, the volume's editors and contributors are committed to liberating writing assessment from its confined role as a tool only for admission, placement, progression, and certification, to shifting writing-assessment validation to social justice, and to generating equal opportunity for all test-takers through writing assessment.

Taken together, the eleven chapters of this collection share an interest in making visible social injustice issues through developmental studies on writing assessment. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this book provides readers with critical methodological and pedagogical references to identify the intended and unintended social consequences of assessment practices for all test takers, particularly for disadvantaged students. Pushing social justice research forward on the basis of previous research (e.g., Elliot, 2016; Poe & Inoue, 2016), this collection not only makes social justice the aim and consequence of writing assessment, but also provides actionable suggestions on integrating social justice into teaching and assessing writing. The reflections and future research guidelines in the Eighteen Assertions and the actionable framework in the Action Canvas for Social Justice at the later part of the volume together form an important innovation of the present volume, allowing a synchronic perspective for readers to approach social justice at any time point through a principled framework.

Apart from the incisive analysis and criticism throughout the volume, the considerably designed structure makes this book so reader-friendly that readers can gain a clear overview of the content and get back on track when they get lost in the frontiers explored. For example, the outline listed at the beginning of each chapter, which consists of research problem, methodology, conclusions, and future directions, etc., helps readers grasp the main ideas of each chapter quickly. In addition, the open access provided by the publisher is expected to disseminate the ideas wider and exert greater impact in the community so as to promote the social justice endeavor in writing assessment.

With regard to the weakness of this volume, there is a lack of sufficient empirical studies on student experiences in the process of assessing writing. Among all the chapters, only Chapters 9 and 11 explore student attitudes and narratives to provide insights into their personal experiences with writing. Most chapters ignore students' voices; for example, Toth (Chapter 4) only interviews administrators in excavating the consequences of DSP. Since students are the most direct assessment stakeholders, observing their participation in classroom writing ought to be advocated as a starting point for conducting writing assessment studies. After all, dedication to students is what the editors emphasize in the acknowledgments page of the book. In addition, this collection revolves around unjust writing assessment only in American educational settings. Readers, especially those from EFL contexts, should be aware that the research processes and outcomes might not be replicable in their specific contexts. For instance, Chapter 11 details LGBTQ students' experiences with writing assessment, but discussing sexual orientation remains a sensitive topic or even a taboo in some countries. In the future, more research conducted in contexts other than the US is expected to enrich the scholarship of social justice in writing assessment.

With much work to do, all stakeholders need to question and challenge those social systems leading to unjust assessment practices so as to ultimately increase students' opportunities to learn. Social injustice is generally deep-rooted and invisible as pointed out at the outset of the book, but it is encouraging to see that the editors and contributors, who are not simply scholars but also social justice fighters, have exhibited their decision and ambition to advance justice and opportunity in and through writing assessment. To conclude, this volume is not only a milestone which addresses the past, present, and prospect of justice-oriented writing assessment research, but also a significant reference book to the broader field of language assessment studies. We would highly recommend this volume to writing assessment scholars, advisory boards, administration, students, and many other stakeholders.

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