

DUELING EPISTEMOLOGIES:
MATCHING ASSESSMENTS TO ASSIGNMENTS

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“**W**hy did I get such a bad grade? I did exactly what the assignment asked.”

Fortunately, the student who asked this question was not speaking to me. While erasing the chalkboard at the end of class, I overheard two students waiting for their class to begin. At first I tried to close my ears and pretend I was oblivious to their conversation. Then I began to wonder: Should I defend the instructor or explain the rationale behind the assignment? Deciding these students had the right to privacy, I did not interrupt, but I did continue to eavesdrop, as it provided valuable insight into how these students’ frustrations might correspond to students in my own classes.

The student’s complaint stemmed from her teacher’s comments on her paper, which focused on grammar, thesis, and transitions. The student, however, perceived the writing assignment (a personal narrative exploring a significant learning experience) as expressionist, a writing assignment designed to “maximize student self-discovery.”¹ She felt misled by the assignment when the assessment was based on a formalist theory that “good writing is ‘correct’ writing.”² This student’s frustration was not necessarily the grade itself, but the perceived “bait and switch” of the assignment/assessment: the assignment set up one expectation for assessment, but in reality, the teacher assessed the work based on a different philosophy. With the learning model, Foundations, and a shift from writing courses housed in the English department to being shared by multiple departments, faculty across campus can benefit from exploring why writing assignments and writing assessment may not always align, using this understanding to minimize this mismatch. Additionally, these theories are not composition specific but influence multiple disciplines with their assignments and assessments.

Designing effective writing prompts and assessments is both critical and challenging for many educators. Additionally, while many understand that assessment should be developed prior to assignment design, in order to ensure that assessment and assignment align, reality doesn’t always fit the ideal. Chronologically, assignments are needed first—“I have to have something to give/explain to my students”—with rubrics or other assessments not appearing until later in the semester.

Another challenge in aligning assignments and assessment in writing is that “good writing” is composed of a myriad of elements: relevant ideas, strong organization, valid argument and evidence, geared to the

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appropriate audience, effective critical thinking, grammar and mechanics, engaging language, appropriate style and format. It would be impossible and inhumane (for both student and instructor) to assess *everything* in a student's writing. Therefore, instructors consciously and unconsciously emphasize specific values and requirements with the feedback they give. The purpose of this essay is not to debate whether self-discovery should receive priority over grammar in assessment, but rather to explore two frequently competing philosophies that influence composition and show how instructors may unintentionally design assignments according to one philosophy while designing assessment based on the other.

NEGOTIATED MEANING

In the twenty-first century, communication is generally viewed as a social interaction where author and audience create a negotiated meaning through their interactions with the text. In his text *On Reading*, Ken Goodman argues that “no two readers will ever produce the same meaning for a given text” and that “no reader's meaning will ever completely agree with the writer's meaning.”³

In many ways this concept is at the heart of the learning model. Rather than memorize facts and disconnected data, students must construct their own meaning by engaging with texts and concepts in a variety of methods. Case studies give students authentic audiences that require them to situate their knowledge within a specific context. Student preparation in order to teach one another is another example of negotiated meaning. One student's reading of a text or concept will differ from another. Ideally, the sharing of these different meanings will result in a new understanding; hopefully “the best solution to a problem.”⁴

As mentioned earlier, this epistemology, that meaning is constructed, influences many course assignments. The problem comes in assessing assignments based on this philosophy. If multiple meanings and applications are valid and largely situational, how do we ensure consistent and fair assessment within a class or across sections? Often, what occurs is an epistemic shift from an assignment based on this “meaning as a social construction” philosophy to a modernist method of assessment.

ABSOLUTE MEANING

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, modernism—frequently referred to as current-traditional theory—strongly shaped composition and other disciplines. Many modernist philosophers saw meaning/knowledge as a concrete, objective entity to be discovered rather than created. Modernism argues that “the mind is equipped with faculties that enable it to perceive the external object directly through the medium of sense

impression. Truth is determined through the inductive method—through collecting sense data and arriving at generalizations.⁵

For modernists, language is a “simple transcribing device for recording that which exists apart from the verbal,”⁶ and a writer’s purpose is to find language that best transmits truth to others, without “distorting” the meaning.⁷

While a writer might consider how to best depict a concept so as to interest an audience, writing’s true focus is reduced to producing accurate depictions of truth/observations. Therefore, composition instruction and assessment influenced by modernism focuses on reducing the distortions that might occur—as a writer transfers his or her experience to the reader—by developing technical skills in writing: clear thesis, strong organization and organizational clues, usage and style.⁸

TENSIONS FROM MISMATCHING ASSIGNMENT AND ASSESSMENT

Again, my purpose is not to argue the strengths of one epistemology over the other, but rather to look at the tension that occurs when an assignment is design around the postmodern theory of negotiated meaning and then assessed from a modern perspective. What results is the tension described in my introduction. In class students may focus on constructed knowledge and challenging possibilities and ambiguities. But the reality of assessment filters these experiences to multiple choice exams, comments about writing style appropriate to the specific discipline, and other assessments based on “fact” and accuracy, rather than knowledge construction.

The impact of this disconnect may be students’ distrust of the assignment. Perhaps this distrust, rather than poor critical thinking skills is one reason students interrupt a complex and meaningful discussion with questions such as “will this be on the test?” or “but what is the answer?” While we may decry our students’ critical thinking abilities, our conflicting philosophies may be one cause for students’ search for the exact answer? Our assessments teach them that, despite the classroom experience, the one right answer is still the objective.

In writing, this focus on the “right answer” leads to what Nancy Sommers describes as a “thesaurus philosophy of writing.”⁹ In her study of the revision strategies of student and experienced adult writers, Sommers concludes that student writers “primarily ask themselves: can I find a better word or phrase?...[They] believe that most problems in their essays can be solved by rewording...that the meaning to be communicated is already there, already finished, already produced, ready to be communicated, and all that is necessary is a better word ‘rightly worded.’”¹⁰

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Are there correlations in other disciplines? Do students in math simply want to know the right answer, rather than explore the multiple methods for exploring the problem and how this might lead to several “right answers”?

Another problem with this collision of epistemologies is that assessment can devalue student perspective. An experience shared by a colleague illustrates this problem:

Elizabeth worked hard on her paper. She’d carefully researched her ideas, sharing in social interaction with her sources and having a positive knowledge-constructing experience. Confident in her approach to her subject, she actually looked forward to the peer workshop, where she could share her ideas with her group. After reading her paper, all four peer evaluators—her audience—told her that her ideas and approach didn’t work. Discouraged that her audience didn’t understand or value what she’d tried to do, and seemingly didn’t try to, Elizabeth left the room crying.

After the workshop, Elizabeth came to her professor’s office to discuss her ideas and the group’s response. Although she understood Elizabeth’s reasons for her choices, her instructor explained that Elizabeth needed to accommodate audience needs/worldviews/constructs. Elizabeth left the room crying.

Histrionics aside, Elizabeth’s response to these experiences of constructing meaning with her readers illustrates why some students struggle in this process of creating knowledge. Prior to coming to class, Elizabeth had had a rewarding experience thinking about the assignment, her ideas, and her audience. However, the peer conference situation devalued her perspective—the knowledge she had constructed, and she was “wrong.” In writing, students are frequently told to use their voice. How can they use their voice—language they use to construct knowledge—when they infer that audience (and assessment) trumps their own experience? Yes, audience is vital. Audience has power and students need to recognize this. The audience can walk away from the writer, by putting down the text, at any time. However, in a desire to help students maintain audience interest, perhaps teachers communicate that the student’s context is not valued.

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PROBLEMS OF ASSIGNMENT/ASSESSMENT IN ACTION: ONE STUDENT’S EXPERIENCE

To illustrate how these several problems create tension for student writers, I share the writing experience of first-year student writer Nathan Wilson. In high school Nathan scored well on standardized tests and completed all the advanced/honors English courses.¹¹

Counselors, teachers, and Nathan anticipated he would do well in college. During his first semester, Nathan was given an assignment to write a humorous story. The assignment's premise comes from expressivist theory, with the assignment's objective to help students develop their own voice. Nathan wrote a dark comedy, in which the main character (also named Nathan) is killed by his mother for failing to carry out an insignificant household responsibility. While writing this story, Nathan frequently laughed out loud, nearly falling off his chair. When Nathan's friends read the story, they too had a similar response. Nathan felt confident he had accomplished the assignment: he'd reflected his voice in subject and style and written a hilarious story. His teacher gave the story a D+, primarily because the story wasn't funny.

Nathan's experience illustrates the problems previously outlined. First, he failed to consider the teacher as audience and assessor. He believed the assignment's premise that his audience was his peers and that this assignment was to develop *his* voice. When he discussed his story with the teacher (actually he discussed the grade), the audience/teacher acknowledged she could understand his choices, but the story still failed because it wasn't funny. Obviously humor is a very difficult subject to negotiate, and it is apparent that Nathan does not have the maturity to understand how his audiences might create different meanings than he did. Yet this example illustrates that the student's context is invalidated by the assessment. The result is that Nathan now perceives writing to be "psyching out the teacher" to determine which hoops he must pass through in order to appease someone who is unappeasable. It has also taught him to distrust writing assignments and see assessment as arbitrary.

THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM: POSTMODERNISM THEORY, MODERNIST APPLICATIONS

Perhaps many of these problems stem from a larger issue: modernist assessment continually, unconsciously, creeps into assignments influenced by postmodern theory. For many, modernist pedagogy lends itself well to assignments and assessment and appeal to both instructors and students. Rules are comforting to students: pre-write, draft, revise, and you will sound educated; same goes for grammar and mechanics. This process-centered pedagogy emphasizes the modernist belief that things react off each other in a predictable and rational manner: If I pre-write, I will have strong ideas, which will lead to a strong draft, etc.

Similarly, assessment in a modernistic approach to education is somewhat straightforward. Skill and drill leads to easy-to-grade quizzes and five-paragraph essays. Students feel more confident in this checklist attitude of clear cause and effect because a subjective field such as composition can now be clarified by the structure of process and rules.

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Assessment is also much easier. Ambiguous negotiation of meaning is replaced/simplified with concrete objectives: strong thesis statement, credible evidence, style, usage, etc. Even practices that are overtly postmodern, such as peer reviews (writer and reader conducting a physical and metaphorical dialogue) can be reduced to a modernist assessment. Teachers frequently hand out rubrics and checklists to guide students through the review process, rather than allow dialogue to spark between writer and audience.

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Part of the problem in keeping postmodern theory postmodern in application is that turning this theory into pedagogy is antithetical to core postmodern premises. Pedagogy implies a structuring of methods, based on foundational principles that lead to a cause/effect activity. Education concepts such as best practices imply this result: if I teach X using the best method, Y will result. Are we turning the learning model into modernist theory via its application? “The students are working in groups. Check.”

ATTEMPTING THE IMPROBABLE: MAINTAINING THE POSTMODERN IN POSTMODERN PEDAGOGY¹²

Postmodernism resists pedagogy: “To articulate any kind of pedagogy based on anti-foundationalism would be to support the claim that knowledge can be rooted in a particular approach or system and, therefore, would no longer be anti-foundational.”^{13,14} It is tempting to dust off my hands and say “so there,” ending this discussion after a dissection of the problems of audience theory without offering possible ways to address these problems. However, I am uncomfortable with not exploring some possibility for resolution. What follows is framed within Bakhtin’s statement: “Any genuine kind of understanding will be active and will constitute the germ of a response.”¹⁵ Here is my “germ of a response.” My responses (hopefully) are not a modernist list of “best practices,” but instead a series of principles that may be adapted in a dialogic classroom.¹⁶ Borrowing from I.A. Richards, this discussion “will not perhaps tell us how to do much that we cannot do without it already; but it will prevent us from doing stupid things which we are fond of doing.”¹⁷ Two important aspects of this postmodern pedagogy are situating writing within an authentic context and using peer reviews in such a way that students can genuinely enter discourse communities in order to construct knowledge.

Situate Assignments to Improve Decision Making

Postmodern rhetoric places meaning within a specific context or situation. If a writing assignment does not have strong situational factors, writers struggle to choose the best meaning for their writing. Richards

states that “the task of interpreting [sentences/writing] is that of finding out which meanings work best for which purposes.”¹⁸ If the purpose of writing is solely for a grade or to complete the assignment (e.g., write an expository essay), interpreting becomes meaningless guesswork for students. Adult learning theory also supports authentic situation as a necessary component for learning. This theory posits that learners require an experience that is genuinely meaningful to the student. Or at least the teacher needs to help students genuinely embrace/make the assignment’s context meaningful.

Providing an authentic situation for writers gives context for decisions regarding audience, content, style, and language. Case studies are becoming a prominent method for authenticating situations. Others use connection between writing assignments to better situate students within their topic. One teacher created a genuine writing situation by linking the entire semester’s assignments to one topic. Students identified a topic at the beginning of the semester and then wrote a series of essays that evolved from one another: a personal narrative outlining their own experience with the topic, an observation about a larger society’s beliefs/attitudes/interactions regarding the topic, an evaluative essay regarding the topic. Finally students developed a persuasive researched paper regarding this topic. In addition to their research paper, students submitted a process journal that outlined the decisions/choices they made regarding their subject and audience. In this journal students discovered that their own understanding of the topic was limited. Phrases repeatedly surfaced such as “my audience would never buy this” or “I can’t believe I put all this in my paper. Everyone knows X.” Students identified for themselves when topics were too general or founded on assumptions that were unacceptable to their audience. I argue that this writing is situated because students could not simply write a three-to-five-page paper and drop the topic. The writers’ “intentions and interpretations...[brought the] rhetorical situation into being.”¹⁹ They developed an at-length experience with this topic through a significant investment of time and dialogue with the teacher and other students, allowing a situation to evolve through this process.

Peer Review in Discourse Communities

Mention collaboration to students and many of them will groan. Giving up control to others, scheduling meetings, figuring out how to work with each other’s ideas are just a few of the perceptions students have about collaboration. Many students think of collaborative writing when they think of collaboration; however, I will limit my analysis of collaboration to peer review and how it relates to negotiated meaning. While I’m discussing peer conferencing of papers, these concerns also correlate to small discussion groups and other collaborative activities.

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To address the problem of audience as a construct, many teachers use peer review to provide students physical audiences and face-to-face dialogue. Some teachers may feel that students struggle to act as authentic audience within the academic discourse community, a community unfamiliar to students. Bruffee acknowledges this concern: “How can student peers, who are not themselves members of the knowledge communities they hope to enter, help other students to enter those communities?”²⁰ However, this question is based on modernist assumptions. If knowledge, as “the right answer,” is something to be uncovered (rather than negotiated), then students will struggle with this task because knowledge would have to be “impressed [upon them] by some outside source,” not constructed through dialogue with their peers.²¹ While valuable in offering direction for peer reviews, discussion guidelines from the teacher can reinforce this modernist perspective. Peer reviewers are placed in the difficult task of representing the teacher as audience in peer workshops by responding to the questions/issues the teacher defines, rather than responding to their own genuine questions and experiences.

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In contrast, with a post modernism paradigm, peer review provides students the opportunity to construct knowledge. Students can also use peer review opportunities to “form transitional communities to help students undergo the stressful and anxiety-inducing process of moving out of their indigenous communities and acquiring fluency in the conversation of liberally educated men and women.”²² Together, students practice the language of academic discourse, reflecting this practice to the teacher through writing and class discussion, and continually refining their position within this community.

Teachers can more effectively use peer review by bringing it into the writing experience earlier than the final revision stage. Bruffee argues that “our task must involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible.”²³ For many teachers, peer review entails an assignment before final submission of the paper for students to review each other’s writing. While this type of conference can provide help to writers, students need feedback throughout the entire writing process. Peer review should begin during invention and continue on throughout the writing experience. For example, on the day an assignment is given, students could form learning communities. They could discuss their backgrounds regarding a student’s topic, biases, and existing knowledge. At various stages in the process, the teacher could promote additional dialogue regarding students’ writing. The entire writing experience would be collaborative, even though one student may be responsible for the writing.²⁴ This would give students an opportunity to genuinely construct knowledge with others within their discourse communities.

CONCLUSION

Although I've claimed a nonbiased presentation of two epistemologies, this article obviously reflects a bias toward a postmodernist theory of negotiated meaning. I believe that this theory is a strong influence on our campus. However, assignments based on either postmodern or modernist theories will engage and push our students. Both theories will generate assignments that challenge our students. As Eliot A. Butler, a professor of chemistry at BYU, once stated, "To learn is hard work. It requires discipline. And there is much drudgery. When I hear someone say that learning is fun, I wonder if that person has never learned or...just never had fun. There are moments of excitement in learning; these seem usually to come after long periods of hard work."²⁵ It is not my challenge as an educator to make learning fun, but I shouldn't add to the difficulty by creating mismatched assignments and assessments, distracting student from the process of learning because they cannot believe the premise of the assignment. ☹️

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NOTES

- 1 Richard Fulkerson, "Four Philosophies of Composition," *College of Composition and Communication* 30.4 (1979): 343-348.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ken Goodman, *On Reading: A Common-Sense Look at the Nature of Language and the Science of Reading* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 2.
- 4 John Ramage, John Bean, and June Johnson, *Writing Arguments* 4th ed. Conside ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 3.
- 5 James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Illinois: Southern Illinois UP, 1987): 8.
- 6 Ibid., 7.
- 7 Ibid., 8.
- 8 Patricia Bitzell and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to Present* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001): 1184.
- 9 Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experiences Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication* 30.4 (December 1980), 378-88.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 I'm not arguing that these "successes" guarantee a student's ability; however, current educational attitudes do use them as predictors of capability.
- 12 This section is obviously the least developed in this paper. Ironically, for my own use as a teacher, it is the section I wish were the most developed. However, understanding the problems in implementing theory seemed necessary before application based on these theories could be feasible. Additionally, developing application in greater depth would expand the scope of this paper beyond what this writing situation requests.

- 13 Lee-Ann Breuch, "Process of 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise," *JAC* 22.1 (Winter 2002): 119-50.
- 14 I appreciate that there is not a strict one-to-one correlation between postmodernism and anti-foundationalism; however, in this article, the author makes the correlation.
- 15 Mikhail Bakhtin, from "*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*" Bitzell and Herzberg 1210-1226.
- 16 At this point, these responses are merely responses. While grounded in rhetorical and composition theory, they need to be tested in classroom situations to validate these hypotheses.
- 17 I.A. Richards, "A Contest Theory of Meaning and Types of Context" Berthoff, 114.
- 18 Richards, "The Essential and the Accidental, and the Freedom in Definition." Berthoff 99.
- 19 Richard Vatz, "The Myth of Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6.3 (1973), 154-161.
- 20 Kenneth Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," *College English* volume 46 number 7 (November 1984): 635-52. Rpt in *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader* 2nd ed., ed. Victor Villanueva. Illinois: NCTE, 2003, 415-436.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 John Timber, "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning," *College English* 51.6 (October 1989), 602-16.
- 23 Bruffee, 427.
- 24 Bruce Ballenger's *The Curious Researcher* (New York: Longman, 2003) presents several activities throughout the research process to encourage student dialogue through peer review.
- 25 Kip M. Hartvigsen, "Learning, Our Theology," *Perspective* 1.3 (Fall 2001), 1-9.