Assessment and collaborative writing: Conflict to complement

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ASSESSMENT AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING:
CONFLICT TO COMPLEMENT

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental problems facing writing instructors who use collaboration is that traditional assessment measures, such as in-class essay exams, undermine rather than support such writing activities that are rooted in social construction theory. While the use of collaboration in writing classrooms continues to grow, the field of assessment remains virtually silent about the compatibility of traditional assessment methods with collaborative writing tasks such as group work and peer review. This thesis discusses social construction and assessment theories, their relation to collaboration, and the current role of both in writing classrooms. Additionally, data were generated through informal instructor surveys and a comparative study of common essay exam scores and portfolio scores to indicate which was a better indicator of final grades. The findings indicate that the means and criteria of assessment must be reshaped so that classrooms can be more hospitable to collaborative writing pedagogies. The thesis concludes with suggestions for introducing assessment methods that support rather than conflict with collaborative writing tasks.
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INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT

Traditional college writing classrooms, in the sense of those classrooms that use formulaic rules, models, and procedures to teach writing, were partly shaped by the Harvard Studies done in the 1800's. In analyzing these studies, Anne Ruggles Gere connects an "emphasis on written products and on the problems of writing instructors (as opposed to student writers)" with the intention of Harvard's administration "to rank student writing" according to "skill levels" (115). Writing skill assessments relied on measurable factors, such as grammatical and mechanical errors, that could be flagged, but they failed to address the context and content of the writing. As a result, the desire to rank students' proficiency led to in-class essay exams that gave administrators data that allegedly reflected students' writing skills. As more academic institutions and political bodies became concerned with students' writing abilities, the popularity of these in-class exams grew.

Yet, these assessment methods required more than just exhibiting writing skills; exams entailed exercising critical reading abilities, synthesizing knowledge, and re-articulating ideas found in the readings. This approach to assessment was based on the premise that the readings, which were usually from the literary canon, helped students
demonstrate their writing abilities by giving them something to imitate.

In traditional classrooms, imitation continues to dominate writing instruction. Canonical readings are taught as models of word usage, sentence structure, and the development of ideas. Students are instructed to mimic these models as they write their papers and are subsequently expected to employ these models when they are assessed via essay exams. However, such exams test primarily for an awareness of the literary canon and for the Aristotelian rules and procedures that are associated with what traditionally is defined as "good" writing. Because of this insulated image of evaluating writing skills, instructors and students have come to accept that writing in traditional classrooms is only wrestled with once, when pen meets paper on the students' desks.

With the dominance of this assessment method in grade schools and colleges, students have difficulty accepting writing as a process-oriented task. Coupled with other variables, such as work load and procrastination, the idea of writing papers the night before is not much of a jump for most students trained in the "on-the-spot" writing task. Subsequently, within the traditional composition classroom, writing has been anything but the recursive, process-
oriented task that Lil Brannon describes:

"[Recursive writing requires] movements forward, . . . [it is a] shaping of thoughts as they move along . . . where writers shuttle back and forth from what they want to say, to the words they have written, and back to their inward sense of their ideas." (Brannon 11)

This idea of recursiveness originated in mathematics; the term "recursive" refers to a "formula [that] generates successive terms," implying a generative process in which formula a leads to formula b, then to formula c and so on (Faigley). In terms of Brannon's description, the term "idea" can be substituted for "formula" so that the recursiveness of writing can be defined as a process in which idea a leads to idea b and so on.

Brannon's use of "recursive" emphasizes writing processes that involve constant motion as ideas are generated, shaped, and negotiated by students who try to create depth and understanding. Rooted in a pluralistic environment that relies heavily on social interaction, this recursive process resists E. D. Hirsch's traditional classrooms that are places where "the accumulated wisdom of mankind" can be "related" in a "persuasive fashion;" such classrooms remain rooted in product-based assessment that rely on argumentative essays to show writing proficiency (333).

Even with these shifts in writing pedagogies, writing
assessment has remained a “one shot deal” that stresses the final product (with emphasis on “final”). In the traditional classroom described by Hirsch, the teacher is the source of knowledge, “a living repository of the accumulated wisdom of the culture,” and students try to passively acquire that knowledge (Halloran 333). To assure that the knowledge is passed on, the living repository gives exams in which students try to persuade the instructor that they have acquired the information. Because of this emphasis on persuading teachers that knowledge has been acquired, these classes generally focus on the assessment measure because that is the “hurdle” that students must jump in order to prove their merit and earn satisfactory final grades.

Product-based assessment typically emphasizes the formulaic quality of the writing, so that writers privilege certain grammatical and mechanical models without any explicit encouragement to deviate into what are traditionally seen as “creative” tangents. This emphasis results in a prevailing opinion among students even into the graduate level that they can write a finished product in one sitting. Grading criteria that treats in-class essays as end products, when in fact they rank somewhere between freewrites and first drafts, reinforce this opinion.
However, according Andrea Lunsford, Kenneth Bruffee, and Janet Emig, this method of assessment sets up an artificial environment in which students are expected to perform in an artificial setting that is not repeated outside educational institutions. Compounding the problems presented by these artificial environments is that in-class essays imply that writing is a one-time task; in-class essay assessment does not reflect the revision process that professional writers, including composition professors, undertake to make their writing acceptable. In part, because of the constant debate over writing-as-a-process within the composition field, questions, such as how can assessment be more conducive to collaborative activities, continue to be posed by practitioners and theorists who are trying to move away from product-based writing.

In response to these questions, some theorists and practitioners propose reshaping writing classrooms by introducing social construction theory and collaborative pedagogies. Over the past twenty years, social construction theory has moved composition teaching away from the idea that writing is an individual endeavor; however, the problem of how to prevent traditional assessment measures from breaking down socially constructed collaboration that builds knowledge has not been resolved.
Because of this breakdown, theorists and practitioners can speculate that assessment theories have not evolved as quickly as composition theories. The resulting incompatibility between socially constructed writing classrooms and traditionally competitive assessment makes writing classrooms problematic. To resolve this problem, several facets of writing classrooms must be considered: first, the relationship between social construction theory and collaborative tasks must be studied; then the impact of assessment theories on this relationship, with specific focus on traditionally competitive grading, must be examined; and, lastly, current pedagogical techniques for teaching and assessing writing must be considered. By gaining an understanding of the relationship between these facets, instructors can move away from contradictory situations in which they find themselves trapped between the desire to use collaborative pedagogies and their reliance on traditional assessment methods to evaluate students.
CHAPTER 1: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND COLLABORATION

"The distinctive contribution of [writers] is that they produce not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts" (Foucault 189). Writers engage in processes that involve other members of their social environment, and they invariable give way to critics, researchers, and students who critique, study, and comment on the written text, regardless of the author's presence (and sometimes in spite of it). Historically, writing involved analyzing and imitating texts without any emphasis on discovering new knowledge. However, developments within the past thirty years changed the way students and teachers perceived written texts, particularly how those texts were constructed.

One of the current moves in composition looks past the individual writer and into the community that the writer belongs to. Here, the writer acts as a community scribe with his or her writing shaped by shared knowledge and language. At the same time, writing shapes the communities so that relationships between writers and communities become mutually beneficial. Social construction examines the relationship between social interaction and writing in order to account for the various ways that knowledge is discovered and shaped (i.e.: socially constructed).
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Social construction theory says that writers' social contexts are essential to writing. Within this context, writers construct knowledge through peer interaction and by sharing what they have brought with them to the community. Because of the view that these groups build knowledge, new ideas about the composing process have developed as cognitive studies have turned first to the social processes of constructing language, and then to the social processes of writing: both are seen as a way of discovering knowledge. The introduction of cognitive theory and writing-as-a-process has given rise to the study of the components of the social processes that go into building knowledge. Kenneth Bruffee argues that:

A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. (SCL&K 774)

In this view, communities generate reality, knowledge, thought, facts, etc., through the social interaction of their members. Viewing writing classrooms as communities, social construction says that students bring information to their groups through such things as class readings, essay drafts, and revision suggestions. Students share information with others who work with them to reshape and
negotiate what the written texts mean. As compromises are reached and ideas are defined and clarified, this reshaping impacts all the groups' members as their self-images, opinions, and beliefs adapt or change through the discovery of new knowledge. Such communities are shaped by knowledge and facts through the introduction of various texts that have been brought into the classroom. Together, individual students contribute and exchange ideas; in turn, they grow into a like-minded community that shares individual knowledge and builds community knowledge.

Bruffee notes that contrary to traditional perceptions of classroom interaction,¹

social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or "constitute" the communities that generate them.  

(SCL&K 774)

Social construction theory breaks the image of reality as something fixed, contained, and orderly. Reality is no longer a "paradox of control," to use Robert Brooke's term, that shapes language and knowledge so that people can understand the variables that shape writing.² Rather, reality is shaped by language and knowledge, and language and knowledge are shaped, in part, by writing: language, knowledge, reality, and writing share a reciprocal
relationship. Instead of being paradoxical, as if there were some unavoidable trap nestled in these relationships, the reciprocal relationship between these factors causes them to build on each other, or more precisely, they motivate students to construct knowledge with new language, language with new knowledge, writing with new language and knowledge, and reality through writing, language, and knowledge. Social construction focuses the classroom on this building effect and tries to understand how the interrelationships between factors contributes to students' learning.

Social construction embraces the chaos that results from the somewhat messy interaction that occurs as the interrelationships between knowledge, language, and reality are shaped. It rejects the right/wrong binaries of traditional classrooms by embracing post modern pluralism that emerges from conflict and chaos. As Kenneth Bruffee asserts, social construction theory "assumes that there is no such thing as a universal foundation, ground, framework, or structure of knowledge. There is only an agreement, a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers" (776-7). This consensus is ever-changing and is not always smooth or unanimous; rather, any agreement hinges on negotiation that shapes and
determines meaning through a socially constructed language between these "knowledgeable peers."

With this in mind, social construction theory seeks to examine and study not just students' experiences, but the language used to convey those experiences to the larger group that, in turn, tries to understand and interpret what has taken place. Through this interaction, communicative elements of writing and language, such as words, ideas, and concepts, are negotiated so that knowledge can be discovered and reconstructed communally, equally, and by "consensus." This interaction between writers forms the foundation of social construction so that "social construction [tries to] understand knowledge and [sees] the authority of knowledge as community-generated, community-maintaining symbolic artifacts" (Bruffee 777). Knowledge and language are therefore inseparable (Bruffee) and intrinsic to one another in the formation of both; they share a reciprocal relationship in that they shape and define each other.

In fact, social contexts of language emphasize students' cognitive abilities to formulate ideas and gain knowledge by accessing the "inner reaches of the individual mind" (777). Bruffee notes that "the difference between saying that language has a social context and that language is a social construct defines a key difference between
cognitive and social constructionist work in composition" (784). Bruffee's distinction parallels a key difference between traditionalists and social constructionists. For some cognitive psychologists, meaning in language is viewed as contingent on the members of the society. In order to communicate, members share the same language context so that they can effectively understand one another. Language is separate from individual learners who must acquire it in order to be successful communicators. The same holds true for traditionalists who view language and knowledge as something that must be learned by students so that they can enter the social contexts of writing classrooms.

Social construction holds a different view of language and knowledge. As Bruffee states, language and knowledge have social contexts, but language and knowledge are also constructed within that context by individuals who are learning. Social construction foregrounds interaction between thinkers, situating the formulation of ideas as the compilation of external interaction between "knowledgeable peers" who share what they know with others for the purpose of learning more. Social construction tries to motivate students to "learn to conceive of cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory . . . whatever entities we normally think of as strictly individual,
internal, and mental affairs" (Bruffee 775). In many ways, this motivation moves students to examine their biases, their beliefs, and their assumptions about other people, their environment, and the world as a whole. It introduces plurality into classrooms where only single-minded, individual thinking previously took place. This plurality moves individuals to think in a social manner (Bruffee) so that they share their cognitive, emotional, motivational, perceptual, and imagined thoughts. Through this, biases are changed, torn down, reevaluated, reconfigured, and rebuilt so that thinking by individual students develops into "socially justified belief[s]" (774). In this way, not only are ideas refined, but traditional rules and procedures that undergird writing classrooms become negotiable.

Rather than granting "AUTHORITY . . . only to those who establish their claims by referring to other texts," social construction theory "advocates a social view of writing [that] resists such restriction, choosing instead to place the [students] in a particular, contextualized scene of writing and reading" (Ede 10). This sets up a situation in which students actually formulate ideas, both from their own experiences and through reading, from those of others, and then discuss them: "we [then] generate knowledge by justifying those beliefs [ideas] socially" (Bruffee 777).
Through these discussions, ideas are molded and shaped into forms that take into consideration the plural nature of the experiences and account for the various interpretations that each student will have.

"What we're witnessing is a fundamental epistemological shift, one that both draws on and will influence a broad range of disciplines, including our own" (Ede 10). Social construction theory cuts across disciplinary lines, psychology, sociology, business, humanities, and even the sciences, revealing substructures within each academic field's expectations and standards that dictate how knowledge is perceived and communicated. These substructures require that theorists and practitioners begin to account for and define, as David Bartholomae notes, "basic terms," because what is basic for one group is not for another. Language is contingent; it depends on the people engaged in communication to shape and negotiate how ideas are discovered, explored, and eventually defined for that particular group.

Metatalk, what Bruffee might define as "talk about talk," forces individual learners to think about the way they communicate; specifically, how they choose to convey their ideas, the words they choose, and how many words or sentences are used (777). This latter consideration is
influenced mostly by the group because, through either verbal or nonverbal gestures and questions, students are forced linguistically to reduce their ideas or expand them so that the rest of the group can understand. Therefore, individual cognitive activity and metatalk is not a "matrix of thought" unique to that individual, rather it is constructed by "knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community" (777).

The language of the community is inseparable from the community's knowledge. Functioning within a language and knowledge community requires that members communicate in order to clarify ideas, develop thoughts that have been expressed, and reshape knowledge of the individual. Thus, communication becomes the central element of developing knowledge, with language at the center of communicative acts:

Social construction offers a language with which to cope with [the] diverse, rapidly changing world, a world in which relations between people and things has become subordinate in importance and long-range effect to relations among people and among communities of people. (779)

The focus of classroom discussions and lectures then changes from passing on knowledge, which traditionally is seen as the subject of education, to discovering knowledge and changing perceptions through relationships between learners
as they discuss possible tangents that knowledge can take. To summarize, social construction emphasizes the importance of every participant; it encourages students and instructors to actively participate because social construction theoretically acknowledges that every person brings resources and experiences to the group, and therefore, each is an authority on what s/he already knows. From the outset, power is disseminated laterally because group members possess authority over the text of their individual experiences. Knowledge and language can no longer be hierarchical and vertical in their relationship-orienting nature; rather, according to Bruffee, they are "horizontal."

Within this horizontal relationship, students can be placed on the same level, one that gives everyone an opportunity to interact and puts them on an equal footing. Social construction can take place since, like a contractor building a house, each subcontractor (architect, plumber, electrician, etc.) is able to, and must, contribute his or her specific knowledge, experience, and expertise to the overall construction of knowledge. Out of this construction, students generate new ideas about their environment by sharing each others' views and using these views as lenses for reexamining and reshaping "reality,
knowledge, thought, facts, texts, [and] selves" (Bruffee).

COLLABORATION

Anne Ruggles Gere defines collaboration as an "enduring concept of alienation and a continuing struggle against [that alienation]." Unlike traditional classrooms with their rigid hierarchical systems that emphasize control, collaborative classrooms based on social construction try to break that control by removing teachers from the center of the classrooms and foregrounding student interaction. Because of this interaction, no one person ever has a complete understanding of what is being discussed. Each group member faces moments when s/he is alienated from the discussion because s/he does not have enough information to remain within it; yet, this alienation does not last. Through questioning and negotiating, students reenter the conversation at different points so that the collaborative classroom becomes more like a carousel, with students entering and exiting frequently.

Theorists such as Bruffee and Ede argue that all students come to the classroom with something to offer. By establishing an atmosphere of equality in which students interact freely, teachers encourage students to voice different opinions without fear of being rebuked or told
they are wrong. By encouraging such interaction, instructors reduce the amount of alienation that takes place. This type of classroom usually uses a face-to-face setting, such as a circle, so that everyone in the classroom can be included in the conversation.

However, Andrea Lunsford warns that "collaboration often masquerades as democracy [equality] when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control" (3-4). The relationship between collaboration and social construction theory can be problematic partly because some practitioners unknowingly merge the two as if they were the same thing, a type of pseudo-collaboration that simply replaces one authoritarian method with another.

If teachers believe that only they possess knowledge, then although these same instructors may use collaborative methods, such as group work and peer feedback, they are not working with students to socially construct knowledge because they have set themselves up as the sole authority within the classroom. In this storehouse system, teachers pass on knowledge and then deem the recipients competent when they can independently reproduce that knowledge. This type of instruction places the body of knowledge outside students and instructors; it is not something that can be negotiated and discovered, only accessed and learned.
In traditional classrooms, the most common forms of collaboration are peer response workshops and class discussions. However, student feedback within this context is commonly negated in favor of the teacher's opinions, partly because students do not see their peers as competent authorities. In addition, many instructors undermine peer responses by emphasizing what they see as more important issues. This was the case in one writing center conference in which the writer's peers told her that the essay's ideas needed to be reorganized. However, an instructor saw this as unimportant compared to the comma errors in the paper, so he instructed the student to work on the grammar first because "that was more important."

Although traditional classrooms may engage students in collaborative methods, they value collaborative work differently. The group's purpose is to either rediscover what knowledge already exists or help the group's members conform to the rules and procedures for writing. This does little to encourage students to work together because the groups act to reinforce existing knowledge rather than to discover or reshape new knowledge.

Collaboration, however, is more than just students working together. Muriel Harris states that students' roles in collaborative writing groups should be as "active
participants," and not based on just responding to writing. In collaborative classrooms that are based in social construction theory, students help determine the rules that govern the class; they help define the criteria and requirements for assessing the class, and they help shape the composing process so that it will be effective. This is dramatic because traditionally, instructors possess both the power and responsibility for imposing the rules and criteria for writing situations. In socially constructed, collaborative classrooms, teachers share power with students so that responsibility is also shared.

As a result, socially constructed collaboration demands dialogue that encourages equal participation among group members. Classrooms using this type of collaboration are far noisier than traditional classrooms, and instructors become more like guides, advisors, and/or collaborators than active participants. The role of instructors is to encourage students to examine the knowledge they possess and construct their thinking and writing together (Haviland). At the same time, success hinges on students' willingness to think interactively: to convey their ideas and experiences, both academic and nonacademic, and to engage each other in conversation that elicits change as a result of shared knowledge.
As students and instructors learn to negotiate, classroom societies become increasingly less traditional, moving teachers away from the front of the rooms to other positions so that they are only a part of the overall conversation taking place. At times, these classrooms use large circles for discussions; other times, they are comprised of smaller groups who collaborate on specific assignments by negotiating topics, approaches, and ways of conveying information to the classroom community as a whole. Always, conversation is the central activity in these classrooms, with dialogue and language being key to the socially constructed community as knowledge manifests in both discussion and writing.

Writing within these classrooms is also changed; rather than based on individual knowledge, it reflects the groups' influence, through peer revisions and comments. Students' essays have a better sense of audience because these writers interact with their audience. Common errors such as unclear ideas and poorly worded sentences are more likely to be resolved in the drafting stages so that final drafts are more thought out and show greater depth.

Socially constructed collaboration constructs writing within the aggregate group, resisting the binaries of traditional collaborative classrooms in which "this student
contributes this and that student contributes that," and then individual students take all that back and write their papers. In socially constructed collaboration, students are more like pinball machines, shooting ideas into the arena and bouncing them off of other people, off other ideas, and off theories or speculations. Here, bells ring as new ideas are generated and the metaphorical clicking of the arms as old and new ideas are pushed back into play for discussion, review, and revision can be heard; students rack up numerical points as knowledge grows and the intensity of the interaction escalates.

With this in mind, social construction is more than just people working together or "collaborating," in the traditional sense of the word; rather, it is a way of thinking that places everyone on an equal plateau and encourages conflict, negotiation, and shaping of meaning while discouraging the binary thinking of authoritarianism and hierarchy. As they extend Andrea Lunsford's "demand" for collaboration into a demand for negotiation in the writing classroom, teachers change their classrooms from simply using collaborative methods to actively negotiating and shaping meaning within and through writing.
MOVING TO ASSESSMENT

Social construction theory and collaboration have reshaped the writing process and now challenge traditional ways in which students and teachers assess what students have learned. One of the fundamental problems facing process-based writing is that traditional forms of assessment (i.e.: criterion-referenced grading or norm-referenced holistic scoring) undermine the social construction of knowledge and writing.

Traditional assessment generally emphasizes absolutes in terms of right or wrong answers. Such absolutes encourage students to resist interaction because they are reluctant to depend on someone else for fear that the other person will be wrong. Thus, individualism overshadows collaborative activities as students either struggle to maintain their grades or give up because of peer apathy.

At the same time, traditional assessment encourages competition as it pits students against each other for grades. Bell curves and instructors who claim that they “do not give A’s” intensify this competition, substantially undermining any group collaboration because students are more focused on their own scores than on how they can help each other.

This competition for grades impacts collaboration in
other ways also: it isolates better students from weaker students; it alienates group members by encouraging group hierarchies in which someone takes control because s/he does not want to rely on "weaker" peers; and it encourages failure as students give up for a variety of reasons, such as frustration or because the material is too difficult and/or is being covered too fast.

Rethinking assessment means that teachers, practitioners, and theorists must rethink their classrooms on a much larger scale than process-based writing requires, focusing less on products or 'outcomes' and more on the processes through which writers represent meaning and interact (Lunsford 154). Part of this rethinking centers on finding new means of assessing students, ways that encourage social interaction and reduce competition and individualism.

Many questions surround the debate that is just beginning in the composition field: should grading in collaborative classrooms be different from grading in traditional classrooms? Is there a significant difference in outcomes between current assessment measures (essay exams and portfolios)? Is one of these measure better suited to socially constructed collaboration? What types of assessment criteria are needed to keep collaborative writing from breaking down? How do we make assessment less
competitive? What type of assessment are collaborative writing classrooms currently using? And what new types of assessment can be used to effectively evaluate collaborating students' writing?
CHAPTER 2: ASSESSMENT IN CONTEXT

Because students are expected to "acquire some demonstrable skill" that can be assessed, assessment methods tend to usurp the actual learning of writing skills in the classroom (Trimbur 47). The lack of assessment techniques that encourage rather than undermine socially constructed collaboration stems in part from assessment advocates' focus on essay evaluations in traditional classrooms and on large-scale tests. As a result, conflicts between collaborative writing and traditional essay assessment continue to be undisguised and, therefore, unresolved. A reworking of the way in which theorists and practitioners apply social construction theory and assessment theories to the writing classroom is required so that assessment can support collaboration.

For my purposes, I will deal with two assessment contexts: traditional classrooms, which primarily use mid-term essay exams and final exams to evaluate students; and collaborative classrooms, which use evaluative tools such as peer revision, tutoring, and multiple drafts, and emphasize teachers' comments above value judgments to help students improve their writing skills.
ASSESSMENT IN TRADITIONAL CLASSROOMS

As stated in Chapter One, traditional classrooms can be defined as those that teach writing in a "presentational mode [in which] the instructor dominates all activity, with students acting as the passive recipients of rules, advice, and examples of good writing" (White, DSCWP, 57). In these classes, essay exams are typically the means of determining if students have memorized and can imitate writing models. Essay exams purport to determine students' writing proficiency, knowledge of subject matter, and ability to think clearly, concisely, and critically. And, despite the drawbacks associated with them, in-class essays continue to be the most frequently used form of assessment.

Part of the popularity of in-class essay exams is that they use holistic scoring that integrates norm-referenced with criterion-referenced assessment. This produces data (numbers) that can then be "scientifically" studied. Separately, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment methods are different. Norm-referenced tests rely on questions that typically are the basis of multiple choice exams; these tests are used for entrance exams and other methods of assessment intended to "filter out" or place students at different levels. They produce a bell curve that, depending on the distribution of scores, tries
to maintain a “normal curve” distribution.

However, norm-referenced tests tend to evaluate students’ aptitude and test-taking (or better yet, guessing) abilities rather than their knowledge. According to Edward M. White, such tests actually move students away from learning because they “disrupt” education, invariably “skewing the bell curve” either for, or more often than not, against students taking the test (64). This type of testing works to preserve itself rather than to encourage the development of students’ writing abilities. It also works to segregate and exclude those students who do not fit the social orientation of the test. Because norm referencing favors “certain convenient norming populations,” it promulgates other unfair characteristics such as test-taking abilities and social backgrounds (65).

Essay tests are generally more criterion-based because the criteria used to judge the exam determines success, and these criteria lack specific “reference to a [particular] student population” (66). These criteria try to account for evidence of students’ knowledge of the course material in their essays. This is one of the features of this assessment method that makes it conducive to the new critical and formalist teaching modes. If knowledge exists separate from the individual, the criteria used to judge the
test can be emphasized over the student and then a "normal" assumption of skill levels can be established, thus separating the criteria from individual students taking the exams. Criteria-based testing attempts to gather data that can be generalized or averaged to all students, without reference to student population variables such as gender, race, or social origin.

Holistic scoring "gives those who use it well great opportunities to blend the testing with the teaching of writing" (White, TAW 68). By using holistic scoring guides to set the criteria for students' writing, instructors can teach students how to improve their writing by using the criteria as a model. This type of testing is used primarily for large-scale assessments, such as student placement, and is seen as a way to help "teachers gain power over assessment and hence over the definition of what is to be valued in education" because of the established criteria for writing (White, PASWA 9). Such assessment criteria give teachers the tools necessary to ensure student conformity, and they help define, as White states, goals and values more clearly for the students.

White's statement that "what you assess is what you value," affects students' goals proportionately. Students have the ability, no matter how ignorant teachers may judge
them to be, to discover what teachers really want from them—ironically, this intent to "read the teacher" may be the only true collaboration that students do. Rules and procedures that are implied by the criteria used to judge writing drive the writing course and eventually come to bear on what students pay attention to. In traditional classrooms, these Aristotelian rules and procedures, which come out of the preexisting body of knowledge, tend to be the central focus of instruction.

Teaching to the exam criteria resembles process-based writing in that it tries to define the writer's audience. But it simplifies this idea of audience by teaching students that exam readers look for surface qualities before they judge content. Based on students' responses surveyed after tests, this seemingly inaccurate view of exam readers appears to have some credibility. I have heard many students comment that they write "as much as possible" on exams so that they can fulfill the criteria. They appear to hope that somewhere in the essay, they will be clear enough, concise enough, and organized enough to receive a passing grade. And, judging from the number of long essays that essentially reflect the value of quantity over quality, this belief appears to hold some element of truth. Unfortunately, students can write grammatically and mechanically correct
without actually saying anything, and some teachers will accept these "writing activities" as passable papers.

Essay assessment adds to the emphasis on surface level writing by advocating that students show an awareness of and ability to demonstrate their synthesis of knowledge (as represented in the word choice of "explain, summarize, and/or analyze" in most prompts) without delving into any "original" thought; such thinking is rarely expected, asked for, or considered when teachers grade exams. These expectations have been used to program students to identify immediate surface needs rather than deeper content issues. This results in essays that are superficially correct but empty of content.

Other problems exist that impact the reliability of criterion referenced testing: some tests are difficult to execute and unreliable because of what White calls an "exclusionary design" that reflects only a concern for the final product: problems with "unclear assignments" that use ambiguous terms (see the above list of prompts), "harsh commentary," and "emphasis on grades" influence the construction of essay questions and usually result in students' poor performance (TAW 105). Adding to the unreliability of essay exams are students who can take tests and receive passing grades without possessing the skills
required to write effectively in the academic and nonacademic world. Similarly, other students have acquired skills emphasizing content but are not able to address surface flaws on spontaneous writing assignments and subsequently receive failing grades. These situations show some of the inherent biases of essay testing and lead some theorists and practitioners to conclude that successful in-class essays predominantly rely on test-taking skills.

CONFLICT WITH ASSESSMENT

Problems with essay assessment have created divisions within the composition field, particularly among teachers who, because of the negative consequences of traditional assessment, question the reliability of essay exams. In part, these instructors, and the theorists who back them, argue that essay tests emphasize product-based writing and create an atmosphere of intolerance for process-based writing. This emphasis on product-based exams means that spontaneous writing takes precedence over writing processes and grades invariably supersede skill development. Furthermore, this emphasis results in a "hit or miss" gamble: teachers pose questions and students must interpret and write. If, according to White, students do not understand, are confused, or cannot correctly interpret the
questions, they could feasibly write down an answer that reflects everything they know about the subject matter, no matter how relevant or irrelevant (TAW 75). Student responses validate this conclusion: comments such as "I wasn't sure what the teacher wanted, so I wrote down everything I could remember" are common. Two issues in this response stand out. First, "I wrote down everything I could remember" supposes the existence of an external body of knowledge. It also implies some memorization of text, rules, and procedures occurred during the term (whether intended or not) and that students felt that they could pass the class by knowing these things. "Remember" also implies that this acquired knowledge remains separate and independent from students who, for their part, have been forced to acquire knowledge and must put that knowledge into practice via the essay. This sounds very general, but then the traditional external body of knowledge tends to be very general.

This generality leads to a second issue—poorly worded, ambiguous assignments. In fact, poorly worded prompts generally reflect instructors' confusion about the body of knowledge as well as unsurity about their own goals for the exams. This "hit or miss" game, as Hilgers calls it, stems from beliefs that assessment is "the heartbeat of the
writing process," one in which evaluation of students' abilities "takes precedence over all [other] segments of [writing]" (366). This emphasis on assessing writers' abilities causes teachers to teach to writing tests and for students to learn in the same manner. The result is a paradox: frustrated students cannot understand what instructors want because the goals that shape the assignments are not communicated clearly; frustrated instructors believe that students cannot write because teachers are not getting what they felt they asked for; and both parties become self-destructive cohabitators in a system that does not teach anything relevant to learning how to write.

By emphasizing assessment rather than writing processes, traditional composition classrooms fail to address students' changing needs and skills. This is due, in part, to an assumption by essay assessment users that all students learn at the same rate and level. As a result, because students are at different levels in the same classroom, some invariably face either an overwhelming amount of material that they cannot process, or they are not challenged to become active in their own learning. In response, collaborative learning advocates argue that "writing tasks that demand cognitive operations beyond an
individual writer's abilities are likely to stunt rather than challenge the development of required skills" (Hilgers 365). Sarah Freedman sees the solution to this problem in "collaborative problem solving," a process in which "problems must be within the writer's developmental grasp, and the writer must gradually become more competent, that is, more independent of the responder" (7)\(^1\).

Freedman's solution parallels Stephen Krashen's "Second Language Acquisition theory" which says that "the language which learners are exposed to should be just far enough beyond their current competence that they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress (+1)" (Brown 280). Extending this, learners acquire knowledge in the same way that they acquire language: by adding to their knowledge one factor at a time, as represented by Krashen's equation \( (i+1) \): \( i \) represents their current knowledge and \( +1 \) represents the next step or level of knowledge. Students learn by reaching for information or knowledge that is a step above their current knowledge. If knowledge is too difficult \(+2 \) or more), then the student is less likely to learn what is needed or required. On the other hand, if the student is under-challenged in the class \(+0 \), then they are not learning.

For composition, the acquisition of writing skills is
more complicated that memorizing rules and procedures (namely grammar and mechanics), and entails more than mimicking models that are based on canonical texts. For students, the emphasis on rules represents either something they already know or can easily learn (+0) or something that is so far out beyond their grasp that they can never learn it (+100). For students who must exercise knowledge that is out of their grasp, essay tests are obstacles rather than indicators. In terms of writing skills, essay exams do not allow for process-based writing skills to be exercised or addressed because product-oriented writing (essay exams) only views the utopian ideal of the final product.

Subsequently, questions of how socially constructed knowledge can be assessed in order to determine skill levels and grades arise—what is actually being assessed—the writer's knowledge? The writer's ability to write independently? The writer's development over the quarter or semester? Or, as non-collaborative advocates have asked, is what is being assessed really the knowledge of the individual student, or is it the community knowledge that is being judged? And, what relation/relevance does that community knowledge have to individuals who must exhibit their writing competence? The introduction of process writing has hastened the need for clearer and immediate
answers to these questions so that socially constructed collaboration can be maintained. At the same time, seeking collaborative assessment techniques that do not simply replace the "old authoritarian control" with a new authoritarian means of assigning grades is challenging.

ASSESSMENT IN COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOMS

The collaborative classroom uses many forms of evaluative measures: including peer reviews and workshops, teachers' comments on drafts and revisions, and tutoring consultations in writing centers. These tasks encourage interaction and increase learning by teaching students the processes involved in writing, and these processes are necessary for developing writing skills. However, the goals of evaluative measures differ from those of assessment measures.

Both terms have to do with value: evaluate means to discover value, while assess means to set or determine value. In terms of the value of writing, evaluation can be defined as discovering what is valuable within a text, but doing so without making a judgment as to the worth of that discovery; this latter task is the role of assessment. That is, assessment judges the worth of a text based in part on criteria used to determine value. For example, teachers
evaluate the content of a paper through comments and feedback; however, teachers assess content by gauging how well it follows specific criteria for such things as organization and structure.

Collaborative writing classrooms need an assessment tool—one that acknowledges process-based writing, that is conducive to developing writers' skills, and that reflects students' actual writing abilities. Currently, many collaborative classrooms use a combination of essay assessment and portfolio assessment. In these classrooms, portfolios are becoming more popular because they give a broader representation of students' abilities than essay assessment does: "unlike essay tests, [portfolios] can provide several different kinds of writing and rewriting, without time constraints and without test anxiety" (TAW 119). Portfolios allow students to develop and revise their writing and also to choose what elements in the portfolios reflect their best writing. Rather than being a "snapshot" of students' work, which is one interpretation of essay assessment, portfolios provide more of a "motion picture," as White states, one that reflects the whole process of students' ideas.

Portfolio assessment is not without its drawbacks because portfolios can be used to simply replace one
authoritarian assessment measure with another; Lunsford terms this as "practicing the same old authoritarian control" (CCIWC 4). This assessment method requires students turn in several drafts with their final paper so that instructors can see the "stages" the paper went through and confirm that the students revised. I interviewed two instructors who cited this as their primary reason for using portfolios. By seeing multiple drafts, they expected to find evidence of improvements (new information added, further development, and clarification of ideas) based on peer feedback and teacher comments. But both instructors used the same criteria for grading the portfolios as they did for grading essay exams. They both commented that drafts did not affect final grades, unless they were missing; if this occurred, then points were deducted from the final grade. For these instructors, and others like them, portfolios are no different than essays; portfolios have simply gone through revision—and process writing, although a part of the class curriculum, is still second to the end product.

Other factors that impact portfolio assessment include the lack of a defined purpose for portfolios, inconsistent determinations of what should be included in the portfolios, and lack of grading criteria that considers all elements of
the portfolios (currently, portfolio grading criteria are based on redressed essay assessment criteria). When these factors are not considered, portfolios become just another product-based tool that does not reflect writing development and does not help develop writing skills—in essence, the same old essay assessment packaged differently.⁴

Another issue, one perhaps more important at this stage in writing classroom development, has also been raised and debated: which is a better means of assessing students' abilities, essays or portfolios? But the underlying factor centers on which of these assessment methods is a better indicator of the quality of the students' work and which one is a better way to evaluate and measure students' writing abilities. Currently, no data exist that explore this controversy. Thus, Chapter 3 reports on a small study exploring this issue.
I compared students' common exam essay scores and portfolio scores to determine if one was a stronger predictor of their final grades than the other. These students were enrolled in California State University, San Bernardino's English 495: Upper Division Writing classes. The classes used a combination of in-class common essay exams and portfolios to determine grades. I expected to find that portfolios were stronger predictors of the final scores.

I have several reasons for this expectation: first, portfolios represented a larger sampling of writing done for the courses; these included freewrites, drafts, student and instructor comments, final drafts, and metacognitive reflective letters. Second, I felt that common exam scores would be weaker predictors of final grades because traditional assessment measures conflict with process writing. Finally, because portfolio grades represented most writing done for the classes, and essays were generally considered to be one component among many, I was confident that the portfolio scores would better predict the final grades. This latter consideration could have a potentially damaging skewing effect on the correlations; however,
because instructors involved in the study generally averaged essay scores with portfolio scores, I felt that any discrepancies would have a minimal affect.

I set the study up as a small, focused research project that loosely followed the criteria Stephen North uses to outline clinical studies: identify the problem; design the study; collect and analyze data; interpret data in terms of its contributions to the canon; and draw conclusions as to the implications for research and teaching (North 207).

This study used the Pearson Product Moment correlation to analyze data covering approximately nine years. The data showed that prior to 1992, essay exams better predicted final grades. However since then, portfolio scores have become stronger predictors of final grades; yet, the differences between the two coefficients at this time are not significant. Referring to Table 1A, $r_{23}$, which is the correlation coefficient for portfolios and final grades, is greater than $r_{12}$, the correlation between essays and final grades. This indicates that portfolios are better predictors overall. The score breakdown by quarter also supports this conclusion; Tables #1 and #2 indicate that during the most recent quarters studied, portfolio scores better predicted final grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table #1A</th>
<th>Overall Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$r_{12} = .400$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r_{13} = .311$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r_{23} = .755$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df = 157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cv = 1.645</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t (157) = 1.738$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
grades.

However, Fall 1996's scores do not indicate a significant relationship existed between portfolios and final grades because the instructor used portfolio scores as final grades and did not factor in the common exam scores; rather, the common exam essays were considered drafts and were subsequently revised for the portfolio (this also occurred in Summer 1993). Despite these exceptions, essay scores continue a downward trend which currently reflects a .4 correlation with final grades.

As Table #1A shows, the correlation between essay exams and final scores remains stronger than the correlation between in-class essays and portfolios. This is important when considering factors such as instructors who use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f89</td>
<td>0.723</td>
<td>0.539</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f90</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>f91</td>
<td>0.457</td>
<td>0.571</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s93</td>
<td>0.297</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f93</td>
<td>0.519</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sp94</td>
<td>0.316</td>
<td>0.587</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f94</td>
<td>0.667</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w96</td>
<td>0.505</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f96</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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portfolio scores as final grades. Since this would result in a perfect correlation (+1) between the two variables, the correlation between portfolios and essays becomes more important because they reflect differences in grading that can be significant for practitioners and theorists. These differences result from how essay scores are factored into final grades. Rather than making the essay scores a substantial part of final grades, they are not considered; instead, the scores become indicators of individual essay grades that can be changed by revising.

In Fall quarters 1989 and 1990, essay scores were better predictors of final grades, with t(12)=1.480 and t(8)=2.135 respectively. However, significant difference
only existed in 1990. This is reinforced by the substantial
difference between the variables (.577 compared to -.043) in
Table #2. There is no indication of why the portfolio
variable is so low; however, the data could reflect
instructor discomfort with portfolios, a lack of familiarity
with them, or a heavier reliance on essay exams.

Although no significant difference has existed between
essay and portfolio variables (t(18)=.2317), after Fall
1991, portfolios showed a stronger correlation with final
grades ($r_{12}=.457; r_{23}=.571$). This relationship strengthen in
Fall 1994 and Winter 1996, which showed .948 and .912
correlations respectively (compared to .667 and .505
correlations between final grades and essay scores), with
the data indicating that significant difference existed in
the Winter 1996 quarter, when $t(14)=2.097$.

Additionally, given the range of the correlation
variables, I felt that each quarter's mean scores would also
reflect the changing relationships between essays,
portfolios, and final grades. However, as Table #3
indicates, essay scores have rarely been strong predictors
of final grades (the exception is Spring quarter 1994).
Just the opposite appears to have occurred: portfolios have
almost always shown a strong relationship with final grades.
The overall mean score for essays is 2.580, with an n=160,
while portfolios have a mean of 3.166, with n=150, and final grades have a mean score of 3.154, with n=142. Table #3 shows that mean scores for portfolios tend to be better than final grades. This could result if essay scores and portfolio scores were averaged in order to determine final grades; or it could indicate that other variables, such as participation, need to be considered before final grades are calculated.

These findings are interesting in that they contradict traditionalists who favor essay exams. However, in defense of their position, I must note that the essay scores in the study do not reflect other assignments done for assessment purposes. Those activities are not known nor is there an indication of how they reflect on the teachers' overall grading. What I do know is that Instructor A weighed in-class essays equally with the other assignments. These assignments included other in-class essays and out-of-class assignments that were drafted and revised before they were turned in. Instructor B did not consider the common exam scores; instead, she allowed students to revise them, as they would any of their other assignments, and then resubmit them in the portfolios. This could effectively skew the common exam scores because of the different attitudes that students went into the common exam with: Instructor A’s
students knew the exam would be weighed equally with the rest of their assignments; whereas Instructor B’s students knew they could revise and receive a better grade.

I should also note that the extreme drop for essay scores in Fall 1991, as well as the perfect correlations in Summer 1993 and Fall 1996 for portfolios, reflects Instructor B’s practice of not weighing common exam scores when calculating final grades; this is reflected in Table #4. However, the influence of Instructor B’s practice is lessened because Instructor A taught more of the classes, seven compared to Instructor B’s three, and therefore the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>f89</th>
<th>f90</th>
<th>f91</th>
<th>su93</th>
<th>f93</th>
<th>sp94</th>
<th>f94</th>
<th>w96</th>
<th>f96</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Grade</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table #3
Mean Scores by Quarter
Table 4
Essay and Portfolio Correlations according to Instructor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Essay</th>
<th>Portfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data’s integrity remains intact.

Other factors must also be considered before drawing conclusions from these data: both instructors, particularly after 1992, were more invested in portfolio assessment than in common exam assessment because the portfolios represented a larger part of the students’ work. It is easy to ignore a smaller aspect of the course than a large chunk; thus, essay scores lost some of their influence in determining final scores. Timing was also a factor: the common exam essays were written during the middle of the term, when students’ skills were still being developed and refined. The portfolios better reflected developed skills because they were completed at the end of the term. This indicates that portfolios are more predictive because of their timing. Although factors such as these do not dismiss the study’s findings, they do suggest that the findings are not necessarily conclusive.

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The correlations between instructors vary dramatically. As discussed, Instructor B used portfolio scores as final grades. Instructor A, on the other hand, considered the common exams and portfolios together when he calculated final grades; the result is a significant difference between essay scores and portfolio scores overall (with $t(94)=2.064$). For Instructor A, the correlation between essays and final grades is .497 with a mean for essay exams of 2.613 and for final grades 3.130. This represents a significant difference between the means of the two scores even when considering that fifteen students who took the common exam did not receive a final grade.

Compared with the .679 correlation between portfolio scores, the difference between the predictability of the essays and portfolios is substantial and important. The portfolios in this instructor's classes impact final grades more significantly than in-class essays, as reflected in the portfolio mean score of 3.151. Not only are portfolios a stronger predictor of final grades, but their significance in determining students' abilities appears to share a stronger relationship with overall writing ability because of the factors discussed earlier about process-based writing. Considering this, the different methods of teaching writing that reinforce either essays or portfolios
become vital to assessment processes, and some of these methods have grown out of grading criteria for large-scale common exams and portfolio assessments.

During Spring 1997, the English 495 classes participated in a feasibility study that introduced portfolios as an alternative to common exams. The findings were interesting, and although they have not been tested for significant difference and correlations, they indicate that changes to large-scale assessment are on the horizon.

As indicated by the correlation studies, significant variance did not occur for several years after portfolios were introduced; and, like those early years, current variance between portfolios and essays as large-scale assessment tools does not appear to be significant. Tables 5 and 6 in Appendix B show common exam scores and portfolio scores, respectively, as they were compiled during Spring 1997. The most significant similarity between essays and portfolios is their mean scores, 7.18 and 7.83 respectively. Both exams had a median score of 7. While 65.4% of the students who took the common exam received a 7 or better, 76.5% received a 7 or better on the portfolios. This indicates that students did better on the portfolio than did students who took just the essay exam. However, in terms of the number of students passing the assessment, while 65.4%
received a 7 or better on the common exam, 81% passed the test. In comparison, the median and mean scores of the portfolios are equal; they represent both the average score and the total number of students who passed. This could indicate that portfolios are a more accurate measure of students’ writing abilities and, therefore, a better, predictive assessment tool. Essay exams though would seem to allow more latitude, with the majority of students scoring better than just a passing grade. What remains to be determined is the correlations between common exams, portfolios and final grades for these classes; that will have to be done at a later date.

With the relationship between portfolio scores and final grades drawing closer, and with the gap between portfolios and essay scores increasing, I surmise that portfolios are becoming better predictors of final scores for several reasons: first, that as practitioners rely more on portfolios, portfolio scores will eventually replace final course grades; second, as process-based writing grows, product-oriented tasks—like in-class essay exams—will be used less frequently; finally, with this latter change, scoring criteria will also have to change in order to be more conducive to process-based writing.

The holistic scoring criteria used for the Spring 1997
common exams and portfolio assessments reflect the changes that are happening to grading criteria (see Appendix B). While the portfolio assessment criteria relied on a floating scale that is based on interpretative readings, it is also rooted in the holistic scoring process used on common exams. This may help explain why, when looking at Tables 5 and 6, little significant difference currently exists between common exam scores and portfolio scores.

My experience with grading both exams is that some confusion still exists over what will be considered in the portfolio. Despite this, grading criteria for portfolios seems more conducive to the assessment process because it allows graders more flexibility in assigning scores. The floating scale allows this flexibility so that the holistic scores result from averaging several factors. The criteria for the holistic scoring sheet is still necessary, but with multiple drafts and different assignments required for portfolios, graders have more to consider when determining students’ grades.

Working out problems such as the quantity of writing that must be considered, how each component will be weighed, and graders’ time constraints will make portfolios stronger assessment measures. As such problems are solved, significant differences between essay assessment and
portfolio assessment should also increase and portfolios will become more significant predictors of final grades, if they do not actually replace them.
CONCLUSION: THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD  
HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Portfolios only begin to address concerns of how instructors can make assessment more conducive to building knowledge through collaboration. A closer relationship between assessment measures and social construction epistemology must be established so that they work together effectively. Assessment needs to flow naturally from activities done in the writing classroom. Reading, commenting, and assigning holistic scores to drafts are methods that both instructors and students can use to bring assessment and social construction closer. Supplementing workshops with worksheets that ask students to look for particular elements in drafts—such as thesis statements, main points, and organization of ideas—moves classrooms into critical modes that encourage readers to ask questions while, at the same time, help students develop a sense of audience. Such activities engage readers in building bridges that will lead them to becoming knowledgeable writers.

In current pedagogies, these practices are evaluative measures. To change them into assessment measures, instructors can give points to readers based on constructive feedback so that grading encourages positive interaction.
Drafts that show development from earlier versions can also be assigned points so that assessment entails evaluating and assessing at various stages in the writing process, not just at the end. This assessment method makes the progress of the writing more than a peripheral indicator of revision; rather, progress is a key grading criteria, one that encourages students to write drafts that reflect development and revision of ideas. It also moves writers past surface editing and into discovering and assimilating new ideas indicate a deepening understanding and commitment to their audience.

However, for some instructors, assigning points to the various revision stages restricts socially constructed classrooms. At the NCTE conference "Assigning, Responding to, & Assessing Writing," Suzanne Swinderski suggested not assigning any type of evaluative score until the term’s end. She asserts that by calculating grades at the end of the writing process, teachers can keep students writing; otherwise, students plateau at a certain point in the process and become comfortable with the grade received or indicated on a draft, and thus, they do not do any further revising.

Elaine Frederickson supplements Swinderski’s suggestion by determining grading criteria with students at the
beginning of the term, thereby giving students more responsibility and control over their writing because they have communally determined how it will be judged. Like Swinderski's classroom, grading is not done until the end of the term. Frederickson's students choose three papers from the five written during the term that will be graded. They also write a reflective letter that explains why they chose those three, and they must use examples from the papers to back up their explanations. Finally, students suggest and justify their own final portfolio grades, which Frederickson considers as she reads the portfolios and determines grades.

According to Frederickson, this approach has been successful because it involves students in the assessment process. Her students are more willing to take ownership and responsibility for how the writing is assessed, and they tend to be more honest, either assigning themselves accurate grades or grading harder than the instructor would have. But even though students feel they have more control, this control makes them uncomfortable. This is one of the obstacles that teachers face when they use assessment measures that fit more closely with socially constructed collaboration: students who are used to traditional assessment will be hesitant and uncomfortable, even suspicious, of anything that deviates from it.
When students hesitate to take over the control that they traditionally have never had, teachers can use more subtle evaluative tasks that combine assessment and social construction without disconcerting students. Kathleen Brooher uses metacognitive journal tasks after each workshop and at the end of each assignment to help students explore their writing processes. She asks students questions such as "was it easy or difficult to get started and why?" and "did the time for writing seem long or short?" to "encourage students to gain control over their writing" and to "assume responsibility for their products" (45). Encouraging students to look constructively at aspects of their writing processes—timing, invention, and organization—helps them work through difficulties by discovering strategies that resolve writing problems.

Brooher also asks students to examine and identify their environmental needs, such as noise levels, so that they develop self-awareness of external factors that impact their individual writing processes. This method underscores the increasing popularity of reflective letters that Edward M. White, Barbara Christian, and other researchers encourage practitioners to use. Yet, Brooher takes such letters a step further by giving more directive instructions, via questions similar to those used for in-class journal
writing, in order to focus students' responses.

Each of these suggestions hinges on how teachers convey course goals and objectives. White emphasizes that communication between students and instructors is vital to successful traditional assessment measures. In socially constructed collaborative classrooms, communication is even more important. Chris Anson and Mary Esper advocate self-reflective practices. Anson calls for instructors to constantly monitor relationships between classroom practices, students' individual expertise, and the discovery of new information. He advocates that this self-reflection helps teachers engage students in collaborative activities that cultivate feedback, and also helps instructors shape and reshape classrooms so that socially constructed collaboration is maintained. Similarly, Esper asks teachers to look at how students develop social skills, how they maintain their identity and self-confidence, and how they assimilate comments and suggestions into their writing, so that teachers can identify student behaviors that indicate they have learned how to function within collaborative groups (95).

Carol Gilles and Marc VanDover further encourage teachers to give students "real problems" to solve. Arguing that "collaborative environments grow slowly," they suggest
activities that focus students on discussing relevant issues; conversely, all writing is done outside the classroom so that most class time utilizes dialogues (31). Instructors become "resource people" (the facilitators spoken of earlier) who demonstrate that they are also learners as they engage students in discovering knowledge.

Finally, Joseph Cirincione suggests introducing students to the "language of assessment" so that course objectives can be defined more fully. By doing this, he states that assessment becomes more concrete and less abstract for students because it requires defining terms used to construct writing criteria. This new language shapes collaborative interactions as students discover and negotiate applications of criteria to their writing. It also stimulates communication and helps students gain the confidence needed for classroom interaction and knowledge building.

By incorporating these ideas into their classrooms, instructors can begin bringing assessment methods and socially constructed collaboration closer. Anson's suggestion is perhaps the most fundamental because it recognizes that collaborative classrooms are constantly evolving. Socially constructed writing classrooms cannot remain static as many traditional classrooms do. Beginning
with Andrea Lunsford’s demand for negotiation of knowledge, practitioners must engage students in discovery activities; then they must engage students in assessment activities that reflect this “new” view of knowledge.

Combining Lunsford’s demand with Lil Brannon’s idea that “writing is a way of knowing, a process of discovering connections,” instructors can develop assessment measures that reflect negotiations that students have undertaken to develop their writing (11). Assessment methods must also reflect writing processes, and they must allow students to use, not just show, knowledge constructed as a result of these processes. In essence, social construction theory, collaborative activities, and assessment theories must be reworked so that traditional forms of assessment will not undermine process writing.
APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) What assessment methods do you use to assess your students?

2) What do your students have to do to pass your writing classes?

3) What expectations do you have for students regarding these assessment methods?

4) In what areas do students usually meet your expectations? In what areas don't they?

5) Have you used essay assessment? Why or Why not?
   a) How do you form or decide on your question?
   b) What are you looking for in the question?
      Do you usually find it in the questions you choose?
   c) What criteria do you use to grade these?
   d) What are you looking for in the students' responses?
      Do you usually find it?

6) Have you used portfolio assessment? Why or Why not?
   a) What criteria do you use to grade these?
   b) What specific things you look for in a portfolio?
      Do you usually find them?
   c) What does the portfolio consist of?
   d) How is each part of the portfolio weighted in relation to the overall score for the class?

7) What other forms of assessment do you use?
   a) Do you feel that they are effective? Why or why not?
   b) What benefits do these forms of assessment give you that essay and portfolio assessment do not?

8) What criteria do you use when you grade your students overall?

9) How do you expect your students to perform on essay exams? on portfolios? Why?
10) How does this affect your grading criteria? your actual application of these criteria?

11) How do you plan to use the Common Exam essay scores? Why?

12) How much do these scores affect the students' final grades? Why?

13) To your knowledge, do your students typically do better on portfolios or on essay exams?

14) How do you decide on the weight of the scores for each type of assessment method that you use? 
   a) What factors do you take into account? 
   b) What do you look for in each of these?

15) Why do you use collaboration in your writing classes?

16) What types of collaboration do you use? Why?

17) What criteria do you use to choose the writing situations? Why?

18) What are your goals for each of these assignments? Why?

19) What are the parameters of each assignment? Why?

20) How do you implement each of these? Why?

21) How do your students typically respond to each of these? Speculate as to the reasons why?

22) Any additional information that you would like to add?
This guide was taken from the California State University, San Bernardino Common Exam that is given to all graduating students during the required upper division writing class. The same criteria are used for the English placement test.

**495 COMMON EXAMINATION SCORING GUIDE**

**Score of 6: Superior**
- Addresses the question fully and explores the issues thoughtfully.
- Shows substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought.
- Demonstrates clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization.
- Is fully developed and detailed with ideas supported by apt reasons and well-chosen examples.
- Evidences superior control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few minor flaws.

**Score of 5: Strong**
- Clearly addresses the question and explores the issues.
- Shows some depth and complexity of thought.
- Is effectively organized.
- Is well developed, with supporting detail.
- Demonstrates control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few flaws.

**Score of 4: Competent**
- Adequately addresses the questions and explores the issues.
- Shows clarity of thought but may treat the topic simplistically or repetitively.
- Is adequately organized.
- Is adequately developed, with some detail.
- Demonstrates adequate facility with syntax, mechanics, and usage but contains some errors.

**Score of 3: Weak**
- May distort or neglect parts of the question.
- Lacks focus or demonstrates confused, stereotyped, or simplistic thinking.
- May not provide adequate or appropriate details to support generalizations, or may provide details without generalization.
- May show patterns of errors in language, syntax, or mechanics.

**Score of 2: Inadequate**
- Indicates confusion about the topic or neglects important aspects of the task.
- Lacks focus and coherence, or often fails to communicate its ideas.
- Has very weak organization and/or little development.
- Is marred by numerous errors in mechanics, usage, and syntax.

**Score of 1: Incompetent**
- Suggests an inability to comprehend the questions or to respond meaningfully to the topic.
- Is unfocused, illogical, incoherent, or disorganized.
- Is deliberately off-topic.
- Papers so incompletely developed as to suggest or demonstrate incompetence.
- Papers wholly incompetent mechanically.
This guide was taken from the California State University, San Bernardino Common Exam that is given to all graduating students during the required upper division writing class. The same criteria are used for the English placement test also.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>495 PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT SCORING GUIDE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The portfolio is complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author displays the ability to develop a topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author shows evidence of attention to and an understanding of the writing process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author displays the ability to go beyond mere summary into analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author demonstrates an understanding of how to organize a paper effectively (including transitions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author displays the ability to use supporting details and/or evidence appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author displays the ability to write appropriately at the upper division level (including mechanic, vocabulary, diction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The author demonstrates an awareness of rhetorical purpose (including audience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holistic Score</strong></td>
</tr>
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Instructor:
### Table #5
Common Essay Exam:
English 495: Upper Division Writing
Spring 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holistic Score</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
<th>Cum % of Grades</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<td>1.26</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>13.64</td>
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<td>B+</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>11.11</td>
<td>40.91</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>D-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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Mean = 7.18
Median = 7

42 Discrepancies
11.1% Disc. Rate

### Table #6
Common Portfolio Assessment:
English 495: Upper Division Writing
Spring 1997

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Holistic Score</th>
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<th>% of Students</th>
<th>Cum % of Grades</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<td>88.2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>n = 187</td>
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</table>

Mean = 7.83
Median = 7

32 Discrepancies
17.1% Disc. Rate
Chapter 1

1 Traditional views see reality, knowledge, facts, and texts as outside the individual self. For traditionalists, these are the autonomous forces that, as the individual seeks to learn, shape the individuals thought and self into the same mold as all those "men" who went before him.

2 In the past, this control was ingrained in students who were taught ways to "control their writing," and thereby control any chaotic elements that might interrupt the neat and tidy processes of writing, and I use that phrase loosely because "as writers, teachers, and researchers, we know that writing is often a surprisingly complex process of discovery, learning, and change" (Brooke 405).

3 Traditional views see students as autonomous individuals who use teacher-directed strategies to discover preexisting, universal norms or knowledge (see Hirsch). Chaos and conflict over knowledge are nonexistent because the knowledge is seen as preexisting and separate from the individual student. Acquiring knowledge becomes a quest for learning what is already in existence, not for discovering something new.

4 Typically, this sharing begins with what M. L. J. Abercombie calls "canceling biases" (Trimbur 92). By moving students past their preconceived notions and stereotypes of what other students believe regarding race, ethnicity, religious, intelligence, and background of the other people in the group, we can begin facilitating their shaping and negotiating of knowledge as they hear from different perspectives and experiences.

Chapter 2

1 Freedman's "collaborative problem solving" also implies that the final goal for the writer is independence. Such independence would apparently make essay assessment a necessary part of the collaborative classroom because it requires independent articulation of what has been learned. This poses two problems: first, it assumes that when students become independent, they attain an expertness in writing, and, conversely, it implies that experts do not
need to collaborate. Secondly, and more importantly, the type of independence discussed is not defined?

The first problem is relatively easy to address; although professional writers tend to write “on their own,” they function within a collaborative system that is home to co-authors, colleagues, editors, advisors, grad students, and so on. Through this collaborative interaction, the professional writer’s ideas are shaped, conformed, and negotiated into a form that is considered “expert,” not because the writer accesses all the knowledge inherent to writing, but because s/he has worked to develop an understanding of the available knowledge, and then synthesized it under the influence of the collaborative system. There is a subtle but important difference here—the traditionalist (New Critical/Formalist) view that believes in the autonomous body of knowledge implies that experts are those individuals who have access to and now possess the entire body of knowledge; they can exercise that “skill” almost omniSciently. Collaboration is not needed because it is unnecessary to build knowledge. But, this definition of an expert is not realistic, in part, because 1) no writer is ever truly independent and 2) new knowledge is always being discovered and old knowledge is constantly being revised.

This returns us to the second problem with writer independence: What type of independence is being discussed? The innate emphasis on independence in essay assessment stems from the belief that writers must learn free from outside influences such as other students, tutors, etc.... In fact, this view of independence has come under repeated attack because it is not applicable in the nonacademic world, and because, as Kenneth Bruffee, James Berlin, Andrea Lunsford, and a host of other scholars have shown, no writer is free from the influences of his or her environment. Because of this environmental dependence, s/he will ask for help from anyone willing and qualified to give it. Independence is therefore not a matter of individual action, but rather it is a state in which the writer has acquired enough skills to be considered competent.

Shaughnessy touches on this when she addresses problems for basic writers:

Writing is a trap . . . a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn’t know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer’s eyes, searching for flaws. (7)
The image of a lawyer is very appropriate when discussing the rules and procedures of writing. Too many teachers approach grammar and mechanics with the overwrought legalism of newly graduated law students. The emphasis on flaws rather than strengths shows the depth of the chasm between what the student knows and doesn’t know, and it does little to help establish a bridge by which this chasm can be traversed. Added to this fear is the sentiment that the students’ own writing betrays them. From all this, students’ belief that writing is a trap is almost natural and definitely inevitable. What is needed is a bridging process that takes +1 steps as the students learn the various processes and skills that make up writing ability.

Essay assessment leaves students with no control over their writing, which is, in part, one of the reasons it is so incompatible with collaborative classrooms. This control is equal to power, so that we can say that in-class essay exams remove students’ power over their own texts. A natural offshoot of this removal of power is the lack of ownership that most students feel towards their writing. While other issues are related to this, the fundamental lack of power/ownership encourages students to surrender ownership usually to the instructor, who, in traditional classrooms that predominantly use essays, will accept that control as a disciplinary right.

With portfolios, instructors give up a certain amount of control to students who are freed to exercise control and power but under the instructors’ guidance. This encourages student ownership of the writing and gives students more power to decide what happens within and around the texts. At the same time, the traditional power relationship between students and instructors change so that instructors become facilitators and guides, helping students work through impasses and disputes over ideas, knowledge, and writing.

Chapter 3

Table 1A shows the figures that are used to determine if significant difference exists between the essay scores, the portfolio scores, and the final grades. \((df)\) represents the number of scores that were compared overall and is represented in the \(t\) equation as \(t(df)=cv\). These figures,
the portfolio scores, and the final grades. \((df)\) represents the number of scores that were compared overall and is represented in the \(t\) equation as \(t(df) = cv\). These figures, \(df\) and the coefficients, are then entered into the equation in order to decide the level of significance; this significance is determined against the 5 percent level (\(p\)) on the critical value scale. If \(t\) is greater than the critical value (\(cv\)), in this case 1.645, then significant difference exists. What this means is that a relationship exists between the correlated variables (the scores) and that one of those variables is a better predictor than the other. At the same time, the closer the variables are to +1.0, which is represented in Table 1, the stronger the relationship between the variables.

\[
t = \frac{(r_{12} - r_{13})}{\sqrt{(N - 3)(1 + r_{23})}} \sqrt{\frac{2(1 - r_{12}^2 - r_{13}^2 - r_{23}^2 + 2r_{12}r_{13}r_{23})}{N}}
\]
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