
COMPETENCY TESTING AND THE WRITING CENTER: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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This portion of the session focused on feminist views of literacy, education, and assessment. Sociopolitics influences all definitions of literacy for, as W. Ross Winterowd states in *The Culture and Politics of Literacy*, "Defining literacy is not idle semantic debate or academic hair-splitting but is almost always a consequential political act." From this framework, I emphasized how definitions of literacy by a dominant, ruling elite have been used throughout history as a means to exclude women, minorities, and particular socioeconomic groups from full participation within the broader framework of society.

I extended this line of argument to the issue of assessment, stating that methods of assessment are value-laden and reflect the standards and viewpoints of particular groups within society. Further, I challenged the view that standardized assessment measures—with their

focus upon the method of assessing an entire spectrum of people representing different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural heritages, patterns of cognition, and family values—could ever effectively be carried out without implications of cultural hegemony.

Writing centers should not involve themselves in the process of assessment, however tempting this approach might prove to administrators caught in the bind of using numbers and quantification strategies to justify the expense and value of programs. The heritage of the writing center as a place for individualized instruction removed from the value-laden issue of grading and assessing a student, gives writing centers the opportunity to serve as allies, rather than evaluators and judges, to students in their writing development.

Instead, writing centers, with their focus upon individual tutorials and one-on-one assessments of students' writing skills, as well as their avowed and actual function of serving a myriad of student populations with different language skills and belief systems, should focus upon individualized, supplemental instruction and should serve as alternatives to competency tests that emphasize normative rather than individual concerns.