Reframing Readiness: Through the Cracked Looking Glass: The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing as Assessment Model

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The Easy Way Out of the Labyrinth

Like many of us working in education, my professional responsibilities involve activities that partake of the language and, perhaps inevitably, of the values of data-driven assessment: accreditation reports, prioritization, and programmatic self-assessment, to name but a few. My experiences have led me to view assessment in much the same way that Stephen Dedalus famously symbolized the nature of Irish art, instead of documenting and honoring the passion, creativity, and commitment that I see in the classroom, it too often results in the fractured and piecemeal images of the cracked looking glass of a servant. The fact that these assessments themselves are almost always performed due to pressure from above, that they are destined to be assessed at the next level up the chain of command in a self-generated *nise en abyme* of potentially infinite alignments, standards, and objectives, reinforces the aptness of the connection, as well as adding a dimension of recursive eeriness to the whole process. These feelings are only strengthened by the fact that I was drawn to the teaching profession due, in large part, to a desire to avoid bureaucratic labyrinths more at home in Kafka or *Ibira* than in my younger self’s naive notions of the university.

Paradoxically, my antipathy toward the current tidal wave of assessment-based reform increases my tendency to make uncritical use of its most widespread tropes and patterns. Like a student so desperate to complete a research paper that she uses the first sources she can find, I take the easy way out and reach for the materials that will most readily help me complete the task at hand and get back as quickly as possible to the more pleasant work of studying and teaching English. Since finishing said task involves negotiating a discourse quite compatible with ready-made reference points such as the infamous Common Core State Standards, these sources become disarmingly easy to use as means of legitimizing my work in the eyes of my assessors, be they colleagues, administrators, or outside evaluators. The experience seems akin to what Marxists would call alienation from the products of one’s own labor: estranged from my work on assessment, I look at it as outside of myself, even as I opine that my state of estrangement counts as a form of resistance.

Habits of Mind and the Framework

The question is whether it is possible to overcome this alienation from the assessment process, to reconcile principled opposition with professional reality. It is through my experience of trying to answer this question that I have come to value the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* as offering a positive alternative to choosing between complicity and denial. The *Framework* offers us an opportunity to situate our assessment work in a manner that is distinct from the prevailing discourse in subtle yet important ways. The subtlety is not accidental; for better or worse, the *Framework* strategically presents itself more as supplement than antipode to the Common Core and its ilk. Whether in spite of or because of this, I have found that the more I work with the *Framework*, the more valuable these differences become to helping me maintain a sense of who I am and what I believe in as
an educator as I struggle with the job of doing my job.

Among the most important of these differences is the Framework's emphasis on developing healthy writing habits of mind, as opposed to evaluating writing assignments according to a set of standards. While this might seem a minor shift, the implications for assessment are significant. Take openness, for example: a habit of mind defined by the Framework as "the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world." While one can imagine quantifying "willingness to consider" in a way that can be measured and evaluated in a writing artifact, it feels forced and even counterproductive to do so. The value of this habit is not to provide a new rubric category for grading, but rather to serve as a reminder to teachers and students of the need to incorporate a continuum of relative appreciation of the willingness to consider new ideas, and to cultivate writing practices and environments that foster, or at least do not hinder, such willingness. The habits of mind function less as quantifiable criteria than as notes on a pitch pipe or tuning fork, sounding off reminders of the harmonics that produce a well-tuned instrument, or in this case, a well-attuned writer. Standards, by contrast, are fixed points to be attained; there is something static about them, a legacy perhaps of the etymologically linked stand. This lack of motion emerges even more powerfully in the Common Core's reliance on anchor standards, designed to protect us from our own inclination to stray and wander. If standards are anchors, we can think of the habits of mind as sails; when we are able to open them, they can help us catch the wind.

**Changing the Wind and the Devil's Reflection**

But the winds are clearly blowing against us. We do not want to be in Agamemnon's position in Aulis of having to choose between sacrificing something dear to us or staying home. As we negotiate the dangerous waters of assessment, I believe that the Framework offers the best chance we have of shifting the process away from a set of standards designed to fit in with the overwhelming tides of privatization and hostility to teachers, toward values that are rooted in the basic principles of successful writing instruction as the field has come to understand them over the course of its disciplinary history. What is more, I suspect that there is less enmity to these principles from administrators and accreditors than our resistant rhetoric often posits. These parties, too, are confronted with the pressures of employing the most convenient and least controversial strategies, and thus, in lieu of viable alternatives, the language and values of the Common Core become their default setting of assessment. It is up to us to try to change the settings. By treating the Framework as a legitimate and authoritative touchstone by which to orient assessments of our work in education, we continue the process of conferring legitimacy and authority onto it. If we choose not to, it seems inevitable to me that we will ultimately continue to make uncritical use of standards far less consonant with our pedagogic and ethical principles.

The Framework is not perfect; one can argue with the particular habits of mind that have made the cut, so to speak, as well as with the broad nature of the definitions provided. In addition, by focusing on writing, it unnecessarily limits its potential audiences; the habits of mind seem to me quite desirable for and applicable to the study of literature, history, or mathematics, for that matter. However, I am not sure that perfection is desirable here, let alone possible. The imperfections of the Framework are its own particular evocation of the imperfections inherent in the idea of standardization. They remind us that the Framework is not a final victory as much as a temporary truce in the ongoing struggle to define the role and direction of postsecondary education in our world, and that the battle is far from over. To return to the strange workings of the fictional mind of Stephen Dedalus, we are still dreaming the nightmare of history, and the institutions within which we teach and learn show little sign of waking up anytime soon. Until then, we would do well to remember that when showing the devil his reflection, the cracked mirror is often more accurate than the smooth one.

**Work Cited**