arguments, and what are the different kinds of “honesty” we can use to create ethos? What kind of research will allow a student to write convincingly in the “private” voice of someone struggling with an eating disorder? Are there ethical issues when students write in “other” voices? In this case, the writer is someone who has had an eating disorder, but what happens when a white male student decides it would be “cool” to take on the voice of a Black woman? Finally, how can this student writer usefully question her notions of “public” and “private,” since readers will know they are reading a fictionalized private text rather than the “real thing”—and how can such questions contribute to her growing rhetorical awareness?

Such questions, of course, are not the only ones that could or should be asked of comments such as Jen’s. However, I want to conclude this review by suggesting that a more rigorous interrogation of the assignments and pedagogical strategies they offer, and the student comments they cite, would help Johnson’s and Moneysmith’s book reach readers like me who struggle teaching the traditional research assignment and who are open to alternatives. *Multiple, Genres, Multiple Voices* suggests compelling pedagogical and theoretical questions about argument, research, voice, context, and narrative, and I believe in the great potential of MVAs. However, the authors’ limited analysis of what seem to be complex pedagogical problems takes away from the strength of their book and makes me question how much I can rely on them to inform my pedagogy. I hope that Johnson and Moneysmith will continue working through the issues that MVAs raise—their commitment to this pedagogy and to their students is clear and inspiring—and that they will in the future be more open to theorizing the various complications of MVA pedagogy. Such work will give me, and others, a more secure foundation for including MVAs in the classroom.

Chicago, IL


Reviewed by Lee Nickoson-Massey, Elon University

Writing assessment—the theories and practices of evaluating student writing—has long been a source of consternation (and often a source of great anxiety) for compositionists. Although we devote great time and energy to developing methods of instruction that might best promote our students’ writing
abilities, how can we be sure that the assessment we enact reflects the same commitment? Do the evaluative response comments we write in the margins and at the end of student texts support our pedagogy? Does the assessment we practice further student development, or might it in fact conflict with our approach to writing pedagogy? Patricia Lynne addresses these and other such questions in *Coming to Terms: A Theory of Writing Assessment*, in which she argues that, for composition to realize a theory of assessment that complements social approaches to learning and writing, we must “choose terms” specific to composition.

Written for an audience of composition theorists, researchers, and teachers, Lynne begins by narrating her earliest experience assigning grades. In a reflection that is sure to resonate with many in the field, she describes her experience as a new teaching assistant, handing back her first set of graded essays. Her most vivid memory of the experience was the sense of frustration she felt in the explanations of the assessment criteria she articulated to her students and mentor. Wanting her assessment to be meaningful and understandable to students, Lynne notes her unease with the grades she assigned as accurate reflections of students’ efforts and abilities. It was then, she writes, that she realized that she had no procedure for actually assessing her assessment and that such a resource was sorely needed.

Now, many years later, she describes her ongoing struggle to develop a form of assessment that complements her pedagogy as mirroring a larger disconnect in the field of composition. Lynne argues that, while composition has come to value social constructivist approaches to education, we continue to rely on objectivist approaches to assessment. This reliance on objectivism is evident in our continued attention to issues of reliability and validity, terms at odds with social approaches to literacy instruction. It is this tension, Lynne argues, that is responsible for the failures of past and current approaches to assessment: composition continues to rely on objectivism as conceived by educational measurement theorists, even though we now practice social approaches to writing instruction that understand ideals of objectivism to be unrealistic and even undesirable. “The current lexicon used to explicate assessment practices,” she writes, “comes from educational measurement theory and carries the baggage of an objectivist paradigm that is ultimately incompatible with what compositionists know about writing and learning to write” (3). Lynne presents this disconnect between what we teach and how we assess what we teach as a phenomenon that not only impacts our students but also, and ultimately, composition’s disciplinary authority.

Situating her argument within the historical contexts of writing assessment as theorized in educational measurement theory and composition, she continues her argument in chapter-length analyses of the influence of
objectivity, literacy education, alternative writing assessment practices in composition, and current theoretical arguments on writing assessment from composition and education. The final three chapters of *Coming to Terms* offer possibilities for what Lynne identifies as the “paradigmatic clash” between conceiving of large-scale assessment as a technical activity, as is the case in educational measurement, and composition’s contemporary constructivist pedagogies. Chapter 5, “The Politics of Theorizing,” includes an extended call for us to develop new practices and principles of assessment that are specific to how compositionists understand writing. If we are truly to be recognized as experts on writing, that is, Lynne says that we must be able to articulate a theory of assessment that supports our theory of writing pedagogy.

To make this change, Lynne suggests that we look to the terms “meaningfulness” and “ethics” as an appropriate vocabulary for reconceptualizing writing assessment for composition. In place of objectivist attention to issues of reliability, a meaningful assessment, she writes, reflects the importance of context to composition writing pedagogy. “Meaningfulness” attends to the goals and purposes of the assessment, an ideal bound to current theories of composition pedagogy and that is thus regularly revisited and revised to reflect contemporary theory. She writes, “Without reference to disciplinary knowledge and without consideration of the particular context — without references to contingencies — assessments would lose their meaning” (130). In complement to “meaningfulness,” and in place of a reliance on fairness or validity, Lynne asks her reader to consider “ethics,” posing assessment as a practice in which all assessed are treated as “equitably and justly as possible — but which would add an emphasis on the responsibilities and accountabilities among all parties involved” (131). Calling upon the notion of communicative ethics as posited by Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, Lynne is careful to forward her conception of assessment as dialogic and bound to specific classroom, programmatic, or institutional contexts. It is our attention to writing as dialogic and context-specific acts that, in turn, must drive how we evaluate writing.

*Coming to Terms* asks readers to (re)conceive writing assessment as a discipline-specific set of ideals, a task Lynne repeatedly identifies as warranted and much needed. At points, however, the author makes assumptions about prevailing notions of the relationship between theory and practice, which may in fact sell her colleagues short. For example, when discussing compositionists’ reliance on the expert reader model (an approach borrowed from educational measurement theory), Lynne claims we too often privilege practice in our theorizing of writing assessment: “The emphasis on practice over theory — as much as the two can be separated — either maintains the status quo . . . or leads compositionists toward a situation where each practice is supported by its own theory” (75). While her assertion may be true for much educational
assessment theory, such general claims about how we conceptualize writing assessment lack the thoroughness and nuance she brings to discussions of educational measurement theory and, later, meaningfulness and ethics. For example, while assessment theorists like Edward M. White and Brian Huot (both of whom she sites) do invoke concepts like validity and reliability, they do so with a keen attention to the constructivist principles of composition theory, rendering their work more subtle than Lynne’s characterization of the field wants to allow.

There are other insights that also seem to suggest a need for further explanation as well. For example, Lynne presents a composition-based approach to assessment as one rooted in “expertise and accountability” (135), and notes that those “responsible for performing the assessment itself are the ones who should hold authority in the decision-making process and in the evaluation itself” (135). Lynne adds that it “neither possible or productive” to include all who are involved in or impacted by the assessment, which is curious given her attention to context and affect. One could argue that an approach that privileges specific context and participant accountability implies involvement by those affected by the assessment, including our students. However, Lynne limits participant involvement to more traditionally authoritative figures, like teachers and writing program administrators. While Lynne acknowledges this limitation of her model, it nevertheless deserves more attention than she gives it. If we are to adopt a writing assessment that is dialogic and context-dependent, it seems important to consider the possible motivations for and implications of not allowing all participants involved in the assessment, especially those being assessed, a voice.

Lynne challenges us to (re)consider writing assessment as a project that not only signals what we value to the students who are the recipients of our assessments, but that also claims the disciplinary authority implied in our status as compositionists. While I might argue that writing assessment in composition has more disciplinary authority than Lynne ascribes to it, Coming to Terms nonetheless argues compellingly that a writing assessment grounded in the constructivist aims and goals of composition theory will improve the assessment practices we engage in as teachers of writing. Lynne also provides a useful reminder that this same body of theory is precisely what confers and solidifies our disciplinary authority as writing experts and that, as such, we need to develop it carefully and thoughtfully—and as compositionists.

Elon, NC

Reviewed by Chris Warnick, University of Pittsburgh

Paula Mathieu’s Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition begins with the claim that composition is experiencing a “public turn” as more and more teachers and scholars consider the different ways that writing outside the academy may animate college writing instruction. This comes as no surprise given the wealth of studies on public writing, community literacy, and service learning over the last decade and the increased focus these topics have received at professional meetings. At last year’s Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco, for instance, individuals could choose from over thirty sessions on “Civic, Public, Community Writing and Service Learning,” a category that didn’t even exist as recently as two years ago. Mathieu herself notes later on in the book that scholarship on service learning in particular has entered what she calls a “second wave” of criticism that calls into question the terms and politics of service learning initiatives. But despite the promise implied in the book’s subtitle, Tactics of Hope is less a critical inquiry into composition’s renewed interest in public writing than it is an important cautionary tale about the problems that well-intentioned teachers, students, and administrators can create when approaching public writing uncritically.

Mathieu identifies at least four different ways by which composition has “gone public”: 1) through courses that examine the complex nature of the public sphere and ask students to make their own writing publicly available, oftentimes on the web; 2) through writing classes that bring civic matters into the classroom by having students engage with local controversies; 3) through service learning and community literacy initiatives; and 4) through ethnographic research on literacy practices and other projects that similarly envision a public role for university intellectuals. Although these approaches toward public writing differ from one another methodologically, Mathieu contends that these and other publicly oriented projects in composition are primarily driven by what she calls “strategic logics,” a perspective that overemphasizes the university’s role in community partnerships. According to these logics, local communities are seen as clients whose problems the university can alleviate; moreover, the success of community partnerships rests on university-determined outcomes, such as what academic skills students learn through public works or how a partnership enhances the educational institution’s mission and/or marketability.