enriching and useful. Other readers who don’t feel quite as situated in conversations about the essay and composition may find themselves less grounded; this book is suggestive rather than exhaustive, not giving much context, for example, of the historical significance of the essay within the field of composition. It could be that Eldred assumes audiences will likely bring prior knowledge of this background, or that to relay such an overview would greatly change the tenor of a book that is purposefully working to wed form and content, to be fully essayistic. Given that many in the field of composition discuss hybrid forms but much more infrequently practice them, I think her choice to be contextually spare makes good sense. That said, some may still find that this collection, too, does not truly blend genres as much as it sets out to. Regardless, this book has much to offer: her personal essays within are wonderfully rich, the discussions of the essay and Composition are astute and thought-provoking, and the invitation to compose as we help students compose is motivating.

Fort Worth, TX


Reviewed by Holly Middleton

Norbert Elliot’s On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America, spans 1874-2005, but begins in earnest where Mary Trachsel’s Institutionalizing Literacy leaves off: with the 1900 founding of the College Entrance Examination Board. Formerly the professional responsibility of faculty in English, writing assessment came under the purview of an external organization staffed by researchers in psychology and psychometrics. The challenge was to create a national standard for writing and the methods and criteria for measuring it. On a Scale is a chronology of case studies where Elliott reconstructs the shifting contexts of writing assessment in the twentieth century. In 1904, experiments testing for native intelligence established a link between children’s language facility and their sensory ability to distinguish between degrees of intensity in light, weight, and sound; this correlation underlies the conflation of literacy and intelligence that followed.

Believing that nice distinctions in written composition would index degrees of human potential, Edward L. Thorndike and his graduate student, Milo Hillelgs, utilized one hundred readers and seven thousand specimens of student writing to build a reliable scale of merit. They constructed the “Hillelgs Scale” as a poster for convenience, and it was reprinted four times in 1917 alone to meet the demand for an evaluative standard. The ranked specimens on the scale were thought to demonstrate degrees of intelligence as surely as the capacity to distinguish sensory intensity. What became an institutionalized reliance on scale, statistics,
and distribution, Elliot argues, fuels the “rhetoric of disenfranchisement” that is still so familiar: “Whatever abilities existed were overshadowed by the students’ failure to achieve excellence,” because “accountability and censure were, from the first, interwoven.” If writing scores are plotted on a bell curve, the instrument of measurement automatically relegates half of all scores to “below average” (341). The supposed link between intelligence and literacy and the efficiency of its measurement soon made the College Board a busy subcontractor.

Writing assessment became a national security endeavor when the College Board was mobilized during World War I to sort enlisted men into jobs appropriate to their mental capacity. Assessing intellectual potential in a diverse population proved challenging as examiners were hard pressed to find reliable ways of eliciting basic literacy or discerning a soldier’s ability to speak English. Yet the test results seemingly confirmed the dubious correlation between race and intelligence propagated by eugenics (61-62). They then provided a logic for the Immigration Act (also called the Literacy Act) of 1917, which restricted U. S. entrance to immigrants who could read. By reconstructing for us the complex methods, logic, motives, and figures involved in each case study, Elliott indicates that this sorting of populations was not merely the product of its time; it was contested by critics, even by those involved in its design and execution.

Elliot claims that each “assessment context must be understood as a unique event” (346). But there are patterns. Perhaps most directly relevant to those of us who teach writing is that one would assume that the examiners defined literacy before they designed programs and research to measure it, but that is not the case. Definitions of literacy emerge from the negotiations among readers, who at times are trained to recognize predetermined standards, and at times establish those standards inductively from the compositions themselves. The elusiveness of what Elliott calls “inter-reader reliability” is a recurring problem when evaluating writing: if expert readers cannot agree on what good writing is, how can the test claim to measure ability and, perhaps more importantly, how can there be a standard? Like entropy, the impetus to establish inter-reader reliability repeatedly privileged consensus readings as the best possible reading, because it validated the test. The space allowing alternative readings was narrow indeed, and they were excluded in order not to complicate measurement, examples of what literacy scholars such as Deborah Brandt and Brian Street mean when they say that literacy emerges as the complex interaction among writers, readers, texts, and contexts. In these cases, establishing agreement among readers became the standard by which the validity of the test could be measured, shifting the definition of examination literacy to reader consensus rather than written performance.

On a Scale comprises seven chapters that I will describe here organizationally as four parts. A dense chronological history documenting 1874-1966 takes up approximately a third of the book. Elliott’s work here relies largely on archival materials from the Educational Testing Service, and the figures and organizations involved are voluminous. There is a notable shift in emphasis and
scale beginning in 1966 when, for the first time since the nineteenth century, English faculty began to participate in shaping the theory and practice of writing assessment; for this reason, the chapter also functions as a history of assessment within English as a discipline. The last two chapters are a recursive analysis and an afterword entitled “Lagniappe”: Elliott discloses that this last chapter was an afterthought, the result of a new investment in public discussion after the effects of September 11 began to chill public discourse. And it’s a crucial chapter, for only here does Elliott explicitly state what he sees as at stake in knowing this history.

What Elliott wants the reader to take from On a Scale is that although the history of writing assessment is fraught with the types of exclusionary effects that those of us critical of high-stakes testing might expect, we should note how easy it is to presume that we are measuring actual ability rather than a discrete literate performance. This is what researchers were doing, after all, and “If we do not look deeply into the methodology of complex individuals,” Elliott writes, “we stand to let similar injustices pass unexamined” (353). For me, one of the more telling ruptures that helps tell this story is that the drive to establish inter-reader reliability not only repeatedly excluded alternative readings, but also overt misreadings. When expert readers were submitting their rankings of the writing specimens for the Hillegas scale, for instance, ten of the original eighty-three evaluations were discarded, because the readers did not correctly follow written instructions. That means twelve percent of the sample was set aside simply because it complicated the measurement process. Reader expertise is not questioned in Elliott’s account, which, I would argue, is the point: the generosity extended to fellow professionals is not available to students, soldiers, and immigrants who are under examination. Yet, how many of them have failed a written examination for not following instructions? And what did that cost them? On a Scale demonstrates how easy it is, in the thick of assessment, to forget to ask such questions.

Champaign, IL


Reviewed by Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Texas A & M University

What role does—or should—identity play in the writing classroom? Recent composition and rhetoric scholarship addressing these questions has largely focused on demonstrating the interrelationships between identity and writing. This work has argued, for instance, that writing teachers need to acknowledge the personal investment and risks that are an integral part of writing and speaking with others. In Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos, Zan Meyer Gonçalves takes these questions a step further as she asks how teachers can invite students to