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Ethical Grading: Unleashing the Power of Self-Assessment  
in the Online College Composition Classroom

If one buys fully into the theories of Paulo Friere who writes that teachers can not deposit knowledge for students like pennies in a piggy bank and into those of Kenneth Bruffee who argues that students learn only by entering the conversation of knowledge-making, then the next logical and ethical step towards actually acting out these theories in the composition classroom is to involve students fully in their own assessments. In this paper I argue that sequenced self-assessment is the only ethical approach to teaching writing, a task made even more ethically demanding in the online environment where students and teachers alike become disembodied and depersonified by the limitless nature of cyberspace which transcends traditional boundaries of self and other and which also raises new ethical questions of who holds the privilege to the text and how one quantifies in a hypertextual medium the traditional assessment markers routinely used in a first year college composition class.

This paper argues that self-assessment is a necessary tool in the online classroom because even with synchronous teaching students do not have the same degree and depth of contact with an instructor and hence have fewer opportunities to actualize their learning in the progressive fashion that marks

portfolio-driven face to face composition courses. And I argue that only with self-assessment can the online composition classroom be considered an ethical teaching environment, because otherwise the power balance between student and teacher, not to mention between teacher, *text* and student, is so disrupted by the expansive nature of cyberspace that the possibilities of plagiarism, imitation and/or autocratic grading that does not reflect learning are overwhelming and nearly uncontrollable without deliberately and frequently involving the student in a guided, metacognitive approach to viewing his or her own text.

Before we can get into the heart of my argument, however, we must visit a definition of “ethical” teaching, and we must reach a common understanding of the meaning and purpose of “assessment” in the writing classroom.

Ethical teaching in my mind simply means teaching that has clear goals—goals of which the students as well as the teachers are aware and that are well explained and understood—and that has assessment practices that fully match those goals. It is teaching that has no hidden agendas: a teacher can not, for example, profess to the class that he wants to help everyone succeed, while at the same time using assessment practices that are meant to “weed out” students and “protect” the “standards” of the university. It is teaching in which the instructor is clear to herself and to the students on how assessments are meant to further the goals of the class: if a goal of the class is to teach critical thinking, for example, then a teacher can not reject a student’s argument simply because it may express an unorthodox or “politically incorrect” point of view but only because that argument may not be well developed and well supported. In other

words, ethical teaching occurs when the instructor carefully, intentionally, and articulately matches assessment practices to his or her goals for the class. To make this match actually work, however, students and teachers need to have the same type of goals.

Students commonly have one of two types of goals in the classroom. Anastasia Morrone and Claire Weinstein identify these goals as either performance goals, which are short-term goals such as scoring well on tests, or mastery goals, which are long-term goals that carry over well into other courses and other life situations. Students with performance goals, they write, “tend to focus on the outcome of their learning,” while those with mastery goals “value the learning process itself.” Because much of teaching writing is teaching students to recognize and understand the process, it follows that composition teachers would want to have mastery goals for their students. Thus, assessment practices which are contrary to these goals are not just ineffective, they are also unethical because this mismatch represents a disconnect in the classroom environment and a breach of promise to the students: it is hardly fair to design a syllabus that professes the goal of teaching the mastery of writing, only to assess along lines that measure and encourage performance only.

Exactly why, you may still ask, does this match between goals and assessment practices that I argue for create an adequate definition of ethical teaching. I can only answer this by noting that to accept my definition, one must be willing to concede power and control in the classroom to the student writer, because, as Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch argue, students need to be

allowed control over their own texts in order for their writing skills to increase. Exerting control through assessment practices that call for elaborately marking on papers often, Brannon and Knoblauch write, only leads to a “diminishing of students’ commitment to communicate ideas that they value and even a diminishing of the incentive to write” (59). Even minimal marginal comments and end notes can create little more than “ a guessing game” for students as they try to interpret a teacher’s comments, writes Nancy Sommers, who worries that such comments can “suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following the rules” (153). Without belaboring the point, for arguing against marking on student texts is not the purpose of this paper, such assessments would hardly seem to be ethical classroom practices in this case because they often eliminate the student’s own voice from her paper and generally fail to increase her knowledge about writing strategies that work outside the immediate classroom setting. As Brian Huot puts it, relying on an assessment strategy that puts the teacher in firm control of a student’s text merely encourages a “narrow, perfunctory” response on the part of students, who remain “focused on what will give them a desired grade” rather than on assessing the value of their own writing (168). In fact, students tend to see “this saturation of ink” as merely the teacher’s “justification for the grade that is assigned and not really as a way to help them improve the quality of their writing,” reports Ava Zinn (29). Huot and Zinn appear to be arguing that marking on papers can almost be counter-productive, serving the teacher’s needs more than those of the students. Hardly an ethical situation.

The ethical alternative to marking on papers that I argue for in this paper is a sequenced combination of writing projects in which the student performs clearly defined tasks and then assesses (in writing) the value of his own writing at ten defined points in the semester, coupled with teacher conferencing that returns control of the text to the student by helping the student brainstorm strategies that will increase the value of her writing. This combination of sequenced self-assessment and conferencing constantly negotiates and identifies the writer's progress throughout the semester, beginning with the first day of class and ending with the final self-assessment, the portfolio cover letter and the portfolio itself in which the student displays the successful completion of the revision strategies for each paper that the student and teacher brainstormed and negotiated during the drafting process.

Far from being a risky process that might lead a student to unrealistic expectations, as some teachers may argue, this negotiation process is considered an essential composition pedagogy and is even called for by some university writing programs. For example, the IPFW Writing Program Handbook justifies and calls for classroom self assessments with this language: "Since the ultimate goal of writing courses is to help people become self-actualized writers, . . . it can be reasonable for instructors to negotiate grades based on their and the students' assessments" (Blythe11). The IPFW handbook further notes that self-assessment works because students can indeed be counted on, with a little instruction and direction of course, to view their own writing realistically and to learn something from the process itself. "Most students will apply fair and

reasonable grades to their own work and write insightful explanations for them,” the handbook authors report (Blythe11). In other words, sequenced self-assessment is a successful strategy without appreciable risk of self-inflation, particularly as the semester progresses, because students are receiving training and practice in applying metalinguistic skills to their own writing process. “Self-reflection, which encourages metalinguistic awareness, is a necessary component of the [writing] process,” notes Zinn (29). Because self-assessment is deeply cognitive in nature, any fears on the part of teachers of inflated grades are easily outweighed by the enhanced learning outcomes that result in the self-assessing classroom.

The beauty of this metacognitive approach to assessment is not simply derived from its ethical appeal, but also because sequenced self-assessment fully integrates the assessment process into the learning environment of the classroom. Rather than causing writing assessments to appear to the student as a separate (and punitive) act, sequenced self-assessment reflects Paulo Freire’s and Kenneth Bruffee’s widely-accepted understandings of how students most effectively acquire knowledge. Freire, in fact, practically describes the value of sequenced self-assessment when he writes that students should not be “docile listeners” (such as meekly submitting to directive marks on their papers) but rather should become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (355). Sequenced self-assessment coupled with conferencing and prompt feedback on the self-assessments creates exactly the classroom dialogue that Freire calls for. Bruffee elaborates on the learning value of this classroom

dialogue when he describes the collaborative element of the generation and transfer of knowledge: “Knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation” (647). Because my students write a reflective memo about each of their four papers in preparation for each conference, followed by a post conference memo about how the conference went for them and what they precisely intend to do to follow-up on our conference brainstorming, and because they also have mid-term and final self-assessments plus portfolio cover letters, they are almost weekly in state of continual conversation and negotiation about their own development as writers that Bruffee suggests is the most effective way of gaining knowledge.

The heart of my approach to maintaining this level of conversation and negotiation, as you have already seen, is the portfolio process. Portfolios, which often comprise at least four major writing assignments as well as a requirement for a well-developed cover letter, provide a logical framework and timeline for self-assessment. Equally important, the portfolio process provides an ethical backbone often lacking in other classes or earlier classes where the repetition of knowledge was privileged over the creation and mastery of knowledge. James Berlin, an early advocate of portfolios, reports that students are all too aware that a university degree can be a meal ticket that ranks prospective employees in a “deadly commodification of the educational experience” (58). Portfolios and cover letters, he argues, subvert the corporate approach to education and put the composing process back into an ethical position because the process model of composing recognizes that writing can be an act that “creates and discovers

knowledge rather than simply recording it” (60). This is the ethical model of education, Berlin and I both believe, because understanding how to acquire and develop knowledge, rather than merely imitating university, corporate or political information delivery systems, helps students gain power over their own lives by, as Lester Faigley points out, encouraging them to view themselves not as static, wholly formed individuals, but rather as a developing “socially constructed self” (396) that consciously “overviews the world around it” (408). Faigley’s “overview,” which he cautiously warns must be critically mentored, coached and scrutinized least it develop as mere mimicry or ego-centrism, drives the portfolio process by teaching the students how to acquire metacognitive skills, thus giving them control of their own development as protagonists in the larger world around them.

Now that I have hopefully convinced you that self-assessment is the most ethical approach to assessing writing because it privileges the student’s relation to her text, because it encourages her to value development, and because it is the only assessment practice that truly creates lasting knowledge about the writing process and frees students to push beyond Berlin’s identification of the “commodification” model of the university classroom, I am prepared to lay out in the following pages the details and precise justification for each stage of my classroom self-assessment process and to address specific concerns and potential drawbacks that this approach can embody.

### **Day One Brainstorming of Assessment Criteria:**

The first step of my sequenced self-assessment process begins on Day One. Rather than introductory games and the like, I immediately get to the core

content of the course by devoting the first chat session to a brainstorming project. I break the students up into three or four smaller chat rooms and ask them to draw on their high school experiences as well as on their own common sense to come up with the criteria they think would distinguish an “A” college paper. After 15 or 20 minutes I bring them back to the main chatroom and ask for one student from each group to present the highlights of their brainstorming. As they present I ask them to explain why they think the items on their list are important, and I make a few comments and observations of my own.

In this first-day exercise, my 100 level writers always manage to thoroughly cover the very same writing issues I will be stressing throughout the semester. In fact, Zinn reports that student-generated criteria can be counted on to be “surprisingly similar to those generated by instructors” (33). For my own students, their self-generated criteria generally range from critical thinking, to paragraph focus and development, to well-constructed introductions and reflective conclusions, as well as essentials like using skillful transitions, accurate citations, and reliable sources. I usually even manage in the first chat session to get in a short discussion of why I set page-length requirements that I expect them to fulfill for each essay.

By creating group and classroom discussion on the very first day of class about how their work is going to be assessed, I feel I successfully set the tone I’m seeking for the entire semester. Students leave that first chat session knowing what the class is about and knowing that there will be a lot of class discussion, that their input and ideas count, and that they will be involved with the

assessment process. Moreover, this approach is in keeping with a 1999 study on student perspectives on the first day of class that found that more than half of those surveyed did not like “ice-breakers” and felt better served instead by an “efficient use” of class time that previewed the course and spelled out faculty expectations (Perlman and McCann 277). And by causing the students to brainstorm and present the assessment criteria, they start from day one engaging in Freire’s and Bruffee’s conversation of knowledge making.

### **The Conference Memo:**

The next element of my sequenced self-assessment process is the conference memo, a response to their own writing which my students prepare and send to me before their online conference as their first written act of assessing their own essays. With this memo, usually at least half a page in length, I attempt to lift some of my own teaching burden and put it on my students’ shoulders, because, as Don Murray argues, the best teacher of writing is the student herself (4). Turning students into their own teachers of writing is accomplished by encouraging them to engage in acts of metacognition that facilitate “a shift of responsibility for writing development from the teacher to the student,” adds Jeffrey Sommers (“Memo” 174), who accomplishes this with his own students by requiring them to turn in a “writer’s memo” with each draft. Primarily about the student’s writing process, this memo provides answers to “a series of questions that deal with the process of writing the assigned paper and with the student’s feelings about the finished draft” (“Memo” 175). Urging that the concept be carefully explained on the first day of class so that it is not perceived

as “additional work” (“Behind” 78) and that its contents be varied throughout the semester to reflect the nature of the specific essay assignment (“Behind” 79), Sommers notes that the memo helps create a collaborative conferencing environment by requiring students “to compose specific questions that they want answered by their teacher-reader” (“Memo” 179). So not only is the writer’s memo an effective teaching tool, it also requires students to come to conference prepared with their own agendas, with their own thoughts about their own writing.

Thomas Newkirk reports that this agenda setting is crucial, because it helps overcome a common problem with conferencing, the tendency of the teacher to dominate the conference. Noting that “we all tend to talk too much” (327), he warns, “Unless a commonly-agreed-upon agenda is established, a conference can run on aimlessly and leave both participants with the justifiable feeling they have wasted time” (318). In other words, the conference memo can serve both to efficiently utilize time and to ensure that conferences accomplish the student’s agenda, which in my mind is a more ethical teaching position than one which meets only the teacher’s agenda.

#### **Post-conference Memo:**

Although this next element of self-assessment adds to the paper load (more on this issue later), I feel it is vital to cause my students to immediately reflect on their conference while the issues we brainstormed are still fresh in their mind. It can be done as a journal prompt in the assignments drop box to be turned in the following week, or it can be done as a discussion posting prompt to encourage more classroom dialog. In addition to serving as a way to make sure

the student understood what was accomplished in conference and what revisions are expected for their paper, this memo also serves as a way for the teacher to keep track of the student's writing progress. By requiring that the post-conference memo be part of the student's portfolio at the end of the semester, the teacher has a permanent record and easy reminder of exactly what work still needed accomplishing to bring that particular draft up to the standards expected.

For my own part, I have my students use the assignments dropbox to send me a short note reflecting on how the conferences went for them and what in general they intend to revise. I also ask my students to provide at least one specific illustration of the type of revisions they intend to make.

Because I often get very revealing comments in these memos, ranging from a new awareness on the student's part of just exactly what is missing in their writing to an outright refusal to do the work required, these post-conference memos also serve to provide a "snapshot" of the class, telling me what is working and what is not working at that particular point in the semester for each student. If a student's post-conference memo contains a comment like this, "By talking about my essay, I answered my own questions," then I know this student is in good shape and is doing well with my teaching style. But if I get a comment like this (which I do at least once in each class every semester), "You didn't tell me what I needed to fix to get an A!" (there's always an exclamation point with a comment like this), then I know I need to spend more time in class explaining and illustrating the value and strategies of revision and talking about the differences between performance goals and mastery goals and why I stress the latter.

**Mid-term Self-assessment:**

The mid-term self-assessment is an opportunity for students to display their developing writing skills as well as to get a real sense of where they are headed grade-wise in my class. I design this assessment in a manner that students must put forth their best writing efforts to show exactly why they deserve the grade they think they deserve at the half-way point in the semester. Using a rubric similar to the criteria list we brainstormed on the first day of class, I ask my students to tell me if they think they are a C level, a B level or an A level writer. I tell them they must thoroughly justify and illustrate why they think they are either an “average,” “good,” or “excellent” writer, and I also ask them to reflect on what is going well for them in the course at this point and what is not working so well. Finally I ask them to tell me what their favorite reading so far in the semester has been, and I ask them to be specific and provide details and illustrations with their answer. Sometimes depending on the class, I ask them to talk a little bit about their attendance and about the timeliness, reflective quality, and thoroughness of their journals. And, of course, I tell the students upfront I will “grade” their self assessment based on how well they actually display the skills for this assignment that they claim they have.

As with the post-conference memos, the comments I get on the mid-term “exam” are often both surprising and revealing. For instance, one of my students, a working single-mom who clearly was apprehensive at the beginning of the semester and whose first journal attempts were painfully underdeveloped, wrote this: “Writing is now something that I am always thinking about. I often find

myself organizing stuff from my other classes the way that I would organize for this class. I am glad that I can read between the lines now. It makes it a lot easier to understand the whole world around me.” Of all the comments an instructor could receive, I can think of nothing more satisfying than to learn that a student is applying what she learned in your class to her others classes and to the world around her.

Many comments, of course, have a certain “sucking up” quality to them, but even these, which usually revolve around a student’s new-found sense of self-confidence as a writer, have their place, according to Scott Paris and Alison Paris. “When students are able to interpret their own accomplishments with pride, their perceptions of ability and efficacy increase,” they observe (95). And as these students get more feedback to their own assessments throughout the semester and as their confidence and pride in their own reflective powers and writing skills increases, so too do their “feelings of ownership and responsibility for learning,” they note ( 95). This new feeling of responsibility for their own learning, which is created by the metacognitive approach to assessment, correlates with more positive attitudes about school, with a resulting increase in performance, they also report (96).

I find this correlation that Paris and Paris write about between self-assessment, pride, attitude and performance to hold true in my own classes. For example, another student, your typical teen male with his baseball cap on backwards and a defiant attitude on the first day of class, wrote this at mid-semester:

To sum up, I dislike many aspects of English and Literature. The only way I like it is when I have a professor who gives me a passion for writing it. I have that now. I look forward to coming to class everyday and doing the scheduled tasks. It helps to have an encouraging, not insulting, figure to guide your way. With my corrections to the transitions and my corrections to the thesis statements, I should be able to walk out of W131 with an “A” and not look back.

I didn’t actually give this young man his new “passion” for writing; I allowed it to develop through the self-assessment process and through constructive feedback that caused him to stay engaged in his own learning. This student, who was writing rambling, un-developed paragraphs at the beginning of the semester, by the middle of the semester had become a focused writer, one who was also adept and articulate at classroom discussion.

### **Final Self-assessment and Portfolio**

The final steps of my sequenced self-assessment process are a final “exam,” a portfolio cover letter, and the portfolio itself. The final “exam” is practically the same as the mid-term. In addition to this final self-assessment, which covers their writing progress in general over the semester, I also have them write a portfolio cover letter which spells out in some detail the revision strategy they used for each paper.

All I have to do for their final grade is to make sure they did the revisions we had agreed on by comparing their earlier drafts to their final drafts. If the self-

assessment is in line with the cover letter and the actual performance of the revisions, then the student gets the grade he suggested in his final self-assessment. If there are wide discrepancies, I point these out in a short memo I e-mail them with an explanation why they received a lower grade. This type of portfolio grading does not take ten minutes, and students are rarely surprised or disappointed by their final grade. I would also like to think that students are less stressed out by this approach, although often they begin with comments such as, “This is really hard for me . . . ,” because the guess work and anticipation are taken out of the equation.

I’m less stressed too, because it becomes quite simple to either reward the student for proving that she has achieved the grade she felt she deserved if she presents revisions which match that grade, or to gently lower the student’s expectations by pointing out in my e-mailed response where she in fact failed to carry out the necessary revisions. I’ve seen portfolios that present elaborate and thorough revisions, and I’ve seen portfolios that simply present clean copies of the first drafts. It is easy to tell the difference, and it is pain-free to award an appropriate grade, because the student knows exactly what she or he has done or not done to deserve the grade.

### **A Few Warnings and Concerns**

Without going deeply here into the nature of conferencing and portfolio grading, it is still necessary to point out that the fundamental aspects of self-assessment may not work for all students. Lisa Delpit warns that such strategies are middle class in nature and presume that you have a responsive student who

has acquired a reasonable degree of cognitive skills (288). I've also already alluded to the student who resists any approach other than one that involves performance goals. However, these students will generally comprise a very small minority of any given class, and because my assessment techniques free up more time for teaching, I can give these students the extra attention that they need.

Ellen Schendel and Peggy O'Neil also warn that self-assessment can turn out to be not as ethical as I make it out, that it is still, so to speak, part of our toolbag of many tricks, contributing as usual to "our culture of testing" (200). They note that self-assessment still ends up ranking students and that the more experienced writers are already more adept at self-assessment, thus adding to their already existing privilege. The ethical dilemma arises because the weaker students are in effect unfairly being asked—some may say "ordered"—to expose their own weaknesses. "An ethical concern and disturbing irony of classroom self-assessment is that it may ultimately be a means by which traditional exercises of power of teachers over students are reaffirmed as students implicate themselves," they write (206). This is a postmodern debate, they note, and as with many questions of ethics, there is no easy, simple answer but rather a host of complex questions and responses. For their part, they encourage an ongoing inquiry into the questions and a teacher awareness of the power dynamics of what they term the "confessional" nature of self-assessment.

They do identify one answer, however, that is at the heart of my sequenced self-assessment process. To make self-assessment ethical, they

urge, it must be an on-going process throughout the semester and not just a one-time exercise in the portfolio letter. Quoting Glenda Conway, Schendel and O'Neill agree that it is not "fair or appropriate for an end-of semester cover letter to be given the burden of conveying the only reflection on a whole semester's work" (qtd. in Schendel and O'Neill 208). They also urge that writing instructors be entirely upfront about their own control over the assessment process and final grade. "The teacher's role in negotiating that assessment must be clear to students and an open, ongoing conversation with students," they write (208). For my own part, I discuss repeatedly throughout the semester the purpose of my sequenced metacognitive assignments, trying to help them understand that my goal is not simply to teach them how to write at the college level but also to help them assess their own writing so that they may learn to develop their own rhetorical moves and revision strategies for any given audience and class. And of course, I point out routinely that if the quality of their portfolio does not reflect their self-assessment, I will not award them the grade they have awarded themselves.

Another concern with self-assessment is the paper load. However, if these assignments are viewed as CATs (classroom assessment techniques), they provide a golden opportunity to adjust your teaching strategies as you move through the semester, in effect implementing "just-in-time" teaching to deliver your lectures and projects exactly to where your students tell you they are developmentally at the moment. In other words, self-assessment can reduce the

time required for grading the major papers by giving you clearer and more frequent snapshots of student progress, thus offsetting the paper load.

On the other hand, it is not just the nature and practicality of self-assessment, but also teachers' motives behind utilizing self-assessment assignments that can be called into question. This fixation with metacognition that teachers so enjoy needs closer scrutiny, warns Conway, who notes that because composition teachers tend to privilege reflective writing, particularly writing that reveals something of what Faigley refers to somewhat guardedly as the student's "unified and knowing self" (408), they are asking students to make rhetorical moves in portfolio cover letters and other forms of self-assessment that play directly to the biases of the teacher and that privilege the teacher as audience. In fact, Conway gives several examples of cover letters that "please" her because they are deeply reflective and reflect her own "good" teaching and others that made her nearly angry because they are disengaged, short, and aimed directly at achieving a specific grade rather than at reaching an excellent level of writing proficiency. She rhetorically asks herself if, after reading these students' cover letters, she is still up to the task of grading their portfolios fairly and ethically. "The ways students construct themselves and their writing in their cover letters inevitably have a crucial bearing on how we will evaluate their portfolios," she admits (87). Once again, then, the ethical response to this dilemma is to be totally transparent in our classrooms, even going so far as to "unveil and then deconstruct" what Conway claims is the "hidden agenda" of cover letters and other self-assessment tools (88).

Some composition instructors, of course, would argue that even without ethical flaws this approach is not directive enough, that it puts too much power into the student's hands and thus might reward mediocrity with inflated grades. Richard Straub, in his article about "directive" and "facilitative" teacher commentary on papers, addresses this issue by pointing out, as have others, that students learn best when they feel a measure of control over their own writing and when they accept personal responsibility for it. "They must be allowed to make their own writing decisions and learn to make better choices," he writes (248). What better way to avoid mediocrity and to encourage student responsibility for their own texts, I ask, than through directed self-assessment where they are required to identify and justify their own rhetorical moves.

Grade-inflation, however, is a real concern for many. I've had some teachers tell me, when I describe how I do not mark on papers, that I am clearly "shirking" my own responsibilities and that self-assessment, along with being "irresponsible" will lead to classes in which all the students get "A"s. I have two of my own comments about that. First of all, going back to Paulo Freire, it is not my job to pour knowledge into my students as if they were piggy banks. It is my students' job to do the learning and it is my job, in Straub's words, to facilitate their efforts. In my mind, my students need to be doing most of the work, and my task is mostly to point them in the right directions and cheer them on. Secondly, as to the comments about grade inflation, I'm not sure I know what that means. My job is to help these students turn into proficient writers, not to categorize them by some arbitrary level of competence for the convenience of the university. I'm

not a gatekeeper, I'm a teacher. Because of the manner in which I teach my classes, and because of the manner in which I encourage my students to develop both metalinguistic and metacognitive skills, I expect all my students to get "A"s. To me, a class of straight "A"s, which of course never happens because not all students apply themselves equally even in the most process oriented classrooms, would be a measure of my own success as well as of my students.

Particularly in the postmodern classroom, where students bring their own definitions of text and their own developing consciousness of Faigley's "self" to the writing process, any effort that attempts to meet students where they are by promoting metacognitive awareness of where they are going instead of attempting to thin their ranks by assessments practices that serve only gate-keeping functions would seem to be the correct ethical choice. In the long run, sequenced self-assessment in on-line classrooms is the most ethical option, despite any apparent drawbacks, because it is the most effective way to privilege the relationship between students and text in an environment where the relationship between the teacher and the text usually holds privilege, because it integrates grading directly into the process of teaching and learning writing, and because it creates a nearly equal partnership between teacher and student. As Ava Zinn puts it, self-assessment turns the process into an "exciting aspect of a shared journey leading toward more confident and competent writers" (33). What more could a teacher want.

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