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Toward an Artful Critique of Reform: Responding to Standards, Assessment, and Machine Scoring

Proponents of reframing argue that prophetic pragmatism entails redirecting contemporary education reforms. While this judgment may defend our professional standing, it overlooks the consequences of redirecting reform's appeals to global competition, which preclude public participation in defining the goals and measures of literacy education. This article forwards an alternate pragmatism for attending to the public consequences of reform discourse.

The scene of K–16 education reform has changed. As recently as 2012, it was hard *not* to foresee corporate-political groups displacing composition professionals' standing to define the goals and measures of public education in literacy. The Common Core and its assessments were being implemented in forty-three states, and over seven hundred institutions in the United States and abroad had adopted the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to “benchmark value-added growth in student learning.” Today, however, the trajectory of reform appears less certain. At the K–12 level, the Opt Out

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movement has publicly, if incrementally, undermined implementation of Common Core–aligned assessments (Strauss, “Testing”; Evans and Saultz). At the college level, the Voluntary System of Accountability has recognized the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ VALUE rubrics for reporting learning outcomes (AAC&U, “Voluntary”), suggesting that at least for the time being, the goals and measures of college writing will be defined by faculty in context rather than by groups like the CLA.¹

Still, past K–16 reforms remind us that neoliberal standardization often succeeds by failing. For example, even though the American Diploma Project (ADP) never went national with its college- and career-readiness measures in the early to mid-2000s, it cultivated a “state-based” strategy that moved the Common Core from corporate-political platform to public policy reality.² Despite the slowing of the Common Core, this strategy continues with Complete College America (CCA), a reform organization that seeks to measure “pre-major learning,” particularly students’ writing development in introductory-level courses (*Time*). CCA demands data to determine whether public institutions are moving students quickly into majors, programs, and credentials. The ultimate goal of CCA is a system of “performance funding,” a policy lever for governors to incentivize greater efficiency in instruction (*Value-Added*). Only greater efficiency, CCA argues, can strengthen state economies and students’ preparation for the global marketplace.

The political horizon of performance funding reminds us that even if the Common Core and the CLA have slowed in the face of public and professional recalcitrance, we who work in college composition will face these reforms’ appeals again soon. And in this work, we are likely to struggle. Groups such as CCA exploit the commonsense framing of college students and parents as consumers rather than as partners of writing teachers, scholars, and administrators. Within this frame, neoliberal standardization is *the* public good: common outcomes allow states to measure public institutions’ performance, performance data allows public choice among institutions, and public choice drives innovations in efficiency. For us in

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composition, of course, such innovation sounds less promising; we recognize choice-for-efficiency as a means of displacing our professional judgment. Yet our critical responses to such innovation have not invited the public participation that appears to be blunting K–12 reformers’ calls for neoliberal standardization.³ Given the shape of reforms to come, we sense that we must innovate on the ways we go public (Mortensen). But how?

Composition’s most prominent innovation answers this question from the perspective of consequences. Since our public critiques of reform do not appear to improve teaching, learning, and assessment in the ways that we value, we should *redirect* these reforms to reflect composition’s values (Adler-Kassner; Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Adler-Kassner and O’Neill). Tactical political action is needed, Linda Adler-Kassner argues, not only to acknowledge our marginalized position in the politics of reform (172) but also to enact the “prophetic pragmatism” of Cornel West. West envisions critics “transform[ing] linguistic, social, cultural, and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and democratic operations” (230); proponents of reframing suggest that we can work toward such aims by publicly seeking opportunities to redirect and expand reform terms such as *college and career readiness*.

This argument responds to contemporary reforms but also attempts to reconcile critical and managerial perspectives on composition teaching, scholarship, and administration.⁴ For scholars advancing a critical perspective, the realist style of reform forwards not only a reductive vision of writing but also an impoverished model of the public sphere in which global competition obviates the need for public or professional participation in shaping educational policy.⁵ From a critical view, redirecting such a model of public representation, even for the purposes of expanding it, undermines composition’s commitment to democratic values. For proponents of reframing, however, *publicly* redirecting reform’s discourse does not betray our values. By invoking prophetic pragmatism, these scholars reposition the management of composition’s public discourse on a democratic horizon. In this line of thinking, redirecting realist style enables teachers, scholars, and administrators to achieve the critical aim of improving public discourse about writing. Thus we in composition are better off moving beyond the convention of denouncing reform and the realist style that enables it. Instead of relying on critique as a means of going public, we need to develop a rhetoric of professionalism that works tactically from the resources of

reform's realist style. In this light, pragmatism means redirecting market-framed discourse to serve democratic aims.

In this essay, I engage with this claim, arguing that the pragmatism invoked by proponents of reframing does more than affirm the wisdom of redirection and the futility of critique. Instead, this pragmatism falls on the bias of the redirection/critique split, affirming reframing's aims while also qualifying its dismissal of critique as a public response to realist style. Through an engagement with classical and contemporary pragmatism, I seek to expand reframing as a response to composition's disciplinary dialectic and to the evolving scene of contemporary reform. I argue that the pragmatic tradition provides such an enlarging vision by goading composition not toward the redirection or denunciation of reform but toward what John Dewey calls an "artful" critique—a means of sponsoring local public inquiry into and critique of the dominant direction of reform. I forward artfulness as a step toward breaking composition's redirection/critique stalemate and reorienting teachers, scholars, and professional associations toward public engagement as a means of going public. To illustrate the potential for such engagement, I sketch out one way we might invite critical public inquiry into a central feature of contemporary reform, the machine scoring of writing.

Reframing and the Problem of Critique

The practice of reframing proceeds from a central principle, a belief in teachers' and students' capacities for growth and improvement (Adler-Kassner 1). Proponents of reframing situate this belief in the philosophically pragmatic tradition, linking educational capacity building with Dewey's efforts to develop critical public intelligence for solving shared problems (Adler-Kassner 41). The practice of reframing aligns the critical efforts of the philosophically pragmatic tradition to outcome-oriented action strategies (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 93) that can be enacted in educational policy contexts from the institutional (88) to the national (O'Neill et al. 527). The goal of such policy action is to advance composition's values of contextual pluralism amid reform.

At the heart of this practice is a standard of professional rhetorical judgment. To enact reframing, proponents argue, composition teachers, scholars, administrators, and professional associations must be strategic. With public discourse about literacy education dominated by appeals to

standardization for global competitiveness, going public cannot simply dismiss the assessments forwarded by reform. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill argue,

pointing out what is wrong does not provide anyone a handhold for acting upon what is right—in other words, it doesn't provide the foundation for a proactive strategy that can reframe issues important to us. Instead, it puts us only in a reactive mode—and reaction, in the long run, only perpetuates the issues being critiqued in the first instance. (167)

This is not to say that reframing eschews critique wholesale: as Adler-Kassner and O'Neill make clear, theoretical critiques of reform are “an important first step” in situating “the assessments and the issues associated with them within our disciplinary expertise” (166–67). But for going public, another standard of judgment is needed. Beyond critiquing reforms, we should seek to redirect their “porous narrative” (Adler-Kassner 52) by highlighting possibility in students and teachers. These images of potential, in turn, can suggest how reforms may be built upon rather than apart from our professional judgment. Instead of asking how we can end the dominant frames for reform, we should ask how we can redirect them to reflect composition's values (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 94). In this line of thinking, more can be gained by reclaiming key terms of reform such as *college readiness* than by pointing out problems with reformers' conceptions of *college-level* writing and their means of assessing *readiness*. In Frank Farmer's term, these innovations seek to “insinuate” (148) our professional judgment into the reform process.

To underwrite this rhetorical judgment, scholars of reframing invoke the pragmatism of Saul Alinsky (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 87) and John Dewey (Adler-Kassner 40) but locate themselves most clearly in Cornel West's “prophetic pragmatism.” West's pragmatism, Adler-Kassner argues, reflects a “faith in/advocacy for the power of individuals to make a difference and improve democracy, balanced with acknowledgement that both these efforts and democracy is situated in and shot through with difference in power” (172). To make a difference, however, depends on a specific critical judgment. West argues that critics must “think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographic insights and to act politically to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics” (209). Scholars of

reframing interpret this call to mean that compositionists must recognize that while disciplinary critique of reform remains crucial, *public* critique cannot deliver the consequences they desire. Thus we must approach reform tactically, redirecting K–16 articulation to strengthen rather than undermine our professional judgment.

By situating their judgment in the philosophically pragmatic tradition, scholars of reframing make both a disciplinary and a broader democratic claim. The disciplinary claim is that a qualification of critique's potential should not be understood as the managerial pragmatism Marc Bousquet terms a rhetoric of "pleasing the prince" (12). Rather, scholars of reframing assert, such discipline should be understood as an invitation to compositionists to develop a standard of rhetorical judgment adequate to the constraints of going public. The democratic claim envisions a professionalism enabled by this rhetorical judgment. Reframing, these scholars suggest, can both defend our standing to shape policy amid reform *and* increase public engagement in questions of teaching, learning, and assessment (Adler-Kassner 82). From this perspective, message management can serve the democratic without the potentially problematic dimensions of public critique.

The 2011 *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* demonstrates reframing as rhetorical tactic for going public. As O'Neill et al. explain in their introduction to the 2012 *College English* symposium, "On the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*," the *Framework* is an attempt to address the exclusion of literacy educators' voices in public discussions of "college and career readiness" (520). The *Framework's* point of entry is the commonplace of public discussion: the competitive world invoked by the Common Core Standards Initiative and the attendant policy exigency (all students "career and college ready"). Rather than critique readiness, the *Framework* attempts to work within the limits established by the dominant discourse of reform: to be college ready, students need habits of mind developed through experiences with instructors in context. Thus the *Framework* "describes the rhetorical and twenty-first century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success" (525). If students have these habits of mind and experiences, they "will be well positioned to meet the writing challenges in the full spectrum of academic courses and later in their careers" (526). Again, the *Framework* "insinuates" (Farmer 148) literacy educators into the discussion, subtly

positioning professionalism as the *means* of reform, thus rearticulating reform's "readiness" and composition's contextual pluralism.

The *Framework* itself does not manage composition's response to reform, but the document illustrates the explicit arguments made in the reframing scholarship: as professionals, we should respond publicly to the threat of neoliberal displacement not through denunciation but through competition. That is, to advance composition's values is to declare ourselves a provider of expertise in the contemporary policy marketplace. To develop the habits of mind essential to success, students need the experiences that only we can provide in our writing courses. That way, at least, we can redirect reform to advance our values. But not all composition teachers, scholars, and administrators accept this standard of judgment. In her response to the *Framework*, for example, Christine Hansen rejects reframing as a rhetoric of professionalism for composition. Despite the rhetorical constraints around literacy educators K–16, Hansen insists that

we must reassert the importance of teachers' judgment in education. The huge state testing apparatuses that want to measure "readiness" or "competence" and the private industries that want to sell courses and tests, asserting the "equivalence" of their products with our college courses, have usurped the role our society once allowed teachers to play: that of professionals whose judgment matters, whether in designing curriculum or assessing students. (542)

Here Hansen does not attempt to mask her aims of responding to reform. The scare quotes around the key terms of reform (*readiness, competence, equivalence*), as well as the exploitation of devil terms (*huge state testing apparatuses, private industries, courses and tests for sale, usurping*) make clear that she believes our professional discourse offers far more adequate terms than those forwarded by reform.

In the same symposium, Judith Summerfield and Philip M. Anderson express a similar dissatisfaction with the *Framework's* response to reform. They want a *Framework* that says what it wants in its own language rather than trying to reframe reform. In composition, Summerfield and Anderson argue,

We need a larger vision of literacy, a humanistic vision for educating our students that recognizes our students' capabilities, and one in which our "framework" for practice makes our theories, and even ideology, explicit.... We want to make explicit the underlying psychological, linguistic, cultural,

philosophical, and pedagogical constructs. We think that the current trend toward “commonsense” categories and academic formalism (now irretrievably transformed by and intertwined with social efficiency, that is, with managing behavior and “preparing” students for vocations) is damaging to a half-century (at the least) of enlightened classroom study and socio-psycholinguistic research. (546–47)

Here, especially in the scare quotes, is an explicit call to go public not through the discourse of reform but through the discourse of our profession(s). For Summerfield and Anderson, this rhetorical judgment is meaningful: to advance our values, we must situate our judgment in our research, which ensures that we maintain our professional standing in reform.

To be clear, this critical view is not shared by all symposium participants. Bruce McComiskey admits that he was prepared to hate the CCSS (Common Core State Standards) as something that would “tie teachers’ hands behind their backs, forcing them to teach writing out of rhetorical context and in formulaic (modal, five-paragraph) structures” (537). But when he finds no such tendency in the standards, he admits he is “puzzled” by the *Framework*. If no one thing in the Common Core’s stated values is disagreeable, he asks, why are we responding? In fact, McComiskey sees the *Framework* as so similar to the CCSS that he doubts school boards would sense a need to inquire critically into the CCSS (538). Given these similarities, McComiskey concludes, the CCSS is not to be feared—but corporately designed assessments are (539).

These scholars’ stances dramatize the redirection/critique split. For McComiskey, there is no *apparent* difference between values formed by corporate-political reform and those formed by composition professionals. If the values are the same, teachers, scholars, and administrators may still be able to serve these values. Even if these values are framed within the logic of competition (both among students and among educational policy providers), we can still serve the public goods of composition. Like the scholars of reframing cited above, McComiskey suggests that we can redirect the discourse of reform without compromising our professional and democratic commitments. But for Hansen as well as Summerfield and Anderson, such redirection ignores how the discourse of reform displaces composition professionals from the policy development process. By not acknowledging this displacement, these scholars suggest, we encourage the tendency in reform debate to grant equivalence between our professional

judgments and those of corporate-political service providers. Redirection compromises our professionalism, our discourse, and our values; thus, these scholars argue, we need to say what we want, in our terms.

This standoff reappears in the February 2012 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, where several scholars respond to *Academically Adrift* and the goals of the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Richard H. Haswell and Jeanne Gunner offer what might be considered conventional denunciations in their essays. Haswell dismisses the CLA's methodology as inappropriate to the claims it makes; Gunner questions *Academically Adrift's* conception of education as a commodity. Both appeal to profes-

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sionalism to highlight the inadequacy of reform, arguing implicitly we need the right people to apply the right methods with the right purposes. However, the other two reviewers, Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt and Teresa Redd, offer less openly critical perspectives. Calhoun-Dillahunt affirms *Academically Adrift's* concerns with limited student learning but points out that *Adrift* invokes a student body that doesn't match up with the student body of most institutions (496). Despite these disjunctions, she still calls on composition to take a position much like reframing:

Rather than resist Arum and Roksa's findings, we should embrace *Academically Adrift* for its focus on what matters most: learning. The book demonstrates the need for a more complete and coherent body of research that gives a full, rich picture of student learning and provides a valuable starting point for national dialogue on improving student learning on college campuses. (498-99)

Although respondents to *Adrift* do not address each other, their position side by side dramatizes the rhetorical distance between redirection and critique. How might we read Calhoun-Dillahunt's or Redd's qualified embraces through the lenses of Haswell's methodological critique or Gunner's suspicion of reform's commonplaces? Are scholars *not* being critical when they take reform's invocations as starting points for participation in reform debate? Are scholars being insufficiently "pragmatic" when they pose problems to (or wholly discount) reform's methods of assessment? What form of professional rhetorical judgment, critique or reframing, best accounts for the exigency of contemporary reform? And how can we talk to each other about these judgments without falling into stalemate?

These are questions that proponents of reframing aim to address through the invocation of prophetic pragmatism. But rather than rewriting the polarities of the redirection/critique debate, reframing's pragmatism appears to reify them. The disciplinary conversations about the *Framework* and the *CLA/Adrift* demonstrate the consequences of such a pragmatism: we tend to talk past each other about what Bruce Horner calls the material social conditions of composition (450), never fully engaging with the grounds of our colleagues' judgments about going public. Still, in its engagement with the consequences of going public, reframing advances an important conversation about composition's rhetoric of professionalism: what commitments do we share that can guide and coordinate our responses to reform? And how might we develop a rhetoric of professionalism suited to the constraints of the contemporary scene? What can extend this conversation, I believe, is an inquiry into pragmatism as a standard of rhetorical judgment. Reframing invokes two central practices in the philosophical pragmatic tradition: melioration, or the improvement of public problems, and prophetic critique. In the following section, I read the pragmatism enacted against the pragmatism invoked, seeking to understand how reframing selects, reflects, and deflects the vision of West and others. Through this analysis, I identify opportunities for reopening composition's disciplinary inquiry into going public.

On Pragmatic Meliorism

In the pragmatic tradition, the term for improvement is *meliorism* (Dewey, *Public* 208; Stroud, "Pragmatism," "What," "John Dewey"; Stob). For contemporary scholars of pragmatism like Scott Stroud, meliorism represents the work of improving a situation despite limitations ("Pragmatism" 287), particularly finding ways to improve the experience of those in difficult situations ("What" 48). Likewise, Paul Stob defines meliorism as the faith that circumstances can be improved through human involvement (240). This effort at improvement has a specific focus: although the pragmatic tradition seeks to enact broad changes that improve public inquiry, deliberation, and cooperation, melioration tends to be linguistic. As Stob puts it, pragmatic criticism issues a "call to alleviate the public's problems through a reconstruction in language" (240), and the task of critics is "crafting linguistic solutions to specific problems [so that] life can get better." To solve public problems, then, critics can "reconstruct a specific thread in the discursive fabric that unites person to person in the public sphere" (241).

West forwards a specific method of improving public discourse. Prophetic pragmatism is a form of critical melioration, a “form of cultural criticism that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural, and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and democratic operations” (230). In this view, improvement depends on critical provocations to “hold elites to account” (213), forward the experiences of ordinary people (214), and denounce the “evils of the day” (233), even when this denunciation authorizes ordinary people to oppose professionals and experts (182, 207). Indeed, for West, pragmatism’s specific force comes from its *antiprofessional* quality: critics’ role is to invite public inquiry into and critique of expert judgments made on the public’s behalf. However, West is careful not to say that critics should simply denounce

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problematic discourse in public life. To be effective, West argues, critics must be *artful*: they must, as noted earlier, “think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best

available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographic insights and to act politically to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics” (209). To pursue artfulness, critics must reevaluate their conventional rhetorics of critique against their likely consequences in particular contexts. Based on this contextual judgment, critics can seek ways to invite their specific audiences to reflect on the limits of exclusionary perspectives to reflect their experience.

If critique drives West’s pragmatic melioration, why does reframing manage critique in the name of pragmatism? Reframing arrives at this stance, I believe, by ignoring West’s qualifier of artfulness. If critique cannot be artful, melioration requires message discipline. But this conclusion has its own likely consequences: it offers teachers and scholars little professional role in responding to reform, for if we are incapable of artfulness and in need of message management, our public role is limited to the redirection of reform discourse. As the previous section of this essay demonstrates, however, composition’s diversity of perspectives on reform frustrates reframing’s managerial aspirations. Another consequence may be more important still: reframing envisions little role for our public audiences in responding to reform. While reframing attempts to reestablish teachers’

and scholars' professional standing in an era of reform, it forecloses on the potential of professional critique to sponsor public inquiry into and critique of reform's rhetorical style. This foreclosure recalls Bousquet's argument that a managerial pragmatism doesn't consider what it's like for teachers and scholars to be managed (28). I would extend this argument to the publics of composition: the case for reframing doesn't consider what it's like to be the public to our professionalism if that professionalism is built on the redirection of reform's realist style.

If the goals of pragmatic meliorism are broader than composition's concern with defending professionalism amid reform, how might reframing be expanded to account for the public aims of the pragmatic tradition? Again, West suggests a method. For West, the central characteristic of pragmatic critique is its "antiprofessionalism," its invitation of public inquiry that can authorize or challenge expert policy decisions. As West puts it, "what was the prerogative of philosophers, i.e., rational deliberation, is now that of the people—and the populace deliberating is creative democracy in the making. Needless to say, this view is not a license for eliminating or opposing all professional elites, but it does hold them to account" (213). This stance would goad composition professionals to goad public not only by redirecting or denouncing dominant perspectives but also by creating opportunities for public audiences to assess and critique these perspectives. This rhetorical judgment envisions going public as a process of public formation: the point of professionals responding to reform, in this light, is to sponsor critical public inquiry that can contend with the power of realist style. Accepting reframing's message discipline as the enactment of pragmatism, however, directs our attention away from the public participation sought by the pragmatic tradition. Reframing's disciplining of critique aims to avoid one problem—professionals' critiques falling on reformers' deaf ears—but it contributes to another by reducing opportunities for our public audiences to experience the limitations of reform's conventionalized perspectives.

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If reframing tends toward managing composition and its publics through message discipline, how might reframing be expanded to make room for artful critique? A starting point is the definition of critique itself. Reframing associates critique with unidirectional public intellectualism (Adler-Kassner 82), pointing out what is wrong without saying what's right (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 167), or saying that "writing can't be measured" (165). Yet in the melioristic and prophetic vein explored above, critique extends beyond the denunciation imagined in reframing. As Stroud and Stob argue, the point of such critique is to sponsor public inquiry that can demand terms more adequate to broader participation. Among composition scholars as well, critique is not merely saying that "writing cannot be measured" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 165); it is saying that writing is better measured by means other than the ones demanded by reform. If the practice of critique in the pragmatic tradition and in composition is not reducible to reframing's portrait of critique, how might critique advance the work of melioration and prophetic transformation?

In the pragmatic tradition, such a critique tends to scale down in order to scale up. Scaling down refers to critics' role in sponsoring local public inquiry. In *The Public and Its Problems*, for example, Dewey calls on experts to "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (184). To achieve such a goal, expert critique needs to do more than perform a rejection of a dominant perspective. Instead, Stroud argues, critics' task is to attend to their local audiences' experiences in concrete situations ("John Dewey" 42). Based on this attention, critics can invite their audiences to reflect on the ways in which a conventional perspective does or does not reflect their experience (42). When audiences take on this orientation, they can experience their current situation as "problematic" (37). As Dewey argues in *Art as Experience*, "the value of [such an] experience is not only in the ideals it reveals, but in its power to disclose many ideals, a power more germinal and more significant than any revealed ideal, since it includes them in its stride, shatters and remakes them" (322). Local inquiry points toward the need for change.

Here pragmatic critique, contrary to Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's claim that "pointing out what is wrong does not provide anyone a handhold for acting upon what is right" (167), attempts both a disintegrative and a re-integrative role. By inviting audiences to experience potential disjunctions between commonsense perspectives and their experiences, artful critique

also stokes audiences' desire to *revise* their perspectives—to begin a process Walter Muyumba describes as “rearticulating, problematizing, and reconstructing the plural publics and cultures in which we find ourselves” (167). This reconstruction is local and individual, but such inquiry also has larger potential. If critics help publics “[tell] the tales of their own ‘aesthetic’ experience,” Muyumba argues, these critics can help “generate the communication necessary for creating associations and knowledge regarding shared cultural or community experiences” (167). That is, the circulation of stories of local inquiry can serve the function of critique: they can invite other audiences to reflect on their own experiences as a way of problematizing reform’s standardizing perspective. Dewey elaborates on this function in *The Public*, calling on critics to sponsor local public inquiry into shared concerns and then to circulate accounts of this inquiry more broadly (153). By sponsoring continuous inquiry into diverse contexts, Dewey argues, critics can help break up the calcifications of public discussion (184) and improve public discourse. In this view, local critique and experiences of inquiry can scale up to foster a broader public discussion of shared concerns.

Certainly, reframing attempts such a scaling down and scaling up. Amid the stalemates of national reform debate, proponents of reframing call on teachers, scholars, and administrators to respond sensitively to policy discussions. Artful critique, from reframing’s view, does not decry potentially deprofessionalizing reforms but invites policy agents, such as testing companies, political think tanks, and administrators tasked with implementing reforms, into experiences that can disclose alternate perspectives and suggest the need for a revised approach to policy. Those who attended the 2015 CCCC Convention in Orlando may recall such an invitation at the Dialogue on Success in Postsecondary Writing.⁶ This invitation recognizes the need for a starting place among seemingly irreconcilable perspectives. As Adler-Kassner and O’Neill put it in *Reframing Writing Assessment*, “while we might ultimately like to say we should take a more radical stance, defining precisely what *we* want and advocating for that at all costs, we know such a positioning would fall on deaf ears and ultimately cause more harm than good” (177).

Yet the deaf ears of those who control reform efforts are not the only audiences in public discussions of reform. Proponents of reframing implicitly conclude that professionals’ public critique of reform is not worth the trouble because the prospects for fostering public inquiry are slim. Thus

composition teachers, scholars, and administrators are better off redirecting reform in the hope of gaining a seat at the table than by inviting public inquiry into and critique of reform. This conclusion rightly recognizes that participants in reform debate speak from what Gerard A. Hauser calls “dialectically secured positions of progressive or neoliberal ideology that reduce political relations to a zero sum game” (235). Yet despite the stalemates that characterize the contemporary political economy, Hauser argues, critics’ role is to sponsor “the rhetorical experience of diversity as a way of creating relationships through inquiry” (242). Scholars of reframing would insist that they do this by redirecting the stated goals of the Common Core or the Collegiate Learning Assessment. An artful critique guided by West’s critical melioration, however, would *also* seek to enlarge policy debate so that a broader range of public audiences can experience the limits of reform discourse to reflect their experiences with literacy. Publicly fostering such antiprofessional possibilities is the aim of an artful critique.⁷

Toward a Pragmatic Public Critique

Not long after the Common Core entered the implementation phase (2011–12), the K–12 assessment consortia of PAARC and Smarter Balanced announced their plans to use a combination of human and machine scoring to evaluate students’ responses to the Common Core’s written performance tasks. In response to these choices and others like them, a group of writing teachers, scholars, and administrators circulated the Human Readers petition, which asserted that machines cannot “measure the essentials of effective written communication: accuracy, reasoning, adequacy of evidence, good sense, ethical stance, convincing argument, meaningful organization, clarity, and veracity, among others.” Machine scoring can’t assess these qualities of writing, HR argued, because its methodology is “trivial,” “reductive,” “inaccurate,” “undiagnostic,” “unfair,” and “secretive.” To support authentic writing and make good judgment on behalf of the public, HR insists, we need human readers.

I’m guessing this is a way of going public that proponents of reframing would consider unpragmatic. HR’s critique does not contain discussion to the disciplinary-professional sphere; instead, the HR petition attempts to expand public concern with reform. It forwards machine scoring as a shared problem, a failure of PAARC and Smarter Balanced to account for students’, parents’, and administrators’ experiences with writing. From this

perspective, there is only one way to address this public problem, and that is to restore educators' professional roles as readers in assessment. From the perspective of reframing, however, HR's critique threatens to close down potential future cooperation among assessment scholars and reform stakeholders. Once composition goes public through denunciation, there is no hope of a seat at the policy table. Thus, in this line of judgment, stoking public resistance is unproductive for professional goals; a more tactical response to reform would invite collaboration between composition and the testing consortia designing K–12 assessments of writing. In this view, professional denunciations of reform do not so much reassert our expertise as reveal our refusal to recognize the way the world is.

While this perspective anticipates the very real constraints of contemporary debate, its rhetorical style begins to form a circle. In its attempt to redirect the market discourse of reform, proponents of reframing forward a realist style of their own within composition: like it or not, *this* is what we have to do in the world we all inhabit (see Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 88). Certainly, these assumptions may bear out, but they are not certainties. Reframing's redirection of realist style may well create space for composition's professional values amid reform, but such judgment may also accelerate the neoliberalization of writing expertise. We don't know. In the effort to wield managerial authority, proponents of reframing begin to echo Richard Miller's argument that it is time, at least publicly, to "leave off critiquing the academy for having failed to make good on its promise to deliver a meaningful, morally sacrosanct life and to begin, instead, to work within the fiscal and bureaucratic constraints that both enable the academic enterprise and limit its scope" (210). Despite avoiding the terms *bureaucracy* and *management*, scholars of reframing make a similar argument, except that the pragmatism of reframing is framed as prophetic, not managerial. As I've argued here, however, the prophetic aims of reframing are limited by a desire to contain disciplinary or public dissensus in favor of defending professional standing.

In taking up this move, reframing shortcuts its pragmatic provocation. The case for reframing recognizes the limits of our conventional rhetoric of professionalism in the contemporary reform scene. Asserting the mistakenness of corporate-political reform and the rightness of experts appears to do little to reopen stalemated debates. Sensing this standoff, proponents of reframing invite us to envision a public rhetoric of professionalism for

composition. That is, reframing seeks to make the grounds of professional judgment accessible so that composition's pluralistic contextualism can be affirmed not only as the exercise of expertise but also as the democratic representation of our publics' experiences with writing. This is the work West, Dewey, and other pragmatists envision professionals undertaking in an effort to build publics' capacities for democratic participation. But by encouraging us to work publicly from the terms of reform, reframing discounts the power of realist style to narrow and constrain the participation of the publics served by reform. And by disciplining public critique, reframing discourages us from tapping into the public inquiry and participation that could authorize our professionalism as publicly representative.

This is not to say that HR's rhetoric of critique engages public participation. By denouncing machine scoring's methodology as a public problem and forwarding professional judgment as a solution, HR falls back on our familiar argument that professional judgment is the bulwark of democracy.⁸ Again, while this is our favored appeal, such an argument appears not to unsettle the dominance of realist style or reopen reform debate. Rather than endorsing critique over reframing, then, I am suggesting that HR's public critique deserves a look beyond reframing's message discipline because it demonstrates a potential strategy for going public. In addition to denouncing assessment methodologies central to reform, many of the scholars cited in the HR petition perform their critical inquiry into an act of assessment, inviting their audiences to examine their own experiences with assessment through the same lens.

Les Perelman's *Boston Globe* article "Flunk the Robo-Graders" demonstrates such a performance.⁹ Perelman begins with an example of nonsensical prose: "*According to professor of theory of knowledge Leon Trotsky, privacy is the most fundamental report of humankind. Radiation on advocates to an orator transmits gamma rays of parsimony to implode.*" Perelman then says what readers are thinking: "any native speaker over age 5 knows that the preceding sentences are incoherent babble." But machines don't know this; in fact, as Perelman explains, they rated this prose highly. This concern is not merely an academic one, however. As Perelman points out, machine scoring is at the heart of the new assessments for the Common Core. So the question of writing assessment is a public and national one. And the issue of machine scoring is the failure of its methodology to understand how writing works: "Robo-graders do not score by understanding meaning but almost solely by use of gross measures, especially length and the pres-

ence of pretentious language.” When metrics are this poorly designed, they can be gamed. Who then should read student writing? Perelman proposes having expert teachers check at least 20 percent of the papers evaluated by machine readers, arguing that “education, like medicine, is too important a public resource to allow corporate secrecy.”

Perelman performs his inquiry into machine scoring and concludes with a familiar peroration: we need professionals to serve the public good. But I suggest this inquiry can also be performed to sponsor critical public participation in local contexts. This participation is already happening among students and parents involved in the Opt Out movement. As *The New York Times* reported in May 2015, parent-teacher organizations, teachers’ unions, and superintendents have sponsored such public attention to the new assessments that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo is reconsidering his embrace of testing (Harris and Fessenden). Granted, public decisions to opt out may center on methods of writing assessment or on broader consequences of standardized measures. But one impact of this engagement is clear. Our concern about *who* should define the goals and measures of literacy education is being taken up as an issue worthy of public as well as professional participation.

The relative success of Opt Out suggests the possibility of a parallel effort in composition. When we create opportunities for parents, teachers, and administrators to assess the assessments, our critiques of machine scoring may not only issue expert denunciations but also foster public participation in reform. Although movements to opt out do not counter the realist style of reform in national debate, they do foster local critiques that unsettle the inevitability of reform and potentially authorize composition’s professional perspectives. Such local public critique, fragmented and contingent as it is, appears to have a greater impact on reform debate than the professional statements we make in composition. As assessments such as those championed by Complete College America come more fully into view, I suggest we begin thinking about going public not only as decrying or redirecting reform but also as sponsoring critical public participation in the questions of reform.

Developing a (Pre)Response to the CCA

In *Time Is the Enemy* (2011), CCA calls for policies to help students finish college more quickly. The first step, CCA argues, is to establish common measures of student readiness for entering their majors and their programs.

With this data, better decisions can be made at the state level: governors can “allocate funds appropriately, measure the progress of postsecondary performance over time, encourage successful practices, and discourage waste in the postsecondary system.” Although CCA does not name first-year writing as a central concern, the “pre-major learning” emphasized in CCA happens in FYW. And while CCA avoids saying exactly *how* it plans to speed students along, the available public documents suggest that CCA’s sights are set on a standardized FYW equivalency assessment. It takes little effort to imagine “innovative” course delivery modules that would allow students to demonstrate writing development equivalent to FYW.

Early in its development, CCA considered Accuplacer, the College Board’s computer-based placement software for incoming first-year students, as a means of measuring students’ readiness for their major coursework. But starting in 2011, CCA began to critique Accuplacer for reasons familiar to composition: the test doesn’t tell us about students’ abilities, it can land students in non-credit-bearing courses that lengthen students’ time to degree, and it forwards criteria for “college-level writing” that do not align with actual college writing (see Headden). Even though CCA positions itself in opposition to Accuplacer, CCA offers no evidence that they will offer anything substantially different. In this situation, I believe our existing inquiries into Accuplacer and other machine-scoring platforms can help us anticipate CCA’s proposals. Rather than starting from scratch, our inquiry into CCA might pick up where Patricia Freitag Ericsson and Richard Haswell’s 2005 collection *Machine Scoring of Student Essays: Truth and Consequences* leaves off. The contributors to this collection offer a set of trenchant questions for assessing efforts at mass machine scoring. As Edmund Jones asks, does this assessment measure the actual skills of writing that matter in majors and programs? Does this assessment treat writing, in Ericsson’s memorable phrase, as “a bag of words” to be scanned and counted? And does this assessment create “a black box” around the reading of student writing, as Richard Haswell finds most entrepreneurs of machine scoring doing?

If the answer to these questions is yes (as I suspect it will be), I am actually hopeful because our scholarship not only decries the poverty of machine-scored “meaning” but also invites local public engagement in questions of assessment. Tim McGee, for example, describes how he performs his inquiry into the texts assessed by Pearson’s Intelligent Essay Assessor

for audiences at his institution (91). Like McGee, Edmund Jones abstracts a scoring method from proprietary assessment software and then dramatizes the limits of this method to appreciate written meaning in his students' texts (109). For both McGee and Jones, the power of such local inquiry is that it dramatizes otherwise narrow debates about scoring methodologies. Such dramatizations are where I see assessment inquiry informing efforts at going public. Local audiences experiencing the limits of machine scoring to account for their meaning making can articulate a dual response to reform: yes, machine scoring fails to satisfy professional criteria, but it also falls short of public expectations for being read.

This possibility suggests a strategy for going public locally. We can invite our students to consider how they are being read through machine-scoring criteria, and we can compare these inquiries to campus- and system-level administrators' rationales for using these tools. Placed side by side, these responses dramatize the distance between students' experiences with and administrators' arguments for machine scoring. In their contribution to *Machine Scoring of Student Essays*, Anne Herrington and Charles Moran describe what we are likely to find if we take up this line of inquiry: students express concerns about experiences of being read (118), while administrators appeal to cost and time savings (117). Following the lead of the Opt Out movement, I see an opportunity to circulate these local inquiries to sponsor broader public discussion of reforms like CCA. Students' inquiries into the experience of being read, especially when contrasted with administrators' rationalizations of machine scoring, can disclose the limits of "efficiency" and "cost-effectiveness" for governing the work of reading and responding to student writing.

Certainly, state officials have heard and ignored our professional perspectives on assessments like the CLA. But state officials have not yet faced student protest regarding reform. The years 2014–15 saw a range of student actions on issues ranging from athletics to race to sexual violence. These actions frequently stemmed from local inquiry into decisions made on students' behalf. In one of the most prominent actions, for example, a group of University of Missouri students named Concerned Student 1950 publicized administrators' efforts to address racial segregation on campus. In October 2015, Concerned 1950 issued a list of demands, such as removing Missouri System president Tim Wolfe, increasing black faculty and staff system-wide, and developing a strategic plan for increasing minority stu-

dent retention (“List”). After displays of solidarity with Concerned 1950—in which faculty threatened to stage a campus-wide walkout and the Missouri football team refused to play—President Wolfe resigned. But this critical action scaled up well beyond the local when mass student demonstrations circulated online and sponsored similar events at other institutions. Students at Missouri and elsewhere assembled critical publics around their concerns and successfully demanded policy change.

Like the publics of composition amid reform, the publics of student action are both local and national. But unlike the largely professional publics targeted in our responses to reform, student actions like those in Missouri embrace counterpublic resistance. These student actions’ tenor was one of antiprofessionalism—experientially grounded resistance to rhetorics of power in higher education, and this antiprofessionalism appears to have more power to effect change than our professionalism. I am not arguing that we in composition abandon the defense of professionalism or neglect the professional publics we attend to by redirecting reform or reasserting professionalism. I am, however, arguing that we expand our rhetoric of professionalism to engage the antiprofessional energy of local inquiry and resistance. At a time when our appeals to professionalism are ignored by institution- and system-level administrators seeking to implement reforms such as Complete College America, we need an alternate basis for the authority of our judgment.

To be sure, students have not yet inquired into what we call “the discourse of student need” (Horner) as reform’s warrant for neoliberal standardization. Still, we have good reason to seek out resonances between students’ concerns and the claims of reform. Reformers insist that neoliberal standardization will democratize access to opportunity, and we insist that our expert judgment in context ensures the democratic representation of diverse publics. But students, and particularly our most vulnerable students, rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to challenge or authorize these claims. Inviting local inquiry into the teaching, learning, and assessment envisioned by professionals and reformers can restore student voice to a debate stalemated between markets and professionalism. I don’t suggest that inviting and circulating local public inquiry *will* guard us against deprofessionalization by reform, but what this proposal gives up in safety, I argue, it gains in participatory potential. By scaling down to local experience and scaling up to institutional, community, state, and national reform discussions, we

may begin to draw on the participatory energy of public inquiry to support the professional goal of improving the discourse of reform.

What I am describing may be risky. Circulating accounts of students' inquiry into the proposals of reform may create opportunities for our publics to interrupt the neoliberalization of our expertise, or this strategy may accelerate it. But this proposal clarifies the stakes of the redirection/critique debate. A turn toward sponsoring students' public inquiry would recognize that we in composition need a basis for our professionalism that is broader than the redirection of neoliberal reform or the reassertion of our expertise. Our performances of inquiry into machine scoring and other reform practices can help develop this basis. Following Cornel West's vision of prophetic pragmatism, these performances can serve as "a political form of cultural criticism" (213) that "locates politics in the everyday experiences of ordinary people."¹⁰

Toward an Artful Critique

If our public critique can be artful, we don't need to manage critique. What we do need, I believe, is to contend with artfulness. In *The Public*, Dewey worries, much like composition teachers, scholars, and professional associations today, that the gulf between experts and publics is "being bridged not by the intellectuals but by investors and engineers hired by captains of industry" (205). Unless professionals learn to engage their publics more effectively, Dewey warns, informed public participation in public policy will likely be eclipsed by consumer choice. Yet Dewey argues that the task of professionals facing the threat of displacement by markets is not to reappropriate the conventionalized appeals of bureaucracy and markets but to refashion professionalism as responsiveness to public experience. He cautions experts that

rule by an economic class may be disguised from the masses; rule by experts could not be covered up. It could be made to work only if the intellectuals became the willing tools of big economic interests. Otherwise they would have to ally themselves with the masses, and that implies, once more, a share in government by the latter. (205-06)

As we seek to go public amid market-driven reforms, Dewey reminds us that our professional standing is contingent on its publicness. And Dewey challenges us to envision a rhetoric of professionalism adequate to public

participation and engagement. Artful critique is one method of enacting an alternate pragmatism for going public. With this diversity of perspectives in play, I argue, we will be better suited to continue our work within composition's vexing material social contexts.

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Notes

1. The American Association of Colleges and Universities terms its VALUE rubrics "Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education" ("VALUE"). AAC&U is careful to emphasize faculty's role in rubric development and the need to translate rubrics into "the language of individual campuses, disciplines, and even courses."
2. ADP foresaw how the National Governors Association could channel the corporate-political platforms of groups such as Achieve, Inc. to state leaders, who would adopt this platform as public policy, thus bypassing legislative and public review. For example, Achieve's 2004 *Ready or Not* forecast the NGA's 2005 *Action Agenda*.
3. In our scholarly journals and professional associations, we have decried the Common Core's tendency toward formalism (Hansen; Summerfield and Anderson; NCTE, *Report*), the K-12 assessment consortia's reliance on machine scoring (NCTE, "Position Statement"), and the Collegiate Learning Assessment's methodology (Haswell, "Automatons"). We have forwarded these critiques to demonstrate our professional judgment and to argue that reformers cannot serve the writing needs and experiences of our diverse publics. Yet prominent defenders of the Common Core, such as the Gates Foundation, continue to forward corporate-political standardization as *the* means of raising all students' achievement for global competition (Strauss, "Gates"). Likewise, supporters of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, such as the Council for Aid in Education, continue to promote standardized college writing outcomes assessment as necessary to prove graduates' global competitiveness (CAE).
4. The critical perspective on going public is expressed most forcefully by Marc Bousquet, who questions calls for a pragmatism that works within rather than challenges market logics (13). For Bousquet, scholar-administrators' invocations of pragmatism tend to "[conceal their] own market idealism underneath

a rhetoric of exclusive purchase on reality” (25). The “managerial” perspective, by contrast, is expressed most forcefully by Richard E. Miller, who calls on teachers, scholars, and administrators to recognize the profound constraints under which they work (5). If we recognize these realities, Miller insists, we must “give up principled critique and develop a far more pluralistic and supple” approach to argument about teaching and administration (40). These standards of professional rhetorical judgment are locked in stalemate: we must be on the right side of history *or* we must recognize reality.

5. Reform commands what scholars of political economy call *realist style*: it invokes the competitive world as a warrant for one policy action while discounting alternate approaches as failing to grasp the world as it is (Hariman 18; Aune 42; Asen 14; Hirschman, *Rhetoric*; Hirschman, *Exit*). By figuring public policy as accommodation to the world, and by defining that world as irreducibly competitive, realist style reduces the scope of policy values to competition, efficiency, and instrumentality (Aune 36–37). Beyond the professional concerns of reform, then, a critical perspective recognizes market discourse as a public concern because it “corrodes the persuasive norms that are the ground of republican culture” (Hariman 47) and undermines the democratic process of persuasion and deliberation (Aune 42).

6. Moderated by Les Perelman, this dialogue featured David Coleman, president and CEO of the College Board; John Williamson, executive director of Advanced Placement Curriculum Development at the College Board; Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, co-director of the National Writing Project; Linda Adler-Kassner; and Kathleen Blake Yancey.

7. I am responding to Chris W. Gallagher’s call for an “engaged professionalism” that works against the sociological tendency of expert communities to insulate themselves from the publics they serve.

8. As sociologist of the professions Eliot Freidson argues, professionals’ rhetorical stock in trade is to claim a “devotion to a transcendent value which infuses [their] specialization with a larger and putatively higher goal which may reach beyond that of those they are supposed to serve” (122).

9. See also Maja Wilson’s “Apologies to Sandra Cisneros,” which dramatizes the failure of machine scoring to appreciate genre, context, and tone in literary prose. Likewise, Anne Herrington and Charles Moran (“What Happens”) demonstrate the failure of assessment software to reflect the sociocognitive dimensions of undergraduate writing in the disciplines.

10. This proposal also resonates with Jonathan Alexander and Susan C. Jarratt’s call for those of us in rhetoric and writing studies to attend to curricular *and* co-curricular opportunities for students’ rhetorical education (542).

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