Interview with Dr. John Norris

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Thank you to John Norris, Professor of Second Language Studies, University of Hawai‘i, for agreeing to be interviewed for these working papers. Dr. Norris specializes in assessment and program administration in language education settings. He came to Michigan State University to give a plenary talk at the Second Language Studies Symposium on April 3, 2009. For more information about Dr. Norris, please visit his faculty page: http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jnorris/ This interview was arranged by Emma Trentman.

Emma: How did you first become interested in the field of second language studies?

Dr. Norris: That’s such a difficult question, isn’t it? I was a soccer player, and that introduced me to a lot of internationalism and intercultural ideas, and I played a lot of soccer in different places around the world, and with different people, and I suppose that was my first interest in language and culture in general. I also did a degree in German studies for my bachelor’s and I did a Fulbright in Germany, studying literature, and then I started to pursue a Ph.D. in German literature at the University of North Carolina. All of these experiences coalesced to convince me at some point that what I really wanted to do was something more applied than literature studies, and so I decided at that point to make a change, and I moved to Brazil to play soccer and to teach English. So I managed to do both of those things and at some point during the teaching of English in Brazil, on the basis of essentially no qualifications whatsoever, just being a native speaker of English, I realized that maybe there’s a lot more to this than what I thought.

Also, kind of interesting, I was asked there to do a lot of assessment activities like placing students into a curriculum I knew nothing about, simply because I was the native speaker again and so at that point I realized, well, I better go find out more about this stuff. That’s when I looked in... back in the ‘90s, TESOL used to publish a guide to graduate programs in ESL, and I looked in there to find a graduate program that had a beach close to it. I found the University of Hawai‘i, and indeed they had a graduate program in ESL, and so I said well that’s my next step. I handwrote my application and my resume on a piece of paper that I scrounged up out of the back of a book, and I mailed it in, and I got lucky, and was accepted to the University of Hawai‘i. So then I did my MA and PhD there, and those are the origins of my work in SLS.

Emma: How did you get a specific focus?

Dr. Norris: I guess the specific focus came when I hit the master’s program at the University of Hawai‘i, and I just responded well, I guess, to the variety of courses that they offered, and in particular I found myself increasingly troubled by the ways in
which assessment was being portrayed in the literature used in ESL programs around the world and used in foreign language programs that I was familiar with. So, I think right away I saw kind of a combined social value to doing something about assessment and based on my experiences of what was wrong with it as well as maybe an affinity for the kinds of research that would lend [itself] to that. That was the real beginning of my focus.

I think another thing that happened at that time was that I was trying to complete a language requirement for the University of Hawai‘i graduate program, and I had learned Portuguese completely naturally while I was in Brazil. So I took a test that was called the Portuguese speaking test from the Center for Applied Linguistics, which is a SOPI [Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview], and I did fine on it, and I got my scores back and I used that to complete this language requirement. But at the same time, I compared the score report with what I thought I knew about my competence in Portuguese and I didn’t agree with it entirely, and I thought that’s not really me, the descriptions are not really true to what I could do in Portuguese, and so there again I had this other idea that well, maybe there’s a lot more going on with assessment beyond just sort of the careful construct representation in a test and the reliable testing of it. But there’s more there, there may be misinterpretations, there are uses of tests that may be leading people astray, there are all these things, and so I really became quite fascinated early on with that aspect of testing.

**Emma:** How does your work fit into the applied nature of applied linguistics?

**Dr. Norris:** My main interest now is language education and how things we do as applied linguists can help language education do a good job, increase its impact on society, raise the value of language education in the perceptions of the public, and those kinds of things. Testing and program evaluation I think are quite amenable to accomplishing those kinds of ends and so that’s why I’ve maintained my focus on that, so there’s this applied intersection between assessment and the public, assessment and value, assessment and improvement, and that’s definitely why I’m trying to continue focusing my efforts in that area. I think it’s one area where it can really make a difference if we make even minor changes in the quality of assessments that we’re creating or minor changes in how we’re using assessments well or not so well.

**Emma:** How do you think the new presidential administration will affect the field of evaluation and assessment?

**Dr. Norris:** That’s an interesting question. I’m teaching a seminar now called “Accreditation, Accountability, and Assessment,” and we deal a lot with these large scale issues, especially accountability testing. Obama himself has certainly said that he wants to change the ways in which large scale standardized tests are used and to, in very general terms, take away a lot of the punitive aspects of that testing and turn it into something that is, in his words, more useful and more informative for educational improvement. I think that’s a really good idea, and I hope that he is able and his administration are able to accomplish something along those lines, but I don’t know. I think things like [the] No Child Left Behind legislation have so much momentum behind them already, and all of these testing regimes are in place already, that it’s going to take a while to reverse what I think are clear damages that have been wrought. We could talk about the directions that those damages have gone, not the least of which is...
that fact that language education has suffered tremendously as a result of resources and time and energy being shifted into the teaching of other core academic subjects, and so I’d like to reverse that.

**Emma:** What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the field today?

**Dr. Norris:** It’s hard to say, there are so many challenges. The major challenges, it also depends on where you look, but I would say a major challenge in the U.S. anyway, and that’s where I do most of my work, a major challenge in the U.S. is the perception of the value of language learning and language study and pluriculturalism and plurilingualism on the part of the public and on the part of the people in power, generally speaking. So, reversing that should be a number one priority, and I think some of the relevant professional organizations are doing things along those lines—the Modern Language Association has come out with a statement of the values of studying foreign languages, ACTFL certainly tries to organize and do things along those lines—but it’s going to take a lot more ‘strategerizing’, to borrow a term from George Bush, to turn those value statements into actions. So, what the MLA doesn’t understand for example is that you can’t just say we’re valuable because… you then have to actually put in place a variety of campaigns, a variety of ways of changing your practice, such that the public’s perception changes about you and those kinds of efforts. I actually think assessment and program evaluation fit in very nicely as strategies for acting on the value of language education; there are ways to demonstrate, [and] assessment is a really good way to demonstrate what it is that you’re accomplishing in language education. Language educators, especially at the college level, have not necessarily paid attention to that possibility yet, so that’s another area where I think we could really gain some traction.

**Emma:** What advice would you give graduate students interested in assessment or program evaluation?

**Dr. Norris:** I think, well, sort of the basic advice would be get good training in these things, and then think outside of the box; don’t accept the public perceptions about or the received view about assessment and evaluation as something that is just like a metric, or as something that is just mandated and to which people tend to react. I think there is a lot more to those processes that can be quite educational or educative, and so pursue that side of evaluation and assessment, thinking about it as a way of doing different things than just measuring constructs. Instead, we are doing things like making changes in the quality of language education, doing things like transforming language learners’ lives—those kinds of changes are possible, too, if we design assessments and evaluations to make that happen. I think there are examples of that work that are emerging in the literature, and so I would encourage people to work in that direction to the extent possible.

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