

Book Review

Cliff, A. 2024. *Thirty Years of Literacies Testing at the University of Cape Town: A Critical Reflection on the Work and its Impact*. London: Springer.

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In this deeply considered and carefully argued book, Cliff reviews three decades of work into academic literacies testing begun at UCT. His account gives the wider academic community insight into how the testing project evolved at the intersection of local commitments in South Africa to redress and ensuring epistemological access to higher education (HE), and international trends in sociocultural literacy theory and student support. The book's central argument is that academic literacy must be approached critically as a set of historically contingent patterns of knowledge construction, language use, and reading and writing. The heart of the book therefore lies in its detailed account of how *constructs* or models of academic literacy were developed and tests designed, using dynamic testing theory, to measure students' *potential* for coping with academic literacy, rather than measuring knowledge and literacy they bring from school, given the deeply fractured and inequitable state of South African schooling. The book asks enduring questions about what it means to identify potential and work responsively with diverse student cohorts in changing times.

Cliff (2024: 55) frames his reflection as a long view of academic literacies testing in South Africa, dividing the period into four "decades" according to the 'relationship between context and purpose' of the testing. During the first decade, from the late 1990s to around 2005, research by the Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) at UCT focused on finding alternate means of assessing the readiness of students, from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, to cope with the demands of higher education study in English and placement on augmented programmes. During this "first phase" of the testing project, the Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP) was notable for its cognitive constructs, offering a descriptive framework for academic literacy. These constructs included vocabulary, metaphorical expression, extrapolation, application and inference, the relationships between parts of texts, and the ability to distinguish essential from non-essential information. Constructs were also developed for qualitative literacy, reasoning, and mathematical comprehension. Socially situated validity of the constructs and their operationalisation in the tests was ensured through ongoing, inclusive engagement with subject matter experts across South African HE. Informed by classical test theory, results were norm-referenced, comparing students to others in a cohort from a similar educational background, with the aims of enabling access to a wider range of applicants, informing teaching and learning decisions, and shaping HE as a sector in ways that were responsive to the diversity of its student and staff body post-1994.



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The second and third decades of the project formed what Cliff calls the “second phase.” Grounded in item response theory and Rasch analysis, work in the second decade (from 2005 to 2015 or so) concentrated on benchmarking and programme placement. Central to this phase was the National Benchmark Tests Project (NBTP) which evaluated entry-level academic literacy, quantitative literacy, and mathematical proficiency against school-leaving exit outcomes. Cliff marks this phase as a transition toward a criterion-referenced testing approach that evaluated performance across the various domains and sub-domains within the constructs and established benchmark levels – proficient, intermediate, and basic. Particularly in the third decade (since around 2005), attention turned to exploring the diagnostic potential of the testing. Cliff emphasises that a central aim guiding the test’s iterative development and research into assessment data was to design questions that revealed the greatest variability among test takers; in this way, rather than ranking test takers against a pre-established set of desired skills, the testing cycle contributes to an ever more nuanced mapping of the varied literacies the diverse test-takers bring with them, and so provide guidance on how teaching at universities can support their learning.

Cliff (2024: 147) ends by proposing that we are at the beginning of a fourth decade of ‘systems building’ where insights from the 30 years of assessment data and scholarship must be turned back onto the university and its systems, combining staff and curriculum development to support students’ learning more effectively.

The monograph provides a valuable historical overview of the central debates around academic literacy in South Africa and how they manifested in the different models of support and curriculum transformation implemented across various institutions. Cliff creates a critically reflective space in which to examine the implications of testing decisions, consistently emphasizing the need to open debate about the purposes of testing and re-imagine the knowledge structures and literacy forms of academic disciplines. He emphasises important shifts in praxis that have already taken place, particularly that from earlier focus on academic *support* programmes, which constructed problems with access as a function of students’ lack of essential literacies, to a more critical academic *development* approach, based on testing data, that views aspects of curriculum provision as challenging for *all* students and so requiring changes to academics’ pedagogy within integrated disciplinary teaching. This trajectory, Cliff emphasises, should be actively pursued into the fourth decade of testing work; it also has significant potential for contributing to international work on student support as HE cohorts become more diverse all over the world.

The book traces how academics from across the HE sector, and diverse disciplinary backgrounds have been actively involved in all aspects of the two phases of testing. What began as UCT’s work on alternative testing for academic potential drew in other institutions, with Wits, for example, introducing the biographical questionnaire in the early 1990s to provide students who had not qualified for automatic admission with a second opportunity to be considered for entry (Enslin, et al., 2006).

In times of disruption, such as the current climate of ubiquitous Generative AI, testing interventions often revert to a technical, narrow focus on measurement in the hope of accurately predicting students' "risk" of failure. Cliff's wide-ranging discussion cautions against such oversimplification. The significance of the testing project, he argues, lies in its development of a precise, theoretically grounded language of description to explore the implications of the diagnostic information for course design and pedagogy. The book challenges higher education practitioners to reflect critically on the tensions surrounding literacies testing and to apply the testing constructs to address ongoing challenges, to find structural and systemic solutions to current disruptions, and reclaim testing as a site of creative inquiry and scholarship.

Reviewed by

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References

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