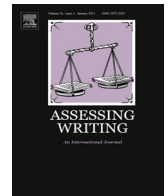




Assessing Writing



Book review

Assessing the Teaching of Writing: Twenty-First Century Trends and Technologies, A.E. Dayton (Ed.). Utah State University Press, Logan, UT (2015). 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-87421-954-8

In a 2012 *Assessing Writing* article, [Wardle and Roozen](#) present an ecological model of writing assessment able to “provide students, teachers, departments, and institutions with fuller, richer accounts of the breadth of students’ literate experiences and how those experiences impact their abilities to accomplish academic tasks throughout the undergraduate years and beyond” (p. 106). This new collection edited by Amy E. Dayton joins this quest for more robust assessment of writing, at a time when university writing programs are experiencing significant pressure to generate and interpret evidence-based information about their contributions to student learning. In our enthusiasm to measure student learning and program performance, Dayton and her fellow contributors argue, we have given unequal attention to the assessment of the teaching of writing. This book seeks to fill this void by both exploring emerging assessment technologies (such as multi-institution engagement surveys) and also re-examining familiar methods of assessing teaching (such as student evaluations of instruction and teaching portfolios) that may already be ingrained within our programs and institutions.

As many of the contributors point out (and as many faculty would likely readily agree) widespread practices for assessing the teaching of writing can far too often feel perfunctory and even punitive. This tension arises from the fact that assessing the work of teachers is a labor issue involving great amounts of trust in students, colleagues, and systems that assess an individual’s work. The authors in this collection do not shy away from the ethical, political, and practical dimensions of assessing the teaching of writing. Contributors also address the practical side of evaluating teaching, acknowledging the very real constraints of time and funding.

Extending the work completed in [Hult \(1994\)](#), *Assessing the Teaching of Writing* is comprised of two sections. The first section explores theoretical frameworks for evaluating teaching while the second investigates the role of new technologies in such assessment efforts with emphasis on the function and appeal of certain technologies to particular external audiences (e.g., administrators, accrediting agencies). The twelve chapters in this volume explore answers to two essential questions: (1) what counts as good assessment data to evaluate the teaching of writing and (2) how can that data be interpreted in meaningful ways?

Three general themes unite the answers posited in Dayton’s collection. First and foremost, the collection is explicit in its emphasis on formative assessment. This distinction from summative assessment is not merely a conceptual binary, but an important theoretical pivot-point that is deserving of the multiple iterations it receives throughout the roughly 200-page collection. By arguing that formative assessments should always be intended to provoke pedagogical change rather than make personnel decisions, contributors are free to delve into the connections between instruction and assessment without being yoked to overly-technical explanations of validity and reliability that might alienate their key audiences: teachers and writing program administrators. This emphasis reminds the reader that because teaching is a multifaceted activity, sound assessment of teaching requires multiple measures, even if some of them are new to our classrooms. If we want to tell “the whole story”—a phrase that appears in one form or another in several chapters—then we must deploy multiple methods to collect evidence of factors contributing to student learning. Several contributors address the formative–summative distinction directly and add needed nuance to the discussion of how the benefits of formative assessment for students, teachers, and programs outweigh the additional investment of time, energy, and other resources needed to complete such assessments. In Chapter 7, for instance, Anson theorizes about teachers’ stance toward these two general forms of assessment. He explains how the assessment of teaching writing can cause teachers to recoil because the work done in the classroom often feels more autonomous and private than research and service work. In light of this tendency toward defensiveness, Anson advocates sensible dialog and multiple measures to help teachers and administrators work through any resistance and approach assessment as a collaborative professional development effort.

Relatedly, a second theme uniting the chapters is the argument that the design of assessment processes must include methods of documenting teaching and learning as well as methods of interpretation. Complementing other recent writing assessment texts that are design-centered (e.g., [White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015](#)), Dayton’s collection addresses the dichotomy

between empiricism and interpretation, but highlights the necessity of mindful interpretation of assessment data by asking *what do we do with assessment data after it is collected?* Individual contributors answer this question by articulating frameworks for reading digital teaching portfolios, understanding student evaluations, or making use of midterm in-class focus groups, to name but a few of the methods discussed in this collection.

The third theme is a rhetorical undercurrent that informs many of the chapters. Rhetorical concerns—audience, purpose, context, exigence—appear in most of the chapters either explicitly or implicitly. For example, while Dayton's collection underscores the importance of site-specific assessment, it also balances the tendency to celebrate local control with an understanding that "big data" and aggregable data are often more appealing to certain audiences, and thus, should be something that WPAs familiarize themselves with. In short, as Minter and Goodburn (Chapter 12) argue, if writing instructors and writing program administrators are going to continue to step up to be responsible stakeholders (a phrase that echoes Adler-Kassner and Harrington's recasting accountability as responsibility), they must familiarize themselves with these new technologies and methods of assessment.

Practical concerns such as time and money are always lurking around the edges of the methods discussed in this collection. The authors collectively argue that these concerns certainly warrant our attention, but warn against allowing pragmatic accommodations for these concerns to overshadow the theoretical principles guiding our assessment design choices.

Readers of *Assessing the Teaching of Writing* will find some of the theories and methods quite familiar while others may be new. However, and perhaps more interestingly, there are several moments when a contributing author discusses a familiar method in a novel way. For example, in Chapter 3, "Making Sense (and Making Use) of Student Evaluations," Dayton discusses the ubiquitous use of student evaluations of instruction, an assessment method that is often very high stakes for instructors for promotion, tenure, and retention. Such evaluations are often part of an institutional process that teachers and program administrators have little or no control over. Dayton addresses this concern in her discussion of the validity of student evaluations by asking "in what ways are they valid?" (p. 33). She offers a new interpretive framework for rendering evaluations meaningful that includes discussion of the ethics of judging teachers based on institutionally mandated and controlled summative student evaluations.

At a time when teacher judgment is being questioned—and reclaimed (Gallagher, 2007)—it can be natural for teachers to instinctively assume a defensive stance against assessment, especially assessment of the intimate art of teaching. But I agree with the authors of this collection—it is prudent to reexamine our assessment practices as they apply to writing pedagogy. Dayton's collection provides a solid foundation for administrators and scholars interested in the assessment of teaching and teachers of writing. As an experienced teacher of writing and future writing program administrator, I found this practical guide to be useful in its articulation of theoretical approaches, description of unique methods that often accompany emergent technologies, and reintroduction to tried-and-true methods in ways that better align them with best practices in writing studies. As Ed White famously argued, we must assess ourselves or assessment will be done unto us. Toward this goal, Dayton's collection provides fresh insight into the complex work of assessing teaching and learning through reflective but nonetheless rigorous inquiry.

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