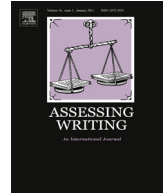




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Assessing Writing



Book review

Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter, E. Schendel, W.J. Macauley Jr. Utah State University Press, Logan UT (2012) 220, ISBN: 978-0-87421-816-9

Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter by Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, Jr. should be on the reading list for all writing center directors. The title foreshadows the underlying theme of the book but does not explain to whom and why assessments matter. For the answer, one must read the book; then one finds out that the intended audience is readers of the assessment report, the stakeholders, who are primarily university administration, and writing center employees. Each author has contributed chapters to the book. Macauley authors the first four chapters of the book while co-author Schendel pens the last two. There is a chapter between these two sections called Interchapter – Of Numbers and Stories, written by guest author Neal Lerner, addressing the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

An introductory chapter by both authors provides background regarding the need for re-evaluating writing center research. This chapter begins with some of the issues currently debated by writing center scholars and ends with an overview of the topics in the book. Chapter one continues to raise questions about the amount and type of research that exists regarding writing center assessment. A literature review by the authors identified reflections, speculation, and surveys as preferred methods of assessing writing centers. A number of references indicated that scholars tended to prefer qualitative over quantitative methods, particularly researchers in composition studies. The authors question the usefulness of previous research, which has focused largely on methods (local) rather than context or connections (global), in improving the work of writing centers. As a result, the concept of the book is to serve as a guide for writing center directors (WCDs) who are looking to begin assessing their centers. The text is not intended to be a list of methods but rather a floor plan or map for developing assessment objectives within writing center scholarship and connecting the objectives to the larger context the educational institution in which the writing center serves.

Chapter two, Getting from Values to Assessable Outcomes, frames the discussion of writing center scholarship and the relevance of assessing writing centers. Macauley maintains that assessment of writing centers in writing center scholarship is not new. Such a conversation has been continuing in published texts as well as listservs. It is here one finds a gap between the need for assessment and which assessment methods are used as well as research that studies writing centers rather than research that assesses them. Macauley refers to the idea by Adler-Kassner & O'Neill in their book *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning* that assessment has a purpose and proposes that WCDs should be the ones leading writing center assessment. This theme is maintained throughout the book illustrating that assessment results can impact various facets of the center including staff development in addition to the work of the program itself.

Chapters three and four outline the plan for developing assessable outcomes and assessment measures. These chapters take their cue from the book's title. Macauley recommends starting the process by working with administrators, institutional statements, and documents in order to connect the assessment in the center with the mission and vision statement of the institution. Macauley recommends a

Careful examination of institutional documents for assessment ideas to identify common values and objectives. These commonalities can then be prioritized. By working with institutional statements in the development process, the WCD can not only adapt to the language of the statements but also develop assessments that are in line with the values and identify priorities of the institution promoting collegiality and collaboration, thereby positioning the writing center as essential during annual budget reviews in an attempt to acquire future monetary resources. Macauley does warn, however, against spending too much time looking for connections in institution documents.

After a theoretical discussion of research methods in the chapter called Interchapter, we turn to two more practical chapters (five and six) written by Ellen Schendel. Two themes emerge in chapter five, *Integrating Assessment into Your Center's Other Work*, relating to both an internal and external context. First, Schendel presents the reality that writing centers and their directors, in particular, are too busy to supplement the center's work with assessment tasks. Therefore, assessment can only "really work" when integrated into the other work of the center. Second, Schendel returns to the idea that assessment can be used to better understand teaching and learning. To do this, assessment objectives should be based on fundamental principles within the field of writing center scholarship – "build on the activities & systems already in place" (p. 117). The chapter is then further divided into two parts. The first introduces strategies for gathering data; the second discusses methods for collecting assessment data, albeit without sufficiently addressing data analysis.

Chapter six emphasizes the final product in the process, the assessment report. Schendel states bluntly that she is not sure that reports are actually read. If, indeed, they are read, the reports should be well written considering that writing tutors and writing center employees wrote them. Consequently, such reports should be meaningful and useful, written in lay terms for a broad audience who might not be familiar with technical nomenclature of assessment methods and procedures. An integral part of the success of a writing center is for assessment reports to be persuasive and speak to the audience by "...connecting [the] center's assessment outcomes to the institution's mission statement" (p. 139). Subsequently, the chapter discusses strategies for writing successful assessment reports, connecting to the audience, telling a persuasive story, and using the reports to identify new directions for research.

The book concludes with two final sections. The first section called Afterword written by Huot and Caswell is a reflection on the content of the book. This section addresses the issue of feedback from tutors suggesting that tutors focus on global issues first even if a student comes to the center asking for help with grammar, a local issue. This is one of the few times language is addressed in the book. Approaches to writing and a discussion of tutor feedback are limited in this book. The global/local example was provided to make a connection with the approach to assessment. Larger global issues should be dealt with first before returning to smaller local issues. The authors of this chapter emphasize this point with the example that "just repairing grammar is not understanding writing; neither is developing rubrics understanding assessment" (p. 164). The second section, titled Coda, which was written by the book's authors, Schendel & Macauley, reiterates the main themes of the book, i.e., what to assess is just as important as how to assess, working with the right people, and supporting and justifying the assessment decisions at the writing center.

Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter is a book written in lay-terms intended for a targeted audience – writing center directors and writing center staff. The book is, after all, about assessments that matter and rightly promotes linking writing center assessments to values and priorities of the institution in which the writing center operates and receives its funding. Assessment is, fundamentally, a judgment of value. The question that needs to be answered by each writing center is *valuable to whom*, which the authors sought to answer throughout the book by developing assessment objectives based on big picture goals related to institutional values and priorities. The strength of the book lies in its fundamental themes. The need to link assessment with the larger institutional picture makes the writing center more visible, which could be financially beneficial. Not only can a center align its assessment objectives with the vision of the institution, but also it can position itself as supporting the mission of the institution.

Not all of the authors' intentions have been successful, however. Schendel and Macauley wrote the book for a select audience in an easy to read format with the purpose of being an introduction for WCDs who are not familiar with assessment. Similarly, in the afterword, Huot and Caswell hold the same opinion as the book's authors that attending to technical assessment concepts such as validation

and reliability brings about feelings of inadequacy and naiveté among English professionals. These key “technical” concepts in evaluation and assessment, such as of reliability (i.e., consistency of measurement), are essential to all research and should not be overlooked or overtly avoided just because the concept is considered too complicated as the authors suggest. Furthermore, although Schendel provides examples of how goals inform objectives in the assessment process as in chapter 6, the book proudly avoids publishing a decontextualized list of assessment methods. Considering some readers’ newness to assessment, it might have been beneficial to include references to additional resources that address assessment methods (e.g., quantitative data analysis, how data is interpreted, both intended and unintended consequences other than lack of funding) that are not covered in the text. While the book may serve as an introduction to assessment for some, it also hinders WCDs from making the connection with evaluation and validation methods already used and developed in related fields such as educational measurement and language testing. Writing is, of course, language use.

Those shortcomings aside, the book is highly recommended for writing center directors and others involved in the operations of a writing center whether they are familiar with assessment or not. Similar to process writing, this book presents assessment as a process (global perspective), which it is. However, as a contribution to improving assessment literacy, the book should have included references to other texts that adequately cover assessment methods and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data (local perspective) so that new readers might get a more complete picture.

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Available online 4 December 2013