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New Books

Approaches to Assessing Student Writing and Writing Programs in the Age of Accountability

Very like a whale: The assessment of writing programs
Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham (2015)
ISBN-13: 978-0-87421-985-2. Pp. 202.

Assessing and improving student writing in college
Barbara E. Walvoord (2014)
ISBN-13: 978-1-118-55736-5. Pp. xiii + 119.

Reviewed by Dan Melzer

Very like a whale and *Assessing and improving student writing in college* represent much collective wisdom about writing in general and writing assessment in particular. Barbara Walvoord has been invaluable to writing program administrators (WPAs), both as a founding member of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement and as an author of prior useful resource books on writing assessment such as *Assessment clear and simple* (2010), In their many books and articles, Ed White, Norbert Elliot, and Irv Peckham have mapped out the history of writing assessment as a field and contributed to major innovations in the field, crossing borders between educational measurement and writing studies. The recent books from these distinguished scholars and practitioners are timely and needed. As White, Elliot, and Peckham contend in *Very like a whale*, we are in a new era of writing assessment, the Age of Accountability. With higher education focusing more and more on assessment and accountability and

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student writing often used as primary assessment evidence, taken together these new books will be a valued resource for WPAs and faculty across disciplines.

Very like a whale explores writing program assessment in all of its complexity, offering new vocabulary and a new model (Design for Assessment) to help empower WPAs. As the authors say in the introduction, WPAs must provide evidence that the writing program is serving 'students, instructors, administrators, alumni, accreditors, and policymakers' (p. 3). These responsibilities require such considerations as planning for accountability in the initial assessment design, communicating results of assessment to a range of stakeholders, being aware of the consequences of assessment, and ensuring that program assessment connects to classroom instruction. The authors maintain that writing assessment is a unique genre, and one that requires quantitative and qualitative approaches. To this end, they encourage doctoral programs in Rhetoric and Composition to require a course in empirical research methods.

The first chapter of *Very like a whale* traces trends in writing program assessment through the context of an historical discussion of writing program assessment and the new era of accountability. In this brief history White, Elliot, and Peckham emphasize that writing as a construct has been too simply defined in writing program assessment, although they point out that recent developments such as the Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement and NCTE's Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing ask us to consider writing in more complex and useful ways. The authors argue that a national consensus for best practices in writing program assessment is built around the Outcomes Statement and ePortfolio assessment, a development they welcome. They contend that assessment should involve an entire campus writing program, and that ideally a campus writing program would include a defined construct model of writing, pre-enrollment assessment and placement, required first-year writing courses, a writing center, WAC faculty development, writing intensive courses, graduation writing requirements, WPAs with degrees in rhetoric and composition, a plan for sustainable financial support, and an overall strategic plan and research agenda. Chapter 1 stresses the importance of gathering validity evidence based on outcomes. Validity is defined as 'an integrated evaluative judgment derived from evidence that a measure in fact assesses what it purports to assess and that its scores are used sensitively and appropriately' (p. 21). The act of validation is complex, and the authors define writing program assessment as a genre in and of itself, with situated action that involves a program mission, resources, retention, graduation, student support services, accreditation, and quality improvement. The complexity of writing program assessment is captured

in the apt metaphor of ecology; this metaphor and its focus on complexity informs the entire book.

Chapter 2 offers lessons from case studies of the authors' experiences in three curricular areas: first-year writing placement, WAC and WID, and graduate studies. Important lessons drawn from these case studies include emphasizing teaching and learning in designing writing program assessment, focusing on the consequences of assessment, drawing on current scholarship and research, documenting everything, and involving and communicating results with a variety of stakeholders. The concrete examples in this chapter help prepare the reader for the more conceptual focus of Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3, White, Elliot, and Peckham introduce key concepts to help align the classroom and the program as a whole. These concepts involve mapping and accurately representing the writing construct, drawing on both educational measurement and writing studies scholarship, and considering the consequences of assessment as part of the validation process. The authors reinforce the value of ePortfolio assessment, and especially Phase 2 scoring, which focuses on the self-reflexive component of the portfolio. In Chapter 4 the authors define and illustrate educational measurement concepts such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

The final chapter of *Very like a whale* summarizes and further explains the approach that White, Elliot, and Peckham have been building toward in each chapter: what they refer to as the Design for Assessment (DFA) model. The DFA model includes a writing program construct model and samples (ideally from ePortfolios); a process of research, theory, documentation, and accountability; communication with all stakeholders; and a plan for sustainability. The DFA model that the authors have constructed is a reflection of the ecology metaphor underpinning the book. It builds on important scholarship in writing assessment (Broad, 2003; Haswell, 2001; Huot, 2002; Inoue and Poe, 2012) and accounts for the complexity and sophistication of writing assessment theory and practice.

Very like a whale makes a valuable scholarly and practical contribution to an understudied area of the field of writing assessment: the assessment of writing programs. The book's focus on the Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement and ePortfolios will help further solidify emerging best practices in writing program assessment. The authors' sophisticated DFA model captures the complexity of writing program assessment, while at the same time providing examples, questions, frameworks, and matrixes throughout to make complicated concepts concrete. White, Elliot, and Peckham acknowledge that WPAs who do not have training in statistics may find the chapter on educational measurement (Chapter 4) daunting, and they recommend getting help from a math-oriented colleague or a

standard research methods book (they recommend a few). It might have been helpful for the authors to slow down a bit in this chapter and offer more explanation of jargon terms and concepts from statistics, especially considering the authors' valuable argument for more training in empirical research methods in Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D. programs. *Very like a whale* would be an appropriate book to assign in a graduate course on writing assessment or writing program administration.

Barbara Walvoord's approach to assessment in *Assessing and improving student writing in college* would be met with approval by the authors of *Very like a whale*. Walvoord's book connects with much of the advice for assessment found in *Very like a whale*: defining the writing construct, drawing on the scholarly research on assessment and on national best practices, moving beyond timed writing tests, and closing the assessment loop. Rather than just jumping right in to writing assessment approaches, Walvoord wisely begins the book by defining key terms and providing a rationale for writing assessment at any level, from the classroom to the department to the institution. In Chapter 1 Walvoord explores the question, 'What is good writing?' in the context of national discussions such as AAC&U's VALUE rubrics and the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement. Walvoord offers an argument for the value of teaching writing and an explanation of how students learn to write, drawing on research from the field of Writing Across the Curriculum. The increasing linguistic pluralism of college student populations makes a consideration of multilingual students a must in writing assessment at any level, and Walvoord devotes a section of Chapter 1 to Speakers of Other Languages. Walvoord then moves to a discussion of assessment in general, and she contrasts psychometric, positivist assessment with the approach favored by most writing assessment specialists – the social constructivist method. Walvoord provides advice for both closing the assessment loop and reporting to accreditors. This chapter, as with all the chapters, offers readers a wealth of resources, including resources for creating rubrics, for assessing the writing of speakers of other languages, and for general assessment scholarship.

Following this introductory chapter, Walvoord gives suggestions to those conducting writing assessment at the institutional level and for general education in Chapter 2. She advises us to start by examining successful writing assessment programs, and she provides a list of a variety of model programs. She encourages us to think about 'value added' assessment, which focuses on two basic questions: (1) Do our students improve as writers?; and (2) Is the improvement due to our action? Walvoord gives a variety of pathways for conducting value added assessment, ranging from assessing samples of students' writing institution-wide with a rubric, to faculty

assessing student writing in groups or individually, to using standardized tests. In this chapter and throughout the book Walvoord warns us that standardized tests are limited assessments, and she encourages us to either consider other alternatives or triangulate data by examining other indicators and not just test scores. Walvoord ends the chapter by recommending a variety of Writing Across the Curriculum structures for institutions to provide support for closing the assessment loop.

In Chapter 3 Walvoord discusses writing assessment for departments and programs. Walvoord recommends a process that includes gathering information about student writing, compiling information about the teaching of writing in the department, creating goals, and then taking action. This is the shortest chapter in the book, and from my own experiences working with departments across disciplines on writing assessment I would have appreciated a more extended discussion about what to do when faculty resist writing assessment, but I did find the concrete examples of departments implementing different kinds of writing assessment helpful.

The final chapter moves to the micro level of classroom assessment – a critical inclusion since so many faculty associate writing assessment with something that has been legislated from above, rather than something they do all the time in their own courses. Chapter 4 contains solid advice about assessing the issues students have with writing in courses and making changes to pedagogy to better support student writers. A good deal of the chapter focuses on handling the paper load and responding more effectively, which is always a topic of primary concern with faculty across the curriculum.

As a WAC coordinator, I can see using *Assessing and improving student writing in college* as a valuable resource for faculty across disciplines in a variety of contexts, whether I am helping create an institution-wide writing assessment for an accreditation visit, working with a department on helping them design a manageable and useful writing assessment activity, or working one-on-one with a teacher who is struggling to integrate more writing while also handling the paper load. The book is written in a tone and style that will appeal to faculty across disciplines, with a minimum amount of jargon and a maximum amount of resources and practical advice based on concrete examples. Some might find fault with this book for its brevity (it covers the breadth of writing assessment in college in 86 pages), but the book is not meant to be an exhaustive overview of writing assessment for insiders. Rather, its concision can make busy faculty from across disciplines, who do not always place writing assessment at the top of their list of things to do, more receptive to the ideas in the book and more likely to find the time to read it. For a more in-depth exploration of many

of the topics discussed in the book, faculty can always turn to Walvoord's *Assessment clear and simple.*

Both *Assessing and improving student writing in college* and *Very like a whale* will become valuable resources for my own work as a WPA. I will keep Walvoord's book on my shelf, ready to bring to university assessment meetings or consultations with departments or individual faculty on writing assessment. And I will delve back in to *Very like a whale* when I work with my colleagues in the design of assessment not just for first-year writing but for the entire writing program. Both of these books are welcome additions to the field of writing assessment in our 'age of accountability'.

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