in the composition classroom. *Democracies to Come* kicks off a series from Lexington Press on Cultural Studies, Pedagogy, and Activism; therefore readers can anticipate an ongoing conversation of the topics addressed in this book.

_Tucson, AZ_


Reviewed by Janet S. Zepernick, Pittsburg State University

*Organic Writing Assessment: Dynamic Criteria Mapping in Action* continues the work begun by Bob Broad in an earlier volume, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing*, where Broad introduces dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) as both a philosophy of and approach to writing assessment. The current volume opens with an introduction in which Broad summarizes the philosophy of DCM (but not the methodology; see *What We Really Value* for a procedural explanation). Each of the five subsequent chapters describes a large-scale assessment project undertaken using DCM: Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem’s assessment of the first-year writing program at Eastern Michigan University; Barry Alford’s development of shared learning outcomes for all of Mid Michigan Community College’s course offerings; Jane Detweiler and Maureen McBride’s evaluation of writing and critical thinking in the core writing course at University of Nevada, Reno; Susanmarie Harrington and Scott Weeden’s work to develop new program goals in the required writing program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; and Eric Stalions’s validation test of the first-year writing placement process at Bowling Green State University.

Philosophically, DCM privileges local control in every aspect of the assessment process, celebrates the complexity and diversity of features that might represent “good writing” in any given context, and honors the rhetorical process of negotiating local writing values. DCM’s imperative that process should emerge from context requires that each institution develop a unique, local methodology, and the five projects represented in this collection do follow very different paths. Beneath the superficial differences, however, they share a recognizably similar approach: Readers
(typically program faculty) are asked to evaluate sample texts and then to articulate the textual features that most influenced their ratings of individual texts. Participants then negotiate the textual features associated with different ratings into a system of assessment criteria that can be mapped into a visual-spatial representation of the program’s writing values and, at least in theory, an assessment tool. The result is an entirely descriptive and context-sensitive measure of student success that effectively answers the question, “What do we value?”

With the exception of Stalions, whose interest in DCM seems to be in its descriptive power, the authors all report having selected DCM because they believed that its privileging of local control and its ability to derive assessment criteria from local practices would produce greater faculty support for the end result than would be possible using external assessment. And, indeed, all four projects seem to have produced a consistently high level of faculty buy-in. However, these projects also reveal one of DCM’s most significant weaknesses. By distilling assessment criteria entirely from the values held by program faculty, the philosophy of DCM dictates an inward-looking culture that offers little scope for addressing questions about the appropriateness of local values. In some programs (presumably including all of those represented here), DCM’s intentional and principled rejection of the outward-looking question “What should we value in student writing?” will be mitigated by participants whose own orientation toward a larger disciplinary affiliation will bring external values to bear on in-house evaluation. However, one of the realities of large-scale writing programs (including the four described in this collection) is that the majority of composition instruction is by adjunct and graduate student faculty whose grounding in composition pedagogy is necessarily limited. In a program of that kind, deriving assessment criteria entirely from local values might produce results of questionable value for shaping program goals. Regardless of the experience of program participants, however, the extent to which Broad and his co-authors treat privileging the local as an orthodoxy should give readers pause. The isolation of programs within the silos of local values seems likely to work at least as quickly toward the disintegration of higher education as anything that assessment by external agencies could do. The fact that the authors do not mention the need for program assessment to address extra-local as well as local contexts does not, of course, mean that they are not sensitive to it; but readers venturing into assessment for the first time should seek additional advice on the matter of local versus extra-local concerns in the assessment process.

In What We Really Value, Broad’s rejection of prescriptive, external values—and the kind of assessment instruments in which external values can be enacted—results in a wholesale rejection of the idea of the rubric as a tool for assessing writing. Broad’s use of the term rubric as a shorthand
for all the ways that writing assessment can fail to address local realities, elide complexity, and allow powerful interests to generate self-serving data in the name of educational excellence is the most serious shortcoming of his earlier work. Broad himself seems to have recognized and taken some steps toward rectifying that problem (nothing as emphatic as a retraction, but an attempt at rapprochement) in his introduction to the current volume. Unfortunately his original error is reproduced in subsequent chapters as contributors sedulously avoid the “R” word without, in fact, being able to avoid producing structures that look remarkably like rubrics. Since a rubric is, after all, merely a graphical representation of a program’s writing values used for the purpose of enabling systematic assessment of student writing, a rubric seems to be the almost inevitable outcome of generating and then organizing criteria for evaluating writing. Although Broad hints at the strong conceptual similarities between his “criteria map” and everyone else’s “rubric,” this is a point that may cause serious confusion for readers not well versed in the literature of assessment, and it unfortunately (and, I think, unnecessarily) obscures the genuine usefulness of dynamic criteria mapping.

Understood as a process of eliciting values for student writing inductively through dialogue driven by collective evaluation of writing samples, DCM creates significant opportunities for faculty participants to engage in meaningful professional development related to teaching writing. Faculty who regularly engage in substantive conversations about what they value in student writing and why (such as the conversations that emerged during all five of these projects), in so doing clarify and reinforce both their own expectations for student writing and their understanding of what textual features produce the effects they value. In this way, DCM’s home-grown assessment creates opportunities for faculty to close the feedback loop by taking their experience of engaging in assessment back into the classroom. This is certainly one of DCM’s greatest strengths.

The fifth project included in this volume, Stalions’s analysis of the criteria used by graduate student raters in Bowling Green State University’s placement process, illustrates a different application of dynamic criteria mapping: its use in determining the extent to which the values enacted by evaluators are consistent with the values stated in program guidelines. In his analysis of placement-related statements made by four pairs of graduate student raters, Stalions found that of the categories of statements made most often, nearly all were drawn from stated program criteria. As Stalions describes it, staffing for the assessment program he studied depended heavily on graduate students, a transient workforce with very limited opportunity to develop institutional memory. Given this context, the high level of consistency Stalions found between stated program criteria and the criteria actually employed by raters suggests a notably high
level of success in communicating program criteria to new team members. However, Stalions’s mapping of categories of placement-related statements reveals interesting differences in raters’ application of and privileging of program criteria compared to contextual information about the courses. Where some pairs referred almost exclusively to textual elements, others included references to the courses into which students were to be placed and to evidence in the essays of students’ attitudes toward or preparation for learning. This suggests interesting avenues for further research on the effects of rater’s outside experiences in causing them to privilege some criteria over others in making placement decisions. And although Stalions’s demonstration is more proof-of-concept than a new contribution to the literature on assessment, it does illustrate what seems to be a fruitful opportunity for similar studies in other programs.

Organic Writing Assessment will be of greatest interest to three kinds of readers: graduate students seeking research projects in composition; program directors seeking the answer to the question Stalions asks: “do we really value what we say we really value?” (122); and assessment coordinators seeking to begin a new or substantially remodeled assessment program with significant faculty buy-in. Readers should be aware that the authors make relatively limited reference to the literature on assessment in general and do occasionally seem to argue for best practices on a philosophical rather than evidential basis.

Works Cited


Reviewed by Ronda L. Wery, Texas Tech University

The first collection of its kind, Going Wireless offers rhetoric and composition teachers, scholars, and administrators a continuum of practical and theoretical perspectives on wireless and mobile technology use in computer and composition teaching and research. Going Wireless certainly is as advertised in the introduction. The book is, in fact, “a far-reaching, multivocal dialogue” that “takes on difficult issues of integration, use, and development” and is “neither celebratory nor reactionary” (10) regarding these technologies and their effects on instructors, students,