

ASSESSING
Twenty-First Century
THE TEACHING
Trends and Technologies
OF WRITING

edited by
AMY E. DAYTON



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OF WRITING**

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Edward M. White vii

Acknowledgments xi

SECTION I: FRAMEWORKS AND METHODS FOR ASSESSING TEACHING

- 1 Assessing Teaching: A Changing Landscape
Amy E. Dayton 3
 - 2 Assessing the Teaching of Writing: A Scholarly Approach
Meredith DeCosta and Duane Roen 13
 - 3 Making Sense (and Making Use) of Student Evaluations
Amy E. Dayton 31
 - 4 Watching Other People Teach: The Challenge of Classroom Observations
Brian Jackson 45
 - 5 Small Group Instructional Diagnosis: Formative, Mid-Term Evaluations of Composition Courses and Instructors
Gerald Nelms 61
 - 6 Regarding the "E" in E-portfolios for Teacher Assessment
Kara Mae Brown, Kim Freeman, and Chris W. Gallagher 80
- ## **SECTION II: NEW CHALLENGES, NEW CONTEXTS FOR ASSESSING TEACHING**
- 7 Technology and Transparency: Sharing and Reflecting on the Evaluation of Teaching
Chris M. Anson 99
 - 8 Telling the Whole Story: Exploring Writing Center(ed) Assessment
Nichole Bennett 118
 - 9 Administrative Priorities and the Case for Multiple Methods
Cindy Moore 133

- 10 Teacher Evaluation in the Age of Web 2.0: What Every College Instructor Should Know and Every WPA Should Consider
Amy C. Kimme Hea 152
- 11 Using National Survey of Student Engagement Data and Methods to Assess Teaching in First-Year Composition and Writing across the Curriculum
Charles Paine, Chris M. Anson, Robert M. Gonyea, and Paul Anderson 171
- 12 Documenting Teaching in the Age of Big Data
Deborah Minter and Amy Goodburn 187
- About the Authors* 201
Index 204

FOREWORD

Edward M. White

There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

—H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Second Series* (1920, 158)

This important book comes twenty years after the first book on its subject, Christine Hult's (1994) edited collection, *Evaluating Teachers of Writing*. During this period, evaluating the performance of teachers has been a hot button topic for educational reformers of every stripe and background—with the notable absence of writing teachers. The well-known problem, though not a consistently or convincingly documented one, is that American students at all levels are not learning what they should be learning; the well-known solution, to follow Mencken's aphorism at the head of this page, is to evaluate teachers in simple-minded ways, place the blame on them and their unions, and replace bad teachers (particularly tenured teachers) with good ones (without tenure). Just where these better teachers are to come from, eager to take notably low-paying jobs without the protections of unions or tenure, has never been made clear. While most of the reformers' attention has been on public schools, which they would like to replace with charter or religious schools, university teaching has suffered from the same concerted attack. Writing teachers at universities have been on the front lines of this struggle for several reasons: most writing teachers in American universities are teaching assistants, relatively inexperienced and powerless graduate students, and the very nature of writing instruction is not suited to pleasing all students, who, in turn, are not likely to rate the teacher highly who asks them to revise work they feel is plenty good enough in their first draft.

Working within these unpromising conditions, university writing researchers tend to focus on the ways all teachers can improve student performance by giving better assignments, responding to the work of student writers in more productive ways, and developing theory-based writing curricula; researchers have also sought ways of developing

college writing programs that can foster the development of both students and teachers. Sometimes, the demands for teacher assessment are met from a defensive crouch, as a distraction from the more profound problems of teaching students from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of preparation for college study. At the large, public universities and two-year colleges where most American students begin advanced study, the economic problems of many students are a primary concern, since they have been a strong negative influence from early childhood. It is no accident that scores on the SAT correlate more with parental income than with any academic measure. When some of the best teachers are working to help poorly prepared students succeed, it is patently absurd to judge the effectiveness of their teaching by the success of their students, particularly in comparison to those students from privileged homes.

Nonetheless, the demand for assessment of writing teachers is not wholly based on political agendas or a profound distrust of public schools. Enough research has shown that truly expert teaching can help students succeed where less expert teaching fails. Some teachers are clearly better at the job than others, and it is reasonable to inquire into ways of identifying and rewarding these outstanding professionals and then place them in positions to influence the teaching of others. It is also clear that if professionals do not undertake this task, it will be—as it has been—undertaken by those who do not understand the enormous complexity of teaching itself and the even greater complexity of teaching writing. The essays in this collection demonstrate constructive ways of assessing teacher performance, with attention to the immense number of variables involved. We need state-of-the-art research in this area—so much has changed since the Hult collection was published, in the nation as well as in the field of rhetoric and composition.

The wide range of essays in this collection demonstrates how much has improved in teacher evaluation over the last two decades. The writers and editor draw from various disciplines, as composition studies itself has done; they are sophisticated in their understanding and use of data; and they are wise to the complexity of their subject. Every reader of this substantial book will experience the goal of the collection: to foster new ways of thinking about teacher evaluation.

EDWARD M. WHITE
August 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book evolved out of a series of conversations with my friend and colleague Karen Gardiner—specifically, our shared concern about the tendency of both teachers and administrators to focus exclusively on student ratings, and particularly on the negative ones, in assessing teaching effectiveness. I am grateful to Karen for her many contributions to the book, especially in developing the initial concept and reviewing and responding to proposals and chapters. This project would not have taken shape without her.

I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who read earlier drafts of the book and offered thoughtful suggestions on how to put the chapters in conversation with one another. Their astute comments pushed both me and my contributors to keep our readers in mind as we revised the work. This collection has also benefitted from the advice of several friends and colleagues who offered practical advice throughout the process—particularly Amy Kimme Hea, Gwen Gray Schwartz, and Nancy Sommers. Michael Spooner at Utah State University was an invaluable resource in shaping the concept and scope of the book and helping to prepare it for publication. Alex Cook, Jerry Nelms, Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, and Ed White provided insightful readings of chapters 1 and 3. Allen Harrell assisted with research, and Nathanael Booth and Andy Currie helped assemble the manuscript. Rebecca Cape served as copyeditor extraordinaire. And the University of Alabama provided me with a one-semester sabbatical, during which I made final revisions to the manuscript.

On a personal note, I am grateful to my family—especially my parents, Margaret and William Dayton—and to my dear friends in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who helped me create a supportive village in which to raise a child while doing the work I love.

**ASSESSING THE TEACHING
OF WRITING**

SECTION I

Frameworks and Methods for Assessing Teaching

1

ASSESSING TEACHING

A Changing Landscape

Amy E. Dayton

Assessing the teaching of writing is a process fraught with conflict. Despite a significant body of research pointing to the importance of multiple assessment measures and careful interpretation of the data, the evaluation of postsecondary teaching still relies heavily on a single measure of performance—the student ratings score—and interpretation of this score is often done in a hasty, haphazard fashion. Aside from student ratings, other data on teaching effectiveness tend to be collected in piecemeal fashion, without sufficient space for reflection and dialogue. When it comes to assessment, practical realities—including a lack of time, administrative resources, or knowledge about best practices—frequently trump our intentions to do a comprehensive job of evaluating classroom performance. Without clear guidelines for collecting and interpreting data, the outcome can be influenced by individual biases about what counts as evidence of good teaching. This collection offers new perspectives on that question of “what counts,” pointing to ways that we can more effectively gather data about teaching and offering practical guidance for interpreting it. It also suggests ways we can improve our practice, mentor new teachers, foster dialogue about best practices, and make those practices more visible.

This book is for teachers who want to improve their practice, administrators and program directors who hire and train instructors, and faculty and staff in writing programs, centers for teaching and learning, and other instructional support units on college campuses. Although its primary audience is composition specialists, the collection offers practical suggestions and perspectives that apply to many contexts for postsecondary teaching. The tools presented in these chapters—mid-semester focus groups, student evaluations of instruction, classroom observations,

teaching portfolios, and so on—are used across the disciplines, in many instructional settings. While some chapters focus on specific methods, others provide new frameworks for thinking about assessment. In her chapter on writing center(ed) assessment, for instance, Nichole Bennett describes a philosophy that could work for both writing programs and other sites for teacher training across campuses. This approach involves bringing teachers and tutors into the broader conversation about the program’s missions and goals, and asking them to reflect on assessment data. By making assessment a broad, program-wide conversation, we invite stakeholders at every level to participate in setting goals and outcomes and gauging how well those outcomes have been met. The authors of chapters 6 and 7 argue for an ethos of transparency, suggesting a need to set clear standards for how materials might be read, to give teachers a sense of agency in deciding how to represent their work, and to share evidence of teaching quality with broader audiences while contextualizing the data for outside readers. These more inclusive, transparent models allow us to engage both internal and external audiences in more productive dialogue.

This collection arrives at a time when the public dialogue and political context for postsecondary teaching are particularly fraught. Challenges include a decline in state funding, public anxiety over the rising cost of college, concern about the value of a degree in today’s lagging economy, and, to some extent, hostility toward college professors. An example of this hostility is found in Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s recent book, *Academically Adrift*, which criticizes faculty for being more interested in their research and the advancement of their disciplines than in their students’ progress or the well-being of their institutions—a trend that, in the authors’ view, has contributed to an epidemic of “limited learning” on college campuses¹ (Arum and Roksa 2011, 10–11). (See Richard Haswell [2012] for a critique of their findings and methodology). At the state level, this picture of the self-interested, disengaged faculty member permeates our political rhetoric. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that recent state election cycles have been dominated by efforts to curb faculty rights, including measures to limit salaries and collective bargaining rights, attacks on tenure and sabbaticals, and proposals to require college faculty to teach a minimum number of credit hours (Kelderman 2011). In a 2010 *Wall Street Journal* piece, “Putting a Price on Professors,” Simon and Banchemo (2010) point to some other developments. Texas state law now requires that public universities publicize departmental budgets, instructors’ curriculum vitae, student ratings, and course syllabi, making all of this data accessible “within three

clicks” of the university’s home page. At Texas A&M, university officials have gone even further, putting a controversial system in place to offer cash bonuses to faculty who earn the highest student ratings, and creating a public “profit and loss” statement on each faculty member that “[weighs] their annual salary against students taught, tuition generated, and research grants obtained” (Simon and Banchemo 2010; see also Hamermesh 2010, Huckabee 2009, June 2010, and Mangan 2000).

This push to make college faculty more accountable—and to quantify their contributions—comes, ironically, at a time when tenured, sabbatical-eligible faculty members are dwindling in numbers, being replaced by part-time and non-tenure track teachers whose situations are often tenuous at best. A *New York Times* article reports that “only a quarter of the academic work force is tenured, or on track for tenure, down from more than a third in 1995” (Lewin 2013). The challenge facing many university writing programs, then, is not the task of fostering commitment to teaching among research-obsessed, tenured faculty members, but rather supporting teachers who are new to the profession—like graduate teaching assistants—or who are working without job security, a full-time income, or adequate professional resources (such as office space or support for professional development). Because first-year composition (FYC) is one of the few courses required for most students at public universities, and because personalized, process-based instruction requires low student-to-faculty ratios, university writing programs find themselves at the front lines of these labor issues in higher education.

Despite the challenging times, composition studies, as a field, has capitalized on the accountability movement and current zeal for assessment by taking a proactive stance, seeking meaningful ways to gather data about teaching and participate in large-scale evaluations of student learning. In the aftermath of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Spellings Commission on Higher Education, and initiatives such as the ones put in place in Texas, we recognize that developing thoughtful, context-sensitive assessments is the best insurance against having hasty, reductionist evaluations imposed upon our programs.² Many writing programs have either fully adopted the WPA Outcomes Statement on First-Year Composition (Council of Writing Program Administrators 2000), or have modified the statement to create local outcomes. Other programs are participating in large-scale, national assessments and making use of the data for local purposes. As Paine and his colleagues explain in chapter 11, the Council of Writing Program Administrators has teamed up with the consortium for the National Survey of Student