

Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs, edited by Edward M. White, Norbert Elliott, and Irvin Peckham. Logan: Utah State UP, 2016. 202 pp.

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Very Like a Whale is an important contribution to ongoing conversations on writing program assessment that serves as an essential resource to institutions seeking to establish, revise, or reorganize programmatic assessment practices. This book is of value whether the reader is housed in an English department, a writing intensive department, or is an administrator seeking to include writing program assessment in the accreditation process (6). Holding writing programs in high regard, Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham provide the reader with models and strategies, as well as terminology, to help empower writing program administrators (WPAs) within their own unique and localized contexts. In this age of austerity, wherein WPAs are subjected to shrinking budgets, proliferating responsibilities, and disenfranchisement, the authors act as expert advocates for both experienced and novice WPAs. This advocacy is carefully balanced with an eye to the stakeholders whom the WPA serves. In addition to students and administrators, the authors also name accreditors and policymakers as stakeholders, illuminating the changing role of assessment (3). Additionally, this text forwards writing program assessment as a unique research genre essential to sustainable institutional ecologies, one in which research and management coexist and which is built upon local needs and goals.

Early in the text, the authors make clear the evolving purpose of writing program assessment by describing the three traditional purposes of the assessment of student writing within programmatic assessment. First, writing assessment is traditionally a means for responding to individual students in the classroom or tutoring sessions. The second and third purposes include assessing how well a writing program meets its objectives and a program's ability "to act as a gateway to national programs or universities for individual students taking nation-wide tests" (23). In addition to these traditional purposes, a fourth has emerged out of the current push for corporatization and accountability in higher education: determining the degree of a student's preparation for the workplace (23), an important issue discussed at length in Nancy Welch and Tony Scott's recent edited volume, *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. More and more, writing programs are being called upon to contribute assessment data and improvement plans to accrediting agencies that carry out campus-wide assessment for accreditation; therefore, WPAs are in kind being asked to navigate local needs and regional accreditation requirements. While this poses a number

of challenges to WPAs, it also leads to a centering of the writing program in the institution's mission, an important step away from the departmental and institutional isolation experienced by many WPAs, and their programs (3).

In addition to defining the purposes of program assessment, the authors highlight three tropes as unifying ideas to conceptualize it. The first is writing program assessment as a genre. Genre is not considered simply as form, but instead as open discourse situated around actions (24). Following the characterization given by Carolyn R. Miller in "Genre as Social Action," genre is described as a rhetorical means for connecting the public with the private. Since assessment itself is also a research genre, centering localized writing program assessment within the assessment genres of regional and program accreditation entities can yield institutional alignment and empower the WPA (24). The authors argue that "[i]dentifying resonances across the campus within the genre of writing program assessment allows teaching, research, and service commonalities to emerge across disciplinary boundaries," therefore centralizing the program in the university community, and opening up interdisciplinary dialogue on the assessment of writing (26). Importantly, this supports a view of writing assessment as a complex, recursive process and helps to eradicate the view of first-year writing as inoculation.

The second trope is construct modeling in writing program assessment (28). Following the definition given by Lee Cronbach and Paul E. Meehl in "Construct Validity in Psychological Texts," who developed the idea of construct modeling and the methods of validation that accompany it, the authors explain the significance of this development in empirical research generally and in its implications for assessment especially. The relationships between predictor and outcome and independent and dependent variables, as well as our ability to identify them as traits for writing assessment, "ushered in an era of multiple-trait scoring of robust writing samples that, in turn, yielded information relevant to the writing construct" (29). The concept of relational modeling has major implications for writing research. First, once we define predictor variables we can learn more about them, as well as a student's ability to demonstrate achievement of them. Second, learning how one variable interacts with another allows us to "advance student learning through detailed knowledge about complex interactions" (29). Perhaps most important is the element of relational modeling that accounts for the ability to improve curricula based upon the large amount of empirical evidence variable modeling allows us to systematically gather from the classroom (29). Advances within this framework have led writing studies beyond the cognitive model of composition practices to embrace sociocognitive theories of writing and the development of White's "Phase 2" portfolio assessment, a construct and embedded assessment model that embraces metacognition and audience awareness while solving the

practical problems associated with portfolio assessment (30). The authors argue that the concept of variable modeling, which is a rather recent development, holds much promise for writing instruction and assessment.

For several decades, the third trope has gained significance in metaphorical explorations of sociocultural dynamics, and especially classroom environments: ecology. The authors provide a helpful summary of some of the most influential research in writing studies that call for or elucidate an ecological theory of the discipline at large, as well as localized classroom and assessment practices. The important work of Asao Inoue and Mya Poe, especially *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* and *Race and Writing Assessment* is credited for significant contributions to our understanding of cultural dynamics in the classroom and the relationship between race and writing assessment. Drawing on Inoue's definition, the authors explain their use of the ecology metaphor, writing,

[t]he presence of such articles across traditional disciplinary boundaries suggests the need for a system of conceptualization that yields robust understanding of construct representation, affords a systems analysis framework to engage complex interactions, anticipates threats to the system, and allows planning within the local environment to achieve sustainable development and growth. (32)

The ecology metaphor suggests an interconnectedness and interaction between parts that is dynamic and complex while marking the limits of human knowledge. Moreover, integral to ecological thinking is achieving current goals without compromising the future (89). This is an important articulation, one that is demonstrated within the case studies that comprise chapter two, for it draws our attention to the threats facing higher education. The neoliberal forces that compose those threats are the same forces that threaten delicate ecologies in the natural world, and just as efforts to implement sustainability are best realized locally, so must WPAs work within their own institutional contexts to achieve change. The authors provide a framework for negotiating the complexity of the institutional situatedness of the writing program, the outside forces calling for accountability and results, and WPAs' duty to students.

The authors use these theoretical and tropological foundations of genre, construct modeling, and ecology as a conceptual framework within which to understand twelve case studies that comprise the second chapter of the book. The case studies measure student performance in pre-enrollment and first-year placement, writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID), and in graduate-level writing programs. Importantly, this text serves as

the most comprehensive guide to the development of ePortfolio assessments, both within the writing program and in WAC and WID applications, providing technical terminology, theoretical background, and numerous case studies to serve as examples, all of which are represented in an easily usable form.

An important aspect of this text is the inherent historicizing of the implications rendered from decades of empirical research. Perhaps most importantly, the text works to demonstrate the rich and complex potential of assessment to bridge disciplinary boundaries, which in turn places writing program assessment at the intellectual center of the university. Program design and recursive assessment are described as “complementary activities” (71) that form part of a feedback loop and serve a number of stakeholders (107). The comprehensive glossary complements an exhaustive explanation of the various forms assessment might take, as well as the multiplicity of implications for stakeholders. Assessment is a dynamic, recursive, complex activity developed from years of research in various disciplines. The terminology elaborated upon is linked to ecological concerns, especially “an argument-based approach to validation” (84), disaggregation of data, as well as assessment’s potential to have a disparate impact on diverse student bodies (87). While research on race and pedagogy is vast in writing studies, sociolinguistics, education, and anthropology, White, Elliot, and Peckham provide an essential guide to realizing equality in assessment practices more broadly, an essential contribution.

A challenge faced by many English faculty charged with programmatic assessment is developing fluency in empirical methodologies, particularly data collection and statistical analysis. The authors provide a guide to the most appropriate methodologies, using the case studies from earlier in the text as practical examples for their deployment. While training in quantitative methodologies and statistical analysis is beyond the scope of such a book, the authors provide a glossary of these terms, as well as foundational works on methodology and statistics for convenient reference. Importantly, they also highlight controversies and disputes that serve to situate the novice in the assessment discourse community.

This text serves as an essential guide to theoretical background, writing program development, and writing program assessment in an accessible and usable format. Whether one is seeking to understand the difference between a narrow writing construct sample and a robust writing construct sample, or is needing to develop a vocabulary for engaging and persuading administrators, or is seeking a means for fine-tuning a well-developed program, this text should be central to both design and innovation. *Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs* belongs on every WPA’s bookshelf.

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