



Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning. A Practical Guide for Evaluating and Reporting on Writing Instruction Programs

Dudley W. Reynolds.

Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010. 134 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-472-03420-8.

Most of the books concerned with writing assessment focus mainly on evaluating the learners' ability to produce an effective piece of writing which complies with the conventions of a specific discourse community. *Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning* offers a more holistic approach to writing assessment that seeks to assess and evaluate the whole learning process in order to provide teachers, administrators, program directors and funding entities with tools to help them make the most of the resources at their disposal and take actions to improve their writing programs. This global assessment approach addresses the following main premises: planning for assessment should be an integral part of a program design, both formative and summative ends should be taken into account, the selection and reporting of assessment tools should be carefully chosen, multiple types of data should be collected, the consequences of assessment findings should be considered and their actual use monitored. Based on these premises, the book is divided into five chapters which include practices and examples that provide support to these guiding principles.

Chapter one constitutes an introduction to understanding the main aim of the book; namely, assessment serves learning. The chapter opens with the description of different scenarios the reader may be familiar with, which point to the need that writing teachers, administrators and entities have to determine whether their writing programs accomplish the goals they were designed for and how they can improve them. The following three chapters constitute the core of the book and develop the three-step process of planning, designing/implementing and reporting on assessment.

Chapter two focuses on the development of an effective assessment plan for a writing program. According to Dudley W. Reynolds, this plan should

involve a detailed analysis of the program context and goals, and should specify how the findings will be reported and used. To attain these objectives, he suggests six chronological components the plan should be based on: program description, goals, formative activities, summative activities, resource evaluation and writing the plan. The “program description” involves identifying those features of the program structure more prone to influence learning such as for example student recruitment, nature of interaction or intensity of the program. “Goals” allow to measure the degree of accomplishment of the expectations of the program taking into account its focus, orientation and desirable impact. “Formative activities” provide feedback that may enhance learning whereas “summative activities” give evidence on the success of the program. The “resource evaluation” requires a down-to-earth analysis in terms of personnel, space and time so that the plan can be successfully implemented. Finally, it becomes necessary to “write down the plan” incorporating the description of the five aspects outlined above.

Chapter three is by far the most extensive of the book as it discusses a key aspect of the assessment process: the tools used to gather the data that will be used to make inferences. Reynolds addresses four main issues concerning collection procedures, namely, production tasks, evaluation guides, indirect measures and database design. “Production tasks” describe some common methods of eliciting data from students for assessment. Among them the author draws attention to writing prompts, objective tests and consultation transcripts, which may be used to obtain practical information about students’ actual writing knowledge, their awareness and confidence in the writing process and the effectiveness of instructor training. “Evaluation guides” include rubrics, observation protocols, checklists and quantitative measures. These can be used to provide guiding principles for evaluating, to measure different types of constructs and to help observers discover behaviours or techniques they were totally unaware of. Chapter three also illustrates the use of “indirect measures” to gather data such as questionnaires, attitudinal surveys and focus groups. Reynolds presents questionnaires as a tool to elicit information with respect to formative and summative evaluation issues whereas he uses attitudinal surveys to identify cognitive or attitudinal states. Besides, he introduces focus groups as a way to obtain more spontaneous but equally valuable data. The author completes the chapter with some general guidelines on “database design” which may come in handy when we have to convert an overwhelming amount of data into numerical values.

Chapter four delves into the report process, which involves generating findings or results and considering some possible explanations for those results. To help prospective report writers, the author addresses different issues related to data analysis and reporting. First he suggests some guidelines for working both with qualitative and quantitative data and describes the customary descriptive and inferential functions of data in an assessment study. Then he focuses on ways to promote the reliability of an analysis in order to minimize inappropriate influences on the inferences made. Finally, he presents some reports which exemplify different types of data and studies. Chapter five closes the book by providing an extensive collection of reproducible worksheets that can be used by any of the agents involved in assessing a writing program. In addition, the volume includes a glossary which defines some of the key words employed throughout the text.

To conclude, *Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning* captures the readers' interest by presenting a well-supported approach to assessing writing contexts. The book provides a detailed look into the assessment process and presents it in a systematic way to ease the task of those interested in evaluating their writing programs. The author makes a special emphasis on the tools and techniques that may be used to cover all the main aspects of this holistic assessment process and includes a wealth of practical examples and resources, which constitute one of the main assets of the book. Thus, the book fills an existing need and becomes a practical tool for those who want to improve the learning outcomes of the writing programs they are involved in.

[Review received 27 June 2012]

[Revised review accepted 5 July 2012]

Reviewed by **Clàudia Barahona-Fuentes**
Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (Spain)
claudia.barahona@fnb.upc.edu