

## Review

Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Ruth Overman Fischer, and Rita Malenczyk, eds. *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP: 2005. 240 pages. \$22.95 (paperback).

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It is no news to readers of this journal that writing is both a process and a product. The process by which the *WPA Outcomes Statement* (OS) developed and then grew into the book at hand are among the most remarkable in the field of rhetoric and composition, and I am glad to have the opportunity to comment on both the process and the product. I am not quite neutral in this regard: a simple post by me on the WPA listserv in March, 1996, in response to a query, was the spark that led, some years later, first to the (OS) and then to *The Outcomes Book* examining the OS's use in various contexts and its implications for the profession. But I quickly became one of many participants in the process and later an observer as Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Ruth Overman Fischer, and Rita Malenczyk pulled this book together and persevered to its publication.

Has such an important book ever had such an odd genesis? The original listserv discussion led to an informal collective of interested volunteers that produced a multitude of draft documents that shaped a series of conference workshops. *The Outcomes Book's* editors point out that "as many as twenty-five people spearheaded the writing and over forty contributed phrases and ideas" (13). The outcomes statement that emerged was adopted by the WPA Executive Committee in 2000 and printed first in this journal (23.1–2, Fall/Winter 1999, 59–70) and again in *College English* (64.3, January 2001, 321–25); it now forms the two opening pages of this Harrington, et al., volume. Here we have some 240 pages of text stimulated by the first two, the OS; in it, more than twenty leaders of the profession discuss the impact of WPA's OS on their thinking and institutional practice. No one can claim ownership of the document, yet it seems to have struck a chord that resonates throughout the profession—perhaps because its origins so fully expressed the general consensus of our colleagues about the goals of our writing courses, and, by implication, what we are not trying to do. After all

these years of listening impatiently while outsiders defined or even attempted to mandate what we do, we now have a statement that is ours. *The Outcomes Book* shows how such a statement can at once help define our purposes and open the way to expanded and revised definitions.

To say that is not to suggest that the volume is a set of encomia for the OS; quite the reverse. Peter Elbow's chapter offers "A Friendly Challenge to Push the Outcomes Statement Further"; the brief chapter by Cynthia L. Selfe and Patricia Freitag Ericsson, "Expanding Our Understanding of Composing Outcomes," mourns the text-based nature of the OS, which has relatively little to say about technology; both Rich Haswell and the late Marilyn Sternglass emphasize the importance of student development over time, a point mentioned in the OS but not, as they see it, stressed sufficiently. Haswell points to the cryptic nature of the OS, "which does not exist outside the interpretations of it" (199). The collective origin of the document urges its critics to be, in Elbow's term, "friendly," but at the same time to see the OS as inadequate from particular points of view. In response, Katherine Blake Yancey points out in her afterword that the document can and should be adapted to the needs of local campuses, not seen as a sacred text.

The editors have grouped the essays into four sections, in addition to Harrington's introduction and Yancey's afterword. Part One, "Contextualizing the Outcomes Statement," includes five chapters looking at the development of the document and the distinction between *outcomes*, its focus, and *standards*, which the document explicitly does not attempt to deal with. Part Two, "The Outcomes Statement and First-Year Writing," contains powerful chapters on the OS in high school (by Stephen Wilhoit) and community college (by J. L. McLure) as well as reports from a number of campuses that have used the OS to revise their first-year composition programs. In these chapters we begin to notice, first, the dominant perspective of appreciation for the document as a means to initiate and focus discussion and, later, a certain disappointment that the OS does not do justice to such concerns as critical thinking, critical reading, and genre theory. Part Three, "The Outcomes Statement beyond First-Year Writing," relates the OS to writing across the curriculum and other upper-level writing programs, technical communication, the Alverno College outcomes-based curriculum, and, in a bold extension by Rita Malenczyk, to "general education reform as exemplified in a report issued in 1998 by the Boyer Commission." The last section, "Theorizing Outcomes," suggests several directions for deepening and revising the OS. The afterword details the extraordinary success and influence the OS has already achieved and anticipates future development, revision, and usefulness.

It is a relief to see that some of the concerns from the early discussions about outcomes have not claimed space in the book. Fears then existed that a statement about outcomes would narrow the field, force all teachers into the same curriculum, ignore the vast diversity of American education, homogenize textbooks, or otherwise harm a fragile enterprise; these complaints have given way to informed and critical consideration of the goals for writing instruction. Far from being defensive, the book seems confident that the purpose and importance of writing programs have been established and that the field can move ahead from a strong consensus about basic goals.

While it is probable that most teachers of writing know little or nothing about the *OS* at this writing, it is also clear that this extraordinary book about the unusual impact of a small but astonishingly powerful document will demand the attention of every WPA. It represents a major move toward professionalizing the first-year writing course, hence protecting it and its teachers. It is also an important move toward expanding the responsibility for student writing and its outcomes to the entire curriculum and the entire faculty of any college or university.