

Review

Haswell, Richard. *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction within a University Writing Program*. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2001. 234 pages. \$39.95 (paper); \$118.95 (cloth).

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“It’s a floor wax!”

“It’s a dessert topping!”

“Calm down, you two. ‘New Shimmer’ is a floor wax and a dessert topping!”

This classic parody of a commercial from year one of *Saturday Night Live* features Dan Ackroyd and Gilda Radner as a couple squabbling over a spray can in a bright suburban kitchen. But the real star here is Chevy Chase as the oleaginous announcer who appears out of nowhere and shows the bickering husband and wife that, in fact, they’re both right. The sketch ends as Ackroyd downs spoonfuls of Shimmer with a bowl of butterscotch pudding and nods his head in satisfaction, while Radner mops vigorously, then beams with joy as she peruses her now gleaming kitchen floor. In the final frame, Chevy Chase urges viewers to buy Shimmer “for the greatest shine you ever tasted.”

Like floor wax and dessert topping, teaching and testing may seem utterly distinct in purpose, even contradictory. Many in education decry the increasing emphasis on high-stakes assessment and the resulting necessity for embattled instructors to “teach to the test”—or else. Opponents of large-scale assessment question whether such tests can measure student knowledge with sufficient accuracy to justify the tests’ power to determine the fate of students, teachers, schools, and even entire districts. Moreover, critics argue that test-driven instruction curtails teachers’ most creative and productive pedagogical approaches, alienates many of the best teachers from the profession, and limits student learning. Many composition specialists

echo these views as they apply to large-scale writing assessments. In recent years, some colleges have tried to limit or eliminate such program-wide assessments, replacing them, for example, with directed self-placement programs in which entering students, after consultation with faculty, decide for themselves which level of composition they'll enroll in. Into this debate steps Richard Haswell, the architect of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and innovative program combining writing instruction and assessment at Washington State University (WSU), and editor of the volume under review, *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction within a University Writing Program*.

This volume discusses the evolution of WSU's program from its late-1980s beginnings in response to a faculty senate initiative caused by widespread concern about poor student writing. At the time, the faculty seemed interested mainly in finding and isolating student writers judged not minimally competent and then whipping them into shape with some remedial instruction. But Haswell and his colleagues saw in this initiative an opportunity to develop not just the testing but also the teaching and learning of writing throughout students' undergraduate years. As the testing program grew, so did the instructional component, with the two becoming inextricably linked and building upon one another. The title's prominent term, "beyond outcomes," refers to Haswell's contention that "a narrow focus on assessment or educational outcomes, as if they were an end in themselves, trivializes both the outcomes and the endeavor of improving student writing" (38). Haswell envisions instead an assessment program that pushes and enriches instruction and learning and that engages in consistent self-scrutiny to advance the role of writing within the entire institution.

In examining the program's history, *Beyond Outcomes* details the various functions that the assessment and instructional components have come to serve, with chapters contributed by many of the faculty who have been responsible for this work over the years, including Haswell, William Condon, Susan McLeod, Jennie Nelson, Susan Wyche, and others. Authors' attitudes, goals, roles, and understanding of developments sometimes conflict, making for an internal discussion that is largely implied but nonetheless lively. Yet there are also major points of convergence and, finally, the overriding sense of a large and disparate group of composition faculty and administrators working together—if not toward a common goal, then at least toward a similar set of aims—prevails. And for these nine authors representing such varied constituencies as the writing center, several writing programs (basic, "regular" composition, writing across the curriculum), the writing assessment office, the coordinator of all writing programs, the university general education committee, the dean's office, and adjunct faculty, even a relatively shared sense of mission is pretty impressive. On the whole, despite, or per-

haps because of, its varied cast of characters and positions, *Beyond Outcomes* offers a powerful argument in support of the view that an intelligently conceived, large-scale assessment program that is sensitive to stakeholders' concerns and closely tied to curriculum can improve instruction and learning.

The book is divided into five sections on various aspects of writing assessment and instruction at the university, plus a set of appendices that includes a timeline of programmatic developments, essay prompts, and rating sheets. It is revealing to consider that throughout the volume the authors go over the same historical terrain in ways that highlight their varying roles and perspectives. The first section, for example, contains three narratives of program development. The first is by a longtime administrative advocate of the program, someone who helped to shape it; the second is jointly written by the faculty member primarily responsible for creation, maintenance, and expansion of the assessment program and the original program's basic writing director; and the third is coauthored by the same "basic writing" director and the current writing center coordinator, who started out as a WSU graduate student. Perhaps not surprisingly, the program and its history look quite different, depending upon who tells the story.

Richard Law, English professor turned associate dean and founding chair of the university's general education program and its writing committee, looks back proudly on a series of successes, including implementation of a timed placement exam for entering students, a junior-level portfolio assessment of all undergraduates, tutorial and basic writing programs, a general-education writing requirement as well as required writing courses within each major, plus the establishment of the writing program's dedicated and continuing budget line to pay for all these programs. While one might prefer a more critical and less celebratory examination, this grudging reader was genuinely impressed with the long list of programmatic accomplishments. The next chapter's lead author, editor Haswell, devoted more than a decade to developing finely grained ways of testing student writers and did so expertly enough to convince the administration to increase program size and the amount of funding. Haswell and coauthor Susan Wyche argue that writing tests should be developed locally, that testers must be aware of but willing to go against received wisdom from published work on fashioning assessments, and that self-scrutiny and change based on stakeholder concerns keep a program vibrant. They also point out that they had to finesse their administrative superiors' desire for timed, impromptu essay exams so faculty could develop the more sensitive, less punitive portfolio assessment they preferred. The third chapter, by writing center director Lisa Johnson-Shull, and Susan Wyche, narrates the difficult birth of the university's writing assessment office. Originally housed in the writing center, the center

director neither wanted the assessment office nor was adequately prepared to administer it. The new, mixed responsibilities of testing and tutoring broke down what had been a smoothly functioning, student-oriented operation. To their credit, the administrators eventually recognized their mistake and set out to right it, providing an assessment office nearby, and the testing and tutoring bodies became, in the authors' words, "amicable neighbors" (34). This narrative, in presenting a less seamless view of development, offers a cautionary tale that registers the potential for disaster when decisions are made from on high.

The three chapters in the book's second section are based on the idea that what leads up to an assessment outcome is just as important as where it leads. First, Haswell explains the two-tier method he developed for rating placement essays and portfolios, in which the vast majority of samples are rated by just one reader. Haswell argues vigorously for this approach, which is somewhat quicker and less expensive than the customary holistic method. Yet he does not fully convince me that his method provides adequate protection against idiosyncratic individual ratings, which under this system can go largely unchecked. In the following chapter, Haswell employs a categorization theory taken from cognitive psychology to explain ways that raters using his system classify student writing. Next, Galen Leonhardy, a former graduate student now a community activist teaching incarcerated juveniles, and William Condon, director of the university's writing programs, examine how the assessment system deals with the most difficult and trickiest cases, often centering on transfers from other universities and on nonnative English speakers. Admirably, after finding that a large number of students in these groups were receiving low scores or not submitting their portfolios, the program administration took steps to open up the process, provide additional help, and greatly improve communication about the writing requirements. This section argues for consistent examination of test results and regular tinkering with the system to improve delivery for all.

Section three consists of four chapters comprising the book's major argument: that instruction and assessment should inform and shape one another. Lisa Johnson-Shull and writing assessment director Diane Kelly-Riley, both of whom began at WSU as graduate students, lay out a framework based on cybernetics and the notion of liminality to argue that teaching and testing work together to form "a cyclic rite of passage for students, tutors, teachers, and academic units" (82). More interesting than this framework are the data the authors provide showing that the junior portfolio assessment, which is linked with the writing requirement in the undergraduate major as well as the general education writing requirement, has led students to turn in for evaluation specific works of extended writing from more than eight hundred

classes spanning all disciplines. The chapter suggests that undergraduates do an impressive amount of writing in many classes and that faculty strongly support this emphasis. The last chapter in this section, again by editor Haswell, discusses the results of interviews and questionnaires with faculty, students, and administrators, further supporting this notion of “a whole lotta writing going on” at WSU. An additional chapter by Haswell in this section details studies he conducted in which he compared the placement essays by entering first-year students with the essays submitted for the junior portfolio by the same students, showing, for the most part, clear improvement in student writing over the two years. Susan Wyche’s contribution to this section details the curious life, death, and rebirth of basic writing at WSU. After successfully creating a basic-writer program, the composition administrators found that a substantial number of students who were deemed basic writers would, in fact, have passed the regular composition course. As a result, they did away with the “basic writer” label and replaced it with an optional tutorial component for students in the regular course who wrote weak placement essays. According to Wyche, the program functioned effectively until she left WSU, when a new writing director more sympathetic to basic writing was hired and the remedial course re-established, enlivening again the adage, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

The book’s penultimate section investigates the effects of the junior portfolio assessment on its primary stakeholders. Jennie Nelson and Diane Kelly-Riley profile undergraduates whose portfolios did not pass muster and who were then required to take an additional writing course. They found that these students mainly considered themselves strong writers and had good grades to back up that view, but they also found that these students had put together weak portfolios, largely out of a lack of understanding of the process. As a result of the authors’ inquiry, the program clarified its submission guidelines; it also improved communication between students and program administrators and instituted more student-friendly appeal procedures. In a study of the faculty understanding of the junior portfolio, Fiona Glade, Diane Kelly-Riley, Susan McLeod, and William Condon find a wide disparity in faculty attitudes and awareness, from deep engagement to complete ignorance, but these four authors also find an overall willingness to assign writing and have students submit that writing for assessment by other faculty—no small achievement. And in a valuable “how-to” chapter that is written as a dialogue, Haswell and Susan McLeod discuss ways to work effectively with higher administration. They recommend figuring out the administrative mindset, examining model proposals and reports, submitting action-oriented and concise texts (bullets are good), and knowing one’s institutional budget cycle. I believe one of the biggest advantages the

writing people at WSU had was the presence of former English colleagues (Law and McLeod) who had moved into influential administrative positions and who supported and mentored writing faculty. The book's concluding chapter, which is divided into question-and-answer sections, with each written by one of nine contributors, considers the future development of assessment-instruction writing programs such as WSU's. The authors point to their assessments as valuable credibility-builders, helping to solidify the status of writing.

In sum, *Beyond Outcomes* demonstrates the need for strong, steady, very industrious long-term leadership to foster the success of a large and ambitious writing program. Haswell and his contributors spent more than a decade working intensively to shape and support writing instruction and assessment at the university while also establishing national reputations for their own published work, much of which directly concerned and came out of the WSU program. They clearly won the respect of faculty and administration as writing expanded from one first-year English course to a range of offerings at all levels of undergraduate instruction throughout the university, buttressed by several school-wide assessments, ultimately becoming a valued part of the university's landscape. *Beyond Outcomes* also suggests the power of assessment to drive instruction in positive ways. Pushed along in large part by the program's upper-level portfolio requirement, WSU asks all academic departments to include writing-intensive major courses, while the general education program insists that the distribution of studies courses involve substantial written work. Thus *Beyond Outcomes* reveals a kind of blueprint for effective program development in a large state university, but it also shows the challenges inherent in such an effort.

WORKS CITED

"Episode Nine, Year One." *Saturday Night Live*. Prod. Lorne Michaels. NBC. 10 Jan. 1976.