

Review Essay

Enhancing Learning and Thinking in Higher Education

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Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Peggy O'Neill. *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. 180 pages.

Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. 259 pages.

Hacker, Andrew, and Claudia Dreifus. *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do about It*. New York: Times Books, 2010. 271 pages.

Peckham, Irvin. *Going North Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2011. 180 pages.

Scott, Tony. *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2009. 216 pages.

How effectively are colleges and universities enhancing students' learning and thinking? This question has been front and center in recent critiques of higher education. On the one hand, such critiques can be helpful because assessing learning and thinking should be an ongoing activity throughout the curriculum. However, such critiques can be counterproductive when they do not take into account current disciplinary theory, research, and practice. Each of the books reviewed here generates conversations about the effectiveness of higher education, with some attention to learning and thinking, and several of them consider how writing programs, in particular, can further promote students' learning and critical thinking.

Those who critique postsecondary education need to consider questions whose answers will benefit students striving to be successful in the academic, professional, civic, and personal arenas of life: What should students learn in college? What is the value of any particular kind of learning or critical thinking? What counts as critical thinking? Why should faculty use particular curricular and pedagogical practices? Who should teach students to think critically?

The books considered here examine critical thinking from multiple perspectives: understanding critical thinking, preparing and mentoring faculty, and assessing student learning. Although there are many factors that influence critical thinking, this review will consider scaffolding for understanding critical thinking, for examining how faculty are prepared to engage students in critical thinking, and for discussing measures to assess students' knowledge and understanding.

Offering a lens for understanding critical thinking, Irvin Peckham, in *Going North, Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction*, discusses how critical thinking skills can be taught and learned. As he considers the evolution of critical thinking, Peckham describes two strands: cognitive and social. Cognitive thinking involves questioning assumptions and evaluating evidence, as well as knowing the appropriate time to question these assumptions. On the other hand, the social strand encourages students to deconstruct the social structures that "naturalize the exploitation and oppression of dominated social groups" (61). Peckham suggests that the two strands may be approached simultaneously in the classroom, noting that educators can encourage students to think critically about their culture to perceive the "social injustice embedded within it and be moved to do something about it" (88). In the classroom, educators can prompt students to read texts about marginalized or oppressed groups, aiding students in adopting new ways of seeing the world, while at the same time questioning the assumptions and beliefs that students may hold (Peckham 66).

When linking cognitive and social strands of thinking, teachers can encourage students to question the social order that contributes to the ways in which they learn—an important aspect of critical pedagogy. However, teachers must be mindful so that the classroom does not become more oppressive than liberatory. Specifically, Peckham explains how educators who adopt a critical pedagogy may be doing a disservice to students by widening the gap between working- and middle-class students. When educators challenge students through critical pedagogy, they open up space for working-class students to fall behind because they may be reluctant to share their experiences.

According to Peckham, practitioners of critical pedagogy can fall short when students resist the topics, readings, or general structure of the course. Too often, teachers structure their syllabi or have students read essays in ways that alienate the working class either by using language with which they are unfamiliar or by using language that immediately implies that they will be questioning their preconceived assumptions. Further, these issues present themselves in assignments that encourage “critical thinking.” Assignment prompts may foster resistance, encouraging students to write about “safe” topics to meet the assignment’s writing goals instead of the critical thinking goals. Ironically, when teachers read students’ writing, they may become too focused on the critical thinking agenda to see other features of the writing. As a result, they “misread” the texts that students craft (142). Peckham argues that when teachers focus on critical thinking too much, they miss opportunities to teach students how to write—to connect their ideas, to work on organization, to consider genre conventions and style, and so on. Throughout the book, he illuminates potential problems with critical pedagogy, providing an interesting perspective on a pedagogy that many educators use in the classroom without fully understanding its ramifications.

While Peckham offers a theoretical foundation for critical pedagogy, Tony Scott, in *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, provides more concrete advice for implementing critical pedagogy. Whereas Peckham prompts educators to revisit their syllabi and assignments, Scott specifically argues for incorporating assignments that will open up space for students to write about their lives instead of assignments that merely help students acquire certain skill sets useful for the workforce. Pedagogies need to promote writing that encourages students to look at how they forge connections in their lives, how their class influences their thinking, and how these identities shape them as individuals. Further, he analyzes how the very notion of critical pedagogy, where teachers may strive to foster identification in social categories, may, if done badly, emphasize students’ current identities without analyzing their historical roots. Reviewing his own students’ work, Scott demonstrates how students can examine their identities and also make connections between the sometimes opposing worlds of academia and the workplace.

Both Peckham and Scott suggest that a contributing factor to the misuse of critical pedagogy is the clear division between non-tenure and tenure-track faculty that often occurs in English departments. For instance, in *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, Scott discusses the gap between tenure-line faculty and part-time faculty, noting that tenure-line faculty who serve as administrators often claim

first-year composition as their “territory.” However, they often do not teach these classes. Instead, most of the first-year composition classes are taught by part-time faculty who may have little or no control over their course content. Scott emphasizes that this disparity can be detrimental, arguing that departments need to ensure that first-year writing faculty are well-educated professionals in the discipline.

Similarly, Peckham also argues that faculty should meld research, theory, and practice, as they implement critical pedagogy. He challenges the notion that “members of the professoriate are better versed in the literature and consequently less likely to blunder” than contingent faculty (143). Even though contingent faculty and professors alike may have noble intentions, Peckham stresses the importance of working together to challenge the educational system that “tends to reproduce the social system within which it exists” (160). By learning to listen to each other, faculty can find common ground to open up spaces for learning. WPAs must ask what resources and preparation are available to all educators within the writing program—teaching assistants, contingent faculty members, and tenure-line professors. This means, based on Peckham’s call, that all members need access to professionalization within the discipline. More professionalization provides teachers with the tools that they need to enhance students’ critical thinking skills.

Making similar claims to Peckham and Scott, in *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We Can Do about It*, Andrew Hacker, a professor emeritus of political science at Queens College, and Claudia Dreifus, a journalist and an adjunct associate professor of international affairs and media at Columbia University, discuss the widening gap between professors and contingent faculty within the university system. They offer a scathing critique of higher education, arguing that “college should be a cultural journey, an intellectual expedition, a voyage confronting new ideas and information, together expanding and deepening our understanding of ourselves and the world” (3). However, they claim that higher education is failing to achieve this vision for many reasons, including but not limited to the vast differences in both rank and monetary status for educators. For instance, they disparage the tenure or “caste system” (15) in which tenured faculty carry lighter teaching loads than they should, and in which the remaining faculty “are the contingent people of the campus—exploitable, disposable, impoverished by low wages. They do the bulk of the undergraduate teaching at many universities” (15). Hacker and Dreifus offer these and other indictments of higher education and support some of the same kinds of efforts that many members of our profession actively promote.

In the chapter “Contingent Education” regarding non-tenure track teaching positions, the authors note that “Higher education is probably one of the only sectors of the national workplace where one regularly finds two people with similar credentials, working side by side at comparable jobs, and experiencing such extreme pay gaps” (49). Like many members of our field, Hacker and Dreifus admire the teaching that adjuncts provide, but they lament the conditions under which adjuncts provide that invaluable service to undergraduates. By publishing a popular book that raises awareness about this issue, Hacker and Dreifus may provide welcome ammunition to writing program administrators who regularly make the case to department chairs and deans to improve the contracts for adjuncts.

Hacker and Dreifus devote a chapter to making the familiar argument that tenured and tenure-track faculty spend so much time doing research that they neglect teaching. This imbalance, they note, is the result of a reward system that values research much more than it values teaching. In yet another chapter, “Fireproof: The Tangled Issue of Tenure,” the authors make the case that tenure is not needed to protect academic freedom. They go further to argue that “few junior faculty are willing to try unconventional research or break with the orthodoxies of their discipline, espouse dissenting ideas, indeed do anything that might otherwise displease their seniors” (146). At the end of the book, in a list of recommendations for improving higher education, Hacker and Dreifus go so far as to assert, “*Paid sabbaticals should be ended* (original emphasis). For their part, colleges should cease requiring research from their faculties. If professors are burning to write books, they have long summers and three-day weekends” (240).

It may be no surprise that Dreifus, a journalist, would offer these recommendations; after all, she may not fully appreciate the synergistic relationship that exists among theory, research, and practice. However, it is surprising that Hacker, a lifelong faculty member, would not do more to acknowledge this important relationship. Hacker and Dreifus seem to be unaware of the benefits of knowledge-making in the academy. They consider research to be a personal privilege for tenure-line faculty. However, as scholars in our field already know, research can benefit a host of stakeholders, including teachers, students, employers who hire graduates, and society in general. Without research, there is no new knowledge for teachers to share with students, so that graduates can contribute to society. In addition to the importance of an institution of higher education generating new knowledge, colleges offer spaces for students to grow intellectually as they grow in all arenas in life, including the personal, civic, and professional.

Another popular text that addresses factors that may influence critical thinking is *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.

Authors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa claim that while many factors such as preparedness, disciplinary expectations, and financial access all affect students' success in college, institutions can do more, such as provide realistic expectations and focus on student persistence for college success. However, Arum and Roksa's principle claim in *Academically Adrift* is that "American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students" (30). This claim relies heavily on limited data from an insufficient measure of assessment.

Analyzing data from the College Learning Assessment (CLA), Arum and Roksa claim that "many students are not improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing" (36). To make this claim, the authors track students' CLA test scores in students' first year of college, and "at the end of their sophomore year" (20). Arum and Roksa indicate that students "completed the CLA at multiple points in their college careers." However, there is no evidence that the CLA data were collected or evaluated beyond the first two years. Arum and Roksa indicate that the CLA offers real-world situations, including two writing tasks. In the first task, students "generate a memo advising an employer about the desirability of purchasing a type of airplane that has recently crashed" (21). In the second writing task, students are asked to evaluate the validity of a proposal for reducing crime and to evaluate a critique of that proposal. Students are given ninety minutes to perform one of the writing tasks. A detailed scoring rubric and sampling are used to assess the test.

Although the CLA may ask students to write about real-world situations, the context in which students address those situations is less than optimal. First, the typical first-year college student is relatively unfamiliar with the genre of the memo. Being asked to write in an unfamiliar genre can magnify the difficulty of any writing task. Second, it is challenging for even highly experienced writers to perform such complex tasks in ninety minutes. In the second task, for instance, students are "provided with a set of documents, including newspaper articles, crime and drug statistics, research briefs, and internal administrative memos" (22), which serve as the evidence to support their evaluations. Further, the scoring rubric "requires that the presentation is clear and concise, the structure of the argument is well-developed and effective, the work is persuasive, the written mechanics are proper and correct, and reader interest is maintained" (22). At this point, most writing teachers are horrified that anyone, especially a first-year college student would be expected to attend to all of those matters in ninety minutes. In most first-year composition classrooms, students have at least several weeks to review the documents, generate ideas, produce drafts, work

on support and organization, revise, and edit. Editing alone may take more than ninety minutes.

Beyond the use of CLA, Arum and Roksa call for “externally mandated accountability systems on public colleges and universities similar to the ones required and promoted in elementary and secondary school systems through policies such as No Child Left Behind” (137). Given that teachers and administrators in the field of rhetoric and composition have already responded to mandates such as the Common Core State Standards with “The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” a resolution calling for external systems would reverse the movement toward responsible accountability. *Academically Adrift* suggests a full transformation that would require “everything associated with coursework, from faculty expectations and approaches to teaching to course requirements and feedback” (131). Writing program faculty and administrators should question the findings of this text based not only on the CLA as an assessment tool, but also on the oversimplified conclusions of this study.

Concern about Arum and Roksa’s findings becomes more apparent in light of the CCCC statement on assessment, which states, “*The methods and criteria that readers use to assess writing should be locally developed, deriving from the particular context and purposes for the writing being assessed.*” The individual writing program, institution, or consortium should be recognized as a community of interpreters whose knowledge of context and purpose is integral to the assessment. There is no test that can be used in all environments for all purposes, and the best assessment for any group of students must be locally determined and may well be locally designed.

Arguing for discipline-specific assessment in *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*, Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neil provide practical applications for improving teaching and learning and discuss using “valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment to improve teaching and learning” (109). Adler-Kassner and O’Neil discuss the role that assessment plays and how the conversations regarding assessment for writing needs reframing: “a theoretical framework, concrete illustrations, and suggestions for action” for those who “care deeply” and are “invested in postsecondary writing instruction” (12). They question the general assumptions of “‘what education should be,’ a frame that also profoundly influences discussions about assessments intended to provide information about what students are learning as well as how and why they are learning it” (15). A highlight of this book is Chapter 5, “Reframing In Action,” in which the authors provide case studies for portfolio, WAC, and writing center assessment models with theoretical examination. Unlike *Academically Adrift*, this book examines how various audiences perceive

and interpret data, specifically how “the public discourse tends to focus around quantitative data that will *prove* what is (or is not) taking place in the classroom” while within the discipline scholars focus more on “qualitative data designed to help instructors *improve* the work of their classroom or program” (39). Adler-Kassner and O’Neil argue that these are not opposite ends of a spectrum, but complementary tools. They remind us that the job of writing teachers and writing program administrators is to function as skilled researchers in building diverse alliances, conducting empirical research, and communicating with stakeholders about what we are doing in the writing classroom.

Although Adler-Kassner and O’Neil examine some of the challenges of using portfolio assessment, they argue that standardized tests cannot effectively determine functions of intelligence (78). Portfolios offer a long-standing, widely-accepted method of assessment in the field of rhetoric and composition. As Edward White observes in *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, tests serve as a “snapshot” whereas a portfolio serves as a “motion picture” of students’ learning (119). In *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*, Huba and Freed note that portfolios can encourage active student engagement in the learning process, thus enhancing critical thinking.

Recognizing how portfolios engage students in learning and reflecting on learning, first-year composition faculty in the School of Letters and Sciences at Arizona State University (ASU) use this tool extensively both to promote learning and to assess it. The frame for portfolio assessment at ASU is the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” a synthesis of research, theory, practice, and years of discussion. Similarly, the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing”—jointly produced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project—focuses on facilitating student learning. As the CCCC Position on Assessment suggests, teachers in the ASU program ask students to construct course portfolios based on the WPA Outcomes Statement to “improve teaching and learning” (CCCC). In these portfolios, students make the following case: “In light of the learning outcomes for this course, here is what I have learned. Further, I offer the following evidence to document that I have learned what I claim to have learned.” *Academically Adrift* and *Higher Education?* ignore such sophisticated assessment devices; the assessment tools, which were used as the premise for each of these texts, were not developed with values of any particular discipline or curricular goals in mind, and certainly not the values of the discipline of rhetoric and composition.

As teachers, when the three of us read such portfolios, we consistently see evidence that students are engaged in critical thinking. For example, anyone who has studied rhetoric for any length of time—even for a few weeks in a first-year writing course—understands that rhetorical choices involve critical thinking. When a student decides how to craft a piece of discourse for a particular audience, with a specific purpose, and in a specific context, that writer is thinking critically. When a student decides whether to use one conventional organizational pattern rather than another one in an argument, that writer is thinking critically. When a student decides to use a more reliable source of information rather than a less reliable source, that writer is thinking critically. When a student analyzes his or her own discursive practices in a course portfolio, that writer is thinking critically.

However, for most students, there needs to be some reason to be invested in the decisions that writers make. For the findings in *Academically Adrift* based on the CLA, students' investment is relatively low because there are few if any consequences tied to performance. Some students spend relatively little time on the CLA tasks, which is understandable because there is little incentive to engage in those tasks or perform well on them. Although college administrators and governing boards may be invested in the results, students may be much less concerned about them because students do not have vested interest or see the benefits of applying themselves to a test that has little to no impact on their success in their academic programs. For more than thirty years, our discipline has widely rejected standardized testing as a single measure of student ability and capability. In course portfolios the investment is higher. Granted, for some students the investment is based on a desire to earn a particular grade in the course. For many students, though, the investment is based on a desire to learn how to use language to accomplish something in one or more of the four arenas of life: academic, professional, civic, personal.

Writing teachers can encourage students to be more invested in writing and engage them in critical thinking by designing writing assignments that encourage students to write about topics that interest them. Further, to promote critical thinking, teachers can encourage students to address audiences that matter to them. Also, students should have opportunities to choose genres and media that fit the occasion. As classroom teachers, we have observed that portfolios are often a point of pride for many students when they are able to see the overall picture of their learning in response to learning outcomes. Unlike individually graded assignments that the student never revisits, the portfolio shows the writer's growth over a semester, series of semesters, or throughout a program.

When the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Writing Project, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators developed and adopted the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing in early 2011, they offered another set of tools for promoting critical thinking, as well as the other learning outcomes described in the WPA Outcomes Statement. Furthering the conversation for educators outside of writing programs, teachers in all disciplines can implement methods for students to assess their own learning and thinking. As Peckham suggests in *Going North, Thinking West*, critical thinking should be taught within a discipline and assessed by that discipline because it is difficult to assess critical thinking outside of one's field given that the standards in one field do not translate to another. In other words, critical thinking is "field-dependent" (60). Critical thinking cannot be performed in a vacuum, meaning that critical thinking cannot occur without teaching critical thinking *about* something. To encourage critical thinking across the disciplines, teachers can establish course outcomes based on their discipline's values, implementing writing assignments and student self-assessment opportunities similar to portfolios used in first-year writing courses.

The books under review here remind writing program administrators that many internal and external stakeholders are invested in the success of higher education, and they care about the teaching and learning that students experience. When outsiders, including administrators, suggest or impose specific assessment practices for writing programs, writing teachers and administrators need to respond—or better yet, be proactive—by drawing on theory, research, and practice in the field to advocate for effective assessment. Additionally, to gain the support needed for writing programs, writing program administrators must use methods and language to represent assessment findings to those outside of writing programs in language that stakeholders can understand. In the Council of Writing Program Administrators, for example, the Network for Media Action has taken on this responsibility. Writing program administrators must develop strategies for determining what works most effectively in their local programs, but theories and research about critical thinking and student success are also increasingly important. As noted here, there are no "quick fix" solutions to the challenges of assessing thinking and learning, and book authors who lump together all programs within an institution—or worse, all institutions as a whole—fail to adequately and fairly represent learning in higher education.

AUTHORS' NOTE

We thank Ed White for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review essay.

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