

Review

Broad, Bob. *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2003. 174 pages. \$21.95 (paper).

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Rubrics have been an essential part of writing assessment for so long that it's hard to remember a time when we did not use them to evaluate samples of student writing. It is even harder to envision abandoning rubrics in large-scale evaluations of writing, especially when these assessments have high-stake goals such as making pass/fail determinations for students. Yet this is precisely what Bob Broad argues that the "age of the rubric has passed." *What We Really Value* does not prove this new age has actually arrived, but the author makes a convincing case that WPAs should rethink the pivotal role given to rubrics. This book offers not only an alternative tool but an alternative model of assessment a model that reflects contemporary perspectives of composition and rhetoric.

What We Really Value describes this revolutionary approach by reporting on the results of an intensive qualitative study conducted at "City University" (a fictional name). From this study, which actually began with a somewhat different purpose, Broad developed a means of assessing writing that, with modifications, could be used in most, if not all, composition programs. This alternative model, which he calls Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM), is certainly a more complex approach than the conventional rubric that grew out of the research of Paul Diederich and others. But as the author argues, writing—because it is a complex act—requires more than the conventional five-point rubric to represent what composition teachers value.

As the author argues, the fundamental problem with most scoring rubrics is that they are aimed at securing inter-rater reliability, which is not the same as determining if sample essays reflect what teachers normally value in student writing. Most rubrics are simple, clear, practical, and focused (for example, Educational Testing Service uses a rubric based on the basic criteria of ideas, form, flavor, mechanics, and wording). Such rubrics, as Broad states, are admirable in many ways, but "their great weakness is in what

they leave out” (2). DCM offers a robust explanation of the multifaceted and often conflicting values teachers have about the teaching of writing *and* about a set of student essays.

This book describes a sophisticated qualitative study, explains the sound but uncommon portfolio system used at City University; it then extrapolates the basic principles of DCM that could manageably be used at other schools. Because these and other descriptions blend into one another, I often found it difficult determining which procedures best defined DCM itself, though the final chapter does offer a clearer picture of the model and how it can be adapted. Broad calls for replacing traditional rubrics with “live” decisions by three teachers about each portfolio (or essay sample). In essence, evaluators discuss each sample and argue its merits before casting a pass/fail vote (conceivably, a score of some sort could be assigned other than pass/fail). This sort of negotiated or communal evaluation is, as the author notes, not new, but it is the work done *before* the communal assessment takes place that is most definitive of Dynamic Criteria Mapping. During norming (or what Broad refers to as “articulation”) sessions, the evaluators and assessment coordinators discuss samples of student writing selected because they would be most likely to reveal diverse ways in which student writers create rhetorical success, or fail to do so. Typically, norming sessions in conventional assessments focus on papers selected because they can serve as benchmarks or obtain agreement. With DCM, the sessions are intended to create open discussions about the many ways a paper might succeed or fail. Rather than securing interrater agreement by constraining criteria for evaluating papers, articulation sessions clarify the range of values teachers hold and why they disagree.

DCM does not simply promote hearty discussions. Participants (teachers and program administrators) at a site carefully analyze notes on these discussions along with relevant documents, such as mission statements or other program materials. From this analysis, participants would next “establish the identities, contents, boundaries, and interrelationships of the various criteria” (131). If all this sounds challenging and perhaps intangible, it is. However, the result is a visual representation that summarizes the dialogues and analyses in a format that, while not as simple and clear as a rubric, is accessible and useful. Broad suggests using assorted maps and visual devices that join similar criteria in clusters and allow teachers to see how criteria relate to one another. (For example, students see constellations of criteria that are placed onto overlapping circles, or diagrams that represent a continuum rather than an either/or relationship between categories of criteria). When a simple list or table suffices, such maps become unnecessary. Not shying from complexities, though, Broad encourages even the

simplest of criteria or lists to be complemented by a range of definitions and synonyms actually used by the teacher evaluators, enabling participants to appreciate the diverse ways of describing a value.

The author’s study provides useful examples of DCM. In his intensive study of City University, Broad found three types of criteria: textual criteria (which he divided into textual qualities and textual features), contextual criteria, and a category he called “other factors.” These categories were made up of numerous criteria that emerged during data analysis. For instance, textual qualities include thirty-one criteria, and contextual criteria comprise twenty-two criteria. Broad represents these criteria through various maps and tables.

I will not focus on these criteria or categories because the point of the book is to describe Dynamic Criteria Mapping itself, not to present a list of “the” criteria teachers use to evaluate all writing. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the findings from City University are extremely interesting, making the book worthy of reading just to explore the values teachers might hold. Broad found, for example, the criterion of mechanics (punctuation, spelling, etc.) to be the most dominant value based on the number of times it came up during evaluators’ discussions. This is not the first time a study has shown the impact of mechanics, but it is still surprising given that the program at City University is not a traditional one in which we might expect teachers to focus most often on mechanics. As Broad notes, it is exactly this sort of contradiction that DCM is designed to highlight.

Equally interesting is the attention the study gives to contextual criteria in formal assessment. These criteria deal not so much with the text of an essay but with “pedagogical, ethical, collegial, and other aspects of the environment surrounding students’ texts” (73). Contextual criteria include factors such as goals of first-semester composition, the purpose of assessment, and the possibility that a student might have plagiarized. Contextual criteria are also important because they represent the values that most rubrics are designed to minimize or mask, even though the contextual nature of discourse is something many teachers value in theory and in their own teaching.

Points are not assigned to criteria listed on a map. In this model, a map is not part of a mathematical formula but instead provides information for evaluators using dialogue to determine if writing samples reflect the values held by teachers in the writing program. Broad believes that the map should be provided to students and others who would benefit from knowing what teachers expect in successful student writing. He also suggests that a map evolves as a program changes, meaning that mapping might not be an

annual occurrence but should certainly not be viewed as a one-time project. As any worthwhile assessment should, DCM leads to pedagogical and program improvements, not just to scores.

DCM has its drawbacks. Clearly, it is time-intensive, and the maps are not as simple to use as a rubric. Broad says little of how often evaluators at City University agreed and disagreed, but it seems unlikely the criteria maps secured more agreement than a rubric would have. As he argues, though, a rubric is designed to secure interrater agreement by constraining choices, while a map is intended to forefront a range of values and the discrepancies that arise in writing programs. Other limits of DCM are less obvious. Despite the author's scrutiny and carefully gathered data, his categorizing, counting, and definitions of criteria are open to debate. Broad frequently notes how certain criteria might seem very much like others he found, yet he explains why he separated them anyway. Such subjectivity occurs with any study, particularly a qualitative study in which apparently only one person performs the fundamental coding and analyses of data. Any conventional rubric is also open to debate and interpretation, but criteria mapping is especially likely to be viewed as arbitrary if for no other reason than the fact that maps must be inclusive and thorough. A rubric might have five or more criteria offering opportunities for debate, whereas a map such as City University's has eighty-nine points of departure.

At times, the author may overstate the case for DCM, referring to the "unparalleled potential for Dynamic Criteria Mapping" (120) and the "unprecedented quantity and quality of information" (121) it provides. However, his enthusiasm is understandable. With no suitable alternative, rubrics have rarely been seriously challenged. Dynamic Criteria Mapping is more than a mere instrument; this model calls for a contextualized assessment that leads directly to teacher reflection and program improvements. Is it worth the additional work it takes to implement such a radical change? DCM may not work at every site, particularly where open dialogue about values and change is risky for nontenured faculty. But it is exciting to think of the ways in which a more robust, thorough assessment might inform teachers and students. I found myself thinking I would like to see Dynamic Criteria Mapping applied not only to student writing but various types of discourse. For instance, it would be both interesting and useful to see a map of what compositionists value in their own professional discourse.

Writing creates a complex dialogue that attends to the setting in which a text appears, and Bob Broad offers a way to assess writing that is also dialogic, contextual, and complex in terms of showing what teachers really value.