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ORGANIC MATTERS
In Praise of Locally Grown Writing Assessment

Bob Broad

In his book *Organic Matters* (2001), farmer Henry Brockman criticizes the USDA definition of "organic" (grown without chemical pesticides or synthetic fertilizers) as dangerously weak. He points out that most commercially grown organic produce purchased at grocery stores lacks flavor and nutrition just as much as most commercially grown non-organic produce. Both these kinds of food are produced industrially with the goal of high yields, and with similar costs to the environment, to the flavor and nutritional value of the produce, and ultimately to consumers.

In other words, what Michael Pollan (2006) calls "industrial organic" agriculture enacts nearly (but not quite) as dramatic an abandonment of the human values and purposes of farming as does the dominant form of industrial agriculture, which also uses pesticides and petro-chemical fertilizers. Both forms of industrial farming ultimately fail to preserve or protect the land, and both fail to nourish the customer optimally; and both fail for the same reason: the pursuit of greater profits.

Brockman argues for (and practices) a tougher, more comprehensive standard of organic agriculture. This higher standard requires farmers to protect the ecosystem, select plant varieties for nutrition and taste rather than appearance and durability, and establish direct farmer-to-consumer connections through farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture co-operatives like those through which Brockman sells his produce. In my favorite passage from his slim book, he lays out the unanswered questions that prevented him from ever eating an organic tomato, imported from South America, brought to him by his sister one winter day a few years ago.

> How could I [eat it]? I knew nothing about that tomato. . . . [Its] life history was a cipher to me. Who planted it? Who picked it? What kind of soil was it grown in? How was it fertilized? Irrigated? How many people had touched it on its long journey to my kitchen counter? How long had it sat in a box? Was the hangar, plane, truck, warehouse, cooler it sat in fumigated with noxious chemicals? How much fuel had been burned on its way from a field in Chile to

> my counter in Congerville [Illinois]? I had no idea what the answers to all these questions might be. This tomato was just too far removed from me and my life for me to eat. (Brockman, 1)

If the tomato comes from too far away for him to know its story, if the circumstances of its production and delivery to his home are, in Brockman's words (echoing Emmanuel Levinas's [1987] ethical philosophy) overwhelmingly "faceless," then Brockman would simply rather do without it altogether—even on a cold, tomato-barren December day.

Among educational leaders and reformers, the phrase "learning culture" is now commonplace (Shepard 2000). As educators, we nurture and grow our students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. We carefully tend the learning environment, and we provide our students with the best resources available to nourish their curiosity, understanding, and active participation in democratic citizenship. Among those of us interested particularly in assessment, we strive to create "assessment cultures" (Huot 2002) in which educators integrate their evaluations into teaching and learning (and vice versa) and match their assessment methods with best instructional practices (and vice versa).

Of course not everyone favors this "home gardening" approach to learning and evaluation. As this book goes to print, commercial testing corporations are eagerly inviting us to out-source writing (and other) assessments to their computerized systems (Ericsson and Haswell 2006). Note, for example, this recent postcard from the Educational Testing Service: "How long does it take you to evaluate an essay? Instantly . . . using Criterion™ Online Writing Evaluation . . ." (One's imagination flashes irresistibly to a hard, pale, joyless, imported tomato.) Or consider this subject line in a recent e-mail message from another evaluation corporation: "Faculty Unburdened: Assessment Made Simple in 5 Steps." Many of us feel troubled by such fast-food-style offers to make assessment faster and simpler by splitting it off from the rest of our work as educators. In such a climate, we need to recall and listen to other voices urging us to re-capture, re-coup, and harness organic, localized assessment to nourish productive teaching and learning.

In 1989, Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln published their book *Fourth Generation Evaluation.* Making good on the promise to their readers of a book "dramatically different from any other book about evaluation that you have ever read" (7), the authors issue a manifesto for a revolution in evaluation as a scholarly discipline and as an institutional practice. Though the paradigmatic and philosophical basis for—and performance of—this revolution is complex, one feature of it clearly marks it as a precursor to the evaluative approaches illustrated in the book you are now

reading. Guba and Lincoln emphasize that the methods and findings of their evaluative system "are inextricably linked to the particular physical, psychological, social, and cultural contexts within which they are formed and to which they refer" (8). The authors go on to insist that much of the positive value of fourth generation evaluation comes precisely from the *impossibility* (their word—and their italics) of generalizing its methods and findings—which are focused on achieving a negotiated, value-pluralistic, site-specific consensus—across dissimilar contexts.

> The consensus [achieved] is the product of human conceptual exchange in a *particular* setting; it is thus unlikely that this same consensus would necessarily help other persons make sense of *their* settings. (Guba and Lincoln, 8, emphasis original)

Guba and Lincoln adamantly oppose the importation of evaluative methods or findings across institutions or cultures. Their fourth generation evaluation is a militantly local, organic assessment practice.

Seven years after Guba and Lincoln's call to evaluative rebellion, Pamela Moss (1996) extended a more moderate and inclusive invitation to those in educational assessment to open our minds to

> less standardized forms of assessment that honor the purposes teachers and students bring to their work . . . [and] the complex and subtle ways that assessments work within the local contexts in which they are developed and used. (Moss 1996, 20)

Moss reinforces the democratizing spirit of her call for home-grown assessment by invoking the classic ethnographic imperative to "understand what the actors—from [their] own point of view—mean by their actions" (21). Moss explains how ethnographers use the term "emic" to refer to interpretations offered by participants in a particular context or culture, as distinct from the "etic" interpretations typically offered by outsiders and experts. The next generation of educational measurement, Moss insists, needs to privilege emic meanings and values.

Richard Haswell's collection *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction within a University Writing Program* (2001) is also rich with calls for healthful alternatives to industrial and commercial writing assessment:

> All good assessment is local (xiv)

> Our moral is that writing teachers should be leery of assessment tools made by others, that they should, and can, make their own (14)

> Everywhere people will prefer known brands to locally grown assessments (39)

Haswell's book urges us to steward the distinctive "climate," "ecology," and "ecosystem" (62, 67) of assessment and learning in our organizations.

One of the strongest voices promoting home-grown assessment culture can be heard in Brian Huot's *Re-Articulating Writing Assessment* (2002). At one point, Huot puts it this simply: "we need to use our assessments to aid the learning environment for both teachers and students" (8). In the chapter "Toward a New Theory for Writing Assessment," Huot offers his now-familiar list of five features characterizing the newly emerging paradigm in writing assessment, four of which precisely match farmer Brockman's core values: site-based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, and accessible.

The co-authors of the present volume carry forward this quest for locally produced writing assessment. In describing the dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) project faculty undertook at Mid Michigan Community College, Barry Alford gives a slightly different twist—and name—to organic assessment culture: he calls it "smart assessment."

> What I find most attractive about [DCM] is that it fits my sense of "smart" assessment, assessment that makes the context, environment, or institution smarter and more reflective. (personal communication)

In similar terms, Eric Stalions speaks of the "symbiotic relationship" his participants at Bowling Green State University envisioned between placement assessment and course-based teaching and learning: each endeavors to help the other grow and thrive. Symbiotic, smart, organic, and locally grown: those are the qualities we seek in our assessments.

The unanswerable questions ("Who planted it? Who picked it? Will it satisfy and nourish the eater?") that left Henry Brockman's long-distance tomato sitting uneaten on his kitchen counter are the same questions that lead Guba and Lincoln, Moss, Haswell, Huot, Alford (2007), Stalions (this volume), and many others in the field of writing assessment to reject generic, faceless, commercialized, off-the-shelf assessments and instead to grow their assessment cultures locally and (by Brockman's rigorous definition) organically.

THIS BOOK'S ROOTS

In *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing* (2003), I presented a critique and proposal that carried forward the relatively young tradition of local and organic assessment culture described above. I argued that, despite the significant benefits of traditional rubrics, they are too simple and too generic to effectively portray the educational values of any specific classroom, department, or program. As an alternative, I urged colleagues in composition and rhetoric to implement a process called dynamic criteria mapping (DCM).

Inspired by Guba and Lincoln's *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (1989) and Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory (1967), the DCM approach promotes inductive (democratic) and empirical (ethnographic) methods for generating accurate and useful accounts of what faculty and administrators value in their students' work. Educators, I claimed, have ethical, civic, and professional obligations to discover, negotiate, record, and publish the values underlying their teaching and evaluation. Finally, I argued that both the inductive and empirical characteristics of DCM made it a process superior to that by which traditional scoring rubrics are developed, and so I called DCM the necessary next step beyond rubrics in the evolution of assessment.

In the closing chapter of that book, I predicted that DCM would yield six distinct professional benefits for faculty and administrators:

- Improve student learning

- Provide drama, excitement, and surprise (for faculty participants)

- Boost pedagogical and evaluative self-awareness

- Improve teaching and assessment

- Increase validity and truthfulness

- Promote buy-in (especially by non-tenure-line instructors)

I ended my book with an invitation to readers to move beyond traditional assessment practices that over-simplify learning, teaching, and assessment, and to "embrace the life of things."

Early reviewers of the book were unsure, however, whether or how to accept these invitations, whether to enter the embrace. (The following analysis of the reception of *What We Really Value* is adapted directly from Chapter 2 of Stalions 2007.) White (2004) and Johnson (2004) were the most skeptical. White described DCM as "impressive" yet also "rather daunting" and "impractically complicated" (115). Johnson dismissed DCM as "too much work" (184) for writing program administrators.

Others saw more potential in the proposed methods. Strauch (2004) and Durst (2006) saw DCM as a new approach that would mark the end of rubrics altogether. Eliason (2004) and Beason (2005) cast DCM slightly differently, both using the term "alternative" to describe its relationship to traditional assessment methods. Kalikoff (2004), meanwhile, called DCM a "claim for alternative twenty-first century assessment."

One of the most interesting patterns of response concerned the relationship reviewers perceived between DCM and traditional rubrics. Myers (2003) saw DCM as a "new rubric," and Belanoff and Denny (2006) also described the outcome of the DCM process as another kind of rubric, albeit one "that will be applicable only within the context in which it is created"

(135). The co-authors contributing to the book you are now reading struggled with exactly this concern: whether their processes and outcomes were enough unlike rubrics to qualify as dynamic criteria maps. At the conclusion of this introductory chapter, I offer my reflections on their quandary.

While the various reviewers of *What We Really Value* reported feeling skeptical, interested, puzzled, anxious, inspired, or blasé, the co-authors of the current volume gathered the will and invested the time and energy to actually put DCM to use. They found my analyses, suggestions, and claims inviting and provocative enough that they adapted the DCM process to their distinctive purposes, needs, contingencies, and contexts. In the following chapters, they explore and discuss what they discovered and achieved when they carried out the second and third generations of dynamic criteria mapping in their college and university writing programs (see "The First Three Generations of DCM Application" in Stalions 2007). In my judgment, their discussions provide solid evidence to validate and confirm several, though perhaps not all, of my hopes and claims for DCM. You, the readers, will judge for yourselves. Meanwhile, and more important, the contributors to this volume generated exciting new insights of their own regarding homegrown, inductive assessment.

In 2002, in reviewing the manuscript of *What We Really Value*, Susanmarie Harrington quoted Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use" and predicted that the forthcoming book would prove useful to those concerned with the healthfulness of the relationship between teaching and assessing writing. In the prologue to the book published the following year (2003), I turned Susanmarie's blessing back onto the readers of the book as a benediction for the work I hoped they might do with it. As the book's author, I had little power to determine whether and how DCM would be put to use in the world. Only the contributors to this book—along with others not included here, who are putting DCM into action in yet more settings and more ways—could make Susanmarie's prediction come true. I am grateful to them all for launching their DCM projects and for studying and reporting on those projects to create this book.

At the following five institutions (presented alphabetically by co-authors' last names), this book's contributors adapted, enacted, and innovated on theories and strategies about which they had read in *What We Really Value*.

Local DCM leaders /co-authors of this book	Institutions
Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem	Eastern Michigan University (EMU)
Barry Alford	Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC)

Jane Detweiler and Maureen McBride   University of Nevada, Reno (UNR)

Susanmarie Harrington and Scott Weeden   Indiana University/Purdue University at
                                                                    Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Eric Stalions   Bowling Green State University (BGSU)

Below are brief sketches of the institutional and scholarly contexts in which each co-author (or team of co-authors) conducted their DCM projects.

Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem, Eastern Michigan University

Eastern Michigan University (EMU) is a comprehensive university of about 24,000 (about 22,000 of whom are undergraduates) located in southeast Michigan. From 2000-2006, Linda and Heidi coordinated the first-year writing program (Linda still serves as Director of First-Year Writing at EMU while Heidi has moved to Boise State University). Within the first-year sequence, English 121, the targeted course for the DCM-based assessment project, is the second and most research-intensive writing course. It is also the required general education writing course on campus, taken by about 97 percent of incoming students. Linda and Heidi used DCM as part of their community-based program assessment because it gave them a way to articulate shared values while making those same values visible and public.

Barry Alford, Mid Michigan Community College

Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC) is one of twenty-eight independent community colleges in Michigan. It has an enrollment of roughly 4,000 students, and is a comprehensive community college, meaning it offers technical, health, and occupational programs along with transfer options. This project covered the entire credit-bearing range of those offerings and involved all the full-time faculty at the institution. MMCC tried DCM in order to ground their assessment program, which covered diverse areas of study, in a common language of what instructors thought students should learn and faculty should value.

Jane Detweiler and Maureen McBride, University of Nevada, Reno

The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) is a midsize land grant institution and the state's research flagship. The Core writing program, a part of the university's vertically-integrated core curriculum, was the site where DCM was adopted and adapted to develop an assessment project focused on "effective writing" and "critical thinking" in English 102, the required first-year writing course. Jane Detweiler, the Core writing program administrator, led an assessment team that included co-author Maureen McBride and several other graduate student interns. They used DCM to develop an

approach that drew from previous portfolio assessment projects (which had not focused specifically on critical thinking as such), provided rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the program's effectiveness at pursuing its stated outcomes, and engaged their teaching community in reflection on our shared pedagogical practice.

Susanmarie Harrington and Scott Weeden, Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)'s writing program serves more than 6,000 students each year at a comprehensive urban university. The program coordinates six different introductory writing courses and provides professional development for part-time and full-time writing faculty. Their traditions and practices date from a time when most students were older commuting students and almost all instructors were part-time faculty whose amazing volunteerism created curricula and infrastructure. Recent changes in the nature of the student body (now mainly younger students) and the faculty (now predominantly full-time, non-tenure track, although a substantial number of part-time faculty remain) changed the program's culture. Despite many positive changes, it was clear that some dynamism had been lost. IUPUI looked to DCM to help them navigate through an important moment of change in their teaching culture. Working together to meet institutional needs, they used DCM to engage their faculty in collaborative research, simultaneously solving a local problem and extending scholarly inquiry. (Susanmarie recently took a new position at the Univeristy of Vermont.)

Eric Stalions, Bowling Green State University

Located in Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green State University (BGSU) serves approximately 23,000 students through 200 undergraduate majors and programs, 64 master's degree programs, and 17 doctoral programs. This DCM study was situated within the General Studies Writing Program, a well-established, independent writing program. DCM was used to identify, analyze, and map the rhetorical values or criteria that guided placement program evaluators in placing students into one of the first-year writing courses in 2006. The purposes of the study were: 1) to strengthen the relationship between the placement program's communal writing assessment practices and the writing program's curriculum, and 2) to provide a general heuristic with which writing program administrators could investigate the evaluative criteria of their placement programs' rhetorical assessment practices.

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While the current book focuses specifically on the interplay among DCM projects at these five colleges and universities, our field is also starting to hear about DCM-inspired studies conducted at a variety of other institutions, including Illinois Wesleyan University, the University of Washington Tacoma, Roanoke College (Salem, VA), Texas State University-San Marcos, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The co-authors of this book salute and cheer all those doing similar work elsewhere, and we look forward to reading their accounts of how and why they tried DCM in their contexts, and with what results.

What follows is my sketch of several themes I observed running through the discussions in the chapters that follow.

HOME-GROWN, DO-IT-YOURSELF WRITING ASSESSMENT

As you will discover as you read this book, one of the strongest themes in the following accounts of DCM projects was the high value that these co-authors—and colleagues at their institutions—placed on the home-grown, do-it-yourself qualities of the process. In an e-mail message, Eric Stalions (DCM researcher at Bowling Green State University) wrote that

> Composition scholarship seems to be dominated still by theoretical arguments for locally-contextualized assessments. Our book, I think, will infuse real-life applications into future theoretical discussions . . .

Barry Alford, Faculty Assessment Chair at Mid-Michigan Community College, echoes Stalions's excitement about how important it is that these DCM efforts were (and are) grounded in the histories and people that make each institution unique:

> We have been able to engage most of the faculty in the dialogue about our students. It is important that they (the faculty) see this as specific to our students and our institution. This isn't about national norms or general definitions of students. This is about the people in our classes and the problems they bring in the door with them. I don't think that fact can be overemphasized. Faculty are willing, in a way they never were before, to engage in the dialogue because it's about them and their students.

Alford ties faculty investment in professional development and evaluative inquiry to exactly the same home-grown qualities celebrated by Brockman, Guba and Lincoln, Haswell, Moss, and Huot. Alford goes on to observe that he and his colleagues

> wanted assessment to be grounded in real student work and not inferred from published instruments normed in populations of students that did

not mirror our own for institutions that our students did not attend. (see Chapter 3)

Describing their innovations at the University of Nevada, Reno, Jane Detweiler and Maureen McBride speak of the "organic" character of the process they undertook, and they see that feature of the process yielding an enhanced sense of ownership by UNR writing instructors.

> It is the organic nature of DCM that we applied in our assessment design process. We have basically produced a non-traditional rubric, but this is what came from the instructors in the program. And they own the rubric. (see Chapter 4)

At IUPUI, meanwhile, Susanmarie Harrington and Scott Weeden noted that

> Dynamic criteria mapping seemed the best way to articulate the conflicts we saw brewing in our program, conflicts that wouldn't come out in the open so long as we had a traditional rubric that stood in the way of unauthorized assumptions about writing. (see Chapter 5)

The documents Detweiler and McBride (at UNR) and Harrington and Weeden (at IUPUI) produced with their colleagues looked more like traditional rubrics than they had planned or expected, but the rubricity or non-rubricity of the results was not of prime importance. Foremost for them was that the values recorded there were, more than ever before, true to their respective programs and to the particular communities of faculty and students who work within them.

Localness, groundedness, and reverence for the nuances of context comprised one powerful theme in what these assessment leaders and their colleagues valued in their DCM experiences. Another dimension of DCM shared by several of this book's co-authors seems at first at odds with the locally grown quality just discussed. They found that careful, grounded discussion of local particulars created a language by which they could make connections *across* contexts that were formerly difficult to link.

CREATING CONNECTIONS ACROSS CONTEXTS

At the time of their DCM collaboration, Heidi Estrem and Linda Adler-Kassner worked together at Eastern Michigan University. As they explain in their project report, they used DCM to help bring to light how first-year writing faculty and stakeholders from across campus valued students' writing. Even with all their emphasis on the primacy of specificity and "place" (inspired by the work of Anis Bawarshi 2006), Adler-Kassner and Estrem nevertheless found themselves in a position to make important observations that transcended the specific.

In the focus groups, we made the somewhat paradoxical discovery that asking participants to ground their discussions of qualities associated with good writing in specific "places" allowed us to make connections between and among those stories to more general qualities. (see Chapter 2)

Likewise, Barry Alford, in his multi-disciplinary DCM project, found that the study of "real student work" authored by "our [MMCC] students" produced a lexicon with which faculty across the curriculum could discuss not only assessment, but also curriculum, teaching methods, and other issues around which they had not previously been able to converse. In Alford's words, their DCM efforts allowed MMCC faculty for the first time

to bridge gaps between disciplines and between programs that have few, if any, common educational goals. (see Chapter 3)

These researchers found that through their locally grounded DCM processes, they moved from the authentic particulars of their teaching-learning contexts into a language and a sphere in which disparate colleagues could converse, connect, and collaborate in new ways.

"TO BE OF USE": ADAPTATION TO LOCAL REALITIES ENACTS AND PROTECTS THE SPIRIT AND IDEALS OF DYNAMIC CRITERIA MAPPING

As you, our readers, prepare to venture forth and find inter-connections and themes of your own among the DCM projects described herein, allow me to point out one more commonality. In several of the accounts presented here, you will find co-authors worrying over whether their methods of conducting DCM events were "true" (or true enough) to DCM as described in the book *What We Really Value*. Harrington and Weeden, for example, started out adamant that they were moving beyond rubrics, and that they needed maps (hopefully replete with circles and squares, like the maps I drew of City University's rhetorical values). However, their faculty were equally adamant in their anticipation of "the new rubric."

Our colleagues have tolerated our foray into DCM, but they're not much interested in the maps Scott produced. . . . "Where's the rubric?" they kept saying. (see Chapter 5)

The outcome of this ideological and political dialectic was the IUPUI "unrubric," which discusses levels of performance (the feature of rubrics the instructors considered necessary) but also highlights fresh, detailed language about what qualities truly characterize successful writing at IUPUI (the heart of what DCM demands).

Detweiler and McBride, at the University of Nevada, Reno, felt pressure from another direction that drove them toward a less complicated, more useable, and more portable representation of programmatic writing values than what they believed "true" DCM called for. They needed a representation that would not only enhance classroom and program-level practices, but that would also be meaningful and persuasive to directors and deans "up the food chain." In creating the UNR star, which lays out six levels of performance in nine areas (plus two narrative-only areas of evaluation), the DCM leaders at UNR created an assessment tool that met the needs of both these very different audiences.

Along the way, these DCM explorers worried about whether the adaptations and compromises they made were "legitimate" in relation to DCM praxis as I had presented and proposed it in the 2003 book. My response to this concern brings us back to the beginning of this process, to the beginning of my earlier book, and to Piercy's poem "To Be of Use."

I can conceive of projects that might lay claim to the name "DCM" but that do not merit that description. For example, I once watched as a small group of English teachers took the rich, complex chart of values generated over the course of several months of discussions among their colleagues from across the curriculum and collapsed those values into the same old generic, pre-fabricated rubric presented as part of the statewide impromptu writing test. These few teachers decided they did not want "to re-invent the wheel" and that the off-the-shelf rubric adequately encapsulated the local, textured values their colleagues had worked so hard to illuminate and articulate. So yes, there is such a thing as DCM gone wrong, DCM not worthy of the name.

However, none of the projects in this book risks such censure from me or anyone. Every one of these five projects was deeply committed to the ideals and principles driving DCM as I envisioned and enacted it. Equally important, every project was also loyal to the people, histories, contingencies, and nuances of their local and momentary contexts. They found ways to "accommodate reality" (in Harrington and Weeden's phrase) while also transforming it. Their deep loyalty to both the axiological and rhetorical idealism driving *What We Really Value* and the gritty, everyday realities of their local working contexts is what makes the contributors to this book not only "legitimate" practitioners of DCM but also pioneers of the next generation of praxis in large-scale writing assessment and faculty professional development.

All this liberal-minded congeniality does not mean that, over a friendly cup of coffee, I might not pose to some of my co-authors some challenging questions. For example, I might ask why in some cases evaluative criteria were gathered not empirically, from discussions of actual assessment decisions on specific student texts, but rather speculatively, from

what people believed and were aware of valuing. Or, I might wonder wistfully about relationships *among* criteria, that rare but informative insight that some maps provide and others do not. I would offer such questions not to discourage or censure any users of DCM, but rather to push them toward more rewarding results.

In fact, readers who re-visit the final chapter of *What We Really Value* will see that these co-authors' departures, adaptations, and innovations to meet local needs are not only allowed, but required by DCM as originally envisioned. I feel grateful to all colleagues (contributors to this book and others) who have put DCM into action, who have brought it to fruition in their classrooms, institutions, and organizations. I believe their projects make us better pedagogically, ethically, and professionally.