2

THE JOURNEY IS THE DESTINATION
The Place of Assessment in an Activist Writing Program—Eastern Michigan University

Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem

LOCAL CONTEXT

Eastern Michigan University is a comprehensive university of about 24,000 (about 22,000 of whom are undergraduates). Our students typically come from southeastern Michigan and northwestern Ohio. They come to EMU for a variety of reasons—proximity to their homes, cost (we're fairly inexpensive, as colleges and universities go), friends who have come here before, or because they want to be teachers and we're well-known as a "teacher training" school. (EMU started as the Michigan Normal School in 1849.)

When we were both at EMU, we were director and associate director of first-year writing, respectively. (Linda remains director of first-year writing.) The first-year writing program actually "hosts" two first-year courses (English 120, Composition I: Reading and Writing the College Experience and English 121, Composition II: Research and Writing the Public Experience) and one second-year course (English 225, Writing in a Changing World). Overall, we run about 190 courses a year in the program. About 100 of those (give or take) are sections of English 121, which is also the required, general education writing course on our campus. About 97 percent of all incoming students take the course.

Our dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) work is linked to a programmatic assessment of English 121. In 2003, we surveyed students at the beginning and end of the course to determine their degree of confidence in their learning outcomes. We also asked them to comment on the usefulness of English 121 with respect to future coursework. We learned a lot from the results about what students thought was working—the results were generally very positive—and about where to focus professional development efforts in the first-year writing program.

When we presented the results to the then-dean, her response—which we'll discuss shortly—led us to think about other assessment models and became the impetus for the project we describe in this chapter. About the same time that we had the conversation with the dean which provoked this

work, we both read Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* (2002), and then Bob Broad's book (2003) shortly after that. Both books influenced our thinking as we considered how to design an assessment process that would move us toward several goals. We are both fascinated by (and always learn a lot from) the process of writing, research, and discovery, so we knew that we wanted a rich, multi-layered, process-based assessment. Second, we were conscious that the process itself could be a way to continue to make visible the work of first-year writing students in various ways across campus. Third, we wanted the *results* of the assessment to provide meaningful information for several groups: students themselves, instructors within our first-year writing program, and various constituencies across the campus and community.

As we wrestled with the issues Huot outlines for writing assessment and considered DCM in that context, we came up with a different approach to programmatic assessment that would not only help us learn about what others thought, but would also involve others in the conversation about writing and writers. This worked for us on a lot of levels. Of course, it would address the dean's question. But it also was consistent with one of our program's most important goals, to affect conversations about writing and writers on our campus in lots of different ways.

ASSESSMENT AND PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE

In the last ten years, work in composition studies has focused the field's attention on the importance of "place" to writing and teaching writing. For writing program administrators, this focus provides us with ways to consider how local exigencies shape writing instruction. Three questions stemming from place-based work others have done permeate the assessment project, described in this chapter:

- How have composition theorist-practitioners imagined the spaces of writing, writers, and writing instruction? (Reynolds 1998, 14)

- How can a focus on the relationship between genre conventions and practices and the specific contexts in which genres function affect approaches to understanding and teaching writing? (Russell 1997; Devitt 2004; Bawarshi 2006)

- What are the relationships among approaches to writing (including writing instruction) and specific contexts? (W. Smith 1993; O'Neill 2003; Huot 2002; Broad 2003)[1]

---

1.   These questions have long antecedents in approaches to the study of literacy practices (composition, linguistics, education) that are rooted in cultural critique (e.g., Volshinov, Bahktin, Gramsci, Hall, Fairclough as they have been employed by Barton and Hamilton, Gee, Street, Bloom, and Selfe and Hawisher, among others), as well.

When we came to EMU in the fall of 2000, we were both acutely attuned to the nature of writing as a situated act enacted in and through the values and ideologies of contexts in which the writing is situated. In light of this valuing of context, when we collaborated with our first-year writing program colleagues to redesign the curriculum for EMU's two first-year writing courses, we put "place" squarely at their core. In both courses, as in the first year writing program more generally, we wanted students, instructors, and other program stakeholders to think carefully about the function of various genres in various places; to think critically and actively about how to identify and consciously enact conventions of genres; and to consider the implications of participating in those practices as writers and readers.

Four years later, we had developed a considerably more robust conception of the relationships between space and both writing instruction and writing assessment. This conception played out in multiple ways in our program assessment, but the journey toward this realization began with the conversation in our dean's office.

The scene

College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office, Fall 2003. Linda, Heidi and Russ (English department head) are meeting with the dean to discuss with her the results of an indirect assessment of English 121, EMU's second semester composition course. This course is taken by about 95 percent of first-year students.

The relevant dialogue

Linda: You'll see in this report that students' confidence levels with all but the technology-related outcomes for English 121 increased substantially, and at statistically significant levels, from the beginning to the end of the course. This assessment also points us to some areas where we need to focus professional development within the program–on reading-related issues, and on technology.

Dean: This is great. But this is what students say. What about other people?

This question, posed to us by our then-dean, is one that teachers have heard before: "Sure—students say they've improved, but what do *their* opinions matter? What do outside experts say?"

As much as we chafed at this question, we saw it then (as now) as legitimate and important. We might take it on its face: "What *do* other (outside/non-student/'experts') say about student work?" This question drives many direct assessments, especially those done by raters outside of writing programs. However, we could turn the question a bit and ask: What do people say about the (quality of) student work? Furthermore, what do people say

Linda and Heidi's work offers such a simple solution to a perennial writing program administrator (WPA) complaint: "They" (students, administrators, parents, colleagues) don't understand what we do in the writing program. Where do "they" get their ideas about writing from, especially if we don't offer much information to the public about what we do? The EMU writing program's willingness to interact with outsiders opens up the chance for it to set the agenda for conversations about writing (literally and metaphorically). If we don't help others see what we know about writing, we can't complain when we are misunderstood. *Harrington and Weeden*

about the qualities *in* written work, and how are those *related to* qualities in other work not created by students? This latter pair of questions reflects a more robust and developed concept of "validity" that is grounded in the same issues of space that we describe above. This conception of validity (in and through space) is developed by Brian Huot (2002) in *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment.* "Including theoretical input about the complexity and context necessary to adequately represent written communication as part of the validity process," Huot argues, "gives writing teachers and writing program administrators a real say about not only the ways in which student writing is assessed, but also in the ways it is defined and valued" (52).

In the Fall of 2004, after reading Huot's book, we began to think about a place-based assessment, one that would not only involve learning "what other people would say about student work" but would also contextualize the assessment in qualities of "good writing" in our local (institutional) context. We wondered what assessment process might address the multiple, overlapping goals and principles of:

- Creating more opportunities on campus for positive conversations about student writing

- Continuing to extend already-public conversations about writing on our campus—built through existing programs and initiatives (our own program, writing across the curriculum, the Eastern Michigan Writing Project) that stretch across populations and contexts

- Designing a process that generated both qualitative and quantitative data, for a variety of purposes, including professional development in first-year writing and writing across the curriculum, and that could be used for on-campus and accreditation purposes

- Honoring first-year writing instructors' knowledge of their students and the discipline while also listening closely to the values and perspectives of instructors from other disciplines

As we considered how to build this assessment, we were mindful of challenges and warnings established by Huot about the dangers of constructing assessments "that honor the legitimate claims of various stakeholders," but that "ignore the politics of power" as they are articulated and enacted *in* space, as well (55). We sought to balance the interests and concerns of outside "stakeholders" (54-55)—faculty, administrators, student services personnel, and others who worked with students outside of the first-year writing program in different ways and at different stages—and those inside of the program who worked with first-year students.

At the same time that we were considering the shape of this assessment, we were working with first-year writing program instructors to redesign the curriculum for English 120 (our first semester course), to make it more intentionally reflective and reflexive about context, style, and genre. Just as we were considering Huot's admonition that assessment should be context-specific, we were also reading Anis Bawarshi's 2003 work, *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*. Through that book, we were especially motivated by the idea that all writing takes place within genres. In a later essay developing this concept, Bawarshi asserts that genres are "the conceptual realms within which individuals recognize and experience situations at the same time as they are the rhetorical instruments by and through which individuals participate within and enact situation. Invention takes *place* . . . . [It is] an act of locating oneself socially" (Bawarshi 2006, 104). As the assessment project and our curriculum redesign work became increasingly intertwined, we began to think of this project through the lenses of genre theory. What would a project that conceived of assessment-as-genre, designed to help us understand what writing took what place, for whom, and why, look like? Investigating such questions would, we thought, provide us with valuable data about how writing was situated in this *place*, and could inform the continuing work of the first-year writing program to situate our courses (and the assignments and activities in them) through an increasingly complex and thorough understanding of context.

IDENTIFYING PLACE(S): CROSS-CAMPUS FOCUS GROUPS AND DCM

The first step in this assessment process involved discovering qualities associated with good writing in our campus community, our *place*.

To learn about this, we convened three focus groups consisting of a total of 18 invited members of the EMU community—three students, nine faculty, four professional staff members, and two administrators from around the campus. We also convened an additional focus group, later in the process, consisting of eight instructors, all from the first-year writing program. In convening the first set of (campus-wide) groups, we sought to invite not just key stakeholders (such as faculty members from departments that were

Linda and Heidi demonstrate how DCM sessions with students, faculty, and staff help educators identify and clarify characteristics of good writing in their specific places. By grounding their DCM work in their particular institutional context, Linda and Heidi foreground the evaluative dynamic among themselves, the dean, and their colleagues, and in the process, illustrate how local context functions in all DCM undertakings. *Stalions*

active in our university's writing across the curriculum program and whom we knew to be invested in student writing), but also participants who we thought would bring different and/or surprising perspectives to the discussions (such as the head of the math department and the Associate Director of University Housing).

We brought to these discussions some carefully crafted questions intended to guide the discussions, especially the connections between genre and *place*. We were especially cognizant, for instance, of the typical associations between "student writing" (to use the generic term so often invoked by those outside of composition) and "college" as a *place* reflected in knee-jerk statements like, "Aren't you appalled by student writing?" or "Students just can't write." We were well aware of the ways in which statements like these reflect elements of a dominant frame—that is, a boundary that both shapes interpretation of a symbol or idea, and fills in any "blank spots" that individuals might have regarding a subject. (This is the premise behind open-ended Socratic dialogue, for instance: those questions that seem 'open' but which have 'correct' answers.) "What is the writing of today's students like?" is such a question, with the already-known answers all-too prevalent today. (For more on framing see, for instance, Hall 1984, Lakoff 2004, Bray 2000, and Nunberg 2006. For more on prevalent narratives about students see Helmers 1994; and Adler-Kassner, Anson, and Howard 2008.) Bob Broad (2003) describes portfolio reading scenarios where instructors "tell unfettered truths about what they valued in the texts before them and compelled others to listen to those truths without dismissing them" (25). We sought those truths, as well, but crafted the questions in a way that deliberately privileged particular truths over commonplaces about student writing.

We also knew, in creating these focus groups, that we were building on groundwork that we had carefully laid over the previous five years. From the time we were hired, we—along with the other 40 or so instructors in the first-year writing program—had worked hard to change campus conversations about student writing, trying to focus them on what students *knew* and *could do* rather than what they didn't do and/or their (perceived) inabilities. For this purpose we had developed a curriculum for English 121 that engaged students in research work situated in real publics and real

communities. We also had created The Celebration of Student Writing, where students developed and shared a wide variety of multi-media projects based on their research work in our second-semester research writing course, English 121, that was attended by over 1000 people every semester (see Adler-Kassner and Estrem 2004). We had countless workshops, together and with colleagues from our writing across the curriculum program, on topics as wide-ranging as developing online instruction, to commenting on student writing, to developing good assignments. We had actively sought out and participated in any committee, discussion, activity, or program that had anything to do with student writing, and had worked with people from every unit on campus to share the work that we were doing in the first-year writing program and to improve that work in ways that took into consideration issues, passions, and concerns articulated in those meetings.

Even though Linda and Heidi's work focuses on first-year writing, their workshops with faculty across the curriculum and their discussions with a variety of stakeholders provide a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary DCM collaborative approach akin to Barry's interdisciplinary DCM assessment plan at Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC). *Stalions*

In and through all of this work, we were trying to both situate our program and approaches to writing instruction in our campus as a specific place, and to shape the perceptions of writing and writers that shaped discussions here.

Initially, we had drafted questions for these groups that asked participants to discuss the general features of good writing. But after a pilot focus group, we narrowed the focus of these questions, asking participants to "tell us a story" about their experiences with specific kinds of writing and reading.

Linda and Heidi's "story" heuristic helped ground faculty discussions of writing in their "place" just as Jane and Maureen's (University of Nevada, Reno) "movie poster" activity helped ground faculty discussions of assessment in their "perceptions" of writing. *Stalions*

This language of "story," we found, helped participants ground their work in a specific context, a specific *place* (Brown et al. 2005). Our intent was to ensure that participants would not initially jump to the default frame of what student writing "is," but would instead begin by exploring together their own specific terrains of "good writing." Thus, we asked participants to talk about *specific* qualities located in specific places:

- Tell us what makes a particular piece of writing [the piece they'd brought in] good writing

- Tell a story about a time when you wrote something inside of school or work that you considered meaningful or significant, and discuss why it was significant

- Tell a story about a time when you wrote something outside of school or work that you considered meaningful or significant, and discuss why it was significant

- Tell a story about a time when you read something inside of school or work that you considered important for you, and discuss why it was important

- Tell a story about a time when you read something outside of school or work that you considered important for you, and discuss why it was important

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. (The tension between our insistence that qualities associated with good writing are grounded in specific places, but that we must then move those qualities to *other* specific sites, is one that suffuses this project, in fact.) For instance, the stories told by members of all three campus-wide focus groups about "something they wrote inside of school or work that they found valuable" centered around the writer's engagement as it was represented through her or his interaction with the process and products of the writing. These related foci emerged in comments about the importance of taking ownership in the ideas in the writing, developing a writing process that enabled the writer to develop her or his own ideas, engaging in "discussion" or "dialogue" with the ideas of others (as they are represented in sources, for example), and affecting (in some way) the writer's own ideas. Through their discussions, focus group participants were able to form connections and alliances around specific *places*, specific instances where they enacted writing in ways that were important and/or meaningful to them in different ways. These places were many and diverse—from eulogies to classroom assignments (described by teachers and students), from memoirs to research papers.

Slightly different versions of these same foci also emerged in discussions with first-year writing program instructors. These instructors' responses were clearly articulated through their participation in the first-year writing program, which features extensive (and, we hope, healthy) collaboration among instructors and robust, collaborative professional development.

First-year writing program instructors, for instance, work together to develop the curricular infrastructure (readings, assignments, activities) for English 120 and English 121; determine, plan, and offer professional development workshops for one another; and engage in collaborative research about teaching-related activities. The result is a shared understanding of the "why" and "how" of writing instruction in our program, an understanding that extended to the ways in which this group positioned themselves in relation to writing undertaken in the context of the academy.

When talking about engagement, instructors placed a high value on the writer's engagement, but also on the engagement of the teacher-as-reader with the writing. Similarly, while they valued dialogue between the writer and others' ideas, they also valued watching writers (including themselves) grapple with the process of developing this dialogue, putting a premium on a kind of messiness that did not emerge as explicitly in focus groups comprised of people from outside of the first-year writing program.

ASSESSMENT AND DCM AS RHETORICAL ACTIVITY

When the three campus-wide and one first-year writing program focus group discussions were completed, we had more than seventy pages of transcripts from which to work. Here we drew on the concept of dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) as it is articulated in *What We Really Value* (Broad 2003) to help us make sense of and bring order to the abundance of data. As Broad describes it, DCM is "a streamlined form of qualitative inquiry that yields a detailed, complex, and useful portrait of any writing program's evaluative dynamics" (13). Initially, we'd been drawn to the power of DCM for representing a program's values as they are grounded in specific sites—aspects of the work generated in the program, for instance. As we became immersed in this ongoing, complex assessment process, we also discovered that DCM served two fairly distinct purposes within our project. One was process-based—it provided a way for the two of us to *see*—really and truly, in a visual form—the "complex, conflicted, communal quilt of rhetorical values" (Broad, 120) that came into contact with one another through these discussions. The DCM process, in other words, gave us a way to work back and forth productively among the rich data of the transcripts, our analyses, and a visual document. As we sat and mapped and remapped, our understandings of the complexities of these conversations made real the tension between our focus on specific, narrated stories within specific contexts and the need to abstract from those specificities and make connections *across* contexts. Our DCM maps left us, as people who had "been there," unsettled; they painted an uncomfortably abstracted picture. But, as we discuss later in this chapter, these DCMs also served important rhetorical purposes, providing us with important, strategic representations to take back to

the focus groups and to use as we continue advocating for a kind of public presence for writing on EMU's campus.

Rhetorically, the DCMs spoke volumes when we presented them to the full gathering of focus group participants several months following our initial conversations. The maps made visible to these diverse participants how strong particular themes were across all four conversations, and provided a powerful illustration of the rich possibilities for talking about "good writing"—and for considering, in turn, how that thinking might inform our thinking about *student* writing. After a two-hour meeting with members from all of the groups, we continued to revise both the maps and the assessment tool—for about six months, between November 2005 and May 2006—until we conducted the portfolio assessment for which the assessment tool was developed. The DCM maps thus became *places* where we could engage in a sustained conversation about writing instruction in and beyond our first-year writing program with a diverse group of "stakeholders" from inside and outside of that program.

In this sense, the dynamic criteria maps also helped us to strive to answer Patricia Lynne's (2004) call for "meaningfulness" and "ethics" as key terms for the composition research that underpins our work. She writes:

> 'meaningfulness' draws attention specifically to the purposes for and substance of any given assessment practice. Meaningful assessment, then, should be conducted for specific and articulated reasons, and its content should be intelligible to those affected by the procedure. 'Ethics' draws attention to assessment as it is practiced and specifically to the relationships among those involved in the process. (Lynne, 15)

DCM helped us shape what we believe was a meaningful and ethical assessment process, one that affected multiple groups of people.

Linda and Heidi's use of DCM reflects a courage to confront competing constituencies who feel a stake in the outcome of student writing and an effort to find a productive way of making competing voices part of the assessment of what a writing program does. *Harrington and Weeden*

ASSESSMENT AND DCM AS GENERATIVE SPACE

Above, we mention what we found to be one of the paradoxical aspects of this project: the theoretical framework (from Bawarshi 2003 and Huot 2002) suggests that qualities associated with "good writing" are site-specific, but our process had us taking specifics from one site and applying them to another (perhaps contradicting our premise that the site was important). Like the "quilt" invoked by Broad (2003), though, we took these sites as

separate "squares" in a common piece of work. Our challenge, then, was how to bring them together without erasing the interesting differences between them, especially as we were moving toward constructing a document that could be used to assess the portfolios of writers in our required, second semester composition course. We found, for instance, that we could find major themes among focus groups comprised of campus-wide members, and among those within the first-year writing program. But among the two groups, we also heard differences in the ways that writing was conceptualized, as we mention above. Comments by writing instructors in the first-year writing program focus group, who held a shared (and reinforced) sense of writing instructions developed and fostered through professional development work, generally could be said to focus on the *performance* being enacted in the writing as that performance was reflected in the writer's engagement and the reader's engagement. The first-year writing program group also talked about textual features; however, these features were seen as indicators of the writer's engagement with the performance of the rhetorical process (as it was manifested, for instance, in the ways that they incorporated evidence into their writing), rather than as an indication of a particular mark of "quality" associated with the writing. This group, in other words, viewed the work of writing as a performance in *place.* Indicators of "quality" reflected both the writer's understanding of that "place" (as it was evidenced in reflective/reflexive writing), *and* the analysis in the writing, *and* the writers use of conventions supporting the work in a particular genre. These indicators of "quality" emerged in small part because the first-year writing project group was talking about slightly different texts (provided by us, rather than by them); however, they primarily reflected the fairly unified, cohesive approach *to* writing instruction shared by members of the group (who were all active in the program and, in fact, were working on revising the first-semester class at the same time as they were engaged in this focus group work).

Major themes that emerged from the campus-wide focus groups had elements in common with the first-year writing program group's work, but there also were differences. Members of these campus-wide groups typically focused on the writing as a product, rather than as a performance, and their primary foci were on the conventions manifest in the writing and the author's seeming ownership of and investment in the topic. "Good writing" was also judged to have an effect on the writer and the reader—it helped each to clarify their feelings or ideas *and* to think differently about them (either by understanding them more deeply, or by challenging them). While this group also identified conventional features as important qualities of good writing—for instance, the writer's engagement with the subject, the evidence used to develop and/or support the writing, and

the textual features manifest in the writing—they were cited as qualities that affected participants' experiences of reading (especially as they affected their own emotional experiences). The *place* for this writing, in other words, was primarily comprised of the relationship that existed between writer and reader, rather than being constructed from an intersection of writer, reader, and context for writing.

> Placing the emphasis on what students do seems to me a much richer discussion for both the students and the faculty than the endless rant about what they cannot do. *Alford*
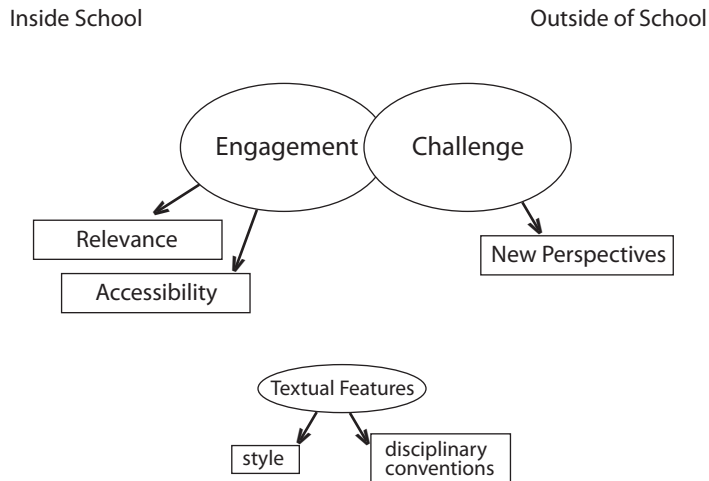
In our first attempt to make sense of these overlaps, we used Cmap Tools[2] software (which allow the user to construct "concept maps" using shapes of various sizes) to construct maps that captured representations of qualities associated with good writing, begin to identify the descriptors that were associated with those qualities (in the discussions), and visually express the relationships of one quality to another. (For example, we could represent the finding that, in the campus-wide focus group discussions, "engagement [of the reader]" and "challenge [to the reader's ideas]" were qualities expressed equally often as important characteristics of good writing outside and inside of school or work, and these qualities overlapped. These two most frequently mentioned qualities were represented in large ovals. "Relevance" and "accessibility" were two descriptors linked to engagement; "new perspectives" was linked to challenge [and represented in rectangles linked to the larger term]. Campus-wide focus groups also associated "textual features" with qualities of good writing, but less often than engagement or challenge. Since this feature was mentioned less frequently, it was represented with a smaller, lower entry in the visual Cmap, and the two descriptors associated with it—"[appropriate use of] disciplinary conventions" and "style"—also were represented in rectangles sized in relation to the frequency of their mention in the discussions. See figure one.)

Our first challenge, then, was to figure out how to bring these two conceptions of writer and writing together in some kind of assessment instrument—one of the many spots in this evaluation process where we felt the push me-pull you tension between the objectivist frame for assessment reflected in concepts like "reliability" and "validity" and the social constructivist frame surrounding instruction in our writing program. For

---

2. CmapTools is software developed and provided as a free download by the Institute for Human and Machine Cognition (IHMC). The CmapTools web site explains that the software "empowers users to construct, navigate, share, and criticize knowledge models represented as Concept Maps."

Fig 1. Concept Map

Questions One and Two
What is Good Writing / Examples of Good Writing
Inside and Outside of School

Inside School   Outside of School

Engagement   Challenge

Relevance

Accessibility

New Perspectives

Textual Features

style   disciplinary conventions

assessment scholars like Patricia Lynne, this tension provides the motivation to reject assessment models that do not reflect the latter frame:

> Educational measurement theory defines large-scale assessment as a technical activity. Consequently, each aspect of an assessment situation is treated as a variable more or less within the control of the assessment designer or administrator. Composition theory, however, treats writing as a complex of activities and influences, most of which cannot be cleanly isolated for analysis or evaluation. (Lynne, 4)

Standing at this decision's juncture, we were at the metaphorical crossroads between a tactical use of our research, and a strategic one. Tactical work, as Michel deCerteau (1984) explains, is the work of making do, the work of the weak, the "other," in the face of strategy that is controlled by the powerful. Tactical work "operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them" (37). Strategic work, on the other hand, is the "calculation . . . of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power . . . can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats . . . can be managed" (36). Attempting to bring together these different conceptions of writing and of writers into a singular, unified document, and to use that reconciliation as the basis upon which to construct an assessment tool, would represent the tactical decision; a strategic one, on the other hand,

would involve something like stepping outside of the process and codifying definitions of "quality" based on the principles and ideas that represented *our* ideas.

Our very description of that kind of (strategic) decision signals the road we took: the tactical one. In taking that road, making that decision, we of course made compromises and, perhaps, lost a little. Two steps forward, one step back (or, in the worst of cases, the reverse: one forward, two back) is the way of the writing program administrator and writing instructor, the kind of negotiation within the bureaucracy that Richard Miller (1999) describes as the conditions of our working lives (3-9). Here, for instance, we were cognizant of the conversation with our former dean (which itself reflected an always-present broader sentiment regarding writing); the inroads we had already made through existing outreach efforts on campus described above (and the need to sustain and perpetuate those inroads, which were themselves tactical decisions); our desire to build additional relationships; and our desire to use this assessment to both inform our program's practices and provide leverage to garner resources (financial and otherwise) to continue developing those practices. But then again, these are factors that contribute to *our* site, to the contexts for our practices—and we ignore that site at the risk of the writing program.

Thus, the first draft of our assessment tool tried to strike a compromise between these conceptions of "good" writing by accounting for *both* of them (when they differed, that is), as in the following example. First, readers would be asked to use a Likert scale to indicate their assessment of a *particular* quality (that had emerged as something associated with "good writing" among *all* the focus groups) in the portfolios of student writers. Then, they were asked to mark which qualities especially addressed that aspect of "good" writing. Working from Bawarshi's notion (2003) that writing takes *place*, we knew we wanted to learn not only about *whether* and *to what degree* readers found the qualities associated with "good writing" in students' portfolios, but also the criterion that they associated with good writing in this place in that work—what it looked like in *this* place, these portfolios. In the following two examples, then, "reader engagement" and "meaning to the writer" were identified across *all* groups as important qualities.

Linda and Heidi's collaborative, collegial work to identify good qualities of writing in portfolios is similar to Susanmarie and Scott's communal efforts at Indiana University/Purdue University–Indianapolis (IUPUI) to establish descriptions of high, medium, and low quality portfolios by way of faculty-driven DCM meetings. (See Appendix F to chapter five, "Approaching Grades in English W131.") *Stalions*

After each Likert scale question, we asked raters to choose from a selection of descriptors (also articulated by focus groups) that were associated with these qualities. Herein lay the differences, though, as groups sometimes articulated *different* descriptors associated with qualities of good writing. In the first draft, we attempted to capture this difference and let raters work from it in their scoring: the list on the left represents descriptors associated with good writing emerging from the first-year writing program focus group; the list on the right represented the descriptors associated with this indicator from the campus-wide focus groups.

---

1. The papers in this portfolio were engaging to me as a reader.

1	2	3	4
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Which of the following qualities led you to respond as you have in #1? *Check three qualities from either or both columns that best describe your response*:

FYWP Focus Group	Campus-wide Focus Group
• Showed that the writer was using writing as a way to think through ideas	• Showed that the writer was engaged on multiple levels
• Kept me interested as a reader	• Showed the writer's authority
• Helped me see the writer making interesting/unusual connections	• Easy for me to read
• Showed that the writer was thoughtfully moving between personal experience and evidence from outside sources	• Accessible language and style
	• Other (please specify)

7. Based on my reading, this writer seems to have been meaningful for the author of the portfolio.

1	2	3	4
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Which of the following qualities led you to respond as you have in #1? *Check three qualities from either/both that best describe your response*:

FYWP Focus Group	Campus-wide Focus Group
• Got a sense of the writer's investment in the question/topic	• Writer seems to have grown through the work
• Made compelling use of outside evidence to develop ideas	• Writing confirms author's feelings or ideas
• Analysis in the papers seemed complex and thorough	• Writing seems meaningful for a specific audience
• Other (please specify)	• Other (please specify)

Needless to say, we quickly realized that this bifurcated approach to portfolio analysis would present almost insurmountable challenges to our rating process. The data that these questions would produce would be so complicated as to be meaningless, and it would be extremely difficult to use those data to guide any kind of future work extending from the assessment. In essence, it might be a somewhat strategic decision to construct this kind of multi-perspectival rating instrument, but we thought that decision would interfere with *any* tactical gain that we might make because we weren't sure how we would analyze the results that we obtained through an assessment like this. Additionally, when we pilot tested this version of our assessment tool with raters, they told us that it was enormously confusing to use.

Returning to the data, then, we used a different visual method to chart the focus group transcripts. Where the Cmap Tools versions had provided us (and focus group participants) with static representations of (our analysis and interpretations of) the focus group discussions, this time we composed dynamic criteria maps that charted the *trajectory* of the conversations. Here we asked: How did these conversations unfold? What ideas, comments, and/or features of writing did participants pick up on and what was dropped? When comments, ideas, and/or features were picked up, how did they unfold as the conversation progressed? How did they lead participants to talk about other (related) topics, and what were those? The following are examples of the kinds of key phrases that led to additional, unguided conversation during our focus group sessions:

Takes complex subject and makes it accessible (*a thought, expressed by a participant, which served as a launching point for participants, who discussed it several times*) [which led to . . .]

Learns about something from a personal perspective [which led to . . .]

Challenges the writer's ideas [which led to . . .]

Makes complicated ideas accessible [which led to . . .]

Provides personal perspective [which led to . . .]

Gets point across without dragging out [which led to . . .]

Summarizes literature/makes an argument [which led to . . .]

Straightforward—helps her understand concepts, applies to life, what she wants to do [which led to at a slightly different but related concept of connecting theory and practice, which led to]

Mattering—putting what's there to use

This re-mapping allowed us to conceive of another way to represent the descriptors associated with "good writing" in broader categories of related topics. For example, these discussants identified "Taking complex ideas and making them accessible" as a major quality of good writing. Re-mapping also helped us identify descriptors associated with these "big picture" topics. For instance, this group associated "challenging ideas," "providing a personal perspective," and "getting [the writer's] point across without dragging it out" as descriptors of "taking complex ideas and making them accessible."

Using this approach, then, we could identify major qualities that spanned all of the focus groups and list all of the descriptors associated with those major qualities articulated by all of the groups, first-year writing program and campus-wide alike. We could then design an assessment tool that asked raters to indicate whether or not these major qualities were evident (to them) and, if they were, what descriptors indicated to them that they were evident:

Based on my reading, this writer seemed interested in the subject(s) that s/he wrote about in this portfolio.

1	2	3	4
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

Which of the following qualities in this portfolio led you to conclude how interested the writer was? *Check all that apply*:

- Kept me interested as a reader
- Showed that the writer was engaged on multiple levels
- Easy for me to read—demonstrated humor or other appealing qualities
- Other (please specify)

While this version resolved the dilemma we faced in the earlier one by creating a list for readers to choose from, we felt—and found—that it was too constrictive. Our pilot test raters indicated that they wanted to articulate what they had found without having to place a judgment on the extent to which they had found it, at least initially.

After one more push—and with assistance from our colleague Gisela Ahlbrandt in the math department—we developed a final version of the assessment instrument. This version consisted of three parts. In the first, readers simply *described* their experiences with the portfolio, indicating what qualities associated with "good writing" they found to be *present* in the writer's work. We referred to each of these major qualities as "keys" so that we could ask raters to refer to the "keys" later in their reading/rating:

Section One: Describing (5 minutes)

In this section, please indicate which of the qualities below you found to be present in this portfolio by checking the boxes next to the words. Please respond to the portfolio as a whole, choosing as many qualities as appropriate. If qualities are absent, please add them in the space for "other" at the bottom of this section. In the next section of this rating, you will be asked to refer to the keywords listed above these qualities.

The writing in this portfolio demonstrates that:

Key: Challenge/Development (Choose as many as appropriate):

a. The writer's ideas about the subjects(s) or genres in the essays were challenged as a result of the writing
b. The writer's ideas developed as a result of the writing
c. The writer developed a different perspective on her/his subject(s) as a result of the writing

In the second section they *rated* the qualities associated with good writing in the work and, ideally, responded to a prompt that invited them to draw on qualities from the first section that led them to the assessment of the writer's work that they assigned.

Section Two: Rating (5 minutes)

In this section, please use the scale below to indicate how strongly you agree that the qualities indicated in each statement are present in the portfolio.

The papers in the portfolio indicate that:

The writer's ideas about the subject(s) in the portfolio were challenged as a result of the writing.

a. Strongly agree
b. Agree
c. Somewhat agree
d. Disagree
e. Strongly disagree
f. N/A

If possible, please write 2-3 sentences about the portfolio contents that led you to your rating.

In the third section, raters wrote a letter *to the writer* about their experience of reading the work, again drawing on qualities associated with "good writing" from the first section.

Please write a brief response to the writer about your experience of reading the portfolio. If pos-sible, please focus on 3-5 of the Keys (see Section I) that engaged you, and 3-5 of the keys that interfered with your process of reading the material included.[3]

This tripartite rating tool allowed us to attend to the differences in *place* that emerged from the first-year writing program and campus-wide focus groups, essentially by including *all* of the places as options for readers.

Equally important, though, the tool made it possible for us to under-stand the ratings assigned during the assessment process as an act of *place*, as well. Correlations between "key" questions in the first part of the assessment tool and "ranking" questions in the second (which, as above, ask raters to indicate the degree to which they found that the

One of the strengths of this approach is the concern over how things "travel" from one audience to another and how they get connected by reading. This reading seems full of depth and details and asks readers to think about what writing triggers in them and how that shapes a response. I like that people aren't being coerced into a reading or made to squeeze their response into a one size fits all form. All of that makes this example one that other "places" can emulate and learn from. *Alford*

The most appealing aspect of Linda and Heidi's work is how DCM focus groups can be used to unearth good qualities of writing and to create a com-munal, institutional writing assessment tool. This tool, the tripartite rating tool, successfully identifies and responds to qualities of good writing within an interdisciplinary context. *Stalions*

"key qualities" were present in the portfolio) allowed us to understand how people understood the relationship between "qualities of good writ-ing" and the assignments of value (through the Likert scale) *to* that writ-ing. For instance, raters were asked to indicate in the first section what *kinds* of connections (if any) they found in the portfolios they read:

    a. The writer found connections between her or his interests and the subject(s) of the writing

---

3.   While EMU is not a resource-rich institution, the university does provide support for the first-year writing program in the form of reassigned time for the director (Adler-Kassner) and assistant/associate director (at the time of this project, Estrem). This assessment was developed as part of our writing program administra-tion work and supported by that time. We also received a research assistant grant from the EMU Graduate School to support a graduate student for 30 hours of work during the summer of 2004-2005. Funds from our department's development fund made it possible for us to purchase small bookstore gift cards for campus-wide focus group participants, but the first-year writing program participants engaged in this work as a[n additional] "donation" of their time, insight, and talented selves to the program and the department.

b. The writer found connections between theoretical or research-based concepts and the subject(s) of the writing

c. The writer thought independently about the subject(s) of the writing

Then in the second section raters were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "The writer found a connection between her/his ideas and those that s/he wrote about in the subject of the writing." There was a strong correlation between the quality, "connection between the writer's ideas and the subject of the writing" (q2a) and a Likert rating of *strongly agree* or *agree* on the question in the second section. There was an extremely strong correlation (of 100 percent) between "a connection between theoretical or research-based concepts and the subject of the writing" and a rating of *strongly agree* or *agree* on q12 (i.e., "there was a strong connection between the writer's ideas and those in the portfolio"). Thus, we learned that in this place—that is, student portfolios from English 121—raters found that connection to theoretical or research-based concepts was a *stronger* indicator of "good writing" than was solely "connection between the writer's ideas and the subject of the writing," though the former quality (between ideas and writing) was absolutely necessary for the raters to agree that the work manifested this quality at all. In the same way, looking at correlations between qualities associated with "engagement" and a question asking raters to indicate whether they believed the writer enjoyed some aspect of the writing (a problematic question, to be sure, but a quality of good writing that emerged strongly from the campus-wide focus groups) indicated that if raters "did not find investment in the product of the writing without investment in the subject of the writing" (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 2004-06).

Correlations also provided us with snapshots of specific qualities of reading—for instance, they demonstrated that writers' use of "well defined and interesting evidence" and "clear language" used to describe that evidence were integrally linked to raters' assessment of whether or not "the papers in the portfolio demonstrate thorough evidence that supports the purpose of writing" (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 2004-06).

MAPPING PROGRAM REVISION THROUGH ASSESSMENT

The results of the actual assessment, then, met our goal of providing us with data that was both complex, qualitative, and rich (what we were most interested in), while also providing ways for us to make clear, quantitatively-based arguments when those are needed (what busy administrators are often most interested in). In the last year, for instance, we have been able to point to these data in conversations with the Assistant Vice President for Retention,

the chair of the General Education Assessment Committee, and the new Vice President for Enrollment Management. (It also is included in EMU's accreditation portfolio under the Higher Learning Commission's Quality Improvement Process [AQIP] track.) These administrators have been interested to learn about the quantitative results (which indicate where the majority of the sample do, and do not, demonstrate qualities associated with good writing). Even more, though, they are reassured to learn that there *is* an assessment process in place here, that there are quantitative data being collected that are then serving as the foundation for development and additional assessment—in other words, that the program's directors know what administrators want to hear, can provide that information, and know what to do with it. This, in turn, means that these same administrators both appreciate the value of the program and endorse its work.

Equally important, this assessment has been important in establishing directions for curriculum and professional development work within the program. Based on it, for instance, first-year writing program instructors have undertaken a year-long (and counting) collaboration project with two of our smartest librarians to revise the approach to research embedded in our research writing class, work that directly addresses findings about "using theoretical or research-based ideas to develop the writer's ideas" from the assessment. Further, because research *is* the subject of that class, we are engaged in "remodeling" that course—keeping the walls, but moving some of the rooms around, as it were, by more clearly articulating the different phases of the research process/course calendar and identifying how the strategies that students develop in the course should be scaffolded over the course of a semester's work. Additionally, during the 2007-2008 academic year, the first-year writing committee, a group comprised of first-year writing program instructors, will consider the assessment results as they examine (and, probably, revise) the program's outcomes.

In the end, this assessment was *all* invention in the sense that Bawarshi (2003) has defined it. From conceiving the project, to conducting focus group discussions that formed the core of the assessment; from the analysis of transcripts from the discussions to the "drafting" of documents that attempted to shape some meaning from the discussions—all of this was "taking *place.*" The assessment we designed aimed to consider how the *place* affected the "taking": how the qualities that focus group participants identified as important were connected with specific sites (spatial, temporal, and otherwise); what connections existed between those *places* and the places of students in our first semester course; what kinds of locations were developed through the work of that course; and how those location(s) intersected—or didn't—with the *places* in which focus group members situated their own thinking, writing, and thinking about writing.

Also and importantly, the project highlighted for us as writing program administrators how assessment can be used both to gather information about a particular place—the first-year writing program—and to *influence* the conversations within another, overlapping place—our campus. We were very much aware of how important it was to set up circumstances that would affect us *all* when we convened the focus groups. We knew that our own representations of writing—in the questions we asked and in the maps we generated—would undoubtedly influence the conception of "first-year students' writing" that these participants from across campus held. What we learned from them influenced our work enormously; the conversations and (re)considerations of what (student) writing is and can be continue on campus today.