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DCM AS *THE* ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Mid Michigan Community College

Barry Alford

The other examples of DCM (dynamic criteria mapping) included in this volume are focused on how the process works in English departments housed in four-year schools. While those examples have some contextual and discursive issues as a subtext about what and how assessment measures are structured, they are still implementing DCM in an institutional and cultural context that is more similar than it is different. That is, while departments have their own internal tensions, they share a field of study and discursive practices that community college "programs" do not. As a result, faculty in community colleges often end up talking past each other when trying to develop models of assessment. The example of DCM in this chapter describes it as the basis of an institutional plan of assessment in the two-year colleges. In this context, assessment has to bridge gaps between disciplines and between programs that have few, if any, common educational goals. In this environment, the differences in discourse and methodology are so extreme that many institutions avoid even trying to assess common student outcomes. The experiences with DCM at Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC) may provide a way forward for assessment that has to engage practitioners across a variety of disciplines and discourses.

Community college faculty, many of whom teach a five-class-per-semester load, are justifiably resistant to assessment schemes that require them to file more paperwork or use assessment instruments that are extraneous to the classes they teach. Some of the programs at MMCC already have licensure exams, and it was difficult to start a dialogue around the "general education" outcomes that tie the whole college together. One of the selling points of DCM was that the assessment was grounded in the work their students were already doing. It is also based on the values that the faculty already had and were trying to communicate to their students. These are issues critical to making assessment work in an environment where resources and time are already at a premium. It is also assessment that is focused on the real success of our students and not on testing instruments that have

often already labeled these students as failures. Michigan has had an exit exam for high school students for a decade, and the students that go to community colleges have not been well served by it. It was important that assessment enrich instruction and not just serve external agencies or provide a "score" that told us little about the real capabilities of the student.

The Mid Michigan Community College (MMCC) experience is an important one for critics of DCM to consider. It is easy to read a description of DCM and think "we'd never have time for that" or "my colleagues would never go for that—they're already too busy." Barry and his colleagues suggest that DCM provides a way past the barrier of time constraints that often frustrates initial assessment efforts. DCM proceeds from what is already there, encouraging faculty to start with what they are already doing, creating strengths from each department or program's distinctive features. *Harrington and Weeden*

Another motivating factor for trying to use DCM was the experience those of use in the writing program had with our portfolio project. For about a dozen years prior to implementing DCM on an institutional scale, we had worked as a department on an exit portfolio for the freshman composition class. The value of working together, of dialogue about our objectives, successes, and failures was invaluable to us as a department. When it came time to revisit the question of institutional assessment, I wanted to bring that experience to the table. That is, I wanted an assessment plan that valued our collaboration and growth. DCM had not been coined when we started our portfolio project, but it fit the model we followed in developing and changing our department's assessment initiative.

In some college contexts, "assessment" has become such a dreaded word that faculty can hardly imagine it as a process that, as Barry *Alford* says in chapter three of this volume, "engag[es] practitioners across a variety of disciplines." However, at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) we found this cross-contextual engagement as well, for at the heart of DCM is listening—and we all want our values to be heard, our stories to be told. Using assessment to listen, gather stories, and engage people from across disciplines is enormously powerful. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

MMCC had followed a basic assessment plan for a little more than a decade. As with a lot of assessment plans, ours identified some key data sources and intended outcomes but left the process of assessment heavily weighted toward an administrative model of compliance. The problem with compliance models is that there is little internal dialogue about what is really learned and the institutional context never gets any "smarter" as a

result. With the exception of a few pockets of faculty activism, the kind of assessment we were practicing had little effect on faculty culture, failed to make a mark on the legion of adjunct faculty, and was virtually invisible to our students.

The impetus for change came from two concerns that the earlier plan never seemed to address no matter how many times we tried to call the question. First, it was difficult to move our idea of assessment away from a compliance model. That is, it was impossible to frame assessment issues as an organic part of the learning community at the college and not as some external obligation. Granted, there were places in the college where assessment had evolved beyond that, but not many. The English faculty had implemented a successful exit portfolio assessment and the math faculty had worked with the introductory algebra courses, for example, but there wasn't anything that connected these efforts, which is often another feature of compliance-based assessment. Second, as the focus of assessment itself changed to include students, it became clear that an esoteric and isolated collection and reporting of data was insufficient. What we decided to do was to go back to the faculty and build an assessment model based on their values which then could be measured, tracked and communicated to students and adjunct faculty.

> The rich tradition within writing studies (Huot 2002; Lynne 2004; deJoy 2004) of considering the role of students in assessment and research is at once commonsensical and radical. The best kinds of assessment respond to real students and real faculty in real situations, as is outlined here. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

> MMCC's transition from a compliance assessment model to an axiological assessment model parallels the paradigm shift from indirect, psychometric assessment models to direct, social constructivist assessment models in the composition field. Educators now recognize the necessity for establishing rhetorical, locally-contextualized, assessment research models based upon constructivist principles. *Stalions*

We decided to try DCM after several attempts at elaborate but spectacularly unsuccessful models of assessment that we'd hoped would provide a common language and methodology for the entire college. Part of our motivation was to find a way to talk about assessment that matched a continuous Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) that the college had moved to for its own accreditation. As part of the North Central Accreditation system, MMCC had adopted a model of quality improvement that put process ahead of results, so the assessment question became what

do these results mean and how did we get there and not just another bar graph or pie chart that was unrelated to anything else.

We value process in writing instruction. How, then, can we communicate an appreciation for process as much as results to our colleagues? To administrators? How can process be as visible as bar graphs and pie charts? Context-sensitive assessment highlights process as a generative, productive stage. DCM articulates this process in a strategic way for additional layers of audiences. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

Part of the motivation was to generate a conversation that might make assessment part of our disparate faculty cultures and give us a common ground, a "third-space," if you will, to work from. Finally, we 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.

One of the first decisions we made was to use an outside facilitator to begin constructing our DCM model. In many of the other examples in this volume, people within the department serve as the facilitators, but it was clear in our case that a "fair broker" from outside the institution would be necessary when faculty from a variety of divisions and disciplines were involved. The decision was crucial in gaining the acceptance of faculty from across the college. This is another example of how an institutional context is different from a departmental one. DCM could not work if one of the disciplines owned it too much. A new start required a new face and a new discourse, even if the examples of student work and shared outcomes were going to be intensely local. In addition, the process of drawing out comments in what the facilitator called an "anti-powerpoint," made the process visual and not just numerical or discursive, something we know students often need but may underestimate in dealing with faculty. Having the facilitator list the hundreds of responses on the screen gave all of the faculty the chance to see that their suggestions were included and that the outcome wasn't rigged by one group of faculty. This helped resolve the tension between departments which had previously had varying degrees of engagement in the assessment process. In fact, the maps we developed became a key component of the DCM plan. Being able to "see" the relationship of ideas and components was critical in having a common reference point at a time in the process when the language was still developing and often unclear and unreliable.

PHASE ONE: MAKING THE MAP

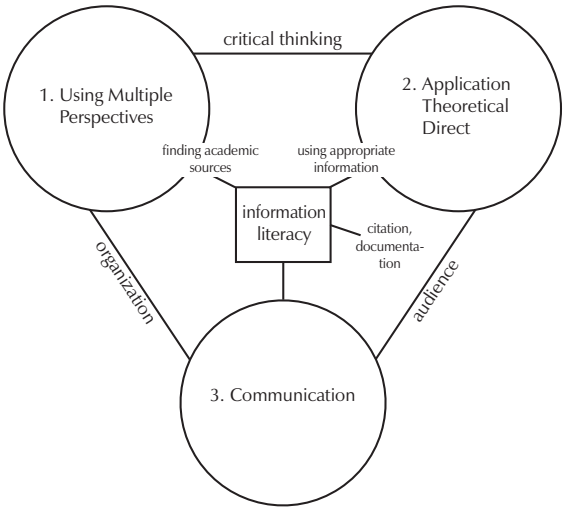
In the first phase of DCM we collected samples of student work from a variety of courses and disciplines. In smaller groups and as a whole faculty we responded to four questions about the assignments collected:

1. What did we value in the work?
2. What would we advise the student to change/improve/revise?
3. What did we value about the assignment?
4. What would we change/revise in the assignment?

> Faculty members across the disciplines collaborated to develop a "common evaluation strategy" visually depicted in MMCC's dynamic criteria map. The "MMCC Student Outcomes Values" map, which facilitates interdepartmental and faculty-student discussions concerning shared assessment criteria, highlights the very best that communal writing assessment (CWA) pedagogy has to offer. According to Broad (1997, 2003), CWA privileges collaborative decision-making assessment processes. *Stalions*

Under Bob Broad's direction, the faculty produced almost 200 hundred responses to the student samples. In a subsequent meeting the faculty, working in teams and as a whole, grouped these responses into three categories that became the "map" we would follow. This phase took most of a day-long faculty in-service and included lively debate before some visual and rhetorical consensus started to emerge. When the dust settled, we had a first draft of the maps, as shown in Figure 1.

Fig 1. MMCC Student Outcomes Values



The faculty decided to focus on three areas:

1. Working from multiple perspectives
2. Application
3. Communication and presentation skills

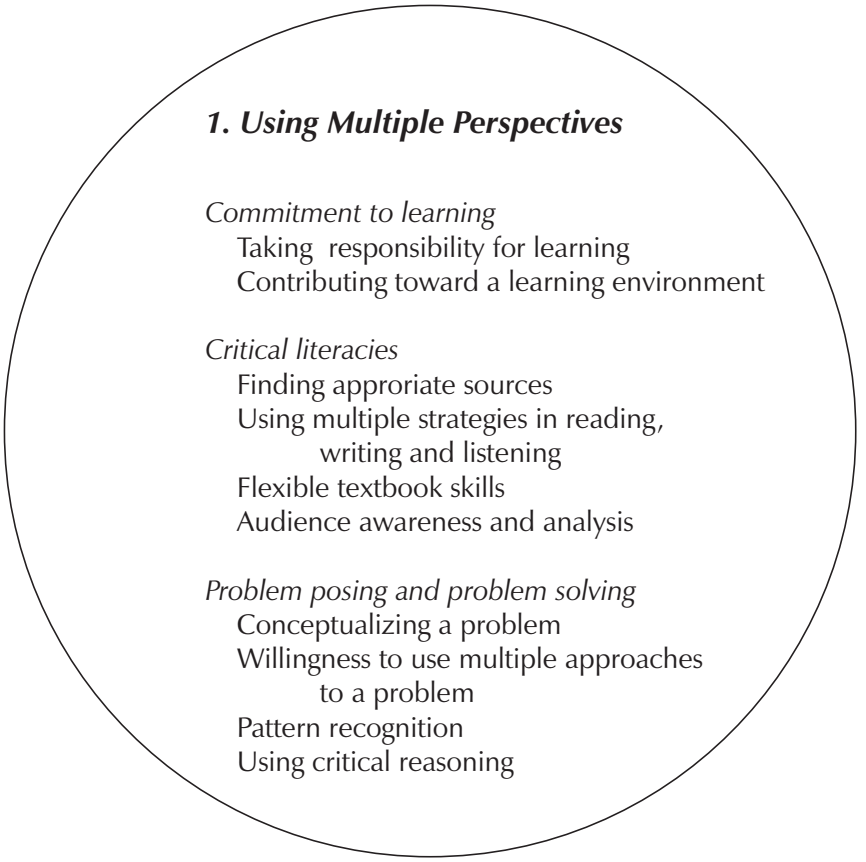
We came to recognize from our discussions that while the appearance and content of what we expected from students might differ, the concept behind what we had them do was the same across disciplines. For example, whether a student is choosing among competing theories and terms or choosing which clinical or technical application was appropriate, they were performing the same intellectual function. The maps allow us to talk across disciplines and programs in ways that make our expectations clear to our students and make them see connections among their various courses. The forms and techniques of evaluation or measurement may be particular to the protocols and methods of a particular field, but the maps allow us to carry on a faculty- and college-wide discussion of their value and significance.

Certainly, at the beginning of our DCM inspired process at University of Nevada, Reno, rubric was almost a dirty word. However, our focus groups and subsequent star rubric (yes, we have embraced the word) have become a source of pride for our assessment. The shift from avoidance to acceptance was spurred by the conversations among instructors regarding what they needed to assess portfolios for programmatic purposes. The star rubric that resulted from hours of dialogue provides a way for all of our audiences to benefit from the assessment results. *McBride and Detweiler*

As that discussion continued, we kept coming back to the question of how different disciplines could use the maps, and how the maps were to be interpreted. As part of that discussion we developed a more concrete list of what "multiple perspectives" meant to us. Clearly, some of the suggestions are pretty specific and some are still pretty vague. An important observation here is that these lists came out of the same process as the maps. That is, we met as a whole, took public notes in the "anti–power point" model and dialogued until we reached consensus. If the list or rubrics that followed were produced using any other process, they would invalidate the fresh start we made and threaten the buy-in of the whole faculty.

The following lists and rubrics were created using the same process that yielded Figure 1. Figure 2 and the outline that follows it were second and third iterations, or levels, of the first map.

Fig 2. Goals for General Education: Using Multiple Perspectives



1. *Commitment to Learning*
    a. Taking responsibility for learning
        i. Curiosity and commitment to inquiry
        ii. Setting goals and personal standards
        iii. Developing autonomy as a learner
    b. Contributing toward a learning environment
        i. Thoughtful participation in class
        ii. Respectful behavior toward faculty and fellow students
        iii. A peaceful and violence-free classroom to contribute ideas without fear
        iv. Sobriety to reduce distractions
        v. No cell phones or pagers inside the classroom

2. *Critical Literacies*
    a. Finding appropriate sources
        i. Choosing search methods and tools
        ii. Evaluating credibility
    b. Using multiple strategies in reading, writing and listening
        i. Reading and writing in different disciplines
        ii. Learning how to participate in a discussion
        iii. Learning to summarize and analyze
        iv. Learning to synthesize
        v. Rhetorical analysis and sensitivity
        vi. Options for organization
    c. Flexible textbook strategies
        i. Different disciplines and discourse communities
        ii. Learning terminologies and concept structures
        iii. Different organizational approaches used in textbooks
    d. Audience awareness and analysis
        i. Academic audiences
        ii. Protocols and expections
        iii. Diversity of audiences
3. *Problem Posing and Problem Solving*
    a. Conceptualizing a problem
        i. Using tools and strategies to frame and articulate the problem
        ii. Willingness to take risks to find new ways to pose problem
        iii. Learning to frame academic problems
    b. Willingness to use multiple approaches to a problem
        i. Learning to see conflict as productive
        ii. Willingness to engage a problem from more than one viewpoint
        iii. Willingness to see value and credibility in divergent viewpoints
        iv. Respecting alternative views
    c. Pattern recognition
        i. Generalizing
        ii. Connecting
        iii. Synthesis
        iv. Creative patterns
    d. Using critical reasoning
        i. Use of sources and evidence
        ii. Drawing connections and conflicts
        iii. Creating a 'third' space

PHASE TWO: MAKING IT WORK AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

The next phase was to take the mapping process to a program or course level. We have identified discrete groups of faculty—English/humanities, social science, science, business, technical/occupational, and nursing/radiography—who worked together to identify what the three categories in the maps mean in their discipline area. Specifically, we asked them to identify where in their programs or courses these attributes of student work are measured and how. In some areas there are common assignments, and in other areas there are assignments that parallel each other. In either case, faculty developed a common evaluation strategy, whether that be a rubric or point scale, that is connected to the way student work is evaluated and which can be communicated to students to help them understand the assignment and its evaluation.

It is in this phase that the flexibility of DCM became most evident. In our previous attempts at assessment the differences in evaluation techniques and metrics was a barrier to common assessment. That is, if one faculty member values essays, another uses multiple choice tests, and a third uses some form of performance assessment, what do they have in common? The answer became that they were different ways of teaching and assessing a common outcome, such as problem posing. It is fair to say that broader terms, such as critical thinking, could facilitate the same discussion, but we could never agree what critical thinking was until we broke it down into smaller components. Plus, every academic already "owned" their own definition of critical thinking, but we created these categories together, which prevented them from being always already colonized.

Communicating to Students

What follows in a description of the work we are currently (as of this writing) doing and planning. In the first two phases the emphasis was on faculty-to-faculty dialogue. Now we are giving the maps to students and trying to help faculty use them to explain assignments and programs. At this point students become the primary focus of the plan.

Using the dynamic criteria map, faculty members share learning outcomes, curricular expectations, and assessment criteria with students to help them become more proficient writers and learners, for student learning is at the nucleus of all DCM endeavors. Broad (2003) explained that there is an "unparalleled educational potential for dynamic criteria mapping to give our students a more complex and true portrait of how writing is learned, practiced, and valued," which will, in turn, help students "better understand the challenge of writing well" (120-21). *Stalions*

We will work with all adjunct faculty to explain how to use the maps to help students understand both the expectations and means of evaluation. In the curriculum and program review process, we have created syllabi that are starting to look and sound consistent across programs and disciplines. That means that our students hear us talk about these outcomes and categories from course to course. When students in a technical program raise the inevitable question about the value of the humanities course they are in, the answer now goes back to a common theme of learning to think and act in ways consistent with the outcomes in the maps.

Mapping highlights a key tension, for a map is always a representation. What territory gets named and included, which interests are represented, how much space is given to various countries—this too is an unavoidable tension in DCM. Yet as this anecdote reveals, a map that is drawn from communally negotiated values is vastly different from one that too quickly settles in. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

The revised maps from above have been attached to the college's website and to course syllabi to help introduce students to the DCM process. Those materials also include the materials presented in the next section.

Rubrics

In some DCM applications, rubrics are a dirty word. In fact, some DCM applications are driven by the desire to replace a rubric-driven assessment. It was never part of the "plan" to develop rubrics for our DCM maps, but both students and faculty, adjunct faculty in particular, wanted and needed something they felt was more specific and concrete to help them understand what the values and outcomes really meant. We developed the rubrics the same way we did the maps, in collaboration with the whole faculty. They reflect what the faculty identified as measurable standards for the items listed as "multiple perspectives." An example is included in table below.

The maps and rubrics attached are the result of two years of work with the whole faculty. They may be of little use to anyone outside the institution, but they help demonstrate some important and essential ways that DCM 'fits' the need for meaningful assessment that builds on faculty involvement and direction. They also help define and negotiate the tension between internal and external audiences. We are getting much better at connecting any data we collect about student achievement to this ongoing discussion in ways that allow us to talk to outside evaluators using the structure of our internal discourse.

MMCC Table 1: Conceptualizing a Problem

5	4	3	2	1
Can grasp the key ideas as part of an independent recognition and articulation of the problem Can see the significance of the problem and of posing the problem, including: • cause and effect relationships • different ways of approaching the problem • means of researching the problem • ability to go beyond materials and discussions of the problem presented in class Can empathize and respect other positions	Can grasp the key ideas as part of a mostly independent recognition and articulation of the problem Can see the significance of the problem and of posing the problem, including *many* of the following: • cause and effect relationships • different ways of approaching the problem • means of researching the problem • ability to go beyond materials and discussions of the problem presented in class Respects and can often empathize with other positions	Can grasp most of the key ideas as part of a class directed recognition and articulation Can see the significance of the problem and of posing the problem, including *some* of the following: • cause and effect relationships • different ways of approaching the problem • means of researching the problem • ability to go beyond materials and discussions of the problem presented in class Respects other positions	Has some difficulty grasping the key ideas as part of a class directed recognition of the problem and have trouble articulating Has difficulty seeing the significance of the problem or posing the problem in any of the following manners: • using different approaches • cause and effect relationships • thorough research • going beyond the materials and discussions of the problem presented in class Has difficulty respecting and/or empathizing with other positions	Cannot grasp the key ideas of the problem and cannot articulate the problem clearly Does not see the significance of the problem or of learning to pose the problem using: • different approaches • cause and effect relationships • research • going beyond class discussions or materials Seldom respects or empathizes with other positions

It's fascinating that the irony we discovered at EMU exists in the MMCC context as well: that, once highly localized and personalized values for writing have been carefully noted, patterns emerge that are meaningful across contexts—even contexts which initially might not have seemed compatible. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

The following are the points about our instance of DCM I think need to be emphasized:

Local

DCM is always local, although the scope of "local" can be negotiated to larger collectives and regional agencies. Regardless of the size of the group, the key element is that the values are articulated from real student work with real faculty. When Brian Huot talks about a "culture of assessment" in his 2002 work, (*Re) Articulating Writing Assessment*, he is making a case for

a dialogical and integrated view of assessment that requires practitioners to put assumptions about how we evaluate and respond to student work on the table so they can be examined and interrogated. Bob Broad's work in *What We Really Value* (2003) builds on that concept, but only by actually engaging in the dialogue can the work begin. The dialogue is always a specific and local event that cannot be scripted in advance. It is inevitably "messy" and not always easy to direct, but the local nature of the assessment is a strength. It also recognizes an ethical concern that working with open-admissions students brings into play: Is the assessment a screening device that, given the educational and class backgrounds of the students, will be used to deny them access? Or, is the assessment a means of improving the learning and recognizing the capabilities of these students? DCM has the potential to improve and measure performance without destroying the local context of learning and teaching that creates and supports it.

Fractal

To say that something is fractal suggests that it is built not from linear and pre-configured models but is an iterative and organic approach that creates variable formations and multiple perspectives. DCM is a fractal concept in two important ways. First, it allows us to change the level of specificity without losing the main or organizing concept. For example, we can talk about one of the points in a rubric at any of several different levels. It can be evaluated as a program goal, a course goal, a general education goal, as an outcome for an assignment, or even just part of an assignment. It can also be a piece of writing, a test score, a visual representation, or a performance. Some of our best discussions have been between faculty from different disciplines or programs negotiating what it means for a student to show competency across those barriers.

Barry's argument that assessments can and should be fractal and multi-modal, incorporating all perspectives into an organic whole, demonstrates how educators must now navigate and negotiate diverse, multiple postmodern perceptions in order to validate assessments. Broad (1997, 2000, 2003, 2004, Broad and Boyd 2005) discusses such assessment enterprises. *Stalions*

The second aspect of DCM as fractal is that it allows, or encourages, multiple hypotheses. This is significant because it allows us to reframe problems and results in many ways and for many different audiences. As Nuhfer (2006) suggests, fractal concepts help deal with situations with too many variables to approach them in a strictly linear fashion or a way to track things that move through time, both apt descriptions of assessment. This is another way that DCM succeeds because it is not a self-contained metric

of its own. In this sense, its fractal qualities allow a scan of possible inputs and outcomes. Instead of looking at the difficulty students have in posing problems in one class or one discipline, we see them in interconnected but not identical contexts that have multiple points of interest and multiple forms of dialogue and intervention. It has become, particularly in the general education area, a rich source of dialogue about teaching and learning.

> Here, echoes arise with Rob Pope's (1995) interesting work in Textual Intervention: Critical and creative strategies for literary studies in which he explores with students "what happens if" an element of a piece of writing is changed. Context-sensitive writing assessment functions as an intervention on the "text" of a program or college; it gives an opportunity to reassess values, to ask "what if" we look again at what we value in student writing. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

Ecological

Meg Syverson (1999), following the work of her mentor Edwin Hutchins (1995), talks about an "ecology" of composition. That is, she creates a rich and multi-modal view of what writing is and how it can be assessed. DCM moves in many of the same ways, although it adds something that Syverson cannot claim in her account. DCM helped us create a background against which the various results, teaching strategies, and outcomes could be arranged. It frames an ecology of interrelated but not necessarily similar efforts as a common project. As Hutchins argues in *Cognition in the Wild*, (1995), intelligence is as much a social and material (through tools and instruments) construction as it is a property of individual cognition. A DCM model helps make the construction visible and makes it possible to ask questions about how valuable or appropriate any individual measure is to the overall assessment of student learning.

Syverson's (1999) models depend on exactly the same kind of texture that DCM assessment creates. Sometimes it takes multiple exposures and frames of reference to evaluate what students are doing or how well a program is working. Constructed this way, our dialogues about student outcomes are never reduced to a test score or single point of assessment. Conversely, we know that merely raising a mean score doesn't necessarily mean that the learning outcome has been met or understood. Our assessment project has helped develop a significantly complex and multi-modal approach which, like any ecological system, requires a careful and humane interpretive approach.

Two-year colleges lack some the "institutional insulation" that four-year schools have from the demand for assessment from outside agencies. Without a culture of assessment within the institution to focus assessment

on student work and faculty values, the drive to find valid forms of assessment often alienates faculty from the assessment process and tells the institution nothing about how it can be, in Hutchins' (1995) terms, more "intelligent." When assessment is driven by the institutional research person or department or by the ill-conceived notion of assessment evident in the political discourse of educational reform, faculty are often left out of the loop and without a place at the table.

Our IUPUI experience mirrors the MMCC experience: DCM led to a cultural change in which the faculty felt in control of the assessment. The DCM process truly allowed faculty values to drive programmatic changes with an eye on student learning outcomes—and that's the foundation of a meaningful assessment cycle. *Harrington and Weeden*

It is significant that our assessment program has been recognized as viable and as fulfilling our accreditation requirements. In other words, this isn't just pie in the sky, this is real and viable assessment that can stand up to outside evaluation. In the end, it is assessment meant to help mirror and evaluate what we value in our teaching and our students and not an attempt to reduce teaching and learning to an assessment.

From our experiences at two institutions (and from discussions with countless other WPAs), we have discovered that faculty-grown assessment is valued institutionally when it's done well and communicated clearly. It's choosing to do nothing that is the dangerous position for WPAs or other faculty to take. All colleges and universities face increasing scrutiny, and assessment—when it responds to principles like those outlined in recent work by Huot (2002) and Lynne (2004)—can respond to and enrich that kind of close attention. *Adler-Kassner and Estrem*

Barry and his colleagues' DCM assessment model and pedagogy are validated based upon the theory of complementarity, the theoretical rationale for using rhetorical, democratic, civic debate to validate comprehensive writing assessments (Broad and Boyd 2005, 13). After all, assessment validity is, in fact, "a quality of the decisions people make" (Broad 2003, 10). *Stalions*