Views

Reframing the Accountability Debate

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In contemporary discussions about education, the word "accountability" is everywhere. It's associated with students, teachers, and especially the process of education. In the most recent *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, a compilation more than 385 million English words from a variety of texts from 1980-2008, in fact, the top associations for the term "accountability" were first government, and then school-related nouns -- school, teacher, education.

As teacher-researchers who have been intensively involved in research about what students learn in writing classes and programs, how they learn those things, and how that learning can be improved, we know that our work has not been and is not about "accountability." Instead, it's about *responsibility* and *visibility*, terms that much better represent many contemporary assessment efforts in higher education, especially those stemming from our discipline of composition and rhetoric.

We are *responsible to* people who care about what students learn in writing courses (faculty, administrators, parents, employers, and certainly students). We are *responsible for* designing assignments, courses, and programs that reflect best practice principles and making those principles and the research-based practices that underscore them visible to those who care about and are interested in them.

The concept of *accountability* is laden with problems that *responsibility* and *visibility* counteract. First, the premise underscoring "accountability" is that, left unchecked, individuals and groups will work in *their own* interests. Think about how "accountability" is invoked in recent media stories: "AIG executives must be held accountable for their actions," for instance, is a phrase we've heard a lot of late. The implication is that they won't take responsibility for their own actions, and thus must be held accountable for them. To keep power in check, actors must provide evidence that they understand and have taken into consideration the interests of others in addition to their own. "Accountability," then, is linked strongly to a tradition where *self advancement* is assumed to be a primary goal of human beings.

Assessment efforts that we support – in fact, efforts with which we have been involved – such as such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)-Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) **White Paper on Writing Assessment on Writing Instruction in Colleges and Universities** and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) **Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education** (VALUE) Project, strongly link writing instruction to participation in broader communities and cultures, defining this participation as part of the larger activity of citizenship. The WPA-NCTE statement opens with the sentence, "Writing instruction and literacy education at all levels are formal ways in which societies build citizens, and in which citizens develop reading and communication behaviors and competencies in order to participate in various communities," and that same paragraph closes with the statement that "assessment of writing … must account for … contextual and social elements of writing pedagogy and literacy." The VALUE project is sponsoring rubric development for each of 14 learning outcomes identified in the AACU's **LEAP report,** placing assessment in the hands of experts who can read student work emerging from college or university course work. The most current draft of the AAC&U rubric on written communication opens with a statement stressing that "the best writing assessments are locally determined and sensitive to local context and mission. Users of this rubric should, in the end, consider making adaptations and additions that clearly link the language of the rubric to individual campus contexts." (These rubrics will be publicly available in mid-summer.)

Second, accountability is something that is demanded of individuals or organizations in times of failure. The implication is that

processes by which people or entities are "made accountable" can be completed quickly and "errors" remedied. Some who critique higher education suggest that the academy is in crisis, headed toward failure. Such claims are historically ubiquitous and, often, empirically problematic. Those on the ground recognize that college and university educators are engaged in exciting and innovative empirical research that is responsible to the concerns of students, other faculty, community members, and employers and designed to improve teaching and learning. The NCTE-WPA White Paper and the AAC&U VALUE Project provide evidence of this engagement, fostering assessment activities that involve those who are interested in the work of writing instruction, and making this work publicly visible.

Third, accountability gives power to a select few – those who are designing and overseeing the assessment designed to demonstrate accountability. In the process, it is likely that this frame also removes authority from those on the ground – teachers, probably, and certainly students. There is a whiff of doing and being done to here, rather than a sense of shared or collective action. This also is an entirely different stance than the one reflected in these documents. The NCTE-WPA White Paper notes that "assessment should be based on continuous conversation." The AAC&U VALUE project also frames assessment as an inclusive process that involves input from and participation by many – from in-the-classroom teachers, to administrators and outside stakeholders. The process through which the rubrics in this project were developed reflect this frame. As a first step, AAC&U collected outcomes and rubrics from writing programs around the country, placing them in a publicly accessible space called, not coincidentally, "Open Source." Those developing the broader rubrics used these *local* rubrics as a starting point, looking for broad areas of similarly and divergence between them and attempting to incorporate both into the broader Written Communication rubric.

Finally, it goes without saying that "accountability" is about *proving* – that students are learning what they "should" according to a definition that is shaped by someone or someones with particular ends in mind. This last point, especially, is aggressively reframed in both of the NCTE-WPA and AAC&U efforts, which make the case that assessment is about *improving,* not proving.

Not only does the term "accountability" badly represent these efforts, but it also undermines the very principles that underscore them. *Responsibility*, a term that refers to rational and moral decision making, and *visibility*, which is associated with making principles and practices underscoring those decisions clear, much more accurately reflect the impetus underscoring this important work.

As we engage in discussions about assessment on and off our campuses, inside and outside of our classrooms, it's important to consider the broader frames surrounding these discussions. "Accountability" doesn't do education or educators any favors. The bigger story associated with this term has to do with corruption, mismanagement, and ineptitude. Unless we believe that those are the right shoes for us to fill – and we don't think that they are – we would do well to invoke other language, other stories, in our discussions. Responsibility and visibility are two that work well for these purposes, and we might do well to consider how to enact the principles underscoring these terms as we engage in important research designed to improve student learning.

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