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1

RISKING FAILURE

Hope for a Queer Assessment

Is there anything we are not failing at when it comes to education in the United States?

In 2021, in the wake of an ongoing pandemic, the media is amplified something they called “learning loss,” and parents were meant to be scared. What will we do if our children get “behind” on some fictionalized learning plan? For much of 2020, children were at home, experiencing school through various virtual models of instruction, which naturally failed from time to time and especially so for those families without access to reliable internet and working computers, tablets, and smartphones. In fact, a recent study from the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights noted multiple ways the COVID-19 pandemic had disproportionately impacted students who already occupied racial, ethnic, or economically marginalized positions (Goldberg 2021). It’s hard to imagine any student who was unaffected or any K–12 classroom that did not have to veer off its carefully planned lessons and pacing guides. But all around us is a conversation not so much about what students learned about themselves, about life, about viruses and pandemics, about coping with difficult global issues, about inequities built into our various institutions and systems—nor, indeed, about just surviving at all, for those who have—but instead about how “behind” students are in their schoolwork. The teachers who in early 2020 were our “saviors” for shifting their teaching online so quickly during those first lockdowns had become the problem by the fall of 2020 when they didn’t want to go back to teaching in person or when they had not found a way to engage all online students in the same ways that had seemingly worked before in traditional classrooms. And now we are facing a new threat in this thing called “learning loss,” an alliterative and catchy phrase that reminds us how scary it must always be when we “fail.”

But before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been a seemingly endless series of failures and crises in education meant to keep us emotionally fraught and ready for some new plan that would fix things.

Over just the last twenty years, US politicians have wrestled with how to fix public education through three different but ideologically linked projects—the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, Race to the Top (RTT) in 2009, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015—all intended to save public schools through increased “accountability measures” that involved privatizing as much of the work of teaching and assessment as possible. NCLB came about in large part because of fears that US students and schools were no longer globally competitive. In a post-9/11 nationalistic fervor, Congress voted overwhelmingly to enact a new plan that would secure US educational dominance on the world stage through increased testing and benchmarks related to “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), all while simultaneously providing less and less financial support for public schools. A key policy change diverted general funding into specialized Title 1 funding to support private tutoring for students who were not meeting expectations and also provided “school choice,” which meant that when a particular public school did not meet its AYP two years in a row, districts had to allow parents to move their children to ostensibly better-performing schools in the district.

RTT took that model for privatizing public goods and services further by making school funding highly competitive. States could imagine innovative plans for “moving the needle” on student success and, if their plans were good enough, win one of a handful of large federal grants to enact their projects. Because the funds were not permanently part of state or federal education budgets, however, they could not really be used to hire more teachers or fix deep pay inequities among existing teachers; nor could they be used for long-term, strategic investments in change at the local level. These one-time funds had a small window and were most often used to fund a host of private and not-for-profit educational reform corporations (educorps) to build big-box curricula and implement a host of standardized testing frameworks in order to hold teachers and students “accountable” to various external stakeholders. RTT also expanded the option of school vouchers, which further diverted public funds from schools that were struggling by paying for students to attend private and charter academies; these schools were often exempt from the same federal standards for success or the same frequent testing models for accountability.

When the federal government returned significant control to states in 2015 with the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, states could choose how they met certain goals, develop individual plans for success, and articulate how they planned to address their failures, but

regular testing in core subjects is still required regardless of local choices for how schools meet their goals. It's no surprise that this plan has been met with little resistance or outrage. In a space framed consistently as failed or failing, as public schools regularly are by politicians and parents across the political spectrum, accountability is a rhetorical commonplace that is hard to argue against. And, of course, there is big money and big profit in testing: Pearson, Educational Testing Service (ETS), and College Board have consistently pulled in billions of dollars each year over the last several decades, most of which has come from public funds diverted from schools into test preparation, test implementation, and curriculum materials to address the failures the tests create.

But before the neoliberal¹ shift to privatizing as many aspects of public education as we could, there were crises and failures that had politicians, parents, and pundits wringing their collective hands:

- In the 1990s, the Oakland School District in California made national news when it attempted to recognize and value the African American language variations and dialects that were common among many young people in their schools. People across the political spectrum—from Rush Limbaugh and former US Secretary of Education William Bennett to then-education secretary for President Clinton Richard Riley to noted political operative Jesse Jackson and to celebrities like Bill Cosby and Maya Angelou—fomented a national wave of fear and anxiety around the languages young people used to write and speak and engage with the world.
- In the 1980s, the anxiety had come with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report compiled by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which was chaired by David P. Gardner. America's schools were in decline, the report warned, and out of its recommendations we got a longer school day, more school days per school year, and a significant increase of gifted-and-talented student programs. We did not, however, get the recommended competitive salaries for teachers.
- In the 1970s, we were anxious and fearful because *Newsweek* wondered “Why Johnny Can’t Write” (Sheils 1975), which *U.S. News & World Report* followed up on a few years later with “Why Johnny Can’t Write . . . and What’s Being Done” (1981). As Harvey A. Daniels (1983) notes, these stories “insist on seeing imperfect student writing as something new and ominous; [they lay] the blame on irresponsible teachers and lame-brained [*sic*] theorists; [they hold] the weakest student writers up to public ridicule”; and they continue the troubling myth that writing is “basic” and simple, so failure to master it is a key indicator of a nation in decline (218).

As Robin Varnum (1986) has noted, where literacy is concerned, we seem to move from “crisis to crisis,” from failure to failure, while Bronwyn T.

Williams (2007) has similarly recognized that “every generation, upon reaching middle age, finds itself compelled to look at the literacy practices of young people and lament at how poor the work produced today is compared to that of idyllic days gone by” (178). And lurking behind all these late-capitalist literacy crises is the fear of unemployment or a weak (nationalist) economy. There can be nothing fundamentally worse to us, it seems, than to imagine that school activities do not translate into direct and immediate employment and economic growth. In our national consciousness, school seems always to be about workplace training and preparedness rather than about learning, student growth, or creating spaces where human beings might become more fully alive, more meaningfully engaged, and more purposefully connected to each other. But if embracing those things is a failure of education, then we say give us excess of it.

So here we are as researchers—as teachers, as students, as parents, as administrators—rejecting the shame and blame we are meant to be embracing out of this ongoing national dialogue around the failures of US education. Because despite the emotional and physical precarity that continues to catch us in its wake, we can still imagine other possibilities, other ways of being, knowing, and doing that may serve to disrupt the educational status quo. Out of precariousness, we seek possibility; against the constraints of normativity, we imagine a queer liminality of affect that challenges hegemonic narratives of education’s endless failures. Rather than run away from failure, we’ve chosen to orient ourselves toward it. *Failing Sideways* is our attempt to address some of the limited and limiting ways that common assessment frameworks and practices continue to keep us all spinning on an educational failure-ground. *Failing Sideways* is about getting us off.

WHO ARE WE WITHOUT OUR FAILURES?

Of course, one could argue that the project of institutionalized education has always been a project of marking and remarking on failure. For those of us in writing studies, this connection to failure and the anxieties that emerge when failure meets American exceptionalism are certainly not new. In the literature of our field, we recognize how college writing, particularly the creation and implementation of a first-year required writing course (first-year composition/FYC), became a defining feature of higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these histories, we recognize the anxieties that circulated at Harvard when Adams Sherman Hill was Boylston professor of Rhetoric and

Oratory. Shocked by what he and his colleagues saw as the appalling state of writing and thinking among the undergraduates at Harvard, Hill worked to implement a written entrance exam for new students that would effectively place students into a specialized composition course with a curriculum designed to address their perceived shortcomings.

Outside elite Ivy League schools, we can also see several movements in our field as failure based or failure oriented. Consider the shift Robert J. Connors (1997) articulates at the heart of his important study *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. For Connors, where much of college debating and writing had been agonistic in nature, engaged in arguments between young men about issues of the day or of the discipline they were studying, the mass influx of women into university life after 1860 precipitated a change to the genres taught in college, as well as the types of responses/assessments considered appropriate. The presence of women, Connors argues, led to a more “irenic rhetoric” that valued narrative, description, and different types of expository prose, all models predicated on the idea that female students neither needed nor could handle the rhetorical practices necessary for civic or public life (24ff). Since these students would not be entering the male-dominated professions of law, medicine, and ministry, they had no need for the skills that argument/debate provided. Instead, they were encouraged to reflect on their experiences, to tell stories that emerged from their life experiences, and to explore topics appropriate to domestic life. Such a move may not seem, on the surface, to be failure based, but part of the rationale for this curricular and pedagogical shift was the assumption that women students would fail at more traditional genres and modes of expression—and that even if they did not, to encourage them toward a life of the mind was to make them into social failures, women who would no longer be suited for domestic life (see also Johnson 1991, 2002). Additionally, should male students lose their debates with female students, such a failure might also register as a failure of the supposedly natural superiority of men to women.

Of course, each moment of significant change in higher-education demographics has necessitated similar anxieties around what students do or do not know/need to know and how colleges can either police these students *out* of the institution or redesign curriculum to better meet their needs. In her history of Theodore Baird’s writing program at Amherst College after World War II, Varnum (1996) explores just such a moment, one often ignored in the more dominant histories of our field, in part because the result was markedly different from many other such moments. Amherst College offered one of the many organized

first-year writing programs that “first appeared in significant numbers between 1920 and 1940” (15; see also Berlin 1987). At Amherst, as at many colleges around the United States, World War II effected significant changes, not least of these the influx of large numbers of former enlisted men through the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, a.k.a. the GI Bill. Part of what is interesting in Varnum’s history is the way Baird, the program’s designer, and his colleagues approached the change. In a personal communication, Baird told Varnum, “The war was the thing that shook us up” (83). While other similar shake-ups in higher education had led to extensive testing and ever-shifting standards like Hill’s at Harvard, or shifts in assignments like those Connors (1997) chronicles in *Composition-Rhetoric* that worked against preparing women for public life, the Amherst faculty approached this change by making major, non-failure-oriented changes to their pedagogies. In a report in 1946, Baird noted that he and his staff “found that the students in uniform had the common knowledge of basic training, and that assignments dealing with techniques learned outside the classroom were unusually successful” (83). Through an early version of a “funds of knowledge” approach to pedagogy (Moll et al. 1992), Amherst faculty told students to “tell us what you know” (Kennedy 1955, quoted in Varnum 1996, 83) and then worked with them to connect what they knew to other contexts and other ways of communicating effectively. This was more a pedagogy of abundance than one of deficit.

While Varnum’s history serves as one powerful reminder that not all responses to educational crises have focused on failure in the same ways, it is also a lesser-known and understood history. More often, we find the national conversation focused on manufactured literacy crises, like the one that emerged around the publication of the 1975 “Why Johnny Can’t Write” cover story from *Newsweek* (Sheils 1975). Similar to other failure-oriented moments in literacy across the last 150 years, from Hill’s underprepared Harvard student to the national problem *A Nation At Risk* (1983) created, what ultimately emerges from these events is a sense of failure for writing/literacy teachers and their inability to teach an extremely heterogeneous group of students some set of always-shifting ideas about literacy. The 1970s and 1980s also initiated substantial growth in the numbers of writing labs/centers on college campuses as spaces to inoculate “correct” writing into “diseased” (failed or failing) student bodies (Boquet 1999; Wardle 2013). The creation of writing centers as institutional fix-it shops for poor/weak writers represents another space in our disciplinary history that we recognize as problematic, if initially well intentioned. As the open-access movement spread

across college campuses, it was assumed that students not prepared for college would be unsuccessful in a college writing classroom. Thus, their deficiencies would be addressed by a writing center or writing lab. Writing centers were to be the cure-all for unprepared writers and incorrect writing. As Elizabeth H. Boquet (1999) mentions, “Writing centers remain one of the most powerful mechanisms whereby institutions can mark the bodies of students as foreign, alien” (465). Boquet references the development of the University of North Carolina’s Composition Condition Laboratory, where teachers who thought students needed grammar support would label student papers *CC*. The failure of students was reinscribed on their bodies as an individualistic, rather than systematic, concern (468). Students are directed to writing centers, even today, to work on and correct their writing in a context of public and performative shaming. Despite the fact that most writing and literacy teachers recognize that successful writers talk to others about their writing, in practice, squeezed for quick fixes for the slow process of learning new discourses, many continue to identify certain student writers as lacking or deficient and send them on to the center to get fixed, too often making writing centers into punitive spaces. While many writing centers actively resist this narrative, the systematic nature of ill-defined poor student writing overrides the nontraditional, social-justice-oriented work of writing centers.

Ultimately, the deficit model of education is so pervasive as to be nearly impossible to break out of, even among some of our most effective and progressive literacy projects. Consider the National Writing Project (NWP), a once federally funded network of K–college teachers, whose emergence in the 1970s (at the same time we were learning that poor Johnny couldn’t write) further developed, though certainly unintentionally, this narrative of failure through its annual trips to Capitol Hill to advocate for more funding for an important, high-impact national literacy initiative. For nearly thirty years, the NWP enjoyed federal funding to support its network of engaged and effective teachers; to date, it represents one of the most successful pedagogical and educational interventions in the United States, in large part because of its success at receiving federal funding that could then be leveraged with local funding sources to provide innovative, research-based professional development for teachers in all disciplines and at all levels of education (Banks 2016; Gray 2000). But we also must recognize that success often relied on continuing a deficit narrative around students and teachers—at least for an audience of politicians who needed good reasons to divert federal funds toward public education at a time when

privatize was the consistent buzzword in education reform. On the Hill each spring, and through letters to elected officials during the year, even as NWP teachers highlighted meaningful changes to writing and reading in their own classrooms, that narrative also required them to tell senators, representatives, and their various legislative aides about how young people in most classes and schools were struggling as writers, readers, and thinkers and how teachers were also struggling to know how to support those students who were not already strong in the English language arts. Pragmatically, Congress wasn't going to throw millions of dollars at an organization unless it was fixing something that was broken; the least effective arguments many NWP site leaders, like Will, made during their visits each spring were those that started with "the kids are all right." While part of the stories NWP teachers and site directors shared involved examples of star students who had been successful through NWP-inspired practices, those examples worked with the immediate audience in large part because they were set against a vast framework of underperforming young people and the teachers who did not know how to help them. Of course, this irony wasn't lost on many of the NWP teachers who showed up in Washington, DC, each spring; Will can remember a number of conversations he and his NWP colleagues had with each other about the problematic framing of students and schools in ways that were not really what they believed to be true, but the issues most pressing to teachers and students were simply not the ones that were going to loosen Congressional purse strings. Because it turns so easily to the advantage of whoever has power, the success/failure binary doesn't allow for the nuances we need in education, at least not at the level of actually working with and supporting students.

Obviously, these failure-oriented moments are not inherently bad or ill-intentioned. In other contexts, from the Digital Is initiative—now The Current at Educator Innovator (<https://thecurrent.educatorinnovator.org/>)—to *NWP Radio*, the NWP offers brilliant stories of students' and teachers' transformational experiences with literacy. The failure rhetorics themselves seem carefully selected for moments in which the group is asking for support in a context where failure/deficit sells, in large part because of the neoliberal project of defunding public education that has been central to US government policy for so many decades now. But the NWP has also seen how this framework, once partnered with neoliberal values of privatizing public services, can backfire: in 2011, Congress discontinued direct public funding to the NWP and several other literacy campaigns, as those funds were rechanneled to Educorps like Pearson and ETS, whose in-house tests were used to prove how

widespread literacy deficits were and whose off-the-shelf professional development and interventions could supposedly cure those illiteracy ills. As education and professional-development projects have become increasingly reliant on competitive funding models (e.g., privatization), these narratives of success versus failure have become endemic, shaping our national conversation in troubling ways that feed back into our classrooms and assessment models as well.

What we've begun to wonder as we look back over the last century of research and practice in literacy studies and writing studies is whether or not our disciplines know how to function outside this failure-crisis narrative. If history is any indicator, there is always going to be a new failure marked on our field's narrative arc. To establish disciplinary respect, we continue to develop narrative arcs that provide us legitimacy. In terms of writing assessment, we have often turned to educational measurement and psychometrics as discourses valued both inside and outside the academy. While the wholesale adoption of measurement discourse runs counter to how we believe writing and learning to write can happen, our focus on how to establish reliability between readers or how to objectify/objectively study a highly subjective activity like writing has offered us the ability to be closer in alignment to educational assessment discourse. But this move has also created new moments of failure when writing hasn't fit neatly into the epistemological settings we've imported.

The tensions we as teachers and administrators feel about assessment broadly conceived and writing assessment more specifically are also tensions that are reflected among the assessment communities themselves. Recently, what *is* and what *counts* as assessment have been debated in articles from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Gilbert 2018) and *Inside Higher Ed* (McConnell 2018) and, more locally, among separate discourse communities on the ASSESS listserv and the recently defunct WPA-L listserv. Depending on our positionality, then, assessment is/isn't about bureaucracy and accreditation, is/isn't about teaching and learning, and is/isn't about success/failure. Among so many different groups, the term *assessment* becomes unbounded and misunderstood. Or perhaps, more accurately, it becomes open to multiple interpretations wherein those linked to statistical or big-data frameworks most often are taken as valid or superior. In our current contexts at colleges and universities, institutional assessment offices are often read by faculty as "the others," those subscribing to assessment as rigid documentation designed by some outside (accrediting) body, where institutional assessment personnel are hired not to challenge or critique necessarily but to address through reports and documentation a vision of success that

prevents the university from facing external sanctions. Here, arguments for success function to prevent institutional failure(s). Of course, when assessment serves as a response to an external pressure, faculty somewhat naturally resist. Scholars in (institutional) assessment communities like Linda Suskie (2010) and David Eubanks (2019), however, are critical of these reductive views of their work, arguing for what we believe writing faculty want: a valuing of local and scholarly expertise in learning environments. Institutional assessment personnel tend to promote a practitioner perspective that seeks buy-in from faculty for collaboratively driven assessment design and reporting. Yet for the most part, assessment is experienced by writing program administrators (WPAs), writing center professionals (WCPs), and writing faculty as additional, top-down demands with little value to their classrooms and programs—which is, unfortunately, all too often the case. Experienced in this way, assessment work ends up becoming a reductive routine in which writing studies practitioners trudge along someone else’s well-worn path of assessment design. In such a context, faculty and midlevel administrators may seek the path of least resistance, subscribing to assessment practices that are expedient and cheap but that reduce learning to the lowest common denominator in the hopes we can just get it over with and get back to teaching and other research projects.

In *Failing Sideways*, we imagine alternative paths for assessment. Rather than following those well-worn paths that lead us only where we’ve already been, we have begun to imagine queer methodologies for (writing) assessment that can help us answer the kinds of questions we as WPAs/WCPs, scholars, teachers, and learners ask. These questions engage queer rhetorical practices (Banks, Cox, and Dadas 2019, 12–16) in order to understand writerly intentions and processes as much as they address outcomes; they recognize failure as a meaningful end to exploration just as much as they recognize success or even moments of failure-as-success, moments of failing now to get better at something on the next try; and they understand the need to forget past successes and frameworks that prevent us from trying alternative, perhaps disruptive and unsettling, options.

What our history has demonstrated is that collecting failure moments is easy and identifying failure moments is easy, but how those moments are interpreted and communicated beyond the hyperlocal is often a real problem. In those contexts, failure moments are reappropriated as examples of successful learning. They become the metaphorical road-blocks students overcome as part of the required success narrative of contemporary education, bumps in the road, detours students always

seem to find their way around in order to achieve. We think that engaging failure differently, not as a bump in the road but as *both* the end point of some types of writing, composing, and learning *and* part of the intersections among our learning highways, might open new pathways of thinking about our work and about assessment more broadly. This shift in thinking could change how we talk about the work we do, exploring failure in ways that suggest we are not only okay with it but that we embrace it.

QUEER ORIENTATIONS: BECOMING ASSESSMENT KILLJOYS

As writers, teachers, researchers, assessors—as bodies that occupy space on our campuses and in our classrooms—it is important for us here to explain how we came to disidentify with the assessment frameworks we had learned about in our own graduate training and the writing constructs that shape so much of what happens in writing classrooms across the United States. Rather than simply giving up on assessment, tempting as it may be, we have chosen instead to follow José Esteban Muñoz’s (1997) disidentificatory practices in order “to discern seams and contradictions and ultimately to understand the need for a war of positions” (101). This is a story, then, about orientations, about the ways we turned from the ideas about writing and assessment we had learned throughout schooling and toward more diffractive understandings of reading, writing, response, and evaluation to develop queer orientations that have shaped the ideas in this book. In short, this is how we became what we now think of as *assessment killjoys*.

According to Muñoz (1999), there are three modes of identity entanglement that do the work of individuation: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. Each of these modes can produce distinct personalities or personal (dis)continuities that allow individuals to be recognized by others in social groups. For Muñoz, the process of identification occurs when a “‘Good Subject’ chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms” (11). On the flip side, counteridentification is characterized as “bad subjects” rebelling against and resisting those dominant discursive and ideological forms. Disidentification, however, occurs when an individual “neither opts to assimilate within such [an identity] structure nor opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (11). To do so, disidentification becomes a way of working from inside an identificatory site to disrupt the social norms that already exist, not by submitting to them (identification) or by completely breaking with them

(counteridentification) but by acting with others, often in collaboration with those others, to consciously subvert social norms. Disidentification is a model of personal and social praxis built out of our entanglements with each other and with the materialities in which we teach and learn.

As scholar-practitioners, we have, at times, engaged dominant paradigms of assessments via each of these modes. When we began this work of queering writing assessment, of engaging failure as a sideways project, Stephanie was a non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty member at ECU. From this vantage point, Stephanie was eager to participate in new programmatic portfolio assessments in the English Department to understand whether students were proficient in the course outcomes she had been teaching toward for sixteen years. If she understood student failure as a practitioner, Stephanie thought, she could fix it by teaching more directly toward the program outcomes. Similarly, when she was a graduate student and then a pretenure faculty member, Nikki had at times gone through the motions of the dominant paradigms of assessment, particularly when the assessments were inconsequential to the stakeholders involved. Identification, then, can be motivated by a belief in the process to “close the loop” and/or a desire to take the path of least resistance, especially when there is little to be gained from resistance.

However, at times, when the stakes have mattered to the everyday lives of students and teachers (and ourselves), we have actively counteridentified with dominant assessment paradigms. When assessment practices leave indelible marks on teachers, writers, programs, institutions, and classrooms, resistance may be the most appropriate and ethical response. For example, around 2010, when the University of North Carolina System sought to implement a critical-thinking test designed to assess upper-division students’ ability to analyze, evaluate, and make informed judgments, we worked hard to disrupt that work at ECU. Developed as a writing test that gauged students’ mastery of critical thinking through constructed writing responses, this assessment was pitched as a measure that could independently validate the students’ undergraduate diplomas. Appalled that faculty and WPAs across the university system, including our own institution, weren’t consulted, we actively worked to resist this initiative and sabotage its success on campus because embracing this model of assessment would mean real harm to ECU students and faculty. From our institutional positions, there seemed no way to subvert this perverted plan from within, so we worked to refuse and resist by actively dissuading students and faculty from participating in the testing pilot. When there were not enough faculty and students to participate, administrators began asking why and eventually

decided this type of assessment project wasn't going to work because it lacked buy-in.

More recently, however, we've adopted the queer tactic of disidentification by performing as assessment killjoys. To imagine what disidentification might look like, we have worked to read and reread queer theory, queer rhetorics, educational measurement studies, and writing assessment scholarship diffractively in order to perceive what becomes visible as one conversation passes through a narrow opening or across the edge of another as they become interoperably entangled.² We stumbled upon this diffractive method accidentally, rather than intentionally, which is also in keeping with a discovery process that fails sideways rather than simply up or down. While each of us identifies as an activist-scholar committed to making our classrooms, programs, institutions, and communities more accessible and equitable, we come to that work from different academic lineages and different embodied experiences. As compositionists and queer rhetoricians, Will and Stephanie have been engaged in a host of theoretical and practical projects to work out how *queer* refigures relationships among readers and writers, teachers and students, writers and other writers, and writers and writing tools, as well as writers and their own texts. With Will and others, the faculty in ECU's doctoral program in rhetoric, writing, and professional communication (RWPC) had existing expertise in cultural rhetorics; however, it could not boast the same for writing assessment. When Nikki joined the ECU faculty in 2012, her graduate work in educational measurement and a research agenda that examines the emotional labor of writing assessment added an important puzzle piece Will and Stephanie didn't even know they were missing. When she was a doctoral student focused on cultural/queer rhetorics, Stephanie wasn't terribly interested in an assessment seminar Nikki offered one term. After all, what could possibly be queer about assessment? As her academic advisor, however, Will suggested the seminar could be useful, especially if Stephanie were to accept a faculty position as a WPA. Early in the seminar, Stephanie became intrigued by the course readings in educational measurement (for example, Kane 2006, 2010, 2011, 2015; Mislavy 2016; Mislavy et al. 2013; Moss 1994; Parks 2007) and the focus on conceptual and critical issues in writing assessment. Nikki taught her assessment seminar through a theoretical and critical approach to assessment practices that traces the power relationships involved in assessment scenes, as well as how hegemonic deployment of assessment regimes works to mediate access to a host of tangible and intangible resources. Stephanie raved to Will about how useful and intellectually stimulating this approach was, and Will decided to audit

Nikki's assessment seminar the next time it was offered. Once Nikki had trained Stephanie and Will to talk, think, and write about educational measurement through more recent critical validity frameworks, all three of us started to see how conversations about assessment dead-ended with objective approaches to validity. Until we could work out alternative approaches to validity, assessment as a project of social justice seemed to us an unattainable horizon. Around the same time, Nikki expressed interest in starting a queer theory reading group in order to address a gap she had felt in her own graduate training. As the three of us met each month to discuss books and articles on queer theory, we got excited about the possibilities that queer and feminist rhetorics could offer in order to reimagine the language and conceptual frameworks of writing assessment to ream validity from the inside out. Through an affective economy that traded in feelings and motivations of duty, excitement, ennui, optimism, shame, disgust, and hope, we have carved out a space to disidentify with monolithic approaches to writing assessment and take on the mantle of assessment killjoys.

Despite this disidentification as an intellectual move, we also need to acknowledge our own identifications and the privileges those afford us in this work. While she started this project as a doctoral student and a long-term NTT faculty member, Stephanie is now an assistant professor and WPA at the University of Rhode Island. Will is a tenured professor who directs the University Writing Program (writing across the curriculum) at East Carolina University, while Nikki is a tenured associate professor at ECU in charge of a robust and valued writing center that is part of that larger writing program. To be a tenured writing center director remains a place of significant privilege given national data on how often this work is performed by NTT faculty and staff (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016). We are also all three white, cis-identified scholars who enter classrooms and various assessment scenes with different types of power and privilege because of those visible markers, many of which the readers of this book may not share. And yet one of the reasons we have found Muñoz's idea of disidentification and Sara Ahmed's idea of the feminist killjoy so powerful is that we know we must actively push back against the privileges that we embody and that are also actively given to us by those with both more and less institutional power. We also know any writing construct we imagine and any assessment framework we develop will similarly be working within this complex context of institutional power, privilege, and value. As such, any critical framework we develop must also be sensitive to those issues and must work to advocate with and for those who may have been

marginalized by or excluded from more traditional scenes of writing and assessment.

To that end, we embrace the antinormative and disruptive identity of the killjoy. This move involves recognizing alternative paths and orientations toward knowledge, toward schooling, and, of course, toward each other and ourselves; it involves disidentifying with systems of power and privilege that feel to many like the natural path, the way things are. To embrace the killjoy is to resist the “but we have to be pragmatic here” apologists. As writing teachers, administrators, and assessment scholars, we have come to claim our killjoy orientations through work with feminist and queer rhetorics, particularly Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), *The Promise of Happiness* (2010c), *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), and *Willful Subjects* (2014), which provide writing studies a queer lens for understanding identity as a continual (re)production of orientation(s). To orient, Ahmed reminds us, is to turn toward or away from another body or object in the world; thus, identity orientations are perpetual “happenings” as we are turned around; propelled forward, backward, and sideways; knocked off course; slowed down or sped up from our embodied engagements with objects, both human and nonhuman. Similarly, in “Feminist Killjoys,” Ahmed (2010a) names a particular mode of identity creation that comes from refusal and resistance, arguing that *killjoy-as-orientation* emerges through the drag we create for others, complicating their collective movement toward heteronormative investments like *happiness, success, and achievement*. By slowing down, by questioning, by pointing out and creating counterstories that are not happy or successful, we *drag* others down affectively; we forestall their happiness by making them think about how the same frameworks, activities, or objects—the same rubrics—do not yield happiness and success for others equitably or at the same time. For Ahmed, then, identity is not a static experience of self but a moving and malleable line of feeling and investment; it is a layering of accumulated performances that we take on and that are also put upon us when our bodies and activities complicate the happiness (success) of others. When we call out and/or put our bodies in the way of practices that are colonialist, racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and so forth, we enact the killjoy, the agent who blocks the unquestioned (though sometimes hard-fought-for) happiness of others (Ahmed 2012). In writing programs, when we refuse rubrics, we enact a killjoy move that denies convenience, unthinking happiness, and normative investment in the illusion of objectivity.³ As WPAs, we have observed a number of teachers

and students who become annoyed when we don't provide traditional rubrics or encourage their use in first-year or advanced writing courses. We exist in a moment in assessment history when rubrics have become so normative that to resist them is to create real drag in our local assessment systems and classrooms.

By momentarily denying this happiness, however, we enact an important space of resistance; by refusing to “just get on with it,” we not only interrupt the smooth and efficient flow toward some assumed better place—being done with this year's assessment, for example, so we can all just get back to the better parts of our jobs—but we also challenge whether or not this happiness is real, whether or not this better place we think we're getting back to is really *better* or simply not the horror of the now. We call happiness itself, this better place of the profession, into question. By refusing a rhetoric of futural salvation from the oppressions of the moment, the killjoy asks us to risk happiness altogether if doing so means we can no longer ignore the problems of the present moment. Given all the affective and embodied pressures of our profession, particularly the ways our jobs/contracts and pay are often determined (or voted on) by others outside education, enacting the killjoy is risky, but it's also the space where affective frictions create the very tensions we believe are necessary to better understand our assessments and the values they often work to hide from ourselves, our students, and other stakeholders.

ANOTHER WHALE OF A WRITING CONSTRUCT

Bringing together Ahmed's feminist killjoy with Muñoz's practice of disidentification, then, allows us to frame the assessment killjoy not as the writing assessment scholar who seeks only to tear down what has come before (though there may also be time and space for that work) but as one who seeks to investigate the writing construct(s) we know and to challenge those models that do not yet reflect the nuanced and complex spaces of writing we value. With that goal in mind, we turn our attention to one of the more recent and significant versions of the writing construct in our field as developed by Edward White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham (2015) in *Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs*. Building on work around constructs and domains forwarded by the National Research Council (2012), these scholars argue that any meaningful writing program assessment must be based on a full understanding of the writing construct that operates in that program. That way, whether the assessment involves only a small piece of that construct or is one built across multiple parts, that assessment is created with a

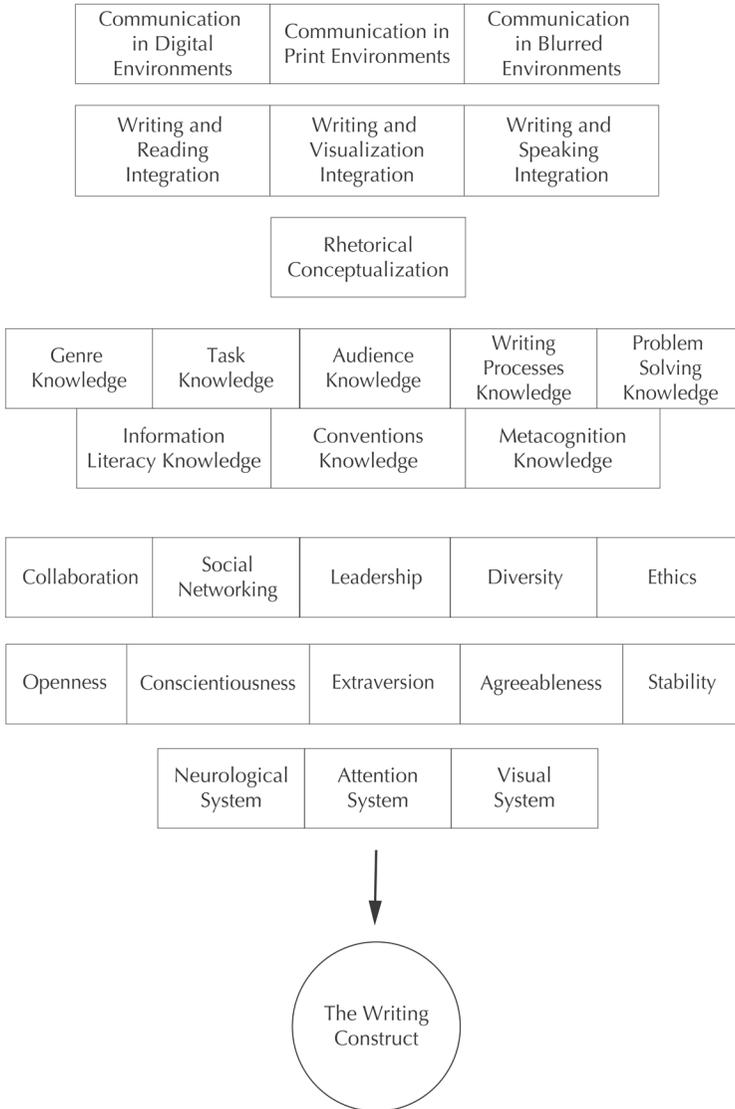


Figure 1.1. Nomothetic span of the writing construct (reprinted from *Very Like a Whale*)

recognition of how it impacts and is impacted by the larger framework in which writers and writing teachers are operating.

In figure 1.1, reprinted here from *Very Like a Whale*, we see a broad and expansive vision for how writing might operate on college campuses in the “hypothetical taxonomy of the writing construct as it might be defined across an institution’s postsecondary curriculum” (White, Elliot,

and Peckham 2015, 74). In this construct, White, Elliot, and Peckham pay attention to key elements of writing that emerged from decades of scholarship in writing studies and writing assessment more specifically. Level one pays attention to the contexts (“environments”) in which writing happens, while level two situates reading, writing, and understanding in an ideological model of literacy (Street 1984, 1995) that shapes most English language arts (ELA) teaching and learning contexts of the last thirty years, and level three recognizes the central role rhetoric (should) play in any college-level/programmatic mapping of the writing construct. Of particular importance is that White, Elliot, and Peckham resist aligning rhetoric with only argument but situate argument as one among many “discursive and nondiscursive” modes (74). Rows four and five connect specifically to cognitive domains related to writing, while rows six and seven advance interpersonal domains; across these four rows, White, Elliot, and Peckham make an explicit connection to the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, National Writing Project 2011). Row eight disrupts ableist linkages between neurological and cognitive experiences to pay attention to the “neurological capacity (nerve function), attention capacity (the ability of the brain to attend to a task), and vision capacity (the ability of the brain to stimulate pathways into the visual cortex) necessary to perform those acts of reading, visualization, and speaking associated with the writing construct” (76).

Of their model, White, Elliot, and Peckham (2015) note, “Mapping the writing construct in this manner through campus consensus draws attention to the core environments, cognitive abilities, and affective competencies embodied in a rhetorical conceptualization of the writing construct” (76). While this model calls our attention to “affective competencies,” the writing construct in *Very Like a Whale* does so through language that to us is unsurprisingly oriented toward a normative model of success. Given our experiences as writers, writing teachers, and writing program administrators, it is these affective competencies that we want to disidentify with here in our role as assessment killjoys. *Openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and stability*—representing, as the authors note, the Big Five personality factors from psychology (74; see also Bandura 1997; De Raad 2000; MacArthur and Philippakos 2015; Pajares and Valiante 2008)—offer one way of understanding the affective work of writing and writing assessment, but they also stand in stark contrast to affective models that work counter to a happiness-and-success framework, such as what we theorize in the next chapter as a

queer model for writing assessment. When we first encountered this particular writing construct, it was this section devoted to affective competencies that stopped us in our tracks. Were these the emotioned values of writing that we as teachers and writers were aiming for? While they might be fine as a set of values or affective experiences in some contexts, did they capture the parts of the writing construct we had watched students struggle with, the parts we ourselves as writers and as teachers often found ourselves struggling with? It felt to us that some things were missing from this particular affectivity framework.

In the same way queer and feminist rhetorics shape the assessment killjoy, they also create frameworks for recognizing what may be missing from our assessment practices, or, rather, they remind us of the parts of the assessment scene forced underground or out of view so we can keep our collective eyes on the prize of successful writing (whatever that might actually be). This sort of (re)visioning has been central to the antinormative project of queer theory since the late 1980s as scholar-activists have pushed us to consider how normative rhetorics frame our realities in binary ways in order to normativize one part of the binary at the expense of the other; this practice simultaneously maintains the either/or binary itself rather than a more complex set of competing forces. We also recognize that, under the aegis of patriarchy, male bodies and male systems of knowledge accrue power and privilege at the expense of women's bodies and experiences. Whiteness studies similarly has examined the ways whiteness across a broad spectrum can come to function as superior to other racial and ethnic embodiments and become the basis of eugenicist assessment frameworks. We recognize these binaries at work in ability and disability, as well as in framing sexuality as either homosexual or heterosexual. In challenging the simplicity of these binaries, queer and trans rhetorics call into question both the identities and objects represented as in competition with each other, as well as the system of binarization itself, to ask why these binaries have risen to prominence, how these concepts have been framed and represented, and why this type of competitive framing is valued by both those who have power in such a system and those who do not. Writing assessments have also been built on and from these power systems, often designed as gatekeeping mechanisms to dissuade (and at times to actively prevent) anyone not white, male, or financially secure from crossing the academic threshold. While many writing teachers and WPAs today might be shocked to imagine such a framework or history, choosing to believe instead that their assessment practices do not mirror supposedly older, racist, sexist, ableist, and classist models, the reality is that

our assessments far too often continue to support systems of inequality and oppression (Inoue 2015; Inoue and Poe 2012a; Poe and Inoue 2016; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot 2018).

For example, recent work by April Baker-Bell (2020) on Black linguistic justice has demonstrated yet again how assessments may function across affective domains in ways white English teachers are not always comfortable acknowledging. Although Baker-Bell does not center her important book *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* in assessment discourses necessarily, the experiences she sketches out represent examples of the myriad ways linguistic justice is assessment justice, and vice versa. When Baker-Bell discusses the idea of anti-Black linguistic racism with practicing and preservice teachers, for example, she often gets pushback that centers on affective and futural fears about what other stakeholders (colleagues, administrators, parents) will think of these teachers if they do not “correct” Black language used by students in their writing and speaking. She recounts the example of one teacher, who asked during a workshop,

I get that people from different cultures and backgrounds communicate differently with each other, but I also understand that my students will enter a land where they will be judged based on their language. Whether this is fair or not, as their teacher, isn't it my job to prepare my Black students to communicate in “standard English” so that they don't get discriminated against? (22)

Throughout her book, Baker-Bell reminds readers that communicating in so-called Standard English has done nothing to stop Black people from being discriminated against regularly in the United States, and it certainly did not stop George Floyd's killer from ignoring his Standard English pleas of “I can't breathe!” So many in education want to believe that how we respond to student language use—both in speaking and in writing—represents a reasonable attempt to teach, to “help,” to make students better in some way, to make them more effective readers, writers, and communicators, but far too often, we choose to forget that the choices we're making around these assessments are neither simple nor value-free (Randall 2021; Randall et al. 2022). Instead, when scholars like Baker-Bell, Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, and Teaira McMurtry (2020) collaborate to demand linguistic justice for Black students, they also begin to enact the assessment killjoy:

Our current call for Black Linguistic Justice comes in the midst of a pandemic that is disproportionately infecting and killing Black people. We write this statement while witnessing ongoing #BlackLivesMatter

protests across the United States in response to the anti-Black racist violence and murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and a growing list of Black people at the hands of the state and vigilantes. We are observing calls for abolition and demands to defund the police. We are witnessing institutions and organizations craft statements condemning police brutality and anti-Black racism while ignoring the anti-Black skeletons in their own closets. As language and literacy researchers and educators, we acknowledge that the same anti-Black violence toward Black people in the streets across the United States mirrors the anti-Black violence that is going down in these academic streets. . . . In this current socio-political context, we ask: How has Black Lives Mattered in the context of language education? How has Black Lives Mattered in our research, scholarship, teaching, disciplinary discourses, graduate programs, professional organizations, and publications? How have our commitments and activism as a discipline contributed to the political freedom of Black peoples?

Their questions challenge us to rethink the work we do with Black language and literacy in our classrooms and in our scholarship by denying us the simple reassurance that somehow White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell 2020, 25) will fix the complex and commonplace injustices that attach to Black and Brown bodies in the United States.

When we think back to those Big Five personality factors, then, we see affective competencies that are focused on whiteness and white supremacy, not because they represent emotive experiences and values held only by white people but because they embody affective frameworks that would have us see writing as devoid of conflict and controversy, as dehistoricized and disembodied. These are affectivities that center on what Ahmed (2004b, 2010c) would call the positive or happy emotions, frictionless engagements that do not create drag on our writing and meaning-making systems. *Openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, stability*—these are the hallmarks of a white, middle-class experience that antiracist scholarship has been calling us to attend to for at least forty years. These are “joyful” experiences with writing that have been the near-exclusive province of a very limited number of writers in K–college classrooms across the country. While these values continue to shape writing assessments as they operate among writing teachers and assessment professionals, we have begun to embrace the assessment killjoy in order to look at our work through queer lenses, to imagine what emotions/affects the Big Five leave out or push to the side in order to keep us all moving along a narrow but well-trodden path that’s oriented toward a narrow and exclusive vision of success. This shift in perspective has encouraged us to engage with writing assessments that resist a

neoliberal model of success and instead look for and embrace the affective elements of writing that might lead to different outcomes, values, and opportunities—or that might lead nowhere at all, that might simply stall out, drift from focus, or no longer capture our attention. Everything we do does not have to end in a successful product to be worth doing. The assessment projects and activities we explore in this book draw us toward failure, or rather what happens when failure is taken up more intentionally as a part of writing, not as the pop-psychology model of failing forward or the success-framed model of failing backward (down) but as lateral moves that create different (im)possibilities.

BEYOND A DEFICIT NARRATIVE: FAILING SIDEWAYS

So how do we break out of these flattened spaces of writing and assessment where success is continually coded as forward movement and failure is framed through return and retreat? After all, that linear/developmental model powerfully connects to embodied experiences of growing up and maturation in which school and grades (both grade level and assessments) become metonymic for our own human development. We tend to envision our grading scale as a spectrum marking higher and lower grades, and schools call us to “move up” toward graduation. In such a framework, lateral movements can come to represent stasis and stagnation rather than meaningful alternatives to ever-narrowing visions of success. But among ancient rhetoricians, stasis was not necessarily a space of stagnation; instead, rhetoricians engaged stasis as a heuristic to help them think through the complexities and nuances of a given rhetorical situation. The stasis questions were a way of engaging issues *laterally* rather than only directly or straightforwardly. So why have we come to think of lateral moves as avoidance, diversion, stepping aside, or stepping away from the thing we should be doing, rather than a way to engage it differentially or diffractively? How might we escape these seemingly commonsense frameworks for thinking about our work? Can we make sideways moves that meet our own internal validity markers, our own needs and values as writers?

In our roles as WPAs/WCPs, teachers, department chairs, deans, and other assessment stakeholders, we are constantly asked to report on the learning students have accomplished in their programs, the successes we mark in reports that can reduce learning to a set of numbers linked to outcomes like persistence and retention. We claim that learning *worked* for X number of students, but we do not always identify how or why, and certainly not what got in the way, what detours were taken along

the way, what other modes of learning spiraled out of or away from the outcomes-based horizons our assessment frameworks have come to valorize. We plot our students and programs along a line we expect to move in only one direction. In this model, particularly for teachers and program administrators, the concern for one dimension of success, while often easy to get access to or report on, seems to limit the breadth, depth, and complexity of what we know as teaching professionals about the learning and writing that happens in our classrooms. While writing assessment as a field of study has wrestled with and addressed many of these complexities, in our day-to-day work, most of us still see ourselves as small players in a larger game in which decisions about assessments and success happen without our input or expertise.

As WPAs and classroom teachers ourselves—researchers and practitioners who are working at the intersections of queer rhetorics, writing studies, and assessment—we propose questions in this book that challenge norm-based writing assessments, such as acontextual rubrics and standardized cut-off scores for placement. What we bring to the table of large-scale, programmatic assessments is an alternative validity model that reframes writing assessment in our current culture of macrocredentialing and accreditation in order to provide teachers and administrators like ourselves with a way to speak back to and rewrite harmful assessment models that serve to limit student and teacher autonomy and learning. In our experiences across many years and multiple institutions, the large-scale/programmatic assessment models we have seen enacted rarely mirror the most current work in educational measurement or writing assessment. As practitioners who have felt lost in/overwhelmed by the campus assessment machine, then, we wanted to figure out how we could reclaim assessment practices in our classrooms and programs such that we could stand in front of that machine as “willful subjects” (Ahmed 2014) that resist from an affective and embodied space. That space led us to think about how critical validity models of assessment could be taken up by practitioners like ourselves who want an ethical and resistant place to stand in our local assessment scenes.

To make this shift for ourselves, we began to bring together scholarship in educational measurement and writing studies with queer rhetorics because doing so allowed us to disrupt prevailing deficit models and to rethink what failure can mean for our discipline and the students we teach. In particular, we have turned to educational measurement scholars like Michael T. Kane (2006, 2010, 2011, 2015), Robert J. Mislevy (2016, 2018), and Pamela A. Moss (1994) because assessment in this field represents a theoretical and practical activity governed by the

American Educational Research Association (AERA)/ National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) standards, one in which (critical) validity arguments remain the gold standard of practice. Many writing assessment scholars (Huot 2002; Elliot 2005; Inoue 2015; Inoue and Poe 2012a, 2012b; Schendel and Macauley 2012) also align themselves with educational measurement researchers in seeking theoretically savvy ways to measure and understand writing and learning. However, even as these discourse communities have sought to move beyond rigid and reductive notions of top-down assessment, writing faculty more broadly often continue to experience assessment through a burdensome checklist format divorced from more local, meaningful (or meaning-rich) contexts. When we think about our graduate student and non-tenure-track faculty colleagues who teach the vast majority of first-year writing at our institutions, for example, we see teachers who rarely shape the programmatic or institutional assessments they are required to participate in; too often, assessment is something that happens to them rather than a set of inquiry practices that engages them as fellow writing and assessment professionals. And, of course, what role, if any, are student writers playing in shaping and interpreting these assessments? Most often, a very small one.

As such, this confusion around “What is assessment?” isn’t surprising given the various communities researching, theorizing, and practicing assessment—and all those teaching professionals left out of the conversation to begin with—but it creates a slippery slope in cross-discourse community conversation because we each mean something different. *Failing Sideways* situates assessment among the overlaps of these discourse communities as a way to value and represent the research, theory, and practice of assessment among college personnel while simultaneously valuing the ways assessment has been experienced by different stakeholders, especially students and teachers. In this book, we approach assessment as the ways we research and represent learning, specifically learning to write. Similarly, we resist seeing assessment frameworks and the critiques writing practitioners have made of them as representing the simple binary of qualitative versus quantitative. Too often, particularly in the humanities, this binary stands in as a simplistic framework for valuing the qualitative over the quantitative, the latter being a metaphor for dehumanized, inflexible policies and practices. Instead, we advocate for both qualitative and quantitative methods and measures of learning. In a queer assessment framework, neither paradigm is necessarily privileged, as both offer unique vantage points for understanding the complexities involved in how individuals and groups

Table 1.1. QVI framework as matrix

<i>Western industrial capitalist assessment models</i>	<i>Diffraction lenses of QVI</i>	<i>New affective writing construct values</i>
Success	Failure	Agency
Commodification	Affect	Consent and dissensus
Reproduction	Identities	Radical justice and lived experience
Mechanization	Materiality	Embodiment

of students learn to communicate through writing. Ultimately, we seek to resist representations of writing that do not attempt to fully capture the writing construct and instead propose a new queer methodology for writing assessment through four failure-oriented principles: (1) failure to succeed, (2) failure to be commodified, (3) failure to be reproduced, and (4) failure to be mechanized. Through these practices, we enact a queer validity inquiry (QVI) model that looks through the overlapping and distinct lenses of *failure*, *affect*, *identity*, and *materiality* in order to discover what affective competencies may be missing from a writing construct that has been overly focused on a paradigm of success. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, QVI leads us to recenter affective values related to agency, consent, dissensus, radical justice, lived experience, and embodiment in our classrooms and assessment paradigms.

One way we might represent this model would be in a table format (table 1.1). In this model, which mirrors the layout of our book, our QVI framework resembles a somewhat traditional dialectic: Western industrial capitalist models of assessment (thesis) meet the diffractive lenses of QVI (antithesis), and their interactions result in a new set of affective writing construct values (synthesis). In this framework, the current model of *success* is disrupted by our attention to *failure* as a critical assessment lens; this disruption results in our need to pay closer attention to writer *agency* in our writing constructs. Likewise, our current focus on *commodification*, when diffracted through the lens of *affect*, requires us to reimagine *consent* as part of the writing construct. *Reproduction* can give way to *radical justice* when we remember the work of writer *identities* in our assessments, and our penchant for *mechanizing* writing and assessment can similarly be disrupted through the lens of *materiality* to remind us to add *embodiment* as a key affective value in writing.

Yet central to our conceptual model is that none of these QVI lenses categorically disrupts any of the long-held and deeply valued Western industrial capitalist assessment models. Breaking out of linear

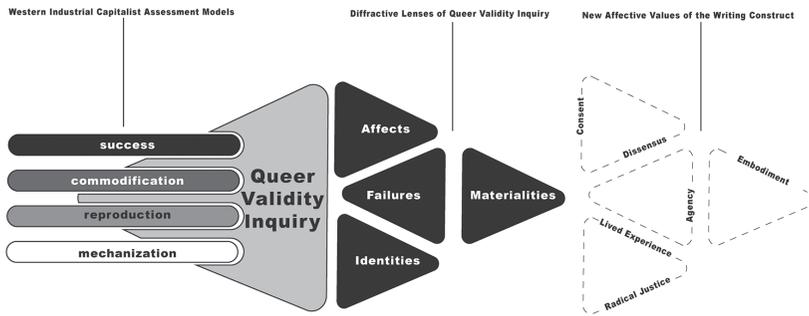


Figure 1.2. QVI framework as flattened Pyraminx

or flattened thinking models is particularly difficult, as these seemingly causal models remain central to our lives: we grow up (not down); we advance through schools in numerically ascending grades; we engage with and create dialectical models of analysis and critique throughout our disciplines. The QVI lenses we work with in this book are interactive and dynamic. As the figures that open chapters 3 through 6 demonstrate, we imagine a moving model, one that spins and rotates, one that must be looked at from multiple angles and across different vertices to be useful. When we began to unflatten this model, a tetrahedron emerged in our minds, one we explain more fully in the next chapter. To that end, while the chart in table 1.1 never felt comfortable to us, the emerging Pyraminx (tetrahedron) we've momentarily deconstructed as figure 1.2 shows how the surfaces of our diffractive lenses connect to the affective values we are working to reclaim as part of the writing construct and as more central to our writing assessment models. The remainder of this book represents our attempt to unflatten our QVI model, to quite literally take it out for a spin, and to demonstrate how our attention to the four diffractive lenses of QVI led us to want to radically rethink the ways our current writing constructs and assessment models ignore the affective dimensions of writing.

Thus, on one level, *Failing Sideways* is a book about our desire to rescue writing assessment and the profession of teaching from the flattened models currently in place for representing student success/achievement. In doing so, we explore frameworks that offer teachers and students a way out of or around overly simplistic structures currently en vogue for creating, interpreting, representing, and reporting on assessments. While many assessment professionals have argued that we can gain a lot from large-scale, outcomes-based assessment models of learning,

particularly in terms of understanding the broad strokes of whether or not a program or college is meeting its teaching and learning goals, we argue that we stand to lose much more by embracing such frameworks universally and unquestioningly. While we recognize that any critique of current assessment frameworks also must acknowledge the diverse and rich types of data these models can, and at times do, provide, *Failing Sideways* foregrounds a validity framework teachers and WPAs can use to capture the complexities and nuances we know are central to the teaching of writing but that are increasingly erased by external assessment practices rooted in efficiency and commonality. Throughout this book, we suggest outcomes-based models of assessment that represent structures for capturing what we *think* we know of learning, but in many ways, such models disappoint because they focus only on what we can *see* in student writing, what we can point to in the products we collect and analyze. This book takes seriously the queer moments of teaching and learning (Waite 2017), the parts of our work that are difficult to track or are too often omitted from an orientation toward the products of student writing, particularly the affective dimensions of writing instruction that may not be easily visible but that are experienced by students, teachers, and administrators alike. These affective moments stand in significant contrast to the “affective competencies” that show up in White, Elliot, and Peckham’s (2015) nomothetic span of the writing construct, so we offer in this book a look at what happens when we orient ourselves away from “successful” affects and point ourselves, instead, toward the affects, emotions, and embodied experiences that emerge when we engage failure more intentionally.

Failing Sideways is also about permissioning writing faculty to resist notions of assessment that have been foisted upon us and that we feel we must embrace in order to justify our positions, our programs, and our classroom practices. While the history of writing assessment specifically, and educational assessment more broadly, tells a story of capturing the rich and compelling work of teaching and learning, the ways these practices are often enacted now on most of our campuses make this work more about reporting on and capturing problems than about providing a space for teachers and administrators to understand teaching and learning in local contexts and to work to address local concerns. Because assessment comes *at us* more so than *from us*, faculty tend to adopt a defensive and anxious position. At times, we have done that very thing ourselves. After all, as instructors, when we turn over samples of student writing to either our WPA or our campus assessment office, how will they be read? How will the analysis of those artifacts be used when

their reading and evaluation become divorced from the learning contexts that produced them? Because faculty are rarely if ever in charge of these assessments, how can we know? As teaching positions from K–12 classrooms to colleges are being tied to assessment data, it's no wonder faculty are anxious about these larger assessment practices. And, of course, as the short litany of failures and crises that open this chapter demonstrate, teachers work in a context where all our efforts seem to be understood only in terms of failure. By providing an alternative validity model for faculty and administrators to consider, we interrogate the current neoliberal paradigm in higher education from a queered assessment framework, one that focuses our attention on students and teachers as collaborative meaning makers in our varied contexts of teaching and learning. The ever-increasing mechanization of assessment is working to turn teachers into tools that can be leveraged and redirected for peak efficiency, rather than to recognize them as professionals who write and teach and learn, and who work with other writers and learners, while it turns students into numbers rather than human beings engaged in learning, in writing, and in making meaning through a host of discursive and material activities.

In framing our critique as we have done, we want to be clear that we are not suggesting writing assessment professionals, particularly those who have been working in critical validity frameworks, are the problem. In fact, this more recent work that reframes and recenters validity arguments in writing assessment has helped us see how queer theories of language, performativity, and embodiment might meaningfully engage with work in writing studies to do something quite different from what many of us were trained to do with assessment. Ultimately, *Failing Sideways* is intended to speak to our fellow writing teachers and administrators who care deeply about students as writers, thinkers, and learners and who find themselves increasingly called upon to justify the ways *writing*—the doing of it, the teaching of it, and the assessment of it—cannot be boxed in and codified through decontextualized rubrics or external frameworks. By queering both the writing construct and our assessment frameworks, we provide our colleagues in writing studies with examples of how we have used assessment to speak back to the varied external pressures that surround assessment practices and to reframe writing assessment practices in our classrooms, programs, and institutions.

As the first book-length monograph to focus on the intersections among writing assessment, student meaning making, and queer rhetorics/theories, *Failing Sideways* addresses the needs of writing

teachers and those who administer different types of writing programs (first-year composition, writing centers, writing across the curriculum), as well as writing assessment researchers and queer studies scholars. In drafting this monograph, we have focused on those teacher-scholars as our primary audience, though we recognize that a much broader audience of assessment scholars and professionals may also find our theoretical framework useful. Likewise, by addressing the local needs of writing teachers—particularly the ways we can develop classroom assessment (grassroots) practices as formative assessments for those teachers while offering methods for critiquing and resisting external assessment pressures—we believe this book is particularly useful to classroom practitioners. Each chapter includes examples of classroom-based assessment projects and practices that illustrate the impact queer rhetorics can have on rethinking our assessment frameworks and activities.

By showcasing assessment practices that move out from the classroom—sometimes up, sometimes down, quite often sideways—we also believe this book will provide a sophisticated framework for various program administrators to reimagine how they engage with programmatic assessment, as well as how they operationalize assessment projects. Across several chapters, we highlight models for programmatic assessment that emerge out of queer administrative practices; these practices resist top-down hierarchies of power and instead engage administrators and teachers as collaborators in both assessment design and implementation. Through a queer validity construct, we demonstrate how program administrators can redefine their own narratives of assessment so they can resist uncritical top-down assessment models that may be imposed on them from outside.

On a more theoretical level, we see this book as opening a new space in queer rhetorical scholarship and writing assessment scholarship by initiating a space for these two paradigms to speak to each other. As we note in chapter 2, for queer rhetorics scholars who are invested in antinormative frameworks of critique, assessment scholarship can seem hypernormative (and oppressive) in its focus on measurements, norms, discrete outcomes, and quantitative data. Likewise, for assessment professionals, an engagement with queer rhetorics may uncomfortably expand a “conditional” and contextual understanding of fairness (Mislevy et al. 2013), one that lies outside the design of assessment instruments and focuses instead on the tightly integrated emergence of a more socially just curriculum and assessment design. Finally, by arguing for queer assessment as praxis—both theoretical and material practice—we provide scholars with a method for imagining and

enacting more socially just writing assessments that move beyond merely naming inequities and biases that have long existed in our assessment structures. *Failing Sideways* pushes us to reimagine what matters in the teaching and learning of writing and to use assessment data to rewrite the construct of writing so it better represents what writing can be and do in a more diverse and inclusive world.

In “Queer Validity Inquiry: Toward a Queerly Affective Reading of Writing Assessment” (chapter 2), we introduce and unpack our assessment framework—the queer validity inquiry (QVI) Pyramid—by situating it among scholarship in educational measurement, writing assessment, and queer theory and explaining why we chose a three-dimensional tetrahedron for assessment modeling. As part of that work, we offer an emotional reading of assessment to validate the felt sense of fear, shame, and uncertainty that many writing studies practitioners and administrators have experienced when engaging in writing assessment. We use affective economies that shape writing and assessment to demonstrate how writing studies has come to be so entrenched in the binary of success and failure. By embracing an assessment-killjoy orientation, we explore ways we can more effectively critique and challenge normative frameworks like failure that have bifurcated our thinking. A queer assessment framework, we argue, requires writing studies scholars to welcome the complexities inherent in our writing constructs and to design assessments that engage writing materially, spatially, and temporally.

“Failing to Be Successful” (chapter 3) explores how our current educational agenda maintains a narrow vision of success as central to the writing construct we teach and assess. We suggest that by refusing notions of best practices and success and orienting toward failure and shame, we can develop an ethic of shared agency in writing assessment. Our capacity to act together in orienting away from success turns our bodies and our pedagogical attention toward other kinds of assessment objects and stories. Such a turn allows us to glimpse different horizons of student potential and to pursue a more capacious view of writing studies practice. Including a critique of the field’s uptake of portfolios, chapter 3 considers practices such as writers’ memos, self-assessment, and programmatic portfolio assessment with writing-across-the-curriculum faculty as options that can lead to meaningful assessments for students, teachers, and administrators while also helping us keep our focus on student learning and engagement.

In “Failing to Be Commodified” (chapter 4), we explore possibilities for resisting neoliberal paradigms that foster standardization while unironically embracing excessive individualism and competition.

Although intended to promote fairness, standardization ignores local contexts, particularly regarding access to resources, materials, and creativity-inspiring curricula. Since learning and literacy are social practices enacted, shared, and embodied in cultural networks, we must hold on to the tensions that exist in those networks and value dissensus at least as much as we already value consensus. Through our examination of practices like rubrics and higher-order/lower-order writing heuristics, we call on writing studies practitioners to acknowledge that no, in fact, we do not all agree on what counts as good writing and that it's okay to account for and even promote divergent meanings, values, and goals. We turn to practices such as programmatic and classroom descriptive assessment and job-expectation documents for writing consultants as ways to invest in the people rather than commodified notions of writing. Valuing and enjoying diverse genres, styles, voices, and modes in our reading practices and then becoming hyperstandardized in our assessment practices creates a troubling disconnect in the writing construct itself.

Key to disrupting the “norm” of writing assessment in practice is to interrupt the “reproductive futurity” (Edelman 2004) that shapes so much of our success framework. As such, “Failing to Be Reproduced” (chapter 5) revels in the intensities and folds of new sites of assessment research by privileging what we don't expect, what we might not seek out, and what we don't know. We consider what happens in classrooms and programs when the goals and expectations of teachers and students fail to align, or even follow a line—in fact, when *lines* are not what we are after at all. In particular, this chapter disrupts sample sizes and types, as well as the contentious but persistent notion of the bell curve. By purposefully seeking out a systematically biased sample to overrepresent a population of students typically disadvantaged by assessments, we offer an example of one way we can create different statistical distribution shapes that allow us to analyze the nonnormative spaces of demographic data. Chapter 5 considers the experiences of writing and meaning making that are invisible in traditional grading schemes and turns to grading contracts and digital badging as spaces for sideways assessment practices.

“Failing to Be Mechanized” (chapter 6), however, explores some of the most visible or well-known parts of writing assessment: reading and responding. Experience and research both tell us that real readers have a diverse and complex range of evaluative responses to any given text. When institutions are interested only in numbers and agreement, it probably makes sense to allow machines to score writing instead of requiring teachers to read as though they are machines. However,

when individuals are interested in meaning and communication, in the embodied experiences students and teachers have with writing and assessment—in short, when we want to know something meaningful about what writers are actually learning about language, composing, and communication—we must pay attention to the subjective, emotive components of assessment and scoring. Through a critique of criterion-referenced norming practices in programmatic assessment, chapter 6 considers the emotional labor teachers, students, and writing administrators bring to assessment and how our fear of subjectivity has driven us to adopt seemingly objective tools of assessment merely to ease our minds rather than to help us understand the complexities of learning. Chapter 6 considers practices like learning stories and assessment-as-play in order to demonstrate how we might value the subjective, emotional components of writing.

Across these chapters, *Failing Sideways* offers alternative orientations to writing assessment at the individual, classroom, programmatic, and institutional levels. These failure-oriented models move us sideways in the direction of QVI, where we can begin to value the voices of those seemingly furthest from, but also central to, the assessment scene. Paying attention to the embodied, lived experiences of students and teachers can offer us more interesting lines of inquiry around, in, and through assessment. We argue that this move is a *sideways* move, rather than a falling down or backwards or a total stopping, as failure is often constructed in our culture. In doing so, we borrow from Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2009) *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* to recognize that queer growth can be a lateral practice, a movement neither backward nor forward necessarily but sideways toward other orientations, other ways of seeing and doing and being. To that end, *Failing Sideways* is about how a failure-oriented assessment model for writing studies can make available to us practices for composing and communicating that are oriented toward possibility. Such a move can help us reorient the goals and outcomes of courses in writing and rhetoric.

We end *Failing Sideways* with an examination of what happens when the assessment killjoy meets institutional barriers. In "Assessment Killjoys: In Invitation" (chapter 7), we consider the double burden of assessment that unfairly taxes faculty who are both providing accountability data for external assessors and seeking to transform the teaching of writing through QVI. We offer suggestions for turning the double burden of assessment into a double boon, focusing on ways that assessment labor can be recognized, reduced, and redistributed. Surprisingly,

we've found our accrediting bodies to be helpful in this work. In familiarizing ourselves with what our accreditors actually require, we've come to see how institutions may sometimes narrowly read and interpret those criteria. The accreditation standards themselves, in addition to support from faculty labor unions, provide a useful way to push back on these narrow interpretations so our mandated assessments can use the lenses of QVI to *both* satisfy external requirements *and* provide assessment results that speak to issues of fairness, equity, and social justice. Armed with method and methodology, as well as strategies and tactics to disrupt the normative structures of assessment hegemony, our readers are ready for action. Thus, we conclude with an invitation for our readers to join our queer assessment collaborative's killjoy army.

Ultimately, this book points out a problem with success as an operational default both for writing as an activity and for writing studies as a field: quite simply, success doesn't scale up. The success frameworks we take as normative do not serve justice or equity; they reserve top spots for a limited few while keeping out the masses. We take as our theoretical frame for failure Jack Halberstam's (2011) point in *The Queer Art of Failure* that in any capitalist framework, success requires the overwhelming presence of failure in order to name and define itself. If everyone were successful in capitalism, who would do the work? If everyone is the CEO, who is working the line? If the worker at an Amazon.com distribution site is earning the same pay as Jeff Bezos, why is one working the line and the other taking joyrides into space during a global pandemic? The bosses of capitalism rely on workers who fail, every day, to become CEOs of their own companies. In the digital gig economy that has emerged in the last two decades, for every Facebook, Uber, and Instacart, there must be hundreds of bankrupt start-ups that go nowhere. If not, success has no real meaning. Under capitalism's elitist yoke, success must remain elusive for the masses, which makes failure the endless and persistent work of most of us. What scales endlessly in such a system is failure itself. After all, teachers across all levels of education worry all the time whether their grades are too high; some administrator somewhere will want to know what's going on with all this grade inflation if the scores students receive suggest success scales up and out. Sure, we say we want students to be successful, but not really too successful. If too many are successful, our current models of valuation mean something is dangerously wrong in the system.

As writers and writing teachers, we are frustrated by the capitalist and competitivist logics of success, especially by the ways they go unquestioned across educational settings and through our assessment

frameworks. With this book, we want to ask why we cannot imagine a more capacious and nurturing option for writers and for writing. We want to suggest that if we suspend the neoliberal imperative for a very particular and narrow type of success that not only dominates our schools but also our culture more broadly, we might be able to imagine a host of alternative paths for writers and writing teachers that can lead us to meaningful and fulfilling work with writing and composing. And while success may not, failure scales beautifully. Not up, not down, but sideways across so many lateral spaces of opportunity and creativity. This is a world-making project, one we invite you to join us on as we imagine together new trajectories for assessment in writing studies.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

For several years, as we have worked on the ideas in this book, we have been engaged as writers, teachers, and researchers with the dense and intertwined theories and practices that make up *Failing Sideways*. Most of the ideas here have become somewhat second nature to us, but we recognize much of what we are exploring in the following chapters may be quite new to many of our readers who have not (yet) had occasion to connect queer and feminist theories, educational measurement, and writing assessment. In this context, we could imagine this book being a bit overwhelming to readers: How could I possibly do all these things? readers might ask. Let us reassure you, then, that you do not need to do everything we suggest in the following chapters in order to queer the writing construct or to queer writing assessment. In fact, we encourage you to fail at this process as well, over and over again, and each time to take sideways paths framed with your own intentions. While one of the limits of the book as a literacy artifact is that it seems to value a linear approach to consumption, we encourage you to read the chapters that seem most interesting to you and to do so in whatever order you'd like. Each chapter incorporates classroom and programmatic assessment models as examples of the different paths we've taken with assessment. However, if you are primarily a classroom teacher and you're looking for classroom-based practices for reimagining writing assessment—and, perhaps, for resisting the pressures of large-scale institutional assessment—then start with chapters 3 or 5, which focus on assessment practices that can be deployed in individual classrooms by individual teachers (e.g., self-assessment, digital badging). Likewise, if you are a WPA, you might find chapters 4 and 6 more immediately pressing, as those chapters report on programmatic assessment projects and

activities. Finally, if you position yourself as a writing assessment scholar or queer rhetorics scholar, then the more theoretical work of chapter 2 might provide you with an engaging entry into this work.

Finally, we acknowledge that the failure-oriented practices we share here are just as intermingled as the theories that support them. You do not need to always be engaged in all four practices to use QVI as your argumentative framework. One of the things we realized in drafting (and redrafting, and redrafting) is how interconnected these practices are. By engaging in just one failure-oriented practice, teachers and administrators pull on the threads of the other three. Some failure-oriented practices might pull readers in one direction given the assessment context that only tangentially picks up the other three practices, whereas a separate assessment context might ask readers to perform all four practices. The nature of a text-based book requires these practices to be presented linearly and temporally, which suggests that they build upon each other in a singular way—this is fake news. As you move through this book, we invite you to revel in the multilayering, upward and backward pulling, sideways growth of bodies and objects that, for us, makes queer validity inquiry both a method and a methodology for exploring and researching alternative writing assessments.