

CHAPTER 1.

TOWARD A QUEER VALIDITY:
DELIGHTING IN THE MESSY
METHODS OF WRITING
RESEARCH

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Paired readings:

- West-Puckett, Stephanie J., Nicole I. Caswell, and William P. Banks. *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*. Utah State UP, 2023.
- West-Puckett, Stephanie J. 2017. *Materializing Makerspaces: Queerly Composing Space, Time, and (What) Matters*. (Doctoral Dissertation, East Carolina University).

In this chapter, we look back at research projects that challenged our pre-existing notions of research method/ologies and our assumptions about validity in research in order to demonstrate how we developed a Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) paradigm that seeks to engage the “messiness” of qualitative and social research. In unpacking our queer methodological model, we “lean in” to the embodied complexities of writing research, particularly the excesses of bodies making meaning in the world and our attempts to understand those practices. In this process, we seek to capture the stories that contradict, that don’t cohere, that defy interpretation. Ours is a story of messiness and chaos, of trying to figure out a meaningful or meaning-making research method/ology that would honor the writing practices of participants and still make some sort of sense to those reading about our studies. As an approach to thinking about how to validate our messy research practices, we believe our QVI model foregrounds relationships, connectivity, and

the affective flows that make up constellated meaning-making networks, and in doing so, points to ways that writing studies researchers can enact more critically aware methodological pluralisms.

In writing studies, as in much contemporary social science research, “messiness” has become a commonplace. Experienced researchers recognize that our work grows out of complex contexts of meaning making and that trying to organize and order that chaos is difficult. We talk with graduate student researchers about those complexities, and we try to help them manage their endless pages of data and field notes into something that their dissertation committees (and the field at large) will recognize as “research.” As such, we believe that writing studies has somewhat come to terms with the idea that research is fundamentally a storytelling project, a set of practices for mediating lived experiences, contexts, actions, and materials in such a way that we create meaning out of the people, objects, and spaces we study. In fact, quite regardless of method/ology, writing studies researchers know that narrative/story is inescapable, not a “limitation” to be explained or justified, necessarily, but a central element of our knowledge making practices. Whether we are exploring how people compose/communicate their stories or we are framing the data we collect (e.g., statistics, case studies, interviews, and ethnographic data sets), we are ultimately creating a story of our research. Meaning-making is fundamentally world-building, and worlds require narrative structures for coherence (Holland et al.). How reflectively and critically we do that work, however, has been an issue that our field continues to struggle with.

Early on, this lack of critical self- and methodological awareness was something Gesa Kirsch expressed concern about when she wrote “Methodological Pluralism: Epistemological Issues.” Rather than engage in pluralistic methods just to collect more data, Kirsch argued that researchers must engage with the epistemological distinctions among the methods and methodologies they choose: “Such a critical self-awareness reveals that all methodologies are culturally situated and inscribed, never disinterested or impartial. I suggest that methodological pluralism demands a rethinking of all methodologies and new ways of conducting and interpreting research” (248). Of course, Kirsch was also quick to note that pluralism alone will not “fix” the chaos of research nor solve all of our thorny research problems, “but, instead, may reveal contradictions, fissures, and gaps in our current knowledge of composition” (248). “The strength of new approaches,” continued Kirsch, “will lie in the ability to invite new questions, to encourage dialogue and inquiry, and to define knowledge making as a continuously changing enterprise” (248). Rather than clean up or streamline our work, pluralistic research practices have contributed significantly to the “messy

methods” (Dadas) that researchers may tend to avoid in favor of the seemingly more ordered models that 20th century qualitative work provided. While our field was perhaps quick to welcome plural method/ologies, prevailing paradigms about what counts as knowledge, what are valid collection practices, and how we should make sense of our data have often caused us either to return to simpler systems or to run our new pluralistic models through more linear and traditional frameworks. These moves, we believe, run the risk of silencing dissenting voices, experiences, and stories in our data.

In our work together on teacher research projects as part of our local site of the National Writing Project and then through Stephanie’s dissertation study (West-Puckett, “Materializing”), it has been this latter problem of methodological purity that we have often run up against. While we were advocating for “mess that matters” in our inquiry practices, we found editors, reviewers, and—where the dissertation was concerned—colleagues and graduate school leadership all pushing back in small but meaningful ways on what we could do. In every case, this pushback was intended to be helpful, to put meaningful boundaries around the project or to help us articulate results in a way that these various reader proxies assumed necessary for “the field.” And, of course, they have probably been right in terms of how others might read and engage these different research projects. In this chapter, however, we want to return to a couple of those projects and unpack some of the ways we had conceived of the “messiness” of research from a queer methodological position. When we talk about mess in the research context, particularly writing studies research contexts, what exactly are we talking about? In part, it is the excess of bodies making meaning in the world and our attempts to understand those practices. It is the stories that contradict, that don’t cohere, that defy interpretation. It is the affective currents that swirl and pull us along, the identities that shift and persist, the meaning-making materials (conceptual, digital, and physical) that get tangled and knotted together, that unravel, and rub on our fingers—and the failures of language or rhetoric or research to capture a totalizing “Truth” that unifies experience or our understanding of it. It’s the shame and stigma we may feel when we realize that we often fail to honor the plenitude and complexity of our research participants’ experiences and stories.

In this chapter, we do not attempt to clean up that mess. In other words, we are not going to help you sterilize, sanitize, or scrub your research paradigms, processes, or the stories that issue forth from them. Instead, over the last several years, we have worked to build a method/ology to help us orient toward the messiness of story and create research trajectories that bumble and blunder around through the chaos so that we might tell different kinds of stories. This method, which we first conceived of in response to the controlling logics of

assessment, is called Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI). As a method of ongoing resistance to the normative and normalizing practices of methodological colonialism (Patel; Tuhiwai Smith; Bratta and Powell), Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) is a methodology for dwelling in messy spaces, for holding and engaging with experiences—those that belong to us and those that don't—and a way of making meaning, stories, and knowledge laterally (West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks). As an approach to thinking about validity beyond top-down notions of positivism and objectivism (Knoblauch), QVI foregrounds relationships, connectivity, and the affective flows that make up constellated meaning-making networks, and in doing so, points to ways that writing studies researchers can enact more critically aware methodological pluralisms.

UNBINDING THE DATA DEMONS: ON THE MESSINESS OF TEXTS, BODIES, AND MOTION

Metaphors for research are undoubtedly as varied as the number of researchers out there, each of us encountering the research site with a creative way to make sense of what we find. Some researchers “herd cats” while others “wait for spring” to see whether flowers, weeds, grass, or all three emerge from a small plot of earth they haven't themselves cultivated. Some “sift for gold” while others work “to separate the wheat from the chaff” among their data. One of the ways we (the authors) have jokingly talked about data has been as unruly imps and demons, each with its own particular interests and desires. Our data are not simply there to do what we want them to; they have their own goals. Reigning them in requires a binding spell, perhaps a pentagram on the floor to trap them and hold them still so we can decide which ones need vanquishing, which ones we might reform, which ones might be useful just as they are. Seeing the triangular points of the pentagram in our minds, it's no surprise that we then began to riff on the ways that certain methodologies have advocated for triangulation as a way to create meaningful or valid data. Those triangulations evince their own binding ritual on our data, keeping certain elements in and vanquishing others. But what happens if we eschew those binders, embrace the mess, and explore methodologies that “delight in disorder,” that revel in the chaos itself?

Over many years of research in different contexts, we have found ourselves increasingly working toward and eventually through queer methodologies that embrace the messiness of writing research. Our thinking here is indebted to the ways that Caroline Dadas has taken up and expanded John Law's initial theme of “messiness” in social science methods and framed it as queer project. Central to Dadas' work is an understanding of the ways that “the term *queer* ... invoke[s] complication” in order to “trouble the production of knowledge” (63). Queer

methodologies, she contends, “encourage us to reconsider and, when needed, disrupt previous research practices” (69). To demonstrate that movement in our thinking, we want to unpack what we mean by queer methodologies for writing research and explore briefly how some of our previous work helped us to become more comfortable with relaxing the grip that normative research paradigms were having on our processes. In sharing this trajectory of our work, however, we do not mean to suggest that other paradigms are not important or useful — there is much to be learned from more traditional models of inquiry; rather we believe that researchers in writing studies would benefit significantly from methodologies that “lean in” to complication and foreground the tentative nature of the knowledge we are often making about writing.

Similarly, in *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer Projects*, William P. Banks, Matthew B. Cox, and Caroline Dadas frame queer methodologies through the practice of orientation. Based on Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological project of understanding orientation as a practice of turning both toward and away from certain bodies and objects—and how those orientations then establish the paths we walk, the ways we understand ourselves, and the ways that we engage both human and non-human matter(s) —Banks, Cox, and Dadas challenge traditional thinking about methods as practices that generate valid or reliable research by highlighting how *method-as-orientation* does intellectual work through its recognition that accepted (and acceptable) practices for data collection can never be value-neutral:

Rather, each represents a way of orienting a researcher toward an object, a people, or a space. Where these practices—surveys, focus groups, observations, rhetorical analyses, and so forth—become commonplace, where they represent normative/unquestioned activities or epistemologies, they demonstrate not only the ways that each has become an active method for orienting a researcher (and thus also preventing other orientations, other views from taking the foreground) but also how each has become a normative orientation for the field, a well-trodden path whose existence actively replicates itself from researcher to researcher, from discipline to discipline. (4)

Likewise, in *After Method: Messiness in Social Science Research*, John Law has argued that “If ‘research methods’ are allowed to claim methodological hegemony or (even worse) monopoly . . . then when we are put into relation with such methods we are being placed, however rebelliously, in a set of constraining normative blinkers” (4). To disrupt those blinkers and the “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2) that replicating existing models embraces, Banks, Cox, and Dadas

argue that queer methodologies focus instead on rhetorics of intentionality (over outcome), failure (over success), and forgetting (over memory/memorialization). These are all rhetorics that resist closure and finitude and, as such, do little to help us bind or contain the messiness of our work. As we demonstrate below, such resistance is important if we want to move away from simply retelling the stock stories of our research.

In what follows, we center a story of Stephanie's dissertation research and how we—as doctoral student and dissertation advisor—worked inter/intra-actively to develop an analytical framework for understanding a fundamentally messy and complex scene of writing. This is a story of messiness and chaos, of trying to figure out a meaningful or meaning-making research method/ology that would honor the writing practices of participants and still make some sort of sense to those reading about the study. At the heart of this project was the desire to make sure that Stephanie's data collection and analysis practices did not enact violence on her participants or their materials by too quickly trying to push them through a pre-made methodological meat grinder. What emerges, we contend, is a new way of understanding methodological “messiness” that does not simply acknowledge the chaos of our work, but which provides a theoretical and practical justification for this work that has been missing from writing studies. To do that, we close this chapter with a brief look at how our current work on Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) in writing assessment (in part) grew out of and was influenced by the methodological frustrations we felt trying to manage the messiness of Stephanie's dissertation project.

WHEN DATA FAILS TO CONVERGE

To some scholars in the field, both in- and outside of the Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication program at East Carolina University, Stephanie's dissertation questions were, well, weird. Informed by Malea Powell's notion of constellating, as well as queer and feminist-inflected new materialisms (Payne; Chen; Stewart; Ahmed; Halberstam, Cvetkovich; Coole and Frost), Stephanie was interested in how composing networks emerge. For several years prior to and during her doctoral study, Stephanie and Will had served as co-principal investigators (Co-PIs) and project directors on several National Writing Project initiatives that brought together K-12 classroom teachers; informal educators working in museums, afterschool programs, libraries, and community centers; and youth learners. These initiatives were intended to build production-centered learning experiences to support and deepen student interest, develop mentoring relationships across educational contexts, and create opportunity ladders for students, especially those from minoritized backgrounds. With each new project, Stephanie had seen

networks emerge that enabled the production of new texts, objects, relationships, and identities. She began calling these networks safety *nets* capable of doing the transformative *work* of composition writ large. What she wanted to better understand, however, was how disparate nodes or bodies (both human and non-human) came to be caught up in such net/works and developed the intra-active capacity to compose a complex array of rhetorics and materials. Thus, her primary research question was, “How do maker networks materialize, and what might we learn about composing from those networks?” and her sub-questions included, “Who and what gets to make? Who and what gets made? What drives composition (as process and product) in the network?” Weird, indeed, at a time when few had considered what making and makerspaces had to do with writing and how non-humans might have the agency to co-produce, write, and make.

Stephanie was, at the time, co-leading two particular NWP projects, a high-school makerspace development initiative (West-Puckett, “Remaking”) and a science literary initiative that brought together spoken word poets, science museum educators, and K-12 teachers in a massive open online making and learning collaboration (West-Puckett, “Crash”). She chose to focus on these particular initiatives because they were sustainable projects meant to develop long-term learning relationships, and they were both built from principles and practices of Connected Learning (Ito et al.). In each network, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) was a pervasive ethos, and making with physical, digital, and conceptual tools was a central practice of both knowing and being. Stephanie’s relationship with participants was already figured as a co-participant and partner-in-the-making; thus, adopting a formal, institutional position and ready-made research methods was inconceivable. She was already concerned about the risks of adopting the mantle of “researcher” in these communities, which might create some awkwardness (which it did) or even cause harm to individual composers and/or the network itself (which it didn’t). To reduce the potential for harm, Stephanie decided on a primary data collection method that would honor existing relationships, epistemologies, and ontologies by engaging participants in making, quite literally, both material and discursive meanings about their experiences in the networks. Thus, she asked research participants to craft origami fortune tellers, to label those fortune tellers with salient material elements—place, people, objects, and ratings of affective disorientation—of their experiences, and to engage in game play with the fortune tellers to create small stories of encounters grounded in the materiality of matter, including the body. This method took the same amount of time as a traditional focus group or set of interviews might, but the activity aligned methodologically with the playful, maker-based values inherent to the research site and allowed for many unexpected and unplanned stories to emerge.

As she developed her research design through coursework in seminars and the comprehensive examination process, Stephanie was reminded by faculty advisors that she should use methodological triangulation to uncover a more comprehensive understanding of participant experiences and attend to concerns of validity in the study. As a good Ph.D. candidate, or at least one who wanted to finish and be PhDone (which is its own kind of good), Stephanie heeded that advice and integrated two other data sets: transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted by the National Writing Project program assessment team and social media posts produced by participants in each network. Because Stephanie wasn't involved in the NWP-sponsored interviews, and the participants knew the data would be anonymized, controlling logics held that the transcription data would have a higher degree of objectivity, or at least offer a differently subjective story to compare to the other data Stephanie was more immediately involved in collecting. Similarly, because the social media artifacts were posted as part of everyday participation in the grant-sponsored program, not in response to researcher prompting, those artifacts were framed as a more reliable data source. The advice Stephanie was given at this stage of the research design was meant to help her establish the credibility of her study as well as her credibility as researcher, but at the time it was also frustrating. It felt as though she were being told that validity could be delivered from above instead of crafted collaboratively from within the research network. Something about that movement felt wrong to her at the time, but a dissertation is almost unavoidably a gaslighting project: you're told you don't know something or understand something about a field or method or methodology you are, in fact, somewhat new to, so you assume these other folks are right, that you're just somehow missing something.

Once Stephanie and Will began to analyze the data, however, interesting differences among the data sets began to emerge. Even a cursory read showed a marked contrast between the kinds of experience-based narratives that were produced via semi-structured interviews (NWP) and the fortune-teller game play (Stephanie). While both data sets were laden with expressed emotion and its affective valences, the semi-structured interview data skewed toward positive affective valences while the fortune-teller data was rich with both positive and negative affective valences. On the whole, during their interviews with the NWP researchers, participants expressed more emotions related to feeling "good" such as admiration, aesthetic appreciation, amusement, excitement, and satisfaction while the origami fortune teller game produced narratives that spanned from excitement and exuberance to anxiety, awkwardness, and empathic pain. The stories that were produced in response to interviews were what critical race theorists might call stock stories, those that reproduce dominant narratives, which, in

this case, are narratives of success (Martinez; Bell). The fortune teller data then revealed a host of counter-narratives that upended that monolith of success, an ideology that is firmly entrenched in educational settings. For example, spoken word poets participating in the science literacy programming shared stories with NWP program evaluators such as the following about positive experiences with teaching and collaborating via Google Hangouts: “We did a Google Hangout and the kids got online and they did their poems and they were really excited about it and that to me was the best part because I got to see how they felt about it and how excited they were and so I think that was the best part.”

When narrativizing experience with Google Hangouts through the fortune-teller game, however, a more complex picture of material interactions and affective experience began to emerge:

Me, being the youthful, seemingly tech savvy college student I knew I would be able to figure out Google Hangout fairly easily. While sitting there with my group I setup a Google hangout link to use during our make cycle. I thought it was that simple, just making a hangout and pressing play. Fast forward 3 months and the day of the hangout arrived. I walked out of class to my apartment to start the hangout, and when I attempted it failed. The wifi disconnected from my laptop so I made a hotspot with my phone to use the wifi. This idea failed also. Next I tried restarting my computer. After which the hangout failed again. I failed three times before calling any of my group mates. Luckily, they were geniuses. I called [teacher’s name] and explained my problem starting the Google Hangout and [they] happily fixed it using [their] IT expert on hand at school. I was able to participate on my phone teaching the workshop in the palm of my hand. (West-Puckett, “Materializing” 110-111)

Through processes of qualitative coding, the differences that emerged created real problems for data set triangulation. If, under duress to adhere to conventional notions of validity, we were to focus only on the places where coding patterns converged around “happiness,” other kinds of not-so-sunny feelings would fail to materialize and matter in the research. Yet we knew, from our lived experiences in the network, that these negatively perceived emotions did (and do) matter in answering questions of how things materialize. And of course, they matter significantly to research in writing and rhetoric, particularly if we want to ask questions about our work beyond “what works” or “what is successful” when we theorize and teach writing.

As important, we want to note that the playful method Stephanie created to collect these divergent stories also matters: the stock stories of success that Halberstam has critiqued in *The Queer Art of Failure* can become so powerful, so seductive in late capitalism, that we all struggle to understand our experiences outside of the success-failure binary. More traditional interviews and focus groups would most likely have yielded the very same success narratives that the NWP program assessment folks got from participants because those are the stories we're supposed to tell; those are the stories, in particular, that teachers need to tell publicly because they exist in a context where their jobs, professionalism, and competence are constantly questioned and devalued in public forums like school board meetings and media "hot takes" on the state of education. The teachers in the study were so accustomed to stock stories of success that they offered those up easily when researchers came along and asked them about their experiences, but the origami fortune tellers playfully disrupted that narrative arc when game play pushed the participants to connect people, places, objects, and affects that they might not have thought to connect otherwise. We have no sense that the participants didn't still tell "true" stories out of this game play, but the truths they shared came from different places, pursued different narrative arcs, and engaged with materialities that were less "ready-to-hand" (Ahmed 2). By being open to playful methods of data collection, Stephanie was able to archive a host of counter stories that themselves opened new and intriguing paths for inquiry. Our shared commitments to queer methodologies likewise allowed us spaces to analyze and engage with those counterstories without forcing them to straighten up or flatten out.

WHEN DATA WANTS TO WRINKLE AND RUMPLE

As such, another major conundrum we faced during the research process was how to work with qualitative coding schemes that were restricting our ability to trace the emotions across bodies in the network. To make sense of participant narratives, we worked through three levels of recursive practice: qualitative coding, reflecting through the co-production of coding memos, and creating visual representations of the coding schemes. First, we analyzed the interview transcripts and then moved on to the origami fortune teller sets, which included the fortune teller itself as an artifact, participant game logs, and the anecdotal experience narrative. We used open, axial, and selective coding processes to identify common themes, ideas, tools, technologies, objects, and texts that were shared on the fortune tellers themselves (Neff; Teston; Farkas and Haas). Then we used the same process to code the anecdotal experience narratives. We organized our codes into tables and boxed the data neatly into their respective cells.

From this vantage point, we were able to determine salient material aspects of individual participants' experience and understand how those experiences made them feel. We were also able to determine how experiences differed for each research participant and track commonalities of shared experience. However, we weren't necessarily able to make meaning beyond those discrete boxes or to answer the looming research question, "How do maker networks materialize?" The two-dimensional *tables with labels* were holding the data hostage, flattening the four-dimensional narratives that wanted to wrinkle, rumple, and unflatten the method.

During one of our many conversations about the data, we stumbled upon the idea of making a three-dimensional data model that would allow us to trace connections (and disconnections) among networked nodes. This move, while wildly inefficient when compared to digital systems like Dedoose or spreadsheet charts of data, respected the context which was itself framed through making and craft literacies. "Making" a method, then, felt to us like we were embracing the same creative practices as the participants in the grant-funded study and in doing so, we were able to experience similar moves, resistances, frustrations, breakthroughs, etc. That deep connection between our messy method(s) and the experiences of the research participants ultimately inflected the meaning we made from the data set by allowing our analyses to be entangled with/in the network.

Serendipitously, Stephanie found, by a dumpster at ECU, a 4'x 3' framed painter's canvas, likely chucked by an art school student, and decided it could be the backdrop for a data analysis/installation project. Inspired by Nick Sousanis' work in *Unflattening*, Stephanie and Will worked to represent this data and our coding schemes for it three-dimensionally, erasing the boxes that can promote a notion of bodies in a research phenomenon as discrete, individual, and static. As Sousanis writes, "Every procedure is designed to ensure that proper results are achieved. This all takes place in boxes, within boxes . . . Not only space but time and experience, too, have been put in boxes. Divided up and neatly packaged into discrete units for efficient transmission" (9-10). To blur the boundaries between the boxes and erase the notion that nodes on the network are separate and unchanged by other nodes, we worked here to show the relationships among material bodies, people, places, tools, and practices. Using everyday crafting materials like foam board, yarn, safety pins, construction paper, and the makers' original origami fortune-tellers (including our own) we made three-dimensional representations of the two compositional networks.

Like the relationships and connections represented in this three-dimensional visualization, the visualizations-as-compositions emerged over time. The construction of each data board took approximately fifteen hours of collaborative

labor shared between the two of us. Most of the time, Will knelt on the floor in his office where we made the board, tying loops of yarn around safety pins and slipping them over the bamboo skewers to which the origami fortune-tellers were fixed (see Figure 1.1). Stephanie sat at Will's desk reading and re-reading the coded data, directing him to string the yarn from this marker to that marker and telling him which yarns should be gathered up into an affective web, stapled together and banded with orange construction paper loops (see Figure 1.2).

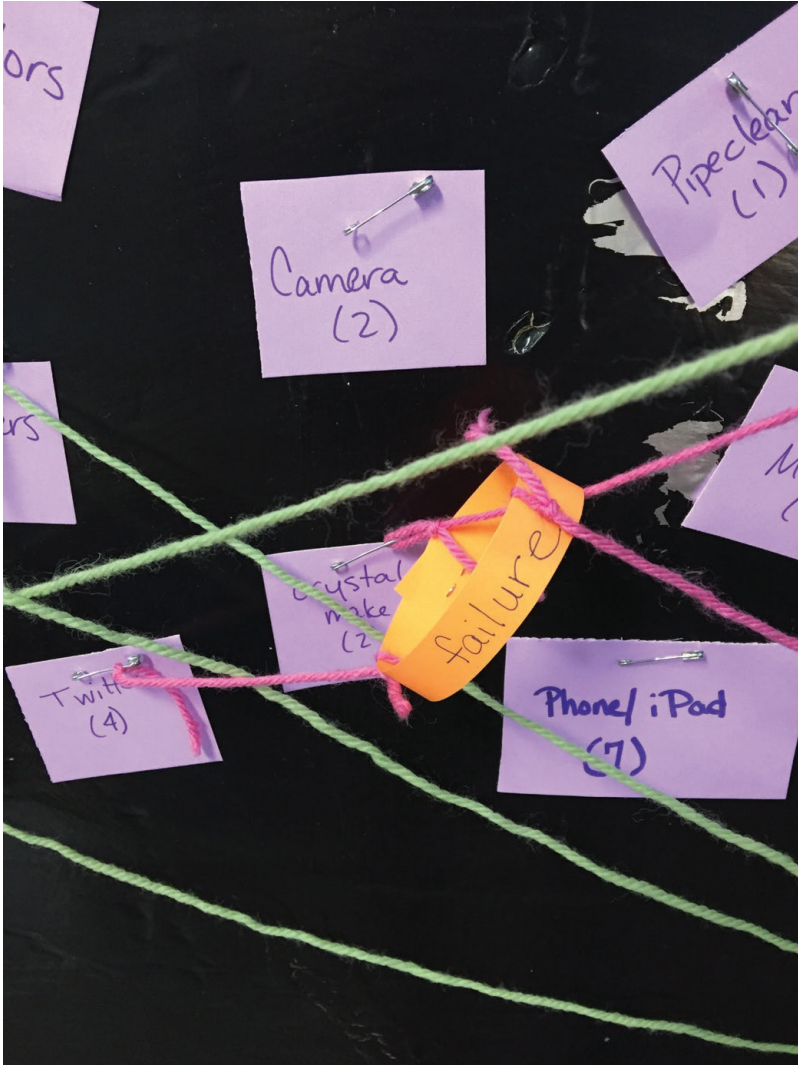


Figure 1.1. Zoomed-in view of research objects pinned to a board and linked by affective labels. Image credit to the authors.



Figure 1.2. Will places research objects on the board and connects them with string. Image credit to the authors.

This process of making an analytical tool has enabled us to make new kinds of knowledge about the ways that makers produce and are produced by the affective pulses and flows of their engagements with other material bodies. This kind of knowledge-making was unavailable in the flat space of the digital spreadsheet. Through both “flattening” (Delanda) and “unflattening” (Sousanis), we worked to enact a queer materialist “both/and” practice that has enabled us to identify and theorize patterns of emergence in academic adjacent composing spaces like the makerspace funded by our teacher development grant from the National Writing Project (see Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3. Completed research board of unflattened origami fortune teller stories. Image credit to the authors.

In the experience narratives, we found that emotions and affective currents were a driving force that materialized new nodes for both participants and researchers. In other words, as Sara Ahmed has pointed out, we noted how feelings are object-oriented, directed toward or away from others (human and non-human), and in these networks, these emotions created direction, movement, and connective threads that made a safety net to do the work of composing. In the end, queer theories of language and materiality helped us to walk away from the methodological expectations that we had started with. As such, we didn't attempt to "resolve" the conflicts between traditional positivist and post-positivist epistemologies and the more queer and new materialist epistemologies that framed our study; rather, we gave ourselves permission to keep those tensions there, to keep the lines taught between nodes, to become attuned to the music those strings offered us when plucked at in different ways rather than attend only to the objects themselves or to the nodes. Such a move recalls Dadas' point in her article on messy methods: "queerness as *techne* emphasizes process—the process of adapting previous approaches. When we attempt to use the same methods to address specific new research scenarios—because we have been taught that these are the "accepted" methods in our field—queer methodologies become degraded" (70).

DIVESTING IN TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF VALIDITY

The experiences that we had as researcher and faculty mentor when working with Stephanie's dissertation project became a salient reminder of the ways that our work as researchers exists in spaces of tension between what has been valued and what might yet be valued. One way to think of this tension point is as *validity*. Whether we explicitly use the term or not, the specter of validity haunts our research designs, especially in cases where our theoretical grounding breaks with various intellectual traditions. Throughout most of the 20th century, validity was understood to exist in the research model itself (construct validity): does the research model or tool accurately or effectively measure what it claims to? As Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba have noted, researchers have often relied on concepts like internal and external validity to establish "trustworthiness" in their research (290). In this paradigm, internal validity focused on the ways that the instrument (test, method, study design) controlled for variations that might impact the findings, while external validity was concerned with creating sample sets that are generalizable across the broader range of possible participants in a study (Lincoln and Guba 290-91). In many ways, the languages and epistemologies that we learned in graduate school and have often repeated as graduate faculty grow out of these traditions and are difficult to silence when we want to imagine other possibilities.

More recently, however, some important critiques of validity have helped us to position our own emerging understandings, particularly those that have emerged in assessment scholarship, which has moved us away from frameworks built around correlation to ones centered on argumentation (Kane, "Validation"; Kane, "Explicating Validity"). As a normative practice, validation is "a process of constructing and evaluating arguments for and against the intended interpretation of test scores and their relevance to the proposed use" whereas validity "refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores for proposed uses of tests" (AERA 11). In plain terms, validity is increasingly understood as an argument-making practice designed to justify truth-claims. Every time we generate a research question, construct a methodological framework, or outline methods that answer our question, we are building a logical argument for how we will arrive at answers and their meanings in a particular time and place. John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller note that validity arguments must be able to address "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (124-25). These arguments, in their own way, build on the commonplace logics of the field, or borrow logics from adjacent fields, because doing so justifies the processes and products of our research. Validity arguments lay plain the claims,

warrants, evidence, and counterclaims embedded in research design and allow others to decide for themselves if these are assembled in a way that is rhetorically sound and capable of producing trustworthy or credible results. In other words, validity inquiry is about justifying the use of particular instruments and processes in order to make meaning and take action in the world. Validation reassures us and our audiences that we are moving in the “right” (e.g., forward) direction. This linear directional pattern, however, comes to represent its own “truthiness”: research, we believe, leads us from darkness to light, from unknowing to knowing, from ignorance to knowledge—and these trajectories become “right” directions when readers see our data collection methods as reasonable in the context of our theoretical/methodological paradigms.

As argument is traditionally thought of as a consensus-generating activity, familiar methods become familiar, in part, because they are used repeatedly. They become commonplace for researchers: the paths they lay out have actually already been laid out by previous researchers. Their validity comes to us as a set of sedimented practices, each deepening like the “coastal shelf” in Philip Larkin’s poem “This Be the Verse.” As such, familiar methods can become easier to argue for while less familiar or more contentious methods must stand up to greater scrutiny. In part, this is why Ellen Cushman has argued so persuasively against the colonialist imperative of traditional notions of validity: validity (and reliability), she has noted, “is used to claim, gather, and justify results with so many performance and survey tools, it has now more than ever been used to routinize inequities as naturalized parts of systems of educational access, predictions of success in school or on the job, psychological and intelligence measures, and as a foundation for knowledge creation in research studies” (n.p.). In this way, the onus of rhetorical persuasion falls disproportionately on those who stray from the well-worn paths of widely accepted methods. Those who choose queer paths that revel in messy research contexts and perhaps messier methods can experience a friction or drag as normative method/ologies work to restrict or restrain sideways knowledge-making movements.

Researchers looking for different ways to move with (rather than tidy up) the mess of methods, then, can benefit from queer approaches to framing validity. Queer approaches to validity are rooted in constructivism. Constructivist approaches to research position researchers as makers and crafters who must assemble their own representations of knowledge. Creswell and Miller note that constructivist research practices are “pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized (e.g., sensitive to place and situation) perspectives toward reality” (125-126). What “queer” brings to the constructivist sandbox or, to return to our magical metaphor, the conjuring circle, is permission to pick up the “wrong” wand or to use the right wand in the “wrong” ways. For example, in Stephanie’s

dissertation, we rejected sleek digital data models and instead crafted a way of knowing that was both monstrous and precarious. The board itself was a hideously beautiful sight (Figure 1.3), where one wrong move may lead to squished fortune tellers, unhinged safety pins, and unraveled yarn. Equally, there was no pre-made map/method that guaranteed us that the chaotic board would yield meaningful data. As researchers, we leaned into that contingency and risk, and those movements reoriented us to the data and the participants who generated it. Similarly, we argue (with our colleague Nicole Caswell) in *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*, “Our interest in Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI), then, reflects a disinvestment in/disidentification with success and a willingness to follow the ‘wrong’ paths of validity inquiry, those that promise to disrupt” the more demure models of inquiry that permeate our practices (45). QVI unsettles normative notions of validity to introduce sideways paths and, we believe, offers a compass with an ever-shifting magnetic north wherein we navigate with intentionality that’s rooted in continual reflection and re/consideration of the present rather than simply headed in one direction because of a predetermined outcomes we have established for a project. In thinking through disrupting normative logics of argument, whether they are related to assessment or research design (or the intersection of the two), we take our cue from Sara Ahmed’s work on queer phenomenology and affectivity. Ahmed argues that bodies are shaped by their encounters with the material world and the paths they take to avoid or move closer to people, objects, and feelings. As bodies move, some objects recede from view, others come into view, and our movements put us in close proximity, close enough perhaps that we can grasp hold of them. Bodies that are attracted and repelled, confused, or confounded, become, through these serendipitous movements, queer bodies. The queer body no longer follows the normative and normativizing paths that have been laid out for it. Instead, it comes to delight in disorientation and dislocation, finding new spaces in which to dwell and new ways to occupy those spaces.

When we apply this idea of queer phenomenology to our research methods, we are prompted to dispense with the idea of the researcher as an *a priori* being operating out of a carefully constructed set of ideological and practical pathways, pathways that invariably lead to a precipice where knowing involves seeing from above, taking it all in, capturing a scene in its totality. Sure, aerial views might lead to different ways to see the research landscape, but those vantage points are no more trustworthy than any other. Similarly, we cannot think of concepts like positionality as static and unchanging. Movement necessitates quotidian repositioning and reorienting toward our methods, our processes, and our participants. We should also accept that researchers are, whether we acknowledge it or not, directed by our own desires and emotions, following interests and

excitement, and perhaps avoiding or embracing risk, fear, and awkwardness. If we let them, these affective movements can queer preplanned research trajectories and prompt us to speed up, to slow down, and to change course in ways that allow alternative stories, patterns, practices, and experiences to emerge. This sort of move is about not settling for the stock stories and narrative archetypes we know, purposefully and intentionally resisting them through methods that resist traditional validity frameworks and their desire for “mastery” (Singh). We might spend more time collecting data, less time perseverating about fail-proof plans, and ultimately conjure different spells that unflatten and animate data in surprising ways.

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