

CHAPTER 11.

QUEERING WRITING ASSESSMENT: FAIRNESS, AFFECT, AND THE IMPACT ON LGBTQ WRITERS

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Research Problem: While our writing center purposefully worked to cultivate an inclusive space that provided our staff a welcoming venue for discussing concerns about sexuality and writing, we did not know how sexuality functioned in the assessments of writing from either a consultant or student perspective. Sexuality, as a writing assessment concern, remained invisible. We also did not know how the sexuality of writers shaped the responses to or assessments of student writing from consultants, students, or faculty.

Research Questions: How do writing centers, programs, and classrooms engage in assessment projects that attend to LGBTQ writers? How might we develop validity arguments that consider whether our proposed writing program and writing center assessments are appropriate for LGBTQ students throughout their time in higher education?

Literature Review: Our chapter considers how queer rhetorics and a sociocongitive perspective of measurement allow writing assessment scholars to engage questions of fairness, validity, and reliability while opening the door to queering writing assessment in more structurally sophisticated ways. Our interpretations of LGBTQ data hinges on our theoretical understanding that LGBTQ students experience writing assessments in structurally different ways from their non-LGBTQ-identified peers.

Methodology: We conducted two focus groups with a total of five students who identify as gay. Focus groups allowed us to listen to LGBTQ students to better understand their lived experiences before designing writing assessments. Our focus groups employed a semi-structured interview script designed to elicit students' experiences and stories with writing assessment in and out of the class-

room. We engaged in inductive, emergent coding (Kelle, 2007) in order to preserve the students' experiences.

Conclusions: A queer turn in writing assessment provides the necessary space to push forward a socially just writing assessment agenda that privileges the intersections between queer rhetorics and writing assessment. We argue that writing assessors must concern themselves with the emotional (and physical) safety of the students they assess, recognizing that because knowledge and ability are fundamentally embodied experiences, we must attend to those bodies that remain marginalized in and by culture.

Qualifications: Our focus groups provided us the experiences of gay-identified students reflecting a narrow sample.

Directions for Further Study: We need to hear from more LGBTQ students to understand their experiences as writers. Further information is also needed on how the affective aspects of writing assessments impact LGBTQ students.

In 2010, our institution began designing a writing-focused Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) re-accreditation. Emerging from the QEP was a new writing center space that allowed us to quadruple our writing center staff, invest in a data collection system, and eventually triple student usage of our services. The quick growth of the writing center also drew our attention to particular usage trends in assessment reporting data. One of the patterns we noticed was that sexuality remained an invisible part of those data trends even though sexuality was a prominent staff meeting topic. As administrators, we noticed a significant number of LGBTQ students on our staff, and their stories about how to interpret faculty comments during writing center sessions, how to work with homophobic essays, or how to engage with writing assignments in the classroom, while important to our staff development, went undocumented and undervalued in our end-of-year reporting.⁷ While we

7 For the purposes of this chapter, we have chosen LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) as our acronym for the population of students whose experiences with writing we want to explore in our study and about whom we want to raise significant questions regarding assessment practices. Institutions are increasingly comfortable with engaging LGBT students, in part because those identities seem stable and trackable. However, we include Q for both queer/gender-queer and questioning in order to remind ourselves and readers that categories intended to name or represent sexuality should remain fluid and complex, as are the lives these letters and terms are intended to represent. Likewise, in the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (2014), Standard 3.17 now recognizes that this sort of embodied complexity is essential for those doing assessment work.

purposefully worked to cultivate an inclusive space that provided our staff a welcoming venue for telling these stories, we did not know how sexuality functioned in the assessments of writing from either a consultant or student perspective. We also did not know how the sexuality of writers shaped the reading, responding, and assessing of student writing from consultants, students, or faculty. In these moments, we noticed all around us something different and exciting happening, and we also wondered where to showcase those changes, how to attend to the knowledges being developed, and how to honor the diverse experiences that were suddenly being called to our collective attention.

In order to foreground the knowledge and experience of LGBTQ students, we began to collect information in the writing center related to sexuality/sexual orientation and gender identity as part of programmatic assessment efforts in spring 2016. We started to think about how we might make sexuality a component of our larger university-wide writing portfolio assessment and why we might need to do so. We started conversations with offices on campus that were also beginning to collect and track data on LGBTQ students; we began looking at how we might partner and share data and work together to better support and advocate for all our students. Our experiences with students and our conversations around assessment as writing program administrators caused us to pause and recognize that, until recently, we too had not been collecting or thinking carefully enough about LGBTQ concerns in our assessments, certainly not as much as we should. Paying attention to LGBTQ students in our assessment projects should be a core concern for any faculty, administrator, or researcher who is committed to social justice work. Sexuality, like gender and class, intersects racial and ethnic identities in ways that offer us more complex and sophisticated understandings of ourselves.

Throughout this chapter, we identify several ways in which we see the lived experiences of LGBTQ students, sexuality, and queer rhetorics converging with writing assessment. Our approach cuts across various contexts of writing assessment, such as classroom and portfolio assessments, programmatic assessments, and placement testing. In doing so, we demonstrate why questions of justice, particularly with diverse populations, must be central to writing assessment research. Through our emerging queered writing assessment methodology, we offer other WPAs/WCDs the opportunity to reflect on and to question their own current assessment projects and practices. Ultimately, we argue that writing assessors must concern themselves with the emotional (and physical) safety of the students they assess, recognizing that because knowledge and ability are fundamentally embodied experiences, we must attend to those bodies that remain marginalized in culture at large. Equally important, we note, is the fact that since gender and sexuality are for many people fluid and unfinished experiences, par-

ticularly among youth, we must consider the complexities of sexuality both in forming the structure of our writing assessments and in the validity arguments we make based on our results. In short, failing to attend to complex notions of gender and sexuality in our work jeopardizes fairness, validity, and reliability in our assessments.

Beginning with an analysis of a new study of writing assessment in action, we take a primarily theoretical approach in this chapter in order to challenge various elements of writing assessment that remain normative to classroom-based and programmatic work. Following Cole's (2015) recognition that theory works to historicize and materialize language and thinking, our approach establishes new avenues for the ethical collection and analysis of data within an educational measurement framework (see also Elliot, 2016). Our chapter builds on feedback from two focus groups of gay-identified students to help us think about how classroom assessment, programmatic assessment, and larger, standardized assessments would benefit from the intersection of queer rhetorics and writing assessment. This theoretical approach to writing assessment allows us to consider how individualized moments of feedback impact students' learning and writing development, as well as how their writing can be used for programmatic assessment. We name the writing assessment contexts in this chapter as we shift between the classroom and programmatic spaces while detailing a queer turn to assessment, but we privilege the classroom context as a beginning space to think through the larger relationships between queer rhetorics and writing assessment scholarship because queer rhetorics tend to value diverse and distributed contexts rather than top-down frames for inquiry and analysis. As such, we begin our inquiry into/critique of writing assessment by looking at how assessment practices operate on individuals so that any theory we build around writing assessment grows out of the lived experiences of those individuals and feeds back into those experiences in meaningful ways (Moss et al., 2008).

Our entry into queering writing assessment, likewise, draws from the larger inquiry of educational measurement and Critical Validity Inquiry (CVI). Drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Jeffrey Perry's (2012) CVI places validity inquiry in conversation with CDA and sociocultural understandings of language. The overarching goal of CVI is to understand the embedded power and possibility within assessment to break the social reproduction of privileged epistemologies in our work, particularly around positivistic notions such as standardization, measurement, and reliability that continue to guide normative practices in writing assessment. As a result, we believe CVI is one way to move toward greater social justice in writing assessment since CVI asks us to design "reflexive methodologies that continually challenge the researcher's method of producing results" (Perry, 2012, p. 187). Similarly, Mislvey (2016) argues for educational as-

assessments to develop ways to meet the sociocognitive challenges in measurement. Mislevy extends our thinking on socially just writing assessments by providing a sociocognitive perspective to help us consider the complex interplay of “cognitive processes within individuals, interactions among people and things in the world as we experience them, and between-persons social practices and LCS [linguistic, cultural, and substantive] patterns” (2016, p. 268). In particular, we are concerned about the lived, embodied experiences of LGBTQ students as they participate in writing assessments that call upon their experiences which Mislevy situates as an important step in establishing validity arguments.

While Mislevy argues that “a sociocognitive perspective views a construct as an aggregation over clusters of individuals’ unique constellations of resources, in a way that suits the assessor’s purpose and point of view” (2016, p. 274), we believe queer rhetorics can draw our attention to the highly constructed and often unsettling performance of the self—self as agent, self as researcher, self as autonomous, self as performative—and provide language to either identify the individual or to represent our realities. Browne and Nash (2010, p. 1) ask, “What meanings can we draw from, and what use can we make of, such data when it is only momentarily fixed and certain? And what does this mean for thinking about ourselves as researchers?” Central to queer methods of inquiry, therefore, has been a concern for reflexivity. Where queer rhetorics, like other poststructural projects, recognize the slipperiness of language (and data), reflexivity becomes a core method for testing our hypotheses and interpretations. Thus, we argue that assessment practices that assume gender or sexual orientation categories as fixed or taken for granted can offer only limited or partial data. Queer rhetorics, a sociocognitive perspective of measurement, and Perry’s CVI offer one way for writing assessment scholars to engage questions of validity, fairness, and reliability while opening the door to queering writing assessment in more structurally sophisticated ways. We enact and enable a “queer turn” in writing assessment by considering how we might develop validity arguments (Kane, 2010, 2015) that consider whether or not our proposed writing program and writing center programmatic assessments are appropriate for LGBTQ students over their educational careers in higher education. Our interpretations of LGBTQ data hinges on our theoretical understanding that LGBTQ students experience writing assessments in structurally different ways from their non-LGBTQ-identified peers.

HOW QUEER THE TURN?

Recently, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace’s (2009) review of key texts in Writing Studies articulated a “queer turn” in the field that can help the discipline toward a “better understanding of how heteronormativity operates in society at

large, in our classrooms, and in the pages of our books and journals” (p. 301), and they make a strong case for the multiple and varied ways that heteronormativity continues to enact violence on our teachers, students, instructional contexts, and research practices. Yet, the work of assessment remains absent either from their critique or review for obvious reasons: to date, no scholars in the field have explicitly addressed the interconnections of queer studies and writing assessment in terms that make it clear that what many queer scholars have been discussing all along are issues directly related to assessment practices, methodologies, and epistemologies. This absence leads us to wonder below how the subfield of writing assessment might tackle such a thorny and difficult problem, as well as why the queer turn has seemed to have had so little impact on writing assessment? When we look at the extant scholarship through an assessment lens, we begin to notice how important and interrelated these areas of study are.

For example, early LGBTQ scholarship in Writing Studies concerned itself extensively with classroom assessment issues like responding to and evaluating student writing, even if this concern was often contextualized through first-person narratives of teaching experience and the practitioner’s concern: “What do you do when/if?” Scott Lankford’s (1991/1992) presentation at MLA, “Queers, Bums, and Magic’: How Would You Grade a Gay Bashing?” initiated a watershed moment of discussion in the field about responding to homophobia in student writing. Lankford offered a critical look at a student paper that he had received and which detailed a straight male student’s travel narrative about a trip to “San Fagcisco.” While the essay met all the criteria of the assignment that the teacher had listed, what Lankford had not accounted for was the possibility that a student would write a sadistic, homophobic essay in response to the prompt. As part of the narrative, the student recounts how he and his friends stopped a man on the street to ask if he were a “fag” so they could ask him questions for a class project. Later in the essay, the student recounts how he and his friends urinated on a homeless man in a dark alley—a man whom they then kicked multiple times for sport. Lankford posed the question that many of us have been forced to ask ourselves: what are we grading when we grade student work? And as important, how do we respond to texts that violate our sense of ethics and our concern for engaged, thoughtful public dialogue on important topics or issues?

This presentation reverberated through the field at a time when it was only just beginning to deal with its own silences around sexuality. Richard E. Miller (1994) would eventually write about the exchange and his own concerns around the text in “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing,” arguing that “this student essay . . . has seized the attention of more teachers, taken up more institutional time, and provoked more debate than any other single piece of unpublished undergraduate writing in recent memory” (p.

391). After a discussion of multiple grading options, Miller reports, Lankford assigned the paper a low B and treated it as a fictional account of “megaviolence” reminiscent of Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*. The grade evoked as much debate and frustration as the type of response to give. For Miller, this essay offers a dramatic example of what teachers face each time they sit down to respond to student writing. He writes that the two primary response paths offered by teachers in the room—1) remove the student from the class, and 2) comment on surface features and treat the text like fiction—demonstrate the paucity of professional development for preparing “teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom” (Miller, 1994, p. 394). We share this “contact zone” moment from our recent disciplinary history at length because we remain uncertain that Writing Studies, some twenty years later, has dealt in significant ways with the questions that Lankford’s student essay and Miller’s read on it (and our field) have created for us. What role, if any, is the assessment community going to play in this conversation?

While Ball (1997), Inoue (2015), and Inoue and Poe (2012a, 2012b) have explored response concerns regarding race; and while Haswell and Haswell (1996) and Cleary (1996) have explored these questions regarding gender, there has not been the same inquiry into sexuality and classroom assessment and response. Yet, things are beginning to change. One change is making LGBTQ identity visible. For example, in the most recent *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (2014), the assessment community moved to recognize the importance of LGBTQ participants in our work:

When aggregate scores are publicly reported for relevant subgroups—for example, males and females, individuals of differing socioeconomic status, individuals with different sexual orientation, individuals with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, young children or older adults—test users are responsible for providing evidence of comparability and for including cautionary statements whenever credible research or theory indicates that test scores may not have comparable meaning across these subgroups. (Standard 3.17, p. 71)

By recognizing the importance of including sexual orientation in a sampling plan design, Standard 3.17 requires score disaggregation, evidence of comparability, and cautionary statements when scores do not hold the same meaning across these sub-groups; the inclusion of sexual orientation reminds assessors

that the experiences of LGBTQ participants may vary from heteronormative participants.

A second change is recognizing that writing assessment is no longer understood as a primarily normativizing project, rather an interpretative and argument-based undertaking (Kane, 2013, 2015). Unfortunately, as we sit in campus assessment conversations, ranging from departmental committee work on writing assessment to campus-wide reaccreditation discussions, the discourse of normalization (e.g., base lines, norms, agreement, and standards) remains.

A final change is engaging the scholarly community to include the voices of queer students in writing assessment practice. We hazard that one reason many queer scholars have been reticent to engage with writing assessment is that so few of us had extensive assessment training in our graduate programs, and where we did, the older discourses of normativity were still prevalent. More recent writing assessment work, however, seems to be opening a productive space for queer rhetorics to engage with assessment practices and theories. As with current assessment work being used to promote social justice broadly conceived (Inoue, 2015; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Poe & Inoue, 2016), we recognize that where assessment conversations still engage “baselines” and “norms,” a queer notion of assessment might ask us to consider alternative notions of “growth,” including the idea of growing sideways (Bond, 2009). Likewise, where norming readers functions to achieve interrater reliability/agreement, a queer lens for assessment might instead value dissensus and disagreement, paying attention to outliers in order to challenge those texts/readers/values that fall so neatly into our norms. What, then, would program assessment look like if we dismiss reader-norming and its implicit assumptions around “reliability”? While assessment experts would recognize our move toward validity, WPAs and WCDs might still wonder how such a shift will help their programs. For example, the 2016 *College English* issue “Toward Social Justice as Writing Assessment” includes Alexander’s critique of writing assessment: “I’m not sure that writing assessment can ever be queer. It still seems too invested in norming at times, even in normalizing experiences of composing and its teaching. We are called upon to produce results, to justify our existences even. But we can also tell other stories” (205). Banks and Alexander (2010) explore similar issues when they note how difficult it has been to engage queer theory at the programmatic level since so much of our field’s discourse around “programs” has to do with commonality, uniformity, and an obsession with outcomes that privileges normativity over dissensus, conflict, intentionality, failure, or any number of concepts we might articulate as “queer values.” Likewise, many compositionists encounter assessment as an outside force, something that comes from external pressures like reaccreditation (Sharer et al., 2016); from

system or campus-level attempts to determine which programs are “successful” and thus which ones to cut or “restructure”; or as department or program level impositions on teacher independence and academic freedom. In the end, while assessment as a field has moved on significantly in the last few years (Kane, 2010, 2011, 2016), WPAs and WCDs work in contexts where the assessment conversation has not yet moved on, so we are not surprised that queer compositionists have spent so little time engaging with assessment beyond the individual classroom or the individual teacher-student experience.

Yet, we believe that writing assessment—the conversations it engages and brings into being—has the potential to lead Writing Studies to enact and engage in queer work; we believe that assessment can be (re)understood as a queer project. To do so, Writing Studies needs to wrestle with WPAs’ and WCDs’ misperceptions of contemporary assessment theory in order to see how the work of assessment is one avenue for advancing a queer turn in our field. Following Mislevy (2016), we see spaces for challenging normativization (Lederman and Warwick, Chapter 7, this collection, for further discussion on challenging normativization) and reconsidering what we want writing assessment to do for us (and our students) and why. In the study we outline below, we demonstrate how issues of gender and sexuality are central to considerations of fairness, validity, and reliability through our attention to LGBT students.

LISTENING TO LGBTQ STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES WITH ASSESSMENT

Response research has consistently called for more inquiry on student voices (Blakely 2016; Huot, 2002; Kynard, 2006; Murphy, 2000) in the classroom and how students understand feedback, yet aside from a few studies (Sommers, 2006; Straub, 1997), we still have a limited knowledge of how students experience classroom and programmatic assessment. And, as Karen S. Nulton and Irvin Peckham (Chapter 9, this collection) remind us, the sociopsychological aspects of teaching and learning impact students’ attitudes toward writing and provide valuable insight to students lived experiences with writing. As administrators working to ensure fairness, validity, and reliability, we turn to student voices (response processes) as another point of validity evidence. Conversations with LGBTQ students about their writing strategies and writing assessment experiences “can yield evidence that enriches the definition of a construct” (*Standards*, 2014, p. 15). Focusing on LGBTQ students’ experiences with writing assessment requires us to redefine student-centeredness to incorporate the emotional welfare of LGBTQ students. As Kalikoff (2005) reminds us, “students are not inevitably central to student-centered learning,” but when considering

research on LGBTQ students and their experiences with writing assessment, students *must* be the center (p. 116).

After a conversation with a student affairs educator on what information our university gathers and tracks with regard to LGBTQ students, we started to think of ways we could listen to LGBTQ students in gathering data ourselves. Before conducting large-scale studies about LGBTQ students' GPAs, or how LGBTQ persistence/retention aligned with other demographic markers, we needed to talk to students to understand how to develop identity taxonomies and what data to collect. Focus group methodology provided one way to gather student input on designing studies that include LGBTQ students as a demographic category.

We conducted two IRB-approved focus groups with a total of five students who identify as gay. Both focus groups were audio and video recorded. For the purpose of this chapter, we focus exclusively on the audio. Our focus groups employed a semi-structured interview script with five questions designed to elicit students' experiences and stories with writing assessment in and out of the classroom. The first focus group included two undergraduate male-identified students: Michael, a white junior transfer student, and Marcus, an African American senior. The second focus group included one undergraduate student and two graduate students, all white males: Jason, a senior; Matthew, a first semester master's student; and Steven, a third semester master's student. All participants have been given pseudonyms. The first focus group lasted about 45 minutes whereas the second focus group was closer to 75 minutes. We initially attributed this difference in time to having three participants in the second focus group, but as we listened to the audio recordings, it became clear that participants in the second group demonstrated a greater sense of personal awareness and confidence as gay men and as students more generally.

Following transcription, we engaged in inductive, emergent coding (Kelle, 2007) to preserve the students' experiences and to think through how those experiences shape the ways we approach researching and writing about LGBTQ students and assessment. Three key codes emerged as we read through the transcripts: affective markers (e.g., teacher/classmate behaviors that suggested LGBTQ topics were welcomed); curriculum markers (e.g., presence/absence of LGBTQ topics in syllabi or assignment directions); and identity markers (e.g., students negotiating "coming out" in college or high school contexts; demographics). These minor codes led to our major code that writing assessment for LGBTQ students is emotionally risky. In the following section, we explore our participants' experiences through the lenses of ontology, epistemology, and axiology because these terms represent key areas of "risk" for writers and provide an analytic frame that foregrounds LGBTQ bodies and lived experiences as a category of validity evidence in writing assessments.

LGBTQ ASSESSMENT IS EMOTIONALLY RISKY

Despite seemingly radical changes in the political climate of the United States between 2000 and 2016, including current marriage equality options for gay and lesbian couples, participants in the focus groups frequently shared stories from high school about negotiating their sexuality in a context of restrictive expectations from family members, religious institutions, and various communities they were part of:

My knowledge of LGBTQ was literally bound to health class and homosexuality that was all that was talked about. That was my only knowledge. I don't even think we covered transgender. The only thing I remember is the section in the health book was homosexuality. By section I mean the definition and then the next paragraph was something else. (Michael)

Stories like Michael's did not necessarily surprise us, but after a somewhat banner year in terms of LGBTQ equality and acceptance (e.g., marriage equality, increased visibility for trans* people like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner), it was important to remember that these sorts of political and social changes happen slowly. In terms of writing assessment, they also reminded us how personal such work can be and *should* be if we want useful, student-centered assessment data.

Our participants also shared stories of how they navigated their college writing experiences with the major difference being that many came out during their college career. Coming out to friends, family, and classmates shaped their classroom, writing, and assessment experiences. During high school, participants were mostly closeted and not involved with LGBTQ communities, and they often reflected on the paucity of informed, responsible information when it came to LGBTQ people. For example, several noted that their middle or high school health classes had been primarily "clinical" and used words like *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality*, while the focus had been on abstinence. Living in an atmosphere of near total silence around sexuality, we might ask, how could these students possibly write about such issues? This reminded us that for many LGBTQ students, college is the first time they have had the opportunity to practice writing about their sexuality or identities in full and complex ways (Alexander, 2008; Gonçalves, 2005; Malinowitz, 1995), so unlike their peers, who have perhaps thought about their ethnicity, race, or gender in any number of ways, LGBTQ students may struggle to engage such topics or to do so in "academic discourse." In part, this is Alexander's (2008) point that all of our students need more experiences exploring sexual literacy, that such awareness-in/through-writing should not be only the work of queer youth because all people

benefit from greater awareness of sexuality and gender issues. We also need to discover what impact, if any, this disconnect between high school and college is having for LGBTQ students. At the very least, this re-thinking about the connection between high school and college may challenge some of the current work being done on writing transfer, as the genres, experiences, and topics reflected in transfer scholarship may not work for LGBTQ students (Alexander & Gross, 2016). We see writing assessment taking a leadership role in helping us to better understand how ontology and epistemology are inextricably linked for LGBTQ students—how their varied and shifting experiences with being shape their ways of knowing and communicating that knowledge.

At the university level, our participants had to negotiate how and when to come out to classmates, teachers, and friends/family alongside students' typical concerns about writing (e.g., what does the teacher want? what does the rubric say? how do I phrase this?). For LGBTQ students, choosing to write about their personal experiences or an LGBTQ issue for a graded assignment becomes both a grade-based choice and a political choice as well as one filtered through multiple issues around personal growth and development. Aside from just wondering what the teacher wants or the writing context demands (e.g., organization, citation style, length, or type of sources), student writers may also need to consider the political leanings of their instructor, classmates, and university community. When our participants did elect to write on LGBTQ topics, it was because they felt it was somehow *permissioned*:

It was in the 1200 English class [Composition II]. It was well received. I chose what was most relevant to me at the time: coming out. And the other I wrote on LGBTQ issues—wrote about coming out because I was coming out—went fairly well. Turned it in late because of the emotional issues, but she was understanding about that. . . . but it didn't really affect the way I wrote about it . . . just because at that point and time I was fine with who I was. It didn't make me uncomfortable. She was awesome: my favorite English teacher ever. Went to her office hours and she would listen. It was like a counseling session/how am I doing on my paper session. (Michael)

Ultimately, Michael even noted that his teacher's "comments made me more comfortable with writing." Marcus also told a story of how he wrote two different versions of an assignment before he could discern if it were "safe" to submit the one that outed him. He was enrolled in a face-to-face summer course with a professor he eventually came to describe as "cool":

In the course “marriage and family relations,” we were asked to write about our ideal family. I wrote about my idea of a family in the —marry my partner/husband. He responded with comments in the margins about society “coming around” and the teacher echoed the same thing—he thought it was cool . . . I actually wrote 2 different papers. I was debating this one or this one where I had a pronoun difference for the partner. (Marcus)

In addition to adhering to the assignment guidelines, LGBTQ students have to read the political and affective aspects of the teacher and classroom (Cox, 2017). In both of these cases, we see that assessment practices are directly related to composition practices: for one student, the emotional work of articulating a self in text (Banks 2003; Hindeman, 2003) was significantly different from other types of “personal” writing (Newkirk, 2000), and in this case impacted the time it took for him to finish the project and turn it in. Unlike the often innocuous stories of favorite childhood toys, summer vacations, or family traditions that pop up in a number of both test-based and classroom-based narrative assignments for students from kindergarten to college, “coming out” as topic and trope remains one that students in classroom settings have little experience writing, receiving feedback on, and revising. Recognizing the affective impact that such writing has is important. For example, should Marcus’ “late paper” lose points? Marcus may have done twice as much work as his peers because the paper he wanted to write and the paper he thought “safer” to write were at odds. Both of those experiences suggest that LGBTQ students may struggle more with certain writing assignments or activities as they attempt to negotiate their own sense of safety in a classroom or assessment setting. How do our current classroom assessment practices consider these sorts of writing complexities, which operate at the intersections of ontology and epistemology?

Of course, we are well aware that not every student is fortunate enough to be in a classroom where they can freely explore topics that are important to them. In fact, it came as no surprise that some classrooms are set up for students not to question either topic or instructor, or to imagine other ways of engaging with pedagogy, as this elementary education major indicated in his story:

I never really thought about it in undergrad as an elementary education major in writing lesson plans—that was the main genre for writing . . . the buzzword for lesson plans was global awareness. . . . I feel like, looking back, there’s this element of diversity as multiculturalism that every elementary major should strive for. So there was this understanding that you

need to be inclusive and you need to tailor your curriculum and your instruction for different kinds of audiences, but there was this unspoken rule that nothing you do in the classroom should bring in any kind of discussion of sexuality and gender. I didn't really see it as a problem at that point and just something I accepted. Now, I would certainly write a lesson plan that was inclusive of LGBTQ students. (Matthew)

Matthew's story reminds us how easy it is, even for LGBTQ students writing in their major courses, to be convinced that their lives and experiences are fundamentally extracurricular, so much so that Matthew did not really think to challenge or question the absence of LGBTQ students or texts in the global curriculum he was learning. In such cases, we believe that writing assessment can also demonstrate leadership at the intersections of Writing Studies and queer rhetorics by providing frames to bridge the epistemological and the axiological: How do writing prompts frame what is possible or not for LGBTQ students? How do our writing assessments engage with beliefs, mores, and values that operate in the classroom to keep some topics (bodies, experiences, knowledges) off limits or out of bounds?

These initial stories around teacher feedback point out the criticality of remembering that LGBTQ students and experiences exist, as well as the need to consider the emotional safety of individual students before we can think about research projects involving writing assessment. Equally important, they foreground the complexities among being, knowing, and belief for LGBTQ students. In regards to writing assessment, we believe that the role of writing assessment should be in keeping the lived and embodied experiences of LGBTQ writers as central to assessment designs, validity arguments, and data analysis. While this approach to writing assessment may limit larger, data-driven validity inquiry studies, our approach to writing assessment allows researchers to design local assessments that value student voices. Our participants remind us there is still a level of vulnerability for LGBTQ students in classroom-based writing assessments. Where sexuality can be a hidden or invisible identity marker, researchers also need to be attuned to the ways students are electing to reveal their sexuality. Sometimes, this "reveal" may be in topic selection, as one of our participants noted; he chose to write about LGBTQ issues in a research-based paper. Matthew noted leaving LGBTQ issues out of his lesson plan for an education class. Had he done so, at least in his mind, that would have been tantamount to outing himself to his teacher and peers.

Similarly, our participants wanted to remind teachers that "if there [are] personal details in there or personal events regardless of what they are you should go

a little easier on that not in terms of the structure of the raw essay, but the content.” Our participants backtracked a bit to say that teachers should not go easier on the grading, but “I guess what I am trying to say is, don’t invalidate what they [students] are putting in the paper” (Michael). Similarly, Marcus noted an ongoing concern for LGBTQ students: “don’t put your personal opinion into how you are grading or effect your grading.” Part of what Michael and Marcus are both getting at, it seems to us, is a “felt sense” (Perl, 2004) that writing teachers may not be prepared to engage topics in LGBTQ students’ papers. A concern for the grade cuts both ways: students did not want to be “graded down” from a homophobic teacher, but they also did not want a teacher to “feel sorry” for them because their story may involve pain or disappointment. Responding to writing that is layered with affective experiences remains a struggle for writing teachers; one significant shift in writing assessment could be to include more work from queer affect studies which should work to include voices and experiences from LGBTQ writers.

LGBTQ DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES AS MARKING THE UNKNOWN

While the most recent *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (2014) marks the assessment community’s recognition of LGBTQ participants in our work, writing researchers have not yet demonstrated the impact of difference markers on LGBTQ student writing; likewise, researchers rarely approach demographic markers as fundamentally intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall 2005; Thompson, 2002), each individual research participant representing more than one demographic category.

Of course, paying attention to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other “acceptable” census/demographic categories in assessment seems obvious/normal, in part because data on these markers are actively and aggressively collected by many institutions. In contrast, finding data related to sexuality often requires teachers and programs (1) to make it a priority by naming sexuality and calling attention to it; (2) to collect new assessment data that includes sexuality; and (3) to provide a safe or welcoming environment in which students can identify their sexualities among other demographic markers. We should also remember that categories of sexuality may not be as fixed as other demographic markers. For example, it is not uncommon for some young people to identify as “bisexual” in their adolescent years and then as either gay or lesbian once they enter college (Savin-Williams, 2006). Similarly, some trans* people may initially identifying as gay or lesbian in their youth because they think those categories will be easier

for their parents and friends to understand, or because they do not yet understand themselves as trans* persons. At the same time, while trans* is usually included when we discuss sexuality, not all trans* people understand “trans” as demarking a sexual orientation: a female-to-male (FTM) trans* person may experience sexual attraction to other men, to women, or to both; his/their embodiment as male does not necessarily dictate his/their sexual orientation.¹

With this complexity of categories in mind, one of our questions to our focus group participants was, “What would/could/should the ‘categories’ look like?” Like Michael Sterling Burns, Randall Cream, and Timothy R. Dougherty (Chapter 8, this collection), we too want our assessment data to drive institutional change and have been considering the ways the writing center can challenge demographic data collections. Thus, using the writing center as an example of a space that might be interested in collecting such demographic data, we asked them how they would structure such a question on a form or as part of registering for an appointment on the website. Michael wondered, “well, what do they personally identify as?” and Steven asked, “could they specify their own?” Other ideas participants shared included, “Do you identify as LGBTQ? Please specify.” Our conversations took an interesting turn when we started to think about the ACT/SAT/GRE and other standardized assessments that students take during their educational career. How would they have reacted to seeing questions about sexuality? What would their response be if the writing prompt had something to do with sexuality or LGBTQ issues? As an example, during our focus group, we offered, “Make an argument for or against gender neutral bathrooms in schools.” After we moved beyond the shock and awe of such a possibility, one of our participants reflected,

At that time in my life I don't think I could've actually formed an answer. I don't think I would've known enough about it or had enough personal experience with it. . . . now that I know more I can write more; give it to me. (Michael)

We had two motives for asking our participants to think about this question. First, we wanted to begin to think about how to collect this demographic data on sexuality in our local writing center. Second, we wondered if we could get our students to think outside their classroom experiences to consider larger, programmatic assessment experiences. Participants offered useful insight and complexity to our decision to collect LGBTQ data in the writing center. In trying to help us form demographic questions, they also demonstrated how hard it was

1 It is important to note, as well, that while some trans* people identify with traditionally gendered pronouns, others prefer the plural-singular pronoun series *they, their, them* because their experiences of gender do not fit neatly into the either/or, male/female binary.

for them to imagine such questions. We had approached the idea of collecting demographic data on LGBTQ students as an obvious move for our program and one that would show our support for these students, but our focus group responses reminded us that there remain good reasons why students would be hesitant to identify themselves officially through such forms. We have begun to wonder when it is most responsible to collect data on sexuality? Is a generic registration form a “safe” space for students to disclose their sexuality? In what ways might age remain a factor in these disclosures? Besides the intellectual work needed to think through what categories to use and the data collection processes, at what point do students have access to the knowledge they need to be able to engage in LGBTQ research prompts/data collection categories?

We acknowledge, of course, that asking these questions and/or challenging the data sets available for large-scale assessments (e.g., NSSE, FSSE) is complicated and comes with some degree of risk. Based on our initial focus groups discussed above, for example, we decided to begin collecting demographic data related to sexuality and gender identity, in addition to data already collected around race/ethnicity, year in school, etc. Doing so, however, triggered an avalanche of resistance at our institution that was somewhat unexpected. While the campus LGBTQ Resource Office administrator and students were pleased to see the questions about sexuality and gender identity, there was some concern expressed by our campus EEOC office that collecting this data might harm students or cause writing consultants to treat students differently based on disclosures on their registration forms. After an investigation by EEOC, we were contacted by one of the university attorneys, who in very firm language “suggested” we cease to collect such data. The Registrar is the only office on campus, we were told, allowed to collect demographic data and we should ask them for this data. Of course, no office on campus that we know of collects data on sexuality or gender identity (as opposed to anatomical sex). While we have worked this out by having the campus Institutional Review Board approve our data collection as research, multiple meetings and emails with EEOC, university attorneys, and the Provost represent an important set of moments where we were actively discouraged from asking these questions because of perceived risk by the university. At one point, when Will suggested it was perhaps a homophobic response for the university attorney to dismiss the need to know this demographic data for assessment purposes, he was told that no other program on campus asks about students’ sexuality; they serve all students and have “no problems.” Will pointed out that just because students do not complain, that does not mean that there are no problems, as our initial focus groups demonstrated. In the absence of assessment data, how do those programs *know* that they are meeting the needs of LGBTQ students? The silence that followed was deafening.

Of course, even if local assessment practices attempt to render LGBTQ students visible through demographic data that is reported on in aggregate form, it is nearly impossible to validate that data against other assessments. If one's university does not collect similar data, for example, local assessments that are responsible to LGBTQ students cannot be compared to other data from different programs; this failure to compare data renders localized assessments silent in larger conversations about important markers like persistence and retention. Likewise, while the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) both collect data on sexuality from participants, that data is not necessarily selected for inclusion in local reports to universities. At our university, for example, Institutional Planning, Assessment, and Research (IPAR) carefully selected out sexuality, as well as granular race/ethnicity categories, when it collected and shared NSSE and BCSSE data for our campus. Unfortunately, at present, NSSE and BCSSE do not request information concerning gender identity but only binary anatomical sex (M/F).

DOING LGBTQ ASSESSMENT

In the 1990s, when he first began to research the literacies and lives of LGBTQ people, Will ran into roadblocks at every turn: resistance from colleagues, anxiety from student participants, and everything from mild reluctance to outright hostility from campus Institutional Review Boards. His experience is not novel, of course, and the literature of our field is filled with similar stories and experiences for LGBTQ researchers. It is no wonder that it has taken so long to begin to engage LGBTQ students throughout research in Writing Studies. In this section, we would like to turn our attention to two similar but somewhat separate sets of conclusions/reflections on our initial foray into this work: 1) what might be initial best practices for writing assessment scholars to consider as they begin to include LGBTQ students and writing in their research? and 2) how might queer theory impact writing assessment theory and generate new avenues for inquiry?

The easiest way to keep LGBTQ people and their experiences at the margins of our field is not to do the research because such research may prove difficult. At this point, failing to attend to LGBTQ writers as part of basic demographic research is inexcusable and demonstrates an active, homophobic resistance on the part of researchers, writing program administrators, writing center directors, and other Writing Studies scholars engaged in research involving human participants. To that end, we offer the following points of consideration.

Gender and sexuality represent vexing ontological categories for writing assessment. Paying attention to LGBTQ bodies and experiences in writing assessment will mean changing business as usual in writing programs and centers.

What role, if any, do LGBTQ people and issues play in your writing program? Are LGBTQ people and concerns central to placement practices (e.g., essay prompts)? Are LGBTQ people and texts part of shared textbooks (Marinara et al., 2009)? What, if any, training/support do instructors receive for developing LGBTQ-friendly topics or course projects—for responding to drafts by LGBTQ writers/on LGBTQ topics? The one thing that was abundantly clear from our focus group participants was that they noticed if LGBTQ texts, people, stories, anecdotes, experiences, and data were part of class discussions, syllabi, and other curricular materials. The presence and absence of those materials gave them clues about whether or not they could write about LGBTQ topics or could be open about themselves to the teachers. Paying attention to the ways that we demonstrate inclusivity is an important first step. Paying attention to LGBTQ students' progress and learning offers teachers and students critical spaces for confronting heteronormative assumptions about language and ideas in the world in ways similar to the ways that paying attention to students' whiteness helps form anti-racist assessment projects (Inoue, 2012).

Assessment data should be gathered in ways that are attentive to participant vulnerability.

Paying attention to pedagogy and program design also means paying attention to the data we collect. WPAs typically collect syllabi from faculty and graduate teaching assistants; adding “LGBTQ content” to the elements that WPAs notice as absent or present offers key assessment data at the program level that does not require students to feel vulnerable. One focus group participant, enrolled in a sociology class on “Marriage and Family,” noted that there was no mention in the syllabus of LGBTQ families or relationships, which let him know from day one that the course might not be a “safe” space to discuss such topics. That student recognized that such a course *should* have LGBTQ families and family structures as a topic; this absence suggested, at the very least, a tacit hostility toward LGBTQ people that worked to keep him silent on the topic. While students may feel powerless to intervene, colleagues or program administrators can offer productive feedback on such documents. Likewise, by simply noting in annual program reports that “X% of composition syllabi included no LGBTQ texts or topics,” WPAs may find that a conversation emerges among teachers about what and how they might include LGBTQ

texts or topics. This sort of work supports LGBTQ students without making them have to do the work of advocating for their own inclusion.

WPAs and WCDs can provide leadership on campus by gather advocating for the collection of aggregate data on LGBTQ students.

Find out if your campus tracks LGBTQ student success and persistence. Ask if sexual orientation is part of standard demographic data collection. Where this is not the case, WPAs/WCDs and other Writing Studies scholars can begin to advocate for such data to be collected. We might partner with campus LGBTQ support offices, where they exist, to advocate for better data tracking and a greater concern for student success. These relationships might provide WPAs and writing scholars with valuable insights from LGBTQ students about what they experience in writing classes that could lead to better professional development for teachers and richer writing assessments/research projects. Writing Centers might also lead this sort of work, as we are doing at our university, by offering “Safe Zone” training to writing consultants and by starting to track LGBTQ demographic data in our usage reports.

In order for LGBTQ experiences to become a form of validity and fairness evidence, researchers must collect these stories from students and pay attention to their local context.

Writing assessment researchers should listen more to students generally, but certainly we need to gather more stories from LGBTQ students in order to understand how and when LGBTQ students begin to/are allowed to write about such topics or when their writings around LGBTQ topics become part of their academic assessments. During National Day on Writing 2015, for example, a trans* student participated in a “Writing for Change” activity in our writing center. He was not sure what to write about; his thinking was constrained by what was “appropriate” given what he was currently learning in his composition course. After a while, he asked, “If I wanted to tell someone on campus about trans* safety issues, who would I write?” From there, he went on to write four letters to key figures on campus advocating for trans* safety issues in residential housing. When we asked if he needed any help, he said quite happily, “Nah, I’m good. I wish we could write about this sort of stuff in comp class—I’d never shut up!” And away he went, tapping for over an hour on the keyboard. Stories like these may lend insights into how better to address the previous suggestions in much the same ways as our focus groups have helped us to think through how to collect LGBTQ demographic data in the writing center. While we can pay more attention to LGBTQ issues in writing assessment as researchers and program directors, we need to hear from more students to help us identify the most

pressing issues. LGBTQ voices should have a constant presence in discussions around the assessment of students and their writing. Until we listen to LGBTQ students and understand their experiences as writers in classroom and other assessment settings, we will not know whether or how our assessment practices are impacting them as writers/students.

CONCLUSION

We believe our queer turn in assessment has provided the necessary space to push forward a socially just writing assessment agenda that privileges the intersections between queer rhetorics and writing assessment. When we consider three key concerns in writing assessment—fairness, validity, and reliability—a queer turn for writing assessment not only engages LGBTQ students as composers, but also forces writing assessment researchers and writing program administrators of various kinds to consider how they are engaging LGBTQ issues in both local and large-scale assessment practices—and if not, to ask why they are making this conscious and purposeful omission. As we look toward designing fairness arguments alongside our validity arguments (Kane, 2010), we can attend to fairness by designing writing tasks and prompts that are accessible for all students and promote a greater opportunity to learn in higher education. For example, based on the stories our students shared in the focus group, we can hypothesize that the affective aspects of assessment might impact LGBTQ students more than others because of heightened levels of vulnerability. LGBTQ students report experiencing a more negative classroom climate (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004) than their straight peers, and we cannot help but wonder how these negative spaces impact their classroom assessments, which may or may not appear in program assessments.

When we consider the affective context and aspect of writing, especially vulnerability, we need to reexamine our constructs so that students' cognitive and social patterns are accounted for (Mislevy, 2016). Different construct models account for various skills, traits, and behaviors, and as we focus on our validity arguments we need to define the construct in a way that elicits valuable writing from all students. We should remain mindful of Mislevy's (2016) justification to include the sociocognitive perspective in our validity arguments because "understanding the kinds of things people need to do in certain kinds of situations not only helps us define constructs, but it helps us determine forms of tasks we can use to obtain evidence, and what they can tell us and what they cannot about the capabilities we are interested in" (p. 270). From our positions in the writing center, we see the influence of negative classroom spaces as student writers struggle to negotiate their identities and writing concerns while working with

writing consultants. If we want students to bring their whole selves to the classroom—and more important, to have access to their whole selves as part of their invention, composition, revision, and publishing process—then we need to consider the whole self in our assessments. Our construct model should include the affective aspect of education and the embodied, lived experiences of students.

Finally, in terms of reliability, we believe a queer turn in assessment works to ensure that writing tasks and their evaluations are available across the curriculum so that students can increase their abilities, in a reliable fashion, beyond the course at hand. LGBTQ students should not have to guess at what assignments or what courses allow for LGBTQ topics, but instead feel emotionally (and physically) safe to write on any topic that they see fit for the assignment. As we have mentioned throughout this chapter, WPAs and WCDs can provide faculty guidance on how to create an inclusive curriculum on local campuses. Ultimately, we argue that the lived experiences of LGBTQ students should not be ignored in our assessments just because the data may be hard to collect or the technology may not seem customizable enough (Straumsheim, 2016). Until we deliberately and systematically consider sexuality and gender together as central components of our assessment designs, just as we do in our other research contexts, we will continue to reproduce the normative practices that constrain current data collection methods and limit our ability to see how the intersectionality of identity both impacts and is impacted by our writing assessments.

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