

# Letter from the Publisher: On Launching and on Learning Analytics

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I'm delighted to be asked to offer some observations on the first issue of the *Journal of Writing Analytics*. The work presented here is impressive, wide-ranging, and important. Individually, the articles offer perspectives that will resonate with scholars across a range of fields and, in particular, within writing studies, the digital humanities, education, and information systems. Collectively, the authors offer a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of writing, providing a useful starting point for the enduring focus on the use of analytics and big data within writing studies that this journal was developed to support and advance.

As I read the articles in this issue, I was struck by the diversity of voices participating in this issue. Perhaps predictably, ten of the authors identify themselves as belonging to disciplines that are broadly associated with the field of English language and literature/letters. The majority of these scholars work in rhetoric and composition/writing studies, with the rest working in English as a Second Language, linguistics, and creative writing. Two of the articles in this issue are written by a large group of scholars (nine) who find their academic home within computer science and information systems; another article was written by scholars in education; and still other articles by a mathematician and a professor in physical education and recreation. Without a doubt, the editors of the *Journal of Writing Analytics* have already achieved their goal of examining writing from a broad range of disciplinary perspectives.

Again, in keeping with the goals of the journal, the diversity of scholarly perspectives is mirrored in the use of a large set of methodological and analytical approaches. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the articles explore texts and their features, often relying on text mining of a text corpus with a focus on lexical features and cohesion. What is notable is the range of purposes to which these methods are put: understanding differences in the writing of students in different disciplines, exploring the effectiveness of specific analytical tools, determining whether analytical tools can be enlisted to help students identify genre, measuring

Written Language Disorder among students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and exploring the analytical methods underlying automated essay scoring systems. Two other articles in this issue examine measures of interrater reliability, in one case focusing on the assessment of student portfolios and in the other case considering the advantages of a new approach to assessing the nature of agreements and disagreements among readers/raters.

The work done by the contributors to this issue is, as I noted above, impressive and important. Equally important, however, is the work done by the editors of the journal to conceptualize it and bring into being. I recall my first meeting with the group, at the 2016 International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Their enthusiasm and energy was evident, their plan was solid, and their commitment to following through on their ideas was clear. I couldn't do anything other than thank them for allowing me to join their project.

I feel privileged to be associated with this journal and with the scholars who founded it and their colleagues who worked on this issue: Joe Moxley, Norbert Elliot, David Eubanks, Meg Vezzu, Sophie Elliot, and Will Allen. As is the case with so many impressive projects, this one has benefited from a highly collaborative approach, a great deal of individual effort, and a clear vision. I hope you'll join me in thanking them for their excellent work, and I hope you'll consider sharing your work with them.

I hope you'll join all of us in exploring the new avenues of scholarly inquiry made possible by the changes in information technology that have given birth to a range of new initiatives across (and well beyond) higher education and, as a result, to this journal. Over the past several years, much has been written about big data and, more recently, learning analytics (see, for example, Daniel, 2014; Fournier, Kop, & Sitlia, 2011; Siemens & Long, 2011). Clearly, we are far from arriving at consensus about its potential and possibilities. Some scholars have pointed to the potential misuse of information produced by these new tools, such as discouraging students from pursuing programs of study in which they are likely (but by no means guaranteed) to fail (see Linda Adler Kassner's discussion of learning analytics tools in her 2016 CCCC Chair's address) and drawing conclusions about the teaching effectiveness of faculty members (for example, Slade & Prinsloo, 2013). Others have argued that learning analytics tools are too immature to be used without a great deal of caution, citing privacy concerns (Pardo & Siemens, 2014), reservations about the commercialization of student data (Flavin, 2016), and concerns about the reductivism inherent in any analysis of "big data" (Stephens, 2017, this issue).

Yet still other faculty members and administrators, including many of the authors of the articles in this issue of the *Journal of Writing Analytics*, see

promise in the use of these tools, arguing that it is far too early to draw strong conclusions about their effectiveness, offering frameworks within which learning analytics can be used without compromising ethics or violating privacy, and pointing to promising approaches that can help students use learning analytics to succeed in courses in which they might otherwise struggle (see, for example, Drachsler & Greller, 2016; Macfadyen et al., 2014).

For my part, and as a scholar/administrator who has worked with learning analytics and big data since 2011, I share with the editors of this journal a sense of optimism in the potential of learning analytics and big data. In my administrative work, I've worked closely with learning analysts who are attending not only to the possibilities these tools afford for improving teaching and learning but also to critical issues related to privacy and data stewardship. Like any new tool—and here we might think of social media and, more generally, network communications—we are faced with the challenge of balancing the potential for good with the likelihood that abuses will occur. We need only recall revelations about government surveillance to realize that some will seek to use technology for purposes other than its creators intended. The concerns expressed by the critics of big data and learning analytics tools are reasonable and, in most cases, thoughtful. We must guard against the abuses of which they warn.

Yet we must also nurture the beneficial uses of these tools. As we do so, we'll benefit from the work of the editors and contributors to this journal. We owe them our thanks, our attention, and our consideration of their ideas.

### Author Biography

Professor, University Distinguished Teaching Scholar, and Associate Provost for Instructional Innovation at Colorado State University, **Mike Palmquist** is the founding director of the Colorado State University Open Press.

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