



Discussant

MLA Panel: Textual Transactions—
A Review of the Empirical Tradition
in Writing Studies Research
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For Whom Do We Make Knowledge and Why? Response to Diane Kelly- Riley and Mya Poe

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1.0 Background

The textual production and assessments at the heart of knowledge making and credentialing enterprises, be they empirical or humanistic, have their roots in Western legacies of imperial thought (Chaterjee, 1993; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000). Though its language may be unfamiliar to some, decolonial theory is helpful in understanding how hierarchies of knowledge come into being and how the work of scholars in fields, such as writing analytics, contributes to the formation and maintenance of these hierarchies. From the perspective of humanistic scholarship, writing analytics, as a methodology and practice of understanding texts, and the structures of thought therein, is well-positioned to take up the ever-important ethical question: For whom do we make knowledge and why? This question could not be timelier as humanists and administrators seek to make disciplines appear more relevant to students, applicable to social problems, and attendant to political, social, and economic exigencies.

The papers presented at the featured session of the 2019 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association reflect on knowledge making practices represented in two journals that figure prominently in the applied fields of English studies: *The Journal of Writing Assessment* and *Research in the Teaching of English*. The papers addressed three important questions related to knowledge making practices in English studies:

1. What counts as knowledge and who gets to decide?
2. How is knowledge made?

3. For what purposes is knowledge made?

In the case of writing analytics, instances of textual production, occurrences of forms, objects, or tokenization of texts (Palermo, 2017), are themselves the basis of a humanistic and empirical tradition. By identifying language features such as lexical choice, grammatical patterns, and topic stance, the computer makes apparent particular “enunciations of knowing” (Mignolo, 2011). As particular instances of textual production are taken together, the larger picture of a Western epistemic hierarchy emerges. And it is at this moment of when patterns are revealed that scholars can conceal or ignore them, thereby replicating Western epistemic hierarchies. At that crucial moment that patterns are revealed, scholars, be they using humanistic or empirical methodologies, are best positioned to actually delink from these arrangements and valuations of thought to actually begin creating alternatives *to* these arrangements (as opposed to alternatives *within* these arrangements that only further the creation of epistemic difference in the first place).

Writing analytics scholars then, are uniquely well-positioned, to begin epistemically delinking from what has counted as knowledge and what has necessarily been discounted as knowledge. Said another way, *valuable* knowledge is *valid* knowledge. It can be measured and assessed, the procedures for its counting can be repeated reliably through methods it has devised and sanctioned—always in and on the terms it itself has named, graded, and eventually credentialed.

The Journal of Writing Analytics and the articles included here by Kelly-Riley and Poe are compelled by the humanistic and ethical tradition prompting the twofold question, *what counts as knowledge* and *who gets to decide?* Fairness and justice are at stake here—for what counts as knowledge must always discount that which is not knowledge, and to account for this dis/counting has been an admirable and key facet of the intellectual pursuit of this journal (Elliot, 2016; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2016; Slomp, 2016).

To name into existence one object practice, such as writing analytics, is to make two claims to understanding. The first claim is what counts as writing (recorded speech), and the second claim is what counts as analytics (empirical and humanistic approaches to data, measurement, and learning, and ethical philosophies imbued in these; see the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Writing Analytics*, 2017). Moxley et al. say it thusly:

In the five thousand years that separate present day writers and readers from the Mesopotamian literate culture, three human activities endure: the materialization of language in the written word; the development of technology that makes language visible; and the interpretation and use of information gained from analysis of that language. In our own time, twenty-first century digital affordances have made it possible to produce and analyze texts rapidly. As analysts, we can create corpora—bodies of texts—and perform linguistic analysis upon them in order to determine, at the level of word choice, the embodiment of ideas (2017, p. vi).

Note here the important vantage that writing analytics as a nascent field has: it is in the process of creating corpora (selecting texts to include and exclude) and performing linguistic analysis on these (again selecting which to include and exclude) in order to see what ideas are embodied in what places within and across texts. Importantly, this vantage is one that is empirical and humanistic, one that sits at the cusp of exposing the process of epistemic obedience in the particular moments of utterance that students are asked to take up and demonstrate as “proficient.” At the core of Poe and Kelly-Riley’s work in these articles is to ask how the implicit understandings and processes of knowledge making impose and/or delink from the epistemic obedience to Western epistemologies as the locus of enunciation of knowledge.

Their papers trace the ways knowledge in these journals came to be articulated, valued, and circulated. Both papers demonstrate state of the art in their humanistic and empirical methods, even as they study the intersection of these methods. Kelly-Riley takes up two case studies from *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, while Poe takes up the shifting debates about methods unfolding in 50 years of *Research in the Teaching of English*. As they do, they’re uncovering the rise and fall of methodologies (practices of counting and interpreting) and paradigms (enunciations of what counts as knowledge and the structuring tenets of that knowledge). Crucially, they’re able to expose the decolonial possibility of creating local practices of valuing knowledge and a pluriversality of literacies (Kelly-Riley, 2019) of creating approaches to writing research that are more inclusive of authors and representative of the pressing social concerns of the day (Poe, 2019).

2.0 What Counts as Knowledge and Who Decides

To make a case for their work, both Kelly-Riley and Poe consider what *has* counted as *valid knowledge* in the studies and editorial practices they analyzed. That question alone — what has counted as valid knowledge— is a decolonial one. It delinks from the belief in validity, showing it to be nothing more than *normative*, establishing itself as the baseline even as it's drawing that baseline. Let’s break it down a bit more: the question presumes (a) that a singular knowledge making enterprise comes at the cost of plural knowledge making practices; (b) that knowledge making itself has imperial legacies of creating itself, through a simultaneous process of valuing and devaluing; and that (c) knowledge making continues to replicate hierarchies of knowing, being, and practicing meaning making—all with the end result of reproducing legacies of inequity and inequality. In effect, because they have framed their studies using a decolonial lens in the asking of this question, they have surfaced the ways in which knowledge production is complicit in the creation of epistemic hierarchies and in the practice of creating alternatives to these epistemic hierarchies.

3.0 How Knowledge is Made

Kelly-Riley and Poe both seek to point out and create different pathways to knowledge. They do so by taking up the question of how knowledge is made and by whom. Kelly-Riley turns her keen eye on recent case studies that appeared in *The Journal of Writing Assessment* to “present

models of localism” that “enable scholars to consider opportunities embedded when writers and writing are accounted for in all of their complexity” (2019, p. 347). She focuses on two case studies to conclude that “situating our scholarship with local focus results in a more inclusive research agenda that facilitates a more diverse representation of students and their abilities from a wider array of perspectives” (p. 347). In the first case study, Kelly-Riley describes how Blankenship et al. (2017) made knowledge about what should be counted as writing outcomes for their institution to reflect the understandings, practices, and research of local faculty and students. In the second case study taken up by Kelly-Riley, Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano (2019) are described as shifting the locus of enunciation of knowledge about writing assessment away from R1 universities to within two-year college settings. Kelly-Riley suggests then that both of these articles offer important models for making knowledge locally in order to consider the plurality of perspectives and practices therein.

In her review of methodologies appearing in several decades of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Poe incisively traces the tensions between humanistic and empirical traditions to surface how knowledge has been made, predominately by white males, during the 50-plus year history of the journal. She names the ideological perspectives of multiple teams of journal editors who, up until recently, had been universalizing and singular in the type of empirical research they sought to include within the journal’s pages. Journal editors, she argues, are helping a community constitute itself empirically by training authors and readers to be epistemically obedient through the inclusion of particular studies written by particular writers. It’s fascinating to see the ways in which the teams of editors wrestled with the question of which types of data and its contextualization would count as empirical and how responsive these editorial teams were to the societal contexts that influence data. Poe rightly says, “It is not enough to bring more people to the table or to recognize the value of the perspectives those people bring; it must be that there are multiple audiences for those perspectives” (2019, p. 329). For even when editorial teams were inclusive of more voices and methodologies, as Smagorinsky and Smith were during their editorial run (1997–2003), the problem still remains that articles may or may not be read, cited, and extended if they’re deemed liminal to the normative streams of empirical and/or humanistic knowledge making. Said another way: even when diverse authors and studies that are more inclusive of a broader range of participants are represented, these studies and their impact for programmatic initiatives and knowledge making may not be taken up by audiences. In this respect, program administrators and journal editors may attempt to decolonize the structuring tenets of thought, but teachers, students, and readers also bear the onus of changing their respective everyday practices of revising curricula and pedagogies, learning goals, and citation and integration of the language and ideas into everyday lives.

4.0 For What Purpose is Knowledge Made

As activist editors, Kelly-Riley and Poe also both take into consideration the larger social purpose of knowledge making. They’re wondering not only about the relevancy of knowledge production for teachers and communities, but also for larger societal challenges of equity,

equality, and inclusivity. The decolonial lens they take up positions them to ask: for what purpose is knowledge made and by whom? Kelly-Riley's case analyses led her to surface the ways in which theory and research drove the curricular reform necessary for the localism it enacted. "Rather than making writing analytics into a universal One, a baseline against which all Others are tested and their knowledges and languages are deemed deficit to, these pluriversal validity measures would seek to identify understandings in and on the terms of the peoples who experience them and honor and recognize what they bring to the setting" (Kelly-Riley, 2019, p. 346). Our moments of concealing and revealing the structuring principles undergirding program initiatives and teaching afford an important avenue of decolonial praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The instances of localism unfolding in the case studies that Kelly-Riley presents make apparent the implicit decolonial praxis of questioning the purpose of knowledge making and for whom.

This question too is the *raison d'être* for Poe's analysis of the editorships and methodological underpinnings of *Research in the Teaching of English*. "Disciplinary research traditions do not arise in a vacuum. Especially for those disciplines that rely on human subjects, social context shapes how we talk about people and how we explain their potential. It is through that lens that we see research—what we think is valuable to study, how we study it, and whom we study it with" (Poe, 2019, p. 330). Importantly, we are the human agents making knowledge in an imperial academy: asking up front for what purpose and for whom we undertake this enterprise introduces the decolonial praxis. The distinction is an important one: while institutions cannot escape their imperial legacies, the individual agents within institutions, whose everyday practices make up these institutions, can be decolonial in their praxis. Imperial writing programs and assessment: decolonial researchers, teachers, students, and administrators. Colonial scholarly practices: decolonial methodologies and methods. The institutional and epistemic change made possible by the slow accrual of decolonial praxis projects over time would be marvelous to study.

5.0 Writing Analytics and the Tenets Structuring Thought

As a nascent and rapidly growing area of study, writing analytics stands to lead conversations about what counts as knowledge, how we make knowledge, for whom, and with what methodologies—even as programs of research are advanced. Scholars working in this area are poised to take up these questions at the very inceptions of their projects in order to epistemically delink from imperial systems of knowledge creation and to create the decolonial praxis that makes possible the pluriversal alternatives *to* these systems and methods of knowledge construction. We are starting down a good path together in this regard. Together, we can unflinchingly examine what has contributed to these systems of knowledge making, our own complicity in it, and identify the tenets of thought we are reproducing in this colonial matrix of power. Together, we can then epistemically delink from the long legacy of imperial practices to create decolonial praxis projects at every stage of project building.

Author Biography

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