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Considering Consequences in Writing Analytics: Humanistic Inquiry and Empirical Research in *The Journal of Writing Assessment*

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Abstract

Consideration of the intersections of humanistic and empirical traditions of research are important, especially now with recent emphasis on fairness and consequences of score use. Humanistic research traditions can enhance research perspectives within the emerging field of writing analytics. Using two case studies from *The Journal of Writing Assessment (JWA)*, this article explores the ways humanistic traditions facilitate a framework developed by *JWA* of localism. Such a perspective provides a bridge between the technically focused concerns for validity and reliability with the complex social contexts and diverse backgrounds and lived experiences of students and faculty who occupy these educational settings. For writing analytics to live up to its potential, the practices and scholarship need to meet high technical standards as well as attend to diverse and socially situated assessment concerns.

Keywords: fairness, humanities, localism, research traditions, validity, writing analytics

1.0 Introduction

In the past 30 years, evolutions in writing assessment scholarship have contributed to changes in educational measurement scholarship in traditional categories of evidence related to validity and reliability. For the emerging field of writing analytics, considerations of the intersections of humanistic and empirical traditions of research are important, particularly within the recent scholarly emphasis on fairness and related consequences of score use. In the early 1990s, emerging writing assessment research helped refocus educational measurement scholarship on validity and reliability to broaden the theory to consider the impact of consequences on actual people and groups. As a result, new lines of inquiry in the twenty-first century now focus on issues of fairness. Today, fairness has a category of its own.

In this article, I will explore the influences of humanistic research traditions on empirical research traditions as they are relevant for the emerging field of writing analytics. *The Journal of Writing Assessment (JWA)* holds a firm commitment to careful examination of writing assessment in local North American contexts. While the journal is read internationally, the U.S. emphasis on localism remains of particular interest to many readers. Using examples from *JWA* as a case study, I will explore how empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, can be enhanced through humanistic perspectives and considerations, particularly the anticipation of consequences for communities we serve. In doing so, I illustrate a scholarly tradition with a finer-grained picture of localism. My aim is to demonstrate how both traditional and innovative research designs allow information to be gathered in ways so that opportunities to learn may be advanced for all members of educational communities.

My case studies will be drawn from two publications in *JWA*. The first, written by Ellen Cushman (2016) entitled “Decolonizing Validity,” was part of a special issue on a theory of ethics for writing assessment. This special issue was dedicated to extending the scholarly work on consequences, arguing “that consideration of fairness is not enough. The next phase must take up larger questions involving the ethics of assessment” (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2016). Cushman critically reexamines the evolution of validity theory through intersectional and post-colonial lenses. In doing so, she problematizes traditional conceptions of validity still widely enacted in current educational measurement practices. Her critical reexamination aligns with evolving educational measurement theory, which now emphasizes fairness; such theory, though, has not extended into classroom or institutional practice to impact the actual lives of diverse students in our educational systems. Her article provides an important argument about the need to implement current theoretical and philosophical conceptions into day-to-day assessment practice.

The second case study, written by Salt Lake City Community College faculty members Christopher Blankenship, Anne Canavan, Justin Jory, Kati Lewis, Marlena Stanford, and Brittany Stephenson (2017) is entitled “Re-Assessing Composition at Open Access Institutions: Using a Threshold Framework to Reshape Practice.” This article was part of a special issue on the politics of pathways. This special issue

present[ed] scholarship that addresses ways in which writing assessments interact with high school graduation requirements; articulation agreements across high schools, community colleges, and four-year universities; and students' pathways through postsecondary education...a robust debate [has] emerged around the pathways students take through postsecondary education, particularly through community colleges. Writing assessment instruments and practices are central players in these discussions about the pathways into and through postsecondary education. (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2017)

Blankenship et al. demonstrate that guided pathways and the use of threshold concepts present a new way of structuring opportunity for postsecondary populations who were previously viewed as “at-risk”—students who occupy courses described as remedial. Many students in such postsecondary courses tend to be from culturally, racially, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. Blankenship and his colleagues thoughtfully bring together concepts and processes that benefit the needs of all students and see these students as wholly capable of pursuing postsecondary study. These case studies of localism provide valuable examples of the ways in which humanities-focused inquiry can inform and shape emerging fields of study that contribute to writing analytics.

2.0 Humanistic Concerns about Data Analytics

Writing analytics defined in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Writing Analytics (Analytics)* is “the measurement and analysis of written texts for the purpose of understanding writing processes and products, in their educational contexts, and improving the teaching and learning of writing” (Shum et al., 2016, p. 481). This combination of large-scale evaluation of writing mediated through digital platforms opens new and essential considerations. Researchers and scholars of writing analytics are optimistic for this emerging field. Shum et al. reflect upon the promises and pitfalls, noting that “ultimately, for the tools to be successful, educators and students must trust them, and the effort of learning these new tools must pay back” (p. 482). The editors of *Analytics* are also hopeful, noting that writing analytics “promote[s] equity” (Moxley et al., 2017, p. v), but others remain more cautious.

Palmquist notes that “while use of learning analytics tools is becoming more common in higher education, they are viewed with skepticism by many scholars—as is appropriate, since these tools are still in an early stage of development...Moreover, skepticism is warranted because learning analytics tools have the potential to shape the academic paths taken by a large number of students. Used without an awareness of their limitations, the predictions they provide might prevent students from defining and reaching career and life goals that they might, without intervention, achieve” (2019, p. 4). In the past, similar issues have surfaced for large-scale assessments that have, in some instances, been poorly designed and/or have been used in bad ways. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) provides a recent example. The CCSSI held promise for a more complex and robust curriculum and assessment across the publicly funded elementary and secondary systems in the United States. Limitations in quality of

the computer-scored assessments, the use of the scores for graduation requirements and as proxy measures for teacher performance rather than their intended uses as measures of program quality led to the politicization and demise of the CCSSI (See Kelly-Riley, 2017 for additional context).

Many humanities and language scholars are particularly distrustful and resentful of empirical work, and such suspicion extends to writing analytics. O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016) articulates concerns about the opaqueness of models and values behind the structures of algorithms that process big data and shape societal interactions. Wernimont’s *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media* (2018) explores the historical contributions of the “tracking and quantifying human life, whether motivated by corporate, state, community, or individual reasons, [and how this] is intimately linked to the way in which we record and enumerate human death...the mediations of life and death impact our life possibilities in ways that are gendering, racializing, and colonizing” (p. 3). As Wernimont observes, “quantum media impact different bodies and lives differently—authorizing and reinforcing group solidarities (some positive, and others not, yet all of them manifesting privileges and oppressions), and creating universal paradigms that can often harm nonnormalized subjects unless interventions are made” (p. 1). Wernimont calls for “an underlying ethics of mediation to be developed around our being with and becoming through numerate technologies” (p. 2). Noble also demonstrates the relevance of this argument in *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018) and asserts that algorithms produced by private interests and a small set of search engines have created a biased set of search algorithms that discriminate against people of color and privilege whiteness. That is, while there is a great deal of possibility behind these emerging technologies, they still are created by humans and potentially contain and reflect biases present in society.

These texts provide a cautionary perspective for emerging writing and learning analytics. Data analytics potentially enable aggregation of student performance or demographic information to facilitate predictive decision-making in ways not previously possible. The consequences of such large-scale learning analytics mediated through digital platforms impact students and the way they and their work are constructed. While the intent is to help students, there are potential consequences, resulting in negative and long-lasting labels based on one’s level of perceived “at-riskness.” For example, in the winter of 2019, the College Board proposed an “adversity index” for the SAT to attempt to quantify and mitigate the economic advantage or disadvantage of test takers as they entered as students to postsecondary study (see Jaschik, 2019a). Later in the summer, the College Board announced that it would change the adversity index “before it was even used” based on “considerable criticism” (Jaschik, 2019b). While the intent of such data aggregated systems is to even out the playing field, such results could carry negative stigma or effects for students in the future.

Humanities scholars note the widespread “sea of ever expanding information” and the ways in which we are surrounded by data, and that empirical description provides a pathway forward to decision making. In *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of*

Data, Slovic and Slovic (2005) argue that “we, as a species, think best when we allow numbers and narratives, abstract information and experiential discourse, to interact, to work together” (p. 4). Adler-Kassner, Estrem, Miller-Cochran, Shepherd, and Wardle (2017) recognize the ubiquity of data analytics and the implications for those in writing studies. They encourage those responsible for postsecondary writing courses to learn about big data and predictive analytics in order to participate in campus conversations and theoretical considerations more widely. They note that “the rise in popularity of so-called ‘big data’ and its concordant terms --including (but not limited to) data analytics, data mining, and predictive analytics -- has blurred the lines between long-established campus practices and new uses of data and technologies. The use of analytics is contributing to definitions of preparation and literacy (appropriate/inappropriate) that are driving educational policy and, increasingly, theoretical work.” Writing analytics is at the crossroads of possibility or potential misuse, and thoughtful considerations of ways humanistic traditions of scholarship can inform it are important. It’s important that the “effective use of data ...helps institutions avoid a ‘pernicious feedback loop’ that simply codifies the past and instead truly supports success and learning for all students” (Adler-Kassner et al., 2017).

3.0 Potential for Humanistic Perspectives on Analytics

Humanities scholars have a long tradition of digital humanities, originally dubbed “humanities computing,” that explores philosophical, epistemological, and humanistic perspectives relevant for writing analytics. Written communication is at the center of potential pathways forward to disciplinarity, localism, and fairness by drawing upon the expertise and experience of faculty from a variety of disciplines and from a variety of postsecondary institution types serving a diverse, and quickly changing, student demographic. Through these distinct research traditions, writing analytics may move toward the promise envisioned by the founding journal editors of *Analytics*. By understanding the effects of “the historical tangle of quantifying media and human becoming... [we can begin to understand the ways] media technologies and practices are ideological, and our histories, which are technologies of knowing too, are similarly invested and interested” (Wernimont, 2018, p. 2). Even the possibilities for the connections between digital humanities and rhetoric and writing studies are still unrealized. Much work has yet to be done to explore the possibilities between the intersections of humanistic inquiry, writing assessment, and writing analytics.

Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson (2015) note that “rhetoric and writing studies communities share many of the intellectual values associated today with [digital humanities]” (p. 3). The fields of digital humanities and composition/writing studies have developed in parallel, and do not currently strongly overlap. Friend (2018) observes that “as Digital Humanities has taken shape, built community, and solidified as a field in its own right, composition studies grew increasingly separate from traditional humanities departments, creating a rift that is now counterproductive and difficult to bridge. The separation between the Digital Humanities and composition is both a historical artifact and a temporary state of affairs contrary to the aims of the modern academy” (p. 401–402). Indeed, other scholars note the promise between a more collaborative enterprise.

Palermo (2017) notes the significant crossover between the digital humanities and rhetoric/writing studies which are “most relevant to this nascent field of ‘Writing Analytics’: that which employs and critiques the use of computational techniques for text analysis” (p. 316).

Humanities-driven scholarship should inform and shape writing analytics by participating in these conversations and imagining new ways of improving assessment and outcomes. The common bond here is language use, and the algorithms that inform big data and writing analytics are first informed by language. By making consequences intentionally visible through language, these conversations can have positive effects in the ways envisioned by the editors of *Analytics*.

Writing studies scholars had early influence broadening the scope of curricular assessment beyond technical concerns dating back to the late 1980s and 90s, and their work shifted assessment concerns to ways we understand assessments to have consequences on students’ lives and life chances. Such debates and discussions continue to unfold. Work on performance assessment, such as writing portfolios, shifted scholarly and theoretical work in educational measurement to consider consequences of assessments. This was a radical shift. Beginning in 1955, technical recommendations for educational measurement practices were articulated for emerging educational measurement practice. In the late 1960s, the *Standards for Educational Tests and Manuals* was published—this largely focused on the technical aspects of reliability and validity of tests separated from the testing context. In the late 1980s, Lee Cronbach advocated for an accountability to the stakeholders most negatively affected by the results tests by stating that “tests that impinge on the rights and life chances of individuals are inherently disputable” (1988, p. 6) and that adverse social conditions, in and of themselves, call the validity of a test use into question. Samuel Messick (1980, 1989, 1994a, 1994b) placed validity as the most important consideration of assessment, and its importance had to do with the use and interpretation of scores in particular settings. In 1989, Messick recast the entire concept of validity to one that made it paramount to all other considerations focusing on the use and interpretation of test scores in particular settings. By the late 1990s, the entire paradigm of theoretical work in educational measurement had shifted from one that considered technical merits of validity and reliability to one that now situated assessment scores and impacts within social circumstances (AERA, APA, NCME, 1999). Messick (1994a) argued that performance assessment needs to address issues of validity, reliability, comparability, and fairness because they are “*social values* that have meaning and force whenever evaluative judgments and decisions are made” (p. 13). Consequences to test takers were beginning to be recognized; fairness was on the horizon.

Such evolutions to situate traditional educational measurement constructs like validity and reliability within social contexts can be seen in the scholarly conversations particularly initiated by Pamela Moss. In 1994, she pushed for more hermeneutically understood constructs of reliability and validity that operationalized these constructs within the social settings in which they were administered. Over a decade she continued to advocate for an expanded and socially situated understanding of reliability. Moss (2004) argued “the operational definitions of reliability that shape the assessments teachers and students experience. If our concern is about the influence of measurement practices on education, then it is the commonly used operational

definitions of reliability that must be confronted” (p. 246). Educational measurement scholars pushed back against her line of inquiry (see Mislevy 2004), but she persisted.

As writing assessment researchers began to apply these emerging hermeneutically informed practices, Moss continued to weigh in on these issues. In response to Haswell’s (1998) locally situated “Multiple Inquiry in the Validation of Writing Tests,” Moss admonished writing assessment researchers to push their revisions of validity and reliability beyond the traditional measurement definitions. She felt that though Haswell’s work exploring a locally developed writing portfolio assessment was consistent with emerging educational measurement scholarship, it didn’t go far enough. Moss (1998) argues that

Messick (1989) opened the door to this kind of reflection by suggesting that we evaluate one inquiring system in terms of another to probe the methodological and value assumptions underlying each system. Concrete illustrations of practices that promote such critical reflection are hard to find in the educational measurement literature and I have turned to the work of researchers informed by hermeneutic, critical, feminist, and poststructuralist perspectives. (p. 119)

Moss could see the importance of situated technically rigorous empirical inquiry within the complex contexts of lived experience. Other settings also continued to evolve these concepts. Part of this change was spurred by locally-developed assessments coming out of postsecondary composition classrooms from the lived experiences of teachers. Such experiences were diverse and varied. Focusing on emerging assessment systems in the state of California, Haswell and Elliot (2019) detail that

postsecondary admission and placement processes were extraordinarily diverse. Private colleges, such as Stanford, as closed admission as possible, relied on school transcripts, teacher recommendations, and parents’ wealth. As for the two-year institutions, in 1960, the fifty or more “junior colleges” were not even united in a state-wide system; the California Community Colleges was formed in 1967. These sites did not test writing or verbal skills for admission. The Donohoe Higher Education Act, signed by Governor Edmund Gerald (“Pat”) Brown in 1960, made them officially what most had always been: open admission. That leaves the public schools. In 1960, the public schools graduated over 40 percent of their students, the highest rate in the nation, yet formal assessment of writing was left up to the districts or schools, who sporadically applied machine-scorable tests at different curricular points, or more commonly imposed none at all. Most school teachers liked it that way, but it gave their opponents an opening. Compared to college teachers, public-school teachers have always been more vulnerable to California Schools, 1960–1982 155 top-down control—administrative, political, and public. (p. 154)

Other composition scholars such as Kathleen Blake Yancey (1999) and Edward White (2001) characterize the evolution of practices in writing assessment as more troubled and antagonistic,

but their scholarship about the ascendancy of performance-based assessments, which included robust constructs of writing and more complex assessment measures, contributed to broadening the concept of validity as socially situated practice as one that considered fairness equally important.

Thus, consequences became part of the scholarly and epistemological architecture of evaluation of all sorts—including writing. In 2014, fairness resulting out of considerations of consequences became an elevated concern on par with reliability in the most recent revision of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. These considerations were under the umbrella of validity, which remains the paramount concern. Over the past 50 years, much has happened in this realm to measure the complexity of constructs situated across a variety of settings with a variety of demographic considerations. The inclusion of consequences means that humanistic concerns about thought, expression, and language provide a check and balance to assessment processes. It also means that we need to consider the experiences of individual students across institution types as we quantify what they learn and know.

4.0 Scholarship of Localism

The Journal of Writing Assessment was founded to provide a scholarly forum for the new field of writing assessment. In particular, JWA was interested in studying and promoting localism, finely nuanced. In the early 1990s, after the Miami University of Ohio portfolio conference, Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot were inspired to begin a journal that focused on the emerging field of writing assessment and founded *Assessing Writing (AW)*. After *AW* was acquired by Elsevier, Huot and Yancey parted ways from *AW* because of a difference in opinion about the scholarly focus of the journal and so founded *JWA* in 2003. Huot and Yancey argued “that the academics who see the need for a journal, who write, research, and edit the articles should make the decisions about who should edit and retain control...[and they retained a] commitment to publish a wide range of writing assessment scholarship from a wide range of scholars and teachers. [They were] once again interested in all forms of writing assessment, from the classroom to those assessments used to make decisions about state and federal programs”(2003, p. 2). Their agenda for *JWA* was to “[provide] a forum for people to challenge existing theories and practices and the room to explore new and more productive writing assessment” (p. 4). Their editorial focus always considered writing assessment socially situated. The assessment of writing was no longer relegated to simply technical issues—as accreditation and accountability became more prevalent in academic life, the assessment of writing was often a way to capture what students learned across multiple contexts. The ways to evaluate writing were changing as well.

As editors, Huot and Yancey emphasized research and scholarship by and for teachers, scholars, and practitioners of writing assessment. They felt strongly that teachers’ and students’ lived experiences with writing assessment were—along with technical issues—worthy subjects to explore. Since that time, the journal has maintained an emphasis on local contexts. Yancey stepped down from the editorship in 2004, and in 2011, Kelly-Riley and Peggy O’Neill assumed the editorship of *JWA* from Huot. At that time, Kelly-Riley and O’Neill reaffirmed *JWA*’s focus

on localism, but also recognized the possibility to make the scholarship more accessible by moving to a digital platform. In 2011, they moved *JWA* from a subscription-based journal to one that was digital and free and open for all, funded first by Washington State University and then University of Idaho and University of California Davis.

JWA has always intended to make the research and scholarship available to as many stakeholders as possible in order to influence broader societal conversations associated with the construct and assessment of writing. The most notable example of this is Les Perelman's (2013) "Critique of Mark D. Shermis & Ben Hamner, 'Contrasting State-of-the-Art Automated Scoring of Essays: Analysis,'" which continues to be cited in mainstream press as the article that raised concerns about the limitations in automated essay scoring and resulted in the removal of the SAT Writing test as part of the main battery of SAT tests. Perelman's article continues to be invoked when the promise of automated computer scoring is raised. When Carl Whithaus joined Kelly-Riley as editor in 2015, they noted the ongoing impact of Perelman's article and created special issues around topics of wider societal interest and impact, still with a focus on localism. They have included the effects of the CCSSI assessments (2015), theory of ethics for writing assessment (2016), politics of pathways (2017), placement in the two-year college (2019), and a forthcoming special issue on contract grading co-edited with Asao B. Inoue in 2020. *JWA*'s readership has increased from 32,000 visits in 2015 to 62,000 visits in 2017.

Cushman's (2016) "Decolonizing Validity" appeared in the special issue on a theory of ethics for writing assessment, which centered on humanities-based concerns about fairness and ethics. Writing assessment, more so than the larger field of writing studies, navigates the tension between idiosyncratic and individualized approaches of the humanities, and the generalizable, policy-driven, policy-setting research agendas in social sciences. Large-scale educational reform efforts have pushed the field of writing assessment to take alternative approaches that are robustly situated within philosophy, the law, and other humanities fields and take on a framework of ethics. Such approaches are socially situated and are more robust than the 1950s versions of assessment practices—grounded in technical concepts of reliability and validity—still so prevalent in our society today. Cushman upholds Huot and Yancey's original vision of *JWA* "to challenge existing theories and practices and the room to explore new and more productive writing assessment" (2003, p. 4).

Cushman explores the legacies of imperialist thought that permeate understandings and uses of validity and deeply reframes this issue. She traces the ways the concept of validity—particularly the widely used and now outdated concept that separates test taker from testing circumstance—creates a mechanism to reinforce colonial difference as it "maintains social, epistemic, and linguistic hierarchies." Cushman traces the linguistic and epistemological roots of validity back to the Renaissance. According to her, validity has its roots from "French *valide* (Old French *valide*, Spanish *valido*, Italian *valido*, Portuguese *valido*) or Latin *validus* strong, powerful, effective" (*OED* as cited in Cushman). Since the 16th century, validity developed as a concept that totalized the Western imperialist reality, identifying what counted as authority in law and perfection in the church; as what became valued in well-founded arguments, proofs and

warrants; and even as a person could be said to be “valid” if s/he was in good, sound, and robust health—or if not, the person was said to be an “invalid” (*OED*). Cushman asserts that it is no coincidence that the word “validity” took hold in these languages at a time when the French, Spanish, and Portuguese empires were creating and codifying colonial difference. As a concept, validity was developed to justify what counts as claim, evidence, and warrant, in support of the enunciation of empire in all realms of legal, moral, intellectual, and physical being.

Cushman observes that the concept of validity created the colonial difference as a tool, which was used to identify and exclude (thereby instrumentally manage) all forms of evidence that it itself had not identified as sufficiently indicative of the claim it wanted to make about knowledge, land, governance rights, morality, and health. “The logic of Western imperial epistemology consists in a meta-discourse that validates itself by disqualifying the difference” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 198 as cited in Cushman, 2016). Validity is, on the one hand, an instrumental tool, established to manage peoples, knowledges, lands, governments, and institutions, and on the other hand, a meta-discourse which reified the social, linguistic, and epistemological hierarchies that made it possible, hence further securing its own position of authority to identify what counts as valid.

In many ways, Cushman introduces an intersectional and post-colonial perspective into educational measurement—in which one Western framework need not stand for all frameworks. As Cushman notes, the predominant use of the concept of validity in much of educational measurement practice still sees validity as something separate from the test and test taker. Cushman’s advice—and important for the emerging field of writing analytics—is to embrace the concept of validity as it has been recast to consider the use and interpretation of test scores in every setting and the consequences to those taking the tests. Cushman argues that the path forward requires a “pluriversality,” which means to dwell in borders to create a world in which many worlds coexist equally, in and on their own terms. This begins with the knowledge, languages, histories, and practices understood and valued by the people who live these realities. It would see validity evidence tools not as a way to maintain, protect, conform to, confirm, and authorize the current systems of assessment and knowledge making, but rather as a way to better understand difference in and on its own terms. Rather than making its own experience into a universal one, the baseline against which all Others are tested and their knowledges and languages are deemed deficit to, validity measures would seek to identify understandings in and on the terms of the peoples who experience them. Her analysis is consistent with the emerging scholarship in educational measurement and writing assessment that advocates for consideration of local contexts including local student and faculty populations, but again, the practice that we see on the ground in our educational institutions is very different than that in our scholarship. It’s important to note that thousands of years of colonial reinforcement of a certain standard are not simply erased in a few years with a revised concept for professional practice.

In 2017, *JWA*’s special issue on the politics of pathways explored ways in which writing assessments interact with high school graduation requirements; articulation agreements across high schools, community colleges, and four-year universities; and students’ pathways through

postsecondary education. There are many educational reform efforts with strong legislative support that also partner with well-funded philanthropic organizations, such as the Gates Foundation or the Lumina Foundation, and testing companies, like ETS or Pearson. Such efforts have been criticized, notably by Linda Adler-Kassner in her 2017 chair's address to the Conference on College Composition annual meeting as the "Education Intelligence Complex...a collection of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), granting agencies, businesses, consulting firms, policy institutes, actions, and actors...[telling the story about] The Problem with American Education and How to Fix It" (p. 320). In Adler-Kassner and others' views, these entities have a financial and political stake that drive public policy toward values other than the education of students. They are driven by for-profit entities that seek to make maximum profit while producing workers to spur the U.S. economy. According to Adler-Kassner, such priorities drive the manifestations and day-to-day life of teaching, learning, and literacy development within classrooms across the entire U.S. educational spectrum.

As a result, articulation processes among high schools, community colleges, and universities have undergone dramatic changes resulting in efforts like Complete College America and Guided Pathways. Often, such initiatives are not informed by faculty expertise or disciplinary knowledge. There is robust debate around the pathways students take through postsecondary education, particularly through community colleges. Writing assessment instruments and practices are central players in these discussions about the pathways into and through postsecondary education. The work by Blankenship et al., faculty at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) with an enrollment of 70,000 students, reflect the lived experiences of students and faculty amidst educational reform efforts. Such efforts tout streamlining curricula to produce students who finish high school college and career ready, and focus pathways to ensure minimal college debt. These guided pathways focus on completion of courses and degrees. In doing so, such initiatives tend to represent constructs like writing as discrete, uniform, and easily measurable skills from place to place rather than complex constructs situated within specific disciplinary areas with diverse genres that represent successful performance.

With these tensions in mind, Blankenship et al. revised their first-year writing curriculum with a reflection-driven threshold concept framework. As composition faculty members, they wanted to ensure that SLCC implemented the requirements of the Guided Pathways initiative in ways that account for what we know about students' diverse literacy needs in the classroom and are responsive to the material realities of teaching composition at open access institutions. In their article, they discuss how a threshold framework led them to new assessment practices that honor what they—as scholars and practitioners of writing studies and writing assessment—know about writers and writing while enabling them to produce data for the current outcomes-based culture at SLCC. They internally re-oriented their teaching and learning practices in response to their departmental climate, which encourages their faculty members to engage with each other and others about what they do, why they do it, and how they go about doing it. As a result, they combine external institutional assessment mandates with an internally driven process focused on the specific needs of their students and their teaching corps.

They note that in 2016, SLCC had a completion rate of 22%, as measured by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) standards, which “presents the percentage of students who earn any board-approved education credential (degree or certificate) within six years of enrollment” (Blankenship et al., 2017). Their composition curriculum offered two credit-bearing courses and two non-credit bearing, developmental writing courses. Conversations among full-time faculty about the curriculum were often centered on the kinds of writing assignments or genres that should be emphasized in the course or which pedagogies are more or less effective, rather than what shared conceptual frameworks might guide our work. Janangelo and Klausman (2012) found in a study of writing faculty at two-year colleges that many faculty members did not “see a consistent underlying theoretical frame [about writing]” in their programs and viewed such interest with suspicion (p. 135). Reaching consensus about writing, let alone the curriculum, had been difficult to achieve. Their institution’s reliance on adjunct labor to deliver the first-year writing curriculum also affects the way the first-year writing program met their students’ literacy needs. Their department has always been supportive of part-time faculty; however, while there are 39 full-time faculty members in the department, there are nearly 100 adjunct instructors teaching 70% of the composition offerings. Their context is not different from many postsecondary institutions where tenure track positions erode away in favor of more contingent positions. The challenge to have a robust, coherent curriculum that reflects disciplinary complexity is real, as the department cannot guarantee that all first-year writing faculty are trained in composition theory and pedagogy; often, faculty come from broader English studies traditions that include literary, film studies, and other interpretative disciplines. Delivering a coherent curriculum to linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse students is also key. Blankenship and his colleagues achieve that through a thoughtful and intentional reflective curriculum that honors the expertise of the faculty and adjuncts and the needs and abilities of the students in their setting.

The issues that Blankenship et al. discuss are more fully explored in *JWA*’s recent special issue (2019) on two-year college placement. Nearly 60% of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions in the U.S. have some contact with two-year colleges. The demographic profile of these institutions is changing and most closely reflects the quickly changing demographic of the rest of the United States. The implications of the ways writing assessment and other assessments are enacted in these settings have important pedagogical, disciplinary, political, social, and ethical dimensions. (For more, see Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2019). This special issue is an important milestone, as it is one of the first to explore the applications of validity and reliability in writing assessment within two-year college settings. This research emerges from the experience of the teacher-scholars at two-year colleges who work directly with the two-year college student population. Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano (2019) note that the field of writing studies has

little or no engagement with the scholarly literature in two-year college writing studies... it is essential that two-year college faculty participate as knowledge-makers as well as beneficiaries of writing assessment research. Local context

matters, and studies conducted at two-year college sites by two-year college faculty can directly inform institutional work and improve student experiences and outcomes. These studies can also make distinctive and important contributions to the broader scholarly conversation about writing assessment.

This observation points to the importance of extending empirical inquiry through the socially situated perspectives in which the work is situated. Such a model pulls together current contemporary theoretical practices from the field of writing studies to address multiple instructional needs: those of students with diverse preparation for postsecondary study and those of a contingent teaching corps that still need anchoring and mentoring within the pedagogical practice of first-year composition. Blankenship et al.'s practice also delivers meaningful outcomes assessment because it is so attentive to local context and those who inhabit it, but they frame the processes around the issues articulated by Guided Pathways, which have their genesis in solutions to problems endemic to community college settings in particular (see Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017).

5.0 Conclusion

These two case studies present important considerations for emerging writing analytics scholarship through the lenses of humanities-based study. Two recent collections of essays in 2018 issues of *PMLA*, the flagship humanities journal, also focus on potential possibilities. The first *PMLA* collection (2018) focuses on Cathy N. Davidson's 2017 *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Davidson emphasizes that faculty must keep their promises to students through their actions. "Where do we teach those deep reading and critical thinking and communication skills? These are not just rhetorical questions but structural ones" (2018, p. 712). As she notes in her reflection on the *PMLA* essays providing reflection on her book, "many of us right now are dedicating our energy and attention against odds, to imagining a better future for higher education, for our students, and for our society" (2018, p. 713). Cushman's reiteration of validity theory as one that needs to serve all populations is an important reminder for writing analytics. Writing analytics needs to adopt a perspective of "pluriversality," to enable the practices and theories to dwell in borders to create a world in which many worlds coexist equally, in and on their own terms. The knowledge, languages, histories, and practices understood and valued by the people who live these realities can help shape more complex processes that live up to the hopes of learning and writing analytics scholars. In doing so, such systems should accommodate local systems of assessment and knowledge making to better understand difference in and on its own terms facilitating curricular and assessment structures like that of Blankenship et al. at Salt Lake City Community College. 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.

The second *PMLA* collection underscores the importance of genres in which the North American academy conducts and presents scholarship, with special attention to writing as “the primary means of humanistic knowledge production” (Bammer, 2018, p. 124). Consideration of genres helps Anne Ruggles Gere articulate a vision of the academy as a place for mutual influence in which the expectations of faculty members intersect with realities of student writers. “Attending to student voices and text illuminates the potential benefits of mutual influence,” Gere writes, “if we faculty members are willing to listen” (2018, p. 144). Blankenship and his colleagues represent an excellent example of ways in which faculty can apprentice each other and their students through the identification and articulation of foundational knowledge within the field of writing studies (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). Their approach seeks to identify core disciplinary knowledge and create ways to bring all stakeholders—students, teachers, and administrators—to a common understanding of what is important. In doing so, their attention to the needs of people who teach their courses and the students who occupy their classrooms presents a more hopeful model for the future. It is one in which their instructional needs are recognized and are accommodated rather than being written off or sent away to languish in a remedial structure in which few find their way out.

These two case studies from *JWA*—and the trajectory of scholarship within the journal—present models of localism. These perspectives enable scholars to consider opportunities embedded when writers and writing are accounted for in all of their complexity. While many of our scholarly lines of inquiry evolve in parallel to each other, the unlikely combination of humanities-based study, writing assessment-situated research, and the emerging field of writing analytics can yield a body of scholarship that is rigorous both technically and contextually. That is, full consideration can be given to the ways in which data about student writing and learning is represented and the constructs utilized for these purposes are also vetted to ensure that they accurately, fairly, and ethically represent the various constructs assessed. In addition, the tools developed for these purposes are informed and re-informed by careful inquiry and close study through the lenses of multiple perspectives. This direction braids together these scholarly traditions of humanistic and empirical inquiry and enables the realization of Moss’ hermeneutic inquiry and Gere’s hopes for “potential benefits of mutual influence.” That is, 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. Such a perspective bridges the technically focused concerns for validity and reliability with the complex social contexts and diverse backgrounds and lived experiences of students and faculty who occupy these educational settings. For writing analytics to live up to its potential, the practices and scholarship need to meet high technical standards as well as attend to diverse and socially situated concerns. These expanded research designs allow information to be gathered in ways so that opportunities to learn may be advanced for all members of educational communities, making postsecondary education a promise for many and not just a few.

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