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Review of Stephanie West-Puckett, Nicole I. Caswell, and William P. Banks' Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment

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West-Puckett, S., Caswell, N. I., & Banks, W. P. (2023). *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*. University Press of Colorado.

Recent years have seen an increase in scholarship attending to anti-racist (e.g. Baker-Bell, 2020; Inoue, 2017; 2022; Inoue & Poe, 2012) and anti-ableist (e.g. Carillo, 2021; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) writing assessment practices. *Failing Sideways* by Stephanie West-Puckett, Nicole I. Caswell, and William P. Banks adds to this body of scholarship on equitable writing assessment by considering how we might queer writing assessment. Queer theory and writing assessment are, admittedly, questionable bedfellows. Karen Kopelson (2013) argued that it might not be possible to reconcile queer theory and writing program administration because of the former's deliberate "turn away from pragmatism or utility, from the legitimate and legitimated, from institutions and social organizations and progress" (p. 207), and this raises similar questions about why we would *want* to wed queer theory and writing assessment. In the words of West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks: "what could possibly be queer about assessment?" (p. 15). Yet for them this irreconcilability is the point. Rather than cataloguing so-called queer assessment practices, *Failing Sideways* provides a theoretical approach to assessment which resists dominant narratives around writing, teaching, and learning and instead centers the agency of writing teachers and students.

The first two chapters explicate their queer theoretical framework for writing assessment. Chapter 1 links the cultural discourses around "learning loss" that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic to No Child Left Behind and to "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Sheils, 1975) to remind us many of our assessment practices are driven by this persistent fear of failure. That is, as concerns with grade inflation make clear, we simply cannot imagine a system in

which *everyone*, or even most people, succeed. Thus, *Failing Sideways* asks us to queer assessment by disidentifying (Muñoz, 2013) with normative assessment paradigms and embracing the disposition of an "assessment killjoy" (à la Ahmed's, 2017, feminist killjoy). The assessment killjoy "denies convenience, unthinking happiness, and normative investment in the illusion of objectivity" (p. 17) by questioning the linear success narratives and systems of power and privilege that undergird our assessment practices.

Chapter 2 then begins with a discussion of the affects that circulate around academic success (such as pride, joy, anxiety, fear, shame, failure) and asks what assessment might look like if it were to instead center passion, excitement, and desire. This discussion of affect frames their concept of Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI). QVI extends the work of Critical Validity Inquiry (Perry, 2012) by emphasizing student and teacher voices, assuming that our assessments have consequences, and interrogating who benefits, and who is harmed, by our assessment practices. QVI resists the success/failure binary, recognizing that following the "wrong path" can reveal interesting insights into how writing and writing instruction impacts/is impacted by people differently in different contexts. Most importantly, QVI takes the affective experience of writing assessment seriously in order to prioritize the embodied experiences of writers.

Chapter 3 introduces the first of four failure-oriented principles of QVI: failing to be successful. This principle resists normative notions of success and views failure as an opening of opportunity. Our widespread fear of failure, they argue, arises from a desire to avoid shame, which limits the potential of transformative assessment practices. For example, they explore the ways portfolio assessment is often taken up uncritically because our scholarship has already marked it as a "successful" practice. Instead of assuming what was successful in one context will be successful in another, QVI encourages us to embrace this fear of shame and explore other options. They discuss several of their experiences with both programmatic and classroom assessment practices which demonstrate what this might look like, such as a programmatic assessment in which participants were asked to assume the common rubric failed to capture something important about student writing. This approach, they explain, risks potential shame for instructors, as it may reveal they are

doing a "bad" job teaching writing. However, they argue it led to productive discussions about what is happening across writing classes and provided space for participants to interrogate their assumptions about writing and learning. What the various examples in this chapter share is a resistance to reducing writing to easily measurable metrics, instead exploring the affective experiences around writing as a way to embrace agency

In Chapter 4 they discuss the second principle of QVI: Failing to be commodified. They argue that writing traits and even assessment itself have become commodities, which they demonstrate through a discussion of the 6+1 Trait® Writing Rubric. While this rubric started as a well-meaning assessment practice, it has transformed into a decontextualized commodity sold as a "quick fix" to writing instruction which merely creates a closed assessment loop. This discussion is especially useful in demonstrating the ways acontextual notions of "good writing" can become entrenched within our assessment practices even when we problematize such static notions of "good writing." QVI resists such commodification by turning towards assessment practices that highlight vulnerability and consent through collaborative negotiations of the parameters of what matters in writing in the hyperlocal situation in which it is being used, thus resisting norming and embracing the fact different readers will understand texts differently. Once again, they provide several programmatic and classroom assessment examples demonstrating ways they have enacted this principle. What these practices emphasize is not whether or not a student met a particular skill, but the "labor, relationships, emotions, and histories" (p. 142) of the writer as they engage with the various readers of their texts. Writing instructors interested in how they can assist students in moving beyond writing solely for the teacher will find this chapter especially compelling.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts towards dissensus and radical justice via failing to be reproduced. Drawing on Edelman's (2004) critique of reproductive futurity, they argue that our linear success models reproduce (hetero)sexist, racist, and classist writing assessment practices. They draw a connection between these linear success narratives and normative grade distribution models, which, despite extensive critiques, often still inform our day-to-day practices. QVI, however, refuses this reproductive futurity by privileging the unexpected and

frequently interrogating our current expectations. To demonstrate how this might work in the classroom, they discuss a digital badging approach to labor-based grading which allows students to pursue a variety of pathways based on their own desires. Turning towards programmatic assessment, they discuss two examples of how sampling demographic data differently can bring insights into the affective experiences of minoritized students that are hidden by our normal data aggregation practices. Central to this principle of QVI, then, is continuing to ask what impacts our practices have on students/writers that are not immediately apparent within our current assessment models. This chapter is an especially important read for WPAs, as it reveals how complacency with our current programmatic assessment models can disadvantage many of our students.

Chapter 6 explains the fourth and final principle: Failing to be mechanized. In this chapter they argue that large-scale programmatic assessment practices focused on objective criteria and normed writers convey writing success as an individualized rather than systemic matter, ignoring the material conditions of the students producing those texts. In failing to be mechanized, QVI embraces the relationality of writing, considering all the human and nonhuman actants that contributed to the writing process. They present game play as a useful way to subvert this mechanization, providing examples such as origami fortune tellers which map the various people and materials that influenced a particular writing project, or learner stories which narrativize a writer's experiences in a class and resist ranking students against each other. Importantly, these stories can be shared with those being assessed, thus requiring us to be accountable to the students impacted by our assessments.

To conclude, Chapter 7 extends an invitation to readers to join their Queer Assessment Collaborative Killjoy Army. They recognize the chapters in this book do not provide an easy roadmap for how to queer our assessment practices. Yet this is the point: QVI is meant to be messy and time intensive, just like writing itself. They argue this work will not only lead to more equitable and fair assessments, but it will also provide tactics for pushing back on normative institutional assessment paradigms, which they demonstrate by discussing how they have resisted artificially imposed external assessment demands. Thus, readers who question the practicality of the assessment

paradigms this book offers should pay especially close attention to this concluding chapter. Lastly, as they ask us to take up the ethos of the assessment killjoy, they remind us that the work of designing fair and equitable assessments is never complete, as assessments need to attend to the specific students we are working with at that specific moment.

In short, through their extensive discussions of how even our most well-meaning assessment tools and practices become normativized, *Failing Sideways* makes a crucial contribution to our field's discussions of socially just writing assessment. As they repeatedly note, the book fails to offer any "quick fix" to assessment, or any practices we can immediately implement. However, it does provide a useful framework for developing a new disposition towards assessment that centers the ever-changing needs of our students. Because they focus on both programmatic and classroom assessment, WPAs and writing instructors alike will find this book useful for considering how we might rethink our approaches to assessment.

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