

Book Reviews

Review of *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*

Thomas Gurinskas

West-Puckett, Stephanie, Nicole I. Caswell, and William P. Banks. *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*. Utah State University Press, 2023.

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Failing Sideways asks readers to consider how queer theory and rhetoric can be brought to bear on writing studies and educational assessment in order to push back against the limited modes of assessment that emerge when we only consider a flat binary of success/failure. Through the use of Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy," West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks define what it means to be an "assessment killjoy" and invite readers to consider a new methodology of writing assessment via queer validity inquiry (QVI). Building on the model of critical validity inquiry, QVI-centered methodology foregrounds failure, affect, identity, and materiality as ways to resist rigid ideas of success, commodification of education, emphasis on reproducibility of numbers, and mechanization of the bodies that make up the system, providing pathways for writing professionals to build an "affective writing construct" (27) based around agency, consent, radical justice, lived experience, and embodiment.

The book is broken up into seven chapters with a foreword and acknowledgements. I want to linger briefly on the acknowledgments, because they provide an important frame for the rest of the book. In addition to the common acknowledgement of support from others, each author takes the time to acknowledge themselves, their embodied experiences, positionalities, and collaboration with each other. The authors present more than just a list of names and organizations: they pause to acknowledge the effort that providing assistance on a book project takes. They speak to their personal experiences with writing that led to this project and how important their collaboration has been to the production of this book, down to how they considered the order that their names would take on the cover (xvi). This expanded acknowledgement was their way of sharing some of the embodied process of writing *Failing Sideways*. Before we are even introduced to QVI and shown how it is designed to draw attention to the emotions, identities, and bodies that are all too frequently obscured in traditional assessment methods, the authors have modeled what acknowledging those things looks like.

Thomas Gurinskas is a Master's student in Composition and Rhetoric at Miami University, where he teaches first year composition and rhetoric. He specializes in queer and transgender rhetorics in the early-mid 20th century, and his Master's thesis focuses on the rhetoric of early twentieth-century trans memoirs. Thomas has published book reviews covering a wide range of genres including historical fiction, graphic novels, and LGBTQ literature, and has been a guest author for the *Making Queer History* project. Thomas recently served as historical consultant, researcher, and translator for Adam J. Rineer's *THIRD SEX: 1930s Transvestite Lieder (Songs)* in workshop.

This attention is also baked into the structure of the book. Chapter one is a summary of the whole book, with contextualizing history of how writing assessment reached where it is today; introductions to the important theories being drawn upon: the “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed), the queer art of failure (Jack Halberstam), disidentification (José Muñoz), among others; an introduction to QVI and its tenets; and a summary of the remaining chapters. Then, at the end of the chapter the authors pause to address the readers and provide non-linear ways of reading, providing specific suggestions for teachers and instructors; writing program administrators; and writing and rhetoric scholars.

With a book review in mind, I kept reading linearly, but their attention to me as a reader, giving me agency and consent to do with the book as I wished, again models the values of QVI. Chapter two takes the reader through an in-depth presentation of QVI. The authors start by defining a theory of failure that provides new ways of making meaning from “failed” moments in learning. They explore what being an assessment killjoy can do to reorient existing, troubled frameworks and bring missing voices back into the conversations around assessment, particularly in terms of the hierarchies that exist in education. For example, how does a graduate instructor navigate teaching in a classroom when they have little to no say in choosing the assessment models being prioritized by their institution? This chapter also speaks more in depth to the conceptual 3D model that the authors use to showcase the movement and reorientable nature of QVI as a methodology. Using a tetrahedron as a base-shape, the point of this model is to draw attention to what it could mean to “unflatten” and make three dimensional our methods and methodologies, as such a model allows for a visualization of how different methodological elements intersect and brush up against each other.

Chapters three, four, five, and six each dive into one of the four core tenets of QVI: failure to succeed, failure to be commodified, failure to be reproduced, and failure to be mechanized. The way they define “failure” is multifaceted, drawing on the productive potential of failure alongside the way that systems fail certain groups who do not meet the often privileged “standard.” Each chapter focuses on particular tools, methods and models of assessment that fail to engage with the actual nuance of writing, even if they come from a place of good and progress initially. They give examples both of the failures of what exists and the ways that they have tried to push back in their own classrooms, programs and writing centers. In chapter three the focus lies with writing portfolios, the failures of existing modes of student self-assessment within that, and the shame involved in failing. One thing they note is that when students are asked to reflect on their writing, they often give a generic response more focused on following prompts for a grade than giving a genuine self-assessment of their learning.

Chapter four goes on to ask how we can push against writing assessment as commodity from the neat and tidy purchasable rubric sold by an education company to the commodification of writing center consultants via the treatment of “good writing” as a commodity. What the authors advocate for in response to this is a focus on vulnerability and consent, offering collaborative assessment as a way forward. Chapter five explores a queer framework for grading, exploring such options as grading contracts and digital badging (a system that replaces the requirement of “complete every assignment” with “complete a certain number

of badges and the corresponding assignments”). The chapter also considers writing centers and the idea of oversampling minority groups in order to fill the gap left when your outliers (minorities) are excluded from data on effective writing assessment. Chapter six concludes this section with a discussion of how we can resist mechanized styles of assessing writing that focus more on product than process. The authors introduce methods like learning stories, introducing elements of game play to learning and research, and using constellation to showcase the complex network of relationships in assessment. These all work to slow down the assessment process and push back against the dehumanizing, numbers-focused approaches to assessment by prioritizing embodied and lived experiences.

The last chapter of the book is an invitation for us the readers to take up the mantle of the assessment killjoy in our classrooms, programs, writing centers, institutions, etc. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that this is hard. Not only do they recognize that their book presents a lot of information about activities and program ideas that are not easily implemented, but we are also limited by our programs and institutions. This leads to their final note, which is disidentification and the double burden/boon of the assessment killjoy as we do the normative work our institution asks of us while also trying to *be* the assessment killjoy, the willful subject who pushes back. Given the current climate in education, it feels more important than ever that we find ways to productively push back, and this book provides a vital methodology for doing so.

Crucially, it is the wide audience of the book that makes it so valuable—K-12 teachers, graduate instructors and contingent faculty, tenured professors, writing program administrators. As a graduate instructor who has only been teaching since I began my degree program, the attention paid to the historical contexts of writing assessment methods were invaluable. I was not particularly familiar with the origins of the bell curve, but the book made room for me the young professional to learn while scholars who have heard it all before are given in-text permission to skip that part (147). As a queer instructor myself, finding ways to make my classroom equitable is always at the front of my mind, and I was thrilled to find that some of the attempts I’ve already made fall so nicely in line with QVI, such as collaborative rubric building with my students and opting to move to contract grading as soon as the choice was available to me.

Something else I appreciated deeply was the acknowledgment that this sort of push back is risky. I am a queer graduate instructor. I can only make so many waves. Finding the balance between being an assessment killjoy and having to keep to departmental and institutional standards is hard. I recently had to explain to my students (as part of our collaborative rubric building) that I could not remove a particular section of the rubric, because I do not have the power to restructure the core assignments of the first-year writing curriculum, which has been carefully tailored by my department to meet university requirements. This is the exact sort of thing that QVI is designed to help reorient us towards: these moments where we can create friction in the system. I know that I’ve already started considering some of activities showcased in the book for my own classroom.