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Innovative Leadership: Navigating Changes in Literacy Education

When: Sunday–Tuesday, November 20–22
Where: The Georgia World Congress Center

What: The CEL Convention features dynamic, interactive sessions with practicing literacy leaders. Attendees enjoy conversations with peers and presenters and return to their districts with practical ideas and resources. Everyone is welcome to attend and will find useful and inspiring experiences, from administrators to teacher-leaders to every educator who works collaboratively.

We all know that change is inevitable. Changes in education, however, can be extremely demanding on teachers, administrators, students, and parents alike. How can today’s literacy leaders not only bring about necessary changes but navigate changes imposed upon us? How can we steer literacy education in the right direction? How can we fight against injustice and focus on promoting literacy?

Join us for the CEL Convention in Atlanta where we will explore these questions by examining and discussing innovations in literacy leadership. We will work collaboratively, share experiences, and reflect upon our practice in order to build our capacities for leadership.

Learn more about the CEL Convention: www.ncte.org/CEL/convention

CEL SPEAKERS

Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle will be speaking at the Sunday Opening Session from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Ernest Morrell will be speaking at the Monday Breakfast from 8:00 to 9:30 a.m.

Troy Hicks and Kristen Turner will be speaking at the Monday Luncheon from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m.

Jemelleh Coes will be speaking at the Tuesday Breakfast from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m.

Sara Kajder will be speaking at the Tuesday Luncheon from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

REGISTRATION FEES*

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*You do not have to attend the NCTE Convention in order to attend the CEL Annual Convention.
Toward Writing as Social Justice: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Mya Poe and Asao B. Inoue

In her last book published in 2013, Responsibility for Justice, the late political theorist Iris Marion Young wrote,

While there are vast disagreements about why, almost no one in American society today thinks that educational opportunity is equal . . . The turn-of-the-century hope that public education can equalize the relationship among children of very unequal parents, giving each child an equal chance to compete with others from more privileged backgrounds, seems like a strange dream. (21)

Indeed, writing teachers and writing program administrators working today in higher education often find themselves wondering if equitable education is a strange dream. Placing students into noncredit basic writing classes, assigning credit for dubious dual-credit experiences, and preventing students from advanced coursework through exit assessments that capture just slivers of the writing construct: So much of the writing assessment work we do seems complicit in sustaining inequality. No wonder we are drawn to seemingly more democratic

Mya Poe is an assistant professor of English at Northeastern University. Her research focuses on writing assessment, diversity, and writing in the disciplines. A NCTE member since 1996, she is coauthor of Learning to Communicate in Science and Engineering: Case Studies from MIT, which won the 2012 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award. With Asao B. Inoue she coedited Race and Writing Assessment, which won the 2014 CCCC Outstanding Book of the Year in the Edited Collection category. She has guest-edited a special issue of Research in the Teaching of English on diversity and international writing assessment. Her research has been published in College Composition and Communication, The Journal of Business and Technical Communication, and Across the Disciplines. Her monograph Intended Consequences: Stories and Statistics of Writing Assessment is under contract.

Asao B. Inoue is an associate professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Tacoma, where he is also the Director of University Writing. His research focuses on writing assessment, antiracism, and political economy. A NCTE member since 1995, he is the author of Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing for a Socially Just Future. With Mya Poe he coedited Race and Writing Assessment, which won the 2014 CCCC Outstanding Book of the Year in the Edited Collection category. His research has appeared in Assessing Writing, the Journal of Writing Assessment, Research in the Teaching of English, Composition Studies, among other places.

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assessment methods like directed self-placement, portfolios, and contract grading. If we were to make this desire for more democratic assessment more visible in our profession—to say that we value socially just writing assessment—what would it mean? Would assessing for justice be asking something of writing assessment that is simply, to echo Young, a strange dream?

This special issue takes up a singular question: What would it mean to incorporate social justice into our writing assessments?

One of our goals in putting together this special issue was to foreground the perspectives of contributors whose voices are not typically heard in writing assessment scholarship: non-tenure-track faculty, HBCU WPAs, researchers interested in global rhetorics, queer faculty, and faculty of color. These voices have too often not been heard in writing assessment scholarship. There is no doubt that the first step toward projects of social justice writing assessment is to listen to those who have not been heard, to make more social the project of socially just writing assessment. Thus, in this special issue of College English, we argue that there is much to be learned by making the writing assessment “scene,” as Chris Gallagher would say, more inclusive.

Theorizing Social Justice for Writing Assessment

Social justice theory may encompass many disciplinary and theoretical orientations. As Michael Reisch points out in the Routledge International Handbook of Social Justice, social justice theory is not simply the eradication of injustice. Achieving social justice, or perhaps simply justice, means “envisioning what a just society would look like” (1). As a result, it requires us to “address fundamental questions about human nature and social relationships; about the distribution of resources, power, status, rights, access, and opportunities; and about how decisions regarding this distribution are made” (1).

John Rawls’s thought experiment, what he called “the veil of ignorance,” was an exercise in imagining what kind of society we might choose if we could suspend our current knowledge of our place in society. In this exercise in which “no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like,” the principles of justice are selected “behind a veil of ignorance” (A Theory 12). Rawls defined this “original position of equality” because “all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles in favor of his particular condition” (12). For Rawls, “justice as fairness” meant understanding the ways that the “basic structure of society” was created by relations among individuals (Justice 10). He explains that “as a social process view, justice as fairness focuses first on the basic structure and on the regulations required to maintain background justice over time for all persons equally, whatever their generation or social position” (54). In articulating a theory of
justice that attempted to balance equality with the redistribution of resources for the least advantaged, then, Rawls provided a powerful critique of utilitarianism.

Iris Marion Young’s views on social justice largely mapped those of Rawls with the exception that she critiqued Rawls for looking at a subset of institutions as being more fundamental to society than others (70). For Young, social structures were not part of society; social structures “involve, or became visible in, a certain way of looking at the whole society” (70, emphasis in original). The social justice question that informed Responsibility for Justice was the social structures of economic inequality. In that book, she traces the political debates that shaped our understanding of social mobility from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. Her book engages political and public discourse about economic inequality, describing the ways that poverty has been constructed as a personal, rather than social, concern. Young describes how the construction of personal responsibility displaces shared responsibility and absolves the “non-poor” from action and argues that the shared responsibility for addressing economic inequality falls not simply to the state or the individual but along four axes: those with greatest power or influence, those with greatest privilege, those with greatest interest, and those with the potential for collective action. In engaging with the debates in political theory on social structures and individual responsibility, Young—like Rawls—reminds us that social justice is not simply the eradication of injustice. Social justice is about the relationship of individuals and the dispositions of social structures. And as an initial way to consider the concept of socially just writing assessment, Young’s four axes seem a good start; focus on those with power, privilege, interest, and potential for action.

If social justice is about creating certain kinds of relationships, distribution of resources, and decision-making along four axes, it is this last point—decision-making—where we may find a toehold for the project of writing assessment as social justice. In fact, we might say, then, that achieving justice is very much akin to the processes of validation.

In the field of measurement, Michael Kane’s work on argument-based validity has been influential, continuing the work of previous validity theorists such as Samuel Messick and Lee Cronbach. In Kane’s formulation, we validate decisions, not tests:

If validity is to be used to support a score interpretation, validation would require an analysis of the plausibility of that interpretation . . . In each case, the evidence needed for validation would depend on the specific claims being made. (1)

As Kane goes on to explain, “if validity is to be used to support score uses, validation would require an analysis of the appropriateness of the proposed uses, and therefore, would require an analysis of the consequences of the uses” (1). In Kane’s validity model, researchers first identify all the claims that may be made from test scores. In doing so, the process of validation is expansive. In the
second step of Kane’s model, researchers empirically work through a subset of those claims with evidence. For example, if we work through the claim that cut scores on a placement exam are accurate indicators of student writing ability, what evidence supports that claim? What claims, warrants, and qualifications are used in interpreting score use? Course grades, retention rates, or other indicators of academic performance? These are all kinds of validity evidence.

Kane’s work has been critical in reshaping the theoretical conversations on validity. We admire that Kane is pushing the measurement community to connect test scores to the decisions made based on scores, and we appreciate the theoretical richness of his model for writing assessment research. Yet, Kane’s model may not be the best fit to connect classroom assessment to program assessment. Additionally, Kane’s model—whose evidence focuses solely on the foundational principles of validity and reliability—cannot accommodate the contingencies of locally diverse students, teachers, and linguistic practices. Here, as our contributors in this special issue show us, sociocultural theory can provide a useful reworking of validity theory for the purposes of social justice.

A sociocultural model of validity points to agents who make decisions. Deflection of agents in conventional validity theory creates the illusion of objectivity. Decisions are objectified, leaving the outcomes to individuals who experience the personal responsibility of assessment—responsibility that rests on students to wind their way through courses and additional assessment mazes. Here is where we can apply a lesson from Iris Young: The rhetoric that accompanies assessment—like poverty—“encourages an isolated, atomistic way of thinking about individuals” (23). Like the personal responsibility discourse of poverty that attempts to “isolate the deviant and render them particularly blameworthy for their condition,” assessment practices often isolate “failure” (23). In doing so, “the application of paternalistic and punitive policies” becomes justified (23). In contrast, a socioculturally informed model of validity offers a different orientation to validity arguments: In each case, the evidence needed for validation would depend on the specific claims being made and the aims of those holding the potential for power who make decisions. Since validity arguments are rhetorical in nature, they are also subjective, meaning they are made from subject positions by people—by individuals or groups—and thus require particular worldviews, values, and dispositions to be understood and accepted.

Yet contingency need not suggest anarchy. If fairness is maintained as the first principle of assessment, as Norbert Elliot argues in “A Theory of Ethics for Writing Assessment,” then foundational concepts such as validity and reliability are unified under a single rhetorical aim: the assurance of fairness. But what is the relationship between justice and fairness? Elliot argues that “fairness, not justice, is the first virtue of writing assessment” (“Definition: Identification of Fairness”). For Elliot, the term fairness, rather than justice, allows the unification of assessment theory under a single aim: Fairness in writing assessment is
defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation. Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged.

In unifying writing assessment under the term *fairness*, rather than *justice*, Elliot seeks to avoid the diffusion of metaphors found in political theory and philosophical treatises on justice. Pulling the field of writing assessment together under the term *fairness* is enormously important to unify methodological approaches and solidify an empirical research tradition that speaks to the composition community. Yet, we also think that it is useful to push the writing assessment community beyond the social justice theoretical traditions of John Rawls and Robert Merton that Elliot draws upon. Social justice and fairness are always an ongoing, mutually beneficial projects, not competing traditions.

**Connections and Departures in Assessing for Justice**

It is no surprise that our contributors come back repeatedly to questions of decision-making and push against traditional validity theory. In doing so, our contributors’ works point to features of socially just writing assessment: creation of opportunity structures, avoidance of value dualisms, and self-evaluation.

In “Making Classroom Writing Assessment More Visible, Equitable, and Portable through Digital Badging,” Stephanie West-Puckett draws on Perry’s critical validity inquiry to bring validity into the classroom and asks students to help make decisions about their learning through decisions about badges they earn. West-Puckett’s work speaks to the fluid nature of construct representation when viewed from our students’ perspectives. From their perspective, we find new ways to open opportunity and understand how our vision for creating opportunity structures are not always shared by our students.

In “Expanding the Dialogue on Writing Assessment at HBCUs: Foundational Assessment Concepts and Legacies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” David F. Green begins with the definitions of reliability, validity, and fairness from the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* to argue for a synthesis of those concepts that work within the “push-pull” context of historically black colleges and universities. Simply put, validity inquiries are not bloodless undertakings; the cares and concerns of people must be included among the claims, warrants, and qualifications. By including student and teacher voices in classroom and program assessment, we resist the false objectivity in validation inquiries that Kane’s validity-as-argument theory unwittingly obviates. In bringing together assessment theory in the HBCU context, Green also enacts Elliot’s call to reject value dualisms. Elliot writes that a theory of ethics for writing assessment must hold that “disjunctive pairs in which terms are seen as oppositional rather than complementary are to be rejected.” In lieu of holding validity and reliability as oppositional pairs, Elliot calls for their integration.
under the umbrella of fairness—“as empirical contributions serving the pursuit of fairness within an integrative, principled framework.” For Green, the integration of push-pull attitudes toward student writing is a powerful force for learning and assessment in HBCU contexts that avoids the value dualisms that so often inform HBCUs’ writing instruction.

Jerry Won Lee’s “Beyond Translingual Writing” asks writing teachers to consider alternative ways to assess linguistic diversity. In pointing to the ways that assessment judgments often rely on a dominant, standardized English to function in classrooms, he highlights the power, privilege, and interests in responding to student writing. Asking us to translanguage our assessment practices in the ways that Won Lee does can help us form important, new questions about the validity of our assessment decisions.

In Siskanna Naynaha’s narrative, “Assessment, Social Justice, and Latinxs in the US Community College,” about two Latinx students’ experiences at a two-year college, she demonstrates the potentially uneven consequences of placement testing. Her vignette, along with Jonathan Alexander’s narrative, “Queered Writing Assessment,” challenges us to assess ourselves. How might we expand on Ed White’s maxim—“Assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee”—to include the corollary, “Assess thyself to know thyself.” In fact, we might claim that any meaningful writing assessment says just as much about those judging as it does about those being judged, and in fact, both views should be accounted for in validation inquiries. Alexander’s vignette is also timely for it resonates with the new Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing guidelines regarding sexual orientation (71). Disaggregating data by sexual orientation is just one step; queering writing assessment opens new lines of inquiry, as Alexander shows us in his work with transfer students.

Finally, as Staci M. Perryman-Clark shows us in “Who We Are(n’t) Assessing: Racializing Language and Writing Assessment in Writing Program Administration,” if we work toward writing assessment for social justice, we must revisit opportunity structures more than once. In Perryman-Clark’s work at Western Michigan University, failure becomes an opportunity. Her work echoes Young’s call:

> The opportunity to learn something should not be closed off, even if a person has so far failed. If we take that principle seriously, it is up to the society collectively to offer that opportunity to acquire a certain level of knowledge and skill, as a lifetime possibility. (22)

To be sure, our work in this special issue continues a long tradition of composition scholars who have pointed to the disparities caused by and reflected in writing assessment practices (Condon; Sternglass) as well as those who have looked for novel ways to make writing assessment more democratic (Broad; Huot; Yancey). We also realize that we are working at a particular moment of
Editors' Introduction

assessment—a moment when the measurement community has come to recognize fairness, along with reliability and validity, as one of the three pillars of its professional standards (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education); a moment in which the measurement and writing community are both wrestling with conceptions of validity (Behizadeh and Engelhard); and in which concerns about ethics and consequences have gained prominence (Elliot; Schendel and O’Neill; White et al.).

We are also struck by what is still missing from this special issue—for example, the effects of machine scoring on the least advantaged, how disability studies might help us understand better issues of universal design in writing assessments, the ways that the double-burdening of socioeconomic status and race are not addressed in validation studies, and the ways that lack of socioeconomic mobility means that some students see little connection between assessment for learning and social mobility. Many of the issues that create unfairness and unequal opportunities are not completely writing assessment issues. As Young and Rawls remind us, when we are working toward social justice ends, we are dealing with societal structures. This is a caveat that the NCTE Standards for Assessment offers in its sixth standard, “assessment must be fair and equitable.”

The description ends this way:

We must also remember that, although assessment plays an important role in ensuring fairness and equity, the goal of equity cannot be laid solely at the feet of assessment. No assessment practice can shore up the differences in educational experience that arise from the obviously unequal conditions of extreme poverty and wealth.

How can we expect our students to do the work we ask of them if they are plagued with food or housing insecurities, if their previous schooling offered them vastly divergent practices or experiences with reading and writing than what we expect of them? How can we engage in fostering a more just society within our classrooms or programs, perhaps around the priorities that translingual approaches to language offer, when we know that most outside our programs and classrooms will assess our students’ writing in vastly different ways, often to our students’ detriment, often in contradiction to the lessons we offer them about language and its valuing? If writing assessment as social justice is to be a reality, it must be more than a project about how to judge students’ writing, more than just about our classrooms and programs.

Is it possible to assess for justice or is that simply stuff that dreams are made on? Our contributors in this special issue tell us that at some times, in some places, assessment for justice is possible. It is, to quote Michael Reisch, “neither simple nor ever entirely realized. It is a goal which is constantly pursued rather
than completely attained” (2). In this special issue, our authors turn dreams into realities. Vexing, these visions should not fade.

Acknowledgments

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