Ericka Christie and Caroline McCraw

Professor Hopwood

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Project Needs Assessment

For the past 30 years, and with each new iteration of educational policy, quantification of the classroom experience has been promised as an objective measure of teacher and student performance. From No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top to Common Core, evaluative measures of students and teachers have increasingly come to rely on standardized test scores and value-added assessment tools. While these efforts have consistently been used to hold teachers and students accountable for achievement and growth, we have, at the same time, had “remarkably limited access to the equations, algorithms, and models” that inform this data (Eubanks 5). Teachers are largely excluded in the meaning-making process of their own and their students’ data, data that is determining everything from student promotion to teacher retention to school funding. Even with the current triumvirate of teacher evaluation in Chicago Public Schools—value-added scores, observations, and student benchmarks—many teachers feel that the evaluative process is happening to them, rather than with them. Often, one of the most powerful tools in the evaluative toolbox, self-reflection, is left completely out of the equation. As quantification of data has become increasingly valued as an “objective” assessment of teachers, there has been little room made for meaning-making within the qualitative spaces of teacher-as-reflective-practitioner (Stanley 1).

Why should digital humanities play a role in addressing this dissonance found between evaluative approaches in education and their actual effects? Projects such as the Digital Humanities Data Curation Guide encourage digital humanists to embrace and explore modes of humanities data curation, providing resources for how to collect, curate, and represent the data existing within humanities projects in order to maximize its possibilities for digital analysis (Muñoz). However, how can pre-existing data sets be met with a humanist attention to complexity, ambiguity, and multiplicity? How can influential data be alternatively quantified? In her reflection upon the role of data in the humanities, Miriam Posner states, “With a source, like a film or a work of literature, you’re not extracting features in order to analyze them; you’re trying to dive into it, like a pool, and understand it from within” (Posner). How can social scientific data be entered with humanist priorities, and how can these humanist interventions contribute to improving educational evaluation systems? How can we dive into data “like a pool” and recalibrate qualitative and quantitative value? This importantly links to the digital element of DH— via digital resources, there is the possibility for a humanist understanding of the complexity of value to synchronize with the technology, systems, and software that educational institutions are using, such as [REACH](http://www.reachedsolutions.com/), [SAS](https://www.sas.com/en_us/software/evaas.html) and [Pearson](https://www.pearson.com/us/) products, and the upcoming [ASPEN](https://cps.edu/aspen/Pages/aspen.aspx) system in Chicago Public Schools. Therefore, a digital humanities approach to evaluative educational data might allow for a more holistic understanding of data while also allowing the opportunity to quantify previously unquantifiable information. A project interested in complicating evaluative educational data would also provide an opportunity to explore current DH concerns regarding interactivity and user-customization, sustainable and flexible infrastructure, a dynamic multiplicity of information, and an emphasis on localized data and knowledge.

There are many journalistic projects that challenge traditional data modeling, including *The Guardian*’s [Are you reflected in the new Congress?](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2014/nov/06/-sp-congress-diversity-women-race-lgbt-are-you-represented), *The Center for New York City Affairs’* [The Calculus of Race and Class: A New Look At The Achievement Gap In New York City Schools](http://www.centernyc.org/calculus-of-race/), and *The New York Times’* [How Effective Is Your School District?](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/05/upshot/a-better-way-to-compare-public-schools.html). Such projects specifically attempt to dissect and contextualize data in ways that might be more resonant or informative to the reader, while also challenging some of the misconceptions that such data represents. There are also a range of assessment applications made for teachers to utilize in the classroom, such as [Plinkers](https://get.plickers.com/) and [Additio](https://www.additioapp.com/en/rubrics/), which both provide the opportunity for educators to generate original and instantaneous classroom evaluations. Likewise, there are a range of teacher evaluation applications such as [EvaluWise](https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/evaluwise-teacher-evaluation/id657406595?mt=8) that are designed for administrators to use in their teacher evaluation processes. However, based upon current research, there are no applications that are intended to empower educators to generate, archive, and analyze self-assessment criteria in order to track, understand, and take ownership over their own evaluative data. While self-reflection is prioritized in educational literature, such as in the [National Board Certification model](https://www.nbpts.org/standards-five-core-propositions/), these techniques primarily exist in informational text-based formats rather than through interactive tools. Many personal tracking and archiving applications exist for daily life beyond education (such as the [Clue](https://helloclue.com/) period tracker, the [Wallet](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.droid4you.application.wallet&hl=en_US) finance tracker, and an immeasurable range of fitness tracking apps); therefore, there is potential for such application designs to intersect with daily educational evaluation methods and inform potential interfaces.

With the consistent change every three to five years in education initiatives at the state and national levels and the sunsetting of web-based platforms meant to monitor progress, teachers are often at a loss for tracking, archiving, and reflecting on their own long-term, historical data, particularly if they move to different schools, districts, or states. We imagine our mobile application to be an environment of empowerment for teachers to store, interrogate, and dialogue about their data throughout their teaching career. The app will offer teachers a user-friendly interface to archive and comment on their own evaluative data (value-added scores, student data, observation notes, ratings, and artifacts), clear and interactive visualizations that help to compare/contrast past and present data, and, in later iterations, an opportunity for conversation among app users about what those numbers mean, best practices, etc. Most importantly, the mobile application will provide a place for teachers to reflect on their practice in a holistic way: by taking pictures and tagging/commenting on student artifacts, making notes about data they may have questions about, and generally noting the larger context in which they teach—both successes and opportunities for growth. The app will provide teachers with a private space to customize their reflective practice and make sense of the qualitative and quantitative data of their classroom experience.

The primary user community of such a project would be public school teachers who are interested in documenting, self-assessing, and tracking their progress as an educator in contrast to standardized evaluative techniques. Engaging with the tool should not weigh upon the teacher as an inconvenient additional level of work. Therefore, this digital tool must operate with an interface that is mobile-friendly and easy to use, with seamless integration of photo, audio, and video functions that can quickly be imported to the individual’s archive. It should also present a range of privacy controls and customizable settings that can be personalized to meet a specific teacher’s needs. While an emphasis on personalized data collection will allow for teachers to develop an evaluative method that aligns with their own priorities, it will be necessary for the digital tool to synchronize with external evaluative standards and scoring in order for this data to be contextualized. There is also potential for the project to include a social element, where teachers can exchange information and provide feedback to one another, thus providing a sense of community around the topic of teacher assessment, which often run the risk of being clinical, impersonal, alienating, or demoralizing.

In considering the current landscape of evaluative data in education and taking into account both the daily and long-term needs of educators, we plan to develop an application that allows teachers to collect, analyze, and self-evaluate classroom practices on their own terms. By empowering teachers to develop and track their own artifacts of progress, such an application has the potential to intervene in the one-sided narrative of quantitative data. This holistic approach to data collection and evaluation will contribute to a more balanced discussion and understanding of educational evaluative standards.

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