Embracing Complexity: Contradictions Between Perception and Application of Counterargument in Writing Intensive Assignments

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Abstract: Writing intensive (WI) courses are well-situated to support students' counterargument skill development**,** a key element for both academic and civic discourse in today's socio-political environment. However, while many researchers celebrate multi-faceted argumentation, few studies look beyond a dichotomous or "two-sided" approach in post-secondary writing instruction. In this qualitative study, we drew on our established WAC program's extensive WI course proposal system to ask: How do WI instructors describe counterargumentation, both broadly and in relation to their writing assignments? Through grounded theory data analyses, we categorized and qualified instructors' descriptions of counterargumentation use within 350 WI courses and assignments. Although there was agreement on the importance of argumentation, our successive rounds of analysis revealed interesting contradictions in the ways WI instructors conceptualized disciplinary argumentation and how they apprenticed students into argumentative writing tasks. As we explored the tension between instructors' characterization and practice of counterargument, we realized the need to design intentional professional development to help WI instructors teach students how to embrace subjectivity as they design, implement, and assess student writing activities.

Introduction

Argumentation and the Social Context

In *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* Susan Herbst (2011) argued that, while 21st century pundits bemoan a loss of civility in American politics, "there was never a true 'golden age' of purely constructive discourse" (p.8). However, Herbst's empirical data surrounding the 2008 presidential election did highlight a growing concern among young people that discourse is becoming more divided and insular. It's no secret that we have witnessed increasing polarization in the last few decades, starting during the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement and continuing through the advent of the internet and social media (Brubaker, 2019; Tannen, 2012). In 2014, a Pew study of 10,003 adults found that Americans are increasingly divided across political party lines, contributing to the most polarized social and political moment in the last twenty years.

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Written and spoken argumentation, of course, is not a new concept. The system of rhetoric came into the public discourse via Aristotle's writing on logos, ethos, and pathos in the 4th century BCE. In 1958, Stephen Toulmin's model placed a new emphasis on the importance of audience and occasion for the argumentative task (Ramage & Bean, 1995; Stapleton, 2001). While modern speakers and writers might view argumentation as a combative rhetorical practice, these classical roots of argumentation focused on making a point clear and steadfastly logical (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). With its emphasis on thesis and evidence, argument is a key element of critical thinking (Stapleton, 2001). Argument requires a focus on logic, highlighting the necessity to deal with evidence, qualifications, and rebuttals of counterarguments. In short, because of these intricacies, "argument is at the heart of critical thinking and academic discourse" (Hillocks, 2010, p. 25).

In 1910, John Dewey first wrote about reflective thinking—the early precursor to our critical thinking—noting its connection to academic and scientific thinking and highlighting its role within a successful democracy. Dewey defined reflective thinking as "the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious consideration" (2015, p. 3). Part of this "serious consideration" includes assessing the complexity of an issue, moving beyond black and white approaches to situate ourselves in the nuanced gray. Bean and Melzer (2021) summed up the theoretical position prevalent in the critical thinking literature: "Skilled critical thinkers demand justification of claims, seek to disconfirm hypotheses, [and] avoid hasty conclusions" (p. 20). As Brown and Keeley (2017) noted, critical thinking means being critical of all viewpoints, including our own. However, the requirement to approach opposing arguments in good faith and then concede, refute, or qualify them represents the most challenging part of argumentation: counterargument. Strong counterargumentation skills are a key element for both academic and civic discourse (Christensen-Branum, Strong, and Jones, 2018; Leskes, 2013). Anyone who has watched a debate between political candidates, attended a public forum at a school board meeting, or experienced a heated discussion with family during Thanksgiving dinner recognizes the requirement for thoughtful counterargumentation skills in the public sphere.

Argumentation and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)

The field of writing studies has increasingly focused on approaches for dealing with opposing arguments since the rise of the Toulmin method (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011; Ramage & Bean, 1995). Writing studies scholars have agreed that counterargumentation "requires substantial epistemological sophistication" (Nussbaum, Kardash, 2005; De La Paz & Wissinger, 2016) alongside an understanding of evidentiary weight and audience values. In an engineering context, Jonassen and Cho (2011) highlighted the dialectical nature of applied argumentation wherein counterarguments reflect "a dialogue between a proponent and one or more opponents" with the goal to "resolve differences of opinions" (p. 682). In their own programs and publications, the National Writing Project emphasizes that students must "understand multiple points of view that go beyond pros and cons and are based on multiple pieces of evidence" (Friedrich, Bear, & Fox, 2018). As these various examples show, counterargumentation is a key component of argumentation across the disciplines. And, regardless of discipline, scholars agree that effective counterargument rejects absolutism and encourages hedging and qualification (Hillocks, 2010; Nussbaum & Shraw, 2007).

Though it is a crucial skill for our college writers, counterargument is especially challenging because, as Melzer's (2014) large-scale study of college writing indicated, persuasion comprises only 17% of disciplinary writing tasks while informative writing comprises 66% (p. 22). If students are infrequently experiencing informative writing assignments with an audience other than the instructor (as Melzer found), and if persuasion is not a major component of their total writing tasks, then students are rarely practicing the challenging process of writing counterarguments in their

college courses. Adding to these complications is the growing issue of myside bias—"the propensity to support arguments with which one preemptively agrees while selectively ignoring contradictory claims and evidence" (Christensen-Branum, Strong, and Jones, 2018, p. 435)—that is cultivated in social media discourse. This trend is exacerbated by the echo chamber effect where the algorithms of social media sites tend to share users' posts with those who already align with them ideologically rather than to those with differing views. For these reasons, secondary and post-secondary students across all disciplines struggle to create effective counterarguments (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011; Nussbaum & Shraw, 2007; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Stapleton, 2001), often including no counterargument at all (Perkins, Faraday, & Bushey, 1991).

Because of "the dialogic view of academic life implied by writing across the curriculum" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 22), the discourse community created in writing intensive (WI) courses supports students' counterargument skill development. Moreover, the necessary development of these skills across disciplinary boundaries makes writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs uniquely positioned to promote students' critical thinking growth (Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006) while also considering our socio-political situation (Fulford & Frigo, 2018) and the intersecting contextual demands of counterargumentation (Nussbaum & Sinatra, 2003). Though university writing requirements have been rather explicit about expectations for criticality in writing (Mirador, 2018), wide disciplinary differences exist in the ways instructors view the complexities of their discourse.

Talking About Counterargument: A Theoretical Framework

Scholars in new rhetoric and discourse studies (Bazerman, 1994; Lunsford, 2007) emphasize the importance of the author-audience relationship, including the ways speakers and writers operationalize shared values and beliefs. In academic discussions around counterargument, scholars writing about the nebulous, complex concept often present contradictory views in the same discussion. For example, in an article which promotes balanced reasoning and increased counterargument refutations, Nussbaum & Shraw (2007) reduce arguments to a both sides, dichotomous presentation. Other scholars recognize—and even celebrate—the "multi-sided nature of the issues in question" (Stapleton, 2001, p. 517) while also using language that implies counterargument includes both (or two) sides (Leki, 1995; O'Keefe, 1999; Ramage & Bean, 1995). These differing viewpoints point to a fruitful place for further study of counterargumentation, especially within writing courses.

Early in the 2018 academic year, we were struck by a Campus Writing Board meeting discussion around the nature of counterargumentation wherein the board members' varying conception of counterargument reflected similar contradictions as those in the literature. In short, some faculty members described counterargument as a formal affair with two clear sides to be discussed; other faculty members depicted counterargumentation as a context-dependent, multi-sided, crystalline process. Here we must recognize that these externalized depictions of counterargument may differ from the ways disciplinary faculty build counterargument into their course documents (via assignment sheets, handouts, lectures, etc). However, we do find value in analyzing the ways instructors speak about counterargument broadly, especially in the course proposals they submit to conceptualize their WI course philosophy, structure, and approach. These varying depictions of counterargument—like counterargumentation itself—are messy.

Our discussions with Writing Intensive program stakeholders combined with the complex, national socio-political environment catalyzed our investigation, leading us to ask the following question: How do Writing Intensive instructors describe counterargumentation, both broadly and in relation to their writing assignments?

Research Design

Methods

We drew on grounded theory data analyses to capture instructors' depictions of counterargumentation within their WI courses at the University of Missouri (Charmaz, 2006). Employing grounded theory allowed us to consider the context, including the current socio-political environment and the culture of writing at our university. Grounded theory also allowed us to embrace a broad view of the data as a whole, rather than fitting individual parts into a predetermined theory (Charmaz, 2006). We should note here that our primary unit of analysis is what the instructors wrote in their WI course proposals, the language they used to answer a question speaking holistically to their WI course aims. We recognize that additional data (such as assignment handouts) might more specifically characterize their application of these ideas, but that is outside of the scope of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

For a course to be approved as WI by the Campus Writing Board, it goes through an approval process starting with the instructor submitting a course proposal. In this proposal, instructors are asked to describe how their course meets the WI guidelines. This includes describing (a) the structure of the overall course; (b) the scaffolded writing assignments which total 20 pages, including 8 pages of substantially revised writing; and (c) their methods and process for feedback on students' writing. Additionally, instructors are required to justify how their course meets the WI course design requirements by explaining how at least one of the writing assignments "addresses a question for which there is more than one acceptable interpretation, explanation, analysis or evaluation" which we will call the multiple interpretations question (MIQ) throughout this study (Figure 1). It is important to note that additional writing assignment descriptions accompany the MIQ answer on the WI proposal document; these additional elements factor into our later analysis. WI proposals are submitted every semester a course is taught as WI. Thus, some instructors may have attended the WI faculty certification training prior to submitting while others will attend the professional development training within the first year of teaching WI.

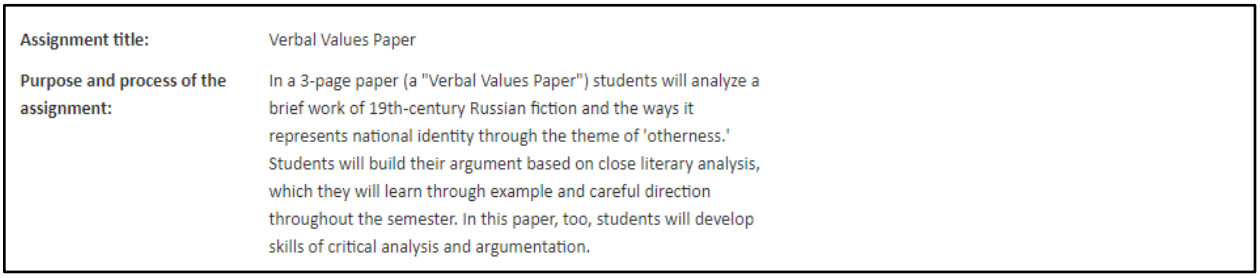
Figure 1: Example response for MIQ on the WI proposal system

Our original study (Birt & Goldsmith, 2022) included two rounds of grounded theory analysis. Analysis round one involved the open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of all 351 MIQ responses for dominant concepts, key phrases, and ideas around the complexity of the disciplinary writing task.

Explain briefly the nature of the assignment(s) which address(es) a question for which there is more than one acceptable interpretation, explanation, analysis, or evaluation:	Given the nature of the course, all of our writing assignments are geared in this direction. In course lectures and in discussion sections instructors will model argumentation and interpretation of complex texts and will raise and encourage varying viewpoints. Assignments will focus on helping students draw their own conclusions from philosophic, historic and artistic texts through careful attention to elements within the texts themselves. That is, for each "Values Paper" (the main writing assignments in the course), students must identify a cultural value in the work they are writing about and base their argument on evidence they have found through close analysis. Very far from recycling information they have gleaned in class, they are critically engaging with texts and drawing their own conclusions about them.

Each of us open-coded half of the original responses in round 1 (175 MIQ answers). This coding produced six categories for which we created broad working definitions. In analysis round two, both researchers probed the tentative theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2010) we had previously co-created, refined definitions and descriptors, and quantified instances[1] (n=534) of the six categories for all 351 course proposals. To generate horizontal alignment (Riessman, 2008) in the coding, the

research team met to review each other's codes and reach a consensus. The most common category, take and defend a position—defined as "writing assignments which ask students to engage in scholarly debate, supporting their assertions with evidence while considering multiple perspectives on the issue"—represented 27% (144/534) of instances coded across all MIQ answers. In our final round of grounded theory analyses, we returned to the course proposals identified in the take and defend a position category to deepen our data interpretation. We collected additional data from the instructors' description of their writing assignments (Figure 2) from a focus group of 37 courses, which included representatives from all the disciplines and had robust responses to both the MIQ and assignment descriptions.



Assignment title:	Verbal Values Paper
Purpose and process of the assignment:	In a 3-page paper (a "Verbal Values Paper") students will analyze a brief work of 19th-century Russian fiction and the ways it represents national identity through the theme of 'otherness.' Students will build their argument based on close literary analysis, which they will learn through example and careful direction throughout the semester. In this paper, too, students will develop skills of critical analysis and argumentation.

Figure 2: Example assignment description on WI proposal system

We open-coded the focus group's answers to the MIQ question and identified action verbs, which further characterized instructors' use of argument. During this analysis, we began to notice that instructors' descriptions of counterarguments often fit into several categories: no mention, one side, two sides, and many sides. See example coding in Table 1.

Table 1: Example coding for number of sides of argument for MIQ question and assignment descriptions.

Counter-argument Code	**MIQ Example**	**Assignment Example**
No mention of sides	"All of the writing assignments have [the multiple interpretation] feature. The students design their research question and write the paper. There is no formula for doing this."	"Student project: Focused position paper on topic of student's choosing. Purpose is to develop familiarity with research literature, understanding of research design, critical thinking about strength of evidence, original thinking about implications (scientific and social)"
One side	"While most of the assignments fit [the multiple interpretation] category, the position paper is specifically designed with this in mind. The future English teachers will read a variety of articles describing the pros and cons of using structured writing, such as a 5-paragraph essay, to teach writing. They will take a position about how they will or will not incorporate structured writing in their own teaching of writing."	"Persuasive Essay - The purpose of this assignment is for students to take a stance on a hot topic in education, support that stance with research using APA and propose an effective argument in a paper 3-5 pages in length."

Two sides	"The persuasive essay is a perfect example of [multiple interpretation}. Students must choose a controversial topic for which there are at least two stances. They must research and present the position they will take while addressing the alternative option."	"The mini-argument, essay, and video are persuasive position papers/videos where students will be asked to identify a communication issue that has two sides. The purpose of all assignments is to improve students' critical thinking, persuasion, and writing skills."
Many sides	"Students must use critical thinking to analyze the engineers' actions within the context of engineering ethics, and then argue their opinions about how the engineers in the scenario could or should have acted differently, or that they believe the engineers acted ethically and appropriately."	"Paper Section 3: Objections to Argument. Entertain objections that might be raised against the reasons you gave in Section 2. Be sure to elaborate on all objections by explaining why one might endorse them."

These categories did not necessarily align with the description of counterargument in the writing assignments description provided by instructors on their WI course proposal. With this misalignment in mind, we chose to quantify instances of counterargument[2] for each of these categories in the MIQ answers (n=44) as well as the specific assignment descriptions (n=57) for comparison as a whole and across different disciplines.

Findings

Counterargument in Instructors' MIQ Answers

When instructors described how their course met the WI guidelines in the focus group for the MIQ question (n=44), we found that over 45% of instances identified asked students to argue one position or made no mention of alternative arguments (Figure 3). One example response asked students to "critically examine evidence from scientific articles or similar sources," stating "this evidence will be used to argue for or against positions in medical applications, public health, or public policy." In another instance, the instructor indicated "students will describe the issue and make an argument to support a position related to the issue." Only 18% of the focus group instances mentioned two sides to students' arguments. One instructor described how "students are asked to consider both [pros and cons to divorce], take a side, and justify their position." Most notably, we categorized 36% of instances as having a high level of counterargument by describing "many" sides, examples of which we will discuss below.

We noted trends across the various disciplines in the use of counterargument (see Figure 3). Overall, instructors in the natural and applied sciences (NAS; n=11) were more likely to describe tasks in which students take a single position and defend it with evidence, and only two NAS instructors included a MIQ answer which fit the many views category. In the few instances which mention counterargument, the instructors asked students to present or describe the alternative option. One instructor noted, "Present at least two of the opinions [on an issue in medicine] and defend one of these positions… Points will be awarded based on successful argument for the stated position"

MIQ answers from the humanities and the arts (HA; n=18) and education and social sciences (ESS, n=15) groupings were more likely to describe where students are asked to consider more than two sides (i.e., codes many sides) in their writing about an issue. For example, in one ESS MIQ answer, the instructor specifically requires that "students explore and respond to debates in queer theories and identities that are contested and have multiple perspectives that challenge one another." Another course in HA "require[s] the student to take a stand on controversial issues and criticize competing positions." Overall, we found a higher level of complex counterargument represented by the many sides code in ESS and HA instructors' MIQ answers than in the NAS instructors' responses.

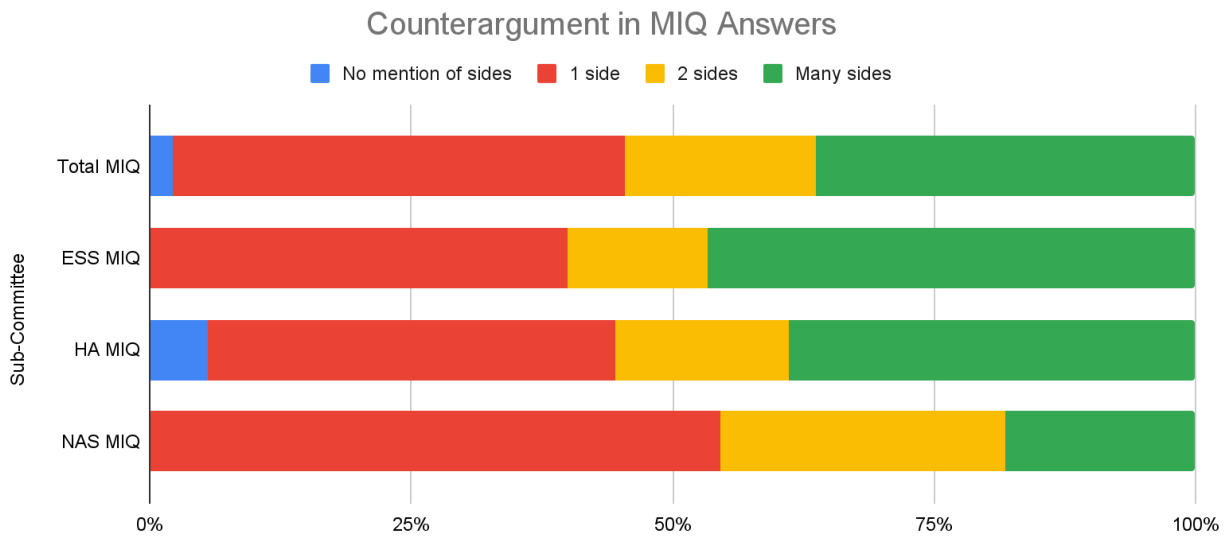


Figure 3: Counterargument characterization coded by number of sides in MIQ answers

Counterargument in Instructors' Assignment Descriptions

Interestingly, when the instructors' writing assignment descriptions were categorized into instances of counterargument (n=57) in the third round of grounded theory analysis, we found differences in counterargument classification. Seventy percent of assignment descriptions asked students to only argue one position or made no mention of alternative arguments (Figure 4). This discrepancy was evident in MIQ responses categorized as having many sides but had associated assignment descriptions such as "argue the author's opinions regarding the issue from within the context of engineering ethics." A modest 19% of assignment instances mention two sides to an argument. One course described how students will "identify a communication issue that has two sides." Another prompted students to "consider an objection or objections that a stubborn but intelligent person who disagrees with you might offer to your argument." Overall, only 10% of the instructors' descriptions of their writing assignments had a high level of counterargument and were categorized as many sides.

Similar to our analysis of the MIQ answers, we saw differences across the disciplines in the frequency their writing assignments required students to use counterargument (Figure 2). For example, more than 75% of NAS (n=16) assignment instances asked students to argue only one position while ESS (n=21) and HA (n=20) assignment instances were slightly more likely to include at least two sides in the writing assignments. Most notably, ESS assignments descriptions were most likely to have included many different counterarguments.

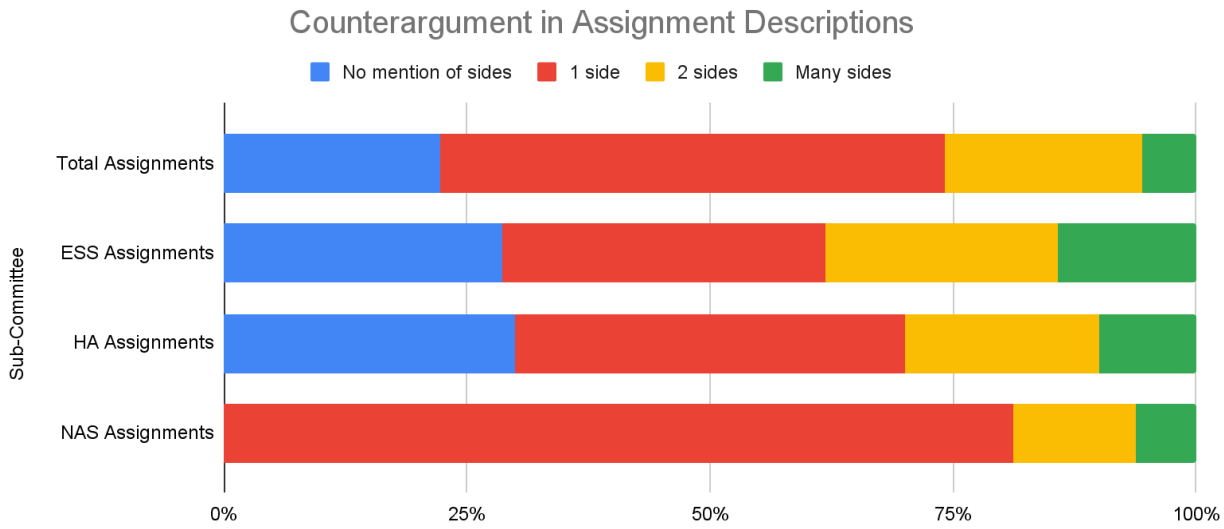


Figure 4: Counterargument characterization coded by number of sides in assignment descriptions

Comparing Counterargument by Data Source

When course proposals were evaluated for the number of counterarguments mentioned, we found that instructors were slightly more likely to ask students to argue two sides or more (54%) when considering their answer to the MIQ question rather than their assignment description (Figure 5). One instructor noted in their MIQ answer: "Depending on the text or cultural artifact in question, the prompts will ask students to develop counterarguments to critical orthodoxies." Instructors also usually mentioned teaching students about alternative options or theory in their MIQ answer but did not explicitly describe asking students to write about it. For example, one ESS instructor wrote, "[Students] will take a position on how they will teach about grammar after we read articles showing divergent findings about the impact of explicit grammar teaching" while a science instructor noted, "the second assignment is either an op-ed type essay or a fictional work. The goal will be to support one side or the other on controversial topics."

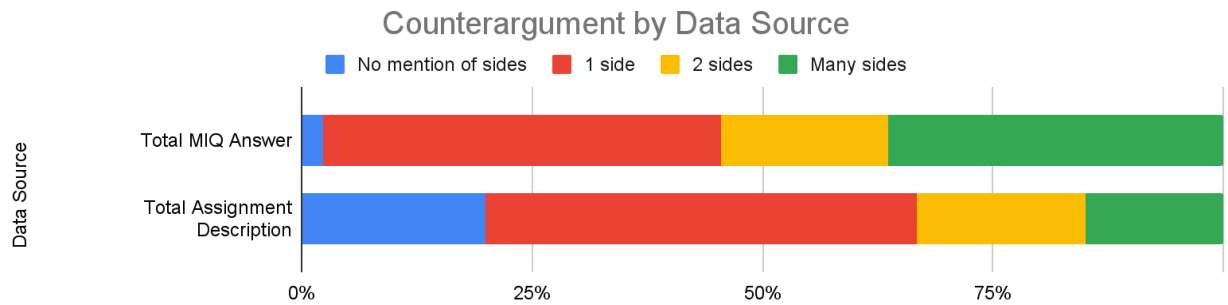


Figure 5: Counterargument characterization compared between data sources

Alternatively, when instructors detailed the purpose of their writing assignments, 70% of assignment instances categorized asked students to take one position on an issue or idea without mention of counterarguments. Commonly, they described the types of evidence or use of theory students should use to support their position rather than having them consider alternative positions to their own. When counterargument was explicitly mentioned, some instructors asked for at least one other objection such as when one teacher instructed students to "be sure to elaborate on all objections by explaining why one might endorse them." They also prompted students to "not consider weak, silly, or confused objections to your argument. This is the path of least resistance, reveals a lack of effort and creativity, and will significantly hurt your grade." One science course described in their MIQ question that they "require students to argue in favor of one of these hypotheses, including appropriate data to support their model (and reject the alternative)" but in turn described the writing assignments purpose as "present an argument in favor of either the 'explosive' model or the 'long fuse' model and cite appropriate evidence to support their claims." Notably, we saw less discussion of multi-sided counterargument in writing assignment descriptions than instructors' answers to the MIQ question.

Discussion

Our grounded theory analysis placed WI instructors' MIQ responses and argumentative assignment descriptions in conversation with our Writing Board discussion about counterargumentation and critical thinking. While we recognize that there is "no universal genre of academic argument," (Iten, 2017, p. 36), the writing assignments identified in the first round of analysis do represent a relatively uniform writing goal. In short, from the humanities to social and hard sciences, through their response to the MIQ question, instructors showed the importance of argumentative writing in their fields, extending Anson's (2010) and Anson and Lyles's (2011) large scale study about the increasingly prominent place of writing in disciplinary curriculum. As one instructor noted, our data indicated students were consistently required to "fuse academic writing with academic inquiry" to crystallize their disciplinary learning.

Although there was agreement on the importance of argumentation, our successive rounds of analysis revealed interesting contradictions in the ways WI instructors conceptualized disciplinary counterargumentation. We recognize a limiting factor in these findings; namely, our analyses are based on language instructors provided in response to the WI course proposal prompts, which are necessarily brief and depict instructors' theoretical positions at the time of data collection. Regardless, as we moved beyond general argumentation and focused more deeply on counterargumentation, we were able to observe (a) that WI instructors are adept in communicating to students how writers in their disciplines take a position and (b) that WI instructors' views of counterargumentation might present challenges in communicating how writers in their disciplines defend a position.

In the MIQ data, where we ask instructors to speak more abstractly about their discipline's complexity, 36% described a high occurrence of counterargument (i.e., indicating that disciplinary issues present many, varied sides). Conversely, in the assignment data where we ask how instructors present the writing task to their students, 15% of the same instructors indicated a high level of counterargument. Faculty—especially those in the sciences and social sciences—often mentioned that they teach students about alternative theories, solutions, or sides, but, in the course proposal responses, they do not explicitly ask students to wrestle with these complexities in their writing assignments. In short, the ways they describe their discipline's complexity seems to differ from the manner in which they apprentice students into those disciplinary writing modes.

Other studies (Moon, Gere, & Schultz, 2018; Olinger, 2014) have explored the barriers to incorporating writing assignments in their courses for STEM faculty especially. The tension we have identified between our instructors' conceptualization versus practice of counterargument seems to be an extension of these previous discussions. One barrier to an expansive approach for our WI instructors might be a common one: faculty outside writing studies default to a current-traditional (Crowley, 2010) approach to writing instruction rather than a more expansive, rhetorically rich approach because, quite simply, they are mirroring their own path of apprenticeship into the academic writing system. Additionally, we often see this sort of mismatch between writing theory and practice when instructors of all levels are at the beginning stages of developing their writing pedagogy (Goldsmith, 2018; Croft, Conn, Serafin, & Wiseheart, 2018; Moon, Gere, & Shultz, 2018). A prevailing assumption also exists that only skilled writers can address counterarguments in the complex way we are hoping to achieve here (Wolfe, 2011; Wolfe & Britt, 2008), so instructors may be working from this view when they design writing assignments. We hope that future studies on the topic—perhaps even our own—can produce additional qualitative data to prod these proposed barriers to expansive instruction in counterargumentation.

In addition to this tension between the two data sources, we noted differences in the occurrence of counterargument in writing assignments across disciplinary groups. Slightly less than half of the assignments in the HA and ESS groups indicated a requirement to argue more than one position, and 18% of writing assignments in the sciences required students to address more than one counterargument. Related to the barrier we discussed earlier about disciplinary faculty as emerging writing pedagogues, we know that STEM faculty sometimes overemphasize mechanical elements over rhetorical elements, reasserting the "misconception familiar to the WAC/WID community that science writing is about inputting facts antiseptically, privileging accuracy and mechanics above all else" (Falconer, 2017, p. 131). Additionally, considering that science education literature has shown that it is simpler to ask students to consider only one obvious conflicting viewpoint rather than more diverse views of complicated topics (Sadler & Fowler, 2006), this finding shouldn't be surprising. However, science disciplinary writing is inherently full of instances to communicate counterargument, for example, through critical review of the literature and considerations of limitations of studies. Our study shows that the need remains for continued professional development targeting STEM instructors' use and recognition of counterargumentation in science writing.

Our dataset is robust, but our study does have a few limitations, namely the nature of found data. In qualitative research, our data depends on the questions we ask, and the questions here exist in a required course proposal submission form. Perhaps what we're seeing is partly a limitation of our WI course proposal system which encourages brevity in response. Or perhaps this form encourages instructors to respond from a broader conceptual orientation than they present in their classroom instruction. Through our informal conversations with WI instructors, we often hear stories of the ways they ask students to engage with multiple perspectives through classroom activities and discussion. We recognize that it's entirely possible—even likely—that activities focusing on counterargument are happening in the WI courses we include in our dataset. Regardless of these limitations, though, our findings highlight work to be done regarding counterargument and WI assignments. Our insights would benefit from additional qualitative data in the form of interviews to probe the relationship between instructors' WI course proposal responses, assignments, and classroom activities, and we are in the planning stages for a syllabus data collection project to begin to answer these questions.

Toward the Future

In our well-established writing across the curriculum program (est. 1985), it is rather taken for granted that courses in all disciplines will contain evidence-based disciplinary writing assignments. We recognize that, in many ways, our WI program is ahead of the curve in this regard. However, we were recently forced to reconsider our approach to argumentation as we confronted the challenges that accompany urgent dialogue in a contentious atmosphere. The 2014 murder of Michael Brown by police two hours from our university and the 2015 campus protests were inflection points that continue to ripple through our campus discourse. A decade later, we are submitting this article on the precipice of the 2024 presidential election where the argumentative discourse grows increasingly contentious. We echo one of our reviewer's questions: In this combative environment, does counterargument live? Can it live? We think it can. For us, the dialogue around these local and national events provides us an opportunity—and a need—to rethink how we talk about counterargument in meetings, professional development opportunities, and classrooms. In 2018, C. C. Hendricks made a case for a transdisciplinary turn in WAC/WID that would value students' lived experiences while also highlighting the transfer of writing skills across disciplines to reduce the traditional—and reductive—disciplinary silos that order academe. Here, we extend Hendricks' call and suggest that, by emphasizing complexity in argumentation in WI courses, we can work toward the future, accessing the elements necessary for present-day communication and navigating the challenges of modern argument.

A heightened focus on counterargumentation allows us to probe the complexities of twenty-first century writing. As Steven Krause (2011) highlights, honing the counterargument—what he calls antithesis—allows writers to "test and strengthen the validity of the working thesis" (p. 143). Additionally, as Krause suggests, building strong counterarguments requires writers to scrutinize their evidence to decide the level of qualification they are going to include. In their answers to the MIQ and assignment descriptions, these WI instructors indicated that they valued students' use of evidence to support their positions. One way student writers can test the strength of their evidence is to consider what competing arguments might arise and what competing arguments would be addressed by the evidence they choose to cite. By exploring a variety of counterarguments their justifications provoke, students are forced to perform more comprehensive research, consider the quality of their evidence, and note the limitations their evidence might lend to their arguments.

Additionally, this future turn requires us to reevaluate the ways we, as writing program administrators, understand and present the argumentative writing task. Or, put more simply, our findings require us as WAC administrators to reflect on the ways we talk about counterargumentation. In *Assignments Across the Curriculum,* Dan Melzer (2014) highlights the work WAC administrators can do to close the gap between writing assignment expectations and the expectations of the disciplinary discourse community. Melzer focuses on grammatical correctness in his explanation of a fruitful model for professional development, and our study extends the possibilities for such a model, focusing on counterargument. As we explored the tension around instructors' characterization of counterargument, we realized the need to design intentional professional development to help them further engage subjectivity as they design, implement, and assess student writing activities.

We echo Rademaekers' (2018) statement on the difficulties that come with addressing challenges via faculty training events. He writes, "Re-casting writing instruction for fellow faculty not as a matter of teaching students to mimic a general academic style, but as a matter of teaching students to be critical, disciplinary thinkers is one of the greatest challenges I've faced in my time as a WAC director and coordinator of faculty workshops" (p. 142). We agree, and we know that an expansive view of counterargumentation isn't enough. If instructors (and students) are not operationalizing that view

via the writing tasks, students are not learning transferable skills that can benefit real world communication. The application to writing is key to the larger social aim we identify here: combating the divisive and insular discourse we often see, especially in online spaces. A simple solution to this problem is to continue to decrease the gap between real-world writing and classroom writing (Gallagher et al, 2020) with a focus on the very complexity that makes scholarly writing a challenging but rewarding task. As Wolfe (2011) notes, "It is therefore helpful to ask not only about how much argumentative writing is being required of students, but *what kinds of arguments* [emphasis added] are they being asked to develop" (p. 194). Our WI program guidelines help to satisfy the first part of Wolfe's call (the volume). Instructors are required to assign at least 20 pages of writing and eight pages of revision with at least a portion of the assigned writing attending to topics with multiple viewpoints. However, our findings indicate a deficiency for our WI program in the second half of Wolfe's call (the type of argumentative writing assigned).

While we have focused here on the assignments which present a limited view of argument, our findings also indicate that there is a cadre of WI instructors who skillfully incorporate strategies to support students' interaction with multiple perspectives. Our established program benefits from these experienced instructors who can join us in our outreach efforts, bringing diverse disciplinary perspectives to the topic of argumentation. At our institution, we have seen successful co-facilitation of professional development sessions on other topics in the last few years (ex: expanding what counts as language in the discipline, rethinking traditional grading practices, etc). Therefore, our prior success with faculty mentors in PD events and the findings from this study encourage WPAs to identify disciplinary faculty with expertise at their own institutions to co-design professional development opportunities on the cross-disciplinarity—and complexity—of counterargumentation in writing.

We recognize the challenges of such an initiative, but successful WAC programs gather stakeholders to work through these challenges to affect structural change over time, albeit it slow and steady (Croft, Conn, Serafin, & Wiseheart, 2018; Walvoord, 1996; Vanderslice, 2000). Our goal of expansive counterargumentation in WI assignments sets 21st century priorities for our WAC program, answering the call from our colleagues at the National Writing Project that we cited to start this paper: designing writing assignments "to equip students [and citizens] to thrive in this challenging [communication] environment."

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Notes

[1] We use instance to indicate a concept or unit of meaning that refers to disciplinary complexity. This means that there were sometimes multiple instances within one MIQ answer and, conversely, some MIQ answers had no instances. In short, there is not a 1:1 relationship between instance:MIQ answer.

[2] In a similar manner as in the original coding, some MIQ answers might include more than one instance for the level of counterargument if multiple assignments are discussed by the instructor.

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