The Material Contexts of Writing Assignment Design

THOMAS POLK

Scholarship on assignment design has largely concerned itself with the difficulty of designing effective writing assignments. While this research offers practical advice for instructors, it often overlooks important contextual factors that influence how writing assignments materialize. This research begins the work of contextualizing assignment design by reporting on interviews conducted with thirty-three faculty members who teach writing-intensive courses across the disciplines at George Mason University. Interviews prompted participants to describe the most pressing decisions they made while designing their assignments. Participants reported decisions related to the following five categories: promoting student agency, defining the writing task, scaffolding the process, clarifying communications, and navigating the institution. Findings from this study reveal that faculty decisions are frequently motivated by pedagogical intentions; however, this research also reveals that institutional and personal motivations exercise significant influence on decision-making.

This study investigates the situated decision-making of WID faculty as they design writing assignments, focusing particularly on the influences that faculty note most shape their designs. This research interest draws on two ongoing conversations in the field of writing studies. The first conversation centers on the professional writing that faculty practice as workers in institutional and disciplinary settings. John Swales (1996) opened this interest into what he called *occluded genres*, documents that faculty use "to support and validate the manufacture of knowledge" (p. 46). Swales believed that these documents were particularly important to study not only because of their commonality but also because these documents are regulated by local institutions with unpredictable expectations, making them complicated documents for outsiders and novices to compose. Since Swales's call, scholars have pursued this interest by focusing on genres that facilitate publication while others have increasingly called to expand this analysis to include such documents as syllabi, teaching statements, and retention-promotion-tenure reports (e.g., Baecker, 1998; Hyon, 2008; Fink, 2012; Neaderhiser, 2016).

The second conversation that informs this study focuses on a genre that is particularly important to the work of writing instruction: writing assignments. Writing studies' interest in assignments began in the 1970s with research by James Britton et al. (1975), who created a taxonomy to classify writing tasks in British secondary schools. This interest in description reached American contexts in the 1980s when Applebee, Auten, and Lahr (1981), Eblen (1983), and Bridgeman and Carlson (1984) studied various aspects of writing assignments in secondary and post-secondary contexts. More recent scholarship has turned toward advising faculty on best practices for design with particular attention paid to the characteristics of (in)effective assignments (Gardner, 2008; Harris, 2010; Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine, 2016). While this scholarship tells us a great deal about assignment design, their research perspectives often elide contextual nuance and demonstrate that we still have much to learn about assignment design.

In fact, Melzer (2014) observes, "few composition researchers have made [writing assignments] the focus of significant study" despite their ability to reveal "a great deal about their [instructors'] goals and values, as well as the goals and values of their disciplines" (p. 3). The latter part of Melzer's observation encourages scholars to recognize that writing assignments are not simply neutral documents that faculty use to elicit writing products but are the material distillations of our "pedagogical identities in action" (Neaderhiser, 2016, para. 28) capable of telling us much about the ways in which we teach writing because they materialize out of what Gardner (2008) calls the "full process," which includes everything from the invention of the assignment concept to the evaluation of the written product (p. 7–8). That is, writing assignments offer researchers a material site through which we can better understand how our pedagogical ideals become enacted in specific sites and situations of instruction.

In recognizing that assignments are not neutral documents, I also recognize that their sites of production are not neutral. That is, writing assignments are not just ideologically informed but also materially situated. I draw this perspective from Horner's (2000, 2016) framing of composition as a "material social practice" (2000, p. 59), which posits the practice of teaching writing as one inflected by the technologies, economic and physical conditions, and socio-institutional relations of those engaged in teaching and learning in specific sites. As such, the activity of teaching writing is formed not just by pedagogical aspirations but also the institutional conditions in which those aspirations enacted. The problem, Horner argues, is that dominant representations of our work often overlook the institutionality of that work: "what we think we do, and what we think about what we do" often fail to capture the realities of our work because these representations are "separated from the material social conditions of its production, and so imagined as, at most, acting autonomously on,

against, or in spite of but not with and within such conditions" (2016, p. 1; 2000, p. xvii).

Similarly, Scott (2009) argues that while writing studies scholars recognize the importance of context in understanding writing practices, "systematic connections" between materiality and pedagogy are "rarely made" in the field's literature (p. 7). He writes, "Though everyday institutional practices and the material terms of labor for teachers and students have a profound effect on the character of writing pedagogy, they don't often appear in research- or theory-driven discussions of postsecondary classroom pedagogy" (p. 7). Scott advocates for analyses that connect macro and micro perspectives of our work to better understand how everyday pedagogical practices dialectically engage institutional and broader discursive representations of those practices. From Scott's and Horner's theorizations, I draw a methodological impetus to investigate the complex and contradictory labor involved in what might otherwise be considered a mundane task: designing a writing assignment. Previous studies of assignment design typically elide this complexity because they focus on the *product* of design and not the *production* of design. My study intends, however, to begin describing assignment design as a "material social practice" and seeks to document how this central task of writing instruction is not only informed by pedagogical ideals but also inflected by institutional realities.

Thus, in the following article, I synthesize and extend conversations about assignment design by reporting on interviews conducted with thirty-three faculty members who teach writing-intensive courses across the disciplines at George Mason University (GMU). I begin with a brief review of the literature on writing assignments. This review reveals that research on assignment design largely fails to elicit insight from the people most involved in the design process: faculty members themselves. That is, few scholars have attended to the reason for studying occluded genres, as described by Swales: to better understand how local expectations shape and influence the production of these genres. While scholars who do research occluded genres typically focus on documentary materials, this study draws on interview data because of its ability to reveal the influences that most matter to participants. Taken together, studying writing assignments from the perspectives of faculty can tell us about not just about the values that instructors hold but also about the local realities of writing instruction and how those realities shape faculty (dis)engagement with the broader ideals of the field.

Following this review, I report on the methods of this study before discussing its major findings. The interviews used for this study focused on assignments that participants currently teach or have recently taught, and the questions sought to elicit participants' descriptions of the "full process." This report concentrates specifically on one question that prompted participants to describe the most pressing decisions they

made while designing their assignments. Findings demonstrate that institutional and personal considerations have a significant influence on the design of assignments, and I conclude with a discussion of the importance of understanding context in assignment design.

Review: How Do Writing Studies Scholars Discuss Writing Assignment Design?

Research on writing assignments has typically discussed assignments in two ways: through descriptions of assignments and through prescriptions of effective design (best practices). Much of the early research on assignments was typically embedded in studies that sought to describe broader practices of writing instruction in university contexts. Studies by Eblen (1983) and Bridgeman and Carlson (1984) surveyed faculty about a variety of teaching practices, including how faculty defined the qualities of good writing, the importance of writing and particular writing skills for academics and professions, and the kinds of writing faculty typically assigned. These studies, and research on writing in high school contexts (Britton, 1975; Applebee, 1981), inform Melzer's more recent research on assignments across the disciplines (2003, 2009, 2014). Drawing on "2,101 writing assignments from 100 postsecondary institutions across the United States," Melzer provides a large-scale description of the purposes, audiences, and genres that faculty assign in academic writing contexts (2014, p. 6). Melzer reports that faculty design assignments with limited purposes and frequently prompt students to write to the teacher-as-examiner. In other words, faculty most frequently "ask students to display the 'right' answer or the 'correct' definition to the instructor through a recall of facts" (Melzer, 2003, p. 90), an assertion that echoes Eblen's research.

Perhaps because these descriptive studies demonstrate a lack of instructional practices generally promoted by writing specialists, Melzer (2014) and other scholars begin to think more seriously about what factors influence effective assignment design. Extending from his research design, for instance, Melzer suggests that WAC/WID specialists promote and "provide space" for particular types of writing; he specifically suggests more expressive and poetic writing that would better align with writing-to-learn pedagogies (2014, p. 116). However, most of Melzer's suggestions target WPAs about programmatic and curricular decisions, leaving the conversation of effective assignments to other scholars. Some of the more prominent research on effective design comes from Gardner (2008) and later Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine (2016) who draw on large national surveys to describe "effective" or "high impact" assignment design; most recently, Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2016) shift the frame away from effective and toward "meaningful" writing assignments. The students who participated in their study suggest that meaningful writing occurs when

they are able to make personal connections to the writing task, such as envisioning their future selves (2019). Collectively, while these scholars identify different characteristics, they largely advise that assignments should have clear expectations, prompt critical thinking, and enable student agency as core design elements.

Although this scholarship helps us to understand the potential tasks and content of ideal design, it doesn't help us understand how assignments (can) actually materialize in sites of instruction. And while it is useful to prescribe effective design practices, such scholarship overlooks how instructors navigate contextual influences that constrain their designs. It should be noted, however, that a few scholars have begun to investigate this relationship. For instance, Burlick (2011) considers the often-recommended design and pedagogical practice of providing choice to prompt, if not enable, student ownership over projects, a design recommendation repeated in the literature reviewed earlier. But, none of that scholarship considers how the context of K12 "high stakes" assessment constrains instructors' abilities to design assignments that might promote student agency. As scholars, we should consider the implications of those competing interests: how much space does an instructor have to promote these design practices when students are compelled to take tests that offer little control over topic, process, and/or product? Research by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) performs a more thorough theorization of the relationship between context and assignment design in their study of disciplinary writing practices. Based on their findings, Thaiss and Zawacki theorize that a mixture of contexts influences faculty perceptions of academic writing and teaching, and they identify these as the academic, the disciplinary, the subdisiplinary, the institutional, and the idiosyncratic. Thaiss and Zawacki offer these five contexts as a heuristic for clarifying the values and expectations implied in the language used to design assignments and evaluate written products, but their research also opens up the possibility for researchers to think more seriously about the role of context in teaching.

In sum, this brief review suggests that research on assignment design has largely not attended to faculty members' own perspectives on the ways in which contexts shape our field's knowledge into their local practices, if those practices are shaped by writing studies in the first place. With the exception of work by Burlick (2011), Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), and Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2016 & 2019), research on assignment design has adopted an etic perspective, failing to elicit insight from the people most involved in the design process: writing instructors. While the field of writing studies has a good sense of what it considers ideal design, it doesn't yet have rich descriptions of the ways in which contextual forces effect that ideal. For this reason, the remainder of this paper reports on interviews conducted with thirty-three faculty members who teach writing intensive courses at GMU.

Methods: Talking with Faculty About Their Assignments

While both Burlick (2011), and Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) help us to begin the necessary work of thinking about assignment design in context, the above review suggests that there are yet more questions and contexts to explore. Consider, for instance, Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) observation that faculty often conceive of student writing through specific disciplinary conventions but often fail to articulate the underlying disciplinary knowledge when talking about writing assignments with students; this finding is also asserted by Clark (2005). The gap of disciplinary and writing knowledge between students and faculty can often result in the failure of assignment design and the production of student writing that can be harshly evaluated by faculty. Thaiss and Zawacki write, "When very real differences are cloaked in the language of similarity, it's understandable that students would find it hard to decode what teachers want" (p. 59). In light of this observation, how should and do faculty consider a design suggestion to create assignments with "clear writing expectations" (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine, 2016, p. 5)? Thaiss and Zawacki would suggest that their heuristic would help faculty clarify their language and expectations, but that advice assumes that faculty are actually concerned with developing clear writing instructions. Thus far, research on assignment design hasn't documented this interest or why in fact faculty would feel compelled to clarify their instructions if they do. Given this lack of documentation, the current study seeks to explore the following questions:

> Q1: What decisions do faculty describe as their most pressing when designing assignments?

> Q2: What influences do faculty report shape these decisions?

The interviews used to address these questions were collected as part of a larger research project at GMU locally known as the Re/View Project. This ongoing review of upper-level writing instruction attempts to better understand the everyday activities and needs of the university's students, faculty, and administrators. In collaboration with GMU's WAC program, a team of graduate research assistants has collected survey data, conducted sixty interviews, observed a number of classrooms, and amassed a significant corpus of instructional documents, including assignment sheets and syllabi.

The current study focuses on a particular set of interviews conducted during the spring of 2018 that concentrated on assignments participants either were currently teaching or had recently taught. Interview participants represent eight of the nine colleges that offer undergraduate courses at GMU and range in employment appointments from graduate teaching assistantships to fully tenured professorships. These faculty were recruited through emails sent to all faculty who teach writing-intensive

courses and through professional development workshops for faculty who teach upper-level research and writing courses. The interview questions sought a range of information about the pedagogical and writing backgrounds of participants, but the majority of questions focused on one specific assignment or sequence of assignments, which interviewers collected before the interviews and used as a focal point for questions and responses during them. The interviews were designed to document the relationship between the material assignments and the contextual influences that shaped what appeared on the page and that were of particular significance to participants.

To identify data that responds to my specific research questions, I began coding the interviews descriptively, pulling language that participants used to describe the *specific decisions that they made* and *the reasoning that informed those decisions*. Upon reviewing my initial codes, I observed that many of the *specific decisions* participants discussed resonated with the language used in the scholarship on effective assignment design reviewed earlier. As my review of this literature revealed, these studies promote similar considerations and employ similar language to talk about effective design. In fact, three of my codes come almost directly from Gardner's suggested process for developing writing assignments: "define the writing task, explore the expectations, [and] provide the supporting materials and activities" (2008, p. 36). I kept *defining the task*, revised *explore the expectations* to *clarifying communications*, and revised *supporting materials and activities* to *scaffolding the process*. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner's (2016) research on meaningful writing inspired my fourth code, *promoting agency*, and my fifth code, *navigating the institution*, derived from Burlick's (2011) and Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) research on context. I, thus, grouped my codes into the following categories:

- **Defining the Task:** pertaining to defining the purpose of the assignment, the type of writing to be produced, requirements of the student text, and the evaluation of the text.
- **Clarifying Communication:** pertaining to effective communication of the assignment, its process, and faculty expectations.
- **Scaffolding the Process:** pertaining to the timing of the assignment and the kinds of supporting activities and materials.
- **Promoting Agency:** pertaining to making the assignment relevant, relatable, and meaningful to the student. Also includes considerations of challenge and student efficacy.
- **Navigating the Institution:** pertaining to decisions about institutional and departmental requirements and matters.

To categorize *the reasoning that informed the decisions*, I largely drew from Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) heuristic of the five contexts through which faculty talk about

academic writing; these contexts are the academic, the disciplinary, the subdisciplinary, the institutional, and the idiosyncratic or personal. I originally used these same five categories to organize my codes but felt a tension about how well these categories described and explained what I was observing. They did not seem to accommodate the experiences with teaching and students that faculty often referred to, and I recognized this tension as pivoting on the difference in research intentions: Thaiss and Zawacki focused on how the writing practices of faculty members informed their assignments; my current interest is less tightly focused. While the academic writing practices of faculty certainly inform their pedagogies, so too do other factors, such as their experiences teaching and interacting with students. So, I revised Thaiss and Zawacki's five contexts slightly: I kept the *disciplinary* and *institutional* categories in place, but I merged the *subdisciplinary* category into the *disciplinary*; I refocused the *idiosyncratic* onto the *personal* to reflect the fact that these interviews reveal the decision-making related not only to faculty values and beliefs but also to embodied individuals; and I redefined the *academic* as *pedagogical* to capture my participants' experiences not with writing in the academy but with teaching (writing) in the academy. This last category also draws definition from the prescriptive and descriptive studies on assignment design. Thus, my final four categories are described below:

- **Disciplinary:** "pertaining to the methods and conventions of the teacher's broad field" and specific concentration(s) (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 138).
- **Institutional:** "pertaining to the policies and practices of the local school and department" (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 138).
- **Pedagogical:** pertaining to the perceptions of pedagogy and prior experiences with teaching, learning, and students.
- **Personal:** pertaining to the individual's values, beliefs, and embodiment.

A potential limitation of the interview protocol hinges on how participants understand what constitutes a *writing assignment*. Some faculty might perceive *assignment* to simply refer to the document given to students, but I believe this concern is mitigated by the extensive set of questions designed to elicit the processes that enact and pedagogies that underlie the documents. Despite this potential limitation, I believe that my study offers useful findings that can further discussions of assignment design particularly because they draw from interviews, a method seldom used in this research. That is, the current study deepens the ongoing conversation about assignment design because the interviews add granularity seldom reported.

Findings: Faculty Talk About the Most Pressing Decisions They Made While Designing Their Assignments

On first glimpse, many of the decisions faculty made while designing their assignments might seem to be only concerned with the texts that they are creating (the assignment sheet) and/or the texts that they are eliciting from their students, so many of my participants responded that their decisions were about textual requirements. These decisions were often framed either tacitly or explicitly as a "constant balancing act," which is how Participant 7 described his thinking about page requirements. Inspired by Participant 7's observation, the following descriptions reveal how participants in this study negotiated the various contextual influences that shape the materialization of their writing assignments. This section is divided into two parts: first, I describe findings related to the *specific decisions* participants made; second, I describe the participants' *reasons for making those decisions*. This second section will include some representative quotations from participants to demonstrate the nuances elided by categorizing their responses.

Q1: What decisions did faculty describe as their most pressing?

Figure 1 displays the categories of decisions that faculty members made while designing their assignments. The chart identifies the total number of decisions, not participants; that is, some participants discussed multiple decisions. The largest category, which more than doubled the next most common, was *defining the task*. Within this category, seven participants cited decisions about text length as their most pressing, six were concerned with questions of evaluation, three cited decisions about how the project would align with course goals, two cited decisions about the kind of text to assign, and two others listed deliberations about citations as most pressing.

The second most frequently discussed decisions related to the process structuring the assignment and the communication about the assignment. Participants cited eleven decisions related to *scaffolding the process* as their most pressing. The decisions in this category varied widely and included deliberations about peer reviews, invention activities, the sequence of assignments, and the amount of time available for assignments. Participants also discussed their attempts at *clarifying communications* about their assignments eleven times. They largely were concerned with their students' ability to understand what the assignment prompted them to do.
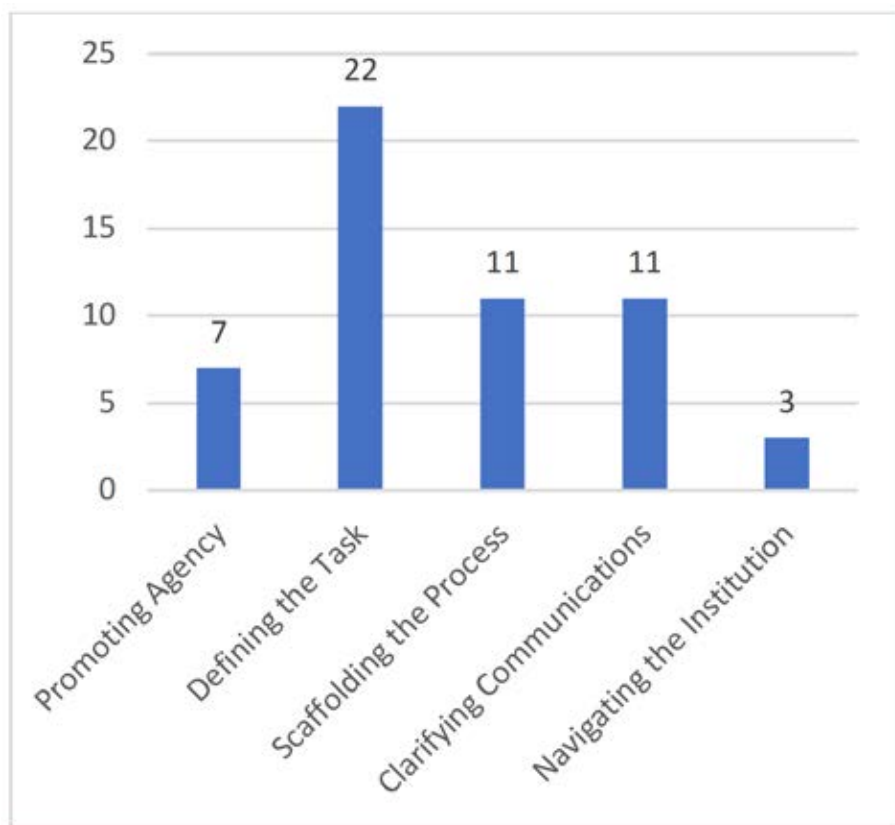
Figure 1. Categories of decisions identified by faculty as most pressing

The least commonly cited decisions related to student agency and the institution. Participants named *promoting agency* as a core decision in their deliberations seven times, and they seemed to approach the design process in the way that many of writing studies scholars would hope: thinking about how to make the assignment meaningful, relatable, relevant, and possible for their students. This category, however, resurfaces in discussions about the influences that shape other decisions listed here. Finally, three participants identified issues with *navigating the institution* as most pressing. Of these three participants, one discussed decisions about staffing, the second discussed decisions about enrollment, and the third discussed decisions related to the curriculum. Two of these participants, however, should not be seen as typical instructors as their interview responses reveal privileged status within the institution. Participant 18, who cited staffing as her central concern, also coordinates the course for her department and is responsible for staffing its sections, and

Participant 10 admits that his department permits him control over the enrollment of his course; that is, he is allowed to set the enrollment below what most WI courses can. Participant 13, however, is a new instructor (also adjunct) who confessed that she simply needed to understand the purpose of the course and the syllabus that she was given to teach.

Q2: What influences did faculty report shaped these decisions?

Figure 2 details the four main categories of influences that participants reported. It should be noted that these numbers correspond with the number of reasons given, not the number of faculty giving those reasons; that is, faculty often offered multiple reasons for their decisions. The discussion below includes some representative quotations, which are lightly edited to enhance readability.
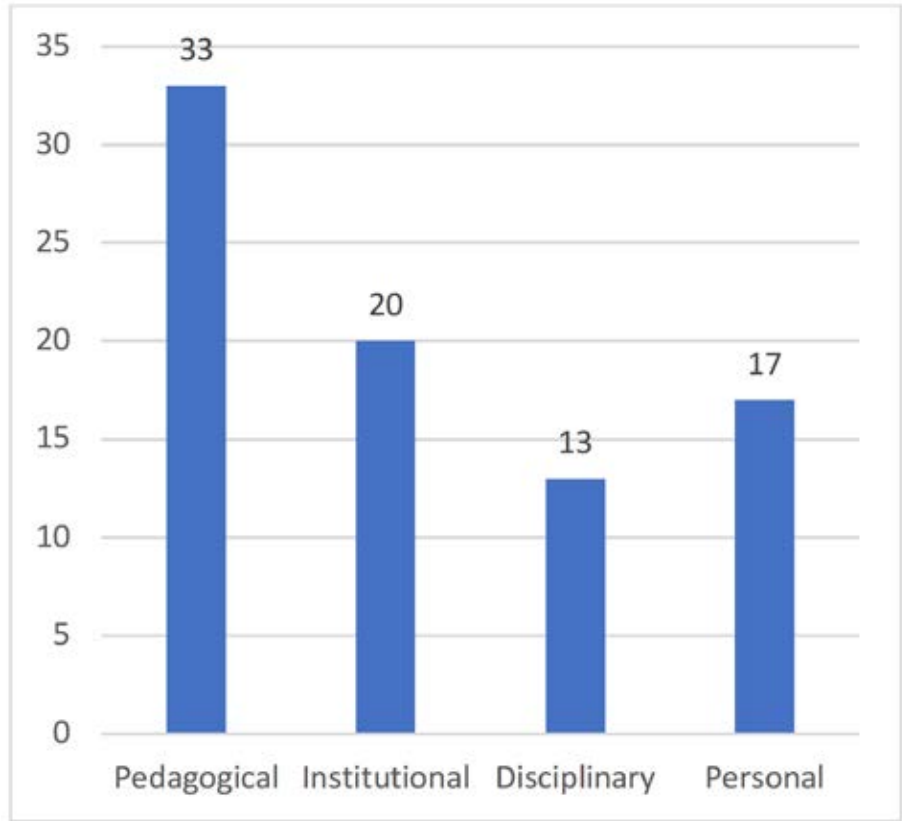

Figure 2. Categories of contexts identified by faculty as influencing their decisions

The most frequently cited reason pertained to *pedagogical* concerns; in all, participants cited thirty-three reasons for the decisions that they made. The decisions in this category were influenced most frequently by concerns for student agency; in fact, thirteen faculty members were concerned with making the assignment meaningful, giving students choice, and/or helping students feel capable of successfully completing the assignment, as Participant 34 demonstrates: "are they going to be capable of doing it?" He continues, "You want to challenge them, but you can't overburden them; you want to get them to do good research and good quality thinking, but yet you don't expect them to write publishable work." Later, he adds, "Do I want this pristine perfect paper that I read that brings tears to my eyes cause it's so beautiful, or do I want to give them an opportunity to take a stab at something difficult and not get there but learn on the way?" Finally, Participant 34 reveals that this question derives from what he sees as a central question plaguing education today: grade inflation and the pressures to earn or award high marks: "That seems like one of the problems in education today is that everybody has to get an A. I know that grade inflation is almost a cliché thing now, but it's true the pressure from everybody especially from the students; and the pressure they put on themselves is that they have to get an A or somehow they've failed."

Another particularly interesting thread in the *pedagogical* category, and one that seems related to participant 34's concerns, were questions about challenge and the independence of students; three faculty members described this as a decision between supporting or guiding students and fostering their reliance upon that support which would, in effect, impede their growth. Participant 21 represents this reasoning when she discusses her decision to include checklists with peer review activities. She explains:

> There is part of me that wonders: am I facilitating their learning so that when they need to go and do some kind of writing or thinking assignment like this in the future they're able to do it without these things in place, or am I creating something that's sort of like a crutch? Then they're not going to be able to do these things in the future without somebody saying, "you gotta do this and then this and then this?" And that is something that I struggle with internally: are we enabling students to become better writers? Are we enabling them to need all these things where somebody's saying this is what you need to do? And I don't know the answer.

It should be noted that her deliberations are also mediated by her conception that students aren't very good at reviewing their own work and aligning that work with assignment instructions and materials. This trend of basing decisions on prior experiences with students and teaching was also common in this category. Sadly, many

of these discussions interpreted students in rather negative ways or contrasted them through discussions of student "range," a common theme that prior research at GMU revealed faculty perceived as a major constraint to their teaching (LaFrance & Polk, 2018).

The second most frequently cited category of reason concerned *institutional policies and practices*. Of the twenty references to this category, participants most frequently identified their own lack of agency in decision-making; in total, ten participants confessed that the decisions they grappled with were actually already decided upon by departmental policies. A majority of these faculty taught with prescribed assignments and curricula. An additional two participants cited WAC program criteria as the driver behind their decisions. Participants, however, demonstrated interesting means for justifying or operationalizing agency within these parameters. For instance, Participant 14 reveals that her college requires rubrics for assignments, but she recognizes the affordances of such a practice: "I was forced to do a rubric, but I think it's useful. I have to say it helps to explicate my expectations and how I'm going to grade." She explains how she uses the rubric to help students understand the citation practices in her discipline:

> But what I also do in the rubric is I say to them: use three sources here, find a couple sources here, find a source here. So that now I'm directing them that they actually have to source not just the topic or the policy, but they have to source their theory and they have to provide a citation for their methods. . . . They understand that when they're building their writing. Their review of the literature is much more complex.

Similarly, Participant 32 discusses her negotiation of a required rubric, first believing it to be "nonsense" but later recognizing that the rubric also protects her agency as an evaluator and frees her to grade artifacts as she deems appropriate: "It really protects the professor." She believes that the assignment rubric removes the "question of subjectivity on my part" and eases the process of responding to students' questions about grades. Participant 32's comment resonates with Participant 34's earlier remarks about grade inflation and gives reason to appreciate the complexity of a departmental policy and its anonymous power, which is sometimes liberating (as expressed here) and sometimes constraining (as described below).

Participant 13, mentioned earlier, shows another dimension to the complexity of departmental practices when she reveals that she spent a significant amount of energy simply trying to understand the course, its syllabus, the "big picture, and then be able to relay it to the students." She felt that this was important because she needed to "sell the course" to the students:

You've got students who are waiting to be negative, so you don't want to appear negative; you want them to see the big picture. It all comes together, and I keep trying to share that information with them. Last semester was a little more difficult because some of the things I was like, "Why are we doing this? It's not really necessary." This is what I was personally saying. So, the message I was sharing with them was probably not the message I was sharing with myself.

One other faculty member, Participant 7, reveals how institutional policies can further influence decisions about teaching. When discussing his decision about page requirements and the amount of writing he would require from his students, Participant 7 reveals his motivation: "I think it was one of my salary reviewers actually . . . they thought I didn't ask for enough writing for my students; [it] was like a critique of my teaching. . . . So, I think one semester I upped the writing for this [assignment] because of that." While we might consider the addition of writing in a writing-intensive course as a positive, this participant had just been reflecting on the balance between student agency and the amount of work he required, something he referred to as a "constant balancing act." As he finishes his thought that began with the reference to the salary reviewers, he begins to interpret that balancing act as a matter of student labor versus quality: "I can ask them to write an extra page or two just for the hell of it, and reading the student essays: am I actually getting value from those extra two pages or not, right? . . . Those were the two things I was thinking about word length."

The least frequently cited category pertained to *disciplinary* concerns. In all, eleven participants cited thirteen deliberations that were framed through their disciplines. These concerns included questions about paper topics, disciplinary genres, and the professional habits of writers and workers in the respective fields. Of these, the habits of professionals were most frequently cited, as demonstrated by Participant 4. He cited his most pressing decision as page length but quickly began a conversation about the sequencing of assignments in the semester. Ultimately, he reveals that he changed the type of writing in an early assignment (used as scaffolding for the major writing assignment that anchored the interview) in order to have his students "start thinking like a project manager as soon as I can."

Participant 11 joins this consideration with another theme in this category: familiarity with the writing practices of the profession. His decision to promote student agency by offering choice over product reveals that Participant 11 wants his students to decide on that product based upon the area of writing that they are least comfortable with:

> Because some students need to learn more in general about what the form of a screenplay looks like, and others need to learn more in general; they might be perfect writers from a form standpoint, but they're not imaginative at all with content, or not as imaginative with content. So, there's that general divide between strengths. But then also, on a script-by-script basis, the needs would dictate one or the other. So, the student who's adapting a novel for the first time, she needs to do research into the adaptation process because that's the biggest deficit.

Participant 16 uses this theme to emphasize the importance of correctness to his students. He states that errors in grammar, spelling, and mechanics undermine the function of a genre in his discipline because that genre typically is the first connection many professionals make with one another. That is, his decision about grade weights relies on his belief that "everything needs to be perfect because sometimes your first impression of somebody is going to be a piece of paper." He continues to explain, writing a proposal "is essentially a job interview. They ask you, submit a proposal. Your proposal IS YOUR INTERVIEW for the job."

The final category, and the third most frequently cited, pertains to decisions motivated by *personal* concerns for either the instructors or students impacted by the decisions being made. In all, ten participants cited seventeen reasons for decisions they made while designing their assignments. The codes in this category, however, largely refer to considerations of student and faculty labor and the emotions tied to that labor. Overall, five of the ten participants included in this category express seven reasons for decisions that are tied to faculty labor (both in and outside of the course), another five cite six reasons tied to student labor (both in and outside of the course), and two participants cite three reasons related to faculty emotion that informed their decision-making. Participant 12 articulates the most direct connection between concerns for labor and decisions about assignment design when he talks about his deliberations over page length: "Length of the paper is another big one. What are my expectations in terms of length? I settled on 5 to 7 pages because of how many students that I have. And the grading load that I have with that." Participant 10 adds to this observation and multiplies his concern for labor over several courses:

> Between the two classes, [I] have an enrollment that's up there collectively; that sort of pressures me to do more or less in terms of the time I can spend reviewing and editing and commenting on what they've done. Just because of the time that's required. Obviously, the fewer the students the more time I can spend on that.

It should be noted here that Participant 10's decision was about lowering enrollment caps, something that his department permits but is unique for WI instructors at my institution. Therefore, his testimony could be argued to carry extra weight for issues of labor in other courses taught by instructors who don't have the ability to limit their enrollments.

While concern for labor was the most frequently cited in this category, two participants did mention concerns for their emotions. Participant 19 admits that she selects paper topics based on her own personal interests, and Participant 3 sequences his assignments to avoid "mind-numbing" bouts with grading. In fact, Participant 3 demonstrates how quickly concerns for emotion can slide into concerns over labor. When talking about considerations of scheduling, he explains, "I'm also trying to mix these assignments up a little bit; I also try to think in advance about how far behind I'm going to fall in the grading, and how guilty I'm going to feel about falling that far behind in the grading."

The other most frequently mentioned reason in this category derived from concerns for student labor: both the workload that faculty felt students were capable of handling and their observations of student responsibilities outside of the classroom and university. Participant 19 confides that she directly considers the amount of work students are completing in the class when she decides on page length requirements: "So I wanted to make sure that this assignment was appropriate in length given the amount of work that they're also doing in the course." Participant 7 demonstrates how this concern impacts the sequencing of assignments throughout the semester:

> I think the decisions have gone into how much time I'm expecting students to devote to doing this, right? And then that's played into . . . what kind of preparatory steps I do in class or not. […] I think that's the thing that weighs kind of heaviest on my mind as I'm thinking about juggling assignments . . . is how much labor [and] time I'm expecting from students.

Finally, participants expressed concerns over the responsibilities students have outside of the classroom. Participant 28 reveals that his design decisions are impacted by his students' obligations to earn money, which impacts not only how he tries to align his assignment with the course goals but also his expectations for what they (can) produce:

> We've done a tremendous disservice by increasing the tuition rates for our students so much that they are trying to work huge numbers of hours, and they just don't have the expectation or the required time to do as well as they could in background and in research. And in that case, my expectation levels of them in the past have been more along the lines of what I expect from

graduate students in terms of time commitment and efforts, and I think that that's eroded over time; it's very difficult to have those levels of expectations because very good students come in tears and say I have to work 60 hours a week at Foot Locker to survive.

Conclusion: Recognizing the Complexity of Assignment Design

This study documented the assignment design practices of thirty-three writing instructors at George Mason University, and it sought to record the most pressing decisions these faculty members made while designing their assignments and the reasons that animated their ultimate design decisions. This research focus developed out of the recognition that much of the literature on assignment design overlooked the perspectives of those who are best able to tell us about the actual practice of design: writing instructors themselves. While much of our scholarship on assignment design describes what faculty produce and provides useful accounts of best practices, hearing directly from faculty about what influences their designs helps writing specialists better understand the local nuances subtending this pedagogical practice and the contextual influences that complicate, if not impede, ideal design. These findings should serve as a reminder that the specific decisions faculty make are often part of a larger, more complex framework of deliberation that extends beyond a singular focus on the pedagogical. Before addressing this point at more length, however, I would like to consider a few practical implications this research suggests for WAC specialists.

First, the findings reinforce the importance of talking with faculty across the disciplines about the differences (and overlaps) between writing-to-learn and learning-to-write, a conversation so fundamental to WAC that Anson (2015) identifies it as a threshold concept. A number of the faculty in this study reported struggling with decisions of evaluation: were they supposed to grade student writing based upon the replication of an idealized written product or were they supposed to encourage students to explore content more freely? These decisions don't have to be mutually exclusive, but the deliberation points to an opportunity for WAC specialists to talk with faculty about different approaches to using writing, the goals that those approaches can serve, and the implications for evaluation. When WAC specialists help faculty to understand these two fundamental approaches, it can ease other decisions faculty make, such as their strategies for providing feedback and concerns over content coverage.

Second, a finding of this study is that faculty are frequently concerned with the clarity of their designs, but this finding raises questions about the concept of *clarity* and what it means in the context of assignment design. In this study, one-third of the participants confided that they deliberated the most about clarifying their

assignments with the hope that a clear assignment might improve student performance. These deliberations align with Anderson et al.'s (2016) research on effective design when they advise faculty to "provide students with an accurate understanding" (p. 5) of the writing task. This alignment, however, prompts the question: what provides that accurate understanding? The participants in this study seemed to believe, at least partly, that the assignment sheet itself provided students with clarity. But should we think of clarity only in terms of the document, or does clarity concern something larger than the document? And how does the expectation of learning, with the implications of novelty and challenge, complicate conceptions of clarity in assignment design? In my own teaching experience, I find students can often be confused when I first assign a project; they aren't always certain of the process or the product. That confusion fades as we work on the project and negotiate our collective understanding of it. Does that mean my prompts are not well-written? Is the scaffolding and instruction that effective? When and where does confusion turn to comfort or clarity for both faculty and students?

Both Gardner (2008) and Anderson et al. (2016) advise instructors to make writing assignments interactive: to talk with students about expectations, to listen to their interpretations, and to negotiate the distances. Those suggestions imply clarity might be the result of an instructional process more so than the quality of a document. How can WAC specialists help writing instructors expand their conceptions of clarity accordingly? And how can we help them gauge what a productive level of uncertainty might look like? In faculty development programming, WAC specialists might use modeling for this purpose. For example, WAC specialists could demonstrate for faculty how to negotiate understandings of an assignment by sharing student planning documents and reflections on assignments or summarizing the kinds of discussions we have with students as assignments progress. This kind of modeling might persuade faculty of the importance of teaching writing as a process, provide them with some specific language for facilitating classroom conversations about writing, and emphasize the value of reflection for learning. In this way, the interest in clarity offers WAC specialists an opportunity to talk with faculty about concerns larger than the assignment sheet and to move them away from seeing clarity as a matter of document design towards seeing clarity as a matter of instructional design. The larger takeaway here should be, however, that the specific deliberations identified in this research and present in our programs, such as clarity, provide entry points into meaningful faculty development that brings research on best practices into conversation with the everyday realities that faculty navigate.

Third, the findings provide a glimpse into how some faculty perceive standardized instructional materials, but this glimpse begs for more attention. Ten participants reported that their most pressing decisions were already made for them by

departmental or institutional policies requiring them to adopt certain practices or use specific materials. Unsurprisingly, some of these faculty resisted the requirements, at least initially. Both Participant 32 and 14 confided their displeasure when they first learned about the requirements, but they eventually recognized the affordances offered by the materials. Participant 14, in particular, remarked how using a college-required rubric improved her communications with her students about the assignment; similarly, Participant 32 felt the departmental rubric she used improved her grading process. However, Participant 13 talked at length about her struggles with the materials she was given to teach; she felt they were out of touch with professional practice and spent an incredible amount of energy simply trying to understand how they helped prepare students for work in her profession. This finding reinforces the importance of communicating the goals of required materials with faculty and hints at the potential impact that this kind of communication might have on classroom instruction. It should also remind WAC specialists and administrators to systematically listen to and learn from the daily experiences of faculty as they teach with standardized materials.

These participants' experiences should also prompt us to think more expansively about agency. Scholarship on assignment design frequently promotes the importance of student agency and its relationship to student performance. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2016), for instance, discuss agency as one of the cornerstones of the meaningful writing experiences they document. What might a focus on faculty agency reveal about the ways in which faculty prompt writing and students experience it? That is, how does faculty agency impact student performance? Here, I am particularly reminded of Participant 7's deliberation over page lengths and student labor. While he believed the amount of writing he originally intended to assign would not overwhelm his students and would enable them to produce quality writing, Participant 7 extended the length of the assignment to satisfy his "salary reviewer's" comment to add more writing to the course. His experience and the experiences of Participants 14 and 32 (detailed above) suggest a complex relationship between faculty agency and student experiences: the limitations on Participant 7's agency seem to negatively impact the writing that students will experience in his course while the constraints placed on Participants 14 and 32 seem to enhance the classroom instruction. Thus, future research might consider how instructors and administrators balance professional expertise with curricular vision and institutional policies. Research by Gere et al. (2015) offers a compelling look at the relationship between a program's requirements and its stakeholders, and scholars might add to their study by considering how program and institutional policies support, limit, or create agency and how faculty and administrators negotiate that agency within institutional constraints.

Finally, the participants in this study revealed how complicated designing (and teaching) an assignment can be. Participants identified a number of expected reasons for their decision-making, such as the desire to promote disciplinary habits; they also revealed some surprising reasons, such as the need to satisfy the desires of a salary reviewer. Importantly, the participants in this study showed that they often make decisions about teaching based on non-pedagogical and non-disciplinary concerns. In other words, they reveal that assignment design is an activity in which pedagogical intentions are often in conflict with the material conditions of their enactment. Participant 9 perhaps best demonstrates the complex and contradictory work observed in this study. Her deliberations over page length represent how the four contexts identified here impact seemingly basic design decision-making, turning it into what she and others identify as a "constant balancing act" (Participant 7). During her interview, Participant 9 reveals that she is reconsidering the number of pages that she expects for a background section in an assigned research report. She states that the disciplinary conventions would suggest a two to three-page limit, but her experience with students also influences her thinking: "students aren't good at writing concisely yet . . . if you limit it to two to three, would they get everything in that they need? But then the flipside of that is, by making it three to four, am I encouraging them to puff it up by not practicing concise writing?"

This deliberation turns toward a more general question of pedagogy discussed earlier: how to provide enough guidance without being too prescriptive and encouraging student dependence on external support. Participant 9 wants to give her students enough freedom to fail so that she can "get to that teachable moment" when she helps students learn from their own mistakes, a sort of trial-and-error, experience-based pedagogy frequently referenced by participants. During this deliberation, she also considers how the length requirement of this section impacts how the overall project satisfies the institutional expectations as they are expressed through the program requirements (here, word count); she jokes about the authority of institutional influence, "Not that I think anybody is going to like arrest me if I don't, but we do want to be responsible for meeting what we said we would do." She ultimately decides on four pages. When asked why she makes this decision, she responds: "Oh well, that's probably self-preservation more than anything else."

Deliberating over page length requirements might seem mundane, but it reveals real impacts on the kinds of instruction faculty (feel able to) deliver. These impacts include manipulating the conventions of disciplinary and professional genres and sacrificing pedagogies and practices that faculty believe to be effective (e.g., a design imperative to prompt agency might be complicated by concerns for labor). This finding reveals the power that local contexts exercise over disciplinary notions of pedagogy. Of the eighty-three reasons motivating the design decisions described in this

article, thirty-three were based on pedagogy; only thirteen were rooted in disciplinary contexts. The remaining thirty-seven originated in either institutional or personal contexts, accounting for forty-five percent of the reasons offered. That prompts a real need to understand assignment design as a "material social practice" (Horner, 2000, p. 59), one that might be informed by national conversations of pedagogy but one that is definitely shaped by local conditions. This finding also suggests that some of the most impactful faculty development work WAC specialists can do is at the institutional level: listening to and learning from the lived experiences of faculty; recognizing and rewarding faculty for the labor involved in good writing instruction; and advocating, securing, and maintaining fair labor conditions for faculty (and students).

References

Anderson, P., Anson, C. M., Gonyea, R., & Paine, C. (2016). How to create high-impact writing assignments that enhance learning and development and reinvigorate WAC/WID programs: What almost 72,000 undergraduates taught us. *Across the Disciplines*, *13*(4), 18 pp. https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/hip/andersonetal2016.pdf.

Anson, C. M. (2015). "Crossing thresholds: What's to know about writing across the curriculum." In L. Adler-Kassner & E. Wardle (Eds.), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies* (pp. 203-219). Utah State University Press.

Applebee, A. N., Auten, A., & Lehr, F. (1981). *Writing in the secondary school: English and the content areas*. NCTE.

Baecker, D. L. (1998). Uncovering the rhetoric of the syllabus: The case of the missing I. *College Teaching*, *46*(2), 58–62.

Bridgeman, B., & Carlson, S. B. (1984). Survey of academic writing tasks. *Written Communication*, *1*(2), 247-280.

Britton, J., Burgess, T., Martin, N., McLeod, A., & Rosen, H. (1975). *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. NCTE.

Burdick, M. N. (2011). Teacher negotiation and embedded process: A study of high school writing assignments. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *26*(2), 21-44.

Clark, I. (2005). A genre approach to writing assignments. *Composition Forum, 14*(2). https://compositionforum.com/issue/14.2/clark-genre-writing.php

Eblen, C. (1983). Writing across-the-curriculum: A survey of a university faculty's views and classroom practices. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 1*7*(4), 343-348.

Eodice, M., Geller, A. E., & Lerner, N. (2016). *The meaningful writing project: Learning, teaching and writing in higher education*. University Press of Colorado.

Eodice, M., Geller, A. E., & Lerner, N. (2019). The power of personal connection for undergraduate student writers. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *53*(4), 320-339.

Fink, S. B. (2012). The many purposes of course syllabi: Which are essential and useful? *Syllabus*, *1*(1), 1–12.

Gardner, T. (2008). *Designing writing assignments*. NCTE. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/gardner/

Gere, A., Swofford, S., Silver, N., & Pugh, M. (2015). Interrogating disciplines/disciplinarity in WAC/WID: An institutional study. *College Composition and Communication*, *67*(2), 243-266.

Harris, M. (2010). Assignments from hell: The view from the writing center. In P. Sullivan, H. Tinberg, & S. Blau (Eds.), *What is "college level" writing, volume 2*: *Assignments, readings, and student writing samples* (pp. 183-206). NCTE.

Horner, B. (2000). *Terms of work for composition: A materialist critique*. SUNY Press.

Horner, B. (2016). *Rewriting composition: Terms of exchange*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Hyon, S. (2008). Convention and inventiveness in an occluded academic genre: A case study of retention–promotion–tenure reports. *English for Specific Purposes*, *27*(2), 175-192.

LaFrance, M. & Polk, T. (2018). *A report on the constraints that impact instruction in writing intensive courses*. George Mason University. https://wac.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Constraints-Impacting-WI-Instruction.pdf.

Melzer, D. (2003). Assignments across the curriculum: A survey of college writing. *Language and Learning across the Disciplines*, *6*(1), 86-110.

Melzer, D. (2009). Writing assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing. *College Composition and Communication*, *61*(2), 240-261.

Melzer, D. (2014). *Assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing*. University Press of Colorado.

Neaderhiser, S. (2016). Hidden in plain sight: Metaphors of composition in teaching statements. *Composition Forum*, *33*, 14 pp. https://compositionforum.com/issue/33/hidden.php.

Scott, T. (2009). *Dangerous writing: Understanding the political economy of composition*. Utah State University Press

Swales, J. M. (1996). Occluded genres in the academy: The case of the submission letter. In E. Ventola & A. Mauranen (Eds.), *Academic writing: Intercultural and textual issues* (pp. 45–58). John Benjamins.

Thaiss, C., & Zawacki, T. M. (2006). *Engaged writers and dynamic disciplines: Research on the academic writing life*. Boynton/Cook.