CURRENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

New Tools, Strategies for Student Success in Changing Settings
Josna Rege

I have always thought of myself as a verbal rather than a visual person, and suspect that in this regard I am not alone among academics. Although I am attentive to typography and appreciative of good graphic design, it never occurred to me to use visual elements to make a syllabus more accessible. Like many other teachers of my generation I was introduced to teaching in the face-to-face classroom, and tended to approach hybrid or online teaching from that perspective. Thus it has literally been eye-opening to recognize that reading a text is as much a visual experience as much as it is a verbal one, and that it can only enhance students' learning experience to improve the visual presentation of text. In this issue's first essay, "Motivating Students with Visualization in Online Environments," Lynn Boettler introduces instructors like me to ways in which they can meet the demands of the online course setting, in which visual, nonverbal cues that face-to-face teachers may take for granted are lost unless they are consciously replaced. Explaining concepts such as visual and digital rhetoric, she offers simple but effective tools for delivering a sense of teacher immediacy and support in online courses, and for addressing the problem of student motivation that is a major obstacle to student success in online learning.

Adapting time-honored pedagogical concepts to new instructional settings is also explored in our second essay, "Low-stakes, Reflective Writing: Moving Students into Their Professional Fields," by Joyce Magnotto Neff, Carl Whithaus, Garrett J. McAuliffe, and Nial P. Quinlan. Low-stakes writing has long been used in the composition classroom to help students make the transition toward the formal writing required of them in college, but this interdisciplinary team from the fields of composition studies and counselor education demonstrates, through their examination of written commentaries in a graduate counseling course, how low-stakes writing as a reflective practice can be used to help students make the all-important transition from student learner to professional practitioner.

Andrew T. McCarthy's teaching report, "Designing Online Course Assignments for Student Engagement: Strategies and Best Practices," offers those of us faced with designing a course key components of a cohesive and effective format that, like Lynn Boettler's visualization tools, can help to motivate online students. These components—curriculum goal mapping, intellec-

tual skills development, and student engagement—are also adaptable to the face-to-face or hybrid classroom setting and additionally lend themselves to effective course assessment, another task that is increasingly required of teachers.

In this issue's program report, "Supporting a Vertical Writing Model: Faculty Conversations Across the Curriculum," Georgia Rhoades and Beth Carroll describe the process by which they created their university's award-winning Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Key to the program's success and to its ongoing sustainability, they argue, has been its vertical writing curriculum, designed to help students develop their writing skills throughout their university careers, and its focus on faculty sharing across the disciplines. At the outset, "with the incentives of stipends or wine," the program's coordinators brought together teachers of composition, often non-tenure-track instructors, and faculty in the disciplines charged with teaching a WAC course, each of whom had something to offer the other group. Now the program annually appoints WAC and WID (Writing in the Disciplines) consultants as resource people; the former serve as consultants to the WID faculty, while the latter investigate different areas of writing pedagogy and share their findings with the entire writing faculty.

In each issue Current Clips and Links includes hyperlinks to a handful of non-commercial websites, along with brief descriptions of their content related to higher-education teaching and learning. One of these sites is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has provided the data that have yielded the high-impact practices (HIPs) that George Kuh discusses in the report reviewed in this issue.

To date, our Book Review section has included two kinds of reviews: new titles of current interest and classics of teaching and learning. This issue we introduce a new category of titles for review, that, in the words of Book Review Co-Editor Sean Goodlett, "treat[s] the broader context for the scholarship of teaching and learning." Accordingly, Goodlett reviews Benjamin Ginsberg's The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters. In a piece that also addresses the broader context of teaching and learning (in this case, administrative imperatives as well as faculty practices that most effectively foster student learning), Jennifer Berg reviews George Kuh's High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAUC).

With this issue, *Currents in Teaching and Learning* completes four years of publication. We extend a heartfelt thanks to outgoing Founding Advisory Board member Karen Woods Weierman, who has served on the board's editorial committee from the beginning, and wish her well in her new role as Director of Worcester State's Honors Program. We also welcome new board member Holly Ketterer, who has already made herself indispensable on the editorial committee as our resident APA expert.

Thanks to our hard-working and highly-valued referees for Volume 4, without whom this entire enterprise would be impossible: P. Sven Arvidson, James Bailey, Gouri Banerjee, Daron Barnard, Jennifer Berg, Elizabeth Bidinger, Andrew Bourelle, Phil Burns, Sonya Conner, Lori Dawson, Tom Deans, Nathan Eric Dickman, Jim Dutcher, Anne Falke, Sue Foo, Maria Fung, Bud Gerber, Ruth Haber, Aeron Haynie, Tona Hangen, Kim Hicks, Vrinda Kalia, Holly Ketterer, Rebeaka King, Holly Larson, Pat Marshall, Patricia McDiarmid, Jeffry Nichols, Bonnie Orcutt, Matthew Ortoleva, Mathew Ouellett, Carey Smitherman, Seth Surgan, Pennie Ticen, Don Vescio, Kristin Waters, Karen Woods Weierman, and Margaret Wiley.

Finally, a big Thank You to Elizabeth Kappos, our outgoing Editorial Assistant, and wish her all the best as she completes her graduate studies. ▪▪

Motivating Students with Visualization in Online Environments

Lynn Boettler

Abstract

The literature on motivational teaching suggests that creating a supportive learning environment is crucial in motivating students. Methods for creating this environment in face-to-face classrooms abound, with verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that create affinity between teachers and students proving extremely effective. In online environments, these communication methods, especially the nonverbal (e.g. smiling/nodding), are more difficult to enact. While advanced technologies (e.g. video communication) offer more sophisticated means of simulating face-to-face interactions, these advanced technologies may be unappealing to faculty members concerned about the time it takes to design online courses or already apprehensive about online learning. Fortunately, there are more accessible means, via the design of course materials, to project a sense of rapport and support to students and thereby to influence their motivation. This article discusses how fonts, images, color, page layout, and other visual rhetorical strategies can be used to generate motivational online environments.

Keywords

motivational teaching, online learning, visual rhetoric, immediacy, online learning barriers

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Introduction

The literature on motivational teaching is abundant. Many have examined factors that motivate college students to learn (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Christophel, 1990; Patrick, Hilsey, & Kimpler, 2000; Sass, 1989; Svinicki, 2004). In a nutshell, students' perceived value of course assignments or content, their perceptions of their ability to succeed (self-efficacy), and their perceived level of support from the learning environment form complex interactions that can work together to fuel students' motivation (Ambrose et al., 2010). In teaching practice, this means doing such things as providing course activities and assignments that are relevant and meaningful to students, giving students choices, providing rubrics and clear expectations, scaffolding assignments, offering active learning opportunities, creating

affinity between students and teacher, and exhibiting immediacy behaviors. Although many of these strategies can be utilized well in both face-to-face and online classes, creating affinity (a liking) between students and the teacher and exhibiting immediacy behaviors (verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors that create the perception of closeness) can be more challenging in online courses.

While videos of instructors or technologies like Skyping are avenues by which these verbal and non-verbal communiqués that build affinity and induce immediacy may be achieved in online environments, many faculty are not utilizing (nor are they inclined to use) these more advanced and time-intensive methodologies. As a result, many of the nuances of nonverbal and verbal communication inherent in face-to-face classes are lost in the online setting. Fortunately, there are other, more accessible means which can stimulate affinity, enhance students' sense of immediacy and support, and influence student motivation. This article examines how fonts, images, color, page layout, and other visual and digital rhetorical strategies might be used in designing online learning environments to influence student motivation and learning. Because of the expanded use of online course management systems and Web-enhanced courses, these means of design can also prove useful for faculty who are using these tools to supplement instruction in face-to-face classrooms as well.

The Connection of Affinity and Immediacy to Student Motivation

While any experienced teacher intuitively knows that students who are more motivated and thus more engaged are more likely to learn and do better in classes, researchers have found evidence to support this conclusion. More specifically, teacher immediacy behaviors have been conclusively linked to student motivation. In two studies that she published con-

currently in Communication Education, Christophel (1990) found definite relationships between teacher immediacy behaviors, student motivation, and learning. Allen, Witt, and Wheeless (2006) investigated whether there was a causal relationship between teacher immediacy behaviors and student learning and discovered that "teacher immediacy behaviors predict or cause a level of affective learning. In turn, the level of affective learning predicts or causes the level of cognitive learning" (p. 26).

Closely related to immediacy behaviors are affinity-seeking behaviors, ways teachers can act to cause students to feel an affinity with them, which have been found to have an impact on students' motivation (Frymier & Thomas, 1992; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986). In other words, when it comes to motivating students, it really does matter if they like a professor. Being open to students, being supportive, and exhibiting optimism are all affinity-seeking behaviors that affect student motivation.

In the face-to-face classroom, immediacy and affinity-seeking behaviors are enacted by teachers when they do things like use students' names, speak with inflection, smile; and laugh; are animated in their teaching, praise students; express concern over students' well-being; listen; use humor; move around the classroom; and arrange the classroom in more informal ways. While some instructors are naturals at building relationships with students through these means, even those who are not can develop and intentionally utilize them in their classroom teaching. The question is, however, how do these behaviors translate to the online learning environment?

What comes as no surprise is that teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors (using students' names, responding quickly to communications, using humor, providing positive feedback, using personal examples, etc.) can be readily converted to the online environment via textual communication with results similar to those obtained

when they are utilized in traditional classrooms. Both Gunter (2007) and Baker (2004) examined the effect of instructional immediacy behaviors in the online environment and discovered that verbal immediacy behaviors (delivered textually) contribute to the affective and cognitive learning of students. What their studies leave out, and what we do not know much about, is how teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors, such as gesturing, making eye contact, smiling, and nodding (often considered more powerful than verbal immediacy behaviors), can be translated into the online setting. This topic raises the question as to whether there are nonverbal strategies, such as those offered via the application of visual/digital rhetoric theories and practices, that could offer opportunities for enhancing perceptions of immediacy in Web-based learning contexts, ultimately increasing student motivation and learning.

Visual and Digital Rhetorical Strategies

In order to understand how visual and digital rhetorical strategies might be used to enhance students' perceptions of teacher immediacy and student motivation, it is essential to examine how images exert influence. In his book chapter, "The Psychology of Rhetorical Images," Charles Hill (2003) links rhetorical concepts of presence with psychological concepts of vividness and explains various research findings from the field of psychology that show correlations between vividness, emotional response and persuasion. According to Hill, images, especially those that are most vivid, have great power to evoke emotional responses, and in turn, emotional responses have great power to persuade. It follows then, that images might be used strategically to evoke emotions that would persuade students to feel affinity for and closeness to their professors (immediacy).

In her article, "Visual Social Semiotics: Understanding How Still Images Make Meaning," Claire Harrison (2003) applies Hill's (2003) concepts

by presenting a framework for understanding how to use images as rhetorical tools. Breaking down the relatively new (1990s) theoretical framework of visual social semiotics, Harrison explains three metafunctions of images, representational, interpersonal, and compositional, and offers analyses of several images to aid in understanding these concepts. According to Harrison, the representational metafunction can be either narrative or conceptual in nature and answers the question, "What's the picture about?" (p. 50). The narrative aspect of an image is created via vectors of motion or connec-

Figure 1. An example illustrating a narrative representational metafunction.

tion points between objects in the image and often represents an action. For example, in Figure 1, there is a horizontal vector between the baby and the adult's arm. These vectors not only indicate a connection but also demonstrate the action of support, with the horizontal vector of the arm supporting the other horizontal vector of the baby's body. In addition, the cradling of the feet tells a story of care and support, possibly evoking emotions of tenderness and compassion.

Images that have a representational metafunction that is conceptual do not have vectors and "tend to be grouped together to present viewers with the 'concept'
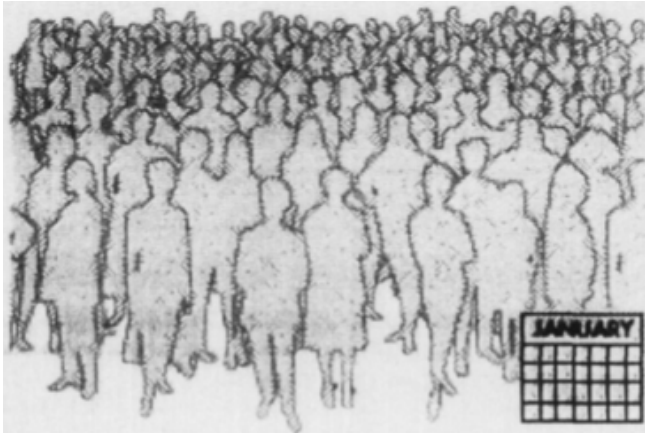
Figure 2. An example illustrating a conceptual representational metafunction.

of who or what they represent" (Harrison, 2003, p. 51). As an example, Harrison (2003) offers this image (Figure 2) of a faceless crowd from a breast cancer site along with its caption, "43,000 will die this year." She interprets the use of the faceless crowd as encouraging "the viewer to think of breast cancer in the abstract, that is, about the many who will die and the social, political, and economic consequences of the disease," thus making its representational metafunction conceptual in nature (p. 52).

Continuing with her explanation of metafunctions, Harrison (2003) describes the *interpersonal* metafunction of images as the interaction between all the participants (designer, viewer, producer) of an image and answering the question, "How does the picture engage the viewer?" (p. 52). These interactions, for example, whether the image's gaze is directly at the viewer or whether the image is close up or at a distance from the viewer, work to create different rhetorical messages and can elicit different responses, such as degrees of social intimacy between the image and the viewer. Suppose the following three images (Figures 3, 4 and 5) were possible options that a professor could select to place on her website. Each portrays aspects of the *interpersonal* metafunction and sends different messages of social intimacy by virtue of the aforementioned elements of this metafunction.

Note that the professor in the first photograph (Figure 3) is shot at a distance, and she is behind the barriers of a computer and a desk, implying that she is less accessible. In the other two photos (Figures 4 and 5), the professor is much closer to the camera, which conveys a greater sense of openness and approachability. In Figures 4 and 5, the angles at which the professor is facing the camera also project different messages. A direct gaze, as in Figure 4, usually indicates more social intimacy, while the distance, angle, and eye gaze of the professor in Figure 5 would tend to indicate slightly more detachment. In addition, the angle at which a person is photographed can also reflect levels of power.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Images illustrating varying aspects of interpersonal metafunction.

Figure 6. Example illustrating effect of camera angle and power message.

For example, the person in Figure 6 seems to be above the eye of the viewer/camera, and this sends a message that the viewers of the image (who could be students) are in a position of less power. When trying to create immediacy and affect student motivation, images of professors directly facing students at eye level suggest equal power between image and viewer and would be more likely to have such an impact.
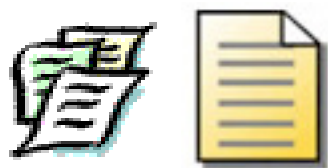

Figure 7. Examples of impersonal, default icons that evoke little immediacy

Other nuances of the *interpersonal* metafunction of images are both abundant and powerful, and images may, if utilized strategically in online environments, aid in creating a greater sense of immediacy between students and teachers. For example, if immediacy is often induced through humor, icons that are amusing might be used on a course website instead of traditional, impersonal, default icons (Figures 7 and 8). Thus, the simplest of choices, such as the professor's photo or icons on a course website or within an online course management system (regardless of whether the platform is

WebCT Vista, Blackboard, or Moodle), can be tailored to generate immediacy and aid in motivating students.

The third and final metafunction, *compositional*, answers the question, "How do the representational and interpersonal metafunctions relate to each other and integrate into a meaningful whole?" (Harrison, 2003, p. 55). Harrison (2003) refers to this concept as "visual syntax" and indicates that if images or a web page do not adhere to the accepted rules of a particular culture's way of reading or viewing it, then its intended effect may be lost. Elements of the *compositional* meta-

Figure 8. Examples of humorous icons that could be used to invoke immediacy between students and professors

function include *information value* (where the image is placed), *salience* (ability of the image to capture the viewer's attention), *framing* (how and whether images are framed together), and *modality* (the validity or reliability projected by an image) (p. 56). When considering the *compositional* metafunction, an image's location on the page, its size, and its colors, as well as whether it is a photograph or a drawing can all have an impact on the message it is attempting to convey. For example, a drawing is considered to have less realism than a photograph; therefore, a drawing would typically project more distance between it and the viewer. Consequently, if a professor represents herself with an artistic photograph or via an icon such as a fictional character in her online course, the sense of closeness (immediacy) students feel toward her may be more diminished than
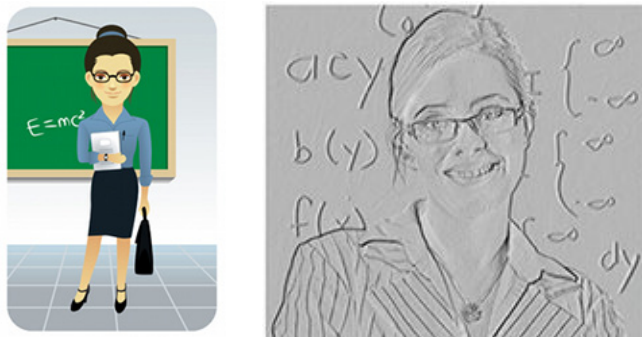
Figure 9. Examples of artistic and fictional representations of professors that create distance and hinder immediacy

if she represented herself with a photographic image (Figure 9).

In addition to images and their rhetorical effects, the typography or the style and size of font used are also elements of visual rhetoric. Eva Brumberger (2003), in her study, "The Rhetoric of Typography: The Persona of Typeface and Text," asserts that typeface and text have a rhetorical impact by virtue of personality traits that readers ascribe to them. Through the results of two empirical studies in which college students rated different fonts and different passages of text according to various personality traits, Brumberger found that certain fonts and text passages tend to have certain traits

(i.e. friendly, elegant, direct). Students perceive Comic Sans as a "friendly" font while Arial and Times New Roman are seen as "direct" fonts and Harrington as "elegant" (p. 214). Even in something as simple as email communication, when these principles are applied, the effect, though perhaps subtle, is worth noting. Figures 10 and 11 offer a comparison of an email message sent to students in which these principles are applied. In Figure 10, the direct font Arial is employed along with the color black (more on color later). In Figure 11, the friendly font Comic Sans is used in conjunction with green text. You will also note the use of exclamation points in the greeting and the closing of the message. While the differences in these emails may not be dramatic, research on the rhetorical power of font styles and color suggests that the email in Figure 11 would be likely to convey friendliness and stimulate positive feelings, feelings more likely to induce affinity and immediacy. This is not to say that every email communication between professors and students will have a goal of evoking affinity and immediacy. There may be times when using a more direct font is necessary to convey a more serious or directive tone such as illustrated in Figures 12 and 13 where the professor is prompting a student complete a specific assignment.

Figure 10. Example of an email message using a direct font that evokes less immediacy

Subject: Class Introductions

From:

Sent: May 24, 2012 11:38 AM

To: Demo Student(webct_demo_4586785101271)

CC:

Hello and welcome to class!
I'm glad to see you found this email. I hope you'll help me and your fellow classmates learn little bit about you virtually.   Please navigate to the discussion board and follow the instructions for introducing yourself.

Looking forward to hearing about you!
Professor Jones

Figure 11. Example of an email message using a friendly font that promotes immediacy

Subject: Your Midterm Paper

From:

Sent: May 24, 2012 11:56 AM

To: Demo Student(webct_demo_5301875152271)

CC:

BCC:

Hi Jo,
I received your midterm paper; however, it was submitted in a file format that I could not open. Please email me another copy in MSWord or PDF file format by noon on Friday.

Thanks,
Professor Jones

Figure 12. Example of an email message using a direct font to convey a more directive message

Subject: Your Midterm Paper

From:

Sent: May 24, 2012 11:57 AM

To: Demo Student(webct_demo_5301875152271)

CC:

Hi Jo,
I received your midterm paper; however, it was submitted in a file format that I could not open. Please email me another copy in MSWord or PDF file format by noon on Friday.

Thanks,
Professor Jones

Figure 13. Example of an email message using a friendly font to convey a more direct message

Brumberger's (2003) studies, which indicate that students are interpreting a variety of rhetorical messages via the images and fonts we give them, support the argument that typography warrants consideration and investigation as an element of visual rhetorical theory and should be given as much thought in the writing and design processes of online course materials (if motivating students is important) as does verbal language. Brumberger's research presents interesting implications for the study of visual rhetoric in online environments. Although the intentional use of visual rhetorical practices, including choice of fonts, and their impact on student motivation is certainly worthy of more investigation, there is strong evidence suggesting that choices of font in digital contexts may affect students' perception of teacher immediacy and ultimately their motivation and learning.

Another often-overlooked visual rhetorical tool is color. In their article, "Decorative Color as a Rhetorical Enhancement on the World Wide Web," Anne Richards and Carol David (2005) argue that color in designing technical communication can be more than a functional or decorative element, that it can enhance the message the designer is attempting to send, and that the message can be a rhetorical one. Using theories from the field of art and psychology along with many examples from existing websites to support their argument, they demonstrate how colors evoke different responses (i.e. blue=tranquility, yellow=excitement, green=passivity) (Richards & David, 2005). And, they suggest that color can be intentionally utilized in Web communication to elicit responses from viewers and to strengthen the designer's rhetorical purpose (Richards & David, 2005). It is thus a logical assumption that the use of color in online learning environments could be strategized in such a way as to evoke feelings of warmth and approachability (stepping stones to motivation) much in the same way that technical communication experts use these methods in web design.

Others have also examined the relationship between color and emotion. Kaya and Epps (2004) conducted a study in which college students were asked to respond to various hues that were presented to them on a computer screen. They were then prompted with the following questions: "What emotional response do you associate with this color? How does this color make you feel? and Why do you feel this way?" (p. 398). Based on thematic analysis, the researchers categorized responses to color as "positive," "negative," or "no emotion" (p. 399). Results showed that green attained the highest positive response (95.9 %), with yellow (93.9%) a close second. As one might expect, green was associated with nature, inducing a calm or soothing effect, while yellow was perceived as more energetic. On the whole, principle colors (red, blue, yellow, green, purple) were also viewed positively (79.6%), while achromatic colors of black, white, and gray were viewed as significantly less positive (29.2%) (Kaya & Epps, 2004). Again, there are implications here for research as well as for the design of online learning. If color can have an emotional as well as rhetorical influence on our students, then decisions can be made intentionally regarding the color of backgrounds, text, and other online learning materials and communication that would be more likely to induce feelings of closeness and affinity for the teacher/course, which in turn influences student motivation. Figures 14 and 15 show the same introductory web page for a course but with different background colors. If applying the research surrounding the rhetorical power of color, the page in Figure 14 with its white background would be viewed considerably less positively than the page in Figure 15 with the most positively viewed color of green.

In addition to images, fonts, and color, other elements of visual digital communication can be examined and employed for their rhetorical value. In "Visual Metadiscourse: Designing the Considerate Text," Eric Kumpf (2000) offers 10 categories or "channels"
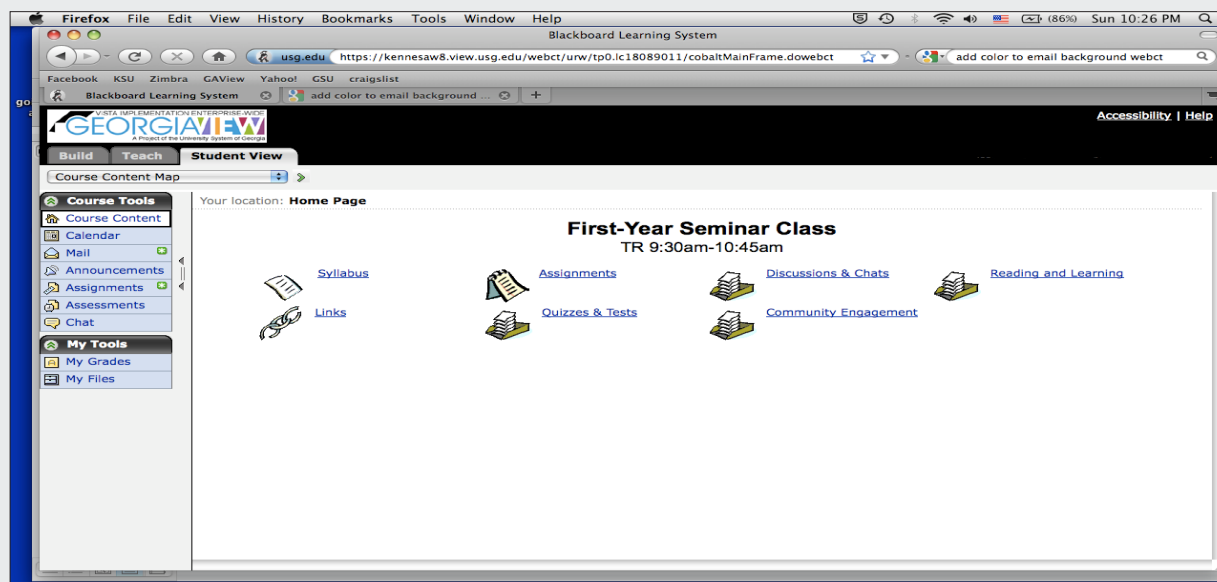
Figure 14. Introductory page of a Web course using less positively viewed white background
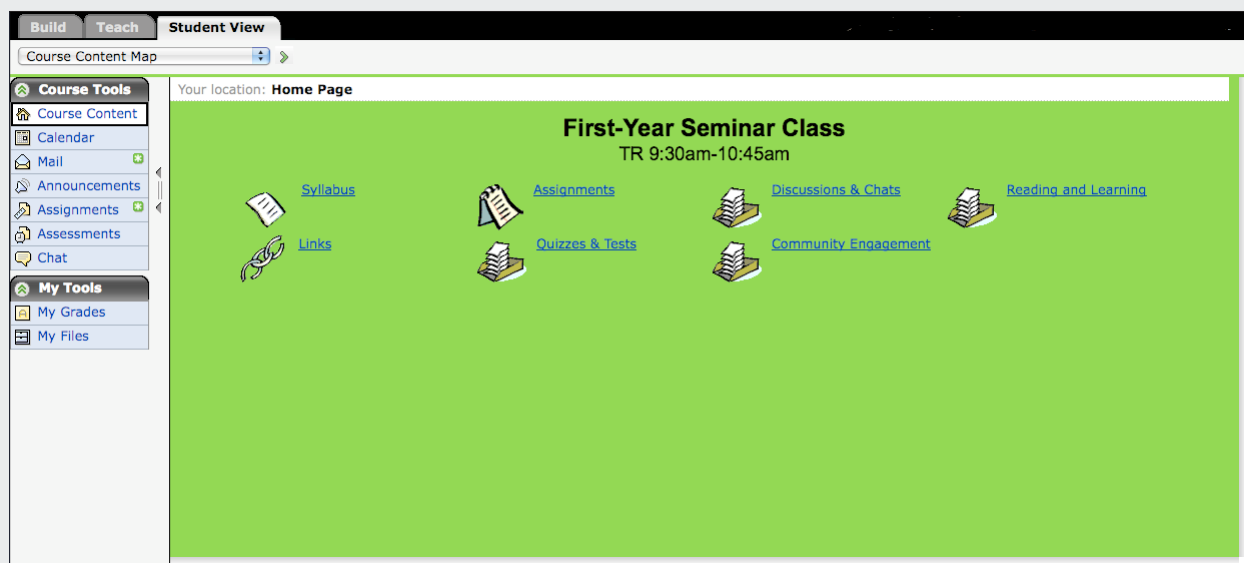

Figure 15. Introductory page of a Web course using more positively viewed green background

(adapted from frameworks for textual metadiscourse) for writers to consider in the formation of written or online documents. The categories are:

» **First Impression**: the "curb appeal" of the document or what viewers experience as a result of first seeing the document but not necessarily reading it.

» **Heft**: size and length of the document or page (a long or large document could be intimidating to a viewer/reader).

» **Convention**: the degree to which the document or page conforms to accepted standards or what the reader/viewer expects (a page from an online course that had ultra large fonts may be viewed as unconventional thus sending a particular message about its creator).

» **Chunking**: the grouping together of text or graphics for the ease of reading or viewing (breaking up dense text passages with white space or bulleting items is considered chunking and enhances the relationship between the reader and writer).

» **External Skeleton**: the overall organization of the document or page.

» **Consistency**: the pattern of organization throughout a document or page (on a Web site this might mean menu items are always on the left side of the page. A lack of consistency may affect the writer's or designer's credibility).

» **Expense**: more relevant to paper documents, the expense refers to the quality of paper, the graphics, the packaging, and the cost of those aspects of the document as perceived by the reader.

» **Attraction**: the ability of the document to keep the reader engaged and compel her to move forward in the document or on the page.

» **Interpretation**: textual elements in the document or page that interpret images or graphs.

» **Style**: the writer's signature via other elements of metadiscourse, such as consistency, chunking, external skeleton, convention, and heft (Kumpf, 2000, p. 405).

Kumpf (2000) argues that all of these aspects of visual metadiscourse can exert a rhetorical influence on readers toward a desired response and can convey information about the author's credibility. If this is the case, then perhaps, when used strategically in crafting and evaluating digital communication and design by online instructors, they may be found to have an impact on student motivation and learning.

For example, heft (length and size of a document) and external skeleton (overall organization) are easily adjustable aspects of digital metadiscourse that can be applied in online learning platforms with little effort. Figure 16 illustrates a web page that could be the opening page of a professor's online class. The numerous icons create a very lengthy page and one that appears somewhat disorganized. Students may find this intimidating, uninviting, and confusing, which they likely translate to their impression of the professor, negatively impacting affinity and immediacy and ultimately student motivation. Simply consolidating icons into folders (Figure 14) or shortening the names associated with the icons would go a long way averting this issue.

Additionally, Figures 14 and 17 represent "before and after" examples of the introductory page of my own course. I hope that you will agree that the "after" example has more "curb appeal" or evokes more "attraction." While I am still tweaking the design and will likely remove the black-and-white background images, my aim in redesigning this page was to intentionally apply visual and digital rhetorical strategies that would improve the curb appeal and that students would find inviting, which in turn would increase affinity, immediacy, and student motivation (and thus learning). After making these revisions, for the first time in seven years of using this course management system, students have
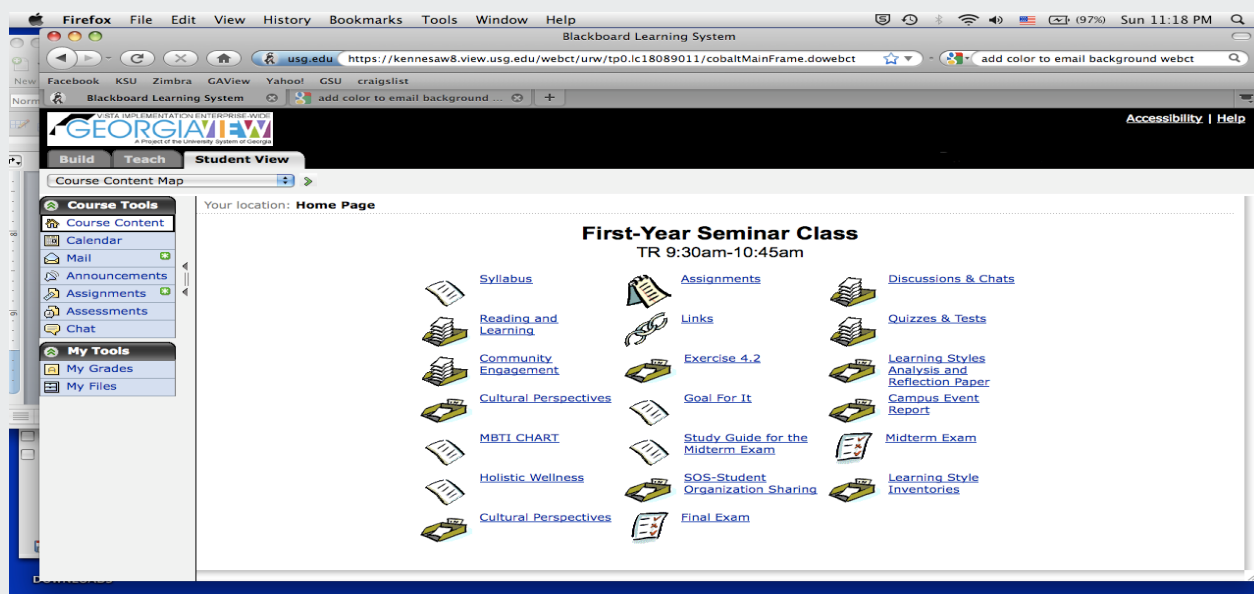
Figure 16. Example of how heft and the external skeleton of course Web page can negatively impact affinity, immediacy, and student motivation
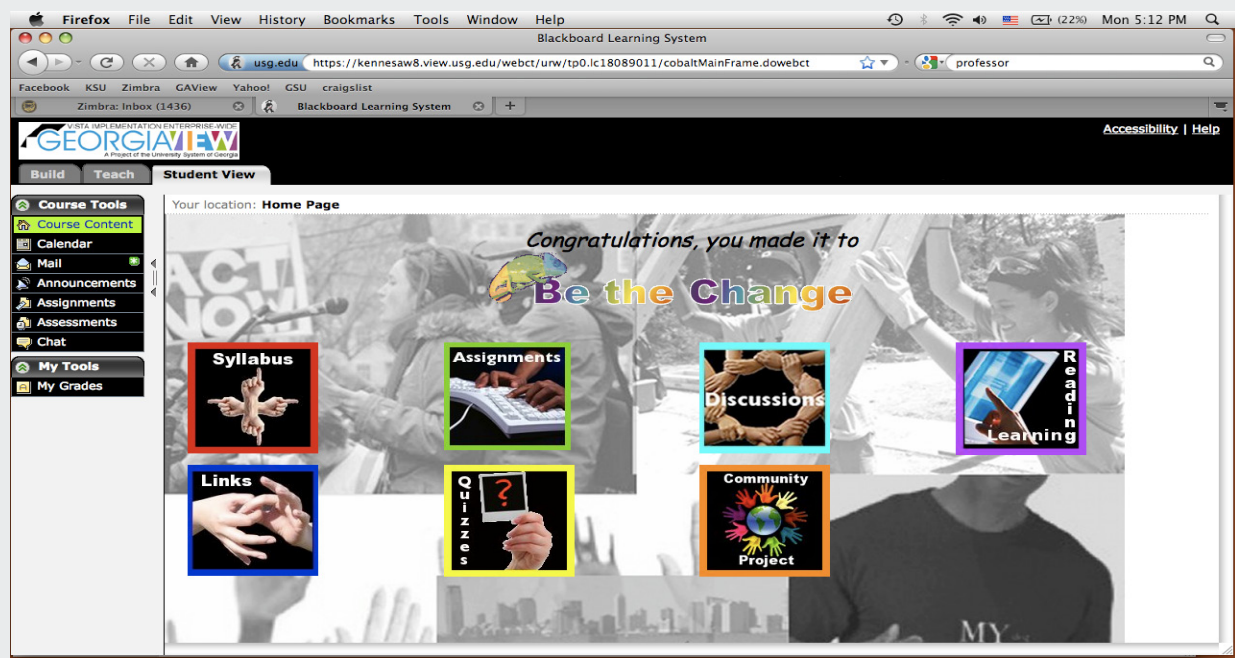

Figure 17. "After" example of more motivating course introductory page from Web-based course management system

been making comments, and all of them have been positive.

Images, fonts, and colors can all be manipulated and chosen with rhetorical purposes in mind. Furthermore, elements of visual metadiscourse, when used as a framework for designing and evaluating online learning materials, can also wield rhetorical power. Whether the utilization of these principles and practices in web-based courses can influence students' perception of teacher immediacy and affinity for the course and ultimately student motivation and learning, however, requires further investigation. For example, there is little research on the effectiveness of emoticons (in online learning environments) at representing non-verbal communication cues (available in face-to-face delivery) that convey the openness or approachability essential to generate affinity and, ultimately, motivation. In addition, although further research needs to be conducted regarding the application of visual rhetorical practices in digital learning contexts and their impact on student motivation, there is little doubt that adopting some of the principles presented here would be valuable in projecting a supportive learning environment that would be motivating to students.

Implications

Whether we as faculty are in favor of online learning or of using instructional technologies in our teaching, the fact remains that students are demanding it. In the recent report, *Going the Distance*, published by the Sloan Consortium, Allen and Seaman (2009, 2011) surveyed over 2500 colleges and universities regarding enrollment in online courses. From 2002 to 2010, enrollments in online courses rose from 9.6% to 31.3% with over 6 million students taking online courses across the country. College administrators are expecting to see those percentages continue to increase, and faculty will be needed to teach these courses. Unfortunately, the number of faculty willing to teach online courses is not

growing proportionally to the increased demand, with faculty identifying several barriers to teaching online courses, including "additional effort to develop online courses, additional effort to deliver online courses, does not count toward tenure and promotion, students need more discipline, and lower retention rates" (Seaman, 2009, p. 33). If colleges and universities are to meet the growing demand for online learning, these barriers must be addressed.

Overcoming many of these obstacles will require comprehensive institutional and administrative approaches; however, two barriers that might be combated with pedagogical interventions by faculty are "students need more discipline" and "lower retention." The perception that students need more discipline is one held by faculty about many students, not just those in online environments. Students fail to complete assignments, turn them in late, miss classes, never check their syllabi, and wait until the last minute to do their work; these students are also more likely to drop out of school. Educators who study student achievement, persistence, and retention often categorize and measure these behaviors under the heading of motivation (Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006). In the online environment, especially one that is asynchronous and one where students must be more self-directed, these types of behaviors can be even more pronounced and student motivation even more crucial. In fact, students themselves identify "learner motivation" as one of their main barriers to online learning (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

Because of the abundance of literature on student motivation, we know that behaviors that build teacher immediacy and affinity play a major role in creating supportive environments that positively influence student motivation and learning. However, enacting these behaviors in online environments is challenging. While advanced technologies that simulate the face-to-face interaction inherent in generating immediacy

and affinity are available, faculty who are just beginning the adventure of online teaching may find such technologies intimidating and too time consuming. Taking advantage of visual and digital rhetorical tools via intentionally selected images, colors, and fonts as well as elementary design principles that invite engagement will provide faculty with accessible and effective tools to add to their teaching arsenals, allowing them to create immediacy and thus more motivating learning environments for their students. ▪▪

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List of Figures

Figure 1

An example illustrating a narrative representational metafunction. Kratchovil, V. (Photographer). (n.d) Newborn baby on arm. Retrieved from http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/

Figure 2

An example illustrating a conceptual representational metafunction.

Figures 3

Images illustrating varying aspects of interpersonal metafunction. *Portrait of an attractive female teacher in classroom.* (n.d). [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-14761703

Figures 4

Images illustrating varying aspects of interpersonal metafunction. *Pretty maths teacher.* (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-5501003

Figures 5

Images illustrating varying aspects of interpersonal metafunction. *Young teacher.* (n.d.) [Web Photo] Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-5500535

Figure 6

Example illustrating effect of camera angle and power message. *Senior executive giving presentation.* (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.istock-photo.com/stock-photo-15372414

Figure 7

Examples of impersonal, default icons that evoke little immediacy. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image captured from own course Web page.

Figure 8

Examples of humorous icons that could be used to invoke immediacy between students and professors. *Portrait studio baby, cry.* (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-15663626

Dog sleeping in her notebook after studying. (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-25889933

Figure 9

Examples of artistic and fictional representations of professors that create distance and hinder immediacy. Adapted from *Young teacher*. (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-5500535

Profession series: Teacher/Professor. (n.d.) [Web Photo]. Retrieved from http://www.bigstockphoto.com/image-25660886

Figure 10

Example of an email message using a direct font that evokes less immediacy. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Figure 11

Example of an email message using a friendly font that promotes immediacy. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Figure 12

Example of an email message using a friendly font to convey a more direct message. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image captured from own course web page.

Figure 13

Example of an email message using a direct font to convey a more directive message. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image captured from own course web page.

Figure 14

Introductory page of a Web course using less positively viewed white background. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Figure 15

Introductory page of a web course using more positively viewed green background. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Figure 16

Example of how heft and the external skeleton of course web page can negatively impact affinity, immediacy, and student motivation. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Figure 17

"After" example of more motivating course introductory page from web-based course management system. Boettler, L. B. (2012). Image designed and captured for this paper.

Low-Stakes, Reflective Writing: Moving Students into Their Professional Fields

Joyce Neff, Garrett J. McAuliffe, Carl Whithaus, and Nial P. Quinlan

Abstract

This study examines low-stakes, written commentaries from a graduate counseling course to better understand the role writing plays in the transition from being a student to becoming a professional practitioner. The cross-disciplinary research team used methods from Grounded Theory to analyze 60 commentaries and found that: (1) low-stakes, reflective writing revealed changes in self-awareness from Situational Self-Knowledge to Pattern Self-Knowledge (Weinstein & Alschuler, 1985); (2) low-stakes writing provided evidence of students connecting personally to learning and then connecting learning to professional practice; and (3) low-stakes writing encouraged the instructor to make mid-course adjustments to his teaching methods. This study provides empirical evidence that low-stakes writing-to-learn both supports and records the transition students make from *hoping to know how* to *knowing how* to imagine themselves in their professional field.

Keywords

low-stakes writing; writing-to-learn; counselor education; writing in the disciplines; transitioning into a profession; reflective practice

Introduction

Low-stakes writing—freewriting, journal-keeping, reflective commentary—has a wide-ranging history. Boice and Meyers (1986) locate its intellectual roots in the automatic writing of surrealism, hypnosis, and early psychotherapy. Within composition studies, low-stakes writing can be traced to the early work of Elbow (1973) who promotes it as a technique that helps the writer begin the journey toward "rational" discourse, i.e., the formal, logical texts required in many college courses. But what is the role of low-stakes, reflective writing in the pre-professional classroom in a field such as counseling, which depends more on talking than writing? And how might we know whether reflective writing prepares students to be better professional practitioners?

Elbow (1981) defines freewriting as "the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know" (p. 13). In "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking," Elbow (1993) discusses both freewriting and

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quickwriting as "evaluation- [;]free" writing—that is, assignments that the students work on and use to learn about writing, but assignments that are not graded. Describing low-stakes writing as a way of preparing students for future "writing tasks that involve more intellectual pushing," he argues:

> Students have a better time writing these uneval-uated pieces; they enjoy hearing and appreciating these pieces when they don't have to evaluate. And *I* have a much better time when I engage in this astonishing activity: reading student work when I don't have to evaluate and respond. And yet the writing improves. I see students invest-ing and risking more, writing more fluently, and using livelier, more interesting voices. This writing gives me and them a higher standard of clarity and voice for when we move on to more careful and revised writing tasks that involve more intel-lectual pushing—tasks that sometimes make their writing go tangled or sodden. (p.199)

Britton (1993), in his research on writing as a means of acquiring knowledge about a discipline, val-ues low-stakes writing as a vehicle for retention of con-tent, fluency with language, and connections between personal experience and new knowledge. Fulwiler and Young (1986) extend low-stakes writing into all dis-ciplines. Yancey (1998) explores writing and reflection in her discussion of how students move from *hoping* to advance to disciplinary knowledge to *knowing how* to advance to disciplinary knowledge: "Not all accounts of writing processes are equal, of course. Some students seem to know their own processes, can mark them in a way that teaches. Others begin more tentatively. They don't seem to know how to talk about their own work, or perhaps they are only beginning to know it" (p. 27). Yancey's scholarship is informed by Schon's (1983) concept of reflective practice, which Schon bases on Dewey's (1938) characterization of it as "an active,

persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge" (p. 9).

Reflective practice opens individuals to new expe-riences and allows them to define unclear situations, consider alternative solutions to problems, and hear feedback on previous decisions and actions. In the field of counseling, professionals use reflective practice to draw on their experience, to construct "informal theory," and to comprehend problem situations, rather than merely to apply previously learned methods to unam-biguous ends (Foley, 2000). In the professional world, reflective practitioners are usually flexible when faced with the uncertainty of complex decisions. They are not rule-bound and can consider multiple factors. A specific dimension of reflective practice is "reflection-in-action," which is most simply defined as reacting to inconsistencies or "surprises" in a problem situation by rethinking one's tacit assumptions and reframing the situation into an action experiment in which possible solutions are tested (Ferry & Ross- Gordon, 1998).

Given these favorable accounts of reflective prac-tice and low-stakes writing in the published literature, our research team explored their connections within a professional preparation program, namely counselor education. We began with two questions: What does written, low-stakes commentary reveal about becom-ing a professional in fields that aim to produce better practitioners rather than better writers? What is the pedagogical value of low-stakes, reflective writing in a pre-professional program? To answer the questions we analyzed written commentaries submitted by students in three sections of a graduate course called Counseling Skills. The commentary assignment posed open-ended questions as a warm-up for later, graded tasks such as analysis of counseling interviews. In the following pages we explain the study's design, define the core cat-egories that emerged during data analysis, and discuss the implications of low-stakes, reflective writing for professional education and for critical pedagogy.

Methodology

Our research team was composed of two composition specialists (experienced in Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines), a counselor educator, and a practicing counselor. The 60 written commentaries were randomly selected from students enrolled in three different sections of a graduate, preprofessional, counseling skills course. Thirty of the commentaries came from the beginning week of the semester and thirty from the last week (hereafter called "Early Commentaries" and "Late Commentaries"). The instructor of the three sections drew on Schon's (1983) notion of reflective practice, Belenky et al's (1986) connected teaching, and Freire's (1976) critical pedagogy, in his decision to incorporate low-stakes, reflective, writing-to-learn into his syllabus. Students emailed their reflective commentaries to the instructor in response to the following guidelines:

> In your commentary, be self-reflective and honest. The content will not be graded for any "correctness." Rather, your honest and open effort to confront the material and to integrate these approaches to helping will be evaluated. Remember, learning to be a professional helper requires self-awareness, open-mindedness, appropriate self-disclosure, and authenticity in interpersonal relationships. I will read them before class and occasionally discuss the issues that you bring up with the whole class. You will be anonymous, however. Submit your commentaries <u>in this order</u>, <u>designating them as "a" through "d</u>:" (a) <u>your written personal reactions</u> about the previous class session and about your general learning so far, including your discoveries and your concerns. The commentary material is confidential. Only the instructor will read it; (b) <u>written "nuggets" from the readings:</u> key ideas, uncertainties, and disagreements from <u>every reading</u> (e.g., a thought from each major heading). Recommendation:

During or after reading, pull out key ideas, or speculate on issues that come up. This is your chance to actively confront the material, emotionally or intellectually; (c) <u>your responses to any assigned activities and exercises</u> from the books. See the weekly assignment sheets, which will be handed out at each class, for specific assignments; (d) <u>brief written comments</u> on your home practice sessions, if assigned; these should be based on the format of the feedback sheets in each chapter, as appropriate. (Counseling Skills syllabus; emphasis in original)

The four researchers used procedures from Grounded Theory to analyze the commentaries. Grounded Theory, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for sociological research and for the "discovery of theory from data" (p. 1), requires a specified set of procedures for discovering conceptual relationships. The procedures include movement through what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call "open," "axial," and "selective" coding, until the emerging categories become fewer and the final core categories become more inclusive. The dimensions and properties of core categories are further tested through theoretical sampling, a process that involves reviewing data "on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176). Theoretical sampling provides a means of checking for confirming and disconfirming evidence. The methods of Grounded Theory leave a paper trail of memos, matrices, and other graphics, which document the researchers' back-and-forth movement between data and theory. Grounded Theory helped our interdisciplinary research team create a shared language that allowed us to work across the borders of our separate disciplinary modes of inquiry.

After each of us completed an individual round of open coding, we convened to discuss our codes and arrived at 11 working categories for the first set of com-

mentaries (Early Commentaries) and eight categories for the second set (Late Commentaries). We met bi-weekly over 12 months; our analyses moved from coding to working definitions of categories to checking the theoretical relevance of the categories. We kept minutes of each meeting and periodically reviewed those minutes as we balanced the descriptive and theoretical components of our progress. Once the three core categories emerged from the data, we compared Early Commentaries to Late ones.

Codes and Categories

During axial coding, the research team combined and refined the 19 open codes into three core categories: self-awareness, connections, and teaching methods. Below are definitions for these core categories followed by examples.

Self-Awareness: Student is attuned to her/his inner states and behavioral tendencies.

The low-stakes assignment that generated the commentaries asked students to report their "written personal reactions about the previous class session and [their] general learning so far, including [their] discoveries and concerns." That open invitation was intended to increase self-reflectiveness, which is a key characteristic of effective counselors (Wampold, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that one of the major themes to emerge in the low-stakes writing was *self-awareness*. In the Early Commentaries we see examples that demonstrate *self-awareness* of *anxiety*:

» "I find myself very nervous and self-conscious."
» "I am nervous about dealing with clients in ways that are effective and helpful."

Other Early Commentaries show *self-awareness* of *doubt and negativity*:

» "I am definitely not a quick thinker. I am having problems standing back and observing."
» "I am the world's worst listener."

Some Early *self-awareness* Commentaries seem *neutral*:

» "I guess that…I'm used to being a blunt person."
» "I realized that I would have asked mostly questions that gathered information."

In the Late Commentaries *self-awareness* of *anxiety* continues, as in "I am extra anxious that I made a bad impression." *Self-awareness* of *doubt* continues as well: "I do not feel prepared to handle clients that might be very angry."

Neutral reflections continue in the Late Commentaries also:

» "I became aware of how strong my maternal feelings are."
» "I am not one who likes the pieces. I like the whole picture."
» "I am a pretty open person and am willing to share easily."

It is noteworthy that a new dimension of *self-awareness* emerges in the Late Commentaries, a dimension we called *self-awareness* of *positive transformation*. Some examples are:

» "I have learned so much from this class [;] … my patience has grown. I am so much more aware of myself and how I am responding to other people."
» "I feel that I listen more effectively."
» "Being assertive is an issue that I have had difficulty with all my life [.] … I find that I have grown in my ability to talk to people."

In sum, the commentaries are replete with statements of analysis of the "self," but the focus of that analysis moves from *hoping to* advance to disciplinary knowledge to *knowing how to* advance to disciplinary knowledge. This focus parallels Yancey's (1998) description of how a companion piece of writing can work as an important tool for reflection-in-action, which leads toward *self-awareness* (pp. 31-37).

Connections: Student links him/herself to classmates or to the field of counseling.

The Early Commentaries that evoke the connections category refer to links or associations made in the classroom, ones that allow for a more personalized and comfortable atmosphere. Some examples of connections statements from the Early Commentaries are:

» "I am glad that [names familiar students] are there so I don't feel alone."

» "I thought knowing everyone's background was really helpful."

» "Prior to the start of the semester, I thought that it might be beneficial for me to have familiar people in my class."

» "I like how the tables are set up – it makes the room feel more personable."

» "Opening himself [the instructor] for the first interview was smart. It allowed us to … feel a sense of connections to the teacher through his sharing a personal part of his life with the class."

In contrast, Late Commentaries coded as *connections* are characterized by links being made between course experience and learning that could be applied outside of the classroom, as in the following:

» "This has helped at work but especially with my friends and families [.] … My communication with all the different people in my life has dramatically changed….So now my patience has grown and I think that is a direct result of having to listen to the client to paraphrase, summarize or reflect what they have said to me."

» "I do see myself in an interview now being more intentional, I can slow down, think clearer, and attend to my client. I can listen, feel empathy and follow his or her story better now than when I first started this class."

» "Learning these skills has made me much more aware and in tune in my everyday work. I think I

had the skills all along but needed a guide in how and when to use them."

» "I do notice myself integrating these skills into my daily life."

Some *connections* are linked to a specific course activity. For example, a student makes a link to the written commentaries:

» "Having to write [the weekly commentary] has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor."

Or students make a link to the counseling interview transcription assignment as in the following:

» "It [the written transcription of and commentary on the interview] caused me to look critically at my own style and hopefully develop some new thought patterns by having to write everything down."

» "It was good to hear that others in the class were feeling the same about how revealing personal recording and transcribing is. It really does put you in touch with self."

Or the student makes a link to feedback from fellow students:

» "My classmates helped me to understand myself, them, and others, especially my clients, in a more productive way [.] … I feel I listen more effectively and am able to help my clients with their issues."

Teaching Methods: Student considers the format of class sessions and instructor's style and/or makes suggestions regarding the teaching method, the instructor, or specific activities.

Commentaries that we coded as statements about *teaching methods* covered several domains: *surprise, discomfort, positive response,* and *critique. Positive response* and *critique* are represented in both the Early and Late Commentaries. However, there is no evidence of *surprise* or *discomfort* in the Late Commentaries. In

the Early Commentaries, *surprise* at *teaching methods* includes encounters with the unexpected:

» "I'm used to a lot of theory…and this seems to be the exact opposite."

» "This course seems much different from undergraduate studies. The student actually participates."

» "I am used to a much more structured set up…to getting a syllabus at the beginning and going over the whole class structure and expectations."

Discomfort with *teaching methods* is expressed in:

» "At first I was intimidated by the long syllabus."

» "I was a little overwhelmed as I first glanced at the syllabus."

» "This was all new to me and I find myself in unfamiliar territory."

Positive response to *teaching methods* is represented by the following:

» "I enjoyed your technique of having students interview the professor."

» "How wonderful it is to be actively involved in your own learning process."

» "I am very excited about this class in the ways of content, student make-up, and format."

» "I appreciate the fact that our readings are done prior to each class so that class time can be devoted to putting the information to work."

Critique of *teaching methods* in the Early Commentaries includes analysis of instructional activities in a positive way and suggestions for change, as in:

» "A simple lecture on that information would not have had the same impact."

» "I would also like [the instructor] to go over the material in a lecture format, and then proceed with group activities."

» "…it is more important to practice the counseling skills than to just read the textbooks."

» "This course does not strive for you to understand definitions and concepts, but to actually utilize

the concepts and skills in class and on audio and videotapes."

In the Late Commentaries, as in the Early Commentaries, the *teaching methods* category includes both *positive comments* and *critiques*, but as might be expected, there are no examples of *surprise* about or *discomfort*:

» "Of all things in this course, the hands-on experience and practice sessions we've seen have been the most helpful. This has been the most student-oriented class I've ever taken. You definitely geared the class toward helping us learn the proper steps and techniques of a good interview."

» "I must say I will miss this class a great deal. I feel I benefited greatly from the hands on experience that I received in this course, and I must say it was nice to put the things I read about in class books into action. I look forward to the opportunity to attend other classes like this one where I can practice skill sets on becoming an effective counselor."

» "Since this is our final commentary, I really wanted you to know how much I've enjoyed this class. It certainly has been challenging - no doubt about that - but it has also been very rewarding. As other people have mentioned, I do notice myself integrating these skills into my daily life… All in all, this has been one of my all-time favorite classes."

» "This has been an exceptional course for me. Just by writing these commentaries have helped me in a deeper sense than just being a "student.". Having to write 'Part A' has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor."

Critiques of teaching methods in the Late Commentaries include suggestions, analyses of particular instructional activities, or mixed or negative comments on those activities:

» "I would like to reflect on the whole [previous] session. Contrary to what it may seem by the other commentaries I did really enjoy the class. Did it challenge me, maybe not as much as I or you would like. Was it thought provoking, undoubtedly yes. It caused me to look critically at my own style and hopefully develop some new thought patterns by having to write everything down. I still stand steadfast in saying that I believe we may oversimplify what counselors do by the way we broke things down."

» "Going to the 5 stages felt rushed at first. We probably should have had the reading assignment without the commentary. It didn't flow at first."

» "First of all, I would like to state that I prefer to get reading assignments ahead of class rather than receive lecture then read materials. I find the former to facilitate better classroom participation, and better practice sessions."

Significance of Reflective Writing for Professional Education

Low-stakes, reflective writing has ramifications for professional education. As discussed below, the writing reveals changes in student self-awareness from Situational Self-knowledge to Pattern Self-knowledge, which is an important concept for practitioners (Weinstein & Alschuler, 1985). Furthermore, an instructor can make mid-course adjustments to his or her teaching methods because the writing uncovers movement (or the lack thereof) on the part of the students from personal learning to practitioner knowledge.

Self-Awareness. Comments about *self-awareness* shift in three major ways from the Early to the Late Commentaries. First, statements alluding to anxiety and doubt, while still present, are much less prevalent in the Late Commentaries. Second, we observed a trend toward students expressing positive transformations. Third, Late Commentaries coded as *self-aware-*

ness reflect greater complexity and sophistication than do Early Commentaries so coded.

Decreased anxiety and doubt. In the Late Commentaries, students seem to move toward greater confidence in their potential to do the work. They are apprehensive about specific elements of counseling rather than their general abilities, as in this comment: "It is difficult to know which one thing to pick to focus on [in a counseling session]." Thus students move away from general anxiety and doubt about their learning capabilities to specific concerns about the requirements of professional practice. A general sense of having the potential to learn the work prevails. This shift might be expected, given the experiential and supportive teaching approaches that the instructor applies. For example, weekly student performance of skills is followed by corrective feedback and further practice. Thus one student expresses a sense of empowerment, self-appreciation, and potential in a Late Commentary with these words, "I can fit the field and the field can fit me."

Positive transformations. A second notable shift in the Late Commentaries coded as *self-awareness* lies in student tendencies to reflect positive transformations. In the Late Commentaries, students mention that their patience has grown, that they are more aware of how they respond to others, and that they now talk less and listen more effectively. These transformations are artifacts of the course process, which encourages successful performance as well as increased self-awareness through writing and talking and then encourages changing emotional and behavioral tendencies. These recursive activities are likely to be central to the transformation.

Increased developmental complexity. An additional important development around s*elf-awareness* emerges in the Late Commentaries as the complexity of student self-knowledge increases. *Self-awareness* comments become more abstract and attuned to general personality patterns in the Late Commentaries. These shifts parallel those that Weinstein and Alschuler

(1985) found in their Self-Knowledge Development Theory, which plots the evolution of self-awareness from Situational to Pattern Self-Knowledge. Our research team suspects that the Early *self-awareness* Commentaries represent Situational Self-Knowledge, which Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) describe as a person identifying a single emotional state that refers to one condition or situation, exemplified in comments like, "I find myself nervous" and "I feel unsure about my presence in the Counseling Program." There are no references in the Early Commentaries to general patterns of thinking and/or feeling.

By contrast, Weinstein and Alschuler's (1985) Pattern Self-Knowledge lies in the individual's awareness of her or his stable, cross-situational tendencies to react in a certain way to a class of situations. Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) describe Pattern Self-Knowledge as an ability to "see beyond the moment, generalize across situations, more accurately anticipate [their reactions to] events, and systematically modify their pattern of perceiving and responding to those situations" (p. 21). In the Late Commentaries, students are inclined to note such behavioral tendencies, as in "I became aware of how strong my maternal feelings are" and "When I'm nervous, I tend to ramble on and on." These utterances demonstrate awareness of broad, cross-occasion patterns.

Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) make suggestions for an intentional "self-knowledge education," one that would use writing to encourage more complex self-awareness in students. Thus, in a course, instructors might ask students to write responses to such questions as, "How do your responses in this situation remind you of responses in similar situations?" and "Would you like to change that type of response?" These questions were common in the Counseling Skills course. In one exercise, students were asked to reflect on and write about patterns of emotional expression in their family and ethnic backgrounds, patterns that affect their cur-

rent ways of managing and expressing emotions. They were then asked how they would like to change such patterns. For example, they were asked to note types of clients, such as child abusers, against whom they might have prejudice and to counter such bias with alternative perspectives, such as, "They were once abused and are also hurting." Students are thus challenged to see beyond the moment, which is a hallmark of Pattern Self-Knowledge.

Further research is needed to determine the role of low-stakes writing in promoting the emergence of more complex self-knowledge in students. It can be seen here, however, that low stakes, reflective writing provides a means for the instructor to observe student change during a course, and the instructor can share selected Commentaries that model Pattern Self-Knowledge as examples for other students.

Connections. Students begin the Counseling Skills course by expressing simple comfort at experiencing the personalized dimension of the course. They describe the support and *connections* that they find with simple, present tense statements about the reassurance that the personalized atmosphere of the early sessions provides.

In the Late Commentaries, the *connections* are of a different order, what we call "learning connections" (as opposed to personal connections), that is, linkages between the course and students' emerging knowledge. They make overt reference to course content and learning, as in "My patience has grown and I think that is a direct result of having to listen to the client, to paraphrase, summarize, or reflect what they have said to me." The students are still self-focused, as opposed to focused on the profession. This parallels Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2003) findings that an individual at the Beginning Counselor stage (one who has just completed a course on helping skills) continues to be concerned more about his or her performance than about the client's concerns or the details of professional

practice. Such egocentrism is thus to be expected at this phase.

Some students in the Late Commentaries link the interpersonal environment of the course with disciplinary learning, as in "My classmates helped me to understand myself, them, and others, especially my clients, in more productive ways." Others connect the writing with their learning: "Having to write [the commentary] has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor."

Students seem to move from trying to find safety through personal connectedness in the classroom in the Early Commentaries to connecting learning to practitioner worlds outside of the classroom in the Late Commentaries. In a sense, they move from what Maslow (1968) describes as a more basic concern for safety and for belongingness to a desire to express themselves in their emerging work. As Maslow suggests, once their basic needs are attended to, students can take learning risks – especially those that require first critique of, and then changes in, their own current behaviors. The course process is predicated on the developmental principles of support and challenge (Sanford, 1966), which are considered the core conditions for human development. The support of the early personalized sessions continued, but challenge began immediately also, with in-class interpersonal encounters and testing of skills. The Late Commentaries again provide a window into students' thinking. Their *connections* are now more de-centered. "What is" in the Early Commentaries is largely replaced by "What is becoming."

Teaching Methods. It is noteworthy that students express surprise and discomfort about *teaching methods* in the Early Commentaries, but not in the Late ones. In the initial sessions, a participatory learning environment is worthy of comment perhaps because encouraging student involvement in the construction of knowledge is still a "transgression," to use hooks'

(1994) term, of normal, teacher-centered, classroom discourse. For some students, such a teaching method breeds discomfort. That discomfort seems to lie in both the newness of the egalitarian, interactive nature of the classroom process and in the course demands. Students are "jolted" out of the more traditional, passive role of knowledge-recipient and into the role of knowledge-creator. And students have the opportunity to express their uneasiness in the written commentary, which allows the instructor to address it accordingly. The absence of surprise or discomfort with experiential teaching methods in the Late Commentaries suggests that students and the instructor have made adjustments.

The comments on *teaching methods* are predominantly positive in both the Early and Late Commentaries. Students express appreciation for being actively involved in learning. Most notably, they comment on classroom process rather than on course content: "Of all things in this course, the hands-on experience and practice sessions … have been the most helpful." By the Late Commentaries students' surprise and discomfort have generally given way to appreciation and analysis of how the *teaching methods* work for their learning.

In the Late Commentaries, students understand the instructional choices and are able to proclaim their preference. In fact, the assignment to do weekly written commentaries is given with the intention that students give voice to their preferences and doubts. They now are able to do so, in a sense putting their name on the world in what Freire (1976) would point to as a way of coming to understand the world through a dialogic process rather than a domineering one. We see students stepping back and recognizing instructional choices and the impact of those decisions on them as learners. No longer are they passive recipients of teacher transmission of knowledge, nor are they ignorant of method. A possible isomorphism occurs through the revealing of *teaching methods*; as in the work of counseling, it is good

to reveal the process to the client so that she or he can take greater ownership of other interactions in her or his life (Rogers, 1951).

One benefit of written commentaries lies in the instructor's use of them to direct course process. Praise for *teaching methods* encourages the instructor to re-dedicate himself to classroom participation and activity. That affirmation can be important, as experiential teaching methods require significant time for group interaction and individual exercises. Thus, the instructor can be emboldened by student feedback to continue such choices. Future research may show whether assigning this type of writing helps the instructor to become a reflective practitioner as well.

No single method or set of approaches can meet all learners' needs. The instructor can see these different needs in Early Commentaries and be reminded to mix methods for efficacious teaching. In that vein, Chickering (1993) has called for a "junkyard curriculum," meaning a combining of many methods, so that multiple learning styles and levels of readiness might be addressed. In fact, research shows that students come to higher education with varying epistemologies and learning styles (Knefelkamp, 1974; Kolb, 1984; Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997). Thus, review of material through lecture and illustration suits the needs of "received knowers" (Belenky et. al., 1986), whereas independent and group analysis matches the readiness of "constructive knowers."

The written commentaries contain no negative comments on the experiential dimensions of the course. It may be that students are disinclined to criticize instruction, even though they have been told that the commentaries will not be graded. It is more likely that students are affirming the predominant value of active learning--critical thinking, try-outs, writing, small-group problem-solving, and similar approaches (Knefelkamp, 1974). Constructive knowers demand such activity because they are ready to integrate ideas

in their own ways; received knowers need it because they must be introduced to the nature of thinking for themselves.

Conclusion

During data analysis of the Commentaries, one of the questions that emerged was "Is the writing itself significant?" The instructor had asked students to email responses to four questions with the first asking for "personal reactions," a type of writing very similar to Fulwiler's (1982) use of journals to "warm students up" or to help them make the transition from their previous activity (talking, walking, etc.) into the course material. The counseling assignment parallels what Fulwiler describes as using journals to summarize a class discussion or lecture and to make the learning personal. Is it important that the instructor asks the students to take this step in writing? How would the assignment be different if the three "content" questions are asked without the "personal" question?

During the open coding phase of our research, especially of Early Commentaries, we found frequent examples of linguistic features such as "I think I _____" and "I feel that I _____." While some of these linguistic patterns persist in the Late Commentaries, their number is reduced. In addition, "embracing complexity and ambiguity" emerged as a preliminary code, but we were unable to sustain that code as we developed our three core categories of *self-awareness*, *teaching methods*, and *connections*. These shifts in codes may somehow correspond with the learning that occurred in the course. An analysis of low-stakes, reflective writing is one way of capturing that learning. Seeing its embodiment in written form may be significant. Our focus now becomes examining how these findings from a pre-professional course support, contradict, and/or refine our understandings of—and advocacy for—the use of low-stakes, reflective writing as a tool for learning across the curriculum. To address this issue, we need

to extend our earlier review of the major claims about low-stakes, reflective writing-to-learn.

Elbow (1993) asserts that low-stakes writing prepares students for better high-stakes writing; however, in counseling education the main purpose is not to produce an effective writer, but rather to produce an effective counselor—someone who listens and responds professionally during an interview session. The verbal "text" that the counselor will be producing in actual sessions is not a written artifact, but rather a learned set of responses that low-stakes writing may better prepare the student to articulate. Counseling is largely a verbal enterprise, but it is also a dialogic one. It requires the ability to respond to both internal and external cues on the spot. That process parallels freewriting.

Some of the richest research on the benefit of writing for learning in the disciplines comes from Britton (1993) and Fulwiler (1982). In "The Personal Connection: Journal Writing Across the Curriculum," Fulwiler says:

> What we see in the form of a product (the journal passage itself) is actually most valuable to the student as a process (what went on in the student's head while writing). Phrases like 'I guess,' 'I think,' 'It seems,' [and] 'I mean,' … indicate attempts to make sense of the teacher's question through the student's own language. Other trigger words in this passage are past-tense constructions ('I agreed' and 'I thought') which reveal the writer testing prior assumptions against both the definition question and what went on in class that day (p. 20).

Fulwiler concludes by writing, "[T]he value of coupling personal with academic learning should not be overlooked; self-knowledge provides the motivation for whatever other knowledge an individual seeks" (p. 30). For Elbow (1993), freewriting and "evaluation-free zones" lead to writing that can later be used for "writing tasks that involve more intellectual pushing." For Fulwiler (1982), journals are a low-stakes writing activity that can encourage students to see the relationships between their lives and their courses of study.

In the field of counseling, which is talk-intensive, writing has not often been examined as a vehicle for increasing students' counseling ability. However, Sprinthall (1994) has presented a model of counselor education in which role-taking (placing students in real roles that require them to put their own egos aside and respond with empathy and intense listening) and guided reflection are central. Sprinthall and his colleagues have found significant increases in ego and moral development to be related to the combination of role taking (as in the counseling practice sessions of the course we studied) and written reflection (as in the Early and Late Commentaries we analyzed). Those findings reinforce Dewey's (1938) dictum that experience alone can be mis-educative, and that reflection on the meanings and consequences of experience are crucial for deep learning. The current study might serve as a spur for fields such as counselor education to make the written dimension more intentional and explicitly tied to the task of learning how to become a practicing professional (see, for example, Craig, Lerner, & Poe 2012).

Research such as that presented in this article is an important means of increasing our understanding of talking, writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. We began with an analysis of low-stakes writing in pre-professional counselor education. That study has helped us see how students transform in a pre-professional field. It shows change in self-awareness, in knowing how instead of knowing what, and in the ability to imagine oneself **in** the field. Writing lets students practice using language for learning and ties into the verbal and lateral intelligences and introspection that are important goals in professional education. Writing lets the writer listen to her/himself. From the instructor's perspective, writing allows him or her to see the

thinking that students are engaging in, thus providing a feedback loop for pedagogical choices. This was the instructor's original purpose for the assignment, but as a result of our study, he now also sees writing as a possible means for students to learn course content and to write themselves into professional practice. And, when students hear their classmates' writing read aloud, they see connections among themselves.

In sum, low-stakes, reflective writing gives evidence of student movement toward professional practice, provides feedback in the form of dialogue among instructor and students which supports the instructor's attempt to implement critical pedagogy, and pushes students to own their learning (developmental intention). Low stakes, reflective writing in such a pedagogy is a rich resource for all involved. ■■

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Designing Online Course Assignments for Student Engagement: Strategies and Best Practices
Andrew T. McCarthy

Abstract

Increasingly, faculty members are tasked with designing online courses in their disciplines, which often requires new skills and considerations. This article proposes a process for the development of a new course to meet evolving requirements of curriculum goal mapping, intellectual skills development, and student engagement. While these seem to be diverse considerations, an approach will be proposed that reveals a very realistic integration of these three elements into a cohesive and assessable course format.

Keywords

curriculum mapping, learning outcomes, assessing, higher order thinking skills, multiple intelligences, multiple learning styles

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Introduction

Creating an online course is a complex process. Not only are there numerous requirements which must be met to satisfy student, institution, and assessment expectations, there also is the challenge of programming the course to unfold without direct, face-to-face, interaction with the students. The course developer is advised to consider a hierarchy of academic goals and a commitment to engage the student through multiple forms of interaction, with relevant assessment. Many online assignments can be adapted to the traditional classroom learning environment as well as the hybrid classroom (face to face, with an online component), but they work particularly well in the online environment where a set of unique interactions and assessments is possible. Course design must also recognize diversity in how students learn, what skills they can use, and how they can be taught in the online environment. These student-centered elements must be put into practice in a structure of goal setting that is increasingly essential to support higher education assessment. This can be achieved through the implementation of course assignments conceptualized around a series of primary online learning interactions (in conjunction with higher-order thinking skills) as supplementary components of the course interactions and associated measurable learning outcomes. The

numerous course design elements, just outlined, testify to the complexity in current online course design.

Contemporary approaches to online course delivery are at a crossroads. There are new ways of delivering instructional materials which are dedicated to reaching the maximum number of students at the expense of the quality of course learning interactions.[1] What sets the standard online course apart from the rising behemoths is precisely the level of interaction that students seek and the accountability achieved by a fully assessable program that is sought by employers. Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, and Treslan (2010) find that online students look for interactive characteristics that are very similar to those expected in the traditional classroom, and Rachel Zupek (2010) affirms employer preference for assurance that the education is legitimate. Until these issues are resolved in the large student volume approach, there is a clear need for educators to shape fundamental, high-interaction, readily assessable online courses.

Beginning with the Student

Since Howard Gardner's (1983/2003) groundbreaking analysis of multiple intelligences, there has been excellent research to support and develop student intellectual capacities (See also Gardner, 1993). This has yielded a parallel research endeavor to support multiple learning styles. Note that multiple intelligences are not the same thing as multiple learning styles. The former term refer to student capabilities or more innate potential while the latter refers to information processing preferences (Prashnig, 2005). The challenge is to find a manageable balance of learning activities which respond to difference in learning style, while challenging students to learn in multiple ways. Examples of best-practice learning interactions will show how various learning styles can be supported in the online environment.

The need to develop student-centered learning activities is further reinforced by several trends in the post-secondary learning environment. Course mapping is coming to higher education assessment. Course objectives will no longer be measured by how enticing and erudite they are. Instead, they must be clearly measurable in the form of student learning outcomes (for instance, see Allen, 2003 and Huba & Freed, 2000), and they must be directly associated with specific learning assignments. Outcomes-based assessment considers what skills and information the student actually takes from the course. It represents a shift away from the course or teaching objectives which tend to identify the skills and material the instructor intends to present. Greater attention to outcomes-based assessment has the added benefit of responding to the developing trend, identified by Arum and Roksa (2011), of a mutual student and faculty culture of disengagement in which little is asked of either party by way of tacit agreement. Traditional assessment practices which attend to instructor input to the educational interaction but not the student output might be a contributory factor in encouraging students to follow the path of least resistance in their educations. Online education is uniquely suited to overcome much of this challenge as educators and students must show tangible evidence that desired outcomes have been met. Thanks, in part, to these factors, online course development in the foreseeable future will include the use of variety in delivery methodology, responsiveness to multiple learning styles, and improved student engagement through increased contact and integration of outcome-conscious assessment.

Course designers who have committed to student-centered learning still must give some attention to the various levels of academic goals at the institution. The University of Connecticut (University of Connecticut, n.d.) uses a "Design it backwards…Deliver it forwards" approach. They recognize a fairly standard collection of goals, ranging from institution, academic program, and the course, to the unit and lesson goals. The designer

should start with institutional goals when developing a course from the ground up; otherwise it might be necessary to begin with some loose course goals in mind and move up the hierarchy to establish a trail of connection with the necessarily broader institutional and academic program goals. From this point, it is possible to shift in the other direction to reconsider course goals and derive lesson goals from these. Unit goals also can be formed if the course takes shape around units or (more likely) around modules, which are increasingly the backbone of online courses. The use of an organizational matrix can be beneficial. (The development of a matrix will be discussed below, and a very basic example can be found in Table 1.) The designer must be willing to put these various goal levels in writing, without making a final investment in them. The goals should drive the development of the course and not constrict it; they can establish important learning milestones that will aid in structuring assignments and determining assessment outcomes.

Designing Learning Interactions

In an online course, there are abundant opportunities to engage students in a manner in which they learn most effectively due to the number of learning interactions carried out. It is up to the designer to use these opportunities to facilitate various learning styles, even if it would be a challenge to tailor the course to each student's preferred learning style. In some cases, it is possible to allow students to select from a variety of assignment options. For instance, the course information could be used to write a short essay or write a mock newspaper article for students who tend toward a reading and writing style of learning, while visual learners could elect to create an idea chart or mind map. A selection of options is not required for every assignment since ideally students should be challenged to expand their intellectual repertoire with other learning styles. This challenge takes place through *learning interactions*.

The structure of interactions identified by Moore and Kearsley (1996/2011) is widely recognized and provides a good developmental framework. The first interaction that Moore and Kearsley identify is *student with student*. A majority of online courses initiate this interaction through mandatory participation in online discussion forums. This format calls upon students to articulate their own ideas and make discerning judgments or constructive recommendations about the ideas posed by peers. To integrate some features of kinesthetic (whole body) learning, students can be asked to tie in their own physical experience with the subject matter. They could describe the most congested street they have ever walked down when discussing the struggle with urban congestion in a lesson about human society.[2] Beyond this approach, there are other types of interactions which can be used to exercise and assess student learning styles.

Two more common interactions where student learning styles can be considered are those of *student with course content* and *student with instructor*. Saint Leo University, a leader in online course delivery, adds a fourth type of interaction which deserves inclusion. In light of the non-traditional student population in online courses, and adult learning styles, Saint Leo (2010) describes an interaction titled, *student with self*.

Describing each interaction in turn, *student with course content* interactions are achieved every time students apply reading (or, for the visual learner, audio-visual lecture material, such as podcasts) to an assignment. The assignment can range from the traditional, like a quiz, to more creative options: "Develop a needs analysis chart for your local community's underserved population. Identify an unfulfilled service requirement and design the basic parameters of an organization that could be created to fill that service requirement by forming a mission statement, values statement, and organizational charter." This initial response can be extended to a *student with student*

interaction by turning it into a group project through the discussion forum.

Student with instructor interactions usually occur within the context of formal and informal feedback. Graded assignments that allow for revision typify this form of interaction. A very straightforward example is the use of idea charts: "Create three idea charts to outline and support the most important concepts or movements in the reading. Include a common, summary reflection." This assignment indicates how well the student has integrated the reading assignment into his or her understanding of the course topic. *Student with self* interactions work best when they are pre-staged. At the beginning of a course, students can be assigned to write a short autobiography of their experience with a given topic, or they can be asked to list all the terms they initially associate with a topic.[3] In a final paper, they can draw this material and any other experiences in the course together to integrate and reflect on how the course has caused them to be more aware of themselves as learners. Although there are limits to tactile learning in an online course, the inclusion of lived experience in the autobiography adds a dimension of kinesthetic learning. To ensure that multiple learning styles are engaged, most course developers form a course around three or four of these types of interactions, but they must also consider a primary methodological question: What *kind* of learning do they want to see taking place?

One reason that it is possible to speak of kinds of learning is the work of Miller and Seller (1990). They identify three types of learning, each entailing a consideration of both general learning styles and teaching styles, as well as the type of interaction used. At the very basic level is **transmissive learning** in which information is transmitted to the students. Since information is not much more than organized data, transmitting content demands little more than identifying data and requiring students to memorize it and fit it into appropriate categories. In early stages of online education,

instructors relied almost exclusively on this approach, (for instance, posting notes on a static webpage), even after it was being abandoned by traditional classroom. Although it is easy to verify that the transmission occurred, there is very little depth to this type of learning. It primarily calls for the use of rote memorization as a learning activity, which is why Miller and Seller offer advanced approaches.

Miller and Seller identify **transactional learning** as a more inventive form. Rather than emphasizing the *transfer* of content, the instructor ensures a series of engagements *with* the content, through the use of intellectual skills, with various agents of the course. (These course agents are the same as those described by Moore and Kearsley (1996/2011) and Saint Leo (2010), above.) Such agents can include the authors of written course material, other students in the course, the instructor, and the student him- or herself. In transactional learning, students can be asked to identify a possible solution to a stated problem or question by the instructor. Other agents, such as students, debate the merits and shortcomings of classmates' submissions to reach a consensus on the top solutions. For example, the assignment could be to re-write an amendment to the Bill of Rights as a group. Students become familiar with the material while experiencing the complexity of shaping legislative language in committee.

The most advanced learning format that Miller and Seller note is **transformative learning**. This approach is most closely associated with the work of Mezirow; students transform their perspective of some aspect of life or the world as they bring together two essential elements: critical analysis of course content and reflection on their relevant personal experiences (Mezirow, 1997, 2009). It is easier to set up transformative learning activities than resultant activities to measure student learning outcomes. For example, a pre-staged autobiographical reflection at the beginning of the course can be linked with interim reflections posted

in a common forum. For the final reflection, students may be required to draw on both their initial perspective and the reflections of fellow students as they shape a cumulative reflection on how their learning experience affected their view of the course topic. Numerous student self-reports indicate that this assignment has proven a very effective means to achieve transformation.[4] Whether students are carrying out transactional or transformational learning, the skills they develop and use will be a central feature of course assessment and prepare them as lifelong learners and valued employees.

Integrating Higher-Order Thinking Skills into Learning Interactions

While there are certain specific technical skills pertinent to every discipline, the most universally desired academic trait might be described as *higher-order thinking skills* (Hart Research Associates, 2010). Many interactions in the online learning environment are well suited to call upon these skills while engaging diverse learning styles. Concentrating on the enhancement and application of higher-order thinking skills in a course enables course developers to visualize the application of many of the interactions described herein to their own courses. Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) first identified the most recognized taxonomy of learning or thinking skills in 1956. Moving from basic to advanced skills, these include knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. At the upper end, *analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation* comprise the higher-order skills. These also happen to be the skills which are regularly utilized in transactions and are most supportive of a transformational experience. *Knowledge* and *comprehension* are closely associated with transmissive learning experience, and *application* can support either approach, being especially helpful in transactional learning. Designing a course to call on student use of higher-order thinking skills through the series of such interactions is a practi-

cal way to facilitate transactional and transformational learning.

There are three primary opportunities for interaction using higher-order thinking skills in typical online courses: the discussion boards; module-based written assignments; and broader assignments at midterm or final intervals. On the discussion board, a carefully phrased open-ended question can set the stage for the use of all three higher-order skills. For example, "What changes in technology and business practice allowed for globalization, and what are at least three ways in which you are connected globally with someone else?" Analysis takes place when students identify a change in technology with potential global impact. Evaluation occurs as the likely impact is explained, and synthesis results when students are asked to draw on their prior knowledge and experiences, including physical experiences for kinesthetic and tactile learners, to reveal their personal connection with globalization. To expand the use of higher-order skills, these experiences can be applied to new material raised in the module preview, the module notes, or the audio-visual and reading material.

Module-based written assignments are also versatile means of addressing higher-order skills. To engage analysis, the assignment can ask students to read a piece of text in order to identify material previously introduced. For instance, a sample assignment might be, "Based on the components of a moral act introduced in your textbook, discuss and determine whether the situation described in the first case study qualifies as a morally just act." With this prompt, students analyze a case study and determine what elements of a moral act apply. To engage synthesis, the question can call on the students to relate their own experience or other new material to the issue at hand in order to derive new ideas. Here the students can connect their familiarity with "having the decks stacked against them," with the

concept of unjust social structures. The result could be a contextualized definition of moral injustice.

Broader assignments, especially those placed at the end of a course, are the best opportunity for *student with self* interactions when these include a reflection component as described earlier. The reflection should not be unstructured. It should be carefully designed, with multiple features that call for the student to demonstrate higher-order skills while engaging with the class content. Pairing a broader assignment with a previous assignment enables students to analyze and select key expressions of their prior experience and expectations with the course content and course expectations. To facilitate transformative learning, students can be asked to evaluate what has changed in their perspective. Alternatively (or in addition), they can integrate ideas from various parts of the course and apply these to an instructor proposed situation or minor case study. For example, students have been required to review Pixar's *Wall-E*, a movie about a machine who teaches humans how to recapture their humanity. As part of the final exam, the students are asked to analyze what had gone wrong with the society (analysis), determine which principles of social justice are most involved in the movie (judgment), and describe how they would shape a society around the principles to prevent the situation that Wall-E faced (synthesis). Assignments in this format give students the chance to exercise higher-order skills and use audio and visual learning styles. They also give the instructor rich opportunity to assess student learning development.

Key Design Features for Assessment

Because institutions frequently require graded written assignments for each learning module, there are many occasions to set up interactions in the module-based assignments. Not only can there be numerous interactions, they also can follow a variety of formats. It is worthwhile designing modular written assignments

after discussion forum assignments and broader term or concluding cumulative reflection assignments because the variety allows for flexibility in covering all remaining learning outcomes and course objectives. While not diminishing the importance of these assignments as opportunities to engage the student with course content in creative and active ways, they can also function as the catch-all opportunity to facilitate remaining learning outcomes. The options for these assignments are limited only by the designer's imagination and the learning outcomes which have yet to be assigned a vehicle of assessment. Some examples include writing a fictional story that draws together elements of historical experience, poetry that exemplifies a common outlook or sentiment about a topic, or designing an advertisement that demonstrates awareness of the power of symbolism and imagery. One also could write a mock newspaper article. This would encourage the student to research and *analyze* course material, *determine* which material is most pertinent under a given word-count constraint, and *synthesize* the material in a common format. Some courses require students to script a short play, rewrite a law, or create a discipline-specific terminology handbook. The important point is to design the assignment to rigorously engage the student in active learning with both the material, and the skills in a manner that connects well with the desired outcomes.

How can it be determined if the course has achieved the goal of student engagement and skills development in conjunction with the anticipated outcomes, objectives, and learning goals? Some very basic mapping can help. There are numerous, detailed assessment checklists which are available, and many of them are online. (See for instance: SREB, 2006; NEA, 2002; NEASC.) Most of these include consideration of specific national, regional, state, and local school district assessment expectations, and it can be useful to review any that are pertinent to the course under design. To keep the focus on the level of engagement and skills

development in the course, development of a much more simplified table that reflects course specifications is recommended. Table 1 is an example that allows the designer to begin with a list of broader institutional and departmental goals. One or two appropriate goals from this level can be co-listed with subject-related goals. Under the course-goal heading these should be rewritten as measurable student learning outcomes. Referencing specific course goals/outcomes from Table 1, the designer can briefly outline an active learning interaction in the chart in Table 2. Identifying the type of interaction and type of learning will be useful in designer self-assessment of the course. A completed set of charts should reveal the use of all four types of interactions, sometimes more than once. This will assure significant student engagement. Identifying the type of learning will allow the designer to gauge whether there is a preponderance of active learning in the course if transactional and transformative learning types dominate.

This process of filling out simplified assessment tables should be just that, a process. There should be give and take and some returning to the drawing board to be sure that student interactions were developed for a purpose and not just busy work. If an interaction does not fit into the table, and re-phrasing does not help, the designer should be willing to let it go and come up with a new interaction. Once a reasonable set of connections has been established across the table for each interaction, the process is complete, and the assessment features of the course are designed. Now all that remains to be done is to select and deliver the content. By following the guidelines and suggestions presented above, and a willingness to think across several dimensions of course development, the designer will have a course that actively engages the student, exercises a variety of learning styles and thinking skills, and satisfies the assessment requirements of the institution. ▮▮

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Notes

1   Led by the Khan Academy, TED-Ed, MAT@USC, Udacity, and MITx, many players in the new wave in online education are fueled by seed money and driven by a rush to maximize student headcount prior to settling into a long-term, sustainable model that balances the education of students with reliable accountability for the verification that the education has indeed occurred. See Felix Salmon (2012). While efforts to educate students in numbers exceeding 100,000 are impressive, these programs still need development in the area of personal interaction, in addition to accountability. The use of social networking to establish student learning communities, in some of the cutting-edge approaches to online learning, only accounts for one of the types of interaction covered in this article. The exception to the identified frontrunners in online technology might be MAT@USC which appears to be developed for traditional-sized classes using streaming video interface for online video interaction.

2   For a lesson on meaning, I have asked students to list the ten most insignificant things that they did in the last 24 hours. They seem to enjoy outdoing each other in pursuit of meaninglessness, but, strangely enough, they discover meaning in the least likely places as their consciousness is broadened.

3   An example of a course related use of autobiography: "Describe a cultural situation in which you felt most out of place. Include multiple details of setting, other characters, and actions (plot)." This assignment could be used as the baseline for an end of course reflection on cultural awareness and adaptation.

4   Three examples of student reports which exemplify varying degrees of transformative learning experience are listed here: "One aspect in which my appreciation for [course content] has matured is in understanding the importance of each person's individual experience of the writings."

"In the midst of the course I did struggle with marrying what I understood before with the content, yet in the wrestling, arrived in humble submission to the reality that I understand more, and in that understanding found a strengthening of my belief."

"From the beginning, having the very method used to interpret the writings being explained, was a wonder and showed the shallowness with which I had approached this subject in the past."

Table 2. Interaction Development Matrix

Course Goal/ outcome	Tool, knowledge, or skill engaged	Description of interaction	Location of assignment in course	Type of interaction	Type of learning
1a	A1	Complete assigned reading in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*; analyze reading for examples of how freedom is curtailed; post example; vote for most serious example in online group; develop group declaration on inalienable right to freedom.	Week 4 Discussion Forum	Student w/ course Student w/ student	Trans-actional Trans-formative
1b	A2				
1c	A3				
1d	A4				
1e	A5				

Table 1. Goal Selection Matrix

Level of Goal	Description	
Institutional	Identify any college/university learning outcomes or goals here. If your institution has not developed these analyze your institutional mission for elements that reflect academic goals. List these below: a. The college will graduate students with an appreciation of human freedom b. c. d. e.	
Academic Program / Division/Department	Complete this only if institution uses these goals	
		Required tools, knowledge, skills
Course	1. Select one or two goals above which could potentially be addressed in your course as learning outcomes. Identify three to six additional subject related learning outcomes. List these below: a. Students successfully completing the requirements of this course will be able to identify and analyze challenges to freedom b. c. d. e.	A. Describe which tools, knowledge, and higher order thinking skills would facilitate the goals listed at left. List these below: 1.analysis, judgment, synthesis 2. 3. 4. 5.
Unit or Module	2. Complete this only if required to specify goals by course units or modules	B.

*Move to Table 2.

Supporting a Vertical Writing Model: Faculty Conversations Across the Curriculum

Georgia Rhoades and Beth Carroll

Abstract

In its award-winning program, WAC at Appalachian State University has placed faculty conversation about its vertical writing curriculum at the center of faculty development. Based on two dedicated writing courses in composition in the first two years and junior and capstone writing courses in each discipline, this program asks faculty in both composition and the disciplines to share expertise in the design of its intersection sophomore course, Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum. With teams of WAC and WID consultants, the WAC Program provides consultation in writing-course design and assessment to the disciplines and through outreach to area community colleges.

Keywords

vertical writing model, WAC consultants, WID consultants, sustainable faculty development, community college conversations

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Introduction

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs are often challenged by sustainability issues, particularly in the creation of a strong central structure to support the work. In the early programs in the 1980s, the move toward WAC, fueled by the work of such pioneers as Elaine Maimon, Barbara Walvoord, Gary Tate, Charles Bazerman, Toby Fulwiler, and Art Young, inspired programs that began enthusiastically with workshops between composition faculty and faculty from the disciplines. In these workshops, the latter group gained some information about process writing, and composition teachers in English departments began to see that their courses, focusing on essay and research writing and MLA documentation, might not prepare students adequately for future academic writing challenges (see David R. Russell's (2010) history of WAC program development).

With the incentive of stipends or wine, WAC coordinators tried to find regular occasions to bring the two key groups together: the composition faculty, often non-tenure-track instructors, and those faculty in the disciplines who could be lured to a workshop with the promise of a streamlined approach to the grading of papers. In many of these programs, the burden fell either

on composition instructors (suggesting that a writing pedagogy specialist should know all about writing in any field) or on the teachers in the disciplines (to teach the subject matter in biology, for example, and to be teachers of writing in biology as well).

WAC as a subdiscipline has thrived, however, as the number of institutions listed with Colorado State University's (2012) WAC Clearinghouse attests. More and more programs have adapted to include it, and rhetoric and composition programs now typically expose students to WAC scholarship and the challenges facing WAC writing program administrators. The term WAC enlarged to encompass WID, or Writing in the Disciplines, distinguishing those courses in the disciplines that do not focus entirely on writing but that do include improvement of student writing as one of their goals. Faculty from both camps, however, were enlisted to create WAC programs, usually with the effect of encouraging writing in the disciplines and of informing WID faculty about the place of writing-to-learn or low-stakes writing activities. (John Bean's (1996) *Engaging Ideas* and Art Young's (2011) *Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum* are among the invaluable resources used by WAC administrators to provide the theoretical foundation and practical ideas for such a curricular shift.)

For WAC programs, one of the biggest challenges is to create conditions for conversations among and between WID and composition faculty. Though curriculum depends on the idea of students moving through connected courses, layering skills and knowledge, many faculty in composition do not participate in the creation of curricula. Most WID faculty may also be unlikely to participate in discussions about pedagogy and even less likely to recognize connections to courses outside their disciplines. In the writing classroom, composition faculty assume that students benefit from awareness of the objectives of their curricula, and the concept of curricula presumes the transfer of skills and awareness

from one level of undergraduate education to another, though composition faculty are unlikely to have these discussions with WID faculty.

In their discussion of student learning patterns and what is often seen as regression in learning, Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Columb (1990) call for faculty to help students become more aware of the need to transfer knowledge and skills from one level to another and to give them the tools to do so consistently and smoothly by "[t]eaching [them] to articulate [themselves] to a community of knowledge and to anticipate those predictable anxieties—the temporary deterioration of performance and the specific forms it will take" (p. 108). Students will navigate curricula more easily if faculty are also aware of the context in which their courses are taught and received by students, particularly if these faculty share goals and pedagogical language. Yet, as Michael Pemberton (1995) has pointed out, even WAC programs can simply reinforce the isolation of conventions of writing in the discipline:

> Drawing from the work of rhetorical and social theorists such as Burke, Foucault, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin, many composition scholars (Bartholomae, Bruffee, and McCarthy, among others) have situated WAC programs in the paradigm of polyvocalism, reflecting the diverse nature of specialized conversations in the "content-area" disciplines and rejecting the notion that a general-purpose "academic discourse" exists. WAC pedagogies often tend, therefore, to address the needs of multiple discourse communities, situated knowledge, and complex, socially constructed conventions of language by treating each discipline as if it were a separate entity with its own set of practices to be explored. (p. 117)

The Structure of Appalachian's WAC Program

WAC program administrators strive for a balance between this polyvocality and genuine dialogue.

Another significant challenge is convincing faculty of their need to learn about courses outside their own fields (and in the case of some WID faculty, to help them learn to talk about writing conventions and pedagogy). At Appalachian State University, whose writing programs received the 2012 CCCC Certificate of Excellence Award, the undergraduate writing curriculum is scaffolded on faculty and student awareness of the connections between levels of instruction; two years of composition and two years of WID courses, with the second course in composition as the intersection of the two levels of the curriculum; and dialogue among faculty in composition and WID. This intersection composition course, English 2001, Introduction to WAC, is informed by the contributions of WID faculty as they articulate the nature of their assignments and expectations for composition faculty.

Rhoades initiated the WAC Program in Spring 2008 as a sustainable support system for the vertical writing model. In creating the program, she consulted WAC scholarship and invited Chris Anson of NC State to visit campus to offer a workshop for the Composition Program, WID faculty, and administrators in the first university-wide writing pedagogy conversation. Anson's influential work includes The WAC Casebook (2002) and "The Intelligent Design of Writing Programs: Reliance on Belief or a Future of Evidence" (2008). In the design of Appalachian's WAC program, the personnel of the program included a half-time director (Rhoades, a professor of rhetoric and composition); four ongoing WAC consultants (non-tenure track composition faculty who work for the program for one course reassignment from English for each semester); a graduate student research assistant; and a program director shared with the General Education Program.

In turn, all WID faculty are supported in their need for writing pedagogy support by the WAC consultants, who specialize in areas of WAC scholarship (among these are assessment, portfolio teaching, website support, student transfer, and outreach) as well as in the writing of certain disciplines (for example, WAC consultant Sherry Alusow Hart, whose specialization is writing program assessment, works with mathematics and most of the sciences). These WAC consultants are available to consult with all WID faculty and will visit WID courses to offer support for instruction. In making these contacts, consultants serve as liaisons between composition and the disciplines, creating an archive of assignments, interviewing the WID faculty about writing in their disciplines and the writing problems they have in teaching and students have in learning.

WID faculty ask WAC consultants for help with syllabus and assignment design, grading rationales, and portfolio teaching as well as specific lesson teaching (for example, WAC consultants have visited classes to help students organize long research projects or navigate APA style). WAC intends that this direct support will allow WID faculty to feel that they need not be forced to claim expertise they may not have, and discussions have led WAC Consultant Dennis Bohr to create a glossary of terms associated with writing pedagogy to aid both faculty and students to be aware of a common language to talk about writing tasks (see WAC Glossary of Terms).

Each year, in addition, the WAC Program works with four or five WID consultants from different disciplines, who serve as resources for the program and who investigate an area of writing pedagogy with the WAC Program. As of spring 2012, eighteen faculty from different disciplines have been recruited as WID consultants. After their year of formal appointment as consultants has ended, WID consultants continue to be resources to the WAC Program, encouraging colleagues to come to meetings and helping in other ways. In 2011, the consultants were chosen based on their experience in teaching writing online in their disciplines; in 2012, the WID consultants investigated

challenges of teaching writing in large classes. At the end of each academic year, WID consultants and WAC consultants offer the products of their collaboration in university-wide conversations.

As a result of these conversations, faculty see the connections in the writing curriculum, enabling them to work together in their individual roles to enable students to connect writing courses and to transfer information and skills from one level to another. With new WID faculty each year invited to work with WAC in continuing workshops and consultations, the WAC Program aims to provide a sustainable program of faculty conversation in which all parties are invested.

With general education reform at Appalachian in 2009, the disciplines were challenged to propose third-year and capstone courses with strong writing components, continuing the foundation created by the two composition courses taught in the first two years of the undergraduate curriculum. Yet there was no connection between faculty in composition and WID faculty, even though these two groups were responsible for the writing curriculum: composition faculty had little knowledge about what writing challenges a student majoring in psychology, for example, would face after his or her composition course. In the traditional composition course under the old curriculum, the student would have written essays and research projects using only the MLA format. A psychology major under the old curriculum, writing reports in junior year and documenting in APA, was unlikely to connect the experiences of composition to the writing he or she produced for courses in his or her major. Faculty in psychology tended to hope that students would retain the skills and knowledge they had learned in composition without knowing what those skills might be or how students might be challenged by the new vocabulary of writing in psychology. The goal of the WAC program was to find ways to reach out to faculty not accustomed to seeing themselves as involved in a writing curriculum,

ensuring that they understood what their students' experiences in composition courses had been and increasing their understanding of how to assist their students to adapt and build on that foundation in WID courses.

The WAC Program's task, then, was to emphasize that the vertical model for writing (the only vertical element of the new General Education program) offered a writing curriculum that is articulated through general education and the major, courses connected by student and faculty consciousness of the whole, encouraging, in fact, a cultural shift toward writing pedagogy and shared objectives.

Appalachian's General Education Vertical Writing Curriculum

When Appalachian began its initiative toward ambitious general education reform in 2006, the General Education Task Force easily agreed that one of its concerns was to strengthen student writing (for an overview of the entire program, see Appalachian State's (2012) General Education Program website. As a consultant for writing courses in 2003-2006, Rhoades, then the Director of the Composition Program in English, had found that many of those teaching "W" courses in various disciplines under the old curriculum were without support in teaching large sections in which students were expected to write as well as learn about the discipline. WID faculty often felt beleaguered by a requirement that was ill-defined and resentful that the two-course composition requirement had not been successful in teaching students all that would be required for writing in the disciplines. In their discussion of learning patterns, Williams and Columb (1990) refer to a common faculty attitude that "whoever taught the student at that 'lower level'. . . did not do the job right" (p. 98).

The first challenge for Appalachian was to create a vertical writing model that would provide a structure

for both students and faculty. The model, approved by the Gen Ed Task Force and the faculty, became part of the new general education program instituted in fall 2009. Aligned with LEAP's vision for active, engaged learning, the program's goals began with a concern for critical and creative thinking with a strong emphasis on writing, reading, and clear, effective communication.

Rhoades envisioned the vertical writing model (see Appalachian State's (2012) WAC website for the complete plan) as a way to connect and reinforce student learning about writing, based on the knowledge that writing requires practice and the belief that students would benefit from being more mindful of their writing by enrolling in a dedicated writing course at each level of their undergraduate curriculum. Although for most higher-education institutions, the idea of connections between writing course is not new, the connections are ineffective, as courses in composition and the majors are only loosely connected by prerequisites rather than being integrated into the curriculum. In his landmark essay, Jonathan Hall (2006) called for a "unified writing curriculum . . . designed as a continuous scale of goals for student competencies, that progresses from the entering freshman right through the graduating senior" (p. 6). In an interview about assessment, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2010) called for "a vertical, structured curriculum" that would ideally begin in middle school (p. 70). As scholarship in composition studies addresses the questions of transfer of student skills and knowledge, colleges and universities are beginning to see the benefit of restructuring curricula to emphasize the connections between courses. At Appalachian, WAC emphasizes the integration of the writing curriculum by working with WID faculty on an ongoing basis, bringing information about writing in the disciplines back to composition faculty so that composition faculty can build that information into their English 2001 courses and encouraging WID faculty to talk about composition instruction in WID

courses. Workshops with both composition and WID faculty also help to emphasize the connections in the curriculum, to bring faculty into conversation about common areas of concern, and to encourage all participants to see themselves as part of a writing faculty.

Appalachian's writing curriculum is unusual not only for its verticality but for the pivotal character of English 2001, Introduction to WAC, a course students take after earning 30 credits. English 2001 introduces students to knowledge about writing in the university rather than one discipline. Composition faculty teaching the course cannot presume to understand all conventions of academic writing in all disciplines, but they still can introduce students to the range of writing tasks they will face in the disciplines and to demonstrate the need for students to train as rhetoricians who will have to deal with a variety of academic writing contexts. Thus, composition faculty teaching English 2001 need to communicate with WID faculty to learn as much as possible about the writing challenges students will experience. This interchange about writing instruction between English 2001 teachers and those teaching the next levels of writing in the majors is essential to the writing curriculum, as is the belief that students will benefit from the Composition Programs' and the WID's attempt to articulate their teaching of writing.

This model depended on two key changes in curriculum. In the Composition Program, students moved from two courses, generally taken in their first year of study, to one in the first year and a second after they had earned 30 hours. To prepare students for the challenges of writing in the university, English 1100, Introduction to Literature, became English 2001, Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum. This change was a response to research by Appalachian writing program administrators about effective curricula and to concerns from students about the nature of the second course as a repetition of high-school study. Composition had begun to pilot possible course models several semesters

before; in 2007, Carroll, the director of the University Writing Center, began to develop models for a new sophomore writing course.

Twenty-two composition teachers volunteered for the WAC pilot. Mostly non-tenure track faculty and MA graduate students in literature, many had no formal academic background in WAC or in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Given the range of the backgrounds and varying levels of expertise of the teachers, it was clear that the WAC Program would need to create multiple opportunities for professional development to support teachers as they prepared for the new course. Moreover, the pilot revealed that the course needed to have a flexible structure that could accommodate different approaches to teaching writing across the curriculum.

To build flexibility into the structure for 2001, Carroll and the composition teachers developed four different models for the course: 1) a **traditional** approach to WAC, that focuses on writing about subject matter that crosses disciplinary boundaries; 2) a **rhetorical** approach, that asks students to learn how to write about issues across disciplines using rhetorical strategies for analysis; 3) an **argument** approach, that offers students a perspective on writing as argument in all academic disciplines; and 4) a **writing studies** approach that introduces students to composition as a discipline and uses research methods developed by composition theorists to study writing across the curriculum. With these four models in place and texts for each approach, teachers are able to teach to their strengths and guide students to meet the same goals for the course, no matter which approach (or combination of approaches) they use.

This ambitious course as an introduction to WAC created an intersection for composition and WID faculty to meet, to bring WID expertise to the development and evolution of 2001 with the intention of sharing responsibility for writing instruction and

not require either faculty group to pretend to expertise they should not be expected to have. However, even without a thorough knowledge of how professionals think and write in a specific field, WAC consultants and faculty members can help to prepare students going into that field for the challenges of writing in the major by helping them become rhetoricians who can analyze the aspects of any new writing situation. A chemistry major, for example, will have learned in English 2001 about basic rhetorical analysis, about writing in scientific report format, and about the kind of documentation required in that discipline. Teaching basic documentation styles in English 2001, the composition teacher helps students to understand how documentation works and can point out that chemistry's documentation style differs from MLA, APA, and CMS (which may be more familiar styles to an undergraduate in general education courses), but operates on the same principles. A sustainable program of faculty development offers benefits to both groups of faculty, strengthening composition faculty by informing them of the complexity of writing challenges students face in upper-level courses in the disciplines. Such a program also helps those interested WID faculty learn what grounding students have had in composition courses and how they can build on those skills as they introduce students to the conventions of writing in their majors. Both groups also need to understand that this sharing of expertise is mutually beneficial. Establishing the conditions for such an equal dialogue would have been more difficult between what is largely a non-tenure track faculty (composition) and WID faculty (mostly tenure track) without the extensive professional development of the composition faculty and their willingness to invest in the creation of the new curriculum.

For the composition faculty, two major challenges were preparing for university conversations and redesigning the second course. This kind of collaboration was possible because of a vigorous faculty develop-

ment program begun in the Composition Program in 1998, which offered faculty an opportunity for peer mentoring; workshops with such composition theorists as Peter Elbow, Andrea Lunsford, Pat Belanoff, Tony Petrosky, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, and Toby Fulwiler; and a program investment in moving contingent faculty into full- and ¾-time benefitted positions. To prepare faculty for teaching English 2001, Carroll and Rhoades continued monthly workshops, and the WAC Program offered a 3-day institute for faculty in May 2008: monthly brown bag sessions and other workshops continue, sponsored by the WAC Program consultants and the Composition Program, now directed by Kim Gunter. At these events, WID faculty present panels outlining the kinds of writing assignments they require in their courses as well as the writing problems they see in their students' writing. Composition faculty began revising their ideas of what they were preparing students for in their courses, and WID faculty began to gain some strategies for responding efficiently to student writing and for assignment design.

The vertical writing model also required the disciplines to propose a third-year writing course and to include writing in their capstone courses. (The former Gen Ed model asked students to take six courses with "W" designations as their writing requirement, and departments and programs had taken a variety of steps to ensure that they offered such courses, but there was little or no cohesion to writing instruction.) The new model asked departments and programs to dedicate one course or more to writing as an introduction to the major for the third-year WID course.

During the fall of 2008, all programs proposed at least one WID course: Some, such as history, created a new course in writing history; others retooled existing "W" courses; others, such as philosophy, proposed all 3000-level courses as WID courses. Gen Ed asked that these courses enroll no more than 22 students and include major writing instruction. The WAC Program

reviewed these proposals and referred them to the Gen Ed Council. In 2012, WAC began interviews with programs to see how the courses have evolved and to offer support for assessing writing, reviewing syllabi and assignments, and reading student responses to those assignments with an interdisciplinary WAC committee from music, curriculum and instruction, sociology, and faculty from the participating programs. These monthly conversations will extend to include all programs in the university with WID courses.

WAC as the Site of Faculty Development for Writing Instruction

A range of activities brings composition and WID faculty together to share expertise in the teaching of writing and strengthen English 2001. Mathematics professor Sarah Greenwald organized a Writing Maths symposium for her department in 2010 with WAC consultant Sherry Alusow Hart, a model for other large departments who want to make writing in their fields more visible. WAC consultants offer brown bag sessions to help connect the Composition Program to the disciplines, asking librarians to support information literacy curricula, for example, and composition and WID faculty participated in a workshop with Nedra Reynolds on portfolio teaching sponsored by Bedford/St. Martin's as part of the series of shared workshops. Since 2008, WAC has sponsored campus visits by Nancy Sommers, Kathy Yancey, Eileen Schell, Nedra Reynolds, Liz Wardle, Nick Carbone, John Zubizarreta, Frank Farmer, Joe Harris, and Lisa Ede to emphasize best practice in writing pedagogy as the focus for composition and WID faculty sessions.

Appalachian's WAC Program also sponsors an annual conference to bring together community college faculty with university faculty (Writing Across Institutions, or WAI) to discuss writing pedagogy. In 2012, over thirty community college faculty visited Appalachian for the fourth conference, talking about

WAC program creation in community colleges, transfer student success, expectations about writing skills of local business and professional people, and writing center theory and practice. One local community college has successfully applied for blanket acceptance of its revised second writing courses for credit for transfer students to Appalachian, an endorsement of their recognition of the value of an intersection course, and other colleges are discussing a similar move with the WAC Program. This extension of our faculty conversations to include community college faculty is one of the WAC Program's greatest achievements and is based on the need of both community college and Appalachian faculty to know what students learn at both levels.

WAC Consultant Elizabeth West coordinates both service learning WAC initiatives and writing groups for women and for veterans in the community (the latter with Lynn Searfoss in English), efforts to help sustain writing cultures in the university and beyond. WAC and the University Writing Center hope to continue a collaboration with writing center mentors in WID courses, where the writing center mentor attends about half of the sessions of the class and supports students in their writing. Also, the writing center's online services are now available to students in all courses to offer additional support beyond face-to-face appointments. WAC consultants Bohr and Travis Rountree created a film to help students understand the vertical writing model and to increase their awareness of the dialogue about writing at Appalachian (www.wac.appstate.edu). In a recent survey by Bohr, 76% of the surveyed students said they had found the new intersection course, English 2001—Intro to WAC, to be helpful in their WID courses.

As recognition of the value of a vertical writing model is growing, Appalachian's WAC Program has been invited to consult with ten higher-education institutions in the U. S., offering guidance on WAC program development and workshops on aspects of writing pedagogy, particularly on how to bring faculty from all disciplines together to talk about student writing. In some cases, these requests are based on the college or university's need to respond to a writing Quality Enhancement Program. Rhoades, Carroll, and the WAC consultants have presented about the WAC Program's work to CCCC, IWAC, WDHE, EATAW, and Quinnipiac's WAC conference. While the idea of verticality and connection between faculties began as a commonsense response to Appalachian students' writing difficulties and curricular reform, other colleges and universities are demonstrating an interest in a strong writing curriculum and are interested in Appalachian's attendant faculty development through WAC .

Faculty conversations are most likely to occur when there is a need, when parties have something to contribute and a desire to learn. Whenever possible, we offer compensation and food to encourage events as a way to lure faculty, but the design of the writing curriculum creates a parallel structure for a curriculum of faculty development that is designed to involve faculty in the whole writing curriculum that their students experience. While curricula vary, these principles for bringing faculty into conversation can easily be adapted by any institution and sustained if there is a strong, flexible WAC program that allows faculty to share expertise and be challenged to learn about how writing is taught in other areas of the university. ▪▪

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Current Clips and Links

A list of links to interesting, non-commercial websites related to teaching and learning, compiled by Elizabeth Kappos and Josna Rege. *Currents* invites reader recommendations.

The Teaching and Learning Center, Wake Forest University
Although the Center's activities are designed primarily for Wake Forest faculty, its website is a valuable resource for any higher-education instructor. The Resources section includes handouts and PowerPoint presentations on a wide range of teaching and learning topics, including Course Planning & Syllabus Design; Student Learning; Pedagogy: Methods, Style, Approaches; Teaching Effectiveness; Multiculturalism & Diversity; Teaching Portfolios; Disabilities; First-Year Students; and links to almost 200 other faculty development centers across the United States.
http://www.wfu.edu/tlc/

Open Culture "The best free cultural & educational media on the web." Founded in 2006, Open Culture gathers and provides links to a wide range of free audio, video, and text content, including 700 online courses across the disciplines, 375 certificate-granting (but not credit-bearing) MOOCs, 500+ audio books, 500+ movies, 400 e-books, 160 (and counting) open textbooks, and language lessons for 40 languages.
http://www.openculture.com

Teacher to Teacher: Critical thinking in the college classroom This website was funded by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and developed by the Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment (DIIA) and the School of Undergraduate Studies (UGS) at The University of Texas at Austin. It provides personal, practical, and published materials collected to help instructors cultivate critical thinking skills in their students, especially first-year students. These materials are contained in 14 modules, ten focused on specific critical thinking skills, and four on specific teaching methods. The modules are then categorized using Halpern's (2003) framework for teaching critical thinking skills across disciplines.
http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/criticalthinking/

Learning in Higher Education (Social Science Research Council) The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Longitudinal Project, the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) current research on learning in higher education, emerges from a collaborative partnership between the SSRC and the Pathways to College Network, with technical assistance in data collection provided by the Council for Aid to Education. This large-scale endeavor, including a wide range of four-year institutions, aims to examine how individual experiences and institutional contexts are related to students' development of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills. It has already produced one book, *Academically Adrift*, and two major reports, both available on the website.
http://highered.ssrc.org

National Survey of Student Engagement This is the home of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), and the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice. Here you will find data and summary findings, papers, and reports, such as this NSSE research brief on high-impact practices.
http://nsse.iub.edu/

From the Book Review Editors

Sean C. Goodlett and Matthew Johnsen

The perceived necessity of reforming American higher education has driven administrators, faculty, and staff into frenetic activity. The works under review in this issue of *Currents in Teaching and Learning* tackle the question of whether this reform should occur incrementally, in small steps, or in a more thoroughgoing, root-and-branch manner.

George D. Kuh, in his brief pamphlet, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, advocates a data-driven, incremental approach. His work, reviewed here by Jennifer D. Berg, emphasizes five particularly successful practices, and it begins the process of exploring the evidence for their success. In the end, Kuh's assessment is that much work remains to be done in developing and understanding what makes for good teaching.

Benjamin Ginsberg, by contrast, finds that colleges and universities have lost their way. He decries the reign of the "professional administrator," and he prescribes a radical restructuring of institutions of higher education. Ginsberg's work, reviewed by Sean C. Goodlett, marks a departure for *Currents*. In forthcoming issues, the editors hope to feature works like Ginsberg's that treat the broader context for the scholarship of teaching and learning.

What's "Best" in Our Practices?

Jennifer Berg

High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter. By George D. Kuh with an introduction by Carol Geary Schneider and findings on student success from AAC&U's LEAP initiative. Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008, 35 pp., $25, ISBN 978-0-9796181-4-7.

Jennifer Berg is Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Fitchburg State University. Her research interests include representation theory and mathematics education.

Faculty searching for reliable research on new teaching methods to help students engage with learning run into innumerable obstacles. Chief among these are the plentiful claims of "best practices," most of which have little or no supporting evidence. Indeed, a sizeable portion of such research done at the university level examines a single institution's program(s), while the analysis of the evidence deployed rarely yields results applicable to one's own institution. George D. Kuh seeks to overcome the gaps in the scholarship. In recent years, the widespread use of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has produced a tremendous amount of data to aid in the search for what Kuh calls "high impact practices." In his brief essay of the same name, Kuh deploys NSSE data to support the claim that ten practices are particularly effective. These practices, he insists, should be more widely used and more thoroughly researched.

The practices Kuh identifies are first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, global/diverse learning, service/community learning, internships, and capstone courses/projects. The ideal version of each of these experiences is briefly described, with the caveat that "these practices take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts" (p. 9). All the practices have been investigated in the NSSE, either directly or indirectly. Indeed, they were included in the survey, in part, because evidence existed to suggest that they were associated with "important college outcomes."

As a founding director of the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Chancellor's Professor of higher education at Indiana University-Bloomington, George Kuh is well positioned to offer reflections on the data collected over the ten years that the survey has been administered. He is also qualified to speak to the significance of the data. NSSE is used at hundreds of institutions, and since 2000 its website has recorded some 3.7

million responses. The survey asks students about their participation in programs and the time spent on activities. Kuh is also a leadership council member of the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) new LEAP initiative, Liberal Education and America's Promise. As part of their work on LEAP, the AAC&U identified—through multi-year discussions with faculty, employers, and accreditors—a set of "student learning outcomes that almost everyone considered essential" (p. 3).

Ultimately, Kuh wants to know what university faculty can do to increase student engagement. The essay begins by setting out the evidence collected from NSSE as it relates to five of the ten practices. The author also describes the main aspects of these practices that he feels are critical to increasing student engagement. He then examines the data more closely to determine the effects these practices have on students from underserved populations. The pamphlet closes with Kuh's suggestions on how colleges should use his findings at their institutions.

Kuh examines two sets of data. The first set shows a positive relationship between students who report that they have participated in one of the five practices he has selected and their responses to other items in the survey. These "other items" are grouped together into eight clusters: deep learning, gains general, gains personal, gains practical, level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment. Service learning and student-faculty research show the most promise, study abroad the least.

The second set of data breaks out both student ethnicity and pre-collegiate achievement levels and compares participation in "educationally purposeful activities" (p. 18) with first-year GPA and probability of returning for the second year of college. In each of the cases there is not only a positive gain for all students but a greater effect on the students from the

underserved populations. "Educationally purposeful activities" refers to a cluster of 19 items on the survey, including having: made a class presentation; prepared two or more drafts of a paper assignment before turning it in; discussed grades or assignments with an instructor; received prompt feedback from a faculty member on your academic performance (written or oral). Kuh then identifies the aspects of each of these practices that makes them "unusually effective." Here the reasons range from "students typically get frequent feedback about their performance" to "can be life changing" (p. 17). This section gets little support from the NSSE data; the survey does not inquire after the characteristics of these activities, and, as Kuh himself notes, there is considerable variance in the characteristics of each of these practices.

Kuh concludes the essay by arguing that all students should participate in at least two high-impact practices during their undergraduate careers, one in the first year and one later, when students are taking courses in their major. He goes on to argue that "common intellectual content should be a nonnegotiable organizing principle" for the early college experience (p. 19). Furthermore, he points out that it is not sufficient to develop activities for students that simply appropriate the names of the high impact practices. Educators must cultivate practices that aim for the ideals set out in the first part of the essay. To do so, more research is needed on what links student participation in these activities to better student learning.

While Kuh does an admirable job of extracting a handful of important themes from the tremendous amount of NSSE data, he does less well in his exposition of those themes. The transition from the ten practices listed at the beginning of the work to only five is never directly addressed and makes two important omissions: writing-intensive classes and global/diverse learning. In the Introduction to the work, AAC&U president Carol Geary Schneider points to a survey of employers of recent graduates. This study examines

the preparedness of graduates in eleven learning outcome areas. Writing and global knowledge are two of the three areas where employers rank recent graduates as least well prepared. Almost all colleges have both writing and global learning requirements, so the omission of data related to these two practices here is disappointing.

Other weaknesses derive from the brevity of the essay. For instance, Kuh summarizes, in a page-long table, the percentage of students who report participating in learning communities, service learning, research, study abroad, internships, and capstone experiences. The information is broken down by institutional type (2005 Basic Carnegie, public/private sector, and Barron's selectivity) as well as by student characteristics (ethnicity, full/part-time enrollment, first-generation status, transfer status, and age). Unfortunately, Kuh spends almost no time highlighting the information from the table, except to point out that both first-generation and African-American students are less likely to participate in the five practices. Here the designation of "less likely" is not well defined and varies among the different practices; both of these sub-groups are as or more likely to participate in some of the practices.

Moreover, when Kuh discusses the reasons why the five practices are particularly effective in increasing student engagement, he often fails to support his ideas with evidence. Nor does he take the opportunity to discuss either the limited conclusions that can be drawn from NSSE data or the lack of research done on the details of such practices. NSSE data can at best highlight correlations. This is in part because of the wide range of educational practices all using the same name. More detailed research is needed for the claims of causation Kuh makes here. As it stands, readers may walk away from this work excited to develop some of these practices at their institutions, but they will find little guidance on how such opportunities should be designed. Here Kuh falls short of answering the ques-

tion, "What can we do to increase student engagement?" and falls prey to the weakness of so many claims of "best practices" in higher education – focusing on style over substance.

The AAC&U has published a follow-up work called *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality* (Brownell and Swaner, 2010), which reviews the research that has been done on these practices. In each case both the authors and Kuh himself, who wrote the foreword, claim that much more and much better research is needed on how and when participation in these practices will increase student learning.)

Drawing correlations from NSSE data between student participation in these practices and positive learning outcomes, as Kuh does here, should serve not as a stopping point, but as a call to further research on the practices. When a student marks down on the survey that he has "worked with a faculty member on a research project" it is unclear what aspects of that work were essential in improving the student's learning. Most of the practices mentioned here were included in the survey because there was early evidence to suggest they were likely to increase student learning. Instead of circularly reinforcing this suggestion with the broad evidence of NSSE, we should begin to flesh out why these practices help our students and then work to use those critical features in all of our teaching practices. The call for "data-driven decisions" is sound. We should demand that the data be adequate to guide our own development as educators. ▮▮

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The University Turned Upside-Down

Sean C. Goodlett

The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters. By Benjamin Ginsberg. Oxford University, 2011. 264 pp.; endnotes; index. $29.95 (HC), ISBN 978-0-1997824-4-4.

Sean C. Goodlett is the Chair of the Economics, History, and Political Science department and President of the faculty and librarians at Fitchburg State University.

Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty* is a veritable *cri de cœur,* a lamentation over the faculty laid low. It is also a work of polemic directed against the "all-administrative university." As such the book is meant to cajole parents, students, and alumni into action and to wake faculty, trustees, and even administrators from their slumber. The enemy is administrative bloat: "Universities are filled with functionaries," he intones in the first chapter: "the vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants" (p. 2). It is Ginsberg's contention that these "functionaries" are draining precious resources from university coffers, thereby preventing institutions from carrying out their core mission of teaching, research, and service.

Throughout *The Fall of the Faculty*, Ginsberg marshals vast quantities of evidence to make his case. The first chapter is among the best. Here he lays out the myriad statistics that chart the rapid and unparalleled growth in university administrations. Follow-on chapters covering "managerial pathologies," the tenure system, and the research and teaching mission of the university are filled with individual examples and case studies of the deleterious effects of managerial bloat. Two other chapters—one treating "what administrators do," and the other dealing with the "Realpolitik" of race and gender—function less well, but they contribute to the overall impression that the mission of the university has been distorted by a professional class interested largely, if not exclusively, in its own advancement.

The transformation of the university in the last two generations has been profound. Ginsberg cites several concurrent trends. First, even as the number of full-time faculty has grown by 51%, the proportion of contingent faculty on campuses has risen sharply. In 1976 only 31% of faculty were adjuncts, whereas by 2005 "almost half the nation's professors [48%] work[ed] … part time" (p. 19). Today only 30% of faculty are tenured or on the tenure track

(p. 131). Second, during roughly the same time period the number of administrators grew by 85%, while those classified as "other professionals" exploded by 240%. As a result, today "administrators and staffers actually out-number full-time faculty members at America's colleges and universities" (pp. 24-5). Between 1975 and 2005, average student/faculty ratios declined only slightly, by 6%; in the same period, the ratio of students to admin-istrators declined by 31%, and the ratio of students to professional staff declined by 58%. Third, spending at America's colleges and universities has "tripled to more than $325 billion per year" (p. 26), but the spending has not been to the benefit of teaching and learning. Instead, as Ginsberg points out, administrative salaries have risen to all-time highs: "By 2007, the median sal-ary paid to the president of a doctoral degree-granting institution was $325,000. Eighty-one presidents earned more than $500,000, and twelve earned over $1 million" (pp. 23-4). The growing ranks of contingent faculty, by contrast, are compensated on a piece-work model (i.e., by the course) and thus do not receive benefits. They are, in consequence, very cheap labor.

The villains in this story are "professional" admin-istrators, and Ginsberg's broadsides against them are all but relentless. At times, he gives voice to the caricatures of administrators common among faculty. In a typical salvo, he exclaims that "professional administrators … lack the academic credentials that would allow them to secure faculty posts and have every reason to aggrandize the administrative positions on which they depend" (p. 37). Such aggrandizement, he insists, comes at the expense of faculty priorities. Elsewhere, Ginsberg offers entertaining if over-the-top descriptions of the crisis in higher education. For instance, when expressing his dismay at the busy-work professional administrators regularly engage in, he decries a "nightmarish" scenario "in which staffers and managers spend much of the day meeting to discuss meetings where other meetings are discussed at which still other meetings have been

discussed" (p. 43). It is as though the fictional Dunder Mifflin from *The Office* had colonized higher education.

Occasionally, Ginsberg's arguments take an even sharper tone. Here and there, he rails against "manage-rial psychobabble" (p. 66) and "mindless administrative mimicry" (p. 118). In an instance of particularly well-deserved scorn, Ginsberg attacks managerial-speak that disguises the "borrowing" (read: plagiarism) done in strategic and academic planning: "Administrators often hide their mimicry under the rubric of adherence to 'best practices.' They can seldom offer any real evidence that the practice in question is even good, much less best" (p. 12). This craze for "best practices," he insists, merely dresses up managerial fads and weak ideas (p. 65). Similarly, he devotes much of the chapter entitled "managerial pathologies" to the delineation of examples of administrative sabotage, shirking, squandering, cor-ruption, and theft (pp. 68-96).

The reader should not get lost in the harsh rhetoric. The larger argument of *The Fall of the Faculty* is against the increasing dominance of university adminis-trators and in favor of faculty-led governance. The uni-versity curriculum is one area where this fault line arises most frequently. Ginsberg argues that administrators approach the question of what is to be taught from a "demand-side view" (p. 170), which is to say that they wish for student preferences to predominate because it is they and their parents who pay the bills. Faculty, by contrast, wish for their own expertise to determine the content and set the boundaries of the curriculum. In Ginsberg's terminology, faculty thus become "supply-siders." And the supply-siders, he claims, should win the day, because "most students come to college with immature and uninformed preferences, or uncon-sciously echoing some parental agenda" (p. 171). A second area where the fault line arises is in "outcomes assessment," which Ginsberg sees as a barely-veiled effort to wrest control over the classroom and the curriculum from the faculty only to place it into the

hands of "committees of deanlets" (p. 214). The vehicle for seizing control is the regional accrediting body; in Ginsberg's view, administrators issue dire warnings about the loss of accreditation in order to advance their agenda of the all-administrative university.

One of the most important chapters of the book treats the erosion of the tenure system. In part, the decline has manifested itself in the steady disappearance of tenured and tenure-track faculty from campuses. Yet even as the tenured core of the faculty have declined in number, so too have the rights that have traditionally accompanied tenure. In a brief legal history (pp. 132-6), Ginsberg shows how these rights are much more tenuous at private institutions and argues that even at public ones internal threats to tenure have grown over time. The greatest danger, as Ginsberg sees it, comes from university management: "professors at state colleges and universities have been reprimanded, disciplined, and fired for opinions they voiced inside and outside the classroom. Professors have even lost their jobs for refusing to assign grades demanded by campus administrators" (p. 133).

The resistance to tenure is as old as the idea itself. It might surprise many faculty to learn that the Association of American Colleges (AAC), the forerunner of today's very influential Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), was the most vocal opponent of tenure in the early decades of the twentieth century (pp. 143-148). Of course, by the 1940s, the AAC had adopted the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) position that faculty granted tenure had earned the right to freedom from arbitrary dismissal (p. 154). The AAC took this stance, though, only because its members belatedly recognized the role tenure played in luring talented faculty to universities, many of which experienced explosive growth in student enrollment during and after World War II.

For Ginsberg, tenure is crucial to the success of American higher education. It affords academic freedom, and this freedom brings innovation: "new fields 'emerge' precisely because tenured or tenure-track professors create them" (p. 158). Tenure also affords faculty the ability to pursue long-term projects that might, in the end, have no "return on investment." Nevertheless, in an odd turn of events, recent Supreme Court and appellate court decisions have limited the free speech rights of professors while protecting the rights of administrators to discipline faculty (p. 134).

The weakest chapter in the book concerns the effect of diversity and multicultural programs on faculty power and the university curriculum. Ginsberg insists that "the political commitments of the faculty have been hijacked and perverted" by cynical administrators, whose "real" agenda is the silencing of unruly faculty and the political indoctrination of unsuspecting students (p. 97). Such programs also further managerial bloat and enable the administrative aggrandizement Ginsberg decries elsewhere. There are several problems with these arguments. First, although he calls it "an important goal" (p. 111), nowhere does Ginsberg explore the virtues of campus diversity in any detail. Second, the anecdotes he cites exaggerate the power of the administrators of these programs. Take, for instance, the "now-infamous 2006 case of the three Duke lacrosse players falsely accused of raping an African-American exotic dancer" (p. 100). However unjust the false accusations may have been, they are an isolated example of the overzealous punishment of boorish students. Last, it is in the chapter on race and gender that the book's principal weakness is most apparent. Too often, Ginsberg speaks of "the university" as though it were a Tier One research university like Duke, when in fact most students attend, and most faculty teach at, far different institutions. The simple truth is that diversity and multicultural programs are lightly staffed at all but the most elite universities. Tellingly, throughout the book Ginsberg cites examples from his own institution, Johns Hopkins. Doing so reinforces the perception

that the author himself creates in his preface, where he claims that "personal observations" led him to write the book (p. ix).

It would be a mistake to dismiss *The Fall of the Faculty* as the product of a crank. To be sure, Ginsberg's polemic comes across as sharp-edged, but perhaps this is simply because, in an age when attacks upon the faculty have become commonplace, it is so rare to see administrators held up to the same harsh light. The analysis of lopsided priorities in higher education is thoroughly on point, and the stakes are high: "The blight of the all-administrative university is spreading from campus to campus, from the community colleges to the private research universities, as deanlets copy one another's best practices, expand their already bloated administrative ranks, and use financial crises to further erode the autonomy of the faculty" (p. 202).

So what is to be done? In the concluding chapter, Ginsberg offers clear prescriptions for boards of trustees, the media, faculty, alumni, parents, students, and, yes, even administrators. The charge for trustees is potentially the most important: to halt and reverse the expansion of "administrative mediocrity" and "managerial bloat" (p. 203). The news media, in particular *U.S. News,* also has an important role to play here. It is they who dispense informal rankings. The ranking formulas, though, should include such important metrics as student/administrator ratios. The advice to faculty and administrations dovetails with the central argument of the book. Faculty should be given every opportunity to "opt in" to administrative work, even if this means administrations must grant more course releases; and the faculty should take up the charge, because it is only in doing so that they can continue to advance the mission of the university. Finally, alumni, parents, and students should put their dollars only into those institutions that fulfill their academic mission, else the fall of the faculty becomes a prelude to the fall of the university. ◼◼

Advisory Boards

For its inaugural period, *Currents in Teaching and Learning* has had a Founding Editorial Advisory Board that fulfils both editorial and advisory functions and, with the exception of one member from Fitchburg State University, has been made up of Worcester State University faculty members from a variety of disciplines. *Currents* is now soliciting interested teacher-scholars from a range of disciplines and higher-education institutions to form our External Advisory Board.

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Volume 6, Number 1, Fall 2013

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Longer research, theoretical, or conceptual articles, and explorations of issues and challenges facing teachers today (5700-7125 words).

Book and website reviews.

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Submissions and Contact Information

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For further information and submissions guidelines see our website: www.worcester.edu/currents.

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