

## Competing Interpretations of ‘Textual Objects’ in an Activity System: A Study of the Requirements Document in the \_\_\_\_ Writing Program

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In April of 2000, the Council of Writing Program Administrators adopted an “Outcomes Statement,”<sup>1</sup> which describes what writing students across the nation should accomplish in the First-Year Composition (FYC) course. Kathleen Blake Yancey, who helped compose the statement, noted in 2001 that “the role of digital technology in composition programs” was “notably absent” (322). In July 2007, a fifth section (dubbed the “technology plank”) of the Outcomes Statement was proposed. This section is meant to address the use of digital technologies in FYC (“Technology Statement”).

In a similar effort to account for the role of digital technologies in composition, \_\_\_\_ recently revised its own Writing Program. This proved to be a massive change, since, at the time, many instructors still taught a literature-based curriculum with an emphasis on grammar instruction. The task was to move the curriculum away from a current-traditional model to one that emphasized digital composing, multimodal projects and a rhetoric-process approach to teaching writing. With these goals in mind, several committees worked to design and implement a new writing curriculum with new goals, objectives, and requirements. Perhaps the most crucial new objective was to more fully account for reading and composing in web and digital environments. This new emphasis on digital design is made clear in the Writing Program’s 2006-2007 guidebook<sup>2</sup> which states that “college graduates in the twenty-first century must be able to use computer and other digital technologies to produce acceptable documents relevant to their academic majors and professional careers” (3). In light of this reality, the Program increasingly emphasized multimodality and composing with new media in faculty workshops and meetings. More importantly, to cre-

ate a material environment commensurate with the new goals, the Writing Program received funding to introduce six rooms furnished with new wireless computers to be used in every writing class. Once again, this was a major change.

The specific aims of the new Tier I<sup>3</sup> writing course—including the type and number of assignments to be given—were listed in a singular document which was distributed to all writing faculty in April 2006:<sup>4</sup> the “Goals and Objectives for Tier I” document (Appendix A). The document consists of a list of six “Goals and Objectives,” followed by four “Requirements.” One goal/objective specifically calls on students to “learn Web and digital environments valued by the university.” However, this goal/objective refers to rather basic digital literacies (e-mail, word processing, backing up files, etc.)—and does not specifically stipulate that first-year students *create* multimodal texts with new media technology.<sup>5</sup> Situated at the end of the goals and objectives document are the four distinct requirements that students must meet (Figure 1). These requirements are the focus of our study. It is important to note that no requirement specifically calls for a digital assignment in the Tier I course. In fact, the requirements may not reflect the realities of composing in a digital environment since they refer to “papers” and “pages”—terms which may not be compatible with digital composition.

In this paper, we study the role of the Requirements document, a “textual object,” as it functions in the activity system in which \_\_\_’s Writing Program coordinators work. By exploring how this document has been interpreted and employed by Writing Program coordinators in the context of a newly-created, digital environment, we hope to gain some insights that could be helpful for other Writing Programs transitioning into the digital age, advancing an understanding of what it means to undertake such widespread change for a writing program, including the introduction of digital technology.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Tier I Requirements document (Figure 1) is perhaps a perfect example of what Cheryl Geisler terms a “Textual Object.” According to Geisler, texts act as objects when they “appear to become part of the public arena, hard facts of organizational life through which authors can control action—or initiate consequences over which they have no control” (301-2). Geisler distinguishes between private texts (such as drafts, notes, and emails), which are often used to produce the final product and then discarded, and public texts (such as memos, purpose statements, published articles), which become part of a social context and have influence on the people in it. Pub-

1. To write approximately 20 pages (double spaced 12 pt. font) of graded writing. In addition to these formal graded pieces of writing, students will also produce informal writing that may consist of, but is not limited to journals, process or research logs, responses to reading assignments, free-write activities, peer responses, and multiple drafts for each graded, formal writing assignment.
2. To develop a minimum of 4 papers on selected topics and 1 reflective essay in a single-semester course; or in the two-semester extended "stretch" course 6 papers: 2 papers on selected topics and 1 reflective paper per semester.
3. To develop papers that have a point; that is, personal experience, narratives, or other modes should not be assigned for their own sake but to further a continuing argument or thesis. To focus on a variety of textual lengths and difficulties.
4. To document at least one paper with research that uses a recognizable documentation format and style.

Figure 1. "Requirements for Tier I"

lic texts, not private texts, function as textual objects capable of influencing people's behaviors.

Geisler derives her concept of textual objects, in part, from David R. Russell's application of activity theory to writing studies. According to Russell, poststructuralist theories, based on Bakhtin's understanding of discourse as a dynamic process, have begun emphasizing the dialectical nature of both the context and activity of writing. Using this understanding of writing as his foundation, Russell borrows from activity theory to develop a broader definition of context that recognizes the dialectical relationships within and between the socio-historical context in which writing takes place, the collective or individual agents of writing, and the texts produced. Thus, according to Russell, the unit of analysis in writing research ought to be the activity system, an "ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction" (510).

An activity system is represented by a triangle and is comprised of three principal parts. At Point A of the triangle are *subject(s)*, defined as socially and historically mediated human agent(s), whether individual or collective. Russell recognizes that subjects can be part of multiple and even conflicting activity systems. The *mediational tools*, at Point B, are materials put to

use by subjects in order to accomplish some purpose. Finally, at Point C are *object/motives*, defined as the “*raw material* or problem space on which the subject(s) brings to bear various tools in ongoing interaction with another person(s)” (511). An object at Point C potentially leads to particular outcomes desired by the subject. But, this problem space is a contested territory, since different subjects bring different motives to the collective work space. As Russell argues, activity systems are not static, but rather dynamic systems that are constantly changing as their internal components interact with each other and with other activity systems.

In the activity system of the Writing Program coordinators (shown in Figure 2), the coordinators are located at Point A, as subjects. The mediational tools (Point B) related to their textual object would include notes from meetings of the committees that composed the Requirements document, previous drafts and versions of the requirements, correspondence related to the composition of the document, and any other resources and documents that came to bear on the Requirements document. At Point C, then, is the textual object, the final draft of the Requirements document, which was disseminated to faculty in the department. The motives and desires of the Program have now been objectified in the document itself, and the document stands as the Program’s representative to the writing teachers.<sup>6</sup>

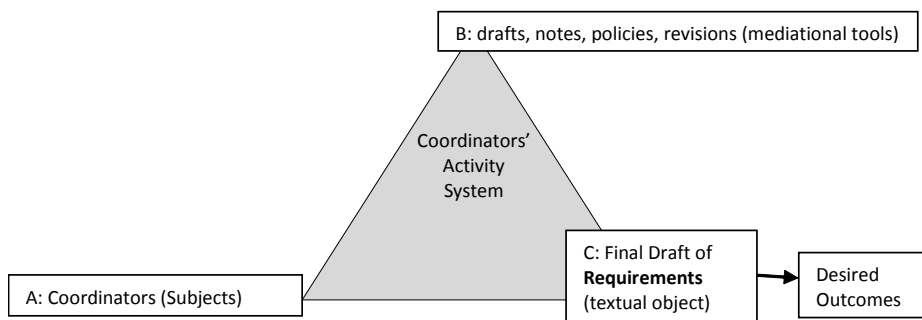


Figure 2: Coordinators’ Activity System

In her study, Geisler sought to explore how texts “jump” from Point B to Point C. That is, she studied how some texts transform from mediational means, tools in the production process, to objects capable of influencing how people conduct themselves. When texts operate in this way, Geisler argues, they “can be understood as part of the shifting consciousness sustaining everyday life in complex organizations” (298). As part of this shifting consciousness, textual objects can produce outcomes that are

in line with the subject's intent and desire, in contradiction to it, or some combination thereof.

Less apparent in Geisler's work, however, is a study of the variables, such as other textual objects, conflicting motives, or divergent interpretations of a given textual object, that lead to desired outcomes being realized or resisted. Several scholars<sup>7</sup> have noted that meaning is not "fixed" or inherent in a given textual object. Instead, meaning is always dependent on the social context in which texts are embedded. As Russell explains, on the one hand, objects (textual or otherwise) have the potential to "stabilize-*for-now* structures of action and identity" (514, emphasis added). On the other hand, Russell notes, a person is likely functioning in multiple contexts simultaneously, and, inevitably, contradictions arise: ". . . people experience double binds, seemingly irreconcilable demands placed on them by the pull of two competing motives. Eventually, individuals' agency or identity may be transformed" (532).

The present study considers how unanticipated variables that lie between a textual object and the desired outcomes of an activity system might prevent those outcomes from being realized (see diagram in Appendix B). Specifically, we examine the Tier I Requirements document and explore how this textual object has shaped (and been shaped by) the behaviors of subjects in the activity system of \_\_\_'s Writing Program coordinators. Of particular interest is the possibility that major desired outcomes for this textual object (programmatically coherence, introduction of multimodality) are destabilized when coordinators (subjects) with potentially differing motives unanticipatedly interpret the document in different ways.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study examines the ways the \_\_\_ Writing Program coordinators have responded to the requirements portion of the Tier I "Goals and Objectives" document. In conducting this study, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- What do the Writing Program coordinators see as the desired outcome(s) of the Tier 1 requirements? That is, how do the coordinators *interpret* the requirements?
- Do their interpretations of the requirements conflict with the coordinators' other motives for the Writing Program?
- To what extent has this textual object become a "hard fact of organizational life" which coordinators rely on to understand the desired outcomes for the program? That is, to what extent does the Require-

ments document influence the coordinators' professional identities and practices?

- How might the coordinators shape the meaning of the document within the program? That is, how do they attempt to shape the ways instructors take meaning from the text?

## METHODS

### *Participants and Site*

The two \_\_\_ Writing Program coordinators<sup>8</sup> agreed to participate in our project. One participant was Dale, the Writing Program Coordinator. Dale was a Professor in rank with a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition. He began directing \_\_\_'s Writing Program in 2004, three semesters after the provost had charged the English Department with revising the writing program and two years before the new program was initiated. As the head of the Writing Program, Dale was mainly responsible for attaining the new computer classrooms by gaining the support of the Provost. Dale met with upper administrators to secure resources for the new writing program. He had informed the provost's office that the new curriculum could not be delivered without computer classrooms. Dale's work focuses on policy development and implementation. He does not schedule instructors or monitor their progress with the new curriculum. At the time of our interview, he was not teaching a writing course, though his teaching schedule does include one writing course every other year.

Maggie, the Assistant Writing Program Coordinator, has a M.A. in Composition and is a non-tenure track Assistant Professor with many years of experience in administrating and teaching composition courses at \_\_\_ University. She was, at the time of our study, teaching a Tier I course; she teaches two writing course each semester. Maggie had an active role in creating the new program and, as the Assistant Coordinator, she was responsible for ensuring that all Tier I instructors made the transition from the old literature-based curriculum to the new digital curriculum. Thus, Maggie had a hands-on role throughout the process of changing the Writing Program and was most responsible for interacting with instructors on a day-to-day basis.

Depending on the participant's preference, interviews were conducted in the participant's office or in our office (across the hall). The interview with Maggie was conducted in her office; the interview with Dale was conducted in our office.<sup>9</sup>

### *Procedures*

After gaining IRB approval for our research, we contacted Dale and Maggie via an e-mail message.<sup>10</sup> Upon receiving their informed consent, we scheduled interviews which comprised the entirety of our data.<sup>11</sup> We conducted semi-structured interviews which were not strictly formal; we attempted to ask questions as uniformly as possible, but also asked the participants to feel free to interject or extemporize. We sought to keep a conversational tone within the constraints of our interview format. For the sake of simplicity, one of us asked the questions and the other took field notes and interjected when necessary. Interviews were conducted over the span of one week in November 2006. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was audio-taped and was later transcribed.

Questions for the interview were developed in advance and were incorporated into a script (see Appendix C). Our questions were divided into three categories which were designed to elicit responses related to our research interests: namely, coordinators' interpretations of, and activities related to, the Requirements document. Our three categories were: (a) coordinators' interpretations of the textual object, (b) the degree to which the textual object has become "public knowledge" shaping coordinators' daily activities, and (c) ways the coordinators have influenced the instructors' understanding and application of the textual object. The same questions were included in both interviews so we could identify similarities and differences in the coordinators' responses.

### *Data Analysis*

Our approach to data analysis emphasized a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss). One of the tenets of grounded theory is that analysis is done *inductively*. That is, categories and theories are built from the ground up, as they "emerge" from the data—not from previous scholarship or assumptions. After a close reading of our interview transcripts, we identified trends that seemed to be emerging from the data. We then developed (and redeveloped) a coding scheme which reflected these trends and systematically coded the transcripts as categories emerged. To ensure the validity of our coding categories, each of us coded the transcripts separately and compared our findings to determine the level of agreement. Based on a random sample of 20% of the data, we calculated a simple inter-rater reliability of .78. Satisfied with this reliability, we reconciled any disagreements and stabilized our coding scheme (Geisler 79-91). Our primary unit of analysis was the t-unit, "the smallest group of words that can make a move in language" (Geisler 31). More specifically, Kellogg W. Hunt defines

a t-unit as one primary clause, with or without any subordinate clauses.<sup>12</sup> In addition, we considered a given response to a question as a secondary unit of analysis. This made it easier to compare one coordinator's answers to the other coordinator's answers.

We identified three main categories of the coordinators' interpretations of the textual object: *consent*, which is stated agreement with the "literal"<sup>13</sup> meaning of a textual object; *objection*, which refers to stated disagreement with the literal meaning of a textual object; and *revision*, which is the intentional or unintentional reinterpretation or non-literal interpretation of a textual object. We identified one category which described how the textual object had become "public knowledge" that influenced coordinators' administrative work: *deferral*, which describes any time a coordinator mentioned deferring to the wisdom of the document. That is, the coordinator might refer to what the document, seemingly on its own, directed her (or an instructor) to do. Finally, we identified two categories related to the way coordinators, guided by their interpretations of the document, influenced (or tried to influence) instructors' practices: *enforcement*, which refers to moves in which coordinators explicitly discuss telling instructors what they should be doing by referring to the document; and *additional digital recommendations* in which coordinators explicitly articulate expectations for digital work to be done in addition to the "papers" called for in the Requirements document.

## RESULTS

Dale and Maggie each indicated that achieving programmatic coherence was a desired outcome of the Requirements document. However, one unanticipated variable that may have prevented this outcome from being realized was that the coordinators varied widely in their interpretation of (and subsequent enforcement of) the requirements. In order to effectively summarize and categorize our data, we have chosen to present some general results in Table 1. The table indicates the number of times each coordinator's response 1) revealed his/her interpretation of the document, 2) indicated that the document was a kind of "public knowledge" influencing his/her day-to-day activities, or 3) indicated attempts to influence instructors' practices in ways that supported or contradicted his/her interpretation of the document.



Table 1: Comparing Coordinators’ Responses\*

Participant	Coordinators’ Interpretation of Document			Document as “Public Knowledge” Influencing Coordinators	Ways Coordinators Attempt to Influence Instructors’ Practices	
	<i>Consent</i>	<i>Objection</i>	<i>Revision</i>	<i>Deferral</i>	<i>Enforcement</i>	<i>Additional Digital Recommendations</i>
<i>Dale</i>	26	11	11	11	11	0
<i>Maggie</i>	52	0	3	12	53	36

\*Figures represent number of t-units per category

As the results indicate, when it came to interpretation of the document, both coordinators generally consented. Maggie overwhelmingly consented. In fact, nearly 95% (52 out of 55 responses related to interpretation) of her interpretations of the document indicated her consent. She never objected to the document and very rarely (5% of her interpretations) offered a non-literal revision of it. Dale also consented to the document most of the time (54% of his interpretations). However, nearly half of his interpretations were divided between objection and revision. Both Dale and Maggie indicated that they deferred to the document, suggesting that it was indeed a “hard fact of organizational life” capable of influencing the work in their administrative activity system (Geisler 301-2). That is, Dale and Maggie both treated the document as an authority that could guide their own interpretations of program goals as well as their interactions with instructors. Finally, Dale and Maggie both inevitably shaped instructors’ interpretations of the document. Maggie, and Dale to a far lesser extent, acted as enforcers of the document, encouraging instructors to comply with its demands. Each coordinator relied upon his/her interpretation of the document when interacting with instructors. Since each coordinator had interpreted the same document differently (Maggie was overwhelmingly a consentor, while Dale felt free to revise), each coordinator was likely to enforce the same document according to different standards in their interactions with teachers. Maggie referenced her role as enforcer 53 times, while Dale suggested that he very rarely acted in this role. Interestingly, Maggie frequently recommended that instructors incorporate digital work into their teaching practices—despite the fact that this was not a stated requirement. Thus, Maggie suggested that instructors create digital assignments in addition to the more traditional writing assignments that the document required. Taken together, the coordinators’ differing interpretations of the textual object constitute

unanticipated variables that potentially destabilize the desired outcomes of their activity system. That is, the coordinators' differing interpretations of the document may have led instructors to get mixed messages (especially regarding the role of multimodality as a requirement) which may have compromised the desired outcome of programmatic coherence.

## ANALYSIS

### *Dale as Rare and Reluctant Enforcer*

To Dale, a desired outcome of the program was that teachers have a certain degree of freedom in designing their classes, and this prevented him from legislating curricula to a great extent. As he put it:

If I really believe that teachers need to create their own curriculum, that teachers need to be autonomous agents, that they need to be able to design their own classes...then that means that I don't get to tell them what to do.

Consequently, Dale observed that teachers had a relatively great deal of flexibility in determining the degree to which they satisfy Tier I goals and objectives:

You could satisfy these in robust ways or you could satisfy these very minimally and I'm not sure that every course could satisfy every one of them in a robust way—again, I guess it comes back to the philosophy of trying to give teachers as much autonomy as possible and still have some kind of core.

Dale was adamant about having a program that is as open as possible—with the goals and objectives document serving as “the only guidelines that people have.” He praised the requirements because they allowed for a coherent program without inducing “lock-step uniformity” among instructors.

Dale's job did not demand that he be an *enforcer* of the requirements. When asked if he found himself having to refer back to the document, he was quick to answer, “No.”

Because... if I were doing that, that would basically be if I were trying to see if people are doing what they're supposed to be doing, and I don't do that...I do very little of that.

By and large, Dale's job entailed being a spokesperson for the program, securing resources, shepherding the new curriculum through various committees and making program-level decisions. More recently, in addition to helping to secure an improved physical space for the writing center, he is currently working with departments across campus to offer dedicated ver-

sions of the second required writing course and with faculty across campus to develop a more coherent approach to upper-division level writing courses.

### *Dale's Deferral: Using the Document as an Authority*

Nevertheless, we counted eleven t-units in which Dale acknowledged that in some instances his job as a coordinator compelled him to enforce the document. According to Dale, if someone confronted him and said that an instructor was having students write only one paper for the entire semester, as opposed to the four required papers, he would defer to the document as a way to insist compliance with program requirements. Dale also mentioned the occasional need to defend the requirements when faced with resistant instructors or administrators. In such cases of having to defend the program, Dale indicated that the Requirements document, as a textual object, served as a sort of final word that all could agree on. Dale's readiness to defer to and enforce the document when necessary indicates that this textual object was central to achieving his major desired outcome for programmatic coherence.

### *Dale's Interpretation of the Document*

But how did Dale interpret or understand the requirements? This question proved to be very important because Dale's interpretations of the textual object could potentially influence instructors' interpretations. When asked if he thought the requirements accurately reflect what he wants the Writing Program to be, Dale initially sought to distance himself from the document, but nevertheless endorsed it: "they don't necessarily reflect what I want because I didn't write them [...] I think they're okay. I think they're fine." In spite of his initial hesitation about the requirements, Dale expressed no desire to change the document. In fact, at first, Dale seemed to consent to all the requirements, offering 26 statements where he interpreted the document literally and endorsed it as something that aligned with his motives for the Writing Program.

When asked to explain how he understood each requirement, initially, Dale commented that they were "fairly straightforward," and offered a rather literal interpretation:

You've got to have around twenty pages; you've got to have four papers and a reflective essay [...] I don't know how else to understand them. I mean, twenty's twenty, right? [...] Four plus one is four plus one. [...] I see this stuff as pretty cut and dry.

Moreover, at first, Dale suggested that the requirements did not conflict with his understanding of “current theory and practice in composition.” As he explained:

I also think that they’re congruent with recognizable and acceptable theory and practice in composition; there’s nothing in the goals and objectives, I think, that are, you know, that would run counter [to]...current theory and practice in composition. I think they’re ambitious, I think they’re forward-looking ... I think they’re defensible.

This seemed to verify that Dale was a consenter. He strictly interpreted the requirements and apparently experienced no significant “double binds” between the requirements and his other motives for the program.

However, when we noted the program’s apparent emphasis on multimodality and digital composition, and asked Dale if he thought these were reflected in the requirements, Dale seemed to discover feelings of dissonance right before our eyes. In fact, in eleven t-units, he objected that the language in the requirements did seem to conflict with his desired outcomes for digital composing:

Look at the way...this is talking about papers and pages. In a digital environment, what’s a page? In a digital environment, what’s a paper? ... what’s a journal? What’s a process or research log? ... so I think you’ve put your finger on something that’s kind of squishy...because we’re using older definitions of texts here.

In the same breath, though, Dale separated himself from this objection and “transformed” into a reviser of the document. In fact, we counted eleven t-units in which Dale revised or re-saw the requirements language. That is, he no longer read words like “papers” and “pages” with strict literalness, and instead read into these words so that they could, with some imagination, account for digital composing:

In a practical sense, you can get there [to digital texts] from here [the language in the requirements]. ... I think maybe ... the way to think about this, are they’re... equivalencies.

The requirements make no mention of “equivalencies.” That is, the document never explicitly states that a digital project can be seen as equivalent to traditional print-linguistic pages. Dale insisted, though, that a digital project—in movie-maker, for instance—could be viewed as equivalent to a certain number of traditional pages. Moreover, he stressed that, for instructors interested in moving students toward digital composing, a multimodal

project could be assigned in place of (not merely in addition to) a traditional paper in order to satisfy the first requirement.

Dale expressed that, “down the road,” he could see “rewriting [the requirements] to reflect the digital.” However, he suggested that, for now, the language in the requirements should remain “conservative” with regard to digital composition in order to reduce the anxiety of long-time faculty unused to computer environments. Dale was very much cognizant of the fact that the new wireless classrooms and the relatively new push for multimodality amounted to a “big change” for many instructors who have traditionally been conservative in their approach.

### *Making Sense of Dale's Response*

We suggest that Dale's interpretations of this textual object influence the degree to which his desired outcomes for the program are realized. One of Dale's desired outcomes is programmatic coherence. Thus, Dale sometimes *enforces* the document—occasionally deferring to this textual object in order to help regulate and standardize to some degree the behavior of instructors. He also infrequently defends the document—explaining how it is commensurate with accepted composition theory and practice—when confronted by people who question the Writing Program. In this way, the document is a textual object that Dale sometimes relies on to handle certain administrative responsibilities that come with his job. Dale's willingness to defer to and enforce the document could mitigate the destabilizing influence of his broader, revised interpretation.

Perhaps the document makes some regulative tasks easier in Dale's activity system. Especially in the case of a conflict with a derelict instructor, Dale is able to defer to a standardized text as public knowledge for the “last word” on a subject. It is clear that Dale wishes to distance himself from the role of “program policeman,” and wants to ensure some degree of instructor autonomy. Dale is able to let the document itself serve as a final authority—a textual object approved by all major curriculum committees of the University and in line with current WPA Outcomes. The document, vested with this authority, does important political work as it helps to sustain a new and better Writing Program while freeing coordinators from “telling people what to do.”

It is also noteworthy that, though Dale consents to most requirements, he is also a reviser of the document. Dale indicated that the language in the requirements does not literally reflect composing in a digital environment, thereby suggesting that the language of the textual object conflicts with one of his desired outcomes for the program. However, his immediate reaction

to this was to re-see the language of the requirements so that “papers” and “pages” could mean multimodal projects. Perhaps, because Dale’s major responsibility was implementing the new computer classrooms, he was more likely to re-read the document in ways that allowed for digital composition. This reading of the document informs the way that Dale enforces the requirements, and, ultimately, informs the way that Dale sees the Writing Program (as “forward-looking” and “defensible”).

### *Maggie as Frequent Enforcer*

As the Tier I coordinator, Maggie had much more interaction with instructors than Dale. This meant that she had to enforce the requirements more often than Dale did. Maggie mentioned enforcement in 53 t-units. On one occasion, she mentioned being confronted by an instructor who claimed that “within a classroom you do whatever you want—you have academic freedom.” Maggie’s response to this instructor was rather unambiguous:

I said, No, you can’t. You can do what you want to achieve the goals and objectives of the program which you teach. That doesn’t mean that, if I have these goals and objectives, I can go in and teach a single research paper [...] That’s not the program.... And if I decide that’s what I want to do... well, I can’t.

This interchange suggests that Maggie believed enforcing the textual object was necessary to achieve the desired outcome of programmatic coherence.

Maggie also enforced the document by reading and reviewing all Tier I instructors’ syllabi. Maggie indicated that the reason why syllabi were collected was to ensure that instructors were incorporating the requirements in their classes. Again, this activity helped Maggie to reach the desired outcome of programmatic coherence. Maggie also suggested that she enforced the document in less authoritative ways, by working with and among instructors to facilitate satisfying the goals, objectives, and requirements in their classes. Maggie indicated that she did this in two ways: informal interactions with individual instructors, and formal meetings with groups of instructors. Maggie was, at the time of our interview, about to hold meetings with four groups of all Tier I instructors on \_\_\_’s Main Campus in order to discuss, specifically, how their syllabi were “working toward meeting the goals and objectives and requirements.” Maggie indicated that the meetings were intended to show instructors how requirements could be incorporated into their syllabi.

Interestingly, Maggie added that, in meetings with the Tier I instructors, she “constantly” referred back to her knowledge of the requirements

and indicated that the document was "there all the time" in her consciousness. Importantly, Maggie suggested that all teachers ought to have the requirements in the back of their heads at any given time:

In any class, I mean, you almost... you have to have this pretty much part of your subconscious because this is what you're looking to do [...] these [requirements] are sort of part of the subliminal thing that's going on while you're teaching. I mean, I would hate to think that teachers would have to get this [Requirements document] out and read it all the time.

One of the ways Maggie enforced her interpretation of the document was by recommending to instructors that they gain intimate familiarity with it and incorporate it into their consciousness as she has done. Maggie viewed this textual object as shared public knowledge and relied on it heavily to achieve the major desired outcome of programmatic coherence. This suggests how much the Requirements document as a textual object influenced day-to-day operations in Maggie's activity system.

#### *Maggie's Deferral: Using the Document as an Authority*

Often, Maggie did not include herself among the authors of the requirements, and instead referred to "the program" or "the committee"—some entity separate from herself—that was responsible for creating the new mandate. As an instructor and as a coordinator, Maggie deferred to what the requirements "said" to do in twelve t-units, emphasizing that she herself had to comply with the requirements, and was "not supposed to go off on [her] own." When asked if the Requirements document made her job easier, harder, or the same as it was before, Maggie again expressed how the document enables her to adopt the role of enforcer when instructors fail to comply with program rules:

. . . having the goals and objectives and requirements makes your job easier because you can turn to it and say, look, this is what the program says, [but] that's not what you're doing.

Thus, Maggie found it helpful (perhaps necessary) to defer to the Requirements document in her day-to-day activities. The document was an authority to her—and everyone else in the program. Indeed, so powerful, so authoritative was the document itself in shaping behavior that Maggie deferred to the document as a textual object and assigned it a managerial voice. That is, she deferred to what the document does and does not "say to do," and commented about what the document "tells [an instructor] to do."

### *Maggie's Interpretation of the Document*

But how did Maggie interpret the Requirements document? What version of this textual object was she enforcing? These questions yielded important insights.

In some ways, Maggie's interpretation of the document was much like Dale's. For instance, Maggie, like Dale, commented on the flexibility afforded teachers by the goals and objectives document: "we're not telling them how to meet them or with what book." Moreover, Maggie, like Dale, commented that, while allowing instructors freedom, the document still inspired coherence in the program. However, unlike Dale, Maggie was a strict consentor through and through. She demonstrated her consent in 52 t-units, and never once objected. She understood each requirement literally and endorsed each requirement completely. For instance, to Maggie, requirement 1 was "self-explanatory." Twenty pages of graded writing meant twenty pages of graded writing. Importantly, Maggie explicitly rejected the notion of "equivalencies" in her understanding of requirements 1 and 2. She never indicated that digital projects could account for a certain number of print-linguistic pages, or that a digital project could take the place of a traditional "paper" assignment. Unlike Dale, Maggie expressed to us that multimodal projects could *not* substitute for traditional writing assignments. What this suggests is that, as a consentor, Maggie read the entire document literally. Since neither the goals and objectives section nor the requirements section specifically calls for a digital assignment, she found it unnecessary to "re-see" either portion of the document to account for a digital assignment.

### *Maggie's Recommendation of Additional Digital Assignments*

However, again and again, Maggie indicated that digital projects *were* to be done *in addition to* (not in place of) the traditional writing assignments suggested in the requirements. In 36 t-units (compared to zero such comments from Dale), Maggie related to us that she was "all the time" explaining to teachers how to "accent" or "enhance" traditional writing assignments with digital projects—without allowing digital assignments to "take over" traditional writing. According to her, a digital project such as an audio essay "has a correlation to writing," but it is not writing per se. She commented that, as a teacher, she would hate to devote a significant portion of her semester to working on a digital assignment because, in that case, she couldn't "get all [her] writing in."

Maggie observed that the document does not require students to create a visual text ("it doesn't say to write visual texts yet") or compose a digi-



tal project ("doesn't say you have to have a digital assignment"). Interestingly, though Maggie clearly understood the requirements to be saying that assigning multimodal projects was not compulsory, she also suggested that multimodal projects *should* be assigned. At some points in our interview, Maggie seemed very much interested in persuading teachers to add to the requirements, and create simple multimodal projects: "maybe add a picture, or add... one PowerPoint or something." Clearly, digital composition, to Maggie, was a desired outcome for the program—even though she indicated that it was not literally required in the textual object.

On the one hand, as a consenter, Maggie made very clear that digital projects are not required and should not "take over" a class. On the other hand, she made frequent mention of getting students to do "digital work." In addition, she often made reference to certain kinds of digital media projects (sound and visual assignments) that students "need to do." Maggie's interpretation of the textual object, unlike Dale's, did not allow for equivalencies. Instead, Maggie resolved the conflict between the language of the Requirements document (which did not account for digital composition) and her own desired outcome of multimodality by recommending digital work in addition to the work recommended in the textual object.

### *Making Sense of Maggie's Response*

Overall, Maggie made clear to us that the Requirements document influenced her—both as a coordinator and as an instructor. Maggie indicated to us that the document indeed represented a textual object that was influencing her behavior. In instances where Maggie had confrontations with instructors who resisted meeting the aims of the Program, she made clear that she deferred to the requirements in order to prove to instructors that their behaviors were unacceptable. Maggie's job required frequent enforcement of the document (in reviewing syllabi, in formal meetings, in confrontations). This suggests that, for her, the textual object was central to achieving the desired outcome of programmatic coherence.

Maggie was certainly a consenter, who adhered to the literal interpretation of the requirements. However, she also recommended assigning additional multimodal projects (not in the requirements) to "enhance" the required print-linguistic papers. In this way, Maggie endorsed the requirements completely, while, at the same time, endorsing multimodality as an additional desired outcome of the program—supplementing those already stated in the requirements. Consequently, she may have unintentionally encouraged instructors to do more than what the requirements literally prescribed.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the time of our study, early in a transition toward a new program, the coordinators may have had difficulty achieving two major desired outcomes. The first desired outcome of programmatic coherence was objectified in the Requirements document. That is, this textual object served as an agreed upon representation of desired outcomes for the Tier I program. The document had become a “hard fact of organizational life” for both coordinators—something that they deferred to (or referred to) when conducting administrative activities. A second desired outcome was a movement toward digital composition. The transition into wireless computer classrooms and the coordinators’ recommendations for multimodal work suggest that digital composition was a desired outcome for the Writing Program. The absence of a digital composition requirement in the textual object may have prevented both desired outcomes from being fully realized.

As discussed earlier, unanticipated variables which lie between a textual object and the desired outcomes of an activity system may prevent subjects from reaching desired outcomes (see Appendix B). In this case, the most notable unanticipated variable was the discrepancy in interpretation of the Requirements document. The coordinators sought to mediate a potential conflict between their desired outcome for digital composition and the language within the textual object which did not literally call for this outcome. More specifically, the coordinators tried to account for their desired outcome for digital composition by (re)interpreting the document in competing ways.

In a sense, the two coordinators were deferring to two different documents. According to Dale’s revised interpretation, a multimodal assignment could take the place of a traditional writing assignment. Meanwhile, in Maggie’s interpretation of literal consent, a multimodal assignment could in no way replace a traditional writing assignment, but should be done in addition to the stated requirements.<sup>14</sup> Because of the coordinators’ differing interpretations it is unlikely that the desired outcomes for creating assignments in a digital environment were being stabilized by the document. More importantly, the desired outcome of programmatic coherence was potentially being thwarted by their divergent interpretations.

What our study suggests is that administrators should recognize the centrality of textual objects which delineate the goals and objectives of a Writing Program. These textual objects become most significant in a time of widespread curricular change, including the introduction of digital environments. It is natural that people unfamiliar with their new, digital surroundings would turn to a seemingly stable, authoritative document.

Moreover, on a pragmatic level, it is easier for instructors to refer to a textual object for information than to make a face-to-face appointment with a Writing Program administrator. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how Writing Program administrators could get a digital writing program off the ground without using textual objects to introduce instructors to the new curriculum.

Many Writing Programs are increasingly attempting to address the role of digital media in composition. The existence of these programs suggests the timeliness of the newly proposed technology section of the Outcomes Statement. Such programs may wish to follow the example of the \_\_\_ coordinators, each of whom played a different role in transforming the writing program. The \_\_\_ coordinators recognized the instrumentality of communicating new standards through stable and authoritative textual objects. However, the example of the \_\_\_ Writing Program also makes clear that coordinators must attend to the fact that all textual objects, including outcomes and requirements statements, are subject to interpretation. Inevitably, inconsistencies in interpretation will arise as administrators work to assimilate new curricular goals with pre-existing ideas and practices. Thus, Writing Program coordinators should take measures to reach and maintain consensus regarding interpretation of textual objects in their activity system.

## Appendix A – Tier 1 Goals and Objectives List

### TIER I ENGLISH 11011 - COLLEGE WRITING I

#### *Goals and Objectives for Tier I*

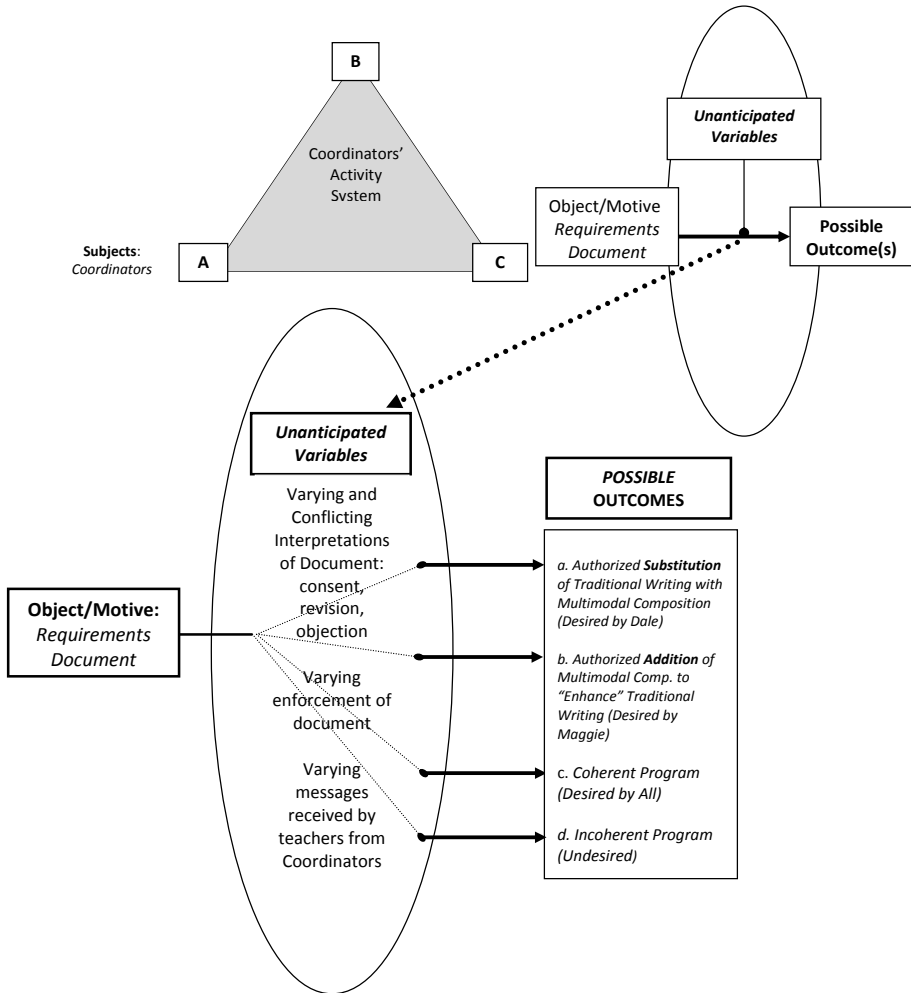
1. To learn how to recognize and strategically use the conventions of academic literacy.
  - a. Control formal features of syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling
  - b. Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
  - c. Demonstrate appropriate means of documenting their work
  - d. Learn common formats for different contexts
  
2. To understand and use rhetorical principles to produce public and private documents appropriate for academic and professional audiences and purposes.
  - a. Focus on a purpose
  - b. Respond to the needs of different audiences
  - c. Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
  - d. Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
  - e. Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
  - f. Use various technological tools to explore texts
  
3. To practice good writing, including planning, revision, editing, evaluating sources, and working with others.
  - a. Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
  - b. Use writing as an open process that permits writers to revise their work
  - c. Learn to critique their own and others' works
  - d. Learn the advantages and responsibilities of writing as a collaborative act
  
4. To practice the processes of good reading.
  - a. Experience and use the many layers of meaning implicit in "texts"
  - b. Interact with a text to question the ideas it presents and the language it uses
  - c. Read and respond to written and visual texts
  - d. Learn to proofread and edit documents for academic and professional audiences

5. To learn web and digital environments valued by the university, for example, some or all of the following.
  - a. Use the internet as a research tool
  - b. Use word processing
  - c. Back up files on disks, CDs or jump drives
  - d. Send and receive email
  - e. Enter discussion in chat rooms
  - f. Access Web CT or Vista
  
6. To learn and practice how writing, at the university, is often based on previous research and inquiry and how to use this research in their writing.
  - a. Use writing and reading for inquiry, rather than merely reporting
  - b. Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
  - c. Integrate their own ideas with those of others (that is, integrate sources to support their own stance)

### *Requirements for Tier I*

1. To write approximately 20 pages (double spaced 12pt. font) of graded writing. In addition to these formal graded pieces of writing, students will also produce informal writing that may consist of, but is not limited to, journals, process or research logs, responses to reading assignments, free-write activities, peer responses, and multiple drafts for each graded, formal writing assignment.
2. To develop a minimum of 4 papers on selected topics and 1 reflective essay in a single-semester course; or in the two-semester extended "stretch" course 6 papers: 2 papers on selected topics and 1 reflective paper per semester.
3. To develop papers that have a point; that is, personal experience, narratives, or other modes should not be assigned for their own sake but to further a continuing argument or thesis. To focus on a variety of textual lengths and difficulties.
4. To document at least one paper with research that uses a recognizable documentation format and style.

## Appendix B – Unanticipated Variables Prevent or Ensure Desired Outcomes



## Appendix C – Questions for Writing Program Coordinators

### *Background Information*

- When, how, and to whom did you distribute this text?
- a. Coordinators' interpretations of the textual object
  - How do you understand each requirement?
  - How do you feel about the requirements? (Do you think the requirements accurately reflect what you want the Writing Program to be?)
- b. Degree to which the textual object has become part of the public arena that influences coordinators' daily activities
  - How does this document influence your day to day activities as a Writing Program coordinator?
  - How often do you find yourself having to refer back to the document either by taking out a physical copy and looking at it, or referring to your memory of it?
  - Under what circumstances might you refer to this document (to explain it, to resolve conflicts, to revise it, to enforce it)? Is this usually done in person?
- c. Ways the coordinators influenced the instructors' understanding and application of the textual object
  - How often do you find yourself having to articulate the meaning of particular requirements with teachers or with other coordinators? Is this usually done in person?
  - So, would you say that the document has made your job as a coordinator easier, harder, or the same?
  - How have you assessed whether teachers have adequately understood and appropriately used this document?
  - To what degree have most teachers succeeded or failed to understand and make use of this document in designing their courses?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Outcomes Statement was originally published in *Writing Program Administration* 23.1/2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 59-63.

<sup>2</sup> The *Guide to College Writing I & II*, better known as the *Guide*, is the only text required for students by the Writing Program.

<sup>3</sup> “Tier I” is the name given to the FYC course.

<sup>4</sup> The finished document was published and distributed to *all* writing instructors in April 2006. However, early and late draft forms of the document were seen at various times before April 2006 by several members of the \_\_\_ faculty: members of diverse committees who collaborated to compose and revise the text; the Writing Program coordinators and other administrators; friends of committee members and coordinators; a few non-tenure track instructors who were asked to provide feedback on a late draft form; instructors who were introduced to the document in developmental workshops prior to April 2006; graduate students who studied the document in a “Teaching College Writing” class prior to April 2006.

<sup>5</sup> The goals and objectives for the Tier II course, typically taken by sophomores, place much greater emphasis on conducting research and writing in digital environments. For instance, the Tier II course specifically calls students to “engage in interactive multimedia projects.”

<sup>6</sup> This description of the coordinators’ activity system is not entirely accurate, since one of the coordinators was not heavily involved in the composition of the document. However, because of his position within the department, he had the authority to make any changes he perceived as necessary and/or veto the document if it did not meet his approval. Because of his cooperation and consent in this manner, we think it is fair to include him as a subject in this activity system since the textual object can be said to reflect his desires.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Street has noted that texts do not contain “autonomous” meanings. Meaning is always dependent, in part, on the interpretations of readers in particular social contexts (93). Frank Smith reiterates this idea, stating that a text’s meaning is not fixed; readers, guided by their interpretations, choose among several “alternatives for a meaning” (59). Several other scholars and researchers have also noted the role of readers in constructing a text’s meaning—Louise Rosenblatt was one of the first.

<sup>8</sup> Psuedonyms are used in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note our unique position as researchers. As graduate assistants in the \_\_\_ English Department, we were teaching the Tier I course while conducting our research. We knew both Dale and Maggie, and worked under their supervision and guidance. As such, we were already familiar with each coordinator’s style and general philosophy about the program. This knowledge



informed the development of our research questions. In addition, our familiarity with the coordinators may have influenced our analysis in ways that are difficult to measure. However, as discussed below, our grounded theory approach to data analysis is an attempt to mitigate unwarranted conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> We also contacted a number of instructors who agreed to participate in our study. Our intent for this research project was to investigate the interface between the activity system of the coordinators and that of the instructors. However, the scope of this paper is limited to our discussion of the coordinators' activity system.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, because the interviews consist of self-reported information, it may be difficult to ascertain the veracity of responses; however, as instructors in the program, we could often rely upon our familiarity with Dale and Maggie's administrative work to verify accuracy. For instance, we attended meetings led by Maggie which revealed to us her interpretation of the requirements. Maggie's work in these meetings tended to corroborate our interview findings. Moreover, having had Dale as a "Teaching College Writing" instructor, we were very familiar with his interpretation and application of the requirements in his own teaching and administrative practices.

<sup>12</sup> For example, what once appeared as an undifferentiated conversational turn from Dale, was divided into t-units as follows:

1. I mean these are the only guidelines that people have...
2. they're not told what books,
3. they're not told what curriculum,
4. they're not told what assignments,
5. I mean we have the, most, open, format ... that is possible.
6. And it is, this is not the most common format at all.

<sup>13</sup> Although it could be convincingly argued that there is no 'literal' meaning of a document, due to the inherent ambiguity of language, we nevertheless find the term helpful. By "literal interpretation" we mean an interpretation that does not vary in any significant way from the actual wording of a document. This is distinguished from interpretations that find metaphorical or suggested meanings not actually printed. The literal interpretation seemed to be the most common understanding of the Requirements document and provides a baseline of comparison for other interpretations. In no way are we claiming that the literal interpretation is the authoritative or correct interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Upon recognizing the substantial discrepancy between Dale's interpretation of the requirements and Maggie's, we felt obligated to immediately inform the writing coordinators, following our interviews, that they were reading the document in very different ways and potentially giving instructors a mixed message about what was expected. Subsequently, the coordinators made an effort to reach a consensus: when we last spoke to Dale, he told us that he and Maggie would

“get on the same page.” The coordinators are in the process of trying to clear up potential confusion about this issue.

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