Review

A Bird's Eye View of WAC in Practice: WAC Writing Assignments at 100 Colleges and Universities

Emily Isaacs

Mezler, Dan. *Assignments Across the Curriculum*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. Print. 148 pages.

In this lucid, insightful, and ultimately praxis-oriented monograph, Dan Melzer provides a view of the state of WAC writing assignments in postsecondary education in the US through an empirical method that emphasizes the bird's eye view over the worm's eye view, a method that has been relied upon at least since Warner Taylor sent a freshman English survey to representatives at 232 colleges and universities in 1927. Large scale studies that focus specifically on practices in WAC have been conducted periodically (McLeod, "Strengthening" and "Writing Across the Curriculum"; Thaiss and Porter), with researchers typically coming to the conclusion that WAC as a movement has grown in influence and impact despite significant difficulties: "[T]he record of the past twenty years, replete with its own periodic recessions, has been of growth for WAC, and the current statistics bode well for a healthy, if not always illness-free, future" (Thaiss and Porter 563). Melzer's research is similar to Taylor's and Thaiss and Porter's—and many other surveyors—in his bird's eye efforts, but it differs in that his primary interest is to understand genre and the rhetorical context of the writing assignments students face after first-year composition and in his avoidance of the survey methodology.

With the affordances offered by the Internet, and following Chris Anson's call for large-scale research in writing that addresses the fundamental questions of disciplinary writing, *Assignments Across the Curriculum* provides insight into the state of writing across the curriculum by looking closely at 400 writing assignments at 100 postsecondary institutions in the

US. Melzer's findings include those that are to be expected, if not always welcomed, as well as those that should surprise readers. In the expected category, he finds that assignments located within a WAC program are vastly superior to those that are not. In WAC programs, students often write in a variety of genres and rhetorical situations with professors providing support for writing through process pedagogies. Unfortunately, if predictably, his study also documents instructors' continued focus on grammatical correctness and an allegiance to the thesis-driven formal essay as a templated form, characteristics that exist in writing assignments from across level, institutional type, and disciplinary focus. Unexpected lowlights include Melzer's finding that, overwhelmingly, students most typically are asked to write to an audience of teacher-as-examiner and to write for the purpose of informing a reader, contradicting a WAC assumption that "students face more rhetorically complex writing tasks as they move from first-year to graduation" (104). However, Melzer's analysis also reveals that while research papers are common, these assignments are more often than not "alternative research writing assignments"—argumentative, personal, essay-form, and multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural (Davis and Shadle 418)—presenting "students with rich social contexts and complex, discipline-specific ways of making knowledge" (110). As these highlights are intended to suggest, Melzer's careful analysis of writing assignments provides readers with a rich and detailed portrait of writing across the curriculum courses in practice.

In designing his study, Melzer eschewed the survey with its problem of self-selection bias in favor of a sample that was selected for geographic dispersity and representation of four different types of institutions: doctoral/research, master's comprehensive, baccalaureate colleges, and two-year AA colleges. After selecting institutions, Melzer used the colleges' search engines to select the first syllabus that was listed in each of the following categories: natural sciences, social sciences, business, and humanities. Once the sample had been selected, Melzer more fully investigated each course, finding writing assignments and related documents, ultimately collecting 2,101 writing assignments for his review and analysis. Melzer's method allowed him to include only writing assignments from courses that were published online, and, of course, his bird's eye view precludes a view of the classroom context of any assignment: the commentary and question and answer dialogue that typically occurs when instructors introduce assignments. As Melzer notes, despite these and other limitations, and though the sample is neither randomly selected nor large enough to enable him to make claims "about all of college writing in the United States" (7), his findings are suggestive of trends, complementing the view afforded by longitudinal studies like Herrington and Curtis's *Persons in Process*, Sternglass's *Time to*

Know Them, and Beaufort's *Writing in College and Beyond.* Indeed, given that many of Melzer's insights are based on characteristics that are seen in the vast majority of assignments he has studied, it is easy to be convinced that he has identified significant trends.

In the first two chapters, Melzer situates his study within those that preceded and inspired him, drawing especially on James Britton et al.'s 1975 study of writing completed by students in British secondary schools. Following Britton, Melzer focuses on understanding the rhetorical situation of the writing expected from the assignments he studies, classifying these assignments under the following genres: expressive, poetic, transactional, and exploratory (10). In chapter two, Melzer convincingly (if dishearteningly) presents the case that the genre of choice is almost always transactional, regardless of whether the assignment is located in a lower- or upperdivision course or at an elite institution or a community college. What is more, he finds very few expressive or poetic writing assignments. Comparing his discoveries to those from the Harvard Writing Study of Undergraduate Writing (Sommers and Saltz), Melzer states: "In contrast to Sommers and Saltz's (2004) findings regarding Harvard instructors' emphasis on writing as constructing new knowledge through research . . . at the 'elite' colleges in my study, 69% of writing was to inform" (21–22). Notably, Sommers and Saltz's study methodology was different: Perhaps through the addition of interviews with students and teachers, a different view is seen. These differences underscore the imperative that we pursue research questions through a wide variety of methodologies.

For me, a highlight of Melzer's findings is in chapter three when he takes on the research paper, that genre that compositionists generally dislike, but which, we had thought, the rest of the academic world adored (though see Burstein et al. for a sense of the scope of research writing that is assigned in K–12 as well as postsecondary education). For Melzer, the research paper is ubiquitous, but it's more varied and better than he had expected. Classifying a majority of research papers as "alternative," following Davis and Shadle, Melzer provides several examples, one of which I briefly excerpt here:

> Integration Project: As an integration course, cross-cultural psychology seeks to involve students in exploring the interrelationships between two or more disciplines. The purpose of the project is to help you do just that. The format of the project is open to your creative ideas as long as the project looks at culture from two or more disciplinary perspectives. (45)

The instructor lays out several options, demonstrating an appreciation for a diversity of research methods and genres. I will say that a great feature of this book is the excerpts from the writing assignments Melzer has pored over. In these excerpts, we not only see evidence for his claims, but we also get ideas for assignments and fuel for the kinds of faculty development workshops that Melzer recommends and which WPAs, writing fellows, and others with opportunity to work directly in WAC programming would want to develop.

Chapter five is devoted to a close examination of those courses that are affiliated with a WAC initiative. Notably, there are only 12 writing-intensive courses among the sample of 400, but Melzer pays close attention to these courses, observing that they are fundamentally different from the rest. First, these courses are writing intensive; second, these courses involve much more journal writing and more emphasis on writing as a process, including pre-writing activities, peer review, and instructor commentary. In these courses, the average number of assignments per course is 8.7, compared to 5.25 in the whole sample (74). In the WAC courses, Melzer sees "the transformative effects WAC initiatives—like writing-intensive courses or writing fellows programs—have on college instructors and on the literacy expectations placed on student writers" (100). The courses profiled are appealing and testament to the value of WAC, though that there are so few of them and the overall sample is so markedly different gives support to David Russell's quite gloomy prognosis for the possibilities of WAC: "[W]ithout structural changes to integrate writing into the disciplinary fiber of institutions, without a permanent change in the way academics value writing in pedagogy, WAC programs will always work against the grain" (304).

Dan Melzer's book will be of broad interest given the enduring interest in WAC and the interest in genre studies; however, it is also the case that Melzer speaks directly to those of us who run first-year composition programs and writing centers. With his observation of the overwhelming presence of the "writing to inform" genres, Melzer suggests that FYC might be where students could be given opportunity to write "for expressive and poetic purposes" (115). In addition, drawing on his observation that writing assignments across disciplines are actually very similar in their focus on "modes of discourse like 'explaining' or 'defining' or 'arguing'" (119), Melzer suggests that rather than attempt to teach so-called disciplinary genres, FYC instructors should teach students genre, rhetorical, and discourse community awareness, advice that few would argue with, but which is certainly easier said than done. Similarly, he reaches out to writing centers, suggesting that they too focus on "the assignment of the genre and the discourse community the assignment is situated in" (129). Melzer, with deep

roots in both FYC and writing centers, makes the case that these concentrated areas of writing expertise can be better utilized to strengthen writing in the disciplines. Melzer concludes that the hard work of increasing the impact of WAC is worthwhile as it is fundamentally a "reform movement" (131), capable of moving us beyond the teacher-centered model and toward an activity-based, genre-diverse approach that makes room for writing in school to be the rich, knowledge-generating, and disseminating activity that those of us who are fortunate enough to be engaged workers, citizens, and sentient humans know it to be.

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Emily Isaacs is Associate Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Montclair State University, a public research university. In her research, she assesses innovations in writing pedagogy and delivery and examines trends in writing instruction and writing program administration at universities and colleges across the nation. Recently completed projects include a study of writing instructional and programming practices at US state comprehensive universities and an assessment of course redesign projects sponsored by the National Center for Academic Transformation. Her book, Intersections, *co-written with Catherine Keohane, is forthcoming.*