

Melzer, Dan. *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing.* Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2014. 160 pages. \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-87421-939-5. **Print.**

Reviewed by Christopher E. Manion

Examining 2,101 assignments from a range of disciplinary courses at 100 institutions, Dan Melzer offers a study of college writing assignments in the United States that is massive in scope, a project he styles as a “panoramic view” of college writing. Using this large sample of course materials, Melzer seeks to examine nationwide patterns in college writing: the purposes for which students are asked to write, the kinds of audiences they are asked to address, and the genres and discursive contexts in which they are asked to compose. The conclusions Melzer draws are on the one hand disheartening. Very few of the writing assignments Melzer examines exhibit any of the rhetorical complexity advocates of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) might hope for, and more often than not writing is simply a mechanism for students to parrot received knowledge back to their instructors. On the other hand, Melzer’s analysis does find patterns of assignments that resist this traditionalist mold that confirm the important role that well-established WAC programs can play in expanding the potential for writing instruction within their institutions. While the scope of his project and method of collecting materials prevents the kind of highly contextualized analysis typical of ethnographic studies of classrooms or longitudinal studies of individual students, Melzer is able to present a national context for college writing about which administrators, instructors, and researchers should be aware. Furthermore, he makes several proposals to improve this context that WAC directors, writing program administrators, writing center directors, and classroom teachers across the curriculum would do well to heed.

Melzer collected the materials that comprise his study over a period of eight years by searching online for “syllabus” at institutions’ websites and then collecting the first syllabi and any related course materials to appear under four disciplinary categories: Natural sciences, social sciences, business, and the humanities. What this approach lacks in context—it necessarily prevents Melzer from consistently collecting much contextual information—it makes up for in volume. Melzer deliberately tries to mirror the scope of James Britton’s 1975 foundational study of writing in UK secondary schools, *The Development of Writing Abilities*, which examined 2,122 examples of student writing in order to characterize the role writing played in student learning. Melzer adapts the three categories Britton’s team developed to describe the writing students were doing in schools, categories that accounted for the target audiences and function of the writing: transactional, in which writers address an audience in order to inform or persuade them; poetic, where writers mold language to create an object of art, and to play with the structure of language for its own sake; and expressive, where writers address their own thoughts, feelings and experiences to come to personal insights. To these three functions Melzer adds exploratory writing, which addresses informal inventive writing for an audience beyond the self. Melzer also follows Britton by considering the range of roles that writers might consider their audiences playing and the stance writers might take in relation to these audiences. Transactional classroom writing could, for instance, be oriented toward teachers who were positioned as examiners looking to evaluate a student’s learning or as instructors seeking to develop or coach a student’s thinking. Melzer expands on Britton by bringing to bear more recent insights that genre and activity theorists use to describe the role that different forms of writing can play within particular social contexts, principally how forms of discourse play a part in defining a social group and in achieving that group’s common goals (Swales; Bazerman and Paradis; Beaufort). For Melzer, this means considering not just the common formats of assignments he

collected but also how particular forms of writing might address common rhetorical tasks in particular contexts, and the particular audiences, purposes, and the social exigencies that motivate their use. It also means carefully considering how these rhetorical contexts might differ from one discipline to another, or even from one individual classroom to another.

Having established his conceptual framework, in the following two chapters Melzer examines the common rhetorical situations and genres that characterize his sample of course materials. Melzer breaks some bad news first. The range of rhetorical purposes that frame assignments are limited within classroom contexts, and the audiences for whom students write are narrowly construed. Far and away, most of the assignments are transactional (83%), and furthermore are intended to inform (66%) rather than to persuade (17%). In his reading of these assignments, students are most often asked to regurgitate answers accurately from textbooks and lectures. The audience for writing is similarly restricted: Nearly two-thirds either implicitly or explicitly position the instructor in the role of examiner as the target readers for student writing, and very few (7%) asked students to address audiences outside the classroom. Melzer found very little of the kind of inventive writing—expressive and poetic writing—that Britton and the American WAC movement following him hoped teachers would adopt (Russell 276-9), though he does find more exploratory writing in the form of journals and online discussion forums. What is most striking about this sample of writing assignments is that this narrowness of rhetorical purpose and audience held across institutions and across course level. Students at comprehensive research universities were no more likely to write for rhetorical purposes and audiences beyond typical classroom settings than students at two-year colleges. Worse, students at any school moving throughout the curriculum would likely not see increasing complexity in the rhetorical tasks put before them.

From here, Melzer switches his focus to examine in more detail two common recurring rhetorical situations and the discourse communities within which those situations can occur:

the research paper and short answer exams. In his analysis of the research paper, Melzer reports some good news. More often than he expected, research-based assignments reflected an explicit understanding of disciplinary ways of thinking and contexts for knowledge production. These kinds of assignments asked students to synthesize a range of perspectives, creatively choose among a range of genres, and, most importantly, authentically enter the discourse of the discipline. Melzer suggests that the unexpected complexity in research assignments could be a “point of leverage” for those leading WAC faculty development, a way of encouraging faculty to consider approaches to writing instruction that reflect their core disciplinary values and ways of producing knowledge. Melzer then turns toward the other dominant genre he finds among writing assignments, that of short answer questions on exams. The stark reality Melzer finds is that exams account for the only writing students do in a quarter of the courses he pulled materials from. For Melzer, this exam-oriented writing seemed to defy analysis using genre theory, since the writing from his perspective seemed to lack a rhetorical and social context, and involved the “least” social action. Within the short time period of an exam, students were simply asked to recall declarative knowledge to their examiners. The questions students are asked to answer are often stunningly broad, as in an American history course: “Discuss the developments and events that led to the America’s Civil War” (50). The contrast between these two genres of research and exams could not be more stark in how differently they engage students’ rhetorical development. They reflect two poles that WAC proponents often face on their campuses: genres that provide clear opportunities for students to practice the discourse of a field, and genres that frustratingly obscure that discourse.

Melzer’s next chapter seeks to theorize what the large sample of writing assignments tell us about the wider discourse communities the assignments represent. To what extent do the assignments reflect the particular disciplinary discourse communities of individual courses, and to what extent is there a

broader, common understanding of academic discourse shared across the academy? Melzer finds a paradox. On the one hand, he sees a number of patterns across the large sample: He sees common invocations of what instructors call the “formal essay,” a range of common attitudes toward evidence and systematic research, common recurring language that on the surface references common rhetorical strategies (like “describe,” “explain,” or “analyze”), as well as a common preoccupation with grammatical correctness in writing. On the other hand, Melzer finds hints underneath the surface that these apparent similarities hide some fundamental differences not only in how disciplinary discourse communities understand these common rhetorical tasks, but also in how these tasks might be framed from one course to another. The upshot of this paradox is that students in these courses might be receiving some baffling mixed signals about the purposes, audiences, and contexts for writing.

While these first four chapters paint a bleak picture for those hoping to see more complexity in the rhetorical contexts and purposes for college writing, Melzer finds a much more nuanced approach to writing in courses that he identifies as being connected to a WAC initiative (though he isn’t clear how he makes this identification, whether the materials themselves signal this connection explicitly, or if they were simply collected from institutions that have well-established WAC programs). These courses were more likely to assign expressive writing, reflecting a WAC commitment to writing as a tool for invention and a mechanism to help novice writers position themselves and their interests within specialized discourse communities. These courses were also more likely to frame assignments toward a readership beyond the classroom, often hypothetical audiences that evoked a professional discourse community in the field. Furthermore, these courses often were designed to guide students toward a culminating research-oriented project, including explicit talk about disciplinary genres and ways of thinking and explaining the rhetorical contexts in which the writing activity is meaningful to a disciplinary discourse community. Finally, the assignments in

these courses were much more likely to frame writing as an iterative process, assigning more than one draft, outlining a process for revision, and incorporating peer response. By bucking the wider trends that so severely limited the rhetorical potential for writing elsewhere, Melzer sees these courses as confirming the important role for well-established Writing Across the Curriculum programs to provide curricular guidance and faculty development.

In his final chapter, Melzer puts forward a series of recommendations to help WAC proponents, writing program administrators, writing center directors, and classroom instructors better promote richer contexts for writing in their institutions' curricula and classrooms:

- Facilitators of WAC faculty development should help disciplinary faculty consider how expressive and exploratory writing activities might invite students into a discipline's discourse community, and help faculty better align writing assignments within learning outcomes that reflect a discipline's goals, rhetorical contexts, and genres.
- Administrators of first-year writing programs and writing center directors should provide spaces for students to practice exploratory, expressive, and poetic writing where the opportunity is lacking in the wider curriculum. They should also use composition courses and tutor training to develop an understanding of how genres and discourse communities function in academic contexts, and outline rhetorical strategies to help first-year writers and tutors understand genres in context, even when a context might be under-articulated.

Ultimately, advocates for college writing should promote the ability of WAC programs to transform the cultures of writing within their institutions and promote pedagogies that establish an environment for students to learn more effectively. While many of these suggestions might be familiar to WAC advocates and

researchers, the recommendations take on a deeper urgency given the relatively gloomy context for writing that Melzer lays out in his study.

The strength of Melzer's study lies in the large amount of material he can bring to answer broad contextual questions about how writing operates in American higher education. But this same strength in scope is occasionally undercut by the core weakness of the study: It cannot consistently account for contextual details that are crucial to understanding the rhetorical milieu surrounding the assignments. This is a shortcoming that Melzer recognizes frequently, but he doesn't always acknowledge the contextual ambiguities of his materials in his analysis. For instance, the first document included in his appendix of sample coded assignments is a "study guide" for an exam in an economics course (137). While the document certainly seems suggestive of the kind of limited rhetorical stance toward knowledge that Melzer posits for exam writing, it does not necessarily tell us enough about the exam itself to draw the kinds of conclusions he seems to be making. Another example of this is his interpretation of questions on an American history exam, which Melzer uses to establish the overly-broad nature of exam questions students were asked to address: "It is argued by some that the Soviet-American Cold War from 1947-1991 was inevitable given the results of World War II and the ideological conflict between the two countries. Evaluate that argument" (49-50). While the question on its surface certainly seems broad, I could also see this question operating like the kinds of thesis-governed questions John Bean recommends in *Engaging Ideas*, which "present a proposition for students to defend or refute" (Bean 107), so that this instructor might be expecting students to take a more engaged, critical stance than might be apparent.

I don't make these points to nit-pick the particulars of Melzer's interpretations of individual documents or even to challenge his wider conclusions about the dominant rhetorical contexts and genres for writing, but to illustrate the limits of interpreting course documents (and a limited sample of them at that) outside

of their immediate contexts, especially given what we know about how bewilderingly complex and opaque classroom discourse can be in light of more localized studies (Prior; Giltrow; Beaufort). Melzer acknowledges these complexities in his fourth chapter, but the insights don't inform his earlier analysis. What could have mitigated this challenge for Melzer would have been a fuller account of the kinds of materials he was able to collect for different courses, and a deeper consideration of the range of discursive work that these different documents seemed to be playing in those courses. How often did different kinds of course documents appear in his online search? When were documents implied but not present? What kinds of roles do different course materials seem to posit for themselves in establishing a rhetorical context for writing in a course? To what extent are some materials more explicit than others in establishing the kinds of rhetorical contexts he's studying? Melzer certainly cannot be expected to answer all of these questions in detail given the limitations of his sample, but having a clearer sense of the range and nature of the materials he collected might have given readers a better sense of the gaps he had to account for in interpreting the documents, gaps that might have helped him temper some of this analysis and more clearly point to productive avenues for future research.

None of this diminishes what Melzer achieves in giving the field such a broad perspective of the rhetorical contexts for college writing in the US. A panorama, as Melzer notes, can offer a "shot that pans wide enough that larger patterns in the landscape are revealed." It cannot "capture the level of detail of the close up shot" as detailed ethnographic studies of classroom writing might (2-3). What remains for scholars following Melzer is to provide some more intermediate detail to fill out the landscape between Melzer's panoramic view and fine-grained classroom studies, as one might zoom in and out on a digital map. Melzer's study perhaps confirms what some of us fear about the limited reach of WAC's pedagogical reforms. But it also shows us some promising opportunities for working with instructors across the curriculum to build richer contexts for our students' writing.

Works Cited

- Bazerman, Charles, and James Paradis, ed. *The Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. WAC Clearinghouse Landmark Publications in Writing Studies. Web. 11 August 2015. Web.
- Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Print.
- Beaufort, Anne. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2007. Print.
- Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18): A Report from the Schools Council Project on Written Language of 11-18 Year Olds, Based at the University of London Institute of Education, 1966-71*. London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1975. Print.
- Giltrow, Janet. "Meta-Genre." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre*. Ed. Richard Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko. Cresskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 2002. 187-205. Print.
- Prior, Paul A. *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998. Print.
- Russell, David R. *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*. 1991. 2nd ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. Print.
- Swales, John M. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.

