

# Getting Personal: The Influence of Direct Personal Experience on Disciplinary Instructors Designing WAC Assignments<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This research study of a WAC learning community focuses on instructors' behind-the-scenes decision making about assignment design. Specifically, we show how instructors use direct personal experience—as students, teachers and scholars—to approach writing assignment design, invoking these experiences to discuss the origin of their assignments and to respond to other instructors' assignments. Accounting for both the positive and negative influence of instructors' direct personal experience, we argue, pushes WAC scholars and practitioners to conceptualize disciplinary instructors more fully as learners and to create strategies for instructor development that prioritize the personal experiences that instructors bring with them to designing assignments.

Despite their variety, all writing across the curriculum (WAC) initiatives share an underlying goal of influencing what disciplinary instructors believe about writing and consequently what they do in their teaching. To help disciplinary instructors deepen their understanding of writing and to develop their pedagogy, WAC programs have long used workshops, seminars, and learning communities as staples of WAC instructor development. The influence of these kinds of instructor development, however, seems to be one of many areas in WAC where lore drives the conversation more than does research. With only a few exceptions (e.g., Hughes & Miller, 2018; Walvoord, 1997), relatively little research has illuminated what instructors across disciplines believe about writing at the conclusion of a WAC seminar and, more specifically, how these beliefs shape the decisions they make when they teach with writing.

The research we present here aims to deepen our understanding of what instructors learn from WAC initiatives. We focus on one crucial manifestation of WAC teaching and beliefs: what disciplinary instructors are talking about as they share and workshop their writing assignments after having participated in a semester-long WAC seminar. A recent focus within WAC research suggests that assignment design (e.g., Eodice et al., 2016; 2020; Melzer, 2014; Polk, 2019; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006) offers a promising means for building our understanding of what instructors believe and do as they teach in their disciplines with writing. The interviews that Thaiss and Zawacki, Eodice et al., and Polk conducted with disciplinary faculty about their assignments give us valuable insights into what instructors believe and their goals and the challenges they face. But there is still much more to learn about how WAC instructor beliefs are realized in assignment design. Just as with any kind of learning, it would be a mistake to conceptualize disciplinary instructors as blank slates. Recognizing the impossibility of isolating just the learning that came directly from participating in a WAC seminar, we conceptualize these instructors instead through a constructivist

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lens: they are blending new knowledge with prior knowledge and experiences. Accordingly, in this research, we are not asking solely about the influence of WAC instructor development but also about what more broadly influences disciplinary instructors as they design assignments.

Our study lets us peer into some of the decision processes as disciplinary instructors—including graduate teaching assistants—design assignments, to see what influences are in play and what they prioritize. Through their workshop group conversations, we can see whether they are thinking about learning goals and about the WAC pedagogy they discussed in the instructor development program. We can analyze how they conceptualize their students: do they think about them primarily as fulfilling an assignment or do they see them as learners more broadly? We can also think critically about these workshop conversations, observing what instructors ignore or what limits their perspectives. Additionally, we can see influences that shape how instructors interpret and respond to each other's assignment drafts. As Tarabochia (2017) argues, “talk about writing among faculty from different disciplines is the cornerstone of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)/Writing in the Disciplines (WID) initiatives” (p. 1). These interactions around writing are epistemic, Tarabochia asserts, as “participants collaboratively construct new subject matter [about WAC] across disciplines” (p. 9). This method—closely analyzing unstructured workshop discussions among disciplinary instructors as they revise and improve their assignments—lets us dig deeply into what instructors considered in the design process.

From our analysis, we found both expected and unexpected results. First, we found plenty of evidence, just as anyone leading a WAC seminar would hope to see, that participants understood and applied core WAC concepts from various components of our seminar. What surprised us—and what we focus on in this article—was how frequently disciplinary instructors invoked and discussed their own *direct personal experience* with writing and literacy practices that stem from their backgrounds as students, teachers, and scholars. We use the term “direct personal experience” in a popular sense, defining it as *lived firsthand experience* with commonplace writing and literacy practices and events such as reading, writing, talking about writing in progress, and teaching about writing. Direct personal experience is significant, we argue, not necessarily because the experiences themselves are always remarkable, but rather because it is from these experiences that instructors derive knowledge, ideas, values, principles, beliefs, and preferences that, in some way, inform and shape their unique pedagogical identities and approaches to teaching with writing. Accounting for instructors' direct personal experiences, we contend, pushes WAC scholars and practitioners to conceptualize disciplinary instructors more fully as learners. We view this learning through constructivist learning theory because direct personal experience both lays the groundwork for and facilitates instructors' learning.

Specifically, we show how disciplinary instructors draw on direct personal experience in at least two ways: (a) to discuss the origin of their assignments (including to signal attachments and claim expertise and to determine learning goals); and (b) to respond to other instructors' assignment designs (including to clarify terms or pedagogical choices across disciplines and to navigate variation in participants' levels of teaching experience). We argue that WAC specialists need to recognize just how powerful and pervasive personal experience is for instructors as they design and workshop their writing assignments. Additionally, we posit that direct personal experience has the potential to shape instructor learning in both positive and negative ways. Direct personal experience often generates exciting ideas and drives enthusiasm for particular assignments. Left unquestioned, however, instructors' direct personal experience can also, as we explain, reinscribe institutional power dynamics and traditions that have historically privileged dominant discourses and literacy practices.

In what follows, we

1. explain the context for our WAC seminar
2. review literature on constructivist approaches to learning that are useful for understanding disciplinary instructors (including TAs) as learners who draw on their direct personal experiences

3. explain our research design, which focused on interrogating interaction among disciplinary instructors
4. and analyze our instructor workshop conversations for evidence of two functions of direct personal experience in WAC assignment-design workshops: establishing assignment origins and responding to colleagues

We close by complicating these findings and discussing their theoretical and practical implications for how WAC specialists lead instructor development and consultations, arguing that “getting personal” is essential for WAC learning.

## Context for This Study: A WAC Faculty and TA Seminar

This research comes out of our shared experiences with a semester-long WAC seminar titled “Expeditions in Learning: Exploring How Students Learn with Writing Across the Curriculum.” This seminar is offered every spring semester as a part of an ongoing partnership between the Writing Across the Curriculum Program and the Delta Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. With roots in the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL) network, the Delta Program is dedicated to creating sustainable opportunities for faculty and graduate students in STEM to engage in rich professional development opportunities around teaching and learning. This WAC seminar is free and open to all university faculty, instructional staff, and teaching assistants interested in exploring teaching with writing within a collaborative and interdisciplinary learning environment. Because the WAC Program at Wisconsin has other projects and partnerships designed specifically for tenure-track faculty and other professional development specifically for TAs teaching their first writing-intensive courses, and because the Delta Program focuses especially on preparing graduate students in the sciences as future faculty, the majority of the participants in this study were STEM graduate students.

We examined video recordings of small-group peer-review sessions in which instructors from a variety of disciplines workshopped drafts of writing assignments that they had each developed. These workshopping sessions took place during the penultimate seminar session. Prior to attending the workshop session, participants had spent time reading WAC texts and engaging in lively discussions about best practices for teaching with writing. They had discussed approaches to responding to and evaluating student writing effectively and efficiently, refined their methods for conferencing with students on papers, and developed strategies for running peer reviews. They had also embarked on expeditions (or mini field trips) across campus to learn about the myriad ways that writing is used to deepen student learning. These expeditions included a range of activities: engaging in conversations with faculty who teach writing-intensive courses in various disciplines; sitting in on student writing workshops in biology, sociology, and other disciplines; and observing Writing Center tutoring sessions and workshops with student writers. The seminar is traditionally led by the Assistant Director of the university’s WAC program, who, in addition to facilitating group discussion and organizing expeditions, helped participants critically analyze their assumptions around writing assignment design and pushed them to consider a range of strategies for designing effective, innovative writing assignments that meet specific learning goals in their courses.

## WAC Assignment Design and Disciplinary Instructors as WAC Learners

Our research study of a WAC learning community draws upon and contributes to important previous research about two ongoing conversations: principles faculty follow as they design WAC assignments, and ways to understand WAC instructors as learners through a constructivist lens. The research on WAC assignment design has ranged from large-scale surveys of the kinds of writing being assigned in college-level classes across the curriculum (Melzer, 2014); to national student survey data on engagement

identifying what makes writing assignments high-impact, engaging learning experiences for students (Anderson et al., 2015, 2016); to applications of WAC theory and research in practical guides for designing effective writing assignments across disciplines (see, e.g., Bean & Melzer, 2021). The previous research on WAC assignment design most directly connected with ours has focused on what disciplinary instructors are thinking about as they're teaching with writing, including as they are designing assignments (see, e.g., Jablonski, 2006; Polk, 2019; Tarabochia, 2017; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). Throughout *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*—an interview-based research study in which faculty define disciplinary and alternative discourses—Thaiss and Zawacki focused even more specifically on connections between faculty as readers and writers within their disciplines and these same faculty as teachers designing writing activities for their students. As Thaiss and Zawacki explained, some of the responses from disciplinary faculty to the researchers' questions were based on "what they perceived to be disciplinary or academic norms, but many were based on their individual or local situations—their own desires as writers or the shape of a program in which they taught" (p. 33). In this way, what we are calling direct personal experience of instructors emerged as an important element in Thaiss and Zawacki's study. In a recent study with some goals similar to ours, Polk sought to understand what influences faculty's decision-making as they design assignments. From interviews with 33 instructors teaching writing-intensive courses, Polk found that, in addition to "pedagogical intentions," "institutional and personal motivations" (p. 86)—including time pressures and emotional demands on instructors—significantly influenced decisions about assignment design. Our study similarly delves deeply into these influences, but focuses attention specifically on instructors' direct personal experience with writing, communication, and literacy practices.

In their influential study of what makes writing assignments meaningful to students, Eodice et al. (2016, 2020) focused attention on the backstories—the origins, histories, and personal experiences—behind the assignments that faculty designed. They included in their student-interns' interviews with faculty designers of assignments questions about the origins, goals, and influences of assignments, questions that they report led to surprisingly rich conversational threads. These opportunities to reflect on assignment design are "unfortunately rare in the teaching-research-and-service lives of university faculty" (Eodice et al., 2016, p. 126). Those kinds of reflections are, in our study, opportunities to explore instructor learning through the window of their own assignment design process.

Our research study draws from and contributes to a second, related conversation—one focused on understanding WAC instructors, including TAs, as learners. Specifically, for conceptualizing disciplinary instructors as WAC learners and for analyzing our major findings about what influences WAC assignment design, constructivism offers a powerful lens to help us place what we call direct personal experience within a larger context of instructor learning. At its core, constructivism focuses on the processes by which learners understand and master new concepts and information, rather than on the concepts and information apart from learners (Baviskar et al., 2009). Although constructivism as a learning theory has grown to be complex and varied over the decades (Phillips, 2000, as cited in Richardson, 2003), one of its foundational elements helps us view disciplinary instructors as WAC learners: put simply, as learners learn, their *prior knowledge* plays an essential role in new learning. "[I]ndividuals create their own new understandings on the basis of an interaction between what they already know and believe and knowledge with which they come into contact" (Resnick, 1989, as cited in Richardson, pp. 1623-24). Constructivism's emphasis on prior knowledge and experience underlies Oleson and Hora (2014), a research study with parallels to ours. Investigating what influences teachers' pedagogical practices through interviews with and observations of 53 STEM faculty at three research universities, Oleson and Hora found that teachers do not just teach in ways that they had been taught. As they taught, faculty drew a great deal from a wide variety of prior experience as instructors, as students, as researchers, and from non-academic roles. These findings have powerful implications for all of us who design professional development activities for university faculty, including WAC. Oleson and Hora argue that we should never underestimate the knowledge base that instructors bring into professional-development workshops and consultations. Rather, "the existing skill

sets, craft knowledge, and instructional challenges facing faculty in specific situations should be the foundation upon which professional development activities are built” (Oleson and Hora, p. 43, drawing on Putnam & Borko, 2000). Within the WAC literature specifically, Neely (2017) has studied the role that constructivist beliefs about learning and teaching play in the context of the collaborations that faculty have with student writing fellows.

The context for our research study matters, one in which the instructors engaged in conversations about their drafts of writing assignments and shared their direct personal experience as teachers, students, and scholars. As a form of professional development, the WAC instructor seminar in our study represents a type of faculty learning community (FLC). As Beach and Cox (2009) defined them, “FLCs consist of a cross-disciplinary community of 8-12 faculty (and, sometimes, professional staff and graduate students) engaged in an active, collaborative, yearlong curriculum focused on enhancing and assessing undergraduate learning with frequent activities that promote learning, development, SoTL, and community” (p. 9). This kind of sustained, cohort-based semester- or year-long professional development model has proven to lead to significant learning and to changes in actual teaching practices for faculty and future-faculty participants (Desrochers, 2011). Laughlin (1997) posited that, if designed to allow ample opportunities for community building, ongoing WAC workshop series and seminars like the one featured in this study can be deeply transformative experiences for participants, especially those who have not previously had the chance to reflect on their pedagogical assumptions, values, and experiences alongside a group of interdisciplinary colleagues.

A high percentage of the participants in our spring 2015 and spring 2017 WAC instructor learning communities were graduate teaching assistants. Because of that, our findings about the powerful role of direct personal experience in assignment design help us understand more about graduate TAs as an important, but consistently under-researched, group of WAC instructors. Previous research on WAC TAs has revealed the complex ways that disciplinary TAs must position themselves with respect to disciplinary discourse as they teach writing-intensive courses (Winzenried, 2016); the need to move disciplinary TAs toward “embracing,” rather than rejecting, the “identity of the writing instructor” (Rodrigue, 2013, p. 2); and in the specialized case of sustained TA work in WAC fellowships, how much they learn and take into careers as future faculty (Cripps et al., 2016). Our work to understand WAC instructors—including graduate TAs—as learners whose diverse direct personal experiences influence their design of writing assignments helps respond to calls by Rodrigue (2012) and Williams & Rodrigue (2016) for more research into the roles of disciplinary TAs as WAC instructors, as well as LaFrance’s (2015) call for more research on contingent faculty in WAC programs.

## Research Design and Methods

Following Tarabochia’s (2017) call for attention to “interaction” in WAC/WID contexts (p. 1), we focused our IRB-approved study on videotaped conversations among disciplinary instructors, at the end of a 10-week WAC seminar, as they gave feedback on one another’s writing assignments. We chose to analyze these workshop interactions, which took place *without* a WAC specialist present, in order to gain insight into what disciplinary instructors in a faculty learning community believe, what they were planning to put into action, and where those ideas came from. As we analyzed these videotaped conversations, we asked the following questions about instructors’ interaction around these writing assignments:

1. When they are discussing their draft assignments, what are disciplinary instructors focusing on?
2. What kind of knowledge influences disciplinary instructors’ thinking about the design of assignments? Where does that knowledge come from?

3. How does that knowledge function in the discussion? What roles does that knowledge play, or in what ways do instructors use that knowledge in their discussion?

## Data Collection and Analysis

As explained earlier, every spring semester, our WAC program leads a semester-long seminar, including 10 meetings spread across the term, culminating in a roughly one-hour peer workshop in which instructor-participants share and discuss drafts of writing assignments they have designed for courses they will teach in the future. In 2015 and 2017 we videotaped, with participants' permission, these workshop discussions. In 2015, nine of our total 10 participants took part in the workshop: two groups of three participants each. In 2017, six of our total eight participants took part in the workshop: two groups of three participants each. Videotaping each of these peer workshops provided us with a total of roughly five hours of videotaped interaction. We transcribed the entirety of these five hours of workshops, generating roughly 170 single-spaced pages of transcripts. In this article, we analyze these videotaped workshops, providing extended examples from the discussions. We assigned pseudonyms to all participants. For an overview of the disciplinary backgrounds of our research participants, see Table 1. Table 2 provides more detailed information about the participants and their assignments organized by workshop group.

**Table 1: Research Participants by Discipline**

Academic Division	Discipline
Life Sciences, n=7	Botany (1) Environmental Studies (2) Horticulture (1) Integrative Biology (1) Medicine (1) Molecular Biology (1)
Physical Sciences, n=3	Astronomy (1) Biochemistry (1) Physics (1)
Social Sciences, n=3	Civil Society and Community Studies (1) Sociology (2)
Arts and Humanities, n=2	Communication Arts (1) Comparative Literature (1)

**Table 2: Instructors and Draft Assignment Descriptions**

Pseudonym	Department	Position	Course Topic	Course Level	Draft Assignment Description
<b>Workshop Group 1 (2015)</b>					
Eliana	Comparative Literature	Graduate TA	Literature & Theory	Advanced undergrad	An exploratory paper: comparing two works of literature from one theoretical perspective, or one work from two perspectives; invites creative approaches and non-linear arguments
Dana	Biology	Post-doc	Science & Society	Intermediate-level undergrad	A research paper based on published sources; present both sides of a current scientific controversy and argue for one side, for an audience of scientists; revised into an opinion piece for the student newspaper
Taryn	OBGYN, Medicine	Faculty	Disparities in Health Care	Intro-level undergrad	Critical thinking paper: evaluating factors that account for diverse opinions about what is fair and equal, fair and unequal
<b>Workshop Group 2 (2015)</b>					
Angela	Communication Arts	Graduate TA*	Digital Design	Intro-level undergrad	Photoshop assignment: creating GIFs, memes, and posters, with critical reflection
Matthew	Ethnobotany	Graduate TA*	Ethnobotany	Advanced undergrad	Scholarly literature review: synthesizing research on a plant species and its cultural significance
Clara	Biochemistry	Graduate TA*	Environmental Toxicology	Graduate	Government-style report: taking on role of an environmental toxicologist writing up findings
<b>Workshop Group 3 (2015)</b>					
Susan	Astronomy	Faculty	Intro to Astronomy	Intro-level undergrad	Letter to school board: urging school to teach about the origin and evolution of the universe
Kayla	Zoology	Graduate TA*	Intro to Animal Development	Advanced undergrad	Short writing responses: explaining core course concepts to lay audiences

Eric	Environmental Studies	Graduate TA*	Environmental Studies Capstone	Advanced undergrad	Critical reflection essays: reflecting on community-based learning activities
<b>Workshop Group 4 (2017)</b>					
James	Horticulture	Graduate TA	Horticulture (with lab)	Intermediate-level undergrad	Seed journal: documenting observations and reflections from a seed germination experiment and keeping a seed journal
Navkiran	Civil Society and Community Studies	Graduate TA*	Civic Studies	Advanced undergrad	Research paper: analyzing different civil society approaches to a range of social issues
Phoebe	Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies	Graduate TA*	Urban Planning	Intermediate-level undergrad	Grant proposal: working in groups to develop creative solutions to a particular urban planning challenge
<b>Workshop Group 5 (2017)</b>					
Lance	Sociology	Graduate TA	Science & Technology Studies methods	Intermediate-level undergrad	A popular-press style article: demonstrating understanding of course content by creating an argument that relies on misleading statistics
Dimitri	Physics	Graduate TA*	Physics for non-majors	Intro-level Undergrad	Extended lab report assignments; doing scientific work in a way that reflects professional practices
Shelby	Community and Environmental Sociology	Graduate TA*	Intro to Community & Environmental Sociology	Advanced undergrad	Argumentative paper: proposing a potential solution to make an existing solution to a particular social issue more environmentally friendly
* At the time of this study, these graduate students already had significant teaching experience and autonomy, including in some cases being instructor of record, designing assignments, evaluating student writing, creating curricula, and/or were about to become assistant professors at other institutions.					

Given our interest in understanding which topics populate and which knowledges inform instructors' workshop discussions, we first followed the open coding practices of grounded theory to determine from our transcripts which important “topics” and “influences” emerged (Charmaz, 2014). From this coding, we identified “direct personal experience”—or first-hand experiences from outside of the workshops—as an important influence instructors mentioned in discussions. We limited direct personal experience to those writing and literacy practices and events that seminar participants had actually engaged in and observed themselves, first hand, *before* designing the writing assignments and before responding to their colleagues' draft assignments.

From a round of focused coding for “direct personal experience,” we found that it stemmed from three sources: instructors' experiences as students, as teachers, and as scholars. Instructors drew on experiences as *students*, sharing insights and passions from previous learning experiences as students themselves; as *teachers*, indicating principles and lessons gained from teaching; and as *scholars/researchers*, offering insights from their experience as scholars or experts in their disciplines, including prior knowledge about writing and thinking in their academic field. We also found that instructors' references to these three sources of direct personal experience served two primary functions in the assignment design discussion itself: (a) to describe the origin of one's assignment, and (b) to respond to others' assignments. While some instances of direct personal experience were explicitly named *by the participants* as coming from their experience as students, teachers, or scholars (for instance, when participants prefaced their statements with claims like, “When I was an undergraduate student...”), oftentimes, the source of direct personal experience being invoked was implied (for instance, when participants referred to trends in their field that they have noticed, and that we can assume arise from experiences as scholars within their disciplinary communities).

## Findings and Analysis

### WAC Concepts Abounding

Within all of these workshop discussions and the draft assignments themselves, we found abundant evidence that the disciplinary faculty and future faculty in our study understood and applied what we would identify as core WAC knowledge and principles that were introduced in the seminar. In fact, core WAC principles and methods were so ubiquitous within the workshop discussions that it would be easy to accept them as givens rather than see them as evidence of what the research participants took from the WAC seminar. For example, the seminar participants talked about connections between writing and thinking and explained that they had designed assignments to solve teaching and learning problems within their courses; focused on their students as learners and on students' motivation to do the hard work necessary to succeed with assignments; and focused attention on disciplinary norms and differences in discourse. They had detailed discussions about the instructor's choice of genre for an assignment and the need to define rhetorical situations; about how to clarify expectations for students and how detailed and explicit to make assignments; about when to schedule assignments within courses to align with particular learning goals; about demonstrating intentional pedagogy, involving process and scaffolding (including learning from models, brainstorming discussions, drafts, peer review, revisions, and reflections about learning), and when assignments were missing elements, interlocutors asked about and suggested adding more process; about developing evaluation criteria or rubrics, and, similarly, when they did not, instructors explained their plans to add them. This evidence, from transcripts of our five workshop groups featuring instructors talking autonomously, demonstrated powerfully how fully disciplinary instructors can absorb and how fluidly they can deploy core WAC principles and act as surrogate WAC consultants. (For a fuller description of this seminar and a study of the WAC learning that occurs within it, see Hughes & Miller, 2018).

## Direct Personal Experience

Although it was both exciting and reassuring to see this evidence of learning from a WAC seminar for disciplinary instructors, none of this should be surprising: it's exactly what WAC professionals would hope to see. What was surprising, and particularly striking, within their discussions was how often instructors drew from and grounded their choices in their own direct personal experience with writing and literacy practices as students, as teachers, and as scholars. As Cox and Brunjes (2013) note, there are close links between the roles of teacher, scholar, and writer. We found that those references to experience performed two functions: (a) to establish, explain, or convey the origin or back stories of their assignments and the particular teaching and learning goals they were designed to address, and (b) to anchor responses to other instructors participating in workshop discussions about assignment design and to make connections across instructors' varied disciplinary backgrounds and levels of teaching experience.

In analyzing these two functions, we show how tracking references to direct personal experience—as students, teachers, and scholars—offers a window into how disciplinary instructors think and make decisions about designing writing activities. Those references to experience that indicate an instructor's attachments and motivations for designing assignments also function as a justification for what can seem like idiosyncratic choices—even choices that may seem to clash with WAC principles. In that way, these references reinforce the constructivist notion that beliefs about writing are learned across individuals' personal and professional lives—from undergraduate writing assignments that struck a chord to disciplinary training that reinforced bedrock principles.

In the context of our WAC instructor learning community, direct personal experience also becomes a tool for participants to provide feedback on other instructors' assignment designs. Responding through experience, we show, facilitates WAC learning as colleagues draw on direct experiences to establish common ground and to educate one another about developing assignments. Just like WAC principles, these references to direct personal experience can help to bridge differences across disciplines and levels of teaching experience. In the following sections, we dig into the transcripts of our workshop discussions to analyze six extended examples of instructors drawing on direct personal experience.

### *Examples of Direct Personal Experience in Assignment Origin Stories*

Reference to direct personal literacy experiences as scholars, teachers, and students saturated instructors' explanations of their assignment origins and motivations. Instructors sought to reinforce student learning goals they found essential from their experience as scholars in particular fields and to clarify writing and rhetorical skills that they knew, from their previous teaching experience, students struggled with. Others were motivated to design assignments based on their own lasting impressions of particular writing assignments that had mattered to them as students themselves. These literacy experiences are deeply intertwined, with participants referencing their experiences as students, scholars, and teachers all in one breath.

**Keeping a Seed Journal: A Nostalgic Recreation of a Past Learning Experience in Horticulture.** In workshop group four, James, a graduate student in horticulture, shared an assignment that he designed for an intro-level undergraduate horticulture course in which students conduct a seed-germination experiment and keep a journal in which they will “document [their] observations” and reflect on their “seed-growing experience.” When introducing his assignment draft to his group members (Navkiran, a post-doctoral researcher in civil society and community studies, and Phoebe, a PhD candidate from environmental studies), we saw James weave together multiple experiences from his time as a student and as a scholar. However, there is one particular moment in the transcript when James's experiences as a student take the forefront. This moment, which is excerpted below, shows James reflecting fondly on his experience keeping a seed journal in an undergraduate course. As he considers the ways in which this experience has informed

his assignment design, we can see clearly that James' motivations in his assignment design were drawn from the emotional attachment he formed to his seed journal years ago.

Phoebe: I guess my question, too, was what is the learning outcome that your ... that you want?

James: So definitely being able to describe seed germination ... um, the sort of lofty things were practicing observation skills....

Phoebe: That's like the top one?

James: Yeah one thing I thought was...I've experienced that keeping a lab notebook is really important. And like in chemistry and in all of these other classes where you have a lab, like formally, I felt like they sort of misrepresent what it is to keep a lab notebook. And I thought that this might be a time for them to try to make sense of what a lab notebook is. So, there could be a follow-up or it could be built onto this where they have to be able to use their journal for an experiment. And refer to it to answer certain questions. When you do these sorts of horticultural experiments, if you didn't write down what you were observing, well, then you can't really write to submit to journals.

When asked by Phoebe to clarify the assignment's central learning outcome, James responded by saying that he wanted to prioritize students' development of observational skills. He went on to explain that his assignment originated from these disciplinary tensions he had noticed between the role of lab notebooks in the classroom versus the role of lab notebooks in professional practice. He emphasized the scholarly importance of lab notebooks in his field and the significance they play in publication. He signaled that this is part of the disciplinary experience shared among researchers in his field.

This thread is picked up later in the workshopping session when James again reflected on his own direct personal experience writing seed journals, this time to emphasize his experience as a student:

James: ... Okay, so like, when I did this years ago, I was just—I still have the word document. I wrote about like—well I don't know how I got prompted to write it—but, it's pretty comical. I cared a lot for my little seeds. So—I'm trying to infuse that here. [points to assignment] Saying that it should be something fun.

What is significant here is that it was not necessarily the assignment he had been given as a student (after all, he doesn't recall "how I got prompted to write it"), but rather the *experience* he had keeping a seed journal and the learning experience that came with writing in this genre. This reflection on his direct personal experience as a student becomes a proxy for James to explain how he wants his students to approach their seed journals.

**Communicating Science with the Public: The Personal and Scholarly Origins of a Molecular Biologist's Writing Assignment.** In workshop group one, Dana, a post-doctoral researcher in molecular biology—who had some impressive teaching experience and a strong record of professional development in teaching programs—signaled that her assignment stemmed from both her long-standing scholarly identity and her own undergraduate education and experience as a communicator/writer. She explained her intertwined critical observations that the media frequently misrepresent scientific research, that scientific illiteracy harms the quality of public discourse, and that scientists shirk their responsibility to communicate scientific findings to larger audiences. In her assignment, Dana planned to ask intermediate-level biology students to study the science behind a controversial subject of public interest, then write a researched paper about that controversy for an audience of scientists, and *then* revise and shorten that paper for a general audience, in the genre of an opinion piece for their student newspaper.

As she talked about her assignment, Dana described her own experiences developing critical reading habits as a scholar and citizen: “I always read, you know, news, science news articles and then go back to the [published scientific] paper it cites and see that it’s completely different than what the newspaper is actually [laughter from all group members] doing.” This critical view of news accounts of science became a consistent focus of discussion and bonded the participants within this workshop group. To illustrate how difficult it is to explain current science research to a general audience, Dana invoked her own experience learning to communicate with her family about her immunology research:

This is sort of a side note, but yeah, when I, I did a rotation in graduate school in a lab that did, you know, RNA work, and I had to explain to my Mom what RNA *was*. Like she knows what DNA and proteins are—but she didn’t know what RNA was, so you know, it really makes me, like, take a step back and whoa....

Ultimately, the broad learning goals of this assignment stemmed from Dana’s own rich learning experience as a student and a writer at a liberal arts college, in which reading and writing assignments encouraged her to think critically, broadened her understanding of the world, helped her move beyond limited family and hometown perspectives, and taught her the power of high-quality journalism to communicate complex subjects to a broader public—all learning experiences that she wants her own students to have. As Dana explained,

In college it can be, it can be challenging, and, you know. I mean, college for me was like sort of the big eye-opener, because I grew up in like a small, rural... area, very, you know, conservative... and just, you know, definitely very different opinions than when you actually get to a more liberal environment. People, like one of my professors for a, for a political science course had us get a, a subscription to *The Economist*, and I just remember being like, “Whoa,” this is completely different than anything I would have ever, you know, read before.

From her experience as a scholar, Dana recognized the value of writing to learn about a controversial scientific topic and the need for clearer communication with the public about contemporary science. And her own intellectual awakening as an undergraduate student—in large part through reading and writing—prompted her to want to spark student engagement with public discourse about science. This conversation—like so many in our study and like some of the faculty interviews in Eodice et al. (2016)—demonstrated just how many of an instructor’s scholarly and personal interests and experiences can lie behind the learning goals for just one specific sequence of writing activities.

**Complicating the Lab Report: A Physics Assignment Born Out of Disciplinary Frustration.** In workshop group five, Dimitri, a graduate TA in physics, shared an assignment he designed for an introductory physics class—a hyper-scaffolded group lab report assignment in which students engage in multiple rounds of peer review akin to the peer review process used by journals in the field. When discussing the origins of his draft assignment with his group members (both of whom were graduate TAs in sociology, but with significantly different research interests), Dimitri explained that his idea for this assignment came out of the disconnects he felt, both as an undergraduate student and as a graduate TA working with undergraduate students, between the lab reports he encountered as a student and the lab reports he produces as a scholar. Traditional lab report assignments, he argued, often misrepresent what scientific research actually looks like:

So many lab reports are done in a way, where they’re written for like a “we took the data and it fit the theory, therefore it’s right.” That’s not how science works. First, you don’t know the theory, you apply that theory, then theories are right cause they fit the data not the other way around. So, I want them to think about it that way.

Demonstrating what Winzenried (2016) calls the kinds of “liminal positions” that TAs hold when they teach in WAC programs, Dimitri attends to the interplay between his experience as a student, a TA, and a scholar. This instance provides more texture for our understanding of his choice to recreate the lab report assignment to make it match what he sees as the standards of scientific research as they are realized in professional lab reports.

This origin story offers an interesting inversion of the seed journal example described above. Unlike the horticulturist who was hoping to emulate his experience with an assignment he loved, Dimitri is hoping to disrupt what he sees as an unproductive, and frustratingly “transactional,” as Melzer (2014) characterizes it, assignment in his discipline. As a normative assignment with near ubiquitous presence in introductory science courses, the lab report should reflect disciplinary practices. Dimitri’s commitment to making his classroom align more closely with his experience of “doing science” is a critical part of his assignment’s origin story.

### *Examples of Direct Personal Experience as Colleagues Respond to Draft Assignments*

Our analysis also revealed how seminar participants drew repeatedly on their own direct personal experiences with writing—as scholars, teachers, and students—to inform, shape, and justify the pedagogical *responses and advice* that they gave each other about draft assignments. As mentioned earlier, each participant brought unique disciplinary knowledge, varying degrees of disciplinary expertise, and different levels of teaching experience. We found participants consistently using that direct personal experience as a tool for bridging these divides.

**Bonding Over Shared Digital Experience: Instructors Respond across Disciplinary Divides.** Workshop group two featured Angela, a graduate TA from communication arts, sharing a syllabus and assignments for her new job as an assistant professor at a liberal arts college. Two TAs, Matthew from botany and Clara from zoology, responded to Angela. In their discussion, the three instructors acknowledged and examined their varied disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., Angela, at one point, characterized her response “as a social scientist ...”). In this excerpt from their conversation, however, the three instructors bonded over their direct personal experience—as students and as professionals in their respective (but very different) fields—using a digital tool: Photoshop. We contend that this acknowledgment of shared experience opened up common (albeit basic) ground that, in fact, enabled them to move on to substantive suggestions for assignment design.

Although Angela situated herself as a communication studies rhetorician, she acknowledged that her new teaching position will be in a digital design minor, which has focused historically on advertising. Angela went on to discuss how she had designed a course and assignment in which students will be using Photoshop “to create digital genres”: a gif, a meme, and then a poster advertising a course in students’ own digital design program. This introduction to her assignment was extensive, spanning almost four minutes. After a thorough review of Angela’s assignment materials, Matthew offered a first response, reading aloud from Angela’s draft assignment sheet: “Photoshop is increasingly a software program used not only by magazines to airbrush models, but by everyday people as well.” While he liked the “brevity” of this introduction, Matthew wondered if Angela “could kind of sell it” more to students. Matthew’s, and then Clara’s, responses—about making clear how valuable Photoshop is in multiple professions and disciplines—were supported by their direct personal experience as graduate students, a sense of usefulness they urged Angela to emphasize to students in her assignment. Matthew expressed how knowing a technical tool like Photoshop “can really bump up your sell-ability in the job market.” The three continued to reflect on the value of Photoshop, in their own experience:

Clara: It is so useful. I use the Adobe suite.

Angela: Alright.

Matthew: As a grad student, I use it a lot for stuff. Stuff comes up, and you have plenty of stuff to do. [All laughing]

Angela: That's awesome. That's so good to hear. What program are you in again? I forgot?

Matthew: Botany.

Angela: Botany. Maybe it's you scientists. Everyone in humanities is scared. I'm like the lone wolf mentioning Photoshop.

Matthew: Images! [mocking tone]

Angela: It is. We don't use PowerPoint all the time for our presentations. Sometimes it is just read from a paper, so yeah. Sorry, that's for another topic.

In this casual exchange, the three instructors' direct experience with Photoshop in multiple disciplines enabled a shared understanding of why the value of assignments beyond the classroom—for professional goals and futures—must be emphasized with students. Ultimately, their experience with Photoshop helped forge connections across disciplinary boundaries, and even highlighted some of the ways disciplines are siloed or typecast. Angela's joking response, "Maybe it's you scientists" and assertion that she is a "lone wolf" in the humanities emphasizing the value of Photoshop showed how disciplinarity, and discipline-specific assignments and tools, are very much a part of cross-disciplinary writing assignment discussions. The fellow TAs' sarcastic responses, too, seemed to operate as a way of gaining some critical distance on the kinds of stereotypes they encounter within their academic disciplines.

These three instructors bonded through their overlapping but differing disciplinary backgrounds and, then, pushed toward how tools, such as Photoshop, are useful for students across fields. "You can bring in some more context for how important it is to have these skills even if you're not going to go and be a graphic designer," Clara argued—as these "tools" are "useful for so many different fields." Angela concurred, responding that including information about the applicability of Photoshop to multiple fields on her assignment sheet "will be a nice preview" of the class discussions and readings that, she said, "reinforce that as well: how it's useful in civic contexts, for democracy as well as jobs and personal use too." After some joking about going beyond, as Matthew said, mastering Photoshop to "look better for Facebook" and as Clara added, offering "a whole day on removing zits from photos," the instructors brainstormed how adding a reflective piece to the writing assignment might deepen student learning. Matthew suggested asking students to "report a few tools or techniques" from Photoshop they used, reflecting upon how they are useful—their "rhetorical effects," as Angela added. Our WAC instructor learning community provided important—and often, as Laughlin (1997) argues, hard to find—space for sharing and building of pedagogical expertise. We were particularly struck by the camaraderie and humor in the group, perhaps facilitated by their interacting as fellow graduate students and TAs. Ultimately, the shared experience of using Photoshop as graduate students in very different fields opened up a common space in which to emphasize student learning and professional goals.

**A Subsurface Clash of Direct Experience and Power: Responding to a Comparative Literature Assignment.** Another of these fascinating workshop discussions not only demonstrated how direct personal experience as a student-writer and as a teacher influenced the way colleagues responded to a seminar participant's draft assignment. The responses also revealed some of the tensions and complexities that can underlie the seemingly smooth surface of workshop discussions among wonderfully collaborative disciplinary instructors. In workshop group one, we came to see two fascinating levels of discussion occurring simultaneously. On the surface, more experienced colleagues were dispensing advice carefully, judiciously, and reflectively. That advice stemmed from different kinds of direct personal experience as

students, as writers, and as teachers. Through a deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that there was a serious power imbalance within this group: the more senior colleagues, both with deeper teaching experience, dominated the conversation and failed to support ideas from a junior colleague—and consequently failed to stretch their own ideas and learn about the possible benefits of open-ended assignments. In this exchange, Eliana, a PhD student in comparative literature, discussed her draft paper assignment with Dana, a post-doctoral student in molecular biology, whose assignment we analyzed above, and with Taryn, a professor in obstetrics and gynecology from the medical school. Absolutely central to understanding this discussion is the radical difference in teaching experience among them and the authority that experience lends to opinions. At that point, Eliana had not yet taught at all; she was designing this assignment for a course she hoped to teach in the future. Dana, a post-doc researcher, had taught for several years and was completing a multi-year graduate certificate program in the scholarship, practice, and research of teaching and learning, while Taryn, the medical-school professor, brought decades of teaching experience.

Their discussion focused primarily on how open-ended the genre of the paper was (what they called the “format” of the paper), how prescriptive the scaffolded process would be for students, and how much critical feedback students would need from their instructor along the way. The draft assignment asked students to compare two works of literature from one theoretical perspective, or one work from two theoretical perspectives. From her explanation of the assignment, it’s clear that Eliana, the comparative-literature instructor, drew key elements from her own experiences as a student and as a writer:

[T]he creative element that I might include is just the format of the paper... [Y]ou can set this up in a dialogue, two people talking about a work. Or you can—*something I find when I’m writing papers is a lot of ideas connect in ways that don’t really follow in a structure one after the other after the other* [emphasis added]. So I’m going to suggest writing or organizing the paper in a non-linear model, especially for something that—if it were in my course I would call a wandering sea[?—you can have a way of organizing things that fill in different ways and return back to the same thing. And if this was organized as a bunch of papers constantly cross-referencing one page, cross-referencing other sections, or a kind of, um, stringing them along in this way, something like that would be a different way to represent it that would follow the format of some, the works that we’ve been discussing. Also there is a theorist called Deleuze who is very into these webs and networks and everything being connected. So especially if someone is doing him and other theorists, it would be very appropriate. A lot of ways that I find my course is working is it’s an open topic, so I find that a lot of this [gesturing toward the printed copy of her draft assignment] gives some kind of basis for what is expected, without limiting the students to anything in particular. And I think I included a note at the end to say that I am open to things we haven’t discussed in class or to different non-traditional formats.

Eliana later stated explicitly that she has *personal reasons* for wanting to give her students the option to write a dialogue instead of a standard analytical or argumentative paper. From the context, we assume that she was referring to her own experience as a writer and her own epistemological beliefs about the dialogic nature of analysis and knowledge.

It’s clear from much of the following discussion that the more experienced colleagues, drawing from their own more extensive direct teaching experience, were skeptical about the assignment, concerned that their newer colleague will run into trouble if she leaves the genre and structure of the paper so open-ended. Taryn, the medical-school professor, for example, asked an obviously critical question, though in a friendly, approachable way: “So what’s your experience with students using open-ended formats?” In response, Eliana quickly gave away her authority and signaled her eagerness for advice: “I have absolutely, I have absolutely no experience. I haven’t actually started teaching yet. I’m taking this [WAC-Delta] seminar so that I can feel more prepared. But that’s [the open-ended nature of the assignment] something I’ve really thought about. ...” As they probed about details of the scaffolding and process built into the assignment,

the more experienced colleagues encouraged Eliana to intervene in the process to guide her students back on track with their choice of topics and structures before they invest too much time in unpromising directions. The experienced instructors repeatedly anchored their critical perspectives and advice explicitly in their own teaching experience and from their direct observations during one of the expeditions (in this case, observing Writing Center consultations), which were a required part of the WAC seminar.

At its core, this discussion juxtaposed a kind of deliberately open-ended invitation of a writing assignment as a learning activity with a pragmatic vision of how students frequently interpret and respond to assignments. As she discussed her assignment, drawing from her own undergraduate experience as a student and writer, Eliana imagined fully engaged student-writers, much like we imagine she herself was as an undergraduate, who will be drawn to open-ended invitations for writing, make good choices about topics and structures for their papers, need minimal direct guidance from the instructor, organize their own groups for peer review (“engag[ing] in” what she calls “regular conversation among friends,”) rather than needing her as the instructor to organize and regulate peer review. In response to that idealized vision, the more experienced instructors in this group, both from the sciences, gently but persistently pushed for a more explicit and detailed assignment and processes with oversight from the instructor. The conversation was unfailingly amiable, filled with supportive back-channeling, smiles, overlapping dialogue, shared laughter, direct requests for advice from the assignment designer who clearly recognized that her colleagues had critical perspectives (“If you have an idea for this, please let me know [smiling]”), genuinely helpful suggestions, and expressions of gratitude from Eliana for the advice she received (“it [your advice] was really helpful”).

But despite this friendly surface to the conversation, it’s clear that as they drew upon their extensive teaching experience, Dana and Taryn, the more senior colleagues, dominated the response part of this conversation and in effect silenced Eliana’s vision of a creative, open-ended assignment and her expectation of engaged, empowered student-writers, doing more than simply fulfilling an assignment. In another form of silencing, Eliana never said that she believed that disciplinary differences may play a role in their different perspectives (she might well have said this when her science colleagues asked whether her advanced literature majors would know what it means to “discuss” a work of literature). At the same time, Dana and Taryn seemed to have missed the chance to learn from Eliana’s more theoretical, open-ended approach to designing a writing assignment and from her more optimistic view of students as learners. Undeniably, the critical responses to this draft assignment and the advice for strengthening it stemmed from radical differences in direct personal experience as students, as writers, and as teachers and the presumed authority or lack of authority stemming from that experience. This conversation illustrated some of the complex ways that new learning builds on prior knowledge, just as constructivist theories of learning predict (Richardson, 2003), and illustrated how experience translates into power within heterogeneous workshop groups like this one.

**Honest Admissions of Teaching Difficulties: Equalizing Differences in Experience.** In workshop group three, experiential and power differences had a completely different effect on how participants responded to each other’s assignment drafts. One particularly striking method of responding by drawing on one’s deep experience with teaching pervaded the responses of astronomy professor Susan. Susan drew extensively on her deep teaching experience as she responded to the assignment designs of the relatively much newer, and less experienced, instructors, Eric (a graduate TA in environmental studies) and Kayla (a graduate TA in zoology). While it is not surprising that Susan has a great deal of experience as a teacher, the way that she referred to that experience to support the assignment design work of Eric and Kayla was of particular note for WAC professionals seeking to cultivate supportive interdisciplinary conversations that seek to level power imbalances, around teaching with writing—especially between instructors with a range of experience.

Susan persistently not only mentioned strategies from her own classroom, but foregrounded her learning process: hard-fought teaching insights arising from trial and error. She offered honest, often self-deprecating, reflections on parts of her teaching that had not gone so smoothly: what she said she didn’t

realize, or wished she'd known before. For instance, praising Kayla's well-defined writing prompts, Susan asserted, "I like how they are very specific....They [students] don't have to guess at how they're supposed to respond." When Kayla replied that she "didn't know if they [her assignments] were too focused," Susan responded with her experience: "I guess I've been surprised at the range with which students can misinterpret what you want, so I think the more focused, the better." Her admission of one of the tricky parts of teaching invited Kayla to chime in with her own teaching experience, when a lack of clarity complicated things: "Yeah, I wrote a question for [my department's] preliminary exam a couple of years ago, and it is amazing how much people could be confused." Eric, too, shared not only teaching, but also his disciplinary experience, asserting that "in survey research" [gesturing toward himself] "like as a social scientist, you have to have like a pre-pilot survey to test your instruments. Kind of makes sense that the same would be true for your own test." This sharing of experience stimulated by Kayla's open discussion of teaching challenges reinforces how instructors always bring diverse experiences with them into professional development, and—as Oleson and Hora (2014) argue—those experiences should be valued and purposefully brought into discussion.

When Kayla later in the discussion admitted her lack of experience creating a rubric—"I don't have any idea how to write a rubric. That's what I need the most help on. It's something I've never done, even a little bit"—Susan responded with some of her learning from failures and student confusion:

I find it hard. I just did a rubric for one of my class assignments. It's really hard because sometimes the score on the rubric ends up just not being the score you give them. In the sense that you could tick off these boxes, but sometimes the overall scientific content was really poor, and so while they did do x, y, and z, that kind of didn't make up for the fact that the core wasn't there. And so, I don't know, I think I would be kind of inclined to do what Eric was suggesting. Give the examples of the five, the three, and the one, but then don't assign specific points to specific parts of it.

Here, Susan again openly acknowledged some of the parts of teaching that she finds "really hard"—including using a rubric to accurately reflect one's feedback and clearly communicating that feedback to students. She also acknowledged Eric's suggestion for rubric design. In turn, Eric and Kayla again appeared to feel comfortable responding, sharing their own direct personal experiences. In particular, they noted their own frustrations from teaching, including clarifying their rubrics and making sure students provide essay text responses that show they "actually understand."

These productive assignment design discussions were facilitated in no small part by Susan's open reflections on the complexities of teaching with writing—that all stemmed from her direct personal experience. For instance, Susan used the phrase, "I was kind of surprised" twice as she began sharing some of the knowledge she has gained from teaching that didn't always go as planned. She admitted even "distrusting" her students' universally positive (read: uncritical) responses to peer review, and expressed more surprise and frustration at students failing to "understand why I was asking them to do certain things." These honest admissions seemed to make Susan more approachable, inciting productive conversation in the workshop group about how to clarify the value and goals of peer review and how to refine assignment prompts and check for understanding. In this way, Susan's generous willingness to share her deep experience with teaching—not only the successes, but also the frustrating, surprising challenges—equalized assignment design conversation and potential power differentials across levels of teaching experience.

## Complicating Our Claims: When Direct Personal Experience Obscures Complexity

From our analysis, we saw direct personal experience serving as a vehicle through which seminar participants talking to instructors from other disciplines could convey their pedagogical attachments and motivations in teaching with writing. More specifically, we found that, within these interdisciplinary WAC conversations, direct personal experience functioned as a multi-tool that instructors can employ when discussing the origins of their writing assignments and when responding to other participants' assignments. Before moving on to a discussion of the implications that our study has for the larger field, however, it is important to interrogate critically the value and limitations of claims about direct personal experience for motivating meaningful [and sustainable] WAC learning. Specifically, we explore two ways that direct personal experience may constrain—or cover over—complexity: (a) As we saw in the analysis above, direct personal experience may reinscribe power dynamics, keeping instructors from seeing and understanding the varied experience other instructors bring with them as they design assignments; and (b) Direct personal experience may prevent instructors from imagining the experiences that students will bring with them to the writing assignments instructors are designing—and the ways in which instructor and student experiences within academia are deeply informed by hegemonic structures.

First, we note that while direct personal experience can reveal pedagogical and disciplinary attachments, these revelations do not always ensure a deeper or more engaging conversation among participants. When instructors pulled in their own unique direct personal experiences in a way that connected with something in their colleague's assignment drafts, these cross-disciplinary connections enabled more substantial pedagogical discussions. However, we also found moments in which direct personal experience invoked as a response resulted in a kind of disruption in which disciplinary and experiential differences were thrown into relief. While the earlier example highlighted the value of astronomy professor Susan sharing her deep teaching experience, our analysis revealed other moments when participants with extensive teaching experience were responding to participants who had little or no experience with teaching in a way that was more directive and authoritative than facilitative and collaborative. Despite the experienced instructors' good intentions, these responses at times contributed to the formation of hierarchies that made it challenging for others to participate, effectively shutting down other ways of thinking, as was the case in workshop group five. In this case, experienced graduate TA Shelby used her own knowledge of challenges teaching undergraduate students to situate and justify her concerns about her colleague Lance's assignment. When Lance, a graduate student with no teaching experience, dismissed Shelby's concerns as not relevant given the particulars of the course he was imagining teaching, Shelby doubled down on her claims, and soon after Lance acquiesced. While this kind of hierarchical dynamic was present in every group, the unevenness of expertise across participants could cause the group to privilege the input received from those with more experience. This finding contributes to and reinforces the field's call for more research focusing on the roles that disciplinary TAs play in WAC instruction (LaFrance, 2015; Rodrigue, 2013).

When we looked critically at all of our data, we found that the WAC seminar itself, with its readings, discussions, and hands-on expeditions, offered participants an alternative path to expertise and, thus, a way to disrupt power dynamics that does not rely on having prior direct personal experience. Rather than being constrained by experiential differences, the participants were often eager to find common ground within the WAC concepts and practices we had discussed throughout the semester. Almost every single participant drew on shared WAC knowledge to cross disciplinary and experiential boundaries and participate in the activity of workshopping assignments. To better illustrate how WAC concepts helped fill in gaps in participants' direct personal experience, consider seminar participant Matthew's situation. Matthew, a graduate TA in ethnobotany with relatively less teaching experience, shared his draft assignment, a revised version of a writing assignment created by the professor from the class he supported as a teaching assistant. Matthew drew authority from his personal experience with the WAC seminar itself to support his revision

suggestions for the main course professor's assignment. Referencing a shared reading from John Bean's (2011) *Engaging Ideas*, Matthew explained that the assignment was originally the "type that Bean was repeatedly warning against. It was very much 'pick your topic, write a report, and that's it.'" Matthew's experience with Bean deeply influenced his assignment design, equipping him with specific language—"I tried to add more justification for what they're doing, some rhetorical context"—even while he worried that "It's still not really a problem-based assignment like Bean advocates." The insights Matthew gathered from not only reading Bean's text (referring with impressive specificity to the assignment being what Bean calls a "paper parade"), but also from his direct personal experience with a WAC seminar "expedition"—an in-person observation in the honors biology program, from which he wanted to borrow a rubric.

Second, despite the readiness with which instructors drew upon their own direct personal experience, they reflected very little on their *students'* direct personal experiences with writing and communication. That is, rather than aiming to imagine the direct personal experiences students bring with them to assignments, they primarily restricted themselves to considering how students *in general* will experience assignment expectations and meet (or experience difficulty meeting) them. For instance, participants in workshop groups three and five spent the bulk of their time grappling with how "undergrads," conceptualized broadly, might misunderstand or misread assignment prompts.

As instructors drew on their direct experience, many instructors used *their own* direct personal experience as a stand-in for student experience. We wonder whether this homogenous understanding of *students'* direct personal experience can be attributed in part to the overpowering influence of our participants' direct personal experience with writing that largely centers around their identities as academics. In "Meaningful Writing and Personal Connection: Exploring Student and Faculty Perspectives," Eodice et al. (2020) remind us that, because most faculty belong to a "particular subgroup of professionals" (i.e. academics who teach), they likely share particular values and motivations about writing (p. 342). When WAC specialists fail to recognize the ways in which disciplinary instructors' direct personal experiences are shaped by the professional attachments and privileges of academic work, we miss opportunities to interrogate institutional traditions that have historically privileged white, dominant discourses and literacy practices.

In his groundbreaking work on anti-racist writing assessment, Asao Inoue (2015) directed attention to traditional writing assessment practices as rooted in a white racial habitus that holds the dominant discourse up as "good writing" (p. 104). Inoue recognized that, while faculty themselves bring diverse personal experiences to bear on their writing assignments, "... we all work within conditions and systems that have branded some languages as less communicative, less articulate, less than the dominant discourse" (pp. 32-33; see also Lerner, 2018). As Jamila Kareem (2020) pointed out, considering the ways whiteness perpetuates tacit norms in our disciplinary discourses is vital—and immensely undertheorized—for WAC practitioners and scholars. Kareem, drawing from Mya Poe (2013), called for WAC practitioners "to account for the intersections of racial histories and identities with written communication" that our instructors *and* students bring to the table (p. 300). As a tool for enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy in WAC work, such an accounting, Kareem argued, can "lead to more robust understandings of what attitudes about students' racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds we bring to writing instruction" (p. 300).

One welcome example of such nuanced engagement with students' direct personal experience did, in fact, occur in our workshop group one. When our participant Taryn was designing an assignment directing future health practitioners to reflect on their own race and class backgrounds, she went beyond imagining students' understanding of the assignment prompt. She, instead, took time to imagine who students are and where they came from and how students' individual prior experiences shape the way they engage in the classroom and the way they write. Reflecting that all students benefit from interrogating their experiences and challenging their assumptions (as, she said, "regardless of who you are, you know"), she helped her workshop group members trouble their understanding of who students are and what they bring to the table. We are convinced that the attention we've focused in this section on power dynamics and student and

instructor identity is crucial for making the complexity of direct personal experience more visible and thus more valuable for WAC instructor development.

## Implications for WAC Theory and Practice

Our findings, we hope, serve as a call to action for all of us who design and lead WAC professional development seminars for disciplinary instructors. We need to recognize the ways that whiteness perpetuates tacit norms in our disciplinary discourse, and to infuse our WAC-seminar curricula with conversations and readings that explicitly grapple with these questions of power, expertise, and identity. In our future iterations of the seminar at the heart of this study we will feature scholarship from diverse voices across WAC studies, including scholarship from Poe (2013), Kareem (2020), and Inoue (2015) whose work has deeply informed the present study. Within WAC workshops, if we are using small-group discussions about draft assignments that the workshop participants are creating, we can urge participants to be attentive to ways in which their own and their colleagues' particular prior experiences with writing and teaching might limit and bias their discussions. In doing so, we must be careful to value diverse literacy practices and histories while actively resisting the privileging of dominant perspectives on what it means to write. Theorizing how direct personal experience, as it is drawn on by disciplinary instructors as they design writing assignments, may perpetuate privilege across lines of race, class, and gender is, we argue, important ongoing work. As we have suggested above, WAC specialists can encourage participants, as they design assignments, to push beyond their own experiences, in order to imagine a range of experiences *students* might bring to their writing, beyond simply thinking of ways to make students fulfill assignments and not assuming that their students' experiences always match instructors' experiences.

More broadly WAC specialists can learn to expect, discover, recognize, tap into, and use the power of disciplinary instructors' prior experiences to improve many dimensions of WAC seminars/workshops—and to develop our skill at doing that. The approaches we are suggesting align with Fulwiler's (1981) classic recommendations for using inductive principles within WAC faculty workshops. When leading a WAC workshop with experienced disciplinary faculty, Fulwiler recommended, "If you want to encourage all teachers to teach more writing in their classes, then start with the knowledge they already possess and build from there" (p. 56). When, for example, we decide which key WAC principles we are trying to convey within a particular workshop, we should use good pedagogy, derived from constructivist learning theory, to think intentionally about how to connect those core principles of our workshop with instructors' prior experience and to consider also how prior experiences can interfere with understanding and accepting those principles. If we are working with disciplinary instructors who seem unmotivated to participate or resistant to change, we can listen to their prior experience for clues about how to increase their interest and motivation—perhaps extending Eodice et al. (2016) and Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) recommendations to encourage faculty to hone in on what does, in fact, motivate them. As Thaiss and Zawacki explain, "In a workshop setting, an opportunity for teachers to hear one another's stories and reflections can be mutually exhilarating and enlightening, as the writing and reading open up the academy's richness as a community of dedicated, imaginative scholars/writers/teachers" (p. 157). Perhaps in some idealized WAC world with no time constraints (hah!), WAC workshop facilitators might even ask disciplinary instructors to examine some of the transcripts from our study—or to record and reflect on the discussions within their own workshop groups—to examine critically how direct personal experience is working within those conversations and in their thinking about assignment design.

As we think in these ways about how best to use workshop groups in WAC workshops, the rich interactions within the workshop groups in our study—together with awareness that contingent faculty and TAs play central roles in WAC instruction (LaFrance, 2015; Rodrigue, 2013; Winzenried, 2016)—suggest that there are powerful benefits to broadening WAC faculty development programs to include not only tenure-track faculty but also lecturers, graduate students not holding TAs, post-docs, and TAs, who bring diverse levels of experience to WAC instructor development. Regardless of who participates in seminars, WAC

practitioners organizing instructor groups should consider relative levels of teaching experience, varied academic roles, and how they might create or mitigate power differentials.

## Closing Thoughts

Our research has been motivated by the disciplinary instructors in this study, specifically by their enthusiasm for, openness to, and interest in teaching with writing—and in supporting other instructors in developing their pedagogy. We found that what initially struck us as spirited conversation within an instructor learning community in fact revealed a great deal about how productive discussion of teaching with writing is both fueled *and* complicated by reference to instructors' direct personal experience. That experience, as we have argued in this article, functions (a) to motivate instructors' choices in designing a particular assignment, and (b) to bridge disciplinary differences and across varied levels of expertise in ways that make room for substantive discussion of best practices for teaching with writing.

Building on these results, future research can explore more deeply the functions of direct personal experience on WAC learning among disciplinary instructors. Researchers could aim, for example, to parse more finely our broad categories of experience—student, teacher, and scholar—and identify additional kinds of personal experience that emerge in conversations about designing assignments. They could explore instances in which particular direct personal experience might constrain, or even shut off, important alternatives within a conversation. And they could examine how instructors with different degrees of teaching experience deploy that experience. They might also explore how, as we have suggested, instructors with limited teaching experience can use core concepts from WAC seminars in lieu of direct teaching experience in order to gain authority and participate more fully in these kinds of conversations. And through follow-up interviews perhaps, researchers could explore the generational influence of WAC programs by asking instructors about their own undergraduate experience with writing-intensive courses. As future research reveals more about how disciplinary instructors learn and apply WAC principles and pedagogy, we are confident that prior experience will remain absolutely central to that learning and crucial to the way that WAC professionals support colleagues in these epistemic WAC conversations.

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