

A Series of Design(ed) Tensions: Reclaiming Space for Faculty Agency in Curriculum Development

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This article will discuss tensions involving a large-scale university-supported curriculum design project for online course development that ran counter to what we know are common practices in online writing instruction. In discussing how stakeholders involved were at odds with the goal of the project, we hope to generate discussion about how best to advocate for truly collaborative professional development and curriculum design opportunities in OWI and our institutions at large. Special consideration will be given to the tensions that can sometimes arise between the institution's need for efficiency and the well-researched practices of online writing/literacy instruction.

Introduction: The Invisible Labor We Carry

As writing instructors, we understand that designing a tech-mediated course that meets the needs of students while also accomplishing explicit curricular goals necessitates a certain amount of invisible labor. Whether tasked with teaching from a standard template or given *carte blanche* to develop our curriculum and deliverables, we spend countless hours revising, learning platforms, and running scenarios for how the class will work in practice. It's a necessary part of the job. Scholars have long acknowledged that such invisible labor is a critical, time-consuming necessity in writing instruction which should prepare students for the various composing situations they may encounter, particularly within digital infrastructures (Ball & Kalmbach, 2010; McKee & DeVoss, 2013; Rice, 2007; Selfe, 2005). Further complicating such invisible labor are the varied experiences, preferences, and needs our students bring with them, meaning that our course design must actively include accessibility options to minimize barriers (Borgman & McArdle, 2019; Coombs, 2010; CCC, 2013; CEUD, 2014; Dirksen, 2012; Foley & Ferri, 2012; GSOLE, 2016; Gos, 2015; Hitt, 2018; Mahaffey & Walden, 2019; Oswal & Melonçon, 2014). As if the quantification of technology skill sets, professional development opportunities, and sheer workload volume weren't enough, labor experts remind us of the institutional pressures of automated educational

models which posit a cost-effective, labor efficient method of “grading” writing, and templated course models which essentially allow for “any” teacher to drop in and run the course (Issacs, 2016; Schnell, 2016). These conditions as a backdrop, we wanted to discuss our experience in a curriculum design project as a way to recognize the invisible labor tensions that we felt.

The Past is Tense: Online Course Design in the Writing, Rhetoric, & Digital Studies Department

To situate our story, we wish to give a brief history of our department. Shortly after becoming an independent writing program, we moved from a two-course first-year writing sequence to a one-course model. Most of our students would take a newly-designed hybrid 4-credit first-year writing course (three hours a week face-to-face, and one online asynchronous writing studio hour). This move in 2015 was the start of our shift to hybrid and online writing courses in our program, which continued to gain traction even prior to the pandemic when we achieved departmental status in Fall 2019.

Concurrently, the university also adopted a stance that more faculty should be trained in online teaching and strongly promoted the Quality Matters curriculum, though other homegrown departmental training programs were permissible. Given our need to develop online studio work and train faculty, two of our faculty experts in Online Writing Instruction (OWI) designed and delivered an in-house OWI course integral to raising issues about student engagement, accessibility, and collaboration. Our work as a department cultivated a strong identity in terms of what effective online instruction can look like, as many of our faculty members became active members and leaders of professional organizations and working groups such as GSOLE and the OWI Standing Groups.

So begins our tale of a series of unfortunate contradictions in online course redesign—a place where issues of faculty agency, invisible labor, institutional pressures, and course accessibility meet. Our goal is to generate meaningful discussions that underscore “[...] such labor is often a moving target that is never truly done and requires continual learning” (Rodrigo & Romberger, 2017, p. 68). Though Rochelle Rodrigo and Julia Romberger’s (2017) work made visible the labor of program technologists often called upon to complete such responsibilities beyond their scholarly and teaching roles, we found ourselves in a similar predicament when offered an opportunity through our institution’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Initially, it seemed this endeavor would grant us a certain amount of cultural capital in our annual reviews, allowing us to speak directly to curricular development

as a scholarly process of making pedagogically-informed technology and digital design choices; this work was more than an act of service. On a purely practical level, as contingent faculty, we were motivated by what appeared to be compensation for service work that so often isn't valued in the same way as other professional responsibilities (Rodrigo & Romberger, 2017). The truth is our story is not novel. Tensions between subject matter experts and institutional services like CTLs are long-established and fraught with disagreements which make the exploration of individual anecdotes and possible solutions—like ours— that much more important. In our case, three distinct tensions emerged: conflicting expectations of workflow, completing end goals, and differing tech options for faculty and instructional designers (IDs) (Figure 1). Despite the somewhat grim landscape we have painted, we want to be clear that we would like to highlight that the retelling of our collaborative work gave us the opportunity to consider spaces for activism, particularly for faculty agency in participatory course design.

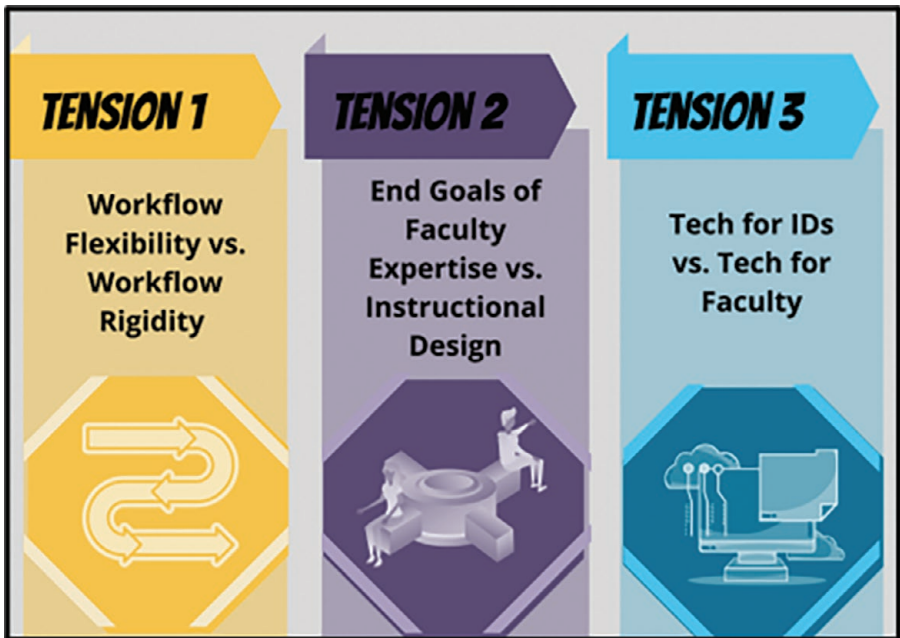


Figure 1: Three distinct tensions we felt: Workflow flexibility, end goals, & availability of tech

Tension 1: The Bad Beginning of Workflow

Though many of us in the department felt well-positioned to teach online courses when March 2020 shifted us into unknown territory, the truth is

most of our implementation during this shift was triaged. Wanting to improve upon our missteps, April 2020 presented us with an opportunity: we could secure funding through our university's Center for Teaching and Learning's university-level initiative to create scalable online course offerings. This opportunity would allow us to revise an existing course and collaborate with an ID, as well as be paid for our labor, which research from education technology (Chen & Carliner, 2021; Richardson et al., 2019) indicated helps build partnerships between faculty subject matter experts and university instructional designers. The enticement of compensation for faculty course designers coupled with the promise of support from an ID couldn't be ignored, though expectations were still nebulous when we agreed to participate. We submitted WRDS 2101: Advanced Writing, Research, and Critical Analysis for redesign, a broad introductory course initially designed to be a writing-intensive course for students wanting more writing support or for transfer students who did not otherwise take our first-year writing course, in addition to potentially drawing students into the minor or major. From Spring 2020 until January 2021, we waited for more information about the requirements of our participation in this program, and when we did receive our contracts in Spring 2021, we were quite surprised at what we saw. Noticeably absent was information on time commitment, expectations of curricular alignment, and design. Information was more focused on how the institution would own the resources we would create and our department would need to teach the course for at least a two-year time commitment, because as Rochelle Rodrigo and Christina D. Ramírez (2017) noted, "In addition to using 'certified' master courses for quality and consistency, institutions that use teams to develop online courses will not want the institutionally compensated labor of all the team members wasted by not reusing the course" (p. 317). Issues of intellectual property and ownership of developed course materials aside, we both still felt encouraged that the work we would complete Insert Figure would be directed by our needs as disciplinary experts in curricular design, accessibility, OWI, and digital composing. Wrong again.

Expertise, as it were, didn't ultimately matter. We mistakenly assumed that the support offered by the CTL would mirror a problem-posing approach rather than a banking model of curriculum development (Freire, 2000). Revealed in small stages, our work required us to take a CTL-designed Canvas onboarding course and two Quality Matters courses prior to actually building our course with an instructional designer (ID) each week over the summer. This process was difficult for several reasons, but one of the biggest tensions was that our design process was not linear. We found ourselves hurrying up to slow down, working with limited or contradictory information, and constrained by institutional gatekeeping requirements in order to be compensated.

The resulting workflow was three versions of the same course to appease different stakeholders:

- One version of the course shell followed the CTL's expectations. These parameters were determined mostly by the ID working within a set of constraints informed by QM. This was also the only iteration where the use of DesignTools was permitted, meaning the other versions of the course were built primarily using HTML code to address design constraints and accessibility issues.
- The second shell was designed so it could be easily understood by another faculty member in our department. In short, there was some flexibility in terms of assignment design and execution so other faculty members could adjust the work to fit their needs. When we realized that the required timeline did not reflect ours, we began to see this project as a way to provide professional development for other faculty in our department who primarily teach FYW and who might want to teach this course in the future. As a new department, we have to initiate ways of providing opportunities to develop curricula for our new major, and our work was one means of doing so.
- Finally, version three was a development course that would be copied over and taught in two different iterations of the Fall 2021 course taught by Ashlyn Walden. These assignments/resources/activities had additional elements such as due dates, models, examples, and rubrics which would be easy for the students to follow when engaging with the course synchronously or asynchronously.

Though technically required to create our original assignment in the QM Canvas development site, we instead chose to build our course assignments in the version of the course that Ashlyn would teach, then work backward to fulfill the expectations of our contract. As subject area experts on accessibility and writing studies curricular design, it was simply not possible for us to follow through with this lock-step program design; this was a space for activism, a place where we could assert our agency in participatory course design.

Tension 2: The Austere Academy of Competing Goals

One of the most confounding tensions to us was the difference in the end goal of this program. From an institutional point of view, once these courses were launched, the belief was that any teacher could pick up the course shell and teach it, devoid of context or pedagogical grounding. While there are proponents of an online templated course shell model, as Rodrigo and Ramírez (2017) discussed in the professional development and training of

new instructors in technical and professional communication, this “one size fits all” or “plug and play” model does not reflect the disciplinary practices of online writing instruction (Gibson & Martinez, 2013; Gos, 2015; Mahaffey & Walden, 2019; Oswal & Melonçon, 2017; Rice, 2015). Teaching writing online differs from teaching other disciplines; not every online instruction practice works for every discipline. And while the discipline of writing studies recognizes the highly collaborative and time-consuming nature of writing, issues of intellectual property, privacy/surveillance, labor efficiency, and disciplinary expertise were highly disconcerting.

In short, according to our contract, the university “owned” the course designed with our intellectual property because we used university resources (Canvas, DesignTools, the CTL, and the use of a university instructional designer) to create it, and we were not notified of our right until we felt we were too involved to back out of the project. Lisa Melonçon (2017) discussed the problematic nature of intellectual property rights in online course development, particularly for contingent faculty, who face the tension of compensation for their work, noting, “They may not be obvious professional development issues, but conditions of labor and ownership of materials are, indeed, concerns of professional development because, with adequate knowledge about their rights, contingent faculty can make more informed decisions about where they work, what work they do for what pay, and what conceptual and practical coursework they prefer not to give away” (p. 260). This idea of ownership, like so many other aspects of our work together, was not immediately transparent when we began this work; it wasn’t until we had already completed onboarding training, two QM courses, and began our own course mapping that we had any sense of the proprietary issues ahead. And given the fact that we had already spent so much time developing our course through required training, we were much less apt to abandon our work at that stage. We were doing this work because it would make the course design better and more accessible to students. “It’ll work. We will find our way” became our mantra.

Tension 3: The Slippery Slope of the Tech Available

Yet, as we attempted to “find our way,” it became abundantly clear that university messaging versus faculty expertise were at cross-purposes. From an institutional perspective, templated Canvas models across disciplines were preferred as concerns had been raised about students’ inability to navigate the widely diverse usage across courses. While well-intentioned in terms of access, such moves give the LMS a lot of power in terms of both course design (because Canvas, like any platform, has preferred pathways of use) and

surveillance (data analytics in terms of use, missing assignments, time spent on individual assignments or pages). For example, within the Canvas LMS, one can view the level of a student's participation in terms of a star rating system, which highlights page views, number of assignments completed, late, or missing, and total hours spent on the course site. In theory, a student may be flagged as low to medium participation because of data points such as page views or total time on the site, but the grade and quality of the work may be entirely different. Such analytics may be devoid of context in terms of access issues such as stable broadband internet access, a relatively up-to-date computer, or any number of other accessibility issues that a given student may be experiencing. Even more troubling is the fact that it isn't immediately clear how the data analytics may be used outside of an institutional context particularly when LMS accounts may also be linked to email, social media, or other third-party integration tools (Lynch, 2017; Marachi & Quill, 2020; Rubel & Jones, 2016).




Step 1	<p>Read the following two texts about modes and design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Filmore's "Multi-Modal Communication: Writing in Five Modes" ▪ Burgstahler's "Universal Design: Processes, Principles, and Applications"
Step 2	<p>Watch the video below for user-centered design in a nutshell. Take notes as needed.</p> <p>What is User-Centered Design?</p>  <p>Watch on </p>
Step 3	<p>Review the infographic below which compares the way accessibility is attended to with both Universal Design and User Centered Design.</p> <p>Universal Design vs. User-Centered Design</p> <p>Minimize File Preview</p> 

Figure 2: Studio: Universal vs. user-centered design (teacher created)

While there are certainly serious issues with student and instructor privacy in terms of data analytics, it is also true that many third-party tools also have the potential to make our course design labor much more efficient, something that we were in desperate need of while working on this project.

DesignTools, a plug-in available to IDs on our campus, significantly cuts down the labor of making the course accessible (e.g., negates the need for HTML coding snippets, background coding, etc.). As of this writing, this is only available to instructors within the individual course that is partner-built with an ID at our institution.

In Figure 2, Universal Design advocates for developing assignment instructions and resources that account for a potential tolerance for error, have easily perceptible information, and are simple and intuitive to use (CEUD, 2014). Averting potential errors is accounted for by the alternating row colors and embedded videos or PDF files; students can watch or view the resources and choose to enlarge the resources to full screen without ever leaving Canvas. The choice of the table to break up steps in a process and being able to use the resources within the Canvas site without navigating away are key features of a simple and intuitive design. Adding alt text to tables, which is a must in terms of assistive technology like screen readers, provides for equitable use. (Please Note: Alt text cannot be seen in this screenshot of the studio, but it does exist within the course itself.) Highlighting the important information was completed by center-aligning text, using bolded text for key instructional details, and underlining for active hyperlinks only.

The CTL-reviewed version of the studio, built in consultation with the ID, included some important UD features while ignoring others. A table, bolded content, underlined active hyperlinks, and one video embedded resource accounts for potential user error, making the studio simple and intuitive to navigate through and emphasizing imperative information. Yet, the lack of alternating colors, centered step headings, lack of alt text with the table labeling, and missing embedded document resources may cause accessibility issues for some readers, while still abiding by the Quality Matters rubric. This theme of Quality Matters was persistent throughout the prerequisite training courses and during the course development phase. At every step of the process, we were required to take QM courses, produce a course design that was QM certifiable, and acquiesce design control to the ID, which was both challenging and frustrating.

This process ran counter to our preferred working style, all the while receiving reassurances that faculty expertise and agency were central to the course design mission. After completing the course, we listened to a sales pitch about why we should have our courses QM certified to bolster the number of certified courses the university offers.


This table contains steps and instructions for this activity	
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Step 4	<p>Process what you've learned. Consider responding to the questions below in a reflection. If you do write a reflection, be sure to save it somewhere as a writing sample for your portfolio at the end of the semester.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What points of overlap and difference do you see in the two readings? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explain one example of how they are similar. ▪ Explain one example of how they are different. ▪ How do you see the 5 Modes informing/working with the concepts of Universal Design? ▪ What concepts or applications do you see yourself using for your portfolio from the 5 Modes? User-Centered Design? Universal Design? Why are these significant choices for you?

Figure 3: Studio: Universal vs. user-centered design (ID created)

While QM does have some merits in terms of visibility and standardization, it does not seem a logical fit for online writing course development, particularly with respect to accessibility. As it stands now, QM does have one standard devoted to accessibility and usability, but the course objectives and goals of the training still privilege understanding QM foundational concepts, linear curricular development, understanding the challenges of online courses for disabled users, and describing an institution's accessibility and disability policies (Quality Matters, 2022). Yet, as much research in accessibility, technical/professional communication, and online writing/literacy instruction point out: accessibility in terms of course development should be at the forefront of our design and curricular goals (Borgman & Dockter, 2018; Cargile Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005; Gibson & Martinez, 2013; Hitt, 2018; Gos, 2015;

McLeod, 2007; Mahaffey & Walden, 2019; Oswal & Melonçon, 2017). This is a place for disciplinary agency, and more importantly, as we seek to become a more equitable institution, we must find ways of better developing online courses to support student success beyond the traditional checklist measures or templated course design.

The Future is Perfect: Activism Within, and Sometimes in Spite of, Constraints

The design of this program afforded us an opportunity to work together, and in the end, we created something stronger than what one of us could do alone. This fact was a bright spot in an otherwise frustrating process. We revised the current course in terms of content but also focused on designing to center accessibility, including creating multiple access points to course material, instructor video explanations of assignment sheets, homework, etc., and did so working within Canvas's limitations. We immediately recognized that instructional design divorced from content negatively impacts the user experience. This is a problem that needs more discussion and problem-solving.

Our experience has been that activism in higher education stems from recognizing that the institution's motives often differ from faculty's motives and through finding spaces where faculty can demonstrate their expertise given the constraints of workload, divergent value systems, and job security. Activism is seeing how tensions can be addressed and ideally resolved in ways that are not exploitative to the labor involved in creating great work. Activism in faculty labor issues, particularly for contingent faculty, promotes visibility and acknowledgment of the many hours it takes to create a thoughtful design providing a meaningful experience for students. We appreciate that there was funding allocated to this curriculum development program, and to be paid for the labor we were already planning to do was a motivating factor in our participation. More professional and curriculum development programs such as the one we describe here have potential if faculty disciplinary expertise and disciplinary habits of mind are centered in the conversation as opposed to assuming each discipline interacts with online course design in the same way or in a linear way. Had we been part of the early conversations about what this program could do, then we would have not worked under the assumption that we did not have instructional design experience. We could have significantly reduced labor and improved communication among all parties.

For activist curriculum development to occur, we need:

1. To center the expertise of writing instructors,

2. For faculty development specialists to welcome more flexibility in curriculum design, and
3. Administration to advocate for time, space, and fair compensation for design work for faculty.

Recommendations

If instructional support and subject-matter experts are afforded opportunities to co-construct effective instructional design, the potential for activism is tangible. Research in instructional design (Chen & Carliner, 2021; Richardson et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2021) highlights the importance of collaboration between instructional designers and subject matter experts, even in the face of constraints, so long as all parties have clear communication and expectations. Effective collaboration has tangible impacts for student learning when IDs and subject matter experts can focus on “humanizing pedagogy” (Xie et al., 2021), especially as we see continued impacts of the pandemic on student learning. Yuan Chen and Saul Carliner (2021), in their analysis of research on the instructional designer-subject matter expert dynamic, identified five factors that negatively impact this dynamic: “lack of clarity on the role of the instructional designer, ineffective communication, heavy workload, concern for academic autonomy, and ambiguity of status” (p. 486). All these factors were at play in our experience to some degree and easily could have been rectified with more understanding and open communication on both sides.

There are many stakeholders in large-scale redesign projects who need to recognize the material conditions of the labor of curriculum redesign. To avoid the repetition of the pandemic-era triage method of online course design, upper-level administration such as provosts and college deans can think more strategically about budget and resource allocation for curriculum development projects. Sometimes decisions made for the sake of top-down efficiency aren’t always the most effective. Perhaps redirecting funds to the faculty first and allowing them to create online courses—with collaboration and support from centers for teaching and learning and other professional organizations outside of their institution—that reflect best practices in their discipline would have more investment and engagement from the expert faculty who do this work often and without recognition or financial support.

Writing instructors who participate in university-sponsored online course design need to advocate for discussions where there is space for research-based best practices in online writing instruction and to show where OWI and QM principles diverge. QM is not a cure-all. Administrators and faculty development specialists in centers for teaching and learning should involve subject-area experts in the design of these development programs, seeing where faculty

are at and what support they need instead of mandating blanket requirements that decrease the efficiency of the task. IDs should seek input from the instructors who are teaching this material every day *before* decisions are made and not after. Providing flexibility in instructional design support and support tailored to the needs of the subject-area experts, such as expertise in design for accessibility in online courses, would be helpful (Chen & Carliner, 2021; Xie et al., 2021). WPAs and department chairs need to think about the ways in which all parties can benefit from these types of programs and support faculty, in particular contingent faculty, in pursuing opportunities where they are both paid for their labor and valued for their expertise. Ultimately, we believe that our experience reveals an area where activism is sorely needed.

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