Repositioning Curriculum Design: Broadening the *Who* and *How* of Curricular Invention

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Conversations surrounding the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* have made scholars and practitioners of composition more sharply aware of the need to think inventively about how we create what Judith Summerfield and Philip Anderson call “intellectually expansive” spaces for writing (547). As the *Framework* shifts attention to how writing curricula teach students habits of mind such as creativity, openness, and responsibility (O’Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, and Hall 525), we also have a crucial moment to think about how these same habits are fostered in the process of curriculum design and rendered through the minds of curriculum designers. The occasion of the *Framework* makes it all the more evident that creativity, curiosity, and other habits of mind do not spontaneously appear in the minds of composition students: these habits must be framed carefully by thoughtful, attentive designers who shape curricular experiences to engage and challenge students. Yet, as we face environments increasingly restricted by accountability measures and outcomes-based expectations (as Chris Gallagher has recently documented [44]), it is worth looking again at the questions of *who* designs our curricula and *how* these designers learn to negotiate the demands of curriculum design with inventiveness and creativity. In this essay, I argue that attending to these questions opens up new ways to imagine both the basic goals of curriculum design and the fundamental responsibilities of curriculum designers.

Now is a valuable time to reconsider curriculum design in the context of creativity, responsibility, curiosity, and other desirable habits of composition. Even while discussions of the *Framework* pursue writing curricula that will foster what

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Summerfield and Anderson call “a larger version of literacy” (546), the freedom to design truly expansive curricula is a privilege currently limited within the field of composition studies to a narrow range of established scholars, teachers, and administrators. It would perhaps surprise us to recognize that the habits of inquiry we expect of undergraduate students often are not extended in practice to early-career instructors. In publications addressing curriculum development and faculty education, design is a nuts-and-bolts skill of application, imitation, and replication. Design is neither inventive nor expansive: rather, it is given a perfunctory role as a mechanical skill of applying knowledge to ready-made “professional genres” of syllabi, lesson plans, and assignment sheets (see Franke 19). This limited role oversimplifies design as a task of replicating existing knowledge rather than engaging in the more difficult work of forging new connections between ideas and practices within environments of uncertainty and contingency. Over time, this oversimplification of design has made it less likely that students, teachers, and scholars of composition recognize design as a space for experimenting with writing in inventive ways.

Recognizing the opportunity to reposition how we define design and incorporate it into our practices, I argue here that we as scholars, students, teachers, and administrators of composition must take on the responsibility of fostering design as an act of invention—an act that prolongs our engaged inquiry into the values, habits, and assumptions that we practice as students and teachers. Expanding the inventive potential of design in composition studies offers promising new ways to imagine both interdisciplinary inquiry and faculty education in general. Fostered as a creative, generative struggle with questions of meaning and value, inventive design (which I will spend a good portion of this essay defining) invites new perspectives on disciplinary knowledge and new space for the ongoing revision of disciplinary values and practices. Inventive design offers a point of contact for students, tenure-track faculty, and non-tenure-track faculty to engage together in pursuing basic questions of how and why writing matters. Through such contact, designers can help generate alternative visions of key disciplinary concepts that extend our theories, add to our practices, and, we hope, contribute to a more inclusive, democratic, and hospitable environment for scholarly inquiry. Reimagined in this way, design offers our field the opportunity to invent new landscapes for questioning and to attune more carefully to the grounds that we occupy. In order to be fostered as inventive, however, design must be given wider attention in our practices and our scholarship.

Repositioning curriculum design means attending not only to how we define design, but also to how we define the roles of designers. Rethinking design prepares us to reimagine what E. Shelley Reid calls “professional awareness” in instructor education, which Reid defines as a simultaneous engagement with the demands of teaching and with “the discipline of composition pedagogy” (W198, W200). As Reid demonstrates, conversations about instructor education have increasingly opened
up attention to how the rigor of teaching can foster “a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar,” recalling Ernest Boyer’s argument for the “integration” of teaching and scholarship in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer 24–25). This vision of teaching as a site of inventive knowledge making has affected a number of important conversations in the humanities, including discussions of the intellectual value of writing program administration (see Slevin; Gebhardt) and of the “conflicts” masked by pedagogies in English studies more generally (Chick; Graff). Within the field of composition studies, we are beginning to recognize that the attention we give to the scene of instructor education directly impacts what Boyer would call the “meaning and direction” of our field (25). Yet, we still have much work to do in order to realize Boyer’s integrated vision in the ways that we define and practice curriculum design.

With these pressing issues of intellectual expansion and instructor education in mind, I argue here that design can become a site for drawing out a more complex relationship between the tensions that sustain intellectual inquiry and the contingencies of practice that concern teachers and designers. Design can be repositioned as an action essential to scholarly questioning: in order to begin such a shift in purpose, we (members of composition studies and other related fields) must first attend to the underlying assumptions we make about the scope of knowledge (epistemology) and the trajectory of action (axiology) we attach to the act of design. Currently, approaches to design often limit its scope to sets of “step-by-step directions” that prepare instructors to construct syllabi and assignments within expected departmental guidelines and conventions (Wilhoit 35; see also Dethier 31–38). Instructional models and templates such as these lend much-needed help to instructors who may be desperate for just-in-time resources. Yet, the axiological commitments underlying this approach may also generate restrictive assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of “novice” members of our field. Our very desire to help early-career students and teachers may keep them from contributing to the disciplinary community in inventive ways. The intervention I offer here by attending to curriculum design positions scholars in composition studies (and English studies more broadly) to look carefully at the stance we take toward instructor education and listen attentively for the material constraints that we have attached to the work of design. Repositioning curriculum design, as I will make clear here, offers a vital way to begin exploring how we all—instructors and scholars alike—can become more invested in the study of composition and more inventive in shaping the habits of inquiry that drive our field forward.

**Design and Dependence**

In order to make the case that repositioning design can positively affect both the work of design and the roles of designers, I first need to lay the grounds for understanding the logics that have influenced the positioning of design within composition studies.
Design, as I define it here, is an act of negotiating big, open-ended questions (ethical, epistemological, ontological, axiological) against a foreground of practical exigencies that require designers to make consequential choices about communication and knowledge making. Curriculum design, more specifically, puts ethics and axioms to work within learning environments that are constituted by decisions about pedagogies, disciplinary identities, and student subjectivities. It is important to recognize these inquiry-centered negotiations as basic to design in order to establish criteria for considering inventive design against other definitions of design that have been offered in contemporary composition practice. As I make clear in this section by looking at scholarship on curriculum design in composition studies, our field has lost touch with the inventive potential of design by restricting its definition to acts of syllabus construction and content scheduling.

If we look first at publications aimed directly at new instructors, we find that handbooks and other guides portray the design process as an action characterized by a posture of deference toward mainstream practices of writing. The widely used *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, for instance, informs instructors that their approach to design should reflect “themes, research, and classroom practices that experience has validated as ‘workable’” (Lindemann 254). Instructors learn from this advice to set aside their own questions in order to defer to the “experience” of others; they also learn to read the experience of others as absolutely authoritative. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* goes on to make this argument explicit: “Throughout our careers as teachers, we’ll confront questions we can’t answer, and if we haven’t had time to read and assimilate the theories and research that could reveal the answers, we must look to those who have” (Lindemann 254). Despite its best intentions, this imperative teaches instructors to avoid conflict in the act of design, applying only those ideas that are field tested (by others), time efficient, and “workable” (Lindemann 254).

A similar posture is conveyed in other publications aimed at new instructors: Brock Dethier’s *First Time Up*, for instance, tells novice teachers not to be “bullied” by program texts or syllabi (28), but also teaches that the underlying goals and objectives of a course are not open for inquiry but are, rather, conventions that “keep your boss happy” (32). Even in the thoughtful syllabi contributed by Victor Villanueva and Gregory Clark to *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, instructors are given the “common assumptions” they are supposed to adopt (Villanueva 99) and are directed toward the authorized epistemologies that should guide their practices (Clark 103). Again, my interest is not in critiquing these contributions but rather in tracing the logics that underlie and support them: if we listen for the tone of mastery that our field has sponsored, we recognize the positioning of design as a mechanism for aligning instructors’ perspectives with disciplinary expectations.

At the heart of this common stance toward design in existing templates and guides is an unsettling assumption that instructors must be passive learners before
they can be active participants in the inventive work of changing the content or form of disciplinary knowledge. In the interest of “training” others in our field, established scholars and administrators do not address instructors (and here I am particularly emphasizing graduate student instructors and other non-tenure-track faculty as well) as co-conspirators in inquiry and scholarship. We do not encourage experimentation or inquiry: we encourage dependence. Recognizing this imbalance should make us pause to reconsider what kinds of habits we promote when we posture instructors to feel less anxious about their responsibilities by teaching them to rely on (and not necessarily engage with) the knowledge and insights of veteran scholars. We as established administrators, scholars, and teachers must also consider how our own habits sustain this imbalance. When we do not teach instructors to engage with the underlying processes of invention and negotiation that lead us to develop the assumptions, grounding epistemologies, or even pragmatic goals and objectives that are at the core of our curricula, are we preparing instructors to understand composition as a complex, rich field of inquiry? Are we encouraging “professional awareness” in its best and broadest sense (Reid W198)? Or are we teaching instructors to focus on the final products of practice by applying forms and conventions uncritically? Crucially, by simplifying the act of design, we may turn instructors away from identifying as participants in conflicts and tensions that are essential to the “emergence” of invention (see Muckelbauer 75). Our best intentions to make curriculum design easier for instructors may in this way encourage passivity and deference rather than engagement and participation.

This stance of deference and nonparticipation also emerges in the most common scholarly treatments of instructor education within our field, which have preserved the conversation about curriculum as a matter to be discussed among graduate faculty rather than put into the hands of early-career instructors. In Kathleen Blake Yancey’s response to the “neglect” of instructor education in composition studies, for instance, she argues that design is an important “key word” that should be at the center of the discussion of “what we want to design into our TA preparation programs—and why” (73). Yet, Yancey’s “we” does not include TAs in the design process. Though the larger intervention Yancey makes by turning attention to instructor education should not be ignored, it is symptomatic of the attitude we have taken toward curriculum design that she directs her remarks about design to other scholars and administrators in the field. This positioning distances instructors from the scene of invention and creation. Overall, Yancey’s framing of design reinforces the construction of instructors as passive participants in their enculturation within composition studies: design affects instructors, but is not in turn affected by instructors’ thoughts or actions.

A similar although more complicated treatment of instructor education is offered by Reid, who argues that graduate courses in pedagogy need to make space
for new instructors to “use their [teaching and pedagogical] experiences to create their own theories and thus to challenge theories about which they’ve read or heard” (W214; original emphasis). Reid draws needed attention to the “fraught” ground of instructor education, yet she invokes a framework of design similar to Yancey's, which reinforces the idea that students are “novices” who need the “support” of graduate faculty and depend on us to scaffold productive learning experiences for them (W214). Taken in the context of other similar approaches, Reid’s argument subtly reinforces instructor dependence on models, templates, and systems of education established by veterans in the field. Of course, it should be acknowledged that this stance of helpfulness toward instructors has been vital to the ongoing and important expansion of instructor education within English studies; yet, we should also stop to consider how reinforcing the “novice” status of instructors—whether graduate students or non-tenure-track faculty—affects their development and “integration” (Boyer 25) as scholars. If instructors are repeatedly taught to depend on senior scholars for insight and direction, then this scene of education not only reduces the complexity of design; it also dulls our response to novice insights that strain against familiar values and traditions.

My worry, and the underlying assumption that I address here, is that simplifying design allows established scholars of composition to perpetuate a cycle of dependency: simplifying design ensures reproduction of established values and traditions in our field rather than inviting questioning, which might expand how we understand the concepts we study. There are strong institutional reasons for keeping instructors from fully participating in the complexities of design, not the least of which are expectations of a “culture of assessment” in response to external pressures (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 100). My point here is that even with such laudable goals as improving the experiences of first-year teachers in front of us, we cannot ignore the habits we encourage when we center instructor education on application and replication rather than on inventiveness and creativity. Although there are risks involved in confronting established traditions, I believe, and I argue here, that the goal of thinking through “what our new writing teachers will become” (Reid W199) is productively extended by working actively to foster inventive design in writing programs and writing curricula, and in English studies more broadly. Rather than continue developing more elaborate templates that guide students around the “questions [they] can’t answer” (Lindemann 254), we need to reposition design as one way that we confront the difficult questions of our field and engage complexity in the hope of inventing new answers.

I n v e n t i o n i n D e s i g n

I have argued so far that redefining curriculum design as an “inventive act” can correct a tendency in scholarship on instructor education to oversimplify the complexity of
design and foreclose the contributions of new designers. To elaborate on what I mean by calling design an inventive act, I will turn in this section to two crucial aspects of invention—discovery and creation—that are cultivated in the process of designing curriculum. Inventiveness as defined by Sharon Crowley in *The Methodical Memory* is an act of both discovering and contributing to the construction of knowledge within a given setting. Crowley explains that in ancient Greek and Roman rhetorics, the act of discovery was also considered an act of knowledge creation: “every act of knowing,” Crowley writes, “influenced the body of knowledge itself” (162). To call design inventive, with Crowley’s definition of invention in mind, thus involves a process of “finding” (2) that is also a process of creating. Design as an inventive act positions rhetors to “impact hearers and readers” in specific cultural and ethical contexts (168).

**Discovery and Dwelling**

Although it may be artificial to separate out the acts of discovery and creation from the overarching process of invention, I insist on this separation here in order emphasize the distinct ways that curriculum design can, in Crowley’s words, “impact” the expansion of disciplinary inquiry beyond serving as a vehicle for the application of existing knowledge. Turning to the characteristics of discovery, first, I argue that when fostered as an inventive act, curriculum design can posture instructors to understand and engage with commonplace values in the wider disciplines of composition and English studies more broadly. Design offers a space for “discovery” (Reid W199) when it engages instructors in acts of uncovering and understanding disciplinary commonplaces. This act of discovery in turn fosters insight and empathy into what others in the discipline find meaningful. Discovery is thus different from mere application or reproduction, because it requires responsive, embodied investment in tensions and conflicts that ultimately define the boundaries of disciplinary practices. Instructors who are simply given a step-by-step guide to follow will not be inclined to attune to these conflicts and consequences in the same way. When the act of curriculum design is fostered as an opportunity to participate in inquiry—to ask and pursue what Paul Dressel and Dora Marcus call “the basic problems and concerns of mankind” (xii)—designers learn to see their choices in design as essentially engaged with the pursuit, rather than the replication, of knowledge.

To foster curriculum design as an act of discovery, it may be helpful to think of design as a habit of dwelling in tensions and complexities that connect studies of composition to larger ethical, ontological, and epistemological questions. In “ Dwelling with New Media,” Jennifer Bay and Thomas Rickert (following Martin Heidegger) define dwelling as “a mode of being that takes active, practical cognizance of the power of things and how they gather us” (121). Dwelling thus requires both “care and cultivation, an attempt to hear what things and the world call for” (121). Centered on acts of cultivation and care, the concept of dwelling helps us to hear how discovery and “finding” (Crowley 2) also require the responsibility of listening...
to the world *through* the commonplaces that we discover. Though a syllabus or lesson plan, for example, might otherwise stand out as a “thing” we have created, the idea of dwelling redirects our focus on the practices, habits, values, and beliefs that are “gathered” in the act of designing this thing. For instructors, who are already exposed to many “things” that they themselves have not created, repositioning design as an act of dwelling offers an opportunity to listen to the bigger questions that are made material in the “things” (Bay and Rickert 121) that a curriculum values (whether outcomes, standard syllabi, required texts, or similar curricular artifacts). Because early-career instructors are directly affected by these underlying tensions that push and pull at their pedagogical choices (even more so than veteran teachers and scholars), the invitation to dwell in these disciplinary tensions through the act of design can prepare instructors to sense important connections between material practices and the questions that dwell within them.

Repositioning design as a space of discovery and dwelling thus extends the questions we ask about the abilities of designers: we move from asking how established scholars can provide instructors with enough just-in-time resources to also asking how instructors can confront disciplinary tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties through the process of design. Step-by-step instructions may still have a use in this process, but the crucial component of this shift is the invitation to approach design as a site for uncovering and engaging with questions of how and why our practices matter. Curriculum scholars Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argue in *Understanding by Design* that curriculum design must begin with recognizing the “big ideas” and “essential questions” that any course of study pursues (109). If we add to this basic act of reflection a wider invitation to explore different ways that the “concerns of mankind” (to cite Dressel and Marcus, xii, again) are made material in our practices, then we create opportunities for instructors to understand their design choices as part of this invitation to discover and dwell in essential questions. This act of discovering, understanding, and connecting becomes a way of perceiving how our curricular practices and the “things” we attach to them form a “home” for disciplinary values and shape how we learn to dwell in our environments with others (Bay and Rickert 121, 120).

**Integration**

In addition to fostering invention through the acts of “finding” (discovery and dwelling), design can also posture instructors to invent by creating new answers to questions about how and why writing matters. This act of creating is essential to inventiveness as Crowley describes it: when invention is grounded in the epistemological assumption that “every act of knowing influence[s] the body of knowledge itself” (162), invention “can change the way people think and move them to act” (168). Invention engaged through design is thus more than just an act of creating alternative teaching apparatuses, as current scholarship too often suggests. Because it is always embedded
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in community commonplaces and values, inventive design creates new perspectives that can ripple through and change community practices. When design postures instructors to engage deeply with the commonplace assumptions of their disciplinary communities, the act of design becomes more than a matter of simply applying community knowledge: it becomes an act of contributing to scenes of questioning and inquiry that open up how we understand ourselves and the world around us. Paul Lynch has recently argued that our changing economic and environmental climates make it incumbent on all composition scholars to participate in the act of *terrain shifting* by reexamining “what it means to work in the field of composition” and what “the very heart of [...] composition means” (458; original emphasis). I suggest here that working with design can posture instructors to identify as terrain shifters. Designers can learn to join the process of reexamining core questions about the meaning of writing when we approach design as a space of inventiveness and change.

Preparing instructors to engage with “the very heart” of composition (or other fields of study) through the act of curriculum design requires us to foster design as a habit of integrating informed, scholarly reflection with creative acts of experimentation that reframe conventional disciplinary values. Inventive design is a complex, participatory act: it demands that designers approach the design process with an open mind, learning to negotiate broad goals, foundational questions, and pragmatic realities all at once. As scholarship on graphic and visual design has reminded us, design requires careful attention to the “contingencies and needs” of what Gunther Kress calls an audience’s “life-worlds” (18). Design, Kress writes, “assumes that resources are never entirely apt but will need to be transformed in relation to all the contingencies of this environment now” (20). Joseph Janangelo similarly argues that design requires “subtlety,” a way of engaging with the local environment to create “distinctive,” but not “intrusive” alterations of existing practices and knowledge (300). Fostered as a transformative act of experimenting with broad questions and local practices, curriculum design refocuses these principles of visual design and applies them to contingent, “messy” experiences of learning-in-practice. When we emphasize such contact between practices and larger questions as essential to design, we prepare designers to transform the basic landscape of the field by experimenting with its values and habits. Design in this way not only uncovers, but also changes the shape of our environments: fostered as an act of attentive creation, design postures designers to participate in reconfiguring and challenging established conventions of writing instruction rather than simply applying these conclusions mechanically.

I have argued in this section that fostering curriculum design as an inventive act positions instructors to contribute to the study of writing by giving them a site where both discovery and creativity converge actively. Before moving on, I also want to acknowledge an important vulnerability in my suggestion that repositioning design can create opportunities for early-career instructors to participate in the
field and integrate their scholarship and teaching. Simply calling design “inventive” does not in itself mitigate the potential for design to become further enmeshed in outcomes-based models of education that, as Gallagher has recently argued, encourage mechanical application of institutional outcomes without regard for the “emergent consequences” in actual learning experiences (45). Despite its upside, inventive design is strained by the problem of how to preserve spaces for complicated, inventive negotiation within environments that are increasingly oversimplified in the name of accountability (see Johnson; Sullivan and Nielsen). It may be a hard sell in many settings to promote the worth of design when we are hailed to enforce heavier regulations and stricter standards.

Given this context, it is not unwise to consider how repositioning design may not immediately open up new opportunities for curriculum designers. Instead, the most immediate, consequential effect of this repositioning may be its potential to draw out constraints that affect both the act of design and the freedoms of designers. Insisting on inventive design may provide one way to better witness the material circumstances that prevent instructors from participating more widely in the knowledge-making practices of their chosen fields. If we use design to begin exploring these material constraints, we also may find unexpected opportunities for both novice instructors and veteran faculty to gain ground in confronting practices that define and regulate who gets to participate in disciplinary conversations. Although I want to make clear that repositioning design does not dispel inequalities that persist in what Gayatri Spivak calls the “teaching machine” (58), I would argue that stretching our habits through the crucible of design may offer opportunities to trace and ultimately change the material conditions that limit instructors and their contributions to disciplinary inquiry.

**Design in Principle**

Having made a case for why design is worth repositioning in the context of integrating teaching, service, and scholarship, I want to step back here in order to outline several principles of inventive design that I have developed in the process of working to expand the role of design in the writing program that I direct. The principles I will discuss are not meant to be normative or universal: they represent, rather, my own attempts to create a framework for inventive design by incorporating research practices drawn from scholarship on curriculum design, visual design, and instructional planning. A few years ago, I began experimenting with a design project in my graduate pedagogy course that would invite instructors to experience firsthand the challenge of designing curricula for a first-year composition course. At that time, I created what I call the Inventive Design Project, or IDP, as a platform for instructors to experiment with engaging tensions between writing scholarship and “live” prac-
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practices of writing instruction. Now in its third year of revision, the IDP has gradually taken shape as a project that invites instructors to explore disciplinary conflicts as an essential part of the design process. Based on several principles of inventive design that I will describe in what follows, the IDP asks designers to design inventive writing courses that not only teach students writing skills, but also invest students (and designers) in asking big, open-ended questions about how and why we write. Instead of providing full details about the IDP here (several versions of this assignment are available at http://engl.unt.edu/~mheard/m_heard_idp.html), I will instead make room in the next few paragraphs to outline some of the most important principles of design that I have developed as I have experimented with the IDP in practice. After exploring these principles, I will briefly consider how they ended up affecting one instructor in my program, Meghan, who used her IDP to challenge the material circumstances of writing on her campus.

Although my experiments with design have taken different shapes from one semester to the next, five basic principles underlie how I frame inventive design in my courses. First, and most important, inventive design must begin with questions that open up inquiry into disciplinary knowledge. The most engaging designs lead both instructors and students to dwell on what curriculum specialists Dressel and Marcus call “the basic problems and concerns of mankind” (xii). As I have already discussed, fostering discovery and dwelling in the design process helps instructors learn to draw out these “concerns of mankind” as part of the specific curricular “things” (Bay and Rickert 121) that they are asked to create. In turn, by adhering to this first principle of grounding design in inquiry, instructors learn to anchor all elements of a course—assignments, assessments, instructional methods, objectives, and so on—in what Wiggins and McTighe call an “enduring understanding” of the larger conflicts, tensions, and areas of concern that inform a curriculum (13). Wiggins and McTighe write that design is empty unless it engages students in habits of inquiry that “do not yield a single straightforward answer [. . .] but produce different plausible responses, about which thoughtful and knowledgeable people may disagree” (342). Insisting that all aspects of a design support and sustain questioning helps designers recognize the importance of opening courses to conflict and uncertainty. Put another way, questioning creates a deep understanding of “conceptual or logical frameworks, methods of inquiry, and values” (Lattuca and Stark 106). When we make inquiry the first principle of design, we position designers to sense the basic concerns—ethical, epistemological, ontological, and methodological—that connect disciplines to one another and open up new possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

In my experiments with the design project, I have engaged this first principle by positioning instructors to explore questions that, to borrow again from Lynch, direct our attention to “the very heart of what composition means” (458). These essential questions of writing open up the design process as a strategic site for con-
sidering “what gets counted as writing” (Nicotra W260): they promote what Jody Shipka calls the “broaden[ing]” of composition (9). Designers learn that insisting on these bigger questions is an essential and overarching responsibility of instruction, whether the setting is writing instruction or other equally complex areas of study. For writing instructors, specifically, I have found that exploring writing as a limited, culture-bound construction helps instructors recognize that freshman composition courses are vitally connected to larger concerns for how we live, act, communicate, and share space in the world as individuals and groups. Instructors design much more interesting, engaging courses when they learn to connect all of the “things” of the course (recalling Bay and Rickert’s distinction, 121) to these open-ended questions of meaning and purpose.

Second, when these essential questions are made the driving force of the entire design process, the invitation to inquiry prepares instructors to take an active role in shaping and reshaping the central values that influence disciplinary knowledge. Design truly begins to encourage inventiveness when it opens up opportunities for students and instructors to actually answer—in critical, creative, and diverse ways—the “essential” (Wiggins and McTighe 109) questions underlying the curriculum. As Nancy Chick argues in her article on “signature pedagogies,” courses in language and literature too often distance students from understanding and participating in discipline-embedded “conflicts” and “the larger concerns of the world we all live in” (51). Inventive designers, by contrast, learn to embrace contact with disciplinary conflicts and “larger” life concerns as the source for all decisions about the curriculum. Design opens up hospitable spaces for designers to feel the pull of these underlying tensions and respond with intelligence, creativity, and openness. In order to develop these habits of response, designers must learn to see themselves (and their audiences of instructors and students) as agents of change whose interventions have consequence. Inventive design in this way extends more familiar concepts of learning communities and learner-centered design (as offered, for instance, in The Learner-Centered Curriculum by Cullen, Harris, and Hill). Rather than focusing exclusively on how students can support one another in their learning goals, inventive design widens the circumference of “community” and positions designers, instructors, scholars, and students as co-conspirators in knowledge making. Inventive design in this way actively encourages designers to use the space of design as a platform for posing questions that disturb the boundaries of established values and practices in the field.

In my experiments with the IDP, I have approached this second principle of design as an opportunity to invite dialogue about difficult questions within composition studies that confront us with profound mysteries and uncertainties about the nature and practice of writing. In different semesters, students and I have investigated generative conflicts in composition by studying the hegemonic influence of Western practices of writing (Canagarajah; Spivak); the ethical and emotional vulnerability of
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writers (Butler; Worsham); complications in how we understand writing processes (Kent; Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola); and limitations of writing against other modes and materialities of experience (Shipka; Nicotra; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sire). These studies confront us with uncertainty, making us realize that we are never fully in control of the tensions that make writing “work” in different disciplinary settings. They also prove generative for instructors’ design projects. In my courses, instructors have responded to Spivak, Judith Butler, Shipka, and others in course designs that weave these writers’ questions into every aspect of their instructional plans and pedagogies. In each case, the questioning of writing is integrated as a habit of practice, which designers frame as an opportunity to ask why writing matters even while they teach students to use and adapt established conventions of writing. Design therefore does more than expose designers and students to complex theories of writing: design also positions learners to talk back as agents in the conversation about why writing is worth pursuing. Although approaching design in this way certainly does not guarantee that students, instructors, or administrators will find ways to contribute new questions to the study of composition, this approach tries to create a more hospitable space for both designers and learners to become invested in the tensions that define writing.

Third, in addition to posing essential questions and positioning instructors as active participants in disciplinary tensions, inventive design prepares designers to revise and reshape the logics of their disciplinary communities. Design, in other words, creates learning environments that participants reconfigure based on their own needs, backgrounds, and experiences. I draw this third principle from scholarship on visual and graphic design, which has presented design as a mode of creating artifacts that invite audiences to reshape meaning by transforming available materials. Kress, for instance, has argued that design confers “different powers on the makers and remakers of representations” (16), because design, unlike writing or speaking, does not confront audiences with a “fixed” order of meaning and causality (7). Design is not focused on “notions of conventions and competence” (20), but rather insists on new configurations produced by audiences—configurations that “arise out of [audiences’ own] life-worlds” (9).

Scholars of writing such as Diana George, Anne Wysocki, and Janangelo have drawn on Kress’s insights in order to emphasize the transformative potential of design for composition pedagogy and practice. Design, as Wysocki has argued, makes audiences stay “alert” to the material configuration of composed artifacts (15). Janangelo calls this transformative potential “virtual refinishing,” arguing that the best designs invite audiences to contribute “distinctive, but not intrusive,” revisions to existing forms, ideas, and values (300, 314). Although Wysocki, Janangelo, and others have considered design primarily within studies of new media and multimodal composition, their insights also help us to recognize the inventive potential of curriculum
design more broadly. As an act of stretching writing both conceptually and practically, curriculum design offers designers the opportunity to transform, reshape, and refinish the landscape of a curriculum that might otherwise appear static and fixed.

In this way, conversations about visual design draw our attention to how inventive curriculum design encourages not only discovery and creation, but also revision. Curriculum design specialists have suggested that the best curricular designs create multiple entry points for learners to “repeat, review, and reconsider their understanding of concepts and ideas” (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 107). Visual designers remind us that even the best intentions to build “reconsideration” into curriculum may not succeed unless they also build in opportunities for participants to experiment with different representational systems. Thus, putting this principle of revising and refinishing in place does not mean (as I remind instructors in my course) simply adding a video project to the curriculum to satisfy some abstract sense of “multimodality.” Designers instead must create chances for students to inhabit the essential questions of a course through multiple practices, each requiring different negotiations of knowledge and inquiry. Revising and refinishing requires learners to compare what each iteration of an argument or idea enables them to see, hear, and understand. The challenge for designers is to create space within the curriculum for learners to actively reconfigure what they are learning in ways that facilitate further inquiry and questioning. Although creating these spaces is often difficult and demanding for designers, such work is also vital to the health of the field. Positioning the “essential questions” (Wiggins and McTighe 109) of a discipline as open to revision and change gives designers greater license to rework, and not simply rehearse, the conventions, practices, and logics that underlie the expectations of any course or curriculum.

My fourth principle addresses assessment, which too often is positioned as the central reason for attending to curriculum development in the first place. Inventive design repositions assessment by framing it as a secondary concern to the primary responsibility of encouraging inquiry and exploration. Inventive designers insist that assessment is not a goal in itself, but is a part of active questioning and involved participation. Assessment approached as part of the inventive design process prolongs inquiry and supports learners as they experiment with revising and remaking knowledge. Unfortunately, these underlying reasons for assessing are not always reflected in scholarship on curriculum design, which sometimes takes for granted both the value of a “culture of assessment” (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 100) and the efficacy of outcomes-based learning (Lattuca and Stark 234). Scholars such as Gallagher are right, I believe, to worry that instructors are being trained to “fixate” on assessment-based outcomes as a consequence of being immersed within these cultures of assessment (45). If there is a corrective to this trajectory, it must involve giving instructors more opportunities to approach assessment inventively, as a practice that opens up new layers of complexity within curricular conflicts and
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Reconceiving assessment as an invitation to deepen complexity rather than simplify it helps designers learn to approach assessment as more than just a means of disciplining students toward certain expected performances.

In my experiments with inventive design, I have had success in teaching instructors to frame assessment as an opportunity to enhance how they communicate with their students and encourage student reflection. Assessment need not always be formal or measurable: as Lisa Lattuca and Joan Stark write, “goal-free” evaluations can be essential in drawing out the “unexpected” ways that learners experience a curriculum (233). When designers create open spaces in the curriculum for students to reflect on their curricular experiences, assessment can even uncover new questions and ideas for the course to pursue. Wiggins and McTighe suggest for this reason creating a constant loop of dialogue between students and instructors by setting up numerous informal “checks for understanding” throughout the semester (169). This dialogue can also continue through the assessment of projects and assignments: as Kevin Porter has argued, the charitable use of responses to student writing can encourage students to see themselves as “engaged partner[s]” with their instructors in a common pursuit of questions (599). Insisting on assessments that support this ethos of involved participation reinforces design as an inventive act of discovery, dwelling, and revision. When we invite instructors to engage assessment in ways that sustain questioning, we help them avoid uncritical assimilation into a “culture of assessment” that sometimes takes for granted the limitations of assessment in the larger goal of promoting habits of creativity, curiosity, and openness.

With assessment repositioned in support of inquiry, the final principle of inventive design I include here concerns the framing of embodied response within curricular practices. Embodiment opens up to what Kristie Fleckenstein calls “embodied literacies,” (74) characterized by rhetorical awareness of one’s place and positioning, by critical questioning of what one sees and does not see, and by physical participation in the active deployment of knowledge (79–90). With Fleckenstein’s emphasis on physical awareness and participation in mind, I teach designers that the act of design demands a living, contingent negotiation with the exigencies of the curriculum. In turn, designers must learn to design experiences that offer students this living, engaged negotiation of knowledge. All experiences in the course, from assignments to daily classroom activities, should construct opportunities for learners to perform “knowing” (Crowley 162) in physical, immersed, embodied ways. Inventive designers must plan instruction not merely based on what is convenient or comfortable in the environment, but based on experiences that will posture learners to situate themselves within the tensions of a course and respond with rhetorical awareness of their own, situated knowledges. Straining to open up such responses requires designers to think inventively about crafting situations that demand active negotiation of knowledge and not just imitation or mirroring. Wiggins and McTighe write that engaging
designs “require students to really ‘perform’ wisely with knowledge and skill, in a problematic context of real issues, needs, constraints, and opportunities” (155). This repositioning of performance shifts instructional decisions away from methods that simply flood students with information or rehearse familiar skills. Instead, inventive design centers instruction on bigger questions that require students to recognize the limits of their own skills and knowledge. Refocusing instruction in this way makes embodied, integrative performances central to the process of inquiry at the heart of inventive design. It also challenges designers to think beyond familiar habits of instruction, such as lecturing, and look for new ways to engage students actively in exploring the limitations and uses of disciplinary “content.”

As a way of addressing these principles in practice and also inviting further conversations about the contingencies that complicate how we approach design in our different circumstances, I want to conclude this section by considering the example of Meghan, a graduate student and instructor at my institution, who completed her IDP with me several semesters ago. Meghan took my graduate pedagogy course while also adjuncting at a local two-year college: for this reason, the freedom of design promised by the IDP was complicated by the fact that Meghan was responsible for teaching from a standard syllabus, standard textbook, and standard assignment schedule. In her project submission for the IDP, Meghan designed a course titled Revising the New World, which focused on attuning students to the possibilities of revision as an ethical action. Meghan centered her course on questions of how revising prepares writers to “make others’ conditions [their] own.” She framed this ethical inquiry through an interesting array of readings that included early American colonial writer John Winthrop, contemporary feminist philosopher Judith Butler, and contemporary nonfiction writer Sarah Vowell. Interestingly, these very readings stood out as one way Meghan chose to respond actively to the constraints of a standardized curriculum. Though her writing program at the two-year college required a common textbook for all composition courses, Meghan was free to choose other course texts to complement the reading. Given this space for invention, Meghan designed her course to engage tensions between the required textbook, which emphasized form and genre, and her selection of readings from Butler, Vowell, and Winthrop, which invited critiques of form and genre against a background of ethical questions. Meghan’s design project was inventive not only because she created new ways for learners to participate in ethical questioning, but also because she connected the enduring questions of the course to the rules of genre and form that students were expected to learn as participants in the standard curriculum of the two-year college.

The most important point I want to draw from Meghan’s example is that the sometimes utopian vision I have presented here of inventive design is mitigated in practice by circumstances such as Meghan’s, which remind us that design is a material act, constrained by our different material privileges in the spaces we oc-
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ocupy. Not all instructors enjoy the freedom to practice design inventively. For this reason, insisting on the inventive potential of design must not become an exercise in abstraction. If there is an urgent reason to insist on the repositioning of design, it is to draw our attention to the material circumstances in our environments that sustain unfair conditions for instructors of differing levels. Meghan’s design, for instance, represented a thoughtful engagement with questions of ethics that extended beyond the more skills-focused approach reflected in the standardized syllabus sponsored by her college. At the same time, Meghan was able to practice her design only inasmuch as she first met the expectations of her supervisors. This situation begs the question, should we advocate for design even if instructors never have the opportunity to use their designs in practice? I think that we can answer “yes” only if we are prepared to use our experiments with design to take action that will confront and, we hope, improve the conditions facing designers in our local environments.

Meghan’s example points to the burden on established scholars and administrators to confront the material circumstances affecting designers, yet Meghan’s sophisticated work as a designer also points to what I see as a more hopeful reason for repositioning design. Working with design, even in constrained circumstances, may give instructors insight into strategies for navigating institutional and discursive systems more inventively. In her project, Meghan willingly embraced the challenge of negotiating her own research interests (in questions of ethics and responsibility) in tension with the outcomes set for her by her college’s standardized curriculum. This response was, I believe, both sensible and strategic on Meghan’s part. It also showcases Meghan’s creativity in navigating the constraints of her institutional environment. While she met the curricular requirements of her administration, she also highlighted the provisional nature of these requirements by introducing questions that stretched the college’s curriculum into spaces of ethical inquiry. I would suggest that working inventively through design positioned Meghan to act as an agent of change: rather than simply follow the standardized guidelines, Meghan took the opportunity to dwell in the “things” that her college created for her. She ultimately reconfigured these “things” in ways that transformed the curriculum and encouraged student inquiry.

As I have already argued, it is the responsibility of established scholars and teachers to make sure that instructors in circumstances similar to Meghan’s have the same opportunities to confront the material constraints that limit their contributions to disciplinary knowledge. What I want to stress here in closing out this section is that, even in less-than-ideal circumstances, learning to approach design as an act of invention may help instructors like Meghan to identify and redirect tensions that affect them. Meghan’s active attempt to use design as a platform for addressing the material expectations of her role as an instructor gives me hope that instructors can be more involved in defining the conditions under which they participate in the field.
At the very least, positioning instructors to engage these tensions firsthand offers an ethical alternative to the requirement that instructors follow step-by-step in the footsteps of convention.

Conclusions

I have advocated here for the repositioning of curriculum design as an inventive act, arguing that this repositioning fosters both discovery of disciplinary values and participation in acts of knowledge making that expand the commonplaces and assumptions of the wider academic community. What I would like to suggest in closing is that working with design can also become a way of witnessing the tone, attitude, and material circumstances that we have attached to design as it travels within our field and shapes the habits of new generations of teachers and students. As conversations about the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* encourage us to think about the habits of mind we want to see writing students develop, we must also take this opportunity to alter the habits that affect how curriculum design is defined and who is allowed to participate in the design process.

We must first of all expand the habit of approaching design in ways that have left designers with little choice but to apply standard models and imitate the designs of other scholars. Even recognizing that instructors need scaffolding and models in order to acclimate to the challenges of teaching and researching in the university, I believe that we severely constrain the potential of new members of our field when we reduce their contributions to writing through genres that reproduce our field’s mainstream traditions and values. The Inventive Design Project that I have described offers my limited attempt to intervene in this issue by confronting instructors with basic human concerns, concerns that provide context for professional documents (syllabi, assignment sheets, lesson plans) and also shape disciplinary boundaries. Watching instructors such as Meghan draw together Winthrop and Butler to stretch how students approach ethical responsibility in writing, for instance, convinces me that instructors are much more capable than our field has recognized at negotiating between complex disciplinary questions, instructional practices, and administrative goals and expectations. Expanding the inventive potential of design helps to foster this active negotiation, encouraging instructors to understand syllabi and other documents as sites of inquiry and exploration that open up, rather than simply apply, questions about how to make writing more democratic, inclusive, and hospitable (see Canagarajah 30; Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock 723).

But expanding the professional genres of the field is not the only habit that we need to address as we reconsider inventive design. We also need to listen carefully to the underlying tone that characterizes how instructors are addressed in our
scholarship and our practices. As I have shown in this essay, reiterating how much instructors need to rely on the established traditions of the field may keep them so dependent on these traditions that they develop an incapacity to take risks or leave the comfort of familiar concepts and practices. The effects of such training extend to veteran scholars as well as novice teachers: by keeping instructors safely within the dominant paradigms of composition theory and writing instruction, we established members of the field shield ourselves from potentially innovative contributions that might disrupt and alter our traditions of practice and theory. This attitudinal obstacle to repositioning curriculum design will not be fully addressed by shifting genre conventions. Rather, it involves a change in stance and posture toward both design and designers. We make this stance consequential as we collaborate to open up space for instructors to approach design as a site of inquiry and intellectual engagement. While I believe that repositioning design as an act of understanding (discovery, dwelling) and creativity (integration and knowledge construction) can give instructors more purchase to participate in the acts of “broadening” the field that Bruce Horner, Samantha NeCamp, and Christiane Donahue, among others, have advocated (272), I also believe that we need to use design to confront underlying beliefs about instructor education that resist this act of expansion.

Finally, and most important, discussion of resistance brings us back to the habits of practice that I have already drawn out in this essay—habits which preserve design as a privilege that only certain members of our community are able to enjoy. Put simply, curriculum design is not a habit of curiosity, creativity, or openness in many academic settings because institutional demands for a culture of accountability increasingly pressure administrators to standardize, rather than expand, the role of curriculum design. We face a concerning cycle wherein institutional pressures keep administrators from opening their curricula to the contributions of instructors, and the absence of innovative curricular alternatives in turn justifies the standardization of courses and programs. This reality reinforces how urgently we need to attend to the role of design in English studies, broadly. In this essay, I have suggested limited ways that we might begin to change these material circumstances in our local settings. Whether advocating for more freedom to experiment with design within our programs and departments, expanding design opportunities to a wider range of instructors, or working within existing constraints to invent new ways of addressing core conflicts and questions, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to take action. Although the conditions for inventive design are not yet ideal, experimenting with design prepares us to witness the obstacles that affect designers, alter the terrain in our local spaces, and in this way create more hospitable spaces for inventive design to survive and flourish.
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NOTES

1. Crowley’s work with invention is well known to composition scholars and remains one of the most comprehensive treatments of invention in the field. For recent, alternative definitions of invention, see also John Muckellbauer’s “Imitation and Invention in Antiquity” and Stephen Yarbrough’s “Deliberate Invention.” Although I do not refer to Yarbrough in the text of this essay, his concept of the ethical conditions necessary for “inventive intercourse” to take place has influenced how I define inventive design.

2. Now also is an opportune moment to begin thinking about curriculum design in our field as an act that draws together information design, visual design, and graphic design. Within composition studies, scholarship on visual design has focused primarily on the creation of artifacts (webpages, posters, video mashups) that stretch our understanding of what it means to compose actively. My argument for inventive design suggests that future conversations about design might expand these insights in order to include a broader vision of the curricular practices that integrate material decisions with basic, foundational questions.

3. Wiggins and McTighe provide several “vignettes” of inventive performance tasks used in K–12 curricula (158–60), which I use in my courses to give instructors a starting place for thinking about embodied response.

4. Meghan generously granted me permission to use her name and work in this essay.

5. A. Suresh Canagarajah has discussed this “hierarchy” of center-marginal relations in his analysis of “marginalized” writing practices in composition studies (see 241, 257). Without implying that instructors are in the same position as the “periphery” scholars that Canagarajah identifies, I do believe that the underlying power dynamics Canagarajah critiques also affect how we create “margins” in our approaches to instructor education.

WORKS CITED


