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Engaging FYC Students with Quality Work Design

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by

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Chapter One: Why Engagement Matters

Introduction

Student engagement plays an essential role in the learning process because engaged learners make a "psychological investment in learning" and are self-directed, claims Fred Newmann, Emeritus Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and director of the National Center on Organization and Restructuring Schools (2). Truly engaged students go beyond earning passing grades by "incorporating or internalizing [new learning] in their lives" (Newmann 3). According to Paulette Wasserstein, Curriculum and Assessment Consultant for Cherry Creek Schools, "Real engagement in learning comes from empowering students, not superficially, but intrinsically" (41). University of Missouri professors Kennon Sheldon and Bruce Biddle add that engagement promotes a higher quality of learning because students who are actively involved retain more of what they learn (166). In *Working on the Work*, Phillip Schlechty claims that for a truly engaged learner, the joy of learning inspires a persistence to accomplish the desired goals even in the face of difficulty (14).

The connection between student engagement and deeper learning intrigued Schlechty and much of his work derived from this question*: If certain qualities of the work assigned to learners increases their engagement level and results in improved performance, what can teachers do to ensure that more students are engaged in learning more of the time?* Over a number of years, he has examined the design qualities of work that both students and teachers reported as engaging and, as a result, developed a conceptual framework to assist teachers with quality work design. Schlechty, founder and CEO of The Schlechty Center, partners with school systems across the nation to implement what has become known as the Working on the Work (WOW) framework. The work of the center begins with the assumption that there is a direct link between the quality

of work students are provided and the willingness of students to engage in the work. When students engage in and persist in their work, they are much more likely to learn at deeper levels and retain what they learn.

WOW comprises ten design qualities critical to creating engaging work for students. As a former teacher, I used Schlechty's framework when planning lessons for students and observed higher engagement levels across all disciplines in K-12 classrooms. After entering the MAPW program at Kennesaw State University as a TA, I was charged with creating effective writing assignments for first year composition (FYC) students. Through course readings about effective writing assignments and my initial foray into the FYC classroom as the teacher of record, I observed possible connections with Schlechty's framework.

Below, I briefly define each category in the framework. As Schlechty argues in his seminal book, *Working on the Work,* the first four should be a basic requirement for any work assigned students, and teachers are free to incorporate the others as they see fit, keeping in mind the more qualities included, the more engaging the work.

1. **Content and Substance.** The content involved is that which teachers, administrators, and the community agree is important. It is consistent with expectations and official benchmarks established by state and local standards as worth knowing and mastering.

2. **Organization of Knowledge.** Do students have the skills in place to do the assigned work? Has proper scaffolding taken place? Have teachers collaborated to ensure the methods used to present new learning are organized in ways that appeal to the largest number of students?

3. **Clear and Compelling Product Standards.** Students are more likely to engage and persist with work when they understand the standards by which the product will be judged. Students see value in the work.

4. **Product Focus.** The work students are assigned to do and the activities they undertake are linked to a product, performance, or exhibition that is meaningful to them.

4. **Protection from Initial Failure (A Safe Environment).** Schlechty

describes a safe learning environment as one in which students are provided more than one opportunity to complete a task. Failure is viewed as a necessary part of learning, and there is trust between teachers and students.

6. **Affirmation of Performance.** Students are positioned to observe, participate in, and benefit from each other's work. Student work is displayed or published. Learners need to believe the work is important, needed, and worth doing

7. **Affiliation.** Being given a chance to work with others enhances student engagement. Students have the opportunity to engage in communication to build cooperative networks, including electronic communication.

8. **Novelty and Variety.** A wide range of tasks and products are required of students to demonstrate learning along with the use of varied technologies. Likewise, teachers employ varied modes of presentation.

9. **Choice.** Students like some degree of control over learning. What they learn is usually not subject to negotiation, but having choice of how they learn is. Numerous options in what they will do to achieve the learning outcome are available.

10. **Authenticity.** Authentic work is work that is genuine to the students. It has real world connection and relevance. Work assigned has meaning and significance in their lives and is related to outcomes to which they attach importance.

The ten design qualities are not a formula; rather, they represent a heuristic framework that indicates the characteristics of schoolwork most likely to provide students with intrinsic rewards—in other words, rewards they value that can only be gained from involvement in the assigned task. Intrinsic rewards have a motivational impact on student effort (79).

Additionally, Schlechty differentiates five levels of student engagement. Understanding student motives, according to Schlechty, is crucial to creating work that is intrinsically motivating for them (95). When he discusses work that engages students, he is referring to engagement at Level 1 as defined below. Schlechty contends the various levels form a continuum that students may cycle in and out of throughout learning.

1. **Engagement –** Engagement occurs when the student sees the work as personally meaningful, persists in the face of difficulty because interest level is high, finds the work

challenging, and believes something that's worth doing will be accomplished.

2. **Strategic Compliance –** Students do the work because of extrinsic motivation such as grades, class rank, college acceptance, or parent approval. Because the focus is on the outcome rather than the task itself, if the task does not meet the external goal, the student will abandon it.

3. **Ritual Compliance –** The student has no goals other than to avoid confrontation. The emphasis is on minimums and exit requirements.

4. **Retreatism –** The student is emotionally disengaged from the task and exerts no energy to accomplish it.

5. **Rebellion –** Not only is the student disengaged from the activity, she refuses to do it, disrupts others, or substitutes another task in place of the assigned one.

If it is true that students learn at deeper levels when engaged with their work, teachers have the responsibility to do all they can to maintain student engagement. The first year composition classroom is a learning lab for TAs and others new to teaching in this discipline. Sure, we've been exposed to a myriad of proven pedagogies, read extensively about ways to structure our classrooms, and prepared writing assignments, but too many choices can overwhelm and confuse. Couple this with the fact that engaging students remains one of the biggest challenges *all* composition teachers face. Often, students are indifferent or anxious about writing because they identify themselves as inferior writers, and as a result, may enter FYC at *the retreatism* or *ritual compliance* level. An additional factor to consider is that new research suggests engaging the current generation of students, the millennials, can be difficult.

If engaging work in college writing can be constructed using the WOW framework, then it could be the logical tool to equip teachers new to the field to design quality work that will increase student engagement, and therefore, lead students to better retention and deeper learning of objectives in FYC. The framework could help simplify planning for beginning teachers by providing a starting point as we learn and fine-tune what we do. My study is designed to

investigate whether or not the WOW framework merits consideration when planning work for first year college composition. Although the terminology differs, an initial review of the literature suggests the framework is worthy of consideration.

Listening to the Experts

A joint project of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggests the design of writing assignments is key in promoting engagement and deep learning among students. In a paper compiled for the WPA Conference based on NSSE surveys from a variety of colleges and universities in 2009, Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, Bob Gonyea, and Chuck Paine concluded that effective assignments include three key features: interactive components, a meaning-constructing task, and clear explanations of writing expectations (Anderson et al. 1).

Interactive components allow students the opportunity to brainstorm ideas before drafting, to receive instructor or peer feedback on drafts, or to visit a writing center (97). In other words, students have the chance to view writing as an exchange between writers and readers. Nancy Sommers' work in the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing concurs. Sommers writes, "Feedback is rooted in the partnership between student and teacher…" (255). She goes on to assert that the deep influence the student/teacher relationship creates through interactive feedback plays a huge role in students' writing development (250). The interactive components of brainstorming, drafting, and feedback all mesh with Schlechty's design qualities of *protection, organization of knowledge, affiliation, affirmation of performance, choice,* and *product focus*.

The second feature of an engaging assignment, according to Anderson et al., is that it is a meaning-constructing task that requires students to bring their own critical thinking to bear on problems that matter to both the writer and her audience. This practice integrates the framework

categories of *authenticity, choice, affirmation of performance*, and often, *affiliation*.

And last, assignments with clear explanations of expectations for the writer are more likely to engage students. Engaging assignment guidelines explain the rationale behind the assignment in terms of the course's learning outcomes and present the instructor's grading criteria (Bean 97), which relate to *clear and compelling product standards, content and substance,* and *organization of knowledge.*

Rebecca Moore Howard's research adds support for Schlechty's framework. Her work with the Citation Project questions the design of typical writing programs in first year composition. After examining source-based student papers, Howard concluded that students don't know how to analyze sources. They typically snatch a few sentences — from the first three pages of the source — without really engaging with the text. She argues students should be trained to read, analyze, and synthesize their sources before they write a research paper (Berret n.p.). To accomplish this goal, Howard recommends shorter assignments based on sources the instructor is familiar with and which allow students to practice and develop these skills. Howard's radical proposal that the research paper in freshman composition be tossed altogether and replaced with such shorter assignments doesn't sound quite so drastic once we consider that expecting students to do things they haven't adequately been taught how to do is counterproductive to success and learner engagement. Howard's approach includes the design qualities of *protection* because the shorter assignments include instructor guidance throughout the process, *organization of knowledge, content and substance, affiliation*, and *affirmation of performance*.

Another design quality from Schlechty's WOW framework was key in high school English honors teacher Elizabeth Kahn's semester-long project, which she details in "Making

Writing Instruction Authentic." Not only was *authenticity* clearly evident throughout Kahn's unit, all ten design qualities were incorporated into her course design and could easily be adapted to FYC. Kahn promoted student engagement when she took advantage of a current controversial issue involving the legislative mandate that schools observe a daily moment of silence. Her students were highly engaged throughout the successful teaching unit which allowed them to argue for one side or the other of the issue through a variety of in class activities and independent writing tasks. Kahn maintains that the level of student engagement and investment in their writing made the extra work for the teacher worthwhile (17).

In another example of *authentic* learning, Kumar and Refaei propose a problem-based learning (PBL) pedagogy which "allows students to apply what they are learning to contexts beyond the classroom in a real and relevant way" (72). In a problem-based classroom, the instructor, or facilitator, sets up a complex rhetorical situation based on a real-world problem that might extend through several writing assignments, and students work collaboratively to solve a problem which has no clear cut solution (Rosinski and Peeples 14). Allen, Donham and Bernhardt argue PBL improves student writing because it's purposeful and gives students a real world problem to write about, as well as a sense of audience—much like Kahn's silent moment controversy (24-25). In another confirmation of the relationship between *authentic* learning and student engagement, Beckelhimer, et al. (6) describe FYC students as more engaged and self-directed and able to use critical thinking skills to solve real world problems in PBL classrooms (68) and Sapp theorizes that writing teachers using PBL empower students by helping them become independent learners (6). Collaboration with peers is another factor in problem-based learning and parallels Schlechty's *affiliation* and *affirmation of performance* qualities.

Authentic learning is closely linked to the design quality of c*hoice.* Consider Nancy

Sommers findings in "Across the Drafts": When students were surveyed about their best writing experiences, a leading characteristic that emerged was the opportunity to write about something that mattered to them (251). Writing teachers can't determine what matters to students. For that reason alone, choice becomes a vital component of an engaging writing assignment. Donald Murray says when teachers choose the writing topic, an essential part of the writing experience is stripped from students (99).

Richard Light's *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* showed that the amount of writing required for a college course increased the level of engagement more than any other course characteristic. Although this research has been downplayed by Anderson, et al. who argue that the quantity of writing has less to do with engagement than the design of writing assignments (1), another survey lends weight to Light's argument. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) 2008 suggests that writing more in college is positively related to active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and deep learning (11). Collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction contribute to WOW's *affiliation* and *affirmation of performance* qualities, and according to the NSSE survey, the quantity of writing was positively correlated with engagement.

A growing body of research is emerging about how digital writing can engage composition students. In the introduction to *Because Digital Writing Matters*, Danielle DeVoss, Elyse Eldman-Aadahi, and Troy Hicks summarize several reports and policy statements that point to the changing context for writing and "the need for students to harness twenty-first century information and communication tools for writing" (2). Heeding the call from Yancey in 2009 to step up and support 21st century writing (1), and the warning from Clark in 2010 that "many of the ideas of the academy are far behind social and cultural innovation, not leading them" (28), composition scholars began experimenting with digital literacy to help teach writing.

The July 2014 WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year-Composition makes clear that composing refers to writing processes that increasingly rely on digital technology.

In the literature I found that an often-documented outcome of digital composition is increased student engagement as learners collaborate with each other, report an increased affiliation with their instructor, find the work relevant and authentic, and appreciate the novelty and variety of it. For example, Valerie Arms developed and implemented the English Alive program in 2005 at Drexel University. Arms was convinced that "changes had to be made in the teaching of composition to engage the twenty-first century learner" (195). Her goal was to engage digital learners by linking their current involvement with technology to traditional composition program outcomes. At the end of the pilot year, the program was "deemed worth replicating" (200). According to Arms, an outside evaluator reported that students were highly motivated. The survey revealed that 78% of 650 students enjoyed the course format. Overall students claimed to be "excited about their work" and "proud of what they accomplished" (200), two traits of learner engagement. Further, the descriptive terms Arms offers about the course, such as *authentic, collaborate*, *new*, and *increased affiliation with the instructor* relate to the WOW framework.

Elyse Lovell revamped a writing course requirement at Highlands College after observing decreased engagement by students. A combination of weekly out-of-class journaling and in-class discussion of social problems had long been a centerpiece of Lovell's class, but students had recently started to resist writing and discussing one routine weekly question after another. Some students were not participating in class discussion, and journal entries were growing shorter (25). After observing students enthusiastically engaging with Facebook before class and in the student center, Lovell, mentored by Betsy Palmer at Montana State University in

her dissertation work, started posing discussion questions to a class Facebook page. In the end, the authors reported that the Facebook posts encouraged collaboration and more sharing in the classroom. The authors claim that the low stakes frequent writing on Facebook led to more polished writing on formal assignments (27). Several WOW qualities were readily apparent in the new course design, including *organization of knowledge, content and substance, choice, novel and variety, authenticity, affiliation*, and *affirmation.*

Although the literature touts the high engagement students have with digital pedagogy, FYC instructors should note that using technology as a means to promote student engagement will not stand up well on its own. In work for her dissertation, Forsyth County, Georgia teacher Elizabeth Bowen teamed with a group of colleagues to conduct a formal investigation in 2003 to measure the relationship between student engagement and teacher-designed lessons based on Schlechty's WOW framework. As part of the study, Bowen et al. analyzed technology as a separate design quality, going on the hunch that students would report higher engagement when using computers. The middle school students did like the technology, but Bowen et al. found that authenticity of the lesson made the lesson even more engaging than using computers. The manner in which computers were used turned out to be important; for example, the technology must be connected to the lesson in a constructive and interactive way to promote engagement (Bowen et al.). If middle-schoolers are savvy enough learners to recognize this, then college students are likely to be more so.

Listening to Students

Plenty of scholarship in the field of composition appears to support the practice of using the WOW framework as a means to promote student engagement and increase learning when designing work in first year composition, just as it does at the K-12 level. The literature I discuss

in this Capstone indicates the teaching practices claimed by experienced FYC instructors to promote higher learner engagement incorporates multiple characteristics that align with Schlechty's framework. I decided to take this study a step further and survey students to find out which instructional activities they find most engaging. Would what they say confirm or dispute that the WOW framework could be used as a guide to create engaging work in First Year Composition? What WOW design qualities, if any, would emerge through the surveys and which might prove more important than others?

Student voices can be powerful forces for improving learner engagement, but we seldom ask or listen to them. Sandy Rivera, a student who entered the alternative Eagle Rock School in Colorado as a last resort before dropping out of school offered this advice to teachers at a National Staff Development Council Conference: "Believe in us. Do not doubt that we can learn. Do not classify us as no good or lazy. Help us. Build trust. Respect us. Do your job as an educator. Hold us to high expectations. Be real. Be honest" (Easton).

What would listening to student voices at Kennesaw State University reveal about the type of work they were assigned in first year composition? Which specific assignments did they find most meaningful and engaging in first year composition? In Chapter Two, I discuss the gathering of the data that will help answer these questions.

Chapter 2: Mining the Data

This study was designed to determine which characteristics of writing assignments students in first year composition found most engaging and to what extent the characteristics align with Schlechty's Working on the Work framework. I surveyed KSU students in English 2110 World Literature classes because of the large pool of students in this course who have successfully completed the two-course sequence (English 1101 and English 1102) comprising first year composition. This mix of students also provided a sample of respondents who have experienced a variety of FYC instructors, and thus, a variety of writing assignments.

The Survey

I created an open-ended paper survey with five essay questions which asked students to describe their most engaging and meaningful writing assignments in first year composition. Surveys are a great research tool, according to MacNealy, for gathering opinions, preferences, beliefs, and feelings (148). I chose an essay, or long answer, survey because they are less limiting than fill-in-the blank or multiple choice surveys, a feature important in this qualitative research. Because the research is exploratory in nature, open-ended questions might more likely extract information not anticipated, as MacNealy points out (153). Another advantage of a paper survey is there is no intonation that might influence a response. Further, a greater sense of anonymity is allowed with paper surveys than with personal interviews, telephone surveys, or online surveys linked through a personal email (MacNealy 149). Students are likely to be more honest in their critique with reassurance of anonymity.

A disadvantage of a paper survey requiring a written response to essay questions is, of course, that participants may not be as forthcoming with written answers as they would with short responses because of the labor involved. For this reason, the survey was limited to five

questions and asked students for no demographic information. Not only was the survey short, the individual questions were brief and spread over two pages, allowing plenty of white space for responses. I started the survey with the most general question because it would likely need the most time to complete. I also predicted the first question would elicit the most valuable information. The remaining four questions asked for more specific information related to the writing assignment described in the first question. Another reason to start the survey with a broader question, according to MacNealy, is it keeps the specific questions from influencing the answer to the more general one (159).

Historically, when K-12 students were asked to describe engaging work, definitive patterns emerged. For example, in 1995 Strong, Silver, and Robinson asked middle school students and teachers *"What kind of work do you find truly engaging?" and "What kind of work do you hate to do?"* (8). Assignments that provided an opportunity to work with peers, ignited curiosity, allowed for creativity or choice, and gave students feelings of success were the most engaging. On the other hand, participants detested repetitive work and work they perceived as mindless.

In another 1995 study, Wasserstein surveyed 200 seventh and eighth graders about their "most memorable work" (41) as a beginning step in designing an Interdisciplinary Portfolio Project. Consequently, students' selections were indicative of the work they found most engaging. Although the survey question was broad and general, clear patterns in the responses surfaced. Similar to Strong, Silver, and Robinson's survey, students in Wasserstin's study preferred active, challenging work over passive learning (43). Their responses implied that challenge is a main ingredient of engagement. Students also denounced work they remember because of its uselessness: "[The science notebook] was memorable because of how pointless but

painful it was" (41). The middle school students unreservedly spurned work they categorized as busywork.

In 2002, Easton collected information about engaging work qualities by asking students at an alternative high school, Eagle Rock, to write a reflection on their growth as learners and on what type of work engaged them. Eagle Rock School enrolls students who did not expect to graduate from high school. They were students who had made plenty of poor choices along the way but came to Eagle Rock because they wanted to change their life's course. These were students who were the least engaged in their former schools and were likely labeled "at risk." Easton found that many of these students "want to be engaged in learning. And they have ideas about how they can be engaged" (Easton). For instance, the Eagle Rock students claimed engagement when asked questions with no easy answers, were allowed to teach others, and were academically challenged. They preferred hands-on learning, having more say over what and how they learned, and classes that were "fun." (Easton).

Likewise, qualitative data has been collected through open-ended essay questions to create knowledge in the field of college composition and rhetoric. When Nancy Sommers conducted a longitudinal study that asked 400 students at Harvard University to describe their "best writing assignments," "…the opportunity to engage with an instructor through feedback" (254) emerged as a key element in the descriptions. The opportunity to write about something that mattered to them was another dominant characteristic (251). Sommers' research, along with the patterns identified in the K-12 surveys, convinced me that my method of open-ended essay questions would prove valuable in looking for a correlation between learner engagement in FYC and the Schlechty framework.

The Subjects

In a case of purposeful sampling, I surveyed English 2110 classes because they offered

the best sample representative of my population of interest. I needed to survey students who had

the experience necessary to answer questions about engaging writing assignments in first year

composition. Both FYC courses (English 1101 and English 1102) are prerequisites for World

Literature (English 2110). After gaining permission from two instructors through email and

scheduling the necessary class time, I conducted the survey face-to-face during Summer Session

2014 in two classes, which I'll call Class A and Class B. At the time of my visits, Class A was

beginning the third week of the eight week summer session and Class B, which as a hybrid class

met face-to-face once weekly, was in its fourth week. Two key advantages of in-class visits were

the higher participation as opposed to telephone or mail surveys (MacNealy 150) and the

speediness of collecting data. I left Class A with twenty-six completed surveys in hand and Class

B yielded an additional twenty-two as shown in Table 2.1:

Class	Students Present	Surveys Turned In	Surveys Eliminated	Sample % Included in Results
A	26	26	8	69%
B	23	22	10	55%

Totals	49	48	18	62%

Table 2.1: Sample Percentage of Total Surveys

The Procedure

First, I eliminated eighteen of the total number of forty-eight surveys—eight from Class A and ten from Class B—also shown in Tale 2.1. The reasons for elimination varied: nontraditional students who couldn't recall FYC because they had taken the courses some time ago, descriptions of assignments unrelated to writing, or surveys that didn't provide relevant information. The rationale for elimination is more fully discussed in Chapter Three. After the elimination process, I ended up with thirty surveys to code. In Class A, twenty-six students were surveyed and twenty-six surveys turned in. Twenty-three students were present in Class B on the rainy Monday when I visited a week later and collected twenty-two surveys. Only one student out of the forty-nine in class on the days of the survey opted out of participation. He politely read a book instead. As suggested by MacNealy, I appealed to the students' sense of altruism in an attempt to convince them the survey was worthy of their time (168). They were invited to participate in an important study to discover what first year composition students valued in writing assignments, and I said that it was a study that had the potential to influence future FYC classes.

Next it was time to begin coding the thirty surveys. I began by setting up categories, as MacNealy suggests, to sort responses (133). Initially, I started with seven categories that represented seven of the ten WOW design qualities, which are listed below:

Product Focus. The work students are assigned to do and the activities they undertake are linked to a product, performance, or exhibition that is meaningful to them.

Protection from Initial Failure (Safe Learning Environment. Schlechty describes a safe learning environment as one in which students are provided more than one opportunity to complete a task. Failure is viewed as a necessary part of learning, and there is respect between teachers and students.

Affirmation of Performance. Students are positioned to observe, participate in, and benefit from each other's work. Student work is displayed or published. Learners need to believe the work is important, needed, and worth doing.

Affiliation. Being given a chance to work with others enhances student engagement. Students have the opportunity to engage in communication to build cooperative networks, including electronic communication.

Novelty and Variety. A wide range of tasks and products are required of students to demonstrate learning along with the use of varied technologies. Likewise, teachers employ varied modes of presentation. Are students provided opportunities to teach each other?

Choice. Students like some degree of control over learning. What they learn is usually not subject to negotiation, but having choice of how they learn is. More than one option in what they will do to achieve the learning outcome is available.

Authenticity. Authentic work is work that is genuine to the students. It has real world connection and relevance. Work assigned has meaning and significance in their lives and is related to outcomes to which they attach importance.

As I coded, an eighth category emerged, which I initially labeled as Other. I purposely had not planned to code the following three WOW categories because Schlechty argues they are mainstays for all well-designed student work (81-82), and I did not expect them to be a factor in my study:

Content and Substance. The content involved is that which teachers, administrators, and the community agree is important. It is consistent with expectations and official benchmarks established by state and local standards as worth knowing and mastering.

Organization of Knowledge. Do students have the skills in place to do the assigned work? Has proper scaffolding taken place? Have teachers collaborated to ensure the methods used to present new learning are organized in ways that appeal to the largest number of students?

Clear and Compelling Product Standards. Students are more likely to engage and persist with work when they understand the standards by which the product will be judged. Students see value in the work.

My survey was designed to elicit student responses about design qualities that instructors may or may not include in lesson design. But interestingly, fourteen students (47% of the total) addressed the three above design qualities in their descriptions of engaging work. Their responses will be discussed in Chapter Three.

After setting up the categories, I created a numbering system to correspond to individual responses. The responses I used from Class A were numbered 01-01—01-18 and for Class B, 02-01—02-12. The numbering system served two purposes: first, it made it easier to return to individual surveys in case additional information was needed; and second, because each student's unique responses are disseminated across multiple categories, it's still possible to track individual responses across several categories. For example, I can use the numbering system to determine the specific assignment Student 01-14 described as most engaging was a lengthy research paper involving choice, authenticity, and protection from failure. A less important effect of my numbering system indicates whether the response came from Class A or Class B.

This initial wading through the data allowed me to record pertinent student phrases that not only related to a certain design quality, but also helped explain—at least in some cases—why the student appreciated it. This outcome will be valuable to this study as I explain results and discuss findings in Chapter Three, "Lessons from Learners." Once this step was complete, it was time to dive in more deeply. Following Schlechty's table of standards for each category (59-61) helped me code the unique responses. I used the following coding system (Table 2.2) for this measure:

A	Authenticity
Ch	Choice
P	Protection
AP	Affirmation of Performance
N	Novel and Variety
Af	Affiliation PR- Peer Affiliation (peer review) PA- Peer Affiliation (non-peer review) TA- (Teacher Affiliation) CA- (Community Affiliation)
Other	OK Organ of Knowledge CS Content & Substance C Clear Standards

(Table 2.2)

As I coded the surveys, it became clear that affiliation in a college composition classroom

often involved peer review, but peer review was not the only type of affiliation mentioned as

students described engaging assignments. Other kinds of peer affiliation mentioned include class

discussions, brainstorming writing ideas in small groups, and working together toward an end

product. Additionally, teacher affiliation developed as an essential characteristic in my survey as

it had in Sommers' survey mentioned earlier. Affiliation with a community outside of the school

setting proved important in Schlechty's work, so I broke down the affiliation category even

further to include this sub-category. I also broke the aforementioned Other Category into sub-

categories to help describe its occurrence.

In the end, I dropped the Product Focus category because the specific products, or end

results, of a particular assignment were not necessary to tally; however, the products described in

the Categories Chart will be helpful when discussing the results.

It turns out that the majority of the World Literature students surveyed had a lot to say about their writing assignments in first year composition. Many student responses indicated a passion for choosing the topics they researched, and a few even marveled at the novelty of being given a choice. The surveys also made it clear that collaboration within the learning community was important to them whether it occurred through peer review, partnering with an instructor to improve their writing, or having a chance to talk about their work with each other. The following chapter discusses in depth the lessons learned from the data collected through the student surveys.

Chapter 3: Lessons from Learners

Setting it Up

Near the middle of summer session 2014, I conducted a face-to-face survey in two sections of English 2110. Both classes were offered during the 8-week session and showed an initial enrollment of more than thirty. In Class A, twenty-six students were present when I started the survey, and each student present turned in the survey form. An additional student arrived twenty minutes after class started and didn't have time to participate. On the rainy Monday I visited Class B, which was a hybrid class meeting face-to-face every other class period, twenty-three students were present and twenty-two chose to participate. Ninety-eight percent of students in class on the days of the survey participated.

Of the forty-eight surveys collected, I eliminated eighteen (38%) for the following reasons broken down by class. In Class A, I rejected eight. One student took the classes "a while ago" and didn't remember particular assignments. Another described writing in general and how much she enjoyed FYC but didn't mention a specific assignment while another liked class discussions the best. A student who took AP English in high school found evaluating papers from previous classes the most engaging activity. One survey was eliminated because of insufficient responses.

Three students from Class A made it clear they did not care for writing at all: "[There's] nothing meaningful about fyc – you just shew [sic] up and write papers." Another said, "…and without being a lit or comp major, 1101/1102 class probably did not/will not help anyone." Then there was this one, "Nothing engaging. Class was mundane."

The last three responses might substantiate that some students are disengaged when they enter first year composition. Perhaps they resent that the courses are required, or they come in

with the preconception that they are poor writers. They could also mistakenly believe that writing has no application for their future lives. Although there is no proven solution for reaching such students, basing instructional activities and assignments on best practices for increasing student engagement—as this study sets out to illuminate—is at least a starting point.

Five of the ten surveys eliminated from Class B were from students who shared they had taken FYC at other colleges, both local and out-of-state, because the assignments described weren't actually writing. I did not automatically reject surveys by students who had earned credit for English 1101 and/or 1102 at a college other than KSU because I was looking for assignment characteristics that engaged students regardless of the institution; however it's clear that other writing programs may not place the same focus on writing as does KSU. For example, one transfer student mentioned reading four books and presenting a report on two of them to classmates. According to another student who reported the teacher simply gave out writing templates and examples, there were no fun activities in FYC. A student who took the courses at the University of the Arts four years ago could recall only the class discussions as meaningful, and another student from Ole Miss loved reading a novel of her choice with the only requirement being that it was set in Oxford, Mississippi. Still another fondly recalled writing about "Hamlet" but offered little additional information. Other rejections from Class B include the student who was returning to school after a five-year absence and related, "my memory doesn't go back that far." Two surveys were too incomplete to be helpful and another waxed on about how the professor and the class turned his life around without describing a single assignment. I also rejected the survey from the student who admitted that although writing classes at KSU helped him improve his writing – a first of any English class he's taken – he still hates it.

After the eliminating process was complete, I ended up with 69% (18 out of 26) of the surveys from Class A to code. Fifty-five percent of the surveys From Class B (12 out of 22) figured into the final results. The data on the sample numbers from both classes is presented in Table 3.1.

Class	Students Present	Surveys Turned In	Surveys Eliminated	Surveys Analyzed	Sample %
A	26	26	8	18	69%
B	23	22	10	12	55%

Totals	49	48	18	30	62%

Table 3.1: Sample Percentage of Total Surveys

Coding the Data

Before coding, I reviewed Schlechty's descriptive standards for each design quality to gain clarity on exactly what was indicated within each design quality because, according to MacNealy, the categories researchers develop "should be so carefully defined that a piece of data can logically be placed in only one of them" (133). However, this proved difficult for a few of the categories derived from the WOW framework. I discovered a need to create subcategories within one category as well as strong links among some of the major categories. I was heartened, therefore, to find in *Basics of Qualitative Research* that Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin acknowledge that the art of categorizing is more complex than simply assigning careful definitions. The researchers discuss categorizing in terms of properties and dimensions because "[properties and dimensions] form the basis for making relationships between categories and subcategories. And still later, between major categories" (70-71).

The Results

After coding, I tallied the responses to determine the frequency each design quality was cited by students when describing their most meaningful or engaging writing experience in FYC. The frequency data results are presented in Table 3.2.
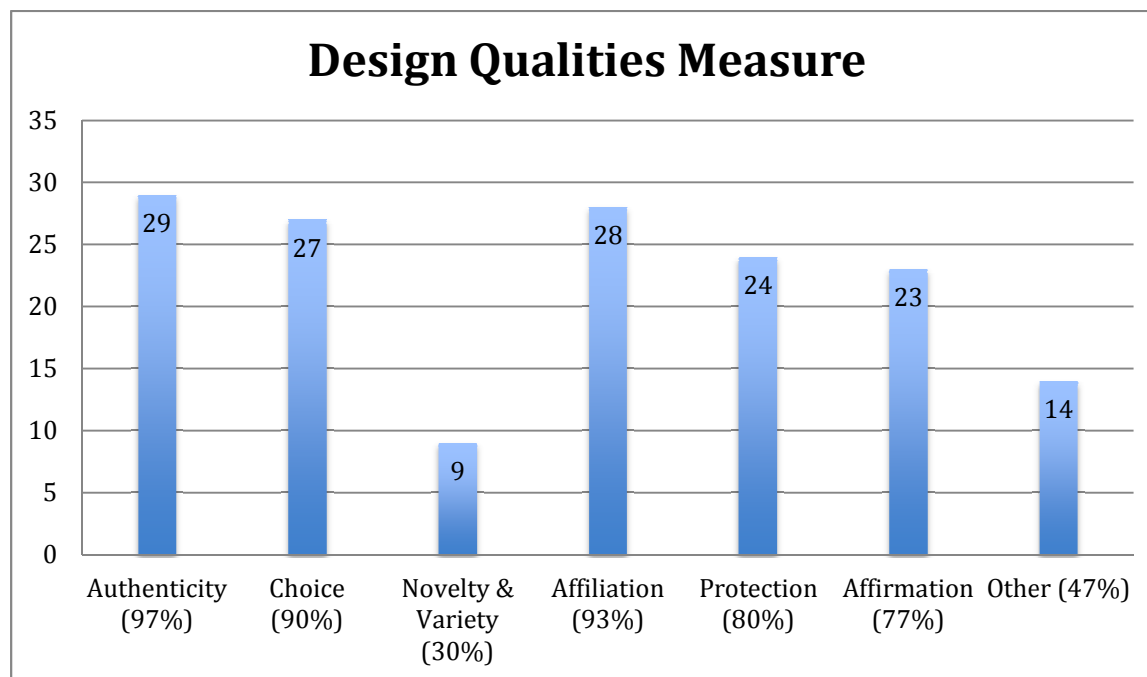
Table 3.2: Number and percentage of students who cited each design quality

As predicted, Question One of the survey elicited the most useful and meaningful information about the characteristics of assignments students valued the most:

> 1. Describe with as much detail as possible your most meaningful or engaging writing experience in First Year Composition (English 1101, English 1102), and tell what made the experience particularly meaningful and engaging.

Authenticity and Choice

I love Schlechty's contention that "activities that respond to the need for authenticity accept the world of students as a resource rather than a problem" (94). It is wonderful, he argues, when work is designed with a goal of capitalizing on the "values of the student subculture" (94) because work is engaging for students if it has meaning and significance in their lives (196).

Choice, according to Schlechty, offers the student power by increasing the control the student has over the work she is expected to undertake. Providing choice helps satisfy the drive for autonomy, which in itself, is a powerful force in regard to intrinsic motivation. Further, the belief that one has some influence over the activity and its outcomes is a source of satisfaction (92).

The results of my study show that authenticity and choice walk closely hand in hand, making a relationship between the two categories clear. Allusions to both of the design qualities quickly surfaced in question one as students described the product focus of their most engaging experience in FYC. The two were difficult to separate based on the language students used to explain engaging characteristics. Undeniably, student responses were more passionate when discussing choice and authenticity than when describing any other quality. Consider the following responses:

- *I wrote about the brilliant basketball mind of Shane Battier. I have never been a huge writer. I'm a physics student and an athlete. This topic allowed me to write about something that I could relate to and something that I loved. It made me realize that I do enjoy writing if it is about something I love* (Student 02-04).

- *…the research paper I wrote on something that needed to be changed in our community. It had us really think about problems with our world and what we could do to change it* (Student 01-01).

- *I got to choose what I wrote about which was cool because I was actually interested in my paper. …I will use those research skills ….for the rest of my life (Student 01-10).*

- *What made it so engaging was that we were able to choose the topic….Being able to have freedom as a student goes a long way in how we learn* (Student 01-14).

- *I got to choose a topic that interested me. I was able to really put more effort in it because I was very curious about the topic…and this made my paper seem better in my opinion* (Student 01-15).

- *I wrote a paper on whether the drinking age should be changed to 18 or not. I found this topic engaging because it was a subject that affected me and my peers directly* (Student 01-17).

- *My paper was on life of young girls under the Taliban in Afghanistan. …I am Muslim and researching the topic and writing the assignment hit close to home* (Student 01-18).

Obviously choice played a huge role in making these and many other assignments engaging. Because students chose an issue they were interested in exploring, the assignment was authentic in that it held value and meaning for them. With the number of times the two qualities were evident in the responses, one might assume that choice in topic is the norm rather than the exception in first year composition. However, that did not prove to be the case because additional response data suggests otherwise.

Student 02-05 stated, "I actually was able to write about something I found relevant rather than writing about an assigned conventional topic that they always assign (ex. Hamlet)." And a student citing a paper he wrote in 1102 about a significant object in his life as most engaging added this: "In 1101 and 2110 not much freedom is given, same old topic and super specific format. 1102 made writing a bit more enjoyable instead of complete torture" (Student 02-10). Student 01-05 voiced strong opinions, not only about choice in topic, but also about restrictive guidelines: "…it was one of the few assignments we were able to work on where there was not finite and set guidelines for every line in the paper."

Allowances for creativity was not a trait examined independently in this study, but it emerged as a dimension of authenticity and choice. Student 01-04 said of her most engaging assignment: "I got to chose my topic which made me more interested and excited to research. I was more engaged and enjoyed writing more because I was not told what I had to base my topic on. I was more in control and felt more creative."

Another student cited the assignment, "A Creative Interpretation of My Research," as most engaging. She explains she did a painting and enjoyed "complete freedom to the type of project she did" in expressing the research she worked on all semester (01-06). The student went on to add it was "interesting to see classmates' interpretations because it not only helped me understand their research but also their personalities."

In two other nods to creativity, Student 02-12 liked that "essay requirements were broad enough that we could get creative in our essay" and Student 01-14 said, "Because we chose topics that interested us, the assignment was much more enjoyable. It gave us the opportunity to explore..."

Even when the instructor assigned the topic, choice was sometimes cited as an engaging factor. One assignment described was an essay about the opportunities young adults have in America in terms of education compared to other countries. Besides proving authentic for this student, the assignment allowed choice of other countries he could research and the "interesting facts he learned" (Student 01-03). And the student who had to write a paper about an assigned book said the essay requirements were broad enough to allow a choice in themes to argue: "I think it is important to have a few choices of how to approach the essay so the student doesn't feel like there is a right or wrong answer" (Student 02-12). In Elizabeth Kahn's "Making Writing Instruction Authentic," all students wrote about the same local issue – moment of silence – but did have choices in their stance and how to approach their research.

It is also interesting to note that choosing groups to work with was a factor cited by a few students. Student 01-17 mentioned that not only did students choose their own groups for a group project, but that they got to pick a relevant topic as well. Another student said an important feature in her research presentation was that choosing which images and graphs she used allowed her to show how proud she was of her research (02-01). These student responses support a report on student motivation by Anderman and Midgley, who point out "even small opportunities for choice, such as whether to work with a partner or independently," give students a sense of self-direction (3).

As shown in Table 3.2, an overwhelming 97% of the surveys (twenty-nine out of thirty) described assignments that were authentic. The only student who did not use language that broached authenticity in his description did indicate that choice played a role in his engagement. As for choice, 90% of the surveys (twenty-seven out of thirty) specified choice as a factor. Of the three surveys not specifically mentioning choice, two students focused on *content* and

organization of knowledge in question one (01-07, 01-09), and a third described the broader

activity of peer review as the most meaningful and engaging experience in FYC (01-02).

Novelty and Variety

Schlechty explains that novelty and variety are powerful forms of motivation, especially

since many school tasks become tedious after time due to the amount of practice some skills

require. To boost student engagement, he urges teachers to intersperse work offering novelty and

variety with routine work. Ideally, teachers can design work so the relationship between the

monotonous tasks and the more engaging and intrinsically motivating end products are clear

(93).

Only thirty percent (9 out of 30) of students surveyed included novelty and variety as

factors in their most engaging learning activities. This really isn't surprising because many FYC

classes at Kennesaw State University require a final researched essay or researched project to

demonstrate learning, and, indeed, a majority of students surveyed, 21 out of 30, referenced a

"research paper" as the most engaging assignment. However, the pervasiveness of writing

academic arguments in KSU's composition curriculum adds significance to the design quality's

importance although it was cited by only thirty percent of students. The nine students who

referenced a novel writing experience described the following assignments:

- *A creative interpretation of our research; I did a painting* (Student 01-06)*.*

- *I went to a restaurant and tried a new cuisine and wrote a cultural enlightenment paper*
  (01-11)*.*

- *The presentation helped me get people to see what I was actually talking about; it caught
  the attention of my peers* (02-01)*.*

- *As an ESL student, writing a film review helped me improve my skills in writing in English* (02-02),

- *Making a visual that showed how we completed our writing process from the point we got our instructions to when we turned our paper in* (02-03).

- *A group project rewriting an organization's introduction for its website* (02-07).

- *I enjoyed the crafty part of making a collage to present a visual argument* (02-08).

- *It was something we normally wouldn't do – go out and closely observe people and their actions and write a paper making an argument about it* (02-09).

- *We wrote about a significant object in our life* (02-10).

The results become even more significant when we consider that three of the twenty-one students who described a researched essay mentioned novel elements of the assignment, the percentage climbs to forty percent:

- *I liked researching a favorite place because it was different and I'd never done it* (02-06).

- *It was a group project about commuting. I took on the role of educational hardships with commuting* (01-13).

- *For a paper about whether the drinking age should be changed to 18 or not, three of us were grouped and assigned 1/3 of the paper* (01-17).

Affiliation

According to Schlechty, students are often motivated by values that are shared with others; therefore, work assignments that require collaborative action and a shared purpose is a powerful driver of student effort (90). Ninety-eight percent (28 out of 30) of students surveyed recognized that affiliation contributes to engaging work. Affiliation often occurs in the form of

peer review in first year composition, but that's not the only type of affiliation FYC students referenced. Affiliation with the instructor proved significant too; seventy-seven percent (23 out of 30) of the sample acknowledged its importance to a successful assignment. Sample student responses indicating that either peer or teacher affiliation occurred include the following:

- *…it involved a lot of peer editing…each person in our group read our paper and answered helpful questions about it* (01-15).

- *Every other week we paired up and made suggestions on ways to improve to each other* (01-10).

- *Peer review allowed us to get valuable input and editing from a partner* (01-12).

- *We had certain class days scheduled to talk with the instructor about our papers and what needed to be done to make the paper better (Student 01-04).*

- *The instructor's feedback was constantly offered because we almost always had a class discussion about everyone's ideas and where they were taking their project* (Student 01-02)*.

- *Instructor was awesome and did everything she could to help in succeeding in writing a good paper* (Student 02-01).

- *We did a lot of work in class that really helped me with my paper. She was very good at helping when you were stuck. We also had drafts due before the final where she could tell us if we were going in the right direction* (Student 02-06).

- *During the editing process my professor offered feedback and after the final paper was turned in we were … allowed another revision. My professor was great because he stated that, 'writing is always a work in process'* (Student 02-05).

In addition to affiliation within the classroom, Schlechty's framework encourages work that requires active involvement with students from other classrooms or schools, parents, and other members of the community. Having students create work intended for others outside the school environment increases student engagement, argues Schlechty, because doing so incorporates several design qualities. Only one student in the survey sample described an assignment involving affiliation with a group, or groups, outside the class setting—in this case website owners: *we had to find an organization that had a poorly written website or brochure and write a better introduction for them* (Student 02-07).

The results of examining affiliation through a lens considering *peer, teacher* and *other* are presented in the following chart.

Types of Affiliation

■ Total Students 30

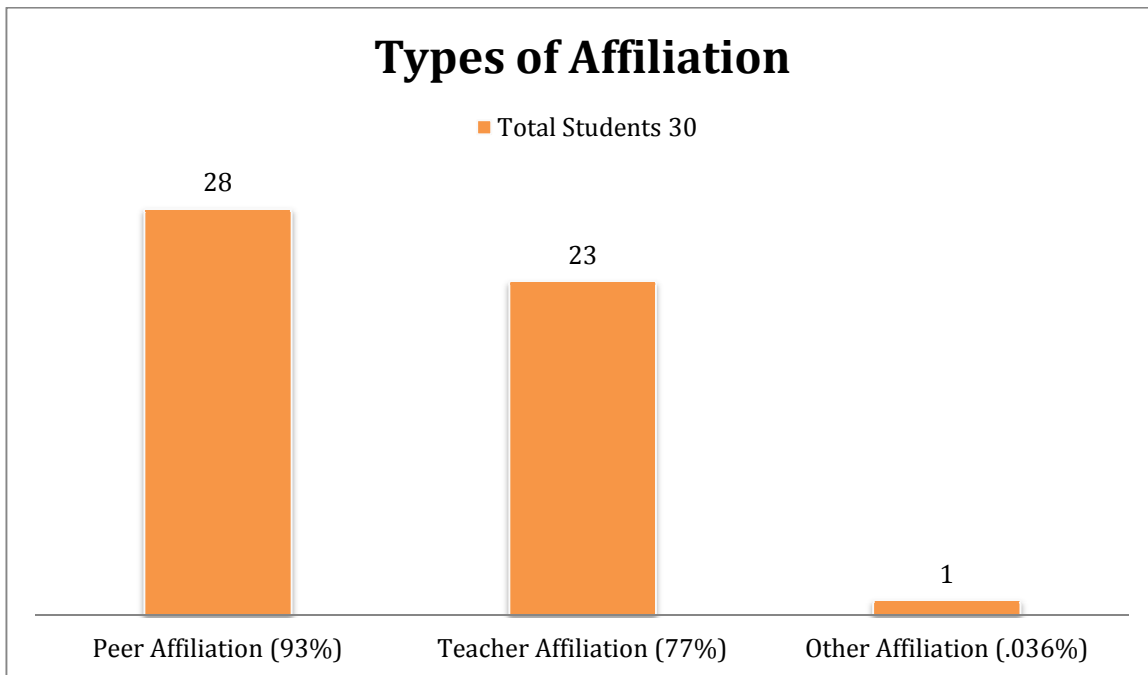|		
28	23	1
Peer Affiliation (93%)	Teacher Affiliation (77%)	Other Affiliation (.036%)

Table 3.2

I next broke the peer affiliation category into two subsets because thirteen of the thirty

surveys (43%) described group work other than peer review. These responses included small group brainstorming, discussions, and group papers. Other students mentioned instructional activities such as small group analyses of effective introductions and conclusions and bouncing ideas off others who had experienced what we were writing about. In the chart below, I show the results of the subset, distinguishing the two types of peer affiliation.

Peer Affiliation Breakdown

■ Total Students 30

17

13

Peer Review (57%)   Non-Peer Review (43%)
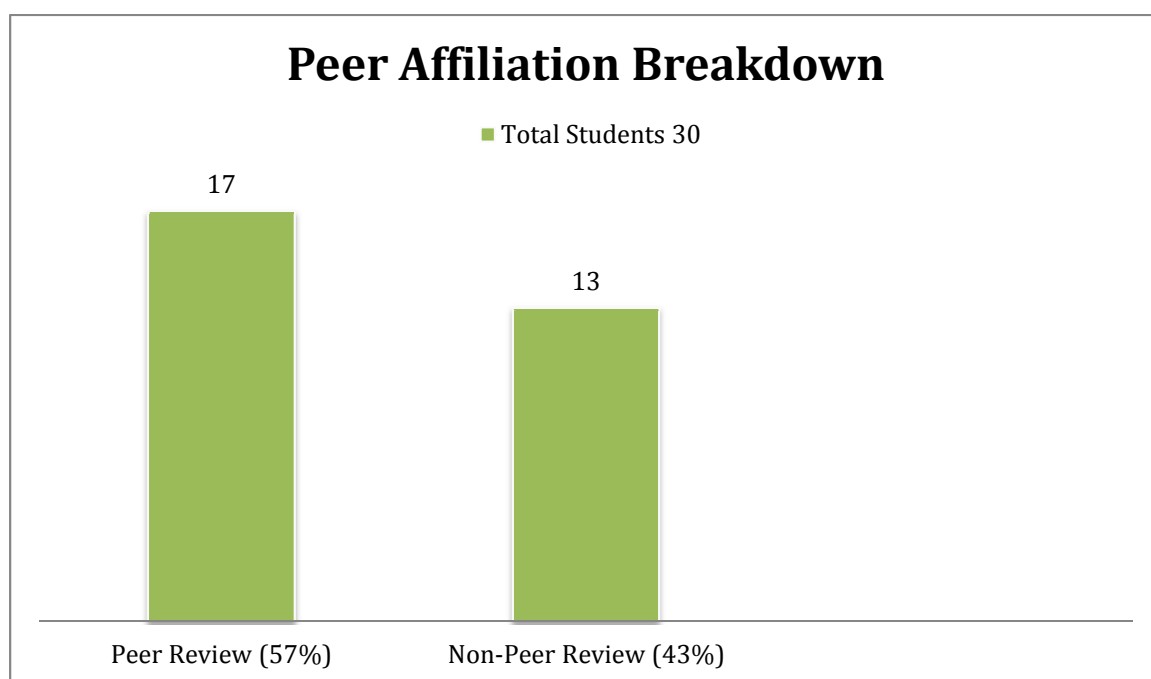
Table 3.3

The two numbers shown in Table 3.3 do not represent the total number of respondents because some students cited one of the two as an important design quality; others cited both; and a few neither. Further, the fact that peer review was not included in student descriptions does not mean that peer review did not take place; it simply speaks to its importance as a design quality, or lack thereof, for that particular student.

Protection for Initial Failure

Schlechty argues that classrooms should be places where students are challenged to try new things and use intellectual skills they have yet to develop. They must be encouraged, he

contends, to take risks even with the consequence of initial failure. Teachers who communicate to students that they are concerned about helping them succeed create a supportive and trusting classroom environment, which offers protection from adverse consequences for initial failure (89). Without trust, students are less likely to respond to the work that teachers design (59).

Eighty percent of the student surveys in this study (24 out of 30) suggest that protection against failure is in place. Many students (92%) indicated that the sense of protection came primarily from an instructor who provided feedback on the work. Student comments ranged from "at some point," to "constantly," to "throughout the writing process" when weighing in on the relationship of teacher feedback and protection from adverse consequences. On the other hand, fifty percent of students mentioned peer affiliation as a factor of protection. A variety of student comments to that effect follow:

- *Instructor gave advice on my thesis and how to set up my paper* (01-01).
- *Certain class times scheduled to talk with instructor and get feedback on how to improve* (01-04).
- *Professor always available before and after class to answer questions* (01-07).
- *She would make us turn in a new rough draft every week, giving us constant feedback* (01-09).
- *Drafts were revised multiple times before final submission* (01-12),
- *Instructor did everything she could to help me succeed in writing a good paper* (02-01).
- *Professor offered feedback during the process, and after final paper we were allowed another revision* (02-05).
- *Instructor was good at helping when we were stuck. We did a lot of work in class that really helped.* (02-06).

- *Peer review enhanced the initial effort* (01-02).

- *Peer editing was cool because I got to see other writing styles and it helped to shape me as a writer* (01-10).

- *One class period spent for peer reviews that helped make sure we were on the right track* (01-07).

- *Great discussions in class which helped shaped final paper and peer review on the final paper was extremely helpful* (02-12).

Additionally, two students mentioned getting together with friends or classmates outside of class to "practice presenting in front of them" (Student 02-02) and to "[review] each other's papers" (Student 02-04). I got the sense these two instances were self-initiated rather than a class requirement and could have grown out of group work in the class. If self-initiated as I suspect, the action demonstrates intrinsic motivation, which is an important dimension of engaged students and leads to learning at higher levels.

Affirmation of Performance

Schlechty proposes that students like to feel their work and class involvement count for something, and one of their basic drives is to have their work affirmed. Praise and positive feedback is one way to do this, of course, but "praise does not always affirm the student; it may simply reinforce the student and encourage him or her to continue to behave as he or she is now behaving…. Affirmation is more forward looking. It seeks to encourage the student to press on and do better…in the drive for mastery" (91). Methods to assure that the work of students is affirmed, he maintains, is to involve them in creating products that other students will use, read, or otherwise take into account. Designing work students do so each one feels that what he is doing is of value to others as well as to himself is also important (194).

Seventy-seven percent (23 out of 30) of students surveyed used language in their responses that implied feelings of affirmation. Affiliation with peers was a major source of affirmation, but so was presenting individual and group projects either formally or informally during class. Schlechty advocates involving public audiences to affirm student work, and while it's difficult to allow for public affirmation in a sixteen-week semester, it isn't impossible. For example, one student in my study said his most meaningful activity was a small group assignment which involved writing a better introduction for an organization's website. "After we submitted our introductions to a couple of organizations, one actually emailed us back and used one of them" (Student 02-07). Following are a few student comments suggesting affirmation:

- *Presented thesis and main ideas to class* (Student 01-01),

- *Presented both in small group and whole class about educational opportunities here and in other counties* (01-03).

- *Expressed the research I'd been working on all semester* (01-06).

- *We got together in groups to read aloud whose paper in our group we thought had the best beginning, middle, and end* (01-09).

- *We talked about our papers with the whole class some days* (01-10).

- *We had to use a visual aid to support our claim when we presented in front of class* (01-11).

- *My Power Point was a huge support in showing how proud I was about my topic* (02-01).

- *Great experience presenting my film review to peers and we got the teacher's evaluation immediately after* (02-02).

- *We got to present our visual to the class and explain our writing process and reflect on why we choose the visuals we chose* (02-03).

- *In groups we helped each other come up with topics, ideas, ways to write* (02-09).

The open-ended responses on the surveys revealed a connection between Affiliation, Protection from Adverse Consequences, and Affirmation of Performance in first year composition. In student comments, the three qualities were often mentioned in conjunction with each other. The affiliation component of peer review and student/teacher interaction through feedback serves, to some extent, as a catalyst for protection and affirmation of performance.

Other Categories: Content and Substance; Clear and Compelling Standards; Organization of Knowledge

At first, I hadn't planned to measure three design qualities of the WOW framework: *Content and Substance*, *Clear and Compelling Standards*, and *Organization of Knowledge*. Schlechty argues the three, along with *Product Focus,* should be a requirement of any work assigned students. Teachers are free to incorporate the remaining six qualities as they see fit, keeping in mind the more qualities included, the more engaging the work. Thus, I'd intended to limit this investigation to the remaining design qualities. But because the survey results show these qualities matter to college students enough to cite in their descriptions of engaging work, I had to include them in the data. Six out of thirty students (20%) cited both *Substance and Content* and *Organization of Knowledge* as influencers in their most engaging assignments. Two students (.067%) described the elements comprising the *Clear and Compelling Standards* category.

Typical comments related to each of the "other" qualities are categorized below:

Organization of Knowledge

- *Learned how to use rhetorical devices effectively which enhanced my writing* (Student

01-02).

- *All assignments related to our final essay which we started building the first week of class* (Student 01-08).

Content and Substance

- *Professor's standards were high and caused me to dig deep into the information* (Student 01-07).

- *It was hard … but improved my writing* (Student 02-02).

Clear and Compelling Standards

- *Instructor was specific in what he wanted us to do and how we should do it* (Student 01-03).

- *It was impossible to not know what she wanted from us because she was so clear* (Student 01-09).

In the chart below, I break the data down into the three specific categories. As an explanatory note, the total count of fourteen shown in the table represents twelve students. Student 01-12 cited both Organization of Knowledge and Content and Substance. Student 01-09 mentioned Organization of Knowledge and Clear and Compelling Standards.
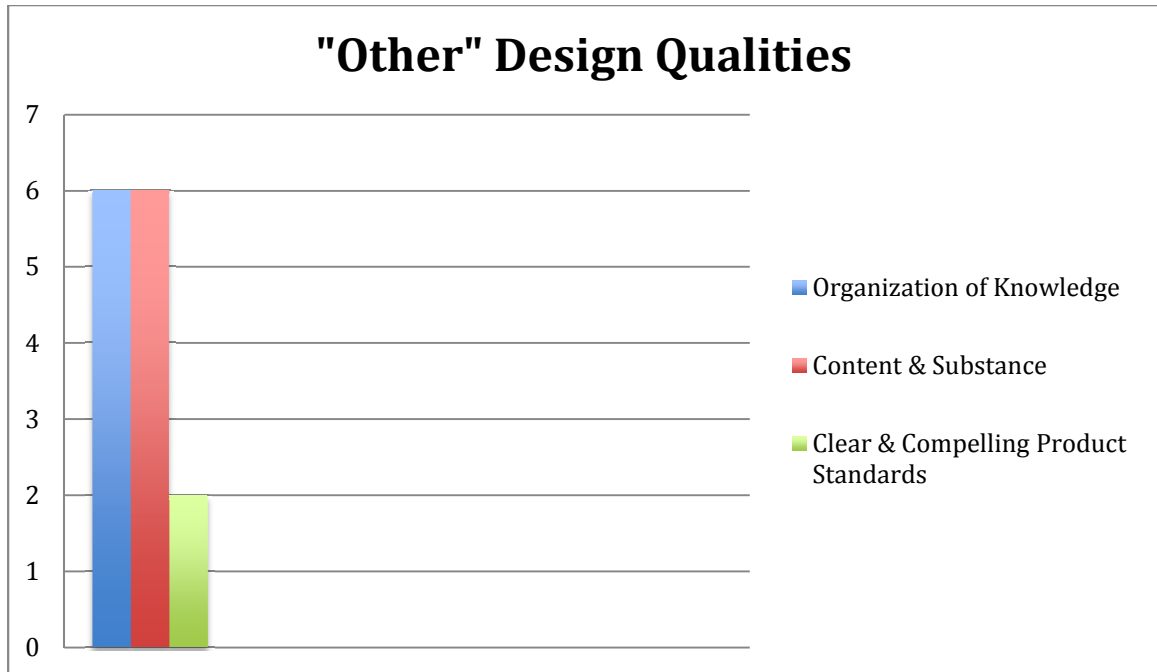
Table 3.4: Breakdown of "Other" Design Category

A Concluding Comment

Clearly, in this study, a correlation exists between qualities of work FYC students find

engaging and Schlechty's WOW framework. Some design qualities emerge more strongly than

others, and a few key differences are evident in Schlechty's research at the K-12 level and this

study conducted in college first year composition. For example, a relationship between

Authenticity and Choice is evident in the results of my study. Likewise, Protection and

Affirmation seem dependent on the Affiliation category in FYC. Another divergence is

Schlechty's speculation that incorporating technology in work design will prove a major driver

in student engagement. In the following chapter, I take a closer look at these results by

examining the similarities and differences in the research at the two levels of education.

Chapter 4: The Schlechty Connection

The intended purpose of my study "Engaging Learners with Quality Work Design in First Year Composition" was to determine if designing student work based on Phillip Schlechty's WOW Framework could increase student engagement in FYC. The study also set out to examine which, if any, design qualities might play a more significant or less important role in first year composition than what Schlechty's research at the K-12 level revealed.

Each characteristic that students in the study attached to the terms "meaningful or engaging" fit into one of the ten areas of quality work as defined by Schlechty. However, there were differences. My study showed a robust relationship among some of the defined categories to the extent that the presence of certain design qualities seemed to rely on the presence of others. Further, student survey responses suggest that particular design qualities may be important in FYC based on different reasons than those delineated in Schlechty's research.

Authenticity and Choice

My student sample indicated a strong connection between authenticity and choice. In fact, it was difficult to separate the two design qualities based on the language students used. Schlechty's work, on the other hand, does not link authenticity and choice in his discussion of the two design qualities. He words the Standard for Authenticity this way: *The tasks students are assigned and the work they are encouraged to undertake have meaning and significance in their lives today and are related to consequences to which they attach importance* (196). Students do express these Schlechty terms in their descriptions of authentic assignments when they provide explanations such as "the assignment hit close to home," "it was a subject that affected me and my peers directly," and "I really put more effort into it because I was curious about the topic." But with the exception of two, all the student descriptions that suggested authenticity highlighted

choice as a determining factor as exemplified by the following comments: "I got to choose my topic which made me more interested and excited to research" (Student 01-04) and "I am a commuter, so I chose the role of educational hardships with commuters" (Student 01-13).

Schlechty does, however, imply a relationship between *choice* and *novelty and variety*: "Choice is a critical element in design and in any other effort to ensure that novelty will be built into the tasks students undertake" (55). And while 23% of student surveys, (seven out of thirty), disclosed that choice in writing topic was novel in first year composition, 93% of students linked choice to authenticity rather than novelty.

The obvious connection between authenticity and choice in my study led me to take a look at the research regarding authentic writing assignments in general. I discovered that choice is mentioned frequently as a component of authentic writing in the literacy field. Long-time literacy educator Elfrieda Hiebert points out that authentic writing includes two important elements: "Authentic writing is students writing on topics or areas of their own interest. Authentic writing provides students the opportunity to *have choice* in their writing and *make connections to their lives*" (390). The overall implications from the field of literacy are that when writing connects to students' lives, when they have choices, and, here it is again, when technology is involved, students' motivations to write increase. (Witte 92; Bintz and Shelton 493-495).

Novelty and Variety (and Technology?)

Novelty refers to "newness" and variety to "diversity of activity." Since Schlechty began his work with engaging work design at the beginning of the 21st century, technology has become more prevalent in the classroom. In the beginning of this revolution, Schlechty reasoned that technology was a primary way to add novelty and variety to instructional activities. In *Shaking*

Up the Schoolhouse he argued that providing students the opportunity to employ a wide range of media and approaches when engaged in the activities assigned can increase student engagement by providing novelty *and* variety (238). But in a later You Tube video (July 2014), Schlechty acknowledged that when computers were new, they fulfilled students' motives for novelty. But after a while, they were no longer novel. Now his argument is that computers alone won't keep learners engaged, but technology can continue to be used to introduce novelty.

Because of Schlechty's contention that technology provides novelty and variety, and because research from the literacy field shows that using technology to write makes assignments authentic, I was curious to discover technology's role in the design of engaging work for first year composition students. Surprisingly, technology did not play a starring role. Of the thirty varied assignments described, only two made an explicit reference to technology. Student 02-01 described a Power Point presentation about her researched topic, but the reasons cited for her engagement had to do more with *organization of knowledge*, *choice* in graphs and visuals, and *affirmation of performance* than using technology. Another student, whose small group rewrote the introduction for an organization's "poorly written website" involved technology, but again, it was qualities such as *affiliation*, *authenticity*, and *affirmation of performance* that stood out as contributing factors. Student 02-08 loved making a collage to present a visual argument, but the only reference to technology was the requirement that it had to be posted to a discussion board. Of course, it can be assumed that the oft-cited final research project involved technology for research, but student responses clearly indicated they valued the *choice* and *authenticity* of the end product over all else.

The data collected in this study in FYC seems to support Bowen et al. who examined technology as a separate design quality as an addition to Schlechty's framework. The authors'

analysis in a middle school found that while students did like technology, a more relevant factor of its engagement potential was the authenticity of the assignment (Bowen et al.).

It appears that effectively engaging students with technology requires careful and deliberate planning. One reason this is true may be that the use of technology has become so ubiquitous that today's millennial students take its presence for granted. Or perhaps it means that employing novel ways to use technology, as Schlechty recently stressed as necessary, is not occurring. Another possibility to consider is that many FYC students are at a pre-career stage and don't understand that learning to write in genres such as email, blog posts, or creating web content might have application to their future work.

Whatever the reasons are that technology didn't stand out in engaging assignments in FYC at KSU, it is possible to design authentic writing assignments using technology. In "'Russia is not in Rhode Island': Wikitravel In the Digital Writing Classroom," Michael Pennell describes a project which involved merging authentic writing with technology. Wikitravel is an open travel guide created and maintained by travelers across the world. Pennell, who taught in Rhode Island, involved his students in writing the guides for Rhode Island—a largely undeveloped section of wikitravel. His students had a great deal of control over the project from grouping themselves into geographical areas of interest to making decisions of how and what they would contribute (80-81). Student work required a mingling of first hand experience with published reviews, articles, and other information. Although students struggled with the collaborative elements of the work because ownership of the writing was constantly in flux (82), they were able to successfully complete a helpful and locally created travel guide.

As one student said at the Wikitravel project's end, "it is not just one mind working on a specific topic, it is the minds of people worldwide." Another addressed several engaging

qualities when he wrote, "The blog and the wiki travel projects were the first times I have ever posted anything onto the Internet. Posting information is fun and I believe could be a useful took in my future professional life" (87). Clearly these students realized the value of learning new technologies and were intrinsically motivated as a result. This supports Schlechty's contention in *Engaging Students* that figuring out ways to make connections between instructional activities and the final product focus, i.e. often a career in the case of college students, is at the heart of engaging work design (82).

Affiliation

While I expected technology to have an impact on student engagement in FYC, I wasn't convinced that affiliation would. Schlechty argues that the drive for affiliation is so great in K-12 that often teachers use it as an extrinsic reward. Teachers might use affiliation as motivation by telling students something like, "If you do your work all week, I'll let you work in groups on Friday." But as Schlechty points out, "Because students, like adults, are often motivated by values that are shared with others, designing work that requires collaborative action and shared purpose can be a powerful source of intrinsic motivation" (90).

I thought affiliation would prove unimportant in FYC because students don't enter English 1101 with a gaggle of friends. Because the class is often taken during their first semester of college, students haven't yet had time to form peer relationships. I've observed some students in my 1101 classes who seem to prefer to work in isolation rather than in pairs or small groups. This changes somewhat in English 1102 because a few students know each other and may have deliberately taken 1102 together, but even then, it's not the rule. However, affiliation emerged as a key characteristic in both classes comprising first year composition. One difference was that,

unlike Schlechty's K-12 work, teacher affiliation was almost as important in FYC as peer affiliation.

Sub-categories: Peer and Teacher

The important function that affiliation plays in K-12 leans heavily toward the social aspect. Not only are these kids socially driven, but also many have been in school with each other over a period of years. Students in college composition like affiliation, too, although it serves a more functional role than a social one. The affiliation types most often cited in my study were those of peer review (57%) and instructor feedback (77%). When Nancy Sommers surveyed over 400 students in the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing about their "best" writing experience, she found that "the opportunity to engage with an instructor through feedback" played an essential role (251). Troy Hicks, author of *The Digital Writing Workshop,* concurs with Sommers' findings when he stresses one of the values of conferring with students is the improvement in teacher and student relationships (36).

Peer review is not the only type of peer affiliation in FYC. An additional 43% of the students surveyed mentioned peer affiliation other than peer review. These activities included group discussions, group papers, brainstorming, and making suggestions about each other's work within small groups. Other students mentioned instructional activities such as small group analyses of effective introductions and conclusions and bouncing ideas off others who had experienced what we were writing about.

Affiliation with the Community

Affiliation with those outside a school setting is a component of affiliation that deserves mention due to the lack of its presence in my survey results. In a list of questions Schlechty formulated for teachers to use to guide their work deign, he asks the following:

- Are students frequently given work to do that requires them to work with parents and others adults in the community?

- Are some of the products students produce clearly intended to be useful to other students, parents, or community leaders? (70).

Obviously, parents don't play a huge role in work designed for higher education students as they do in K-12 education, where parents are considered major stakeholders. But affiliation with a community group is possible. Remember the student who described his group project of rewriting an organization's introduction on its website as not only offering affiliation, but also as affirming and authentic? Even though it is possible, only one student cited affiliation with others outside the school setting (.33%). A probable reason is that teachers have FYC students in class for a fifteen-week semester at most, and such a short timeframe may not allow enough time to carry out such activities. An additional consideration is the difficulty of supervising affiliation outside the walls of a FYC classroom although affiliating with others through technology lessens this particular concern.

Yet, a wealth of scholarship exists in the area of service learning related to partnering composition courses with community writing. In a study about rhetorical contexts for service-learning composition students, L. R. Hall found that students performed better in their writing when they addressed "real" readers than when they addressed the instructor (66). Wade and Susann Dorman set out to "bridge the gap between the real world and the composition classroom" through three versions of their service-learning writing courses (119). Dorman and Dorman established through students' reflective journaling and formal essays that students increased investments in their arguments and enjoyed a greater awareness of audience and the realities they were writing about. The instructors also noted students researched more thoroughly

and used real life examples in writing, which strengthened it. Many of the WOW design qualities

surfaced in student evaluations of the Dormans' course. One said the journal writing improved

writing skills and another claimed that documenting what he experienced helped him develop as

a person. Another student said the community service gave students real life experiences to write

about which led to better writing (125). Therefore, authentic learning can be rooted in service

learning along with affiliation if such courses are designed with the WOW framework in mind.

In addition to *affiliation*, *novelty and variety*, and *authenticity*, service learning offers

opportunities for *affirmation of performance* as students help others, *protection* through

collaboration with peers and supervisors, and, if linked to FYC content, *content and substance* as

well as *organization of knowledge*.

Affiliation, Protection, and Affirmation

Just as with *authenticity* and *choice*, a significant relationship surfaced through survey

results between the *affiliation, protection from initial failure,* an*d affirmation* qualities of the

WOW framework. The *sub*-categories of peer and teacher affiliation serve, to some extent, as a

catalyst for *protection* and *affirmation of performance*. In his most recent book about student

engagement, *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work,* Schlechty broadened

Protection from Adverse Consequences to include a safe environment in general. As stated in the

standard for this design quality:

> …students feel that the school as well as each classroom is a physically
>
> and psychologically safe place. Success is expected and failure is
>
> understood as a necessary part of learning, there is mutual respect between
>
> and among faculty and students, and the fear of harm or harassment from

fellow students and demeaning comments from teachers is negligible.

(193).

Many students in my study indicated that affiliation, both peer and teacher, offered

protection as suggested by the following comments:

- *Peer review enhanced the initial effort; instructor feedback was constantly offered. If you received a bad grade or wanted a higher one, my prof allowed you to do it over* (Student 01-02)

- *Could meet one on one with instructor; certain class times were scheduled to talk with her and get feedback on how to improve* (Student 01-04).

- *She would make us turn a new rough draft in every week, giving us constant feedback* (Student 01-09).

- *Teacher helped with every portion of the paper. She helped us find credible resources. She provided office hours before and after class and informed us of the writing center* (Student 02-11).

- *Our paper involved a lot of peer editing—each person in our group answered helpful questions about it* (Student 01-15).

- *Peer editing was cool because I got to see other writing styles and it helped shape me as a writer* (Student 01-10).

Concurring with my study's results that both teacher and peer response is important to the

development of student writing, Penny Kittle points out "writers grow with regular response to

their work and the work of other writers." In her book *Write Beside Them,* Kittle further argues

"students need time to respond to each other about ideas" (85). And relating to this conversation,

Kenneth Bruffee urges us in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* to consider how our course design allows for students to learn to converse with each other about writing as writers do (73).

Schlechty maintains that affirmation of performance occurs when people who are significant in the lives of students observe, participate in and benefit from their performances, as well as the products of their performances (194). Such affirmation happens throughout a typical school year in K-12 through concerts, plays, beautiful school-wide displays of student work, and other events such as open house and author teas, which showcase student work. Because college composition classes don't offer the luxury of time, I originally conjectured that first year composition teachers would provide the only source of affirmation for students through feedback on student writing. And undeniably, Nancy Sommers' longitudinal study at Harvard revealed affirmation of student writing is vital in moving FYC students forward and motivates them to work harder. And just as important, her research showed that when teachers affirmed students by treating them as apprentice scholars, the young writers got the message that, yes, they belonged in college (251).

My limited study confirmed that teachers were crucial in affirming student performance, but the instructor was not the only source of affirmation. In addition to their teachers, student comments suggest they received affirmation through peer affiliation such as peer review and small group work, and also in talking about their work to classmates either formally or informally. Presenting their research affords them an "expert" status in the eyes of their peers— and professor. Following are a few comments relating to learner engagement when students are allowed to discuss their research in class:

- *We "got" to present our visual to the class and explain our process* (Student 02-03).

- *The different pictures and graphs I used in PP presentation caught the attention of my peers. The PP let me show how proud I was of my project.* (Student 02-01).

- *Great experience presenting my film review to peers and we got the teacher's evaluation immediately after* (Student 02-02).

- *It was interesting to hear opinions and feedback from other students* (Student 01-13).

- *We presented our thesis and main ideas in class and answered questions* (Student 01-01).

- *We shared our ideas about everyone's project and where they were taking it.* (Student 01-02).

- *We sent the final intro to the organizations and one actually ended up using ours* (Student 02-07).

It appears clear from such comments that the value in allowing students to discuss their work with peers, either informally or formally, is worth the class time it takes. Schlechty maintains in *Engaging Students* that learners need to believe their involvement counts for something and want to have this involvement affirmed (91). Schlechty urges teachers to "regularly involve students in creating products that other students will use, read, or otherwise take into account" and to "design the work students do so that each student feels that what he or she is doing is of value to others as well as to himself or herself " (194).

Other Categories: Content and Substance; Clear and Compelling Standards; Organization of Knowledge

Schlechty's stance is that the first four qualities of his conceptual framework are required design elements of engaging work. Here they are again:

> **Content and Substance.** The content involved is that which teachers, administrators, and the community agree is important. It is consistent with expectations and official benchmarks established by state and local standards as worth knowing and mastering.

Organization of Knowledge. Do students have the skills in place to do the assigned work? Has proper scaffolding taken place? Have teachers collaborated to ensure the methods used to present new learning are organized in ways that appeal to the largest number of students?

Clear and Compelling Product Standards. Students are more likely to engage and persist with work when they understand the standards by which the product will be judged. Students see value in the work.

Product Focus. The work students are assigned to do and the activities they undertake are linked to a product, performance, or exhibition that is meaningful to them.

Product focus was considered in my analysis from the beginning because the end products FYC students cited in their descriptions of engaging work were of significance to this research. I had not expected, however, that the other three "required" qualities would be a factor. After all, how often do students at the K-12 think about how their teacher organized her lessons, or how well they understood the evaluative aspects of the assignment? Children do sometimes mention they prefer "challenging" work, which relates to content and standards, but the other two qualities had never held sway in the qualitative data from the K-12 research.

Again, I was wrong. *Content and Substance, Organization of Knowledge,* and *Clear and Compelling Product Standards* all emerged as important in the qualitative data collected in this FYC study. Six out of thirty students (20%) cited both *Substance and Content* and *Organization of Knowledge* as influences in their most engaging assignments. Two students (.067%) described the elements comprising the *Clear and Compelling Standards* category.

What's even more interesting is that no question on the survey alluded to any of these qualities, yet they appeared anyway. I had to ponder why. The answer may lie in the adult education work of Malcolm Knowles.

Knowles, an American educator who pioneered a theory and model of adult learning beginning in the 1970s, defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Pappas). *Andragogy*, analogous to the term *pedagogy* which refers to learning in childhood, designates the methods and techniques used to teach adults. Knowles' basic assumptions of adult learning may offer an explanation for the difference, because as learners mature, so do their learning orientations:

- As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

- As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

  As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.

- As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal.

It's logical to assume that students entering college are moving toward this adult learner model. They are more ready and willing to take charge of their own learning than their younger counterparts at the K-12 level. Because the motivation to learn becomes more intrinsic for adult learners, they are more likely to bring a critical eye to the rationale and organizational design of learning activities Also the maturity they've reached affords them the ability to evaluate an assignment in terms of the organization of knowledge, content and standards, and clear and compelling guidelines.

A Concluding Comment

The discussion in this chapter compared and contrasted my survey results with the rationale behind the WOW framework. Although some differences were noted, clear connections

emerged between the framework and the work students describe as engaging. Schlechty is quick to point out that the WOW framework is not a formula, but rather a heuristic device that provides suggestions for teachers interesting in engaging more students more of the time (95). In other words, it's a tool that serves as a means to an end.

The following and concluding chapter, "Engaging Our Students," highlights the findings most relevant to First Year Composition and suggests dimensions of Schlechty's design qualities which appear worthy of further consideration and investigation.

Chapter Five: Engaging Our Students

Making a Difference

Engaging students may be one of the biggest hurdles composition teachers face in the 21st century because student disengagement with writing often starts well before students reach college classrooms. As qualitative research on learner engagement shows, middle and high school students typically don't cite reading, math, or writing activities as engaging. Both sexes prefer hands-on science such as dissecting a frog, watching mold grow, and acting out the parts of a cell. They like performing skits, making videos, and role-playing. In Wasserstein's qualitative survey of 200 middle school students, only eight percent cited a writing activity as their most memorable work. They were engaged in writing letters to a sports hero or another important person because they received an answer back. Other students who loved writing said they'd received special recognition for it or were in the gifted program (41). In Bowen's collegial study at North Forsyth Middle School, a few students reported writing as engaging: one participant enjoyed writing a letter to an overseas soldier and another described writing a children's book and then reading it to kindergarteners (Bowen et al.). It's obvious that the design qualities of *affiliation*, *choice*, *authenticity, affirmation, product focus,* and *novelty* and *variety* were built into these writing tasks.

In addition to Wasserstein and Bowen's data about the lack of students who find writing engaging, an additional challenge in engaging learners develops when we consider new research regarding the current generation of students, often referred to as millennials. In a study that examines teaching and learning for the current generation of students, psychology professor Christy Price points out "millennials have grown up in an era in which they were constantly engaged. When they are not interested, their attention quickly shifts elsewhere" (5). In light of

this new information, it becomes even more evident that FYC teachers must deliberately plan engaging content to reach learners. We must use all the resources in our toolkit to engage our students in writing.

Engagement is integrally related to effort; engaged students invest in their work and persist until they accomplish a satisfactory result (Schlechty 23-24). In his book, *Drive*: *The Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink cites several studies that say when students are involved in work that has personal meaning for them, they are more likely to internalize, retain, and use it in other contexts. If students don't see meaningful connections between the classroom and their world, they engage only at the strategic level: meet the requirements to earn the credit. Pink uses a personal experience with writing to highlight the limitations extrinsic motivation place on learning. He said when he wrote a paper for a class, he wrote it neatly, on time, and for a grade. On the other hand, when he wrote for the school newspaper, he experienced a mind shift. Because his audience consisted of his peers, he was internally motivated to improve his writing (Rose).

Another challenge I've observed in my 1101 classes is students who come to class with the preconceived notion that they aren't strong writers. From reflective essays about their writing process to anonymous notecard responses, a significant number are quick to announce that writing is not their strong suit – or they feel they can't be of help to anyone through peer review. It simply is not true. Where do these preconceived ideas come from? Using the WOW framework in course design helps create a class environment that can improve student attitudes about writing. Humans are driven by a need to achieve competence, and our beliefs about our ability to perform certain tasks influence future learning. When learners get caught in a web of failure, motivation is hard to sustain (Anderman and Midgley 2). But when learners experience

success with an assignment, it motivates them to take risks and expend more effort with future assignments (Voke).

In "Authentic Writing and the Impact it has on Student Motivation" Jennifer Bliss surmises, "Creating positive attitudes towards writing can help improve students' writing skills. Motivation has been shown to increase when students participate in fun and interesting writing, writing that relates to their own lives, and that gives them choice" (26). Recalling Student 02-04's poignant survey response confirms Bliss's assertion and also illustrates a profound change in his beliefs about writing:

> My favorite assignment was one I wrote about the brilliant basketball mind of Shane Battier. His dedication to the stats was amazing. I have never been a big writer. I am a physics student and an athlete. This topic allowed me to write about something that I could relate to and something I loved. Although I normally have a hard time getting into a paper, having a topic that was more geared for me with the way I think made this one of my favorite assignments. It made me realize that I do enjoy writing if it is about something I love.

Findings and Discussion

Choice

It comes as no surprise that *choice* quickly rose to the top in student surveys as an engagement factor. For the middle class population in America, the power to make choices in one's daily life is crucial to an individual's identity, according to psychologist Hazel Rose Markus speaking on choice at the American Psychological Association's Annual Convention in 2010 (reported by Dingfelder 40). It stands to reason then that students are more likely to invest

in work in which they have some choice over the learning. Constructivists have long held that students who have a degree of control over learning are more engaged students. And while Schlechty argues in *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse* that "considerable choice" should be allowed as to what students do in order to learn what is intended that they learn (125), Anderman and Midgley note "even small opportunities for choice, such as whether to work with a partner or independently," give students a sense of self-direction (3).

During my research, I was struck by the frequency of particular words students used in their discourse about the value of choice. *Excited*, *enjoyable*, *in control*, *freedom, creative*, *fun* and *interested* popped up time and again. Likewise, Schlechty repeats some of the same terms when discussing choice: "The power of choice is that it increases the *control* the student has over the work Choice is linked to *control* and power…." Having some degree of control, or choice, helps satisfy the drive for autonomy. Pink contends that having control leads to autonomy, and autonomy is a factor in intrinsic motivation. While student descriptions involved many forms of the word *enjoy*, Schlechty refers to the word's root when he proposes "Work should bring *joy* along with the exhilaration that accompanies getting better… at something that is important" (89). Because a number of students mentioned that elements of *creativity* were at work in their assignments allowing for choice, I searched Schlechty's work for the term. He presents *creativity* as an intrinsically motivating reward for students that influences performance, problem solving, and productivity (44).

My survey responses—and Schlechty's words—echo the terms of another pioneer in school reform. William Glasser, creator of The Quality School, was an American psychiatrist who developed reality therapy and choice theory, which basically says that all people have four psychological needs: a *sense of belonging*, *freedom*, *power*, and *fun.* A primary way both

students and adults meet the psychological needs for power and freedom is through making choices. The sense of power that results from having choices leads to a feeling of control, which in turn leads to autonomy and finally, to intrinsic motivation—or engagement.

Authenticity

Authenticity proved a fundamentaly important design quality of work that engages students. In my study, ninety-seven percent of survey respondents spoke to this fact; in fact, authenticity was a leading contender in engagement qualities based on survey results. Schlechty has long maintained that work must have meaning and significance in the lives of students to be engaging (196). But the connection cannot be superficial, urges Strong, Silver, and Robinson (10-11). It must involve an idea that is both manageable and unresolved. The concern for authentic learning is not new. As early as 1954, Walker Percy, prominent American writer, refers to the lack of authentic learning as a "fatal gap between the student's learning and the student's life" (57).

Composition scholars Wade Dorman and Susann Fox Dorman, proponents for service-learning in writing classes, argue that unless students see relevant connections between learning and life, they won't store the learning long term, but only until they earn credit for the class (119), which is common in students at the strategic level of engagement.

According to the impassioned descriptions about engaging writing assignments offered by thirty KSU students, authentic learning is occurring in FYC. Illuminating phrases include *memorable, interesting, learned new facts, appreciation, respect, genuine, use those skills for the rest of my life, enjoyable, affected me directly, hit close to home, fun, something I'd never thought about before, something I relate to, something I love, close to my heart, real-world*

connection, changed my outlook, relevant, and *rewarding.* Obviously, based on survey comments, incorporating authentic learning in FYC increases student motivation by creating opportunities for students to participate in writing activities that have meaning to their lives.

Novelty and Variety

At first glance, novelty and variety did not emerge as important elements in engaging writing assignments, garnering less attention than any of the other qualities considered. In fact, only nine students cited assignments other than the research paper. But once we bear in mind that the research paper dominates FYC at KSU, novelty and variety does appear to play a more significant role. What's more, in addition to the nine assignments cited other than a research project, three additional students described a novel aspect of their research paper. But still a question lingers about other design qualities which may have influenced the citing of these novel assignments. *Affirmation of performance, protection, affiliation* and *choice* were all incorporated, according to student descriptions. Based on Schlechty's assertion that incorporating multiple design qualities into a learning activity increases student engagement, as well as my classroom experience, I suspect it was the combination of design qualities that hooked students rather than novelty itself.

Interestingly, it was not evident in my limited survey that students were passionate about writing with technology, although it was obvious that technology was often used. Again, more than likely it was the synthesis of other design qualities with technology that engaged learners. During my first semester in English 1101 as the instructor of record, I assumed my students would find it cool to peer review digitally. After all, they are a generation who has grown up with digital writing. And it would save them printing costs, along with stroking my ego that I

was being kind to the environment. At the end of my second semester as the teacher of record, I had them respond to a prompt in a reflective writing about peer review. It turns out that many do strongly prefer digital peer review, while a few quibbled and said they were fine with either, but if given a choice they'd choose paper. The remaining group adamantly preferred reviewing a hard copy. By my third semester, I wised up and stopped assuming. After the first peer review (digital so they could experience the process), I asked my two sections of 1101 for anonymous feedback about our peer review. Twenty-three out of 48 students (48%) said they prefer digital over paper; nineteen out of forty-eight (39.5%) prefer hard copies, and six out of forty-eight (12.5%) didn't have a preference. Needless to say, the student writers will have a choice of digital or paper review in the future.

Price's research about the learning process of the current generation of students strongly supports the importance of variety in teaching methods. In her work analyzing student responses about the "ideal learning environment" (4), the most consistent theme was that they want a "variety of teaching methods as opposed to a 'lecture only' format" (5). Price points out that students don't necessarily dislike lecture, but they do hate the sameness, the boredom of lecture only. She also found students prefer a multimedia format which includes podcasts, on-line activities, YouTube, and Power Points.

The hard work of writing can become tedious after time due to the amount of practice and revision involved. Blending in novelty and variety in the form of teaching games or by having students write summaries or use paraphrasing to introduce peers as "mock panel members" will add some variety and fun. So will asking students to do something novel like trying a new cuisine and writing about the experience in a cultural enlightenment paper (Student 01-11), or to

closely observe a group of people at an event and write an argument about their behavior (Student 02-09).

<center>*Affiliation*</center>

Although the terminology differed, affiliation with others emerged as a consistent theme of engaging work in FYC. Ninety-eight percent (28 out of 30) of students surveyed recognized the importance of some type of affiliation, whether it was through peer review, instructor feedback, or some other form of collaborative learning. Schlechty describes group work, or affiliation, as the opportunity to work with others on problems, issues, products, performances, and exhibitions that are valued by them and others. When educational psychologists Martin Dowson and Dennis McInerney studied affiliation and its relationship to student engagement, they discovered students' orientation to affiliation was associated with the desire for a sense of belonging or solidarity with a group. One of the surveyed students in the Dowson and McInerney's study said, "Well, you try real hard to keep up or else you won't feel really good in the group" (38). Another simply said, "I feel smarter when I'm working with other people" (38).

Scholarship has long supported collaborative learning. John Dewey, for instance, referred to it in his experiential learning model as early as 1916, but it was the 1970s when collaboration gained traction in college writing. When college professors became concerned about the number of students having trouble transitioning to writing at the college level during the era of "open admission" in the 70's, Kenneth Bruffee wrote the first peer-tutoring handbook, *A Short Course in Writing*. Through the years, Bruffee expanded his work in the area of collaboration based on the idea that when people collaborate, they talk to share their ideas. As he explains in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" the more people converse, the

more they sharpen their thinking skills. Similarly, writing and talking are interlinked. When people write, they are putting their thoughts on paper. If thought is simply conversation internalized, then writing is putting that conversation to paper (88). Andrea Lunsford is another advocate for collaboration in writing classes. She claims it offers several benefits, including transfer and assimilation of knowledge, sharper thinking, and engages students through active learning (38-39). John Bean devotes an entire chapter of *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* to using collaborative learning to integrate critical thinking, talking, and writing as a tool to help students produce arguments (183-201).

Protection: *A Safe Environment*

When survey participants described their most engaging writing experience, eighty percent suggested that protection from adverse consequences for initial failure was in place. Protection, however, did not emerge in question one when students spontaneously described their most memorable or engaging assignment as choice and authenticity did, but rather in the follow-up questions about group work and teacher feedback.

2. If the assignment you described above included group work (small groups or pairs), describe the type of group activity.

4. How and when was instructor feedback offered during the writing experience you described? What allowances, if any, were made for revision (do-overs) if any component of the assignment failed to meet instructor expectations?

The population for my study came from English 2110 students, which indicates participants had achieved success in both English 1101 and English 1102. Perhaps the protection factor and a safe environment were not as key for them as they might have been for students who were not initially successful in FYC. But even when considering this idea, it is nevertheless compelling that many of the respondents suggested that the affiliation component they enjoyed with peers and their instructor offered them a measure of protection.

A body of research illustrates that a caring and supportive learning environment is essential to student engagement. Schlechty believes a safe learning environment and protection from adverse consequences are interchangeable. Teachers must establish a culture of trust in order to fully engage students. Success is expected, and making mistakes is a natural part of learning (59-60). Reflective teaching and learning result in ongoing assessment where revisions and refinements lead to additional learning. Robert Marzano, author of *A Different Kind of Classroom,* contends that teachers who create a positive affect in the classroom—humor, joy, and fun—enhance student engagement (23), and Glasser's quality classroom model emphasizes a learning environment that is warm and supportive (28). Current research in higher education supports a caring and supportive environment. Because millennials are relational, Price argues they appreciate professors who show an interest in them and seem more willing to pursue learning when teachers connect with them on a personal level (5).

Studies with basic writers—those students who enter college underprepared to write— reveal that mutual trust and care is a dominant aspect in the successful basic writing classroom. Consider the words of poet Adrienne Rich who went through a personal transformation while teaching basic writing during the height of college open admissions at CUNY, "For young adults trying to write seriously for the first time in their lives, the question 'Whom can I trust?' must be

an underlying boundary to be crossed before real writing can occur" (10). Rich also pointed out "a fundamental belief in the student is more important than anything else" (11). Leonard Kriegel on the CUNY English faculty both before and during open admissions, arrived at the conclusion that mutual trust was necessary when working with basic writers (qtd. in Min-zhan Lu 146-147). And finally, the succinct words of Jerrie Cobb-Scott nicely sums up the importance of establishing a relationship with students: "…very simply, students don't care what we know unless they know we care" (212).

Whether teaching first year composition or first grade, a teacher who is caring will provide an environment for students that is comfortable and ideal for productive learning while offering positive support to students. Such an environment will create a bridge of mutual trust that helps engage students with their work.

Affirmation

Seventy-seven percent (23 out of 30) of students surveyed indicated that affirmation of their performance was important to them. Students reported feelings of affirmation when given the opportunity to present their work. It did not seem to matter whether they simply talked informally about their research to peers or created a more structured presentation with visuals. One semester I had my students in English 1101 create a digital visual argument. Most enjoyed the assignment, which included a reflective essay about their own work and a letter to a peer critiquing his or her visual based on the assignment guidelines. I assumed that presenting their work to two peers as a team of three would be affirmation enough for them, but I was wrong. A few students expressed an interest in seeing everyone's argument. Deciding I couldn't take class time for this, I reminded them they had access to all of the visuals through the discussion board. I don't think many—if any—took advantage of this "opportunity" on their own time. I think

students, proud of their work, wanted a larger audience, and I was probably remiss in not

allowing it. It would also have been a great way to increase classroom community as Student

01-06 illustrated when she said of her creative interpretation of her work, "It was interesting to

see classmates' creative interpretations because it not only helped me understand their research

but also their personalities." Another student surveyed said of her presentation, "the different

pictures and graphs I used in my power point really caught the attention of my peers. It was a

huge support in showing how proud I was about my topic (Student 02-01).

According to Bobbie Starnes, author of *The Foxfire Approach to Teaching and*

Learning: John Dewey, Experiential Learning, and the Core Practices, one of the core practices

of the nationally acclaimed Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning, is giving students an

"audience beyond the teacher" to affirm that the work is important and worth doing (4).

Students, argue Schlechty, like to feel their involvement counts for something (91). Discussing

their research in class or small groups affirms its significance and importance. Yet, activities that

involve writing for an audience in addition to the teacher should in no way downplay the

importance of affirming students as writers through the partnership that can result from teacher

feedback. As Nancy Sommers points out in "Across the Drafts," affirming student writers

through praise tells them they belong in college, and they "are not the admissions committee's

one mistake. Such messages are vitally important to propel first year students forward with their

writing and to inspire them to work harder" (251).

The English 1102 instructor I shadowed as part of my TA training beautifully used an

affirmation of performance activity to engage students. Individually, the students designed a

Wiki Page showcasing their research project. Following the presentation of their research to the

class, small groups formed a panel to answer questions from classmates. In conducting research,

we usually glean an excess of information not used in the final research project. The students

fielded questions from peers and instructors alike with confidence and pride. Being the "expert"

in the class on their topic certainly affirmed their hard work.

Implications

Based on a literature review and through surveying KSU students who have completed

first year composition, I now agree that Schlechty's WOW framework can serve as a tool to

maximize student engagement. Researchers agree that not only do engaged students enjoy

learning for the sake of learning, but they also learn at higher levels and remember more than

students who are not engaged. Student surveys indicate *choice, authenticity, affiliation,* and

novelty and variety are design qualities that play an essential role in engaging them. It's simple

to add choice and authenticity to writing assignments. Student responses reveal even if they

don't have total control of their topic, they appreciate even a minimum amount of choice. FYC

teachers may have to work a little harder to incorporate novelty and variety and to take full

advantage of using affiliation to engage students, but the literature and my research show doing

so is not only possible, but that students will more likely engage with our assignments. Another

implication of the research is that affiliation is linked to the design qualities of protection and

affirmation.

After considering the work of Bean, Lunsford, and Bruffee, I have to wonder if we're

taking full advantage of affiliation, or collaboration, in FYC. Sure, peer review and teacher

feedback are extremely helpful and linked to the *protection from adverse consequences* and

affirmation of performance qualities, but a more deliberate approach might allow instructors to

take advantage of the critical thinking and learning that can occur during collaborative learning.

Another model worth exploring is service learning. Many composition teachers extol the benefits

of integrating service leaning with composition because it helps students bridge the gulf between writing in isolation and writing in the real world (Dorman and Dorman); leads to higher quality writing (Bacon); and engages students civically (Addler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters). And according to Nora Bacon, the trend to merge service learning and composition is so beneficial that some textbooks include chapters about service learning, and the yearly Conference on College Composition and Communication features several presentations about writing in the community (Bacon). I also found a number of books on Amazon dedicated to service learning writing, and the field has had its own online journal, *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* for a number of years.

Initially, I thought affiliating with others outside the college setting would prove difficult because of the logistics involved. However, it is not an impossible task as the success with service learning in college composition shows, and with the interconnectedness we now enjoy with others through technology. I recall the student (02-07) in the survey who cited, out of all the assignments and activities he carried out in English 1101 and 1102, the task of rewriting the introduction to a company's website as most memorable and engaging. Furthermore, perhaps collaborative learning deserves a larger role in college writing because of the deep learning that can occur as shown by Bean, Lunsford, and Bruffee.

My research piqued my curiosity regarding the effect student attitudes toward writing had on their engagement level and why choice isn't offered more in FYC course design. Of the total sample of forty-eight students, three respondents claimed total disengagement with their FYC courses. It was obvious the three entered the classroom with the ingrained attitude that writing stinks, and they left feeling the same way. Although one student agreed that he was "satisfied that my writing skill was improved at least" he avoids writing as much as possible because he

hates it. Keeping in mind that Schlechty claims students cycle through the continuum of engagement throughout a work assignment, these three students more than likely moved through retreatism to ritual compliance during their FYC classes because they did, after all, earn credit for the courses.

It would be interesting to conduct a survey of existing attitudes toward writing when students enter English 1101 and then have an open class dialogue about the results. Another idea is to provide an overview of the WOW framework's design qualities and ask students to think about the engagement effect of each. Through discussion, much could be learned about what makes a writing assignment authentic for FYC students. During interviews with students from across the country, Schlechty had a student say: "Until my teacher started asking me questions about my engagement, I didn't even know I was supposed to be engaged. Now I try to help my teacher create more engaging work for all of us" (38). Based on student focus groups, Schlechty discovered that teachers have the power to change student attitudes toward work by simply asking them about it. An improved relationship with their teacher was often an added bonus (38). With Schlechty's discovery, a post survey to follow up the pre-survey would be interesting to note if attitudes changed after a semester of involving students in discussions about engaging work and designing assignments.

I also have to wonder why more teachers don't allow for some element of choice in work assigned to students. Although 90% of students reported choice as a factor in their most meaningful work, this percentage includes not only students who had a choice in topic, but also students who cited any small choice allowed. For example, one assignment described was an essay about the opportunities young adults have in America in terms of education compared to other countries. Besides proving authentic for this student, the writing assignment offered him

choice in which other countries he researched (Student 01-03). And the student who had to write a paper about an assigned novel said the essay requirements were broad enough to allow a choice in themes to argue: "I think it is important to have a few choices of how to approach the essay so the student doesn't feel like there is a right or wrong answer" (Student 02-12).

Sometimes it's the unsolicited information that materializes from qualitative research that is the most telling. The fact that some students found having a choice in topic riveting clues us in that choice in topic in not necessarily the rule. For example, student 02-05 stated "I actually was able to write about something I found relevant rather than writing about an assigned conventional topic that they always assign (ex. Hamlet)." And a student citing a paper he wrote in 1102 about a significant object in his life as most engaging added this: "In 1101 and 2110 not much freedom is given, same old topic and super specific format. 1102 made writing a bit more enjoyable instead of complete torture" (Student 02-10). Student 01-05 voiced strong opinions, not only about choice in topic, but also about restrictive guidelines: "…it was one of the few assignments we were able to work on where there was not finite and set guidelines for every line in the paper." Results from this study reveal that students appreciate an element of choice and are more likely to engage with the assignment when choice is a factor.

Conclusion

Listening to students can teach us much about what it takes to engage them and help foster positive attitudes about writing. Motivation increases when students have choices and participate in writing relevant and meaningful to their own lives. By attending to the qualities of the work they design for students, first year composition teachers have the power to increase the probability that more students will be engaged and for more of the time. Quality work design

based on the WOW framework will increase the effort students invest in their work, which will improve learning. Schlechty is careful to acknowledge that "variance in learning outcomes that are attributable to the abilities students bring with them to school are beyond the control of teachers" (56), but he also contends "effort is at least as important as native ability as an explanation for variance in learning outcomes" (56). FYC teachers can increase student effort by incorporating engaging design qualities in the work given to students because engagement leads to intrinsic motivation—a determining factor in the amount of effort expended.

A logical approach for first year composition teachers, especially those new to the field, is to design work for students that rests solidly on the foundation of the WOW framework. The framework is a tool that focuses attention on engaging work qualities. Students are more likely to expend the effort necessary to accomplish the learning tasks and will learn at deeper levels when engaged with their work,

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Appendix A (Research Consent Form)

You are invited to participate in a graduate research study on the correlation between student engagement and quality work design. The proposed benefit of this study is to discover which work design qualities most engage first year writers.
Data collected for this study will be obtained by anonymously surveying students in English 2110 classes about engaging and meaningful work assignments in first year composition (FYC) classes. The five-question open-ended survey will take between 10-15 minutes to complete.

Participation is voluntary, and there is no consequence if you do not wish to participate. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate. Confidentiality is your right with any such study, and you have the right to opt out of the study at any time without consequence. If you have questions or comments about the study, please contact: Candi Deal (cdeal7@kennesaw.edu), Dr. Beth Daniell (bdaniell@kennesaw.edu), or Dr. Letizia Guglielmo (lgugliel@kennesaw.edu).

☐   I am at least 18 years of age and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date: _____

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (678) 797-2268.

Appendix B (The Survey)

1. Describe with as much detail as possible your most meaningful or engaging writing experience in First Year Composition (English 1101, English 1102), and tell what made the experience particularly meaningful and engaging.

2. If the assignment you described above included group work (small groups or pairs), describe the type of group activity.

3. Describe the role that choice played, if any, in the assignment (topic, presentation mode, etc.).

4. How and when was instructor feedback offered during the writing experience you described? What allowances, if any, were made for revision (do-overs) if any component of the assignment failed to meet instructor expectations?

5. Other than through peer review, did you have the opportunity to present or discuss your work for this particular assignment to peers in either a formal or informal way? If so, describe how.