



Design Thinking and the Wicked Problem of Teaching Writing

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Abstract

In this article I explore how the tenets of design thinking as described by Richard Buchanan, Nigel Cross, Lucy Kimbell, Tim Brown and others might be applied to writing instruction. I argue that design thinking, a human-centered approach to designing innovative solutions in response to wicked problems, can help close the gap between writing inside and outside of school and prepare students to participate in a future of writing. More specifically, I recommend that we apply design thinking to writing classes by 1) teaching writing as a design process, 2) creating wicked writing assignments, 3) encouraging writing in teams, and 4) fostering experimentation through prototyping.

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“Literacy teaching is not about skills and competence; it is aimed at creating a kind of person, an active designer of meaning, with a sensibility open to differences, change, and innovation.” Bill Cope & Mary Kalantzis, *“Multiliteracies”: New Literacies, New Learning*

“Above all, think of life as a prototype.” Tim Brown, *Change by Design*

As a writing teacher, I find myself in a challenging position. On the one hand, given the complexity—and power—of our current communication resources, I’m convinced that students need writing instruction now more than ever. At the same time, I wonder whether teaching academic writing is a dying—or already dead—enterprise. More specifically, I’ve come to believe that the field’s dominant approach to teaching composition, as codified in documents like the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition ([Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2008](#)), is in need of dramatic change if we want writing to be important in students’ lives long-term. As Kathleen Yancey (2004) remarked in her CCCC address, which has become a call-to-action for many of us, “Never before has the proliferation of writing outside the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside” (p. 298).

Recently, our professional leadership has taken steps to update and broaden our understanding of the kinds of composition that should be taking place inside our classrooms. In January 2011, a coalition of NCTE, CWPA, and NPW members published “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” a statement that described “the experiences, knowledge, and habits of mind that students need to succeed as they begin the first year of college writing” ([O’Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, & Hall, 2012](#), p. 520). As the Framework authors explained, this statement is intended to

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counter the narrow view of writing expressed in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts, which as of Fall 2013 had been adopted by 45 states (O'Neill et al., 2012, p. 522). The purpose of the CCSS ([Common Core State Standards, 2012](#)) is to articulate standards that will ensure all students are career or college-ready. Toward that end, the CCSS writing standards focus primarily on argumentative and informational writing, with the exclusion of creative and expressive writing from the CCSS having come under particular scrutiny.¹ In contrast to the CCSS, the [Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing \(2011\)](#), while naming values traditionally associated with academic writing as represented in the 2008 WPA Outcomes Statement (rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; flexible writing processes; and knowledge of convention), also identifies eight “habits of mind” that potentially foster a wide variety of writing practices beyond the academic: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition (p. 527–29). Arguably, the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” thus represents its own kind of counterpoint between creativity and convention. Additionally, in 2012 the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) began revising the Outcomes Statement to better account for the increasing presence of multimodal composing in writing classes—evidence that boundaries between academic writing and writing done outside of school are perhaps becoming less distinct. But given that the need to prepare students to write for college is the reason there *is* a CWPA ([Rice, 2009](#); [Strickland, 2011](#)), it is not yet clear how far the CWPA will be willing to go in broadening its focus beyond academic writing. As a teacher concerned with my students’ ability to participate in a future of writing, I believe we need to question our complicity with this predominantly conservative educational mission. What students need to learn about writing is not just how to work within existing conventions but how to make them anew.

Toward that end, I want to consider how writing courses might be reimagined as opportunities for design thinking—a term popularized by practicing designers like Tim [Brown \(2009\)](#), CEO of the design firm IDEO. Design thinking refers specifically to a creative process engaged in by designers, which has been researched, theorized, and in some cases codified into an approach to problem solving applied to everything from designing a child’s toothbrush to improving how nurses handle the changing of shifts. In “Rethinking Design Thinking, Part I,” design researcher Lucy [Kimbell \(2011\)](#) characterized Brown’s version of design thinking in this way:

Design thinking and the designers who say they practice it are associated with having a human-centered approach to problem solving in contrast to being technology- or organization-centered. They are seen as having an iterative process that moves from generating insights about end users, to idea generation and testing, to implementation. Their visual artifacts and prototypes help multidisciplinary teams work together. They ask ‘what if?’ questions to imagine future scenarios rather than accepting the way things are done now. With their creative ways of solving problems, the argument goes, designers can turn their hands to nearly anything. (p. 287)

Many businesses and organizations have implemented design thinking in an effort to foster innovation and to counter an overreliance on traditional analytical approaches to problem-solving. But some in the design-business world, like Bruce [Nussbaum \(2011\)](#) of *Business Week*, have questioned the efficacy of design thinking as a “process trick” that promises to “produce change” but does not always deliver, pointing out that in attempting to package design thinking for use by businesses, “it was denuded of the mess, the conflict, failure, emotions, and looping circularity that is part and parcel of the creative process” (para. 7). Designer Donald [Norman \(2010\)](#) expressed similar reservations, calling design thinking “a useful myth,” because although the term has elevated the work of design to be more than the making of pretty things, what designers do is not unique or special. For [Norman \(2010\)](#), design thinking is just a term for what creative people have always done—“break the rules, go outside the existing paradigms, and think afresh” (para. 3). In “Rethinking Design Thinking” (2013), [Norman \(2013\)](#) reversed his position somewhat, acknowledging that although the activities associated with design thinking—deep immersion in a problem that results in empathy with others, ongoing experimentation and critique, and an emphasis on questioning—are practiced “by all great thinkers,” what sets design thinking apart is “an attempt to teach [design] as a systematic, practice-defining method of creative innovation.” In other words, design thinking is valuable as a means of teaching what is “intended to be the normal way of proceeding, not the exception” (para. 11).

¹ The widely circulated statement by Common Core architect David Coleman, “As you grow up in this world, you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think,” epitomized this rejection of writing for self expression. To view the presentation or transcript that includes this quote, see [New York State Education Department \(2014\)](#).

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