Written Assignments in History: Teacher Talk about Assignment Design Decisions

Graham Shaw (UBC) and Gloria Borrows (UFV)
Writing in the STEAM Fields Conference
University of Alberta
April 17, 2015

Research Activities

- Phase 1: collected syllabi and writing assignments and coded for features; reported findings to department
- Phase 2: convened focus group with participants from the History department to discuss data and get a sense of how to work with it further
- Phase 3: make use of the data and previous discussions to promote interdisciplinary conversations related to writing pedagogy in History (not as missionaries, but as co-creators of interdisciplinary knowledge [Kaufer & Young, 1993; as cited in Soliday, 2011])

Our Goals for Today

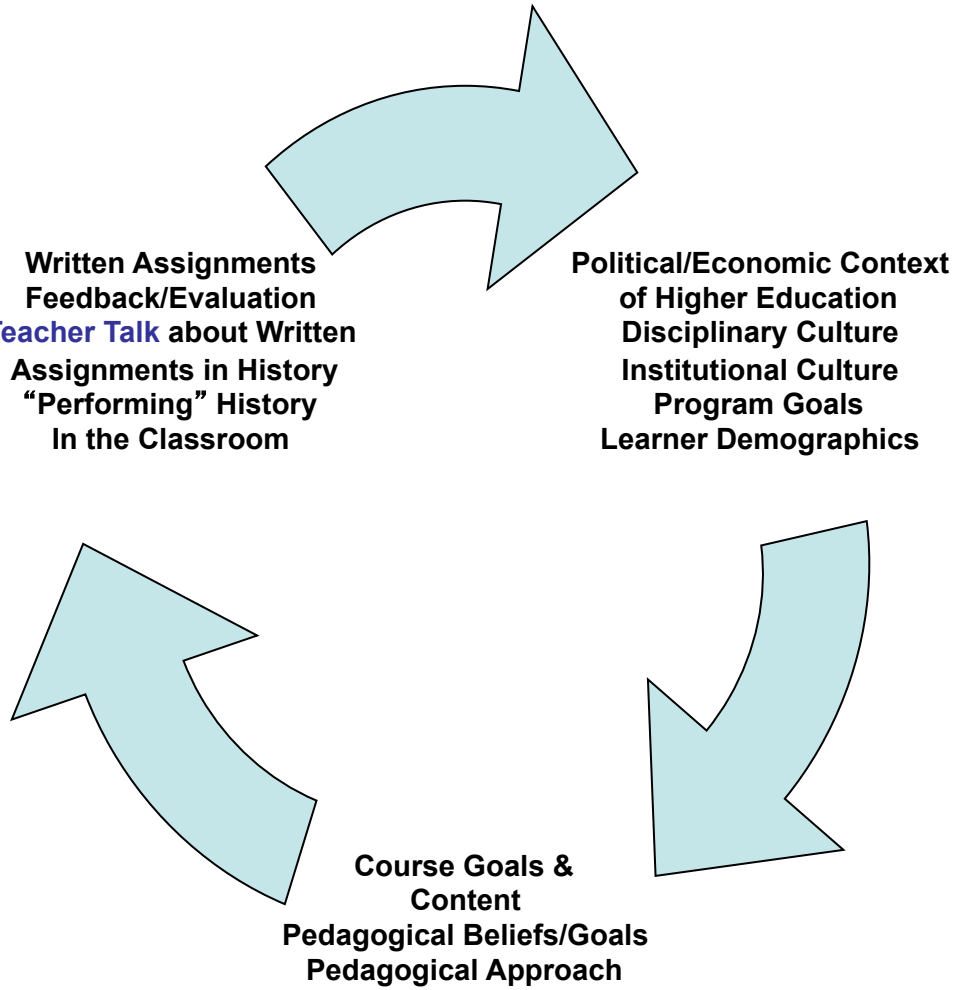
- Engage participants in considering how “teacher talk” reveals the complexity of assignment design decisions

- Two components

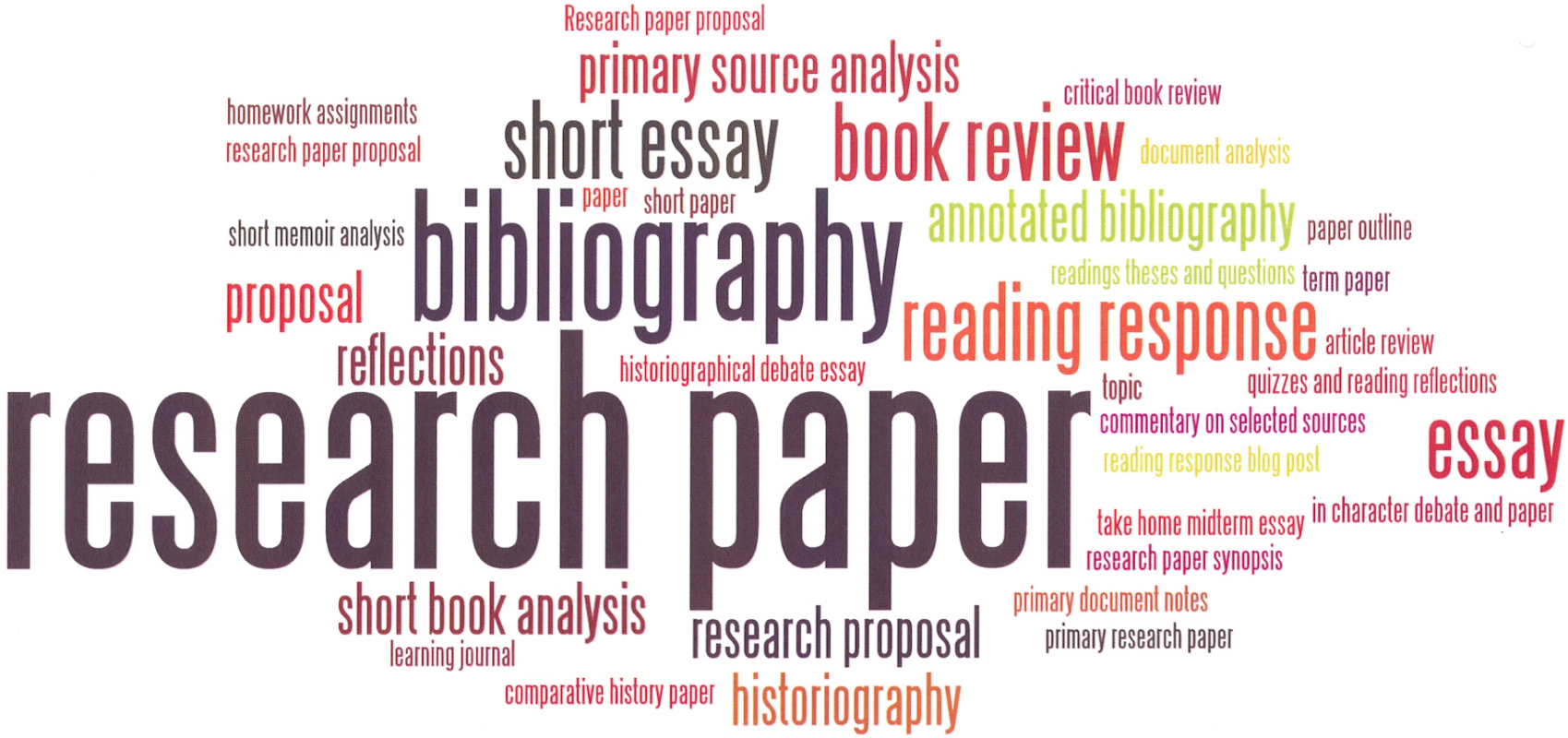
1. Stimulus material from data that we presented to faculty
2. Quotes from faculty discussion transcripts

Writing Assignments as Part of an Activity System

Charles Bazerman (2008), “Considering the activity system in addition to the genre system puts a focus on what people are doing and how texts help people do it, rather than on texts as ends in themselves” (“Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People”)



Overview of Data: Assignment Names
56 records: 36 names



Reflecting on genre consistency

“It’s not that like we have to agree on five assignment titles, and that’s it, that’s all that you possibly use, but there’s some things that might cue a student if a certain word is used on a regular basis like if I look at historiographic essays, historiography paper and historiographical debate essay, in my mind those are actually all probably the same thing because you can’t write a historiographical paper without accounting for a debate.”

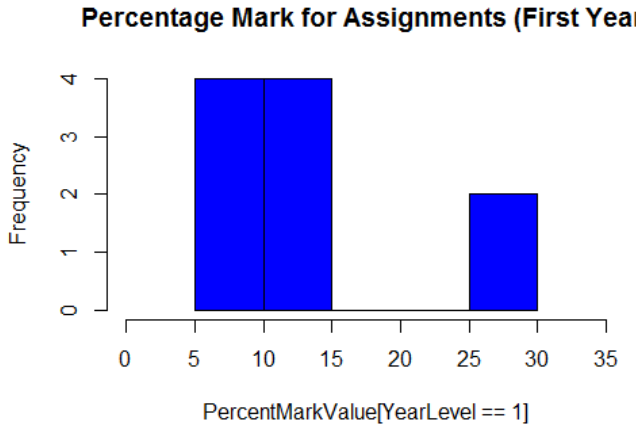
Considering change?

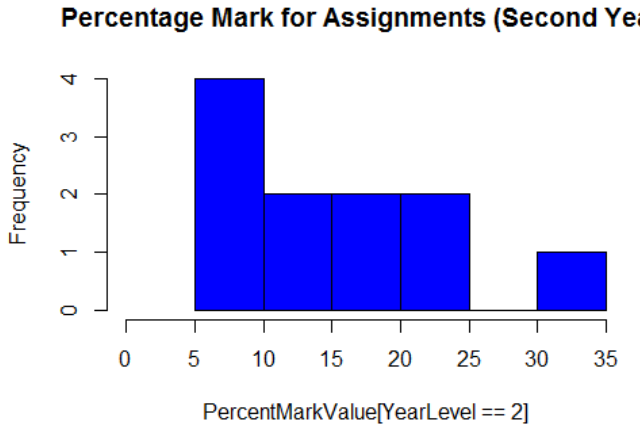
“it seems pretty evident that our nomenclature for assignments is a little varied and a little too varied… on the flip side though, flexibility is something that students are supposed to be educated in, so understanding that similar assignments might have slightly different names might not be the worst thing in the world”

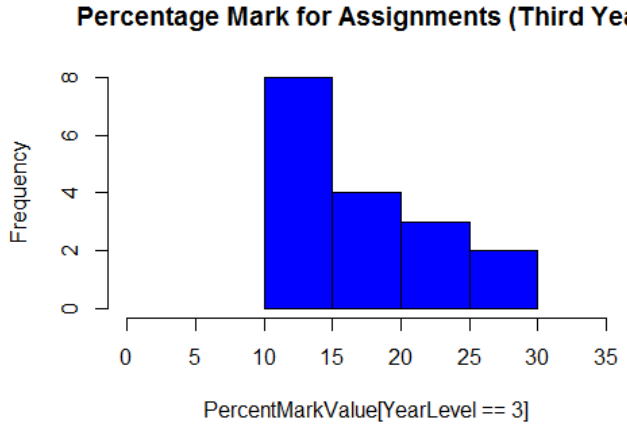
On valuing diversity

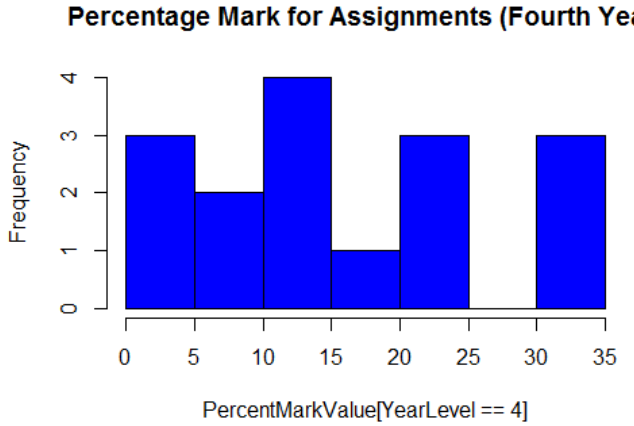
“There may be 36 different assignments. There might be, because we don’t know [from the names] what these mean. So for instance there is one there called critical book review and then there is one that’s there … called book review and those might be two very different things. They might not be the same…and they may not be the same from year to year.”

Use of low stakes writing:
Distributions of percentage marks per assignment by year









Reflecting on low stakes…

"…smaller stake ones that I make usually are like the building blocks, sort of annotated bibliographies, outlines and proposals that sort of thing. Um mostly because it provides me points along the trajectory …"

"if the training wheels idea is part of what we think is important with these low stakes assignments, then I'm kind of surprised that we don't do them at the lower level… like neither first or second year has anything less than 5 %."

Fourth Year

“I think they are also attempts to get students to do their reading in advance of seminars because there’s a lot of people have reading notes or, like I do, 5% weekly short pieces that the students write so I think that probably accounts for the 80% of fourth year because we want them to be prepared for seminars.”

The use of stated learning objectives is discussed in the education literature as a pedagogical process to clarify expectations and focus student attention on the purpose of the assignment. Similarly, specifying grading criteria can be seen as helping students to understand what is required. There was mixed evidence in the available data about the use of these practices with strong variation across year levels.

History Data	**Overall n=56**	**First Year n =10**	**Second Year n=11**	**Third year n=17**	**Fourth Year N=16**
Percentage of assignments with a learning goal specified	19.5%	0%	55%	29%	0%
Percentage of assignments that specify grading criteria in a rubric or statement	13%	0%	18%	6%	25%

On objectives and rubrics

“I actually think it is fundamentally unfair .. that students don’t know … that they are not told ahead of time in a clearly articulated way, Here’s what I’m looking for, here’s the purpose of the assignment and here’s how I’m going to evaluate it…. And I’m not saying that we all have to go to rubrics that have…… cause I, I am still on the fence about how I feel about that.”

On communicating objectives

“Well I don’t think any of us actually disagree with that [value of communicating objectives] I think the question is how do we deliver that information to the student?”

“I keep trying to explain and massage and kind of almost you know kind of …uh… write an essay about what a historiography is, which is of course the big mystery, and I wonder if… ah…. that’s exactly what’s happening, that I put too much in and they just tune completely out.”

“To me the value is only as a liability, like I protect myself from like any kind of complaint about lack of clarity.”

“a part of it for their sake, a part of it is also for my sake so that when I’m grading these things I don’t spend so…so much time repeating a lot of what I’ve said.”

On rubrics

“I have had experiences in the past when the student comes to me and says “why did I only get… like why did I get 3 out of four for this and 4 out of 4 for this and they become really, really focussed on those individual components as opposed to …and they don’t really grasp that it all does have to come together as a whole piece…”

“I want to leave a little bit of room for… because it is a subjective analysis of their quality of their paper… I wouldn’t want to be necessarily locked in to this is only how much this is going to be worth”

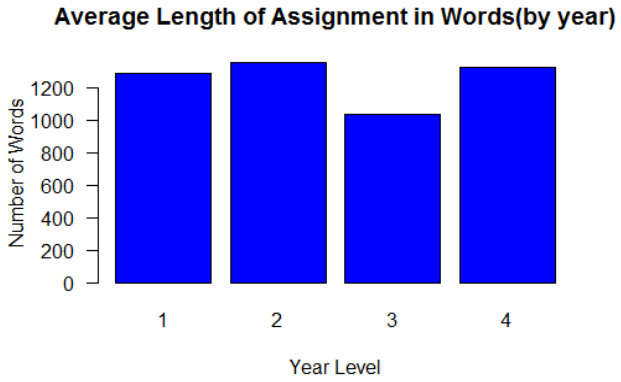
Data relating to the provision of formative feedback:

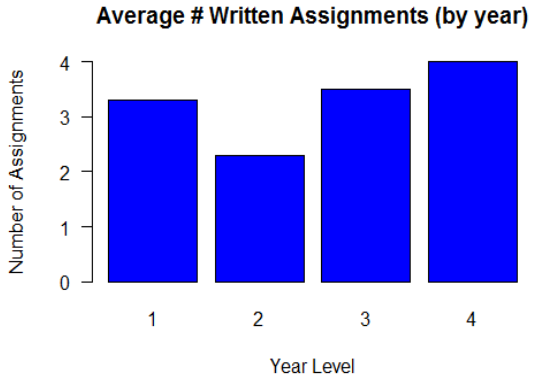
History Data	**Overall n=56**	**First Year =10**	**Second Year n=11**	**Third year n=17**	**Fourth Year n=16**
Percentage of assignments specifying that feedback is available on drafts prior to final submission	7%	0%	9%	0%	19%
Percentage of assignments that are "nested" so that grading feedback from one submission clearly informs the next	43%	50%	36%	41%	50%

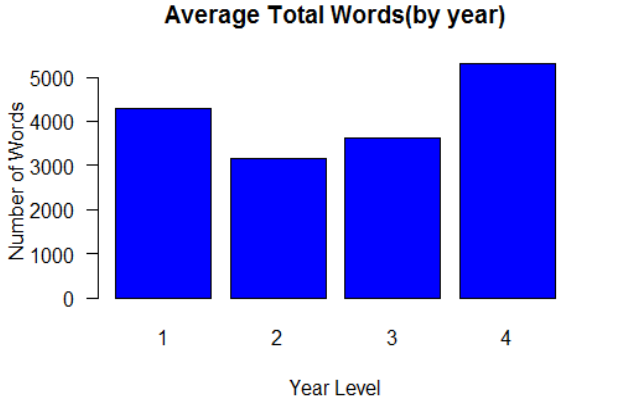
“I wish I could have every student submit a draft and I comment on it, I don’t have time for that. I do introductions thesis statements, outlines, conclusions, um, but I’ve added peer review to all my fourth year courses.”

“…if they bring you drafts and you were able to sit down with them, maybe using a writing centre sort of approach, to them, not shaping what they are writing but helping them come to those…. That would be great teaching. But I don’t … I just don’t know where the hours in the week would come from … to do that.”

How much writing are students asked to do in History?







Responses…

“This is one of the most fascinating slides… We have a content related difference between first and second year”

“There’s all of this length in first and second year and then we drop right off at the third year, and then length again at the fourth year.”

“Are we actually asking our students on average in first year to write more than 4000 words a semester? What the hell are you doing?" laughter follows...”

What questions does this raise and what questions would you like to see explored as the project progresses?

Constructive Alignment

From Trigwell and Prosser (2014):

"…qualitative variation in approach to teaching is related to variations in students' approach to learning. When teachers describe their approaches to teaching as having the intention to develop or change students' conceptions and and to question students' understanding…the students in their classes are more likely to report adopting deeper approaches to learning" (p. 144).

Some Possible Frameworks for Understanding "Teacher Talk"

- Meta-genre: "situated language about situated language" (Giltrow, 2002, p. 190).

- "The most conspicuous candidate for meta-genre are guidelines: a kind of pre-emptive feedback, guidelines are written regulations for the production of a genre, ruling out some kinds of expression, endorsing others" (Giltrow, 2002, p. 190).

- "Teacher Talk" – in the form of classroom discussion of writing assignments, written writing assignment guidelines, syllabi, grading criteria, written and verbal feedback on written assignments, performance in lectures of "doing" History – constitutes the meta-genre that surrounds genre sets in the discipline of History.

Discussion around the amount of writing

Are students avoiding history because they believe there is too much reading and writing?

Can history be effectively taught without extensive reading and writing?

Is the different pattern in second year due to differences between European and Canadian approaches to history?