Working Paper #6: Two-Year College English Faculty Workload: Making the Labor of Assessment Visible
Two-Year College English Association
Workload Task Force
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Abstract

In Fall of 2019, the Two-Year College English Association distributed a 39-question survey to two-year college English faculty through professional listservs, regional distribution lists, and social media platforms. We received 1,062 responses to questions about workload in the areas of teaching, service, and professional development. This working paper presents an overview on the labor of assessment as described by respondents aiming to gather information about the effects of workload on educator effectiveness. This report focuses specifically on a qualitative analysis of the 596 responses to the open-ended question "What aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others?" This paper examines the major theme of *assessment, grading, and feedback.*

Overview

Conversations within the discipline of writing studies about writing instruction are often conversations that center on feedback and its importance to sound writing instruction. In particular, Working Paper #6 focuses on grading and assessment, a prevalent theme in the responses. Specifically, this working paper presents findings related to responses coded under "Grading, Feedback, Assessment" and co-occurring themes that emerged to reveal several key themes: "What Colleagues and Administrators Don't See," "Weekends and Evenings," "Emotional Labor and the Writing Classroom," and "Social Readiness and Writing Assessment." Taken together, these themes generate a picture of how the work of responding to writing is, from the perspective of survey respondents, the primary but invisible part of the two-year college English instructor's work. TYCA Working Papers #6-10 each separately emphasize an element of two-year college writing instruction that respondents identified as not visible to others.

Literature Review

So much of what writing instructors do is to engage in dialogue with writers, as readers, and much of what writers do in the process depends on having feedback from invested readers. The disciplinary professional statements that address this topic repeatedly emphasize the importance of feedback, as the "Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" asserts, "frequent, timely, and context-specific feedback to students from an experienced postsecondary instructor," and establish that the "feedback is intended to guide writers' development in specific contexts—whether classes, workplaces, or community sites—by providing supportive, specific

feedback to guide students' writing and development. This includes both formative and summative feedback" (CCCC, "Principles"). Likewise, the "Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing" calls for a foundation of instructional knowledge that includes "providing constructive feedback on students' drafts; assessing students' writing formatively and summatively; and working with diverse learners" (CCCC, "Statement"). These values of effective writing instruction are emphasized in the professional statement from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), such as Principle 3.1 in the NCTE Statement "Understanding and Teaching Writing: Guiding Principles": "Writers grow within a context / culture / community of feedback," calling for a writing classroom in which "teachers and writers talk together about both products and processes, which means they share criteria, discuss challenges and choices, and offer feedback on how helpful feedback is in helping writers see new possibilities and options in steps they might take next"; (these recommendations are echoed in the NCTE statement "Professional knowledge for the Teaching of Writing" and "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement"). More recently, the "CCCC and CWPA Joint Statement in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic" affirms the importance of providing having "ample opportunities for students to read and respond to one another in a variety of informal and formal writing contexts at several stages of the writing process" and for instructors to "provide regular feedback on student work in a timely manner. When possible, feedback could be delivered in audio or video formats as well as in writing if it meets the needs of the students and instructor" (CCCC and CWPA).

Scholarship in the subfield of writing assessment likewise looks at the role of feedback in writing instruction, with varying schools of thinking reflected on how best to structure, weight, and provide feedback opportunities for students (see Huot, 1996; Yancey, 1999; Inoue and Poe, 2012; Poe, Inoue, and Eliot, 2018; Inoue, 2019). For two-year college English teachers whose contractual load includes, on average (*see the TYCA report "The Profession of Teaching English in the Two-Year College*) 15 credits or 5 courses per term, the majority of which are developmental or first-year writing courses, the practical implementation of these best practices is a significant and ongoing challenge.

Methods
The survey was distributed to TYCA members and other two-year college instructors during Fall 2019 academic term. 1,062 participants completed the survey. The TYCA Workload Task Force conducted a mixed-methods analysis of responses to the survey using descriptive statistics to analyze closed-ended responses. We also applied iterative thematic analyses of open-ended responses to survey questions using Dedoose (a web-based platform for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research) to code each response. This working paper focuses on the labor of assessment, a major theme provided in response to the open-ended question "What aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others?"

This working paper presents an overview on the labor of assessment as described by respondents. The survey included six demographic questions, 28 closed-ended items which asked respondents to select from a list of possible responses, and five open-ended items.

The most prevalent area of the workload visibility of two-year college writing teachers focused on assessment, providing feedback, and grading student work. Within this category, we drilled down to look at the most frequently co-occurring codes around grading feedback. We analyzed 596 participant responses. The code "Grading/Feedback/Assessment" was applied 307 times to excerpts within the open-ended question responses, and sometimes occurred more than once within a specific response, such that 407 excerpts from the data set had this code attached. To

understand with more nuance what role grading and assessment play in workload, we looked at which additional codes intersected most often with those 407 excerpts (individual coded 'utterances'). Of the 21 other codes that could co-occur, the following appeared most often with "Assessment, Feedback, and Grading":
- Extra Time Required (107/407 excerpts, 53/307 code applications)
- Permeable Work Boundaries (54/407 and 38/307)
- Emotional Labor (55/407 excerpts and 28/307codes)
- Student Readiness (53 of 407 excerpts and 25/307 codes)

Findings
In this section on findings, we interpret these category co-occurrences and identify representative examples from the respondent open-ended comments in order to illustrate the key issues that emerged in the survey on that topic.

**"What Colleagues and Administrators Don't See": (coded as *Extra Time Required)*
A theme that emerged from this analysis process was the amount of time the teaching of writing specifically takes, particularly when compared with teaching in other disciplines. Though this is illustrated by, for example, the three respondents who comparatively mentioned the "Scantron" tests used by faculty in other disciplines, more detailed comments illustrate that the time required for effectively responding to student work is part of what colleagues and administrators don't see. The language of comparison between writing instructors and faculty in other departments was frequent:
- "The amount of time we spend outside of class responding to student work can't be fully appreciated by our colleagues in other departments."
- "The time and attention needed to comment on essays is not equivalent to other types of assessment. I get so frustrated when I see colleagues running tests through a Scantron. In particular, developmental writing classes require an incredible amount of time and effort."
- "The amount of grading time necessary to keep up with even a single Comp I class seems to escape even most of my non-discipline colleagues, not to mention administration."
- "And people don't realize how much grading there is. I am married to a TYC math instructor. Our workloads are very different."

In this category, respondents emphasize that "grading," "feedback," and "assessment" are interconnected and extensive processes, as this respondent explained:

> I'm not sure if those (administrators and faculty) who have not taught writing-intensive classes truly understand the time that it takes to provide useful feedback for students. We can't just "grade" an essay; we have to provide feedback to help students improve, and that takes time. Most of my colleagues give feedback on drafts as well as final revisions, and even though rubrics help, I find that I still spend so much time responding to student writing.

Another respondent's observation--"There's SO MUCH TIME spent on reading papers, either to comment for revision or to grade and comment, that our workload is dominated by this single aspect" --seems to get at why the theme of grading and feedback were so heavily represented in the open-ended responses: The centrality of it to the work of writing instruction and the labor-intensive nature of doing it well show that responding to student writing constitutes not only the most time-intensive part of a TYC instructor's workload but also is one of the most important to the work in terms of meeting professional standards and its impact on student learning.

Emotional Labor and Writing Assessment: (coded: Emotional Labor)
A second important category that emerged through the analysis of the responses grading and feedback was emotional labor, specifically the emotional work attached to grading and assessment. We applied this code when responses seemed to be characterizing either the emotional consequences/weight of supporting student writers with academic and non-academic challenges, or emotional components of their workload.

One prevailing trend in responses was supporting students with complex lives, focused specifically on the non-academic barriers that students at two-year colleges can bring to their courses, as one respondent described:

> Every semester, I have students who fall behind because they are working multiple jobs with shifting schedules, who are one medical or transportation bill away from being unable to make ends meet, who simply believe they don't belong in college because so much is new or unfamiliar, who lack support at home because they are the first in their families to go to college, or who don't seek treatment for anxiety, depression, or other mental illness because of the cost, the stigma, or simply not knowing how. Providing compassion and support for these students is absolutely necessary and often rewarding, but it's also exhausting when considering all of the other work I have to do.

This respondent's remarks reveal one significant theme throughout the survey's open-ended comments, that educators manage both the academic needs of their students while simultaneously being attentive to the real material circumstances students face, whether that is in class, through specific instructional methods, or in thinking carefully about how the feedback and grading process has an impact on students that impacts such students differently than those who are confident in their academics, well-supported in their homes, and not struggling with their material conditions. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated such issues, but in open-admissions two-year college, these material challenges have always been a component part of the workload (see Sullivan and Tinberg, 2020).

Similar responses emphasize the secondary trauma they can feel in working with students through the invention, drafting, and revising processes of their work, whether because they are collaborative supporters of those students through the academic experience broadly, or because writing instructor at two-year college simply read and talk more with students about the traumatic experiences they have had inside and outside of the classroom. As one respondent wrote: "The secondary trauma of working with so many students who are on the margins of society and who have so many life issues impacting their ability to concentrate, do homework, and be successful," and the concomitant psychological cost "of 'carrying' so many students who live such stressful lives semester after semester." Another instructor who works with multilingual students also mentions student trauma: "The other thing many teachers are un- or under-prepared for is working with trauma--students who are refugees from wars, students who have survived or are working through poverty or abuse, and particularly the death of [a] student in the class." In this theme, emotional labor and emotional consequences for the instructor are rooted in working with students who face so many obstacles to their college success, obstacles that are only partly academic. The intersection between emotional labor and assessment emerges as instructors work to provide helpful, constructive feedback as part of their instruction while simultaneously managing their own—and their students'—emotional receipt of that instruction, balanced against the other cognitively and emotionally tasking dimensions of their educational and personal lives.

Another aspect of the emotional toll of a heavy workload focuses on the paper load (specifically, giving feedback on and grading student work) and on what could be described as the stakes of

or "weight" attached to assessment. For example, one respondent writes, "There's also an emotional burden, I find, when grading--particularly if students are misplaced. I feel guilty for failing the underprepared ones and angry that they're in the class in the first place." This speaks to the reality that there is often a wide range of students in our classrooms, and that for two-year college writing programs in particular, the role of placement and support courses has a critical impact on instructors.

Other respondents identify an emotional impact of grading: "That's 106 [4 sections of FYW] students who need regular substantial feedback on their reading and writing skills throughout a 15-week term. If the lit course runs full, we're up to 126 students per term who are turning in written work nearly every week. It's exhausting, and I'm seriously reaching the point of professional burnout." This is echoed by another respondent who simply writes that responding to student writing is "emotionally draining and incredibly time consuming." A less frequent but increasing factor in TYC English faculty's workload is dual-credit course assignments. One respondent commented on "The difference between teaching traditional college classes (which many of us prefer) and teaching early college high school classes. It's a class management difference in terms of keeping students off their phones, on task (not working on assignments for other classes), and engaged." In summary, the emotional labor of TYC English teaching in this set of responses focuses on the emotional support instructors provide to students, the energy and sometimes negative affect that accompanies intensive writing feedback, and in some cases, the emotional work of classroom management.

Writing Assessment and Student Readiness: (Code: Student Readiness)
Two-year colleges serve the widest range of college students in the US--whether age, racial and ethnic diversity, academic background--of any type of institution of higher education. As a result, the overlap between "student readiness" and "assessment" centers on meeting the needs of a range of students in a single writing class and the emotional investment that instructors make in student success. Here are representative responses on this issue:
- I have some students who are writing lengthy sophisticated arguments, and I have other students who are functionally illiterate (although I hate that label). In one classroom, it's like a one-room school house.
- I don't think many truly understand the level of quality in the writing we receive--and the incredibly high amount of time it takes to respond to that writing and/or to work with these students to get them to a barely-passing level. I couldn't possibly handle more courses or more students given how much time I already spend assessing student writing
- This can be magnified when students are underprepared for the course, and that is a challenge that my colleagues and I are facing in California, where students are taking transfer-level coursework regardless of their preparation for college-level reading and writing.

At least one respondent speaks to the larger philosophical and moral questions that TYC English instructors may face*: "*The toll it takes on us when our students aren't prepared for a college-level class. They work hard, we root for them, and they still don't succeed. It's heartbreaking. I'm starting to feel complicit in a scheme designed to limit some folks access to education by setting them up to fail."

Conclusions and Implications

For two-year college English teachers, the labor of assessment is more complex than just grading. The intense workload of using best practices in writing studies like individual conferencing and regular feedback on writing when an instructor can have more than 100 students in a term is difficult, even as instructors remain committed to providing students with a high quality learning experience. The high stakes, as well, attached to student's success in a writing course, whether it is their resultant increase in confidence in their academic skills, or their academic standing, financial aid eligibility, or the ability to move to the next course in a sequence--all these factors can weigh heavily on instructors as part of the assessment and feedback processes.

The implications of these findings illustrate the importance of maintaining reasonable class sizes in line with recommendations by national disciplinary organizations, including the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Associated Departments of English, which writes in "ADE Guidelines for Class Size and Workload for College and University Teachers of English: A Statement of Policy" (ADE), and notes that for developmental courses, "Class size should be no more than fifteen in developmental (remedial) courses." The Conference on College Composition and Communication, likewise, asserts in the "Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" that "No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students" (CCCC). It goes without saying that the typical load of a two-year college faculty member (see the [additional reports on this topic](#)) far exceeds this level, and workload is intensified by higher course caps at two-year colleges than at four-year universities (see [Postsecondary Writing Course Caps](#)).

Works Cited

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Resources for Further Study

Professional Statements
- [Statement of Professional Guidance for New Faculty Members](#)
- [Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing - Conference on College Composition and Communication](#)
- [CCCC Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing](#)
- [Understanding and Teaching Writing: Guiding Principles](#)
- [Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing](#)

- Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

Research and Scholarship
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- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment. *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no3, Feb 1999, pp. 483-503.

For More Information
For more information about the TYCA workload project and additional reports, see
https://ncte.org/groups/tyca/tyca-position-statements/.