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GROWING INSIGHT: COURSE INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES ON ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

One-shot information literacy (IL) instruction sessions at most institutions entail librarians engaging in teaching that is course-integrated and tailored to a research assignment. Yet, librarians often have limited insight into a course instructor's rationale and process for assignment design. Some key questions for librarians include:

Why are students being asked to do a certain task?

How have students been prepared for the task?

How will their work be assessed?

In this paper, we will discuss findings gathered from a survey designed to increase knowledge of assignment design practices at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), an institution serving 8,000 students on California's Central Coast.

Gaining insight into the process behind an assignment's design (and the larger context in which it is integrated into the course) is of significant use in developing the most impactful IL instruction experience possible for students. The reasons for this are twofold: First, this knowledge provides librarians with the opportunity to integrate course instructors' practices, like scaffolding and annotated examples, into our instruction in order to reinforce these practices. Second, this knowledge is useful in circumstances in which there are opportunities for librarians to assist instructors with the implementation of evidence-based strategies in assignment design when those strategies are absent.

In seeking to fill this knowledge gap we posed to course instructors broadly relevant questions that provided insight into their approaches to assignment design. Our work seeks to build upon findings from recent campus-wide assessment projects that focused on written communication, critical thinking, and IL, which found that assignment design plays a crucial (and often overlooked) role in the teaching and learning process in our curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In designing a survey that posed broadly relevant questions about assignment design we reviewed a variety of resources from across higher education that provided insight into common, impactful design practices. While there are many resources that describe recommended approaches to creating assignments within higher education settings—such as "Creating Assignments" (2015), to name just one of the many useful web pages on Center for Teaching and Learning sections of university websites—there is limited work that rigorously analyzes assignment design practices and their effectiveness. One area of assignment design that has recently been studied involves strategies that focus on creating clarity in an assignment. The Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education project led by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas has engaged in research regarding the outcomes associated with assignments that have been consciously designed to clearly communicate an assignment's purpose and task as well as its evaluation criteria (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Results from this project suggest that using a framework that emphasizes clarity is beneficial for all students, particularly students who are underrepresented minorities.

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's influential book *Understanding by Design* (1998) provided insight into the utility of backward design, which is defined by first identifying desired results, then determining acceptable evidence of learning, and finally planning learning experiences and instruction. Wiggins and McTighe's book also provided us with useful information on approaches to aligning learning outcomes. Similarly, John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* (1996) provided a list of explicit recommendations through a list of "Questions for Collegial Peer Review of an Assignment Handout," which makes reference to the importance of scaffolding as well as clearly communicating the purpose of an assignment (p. 106). The book *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* references assignment design throughout and provided information for the development of our survey through its discussion of annotated examples and rubrics (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 130). Additionally useful was the article *The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results from a Large-scale Multi-institutional Study*, which details effective practices in creating writing assignments and includes a survey developed to identify those practices, which provided us with a highly relevant template for our survey (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine 2015, p. 208).

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a short survey during the Spring 2017 semester. The survey consisted of eight Likert-scale questions and six open-ended, short-answer questions that followed specific Likert-scale questions. The survey included a preamble stating that the intent of the survey was not to make normative claims about what instructors should or should not do when designing and implementing research assignments, but rather to provide the library with a better understanding of the design and instructional practices that occur. "Research assignment" was defined as "student work requiring the use of information sources beyond assigned course readings," and "design" was defined as "the creation of research assignments from scratch, as well as modification of existing assignments created by others."

Course instructors identified as prospective respondents were those who had, within the most recent four semesters, taught at least one section of a General Education (GE) course in which the university's lower-division IL learning outcomes are embedded. These are also high-priority courses for IL instruction sessions led by a librarian. A total of 62 instructors were contacted via email and invited to complete the survey.

RESULTS

Twenty-two instructors completed the Likert-scale questions in the survey, for a response rate of 35%. Most but not all of those who answered the Likert-scale questions also answered the open-ended follow-up questions.

Alignment

<fig 1>   <fig 2>   <fig 3>

The first three questions in the survey addressed alignment with course, major or program, and institution-level learning outcomes, respectively. Respondents indicated that intentional alignment with outcomes occurs most often at the course outcome level, followed by major or program level, followed by institutional level, and many noted that they are naturally connected. For example:

Because the learning outcomes for course, major, and institution are all linked, research assignments are tied to each of them. However, I most directly think about the course learning outcomes (and major learning outcomes in some cases) for research (and all) assignments.

Some discussed the alignment process in terms of explicitly and directly aligning the assignment with outcomes, while others described a more casual approach of keeping the outcomes "in mind."

Scaffolding

<fig 4>

"Scaffolding" was defined as "a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process." To further clarify, respondents were directed to an online resource ("Instructional Scaffolding to Improve Learning," n.d.) containing examples of scaffolding strategies. All respondents said that they scaffold research assignments sometimes or always. Almost half of the respondents to the follow-up question discussed the importance of scaffolding as a way to provide formative feedback to students. For example:

I often break assignments into smaller pieces. For example, if a research assignment, students may have to turn in a topic description, research questions and a working bibliography and receive feedback on that before they move on to other steps in the process.

Model Assignments

<fig 5>

Over 90% of respondents indicated that when designing research assignments, they sometimes or always look at assignments that other instructors have created.

Clarity of Purpose

There was no Likert-scale question associated with this topic; rather, respondents were asked, "How do you ensure that students understand the purpose of a research assignment (e.g., an introductory paragraph on the assignment itself, discussions in class, etc.)? In communicating the purpose of an assignment, do you explicitly reference learning outcomes?" About one-third said that they explicitly reference learning outcomes. Several instructors' responses concerned communicating a purpose that they considered to be larger than the learning outcomes, including developing a meaningful connection with subject matter, and acquiring career-related knowledge or skills.

Specific Strategies for Success

<fig 6>

Virtually all respondents indicated that they provide students with specific strategies or steps for successfully completing a research assignment. Several discussed this as a means of helping students learn the research and writing process, without needing to focus on it to the extent to which the course content becomes secondary. One instructor explains:

It is important for them to learn the skills, I think, but I also want [them] to experience the enjoyment of an immersive experience relating to a topic/content. If they are expending all their energy on figuring out the strategies, it impedes their relationship to the topic/content.

Another discussed the importance of providing specific steps for students in terms of the multilevel classroom, and the need to adequately prepare all students for future coursework:

I provide specific strategies because of the different experiences students have had at their respective high schools or community colleges; if I can ensure that they have a basic strategy for research, I know that they're ready to successfully complete subsequent courses.

Examples of Successful Assignments

<fig 7>

Instructors were asked whether they provided students with examples of successfully completed research assignments from previous semesters. This question elicited the greatest variation in responses, with "always" and "sometimes" each indicating 36.4%, and the remainder, "never." Of those that said they did, several noted the value of this practice in terms of increasing clarity and transparency: "Students need to see an example of what was done correctly and why it was correct, as well as have an example that they can examine and determine what was done correctly and incorrectly on their own." Of those who said "never," two said things like "no but I should, " and one indicated a belief that this would make the assignment "too easy."

Rubrics and Grading Criteria

<fig 8>

The vast majority of respondents provide students with a rubric or specific grading criteria in some form. However, when asked as a follow-up question whether they discuss the rubrics/criteria with students and why or why not, comments were mixed. Regardless of whether they discussed the criteria in class, most expressed the value of the rubrics/criteria as helpful to students in self-assessing their work.

DISCUSSION

This section offers suggestions, based on our results, for librarians delivering IL instruction sessions in support of existing assignments, as well as participating in assignment design asynchronously or synchronously. The survey results, due to the size and local nature of the sample, may not be generalizable to course instructors across all institutions. However, they shed light on impactful questions that can be asked of course instructors, and on the expertise in this area that might be most valuable for librarians to develop and share.

Developing IL Lesson Plans to Support Existing Assignments

The purpose of our survey was to provide CSUMB instruction librarians with a deeper understanding of the assignment design practices that course instructors engage in, and thus a clearer sense of where to begin conversations about planning an IL instruction session. Asking instructors a few key questions about assignment design can help librarians meet students where they are with respect to their preparation for and understanding of the assignment, thereby well-positioning themselves to produce meaningful learning in the area of IL.

As one might expect, our survey revealed significant attention to learning outcomes, both at the assignment design stage, and in communicating the assignment's purpose to students. While most instruction librarians may already engage instructors in conversations about assignment and IL instruction session outcomes, they can consider further employing the outcomes in discussions or activities with students. For example, one respondent described an activity wherein they ask students to identify which course outcomes a given assignment meets, and why. Librarians can consider having similar conversations specific to the assignment's IL components.

Since the results of our survey indicated varying degrees of attention to other evidence-based assignment design practices, which may not be evident in assignment prompts, conversations about providing effective IL instruction might also revolve around the following questions:

- *What relevant work have students already done? Did they encounter significant challenges in completing that work?*
- *How have students been helped to understand the purpose of the assignment?*
- *What specific strategies or steps have students been encouraged to take in the development of their research project?*

One respondent described this as the domain of the librarian, and another was clear that they avoid this in order to not make the assignment "too easy," so librarians might further ask how to ensure that students receive consistent and appropriate messages.

- *Have students been provided with an example of a successfully completed assignment from a previous semester? If so, would it be appropriate to incorporate this into IL-focused classroom activities?*

Opportunities for Collaboration on Research Assignment Design

There are a number of ways librarians can participate in the design of research assignments asynchronously as well as synchronously. This section identifies specific opportunities based on the survey results.

Asynchronous Support

The survey results demonstrate that some instructors are unaware of common, effective assignment design strategies. In our role as both instructors and facilitators of access to information, librarians are uniquely situated to provide course instructors with support for assignment design by managing, promoting, and contributing to professional development resources such as the following:

- Assignment archives within university institutional repositories
- Broader resources such as MERLOT that bring together teaching materials from across institutions
- Assignment-design aids such as the AAC&U VALUE rubrics (Rhodes, 2009), or resources offered by Centers for Teaching and Learning, such as "How Do I Create Meaningful and Effective Assignments?" (2015) from Texas Tech's Teaching, Learning, & Professional Development Center

Synchronous Collaborative Design

The library can engage in collaborative assignment design by promoting it as a consultation-based service requiring a specified amount of lead time, as well as by strategically scheduling workshops. Junisbai, Lowe, and Tagge (2016) evaluated students' IL learning associated with various levels of librarian involvement in a course, and found that a "sweet spot" exists, i.e., students learn the most when librarians provide some input into assignment design and later lead one or two instruction sessions. Our survey indicated interest among instructors, and therefore possible opportunities for collaboration, in the areas of evidence-

based assignment design, including intentionally aligning assignments with outcomes, providing meaningful scaffolding experiences, and ensuring clarity of an assignment's purpose.

CONCLUSION

The survey that we conducted provided us with newfound insight into course instructor perspectives on assignment design at CSUMB. The responses that we collected thoughtfully described, in considerable depth, various approaches used to design or modify assignments. A key finding for us is that among those surveyed there are a variety of practices employed that may not be evident in the assignment itself and are useful for us to have greater consciousness of as we prepare to teach one-shot course integrated IL instruction sessions. Moving forward, we feel it will be a useful and effective teaching practice to utilize the questions listed in the Discussion section as we engage in conversations with instructors about assignment design prior to an instruction session. In doing so, we will be prepared to reinforce key practices like scaffolding and backward design. Our results also communicated that there are opportunities for librarians to have an impact on an assignment's overall design, as librarians are well-positioned to help instructors gain a sense of the full scope of assignment design resources available to them.

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Survey Questions

1. Do you intentionally align research assignments with course student learning outcomes?

    Always

    Sometimes

    Never

2. Do you intentionally align research assignments with program student learning outcomes (e.g., Major Learning Outcomes or GE Area outcomes)?

    Always

    Sometimes

    Never

3. Do you intentionally align research assignments with institutional student learning outcomes?

    Always

    Sometimes

    Never

4. Please comment on your alignment practices with respect to creating research assignments.

5. Do you scaffold assignments within your course(s)? "Scaffolding" refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process. See Table 1 on page 2 of this document for examples of scaffolding strategies:
http://www.niu.edu/facdev/_pdf/guide/strategies/instructional_scaffolding_to_improve_learning.pdf

    Always

    Sometimes

    Never

6. If you scaffold, could you briefly describe that practice?

7. When creating research assignments, do you look at examples that other instructors have created (either at CSUMB or other institutions)?

    Always

Sometimes

Never

8. How do you ensure that students understand the purpose of a research assignment (e.g., an introductory paragraph on the assignment itself, discussions in class, etc.)? In communicating the purpose of an assignment, do you explicitly reference learning outcomes?

9. Do you provide students with specific strategies for successfully completing a research assignment (e.g., by explicitly referring to the different steps in the writing process)?

　　　　Always

　　　　Sometimes

　　　　Never

10. Why do you or why do you not provide students with specific strategies?

11. Do you provide students with examples of completed research assignments from past semesters?

　　　　Always

　　　　Sometimes

　　　　Never

12. If you provide students with examples from past semesters, are those examples annotated and/or do you discuss the examples in class?

13. Do you provide your students with rubrics or other forms of evaluation criteria for research

assignments?

　　　　Always

　　　　Sometimes

　　　　Never

14. If you provide rubrics or evaluation criteria, do you discuss them with students in class? Why or why not?

Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Do you intentionally align research assignments with course student learning outcomes?
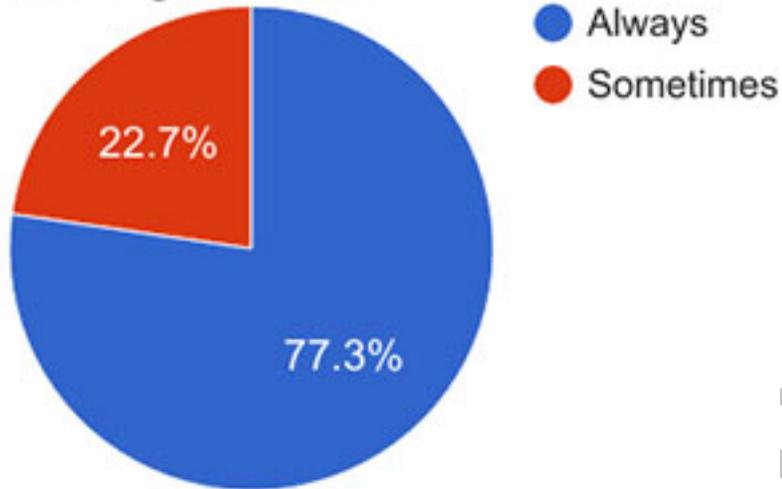
- Always
- Sometimes

22.7%

77.3%

Fig 1:

Do you intentionally align research assignments with major or program student learning outcomes?

- Always
- Sometimes

36.4%

63.6%

Fig 2:

Do you intentionally align research assignments with institutional student learning outcomes?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

40.9%

50%

Fig 3:

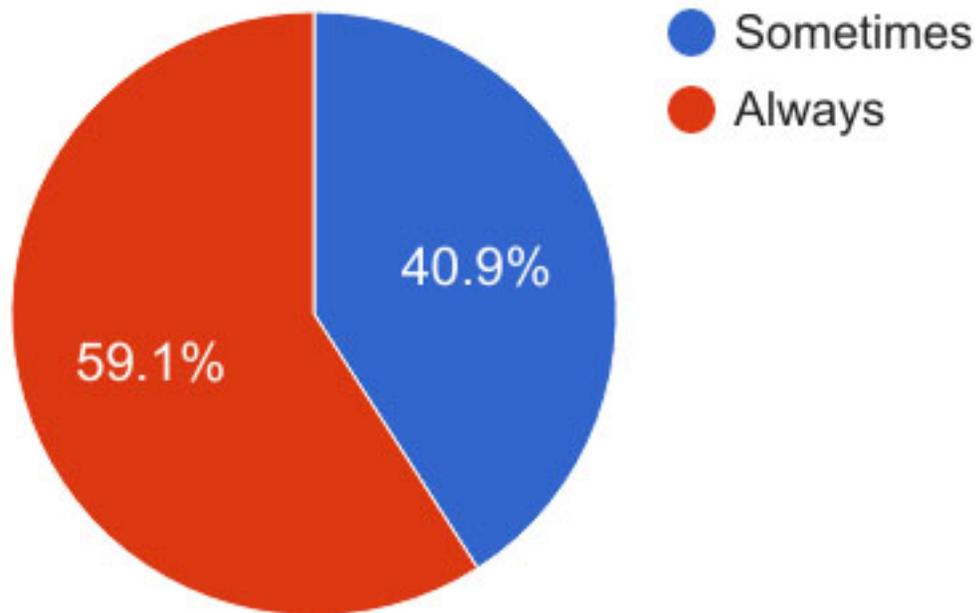**Do you scaffold assignments within your course(s)?**

- Sometimes
- Always

40.9%

59.1%

Fig 4:

When creating research assignments, do you look at examples that other instructors have created?
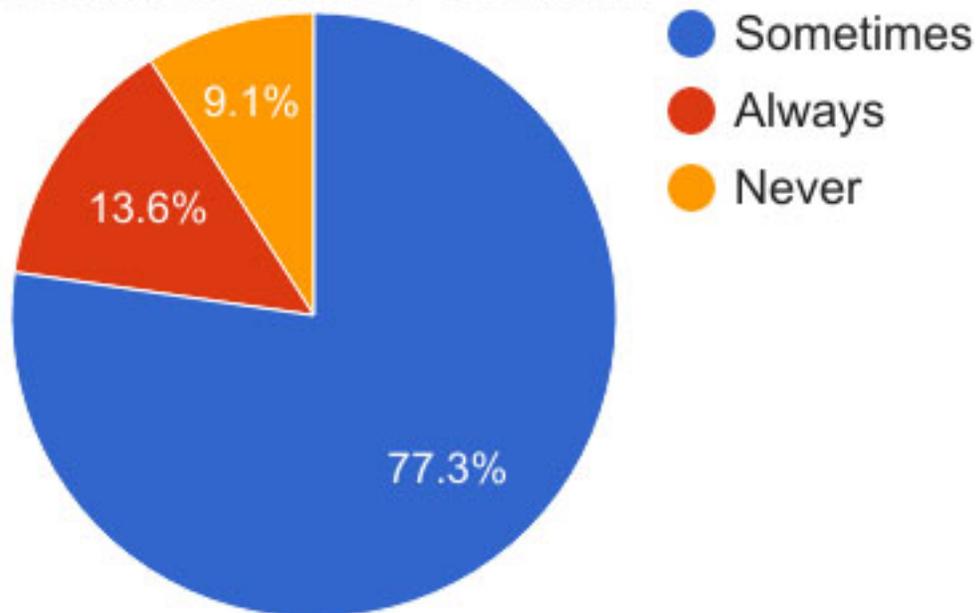
- ● Sometimes
- ● Always
- ● Never

9.1%
13.6%
77.3%

Fig 5:

Do you provide students with specific strategies for successfully completing a research assignment?

- ● Sometimes
- ● Always
- ● Never
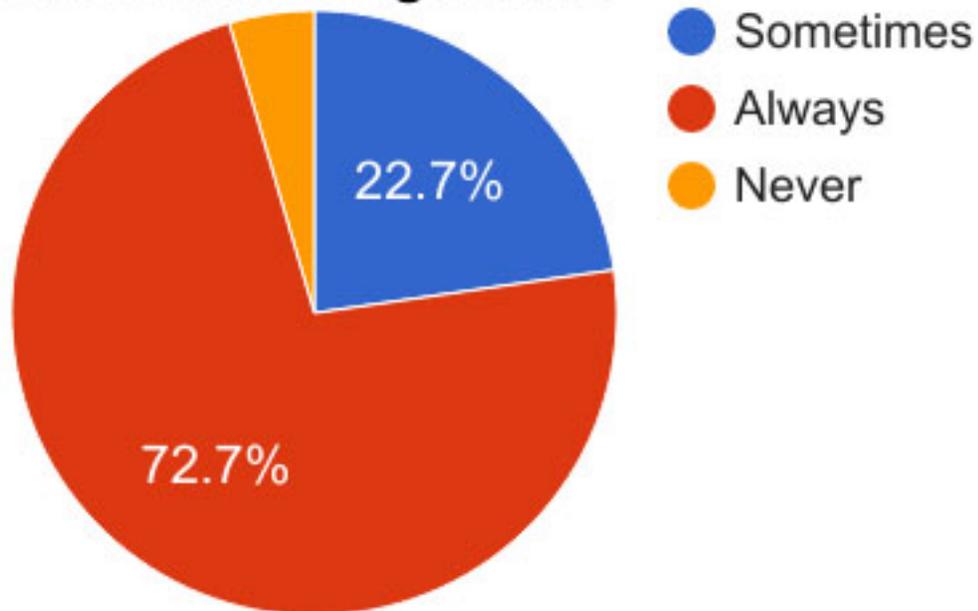
22.7%
72.7%

Fig 6:

Do you provide students with examples of completed research assignments?

Always ● (blue)
Never ● (red)
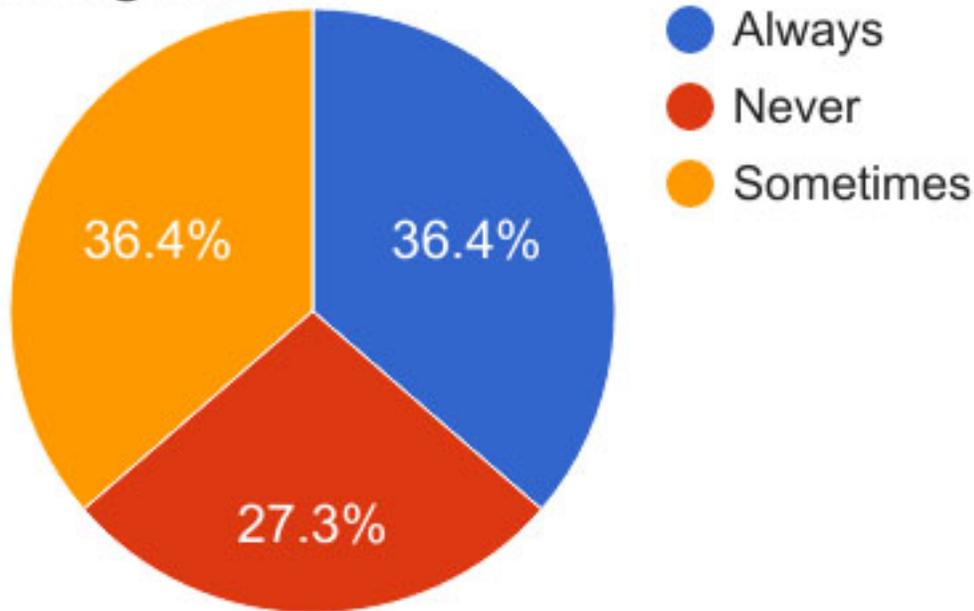**Sometimes** ● (orange)

36.4% (Sometimes)
36.4% (Always)
27.3% (Never)

Fig 7:

Do you provide your students with rubrics or other forms of evaluation criteria?

Always ● (blue)
Sometimes ● (red)
Never ● (orange)

9.1% (Never)
9.1% (Sometimes)
81.8% (Always)

Fig 8: