

**Faculty-Led Working Group Report, Spring 2018**  
**Johnson Center for Creative Teaching and Learning, Gettysburg College**  
**“Digital Project Design and Assessment”**

During the Spring 2018 semester, three faculty members and three College staff members met to discuss the topic of “Digital Project Design and Assessment.”

The group’s first few meetings were concerned with the framework of “specifications grading.” As formulated by Linda Nilson in her book *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Restoring Faculty Time* (Stylus Publishing, 2015), specs grading is a form of satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading, based on a system of clear specifications for student work. Clearer and more rigorous than a rubric, Nilson argues, specs grading lays out precise ‘checkboxes’ for students to satisfy. Successfully meeting the requirements of the assignment earns full credit; failing to do so earns no credit. Nilson’s system builds in a series of “tokens” for students to redeem when necessary, earning them the chance to revise and resubmit a certain number of assignments.

R.C. Miessler brought Nilson’s work to the group’s attention at our first meeting, and we focused on it for our next few meetings. We focused in particular on Mackenzie Brooks’ implementation of specifications grading for a 2017 Digital Humanities class at Washington and Lee University (see <http://mackenziebrooks.info/slides/DLF17-specsgrading.html>).

We also talked about the challenges of media projects, from platforms to scaffolding to the availability of appropriate and cost-effective software. The presence of Eric, Carrie, and R.C. was particularly valuable in these discussions, as each of them has collaborated with a wide variety of faculty members of students from across the College. While the JCCTL program is entitled “Faculty-Led Working Groups,” our mixed group had especially vibrant discussions, as did our membership from various departments; we would recommend this model for new working groups, as appropriate.

Finally, our group spent some time in the last few meetings workshopping our own media assignment prompts-in-progress. Bill presented a podcast creation assignment from MUS CLAS 142 (Music Theory II); Divonna workshopped a YA book trailer assignment that she has used a few times in her Education 332 course, “The Cultural Impact of Young Adult Literature and Media,” and which she used again this semester.

Most members of the working group have expressed interest in continuing our explorations this fall (as of this writing two people have not responded to me). In my consultations with some group members, the idea of moving beyond assessment has arisen. We also still have lingering questions, such as: how best to teach the skills and techniques necessary to produce multimedia assignments; and how to model both best practices and pitfalls for our students. When we reconvene in the fall, our working group will turn its attention specifically towards project/assignment design using digital platforms such as Omeka, Onodo, Timeline.js, Storymap.js, and others.

Several group members indicated that our working group's discussions would influence their teaching or other on-campus work in the future. Bill plans to use specifications grading for several medium-sized creative projects in Music Theory III in the fall, while Alecea will be using it for one project in one of her courses. We have also recognized the importance of iteration in technological and multimedia assignments: more careful and well-documented processes of design, delivery, and reflective assessment, so that each successive version of a given assignment can be more effective.

As R.C. Miessler wrote in his reflection,

Having this framework [specifications grading] to refer to makes it more clear in helping faculty tease out the objectives for an assignment, and the reasons for doing something with digital tools. There are lots of challenges with assignment design, specifically related to scope and what the outcomes are, so building the assignment backwards, in a way, may help me support scoping of projects better. I've tended to start these conversations with "What do you want to do?" Now, I think, it will be more along the lines of "What do you want the students to accomplish, and how will you assess it?"

The six of us are all grateful for the opportunity to work together through the JCCTL this semester, and we look forward to future collaborations.

*Submitted by William O'Hara (Music) on behalf of R.C. Miessler (Musselman Library), Eric Remy (Instructional Technology Services), Alecea Standlee (Sociology), Divonna Stebick (Education), and Carrie Szarko (Instructional Technology Services)*