

Making the Most of Networked Communication in Writing Program Assessment

Sonya Lancaster, Heather Bastian, Justin Ross Sevenker, &
E.A. Williams

ABSTRACT

This article builds on the rhetorical insights of the Council of Writing Program Administrator's Communications Strategies document and writing program assessment scholarship by conceptualizing communications about assessment in terms of network theory. Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, Albert-Laszlo Barabási, and Mark Granovetter, we advocate a three-step process for mapping and analyzing assessment networks. The first step traces the origins of the network; the second step maps the current structure of the network; and the third step explores the potential of weak ties to build bridges within that network. From this, we argue that such work allows writing program administrators to gain an intimate knowledge of their networks' structures that they then can use to communicate on behalf of their assessment projects and programs.

When we began to think about how to present the results of our five-year assessment of a first- and second-year writing program at a Research I university in the Midwest, we imagined our communications about the project in terms of the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Communication Strategies document and the current scholarship that informs it.¹ This scholarship advocates a site-based rhetorical approach to assessment, encouraging WPAs to join and shape conversations about assessment at the local level (Adler-Kassner; Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Adler-Kassner and O'Neill; Haswell; Haswell and McLeod; Huot; O'Neill; White). As Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill suggest, assessment is not simply an administrative task; it is an opportunity for WPAs "to build alliances with others and to communicate messages about writing instruction based in their own values as well as the values articulated in the field of composition and rhetoric" (143).

Following CWPA's suggestion "to identify the individuals or groups who seem to care (or should care) most about what you do" (Council 2), we identified as relevant audiences our writing program's teachers, the English department, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the board of regents (BOR), the provost, students, and the public. Following the suggestion to "carefully listen" to our audiences' "concerns about student learning and how those concerns are expressed," we analyzed documents our audiences produced (per Richard H. Haswell and Susan McLeod's advice) and engaged in conversations with them when possible in order to understand their values, motives, and expectations regarding education and, more specifically, writing.

During the five years of the assessment, though, our understanding of the concept of audience changed, as did the audiences themselves. Existing audiences fluctuated as the university experienced unusually high turnover in administration, including two chancellors, three provosts, three deans of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and three English department chairs. New audiences such as institutional curriculum committees developed, and distant audiences such as the BOR became important as they defined and required assessment of new learning outcomes. With these changes, we found that while acting locally and considering the language of our stakeholders were relatively easy, building alliances, developing messages, and disseminating our messages were far more complicated. The Communication Strategies recommendations for choosing, forging alliances with, and directly communicating with compatible audiences for assessment ran into the reality of a complex assessment network in which our audiences were nodes variously linked to and separated from our writing program. Various audiences demanded our attention at different times, and we could not directly communicate with many of them since our access was limited and our messages were often mediated by others. To make visible the often invisible connections between audiences, we turned to complementary strands of network theory to understand the various stakeholders in our assessment, their relationships to each other and to our program, and the ways that language and power traverse and affect those connections.

In this article, we describe the structure of our assessment's network, mapping its development through time and noting how specific audiences, or nodes, gained or lost prominence and how pathways between nodes changed. Specifically, we employ Bruno Latour's work in actor-network theory to trace the origins of our network; Albert-Laszlo Barabási's contributions to network theory to map its scale-free structure; and Mark Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" theory to identify opportunities to

build alliances and disseminate messages by creating bridges between distant nodes. We believe that viewing assessment as a network in these ways can help WPAs—as spokespersons for their assessment projects—communicate strategically with their audiences.

The networked nature of audiences is already present in some writing program assessment scholarship. Most explicitly, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill offer *assessment as networked infrastructure* as one metaphor for understanding assessment. Specifically, they compare assessment to “networked infrastructure” or “a loosely networked group of alliances that is fairly flexible” (186). While this comparison helpfully draws on the network metaphor to describe how assessment can work to create alliances between interested groups, we suggest that these groups are always and already networked. In other words, assessment occurs within a complex network of audiences/nodes that are fluid and must be navigated and exploited by WPAs.

Our understanding of networked audiences is more akin to Richard H. Haswell and Susan McLeod’s discussion in “Working with Administrators” of how four separate assessment reports travel to and through audiences as well as how they are subsequently used. They do not discuss networks directly or use terms specific to network theories, but implicit in their essay is the importance of understanding networked audiences and communication. They demonstrate, for instance, how one report travels through the “usual routing” to the provost and vice-provost via the general education director and how it could also potentially reach additional audiences along the way, such as an All-University Writing Committee, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the president of the university, the BOR, and the state’s Higher Education Coordinating Board (176). By tracing how documents traverse a network, Haswell and McLeod help WPAs understand how their communications may be used within their own institutions. We build on Haswell and McLeod’s work by making the implicit explicit; that is, we provide direct attention to concepts established in network theory to more fully map the dynamic pathways of writing programs’ communications.

In what follows, we advocate specific steps for mapping and analyzing assessment networks, using our own institution’s assessment project as an example. We begin by tracing the origins of our assessment network, arguing that such analysis identifies significant network nodes and the power relations that have shaped communication in the network. Then, we describe our network in the current moment and illustrate that the structure of the network regulates the flow of information about assessment, providing us direct access to some of our colleagues and only mediated access to some of our stakeholders while removing other stakeholders beyond the reach of our messages entirely. We argue that by performing this kind of

mapping and analysis, WPAs gain an intimate knowledge of their networks' structures that they then can use to communicate successfully on behalf of their projects and programs.

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE NETWORK

As we shifted our efforts to tracing our assessment network, we found that our audiences, our messages, and the network itself were more unstable and less predictable than much assessment scholarship indicates. For example, the CWPA Communication Strategies document presents audiences and communication in traditionally rhetorical terms: communication occurs between a speaker and an identifiable, influential audience; communication is direct; and communication, when successful, culminates in action or identification on the audience's part. But when audiences are considered in a network, people and their offices become nodes alongside many others, including the writing program. The pathway between any two given nodes often is not direct (so communication rarely reaches only the targeted nodes), and certain nodes may change a message or send it in unanticipated directions. Moreover, a network is not stable or even entirely visible to those who must navigate it. It gains and loses pathways over time, and the nodes a WPA might target might gain and lose power. As a result, our assessment network when we began five years ago does not look like our assessment network today, nor does today's network look like it might five years from now in another assessment cycle.

For those who would map an assessment network with the goal of disseminating messages, its instability is further compounded by its limited visibility. When we map, we necessarily bring to the forefront only selected nodes and pathways within a larger, evolving network that encompasses all sorts of communication among and within institutions of higher education. There are many nodes that we leave out when we map such as other departments in the university that are simultaneously assessing their programs, other institutions in the state and nation, and national accreditation entities. Despite the fact that any assessment network map will only highlight a small portion of a communication network, establishing maps can provide WPAs a sense of the shifting parameters of networks and the residual pathways of power and communication in them. This is especially true, as we argue below, when WPAs map the origins of their assessment networks.

To outline the parameters of our assessment network, we began as Bruno Latour recommends by "laying continuous connections leading from local interaction to other places, times, and agencies through which a local site is *made to do something*" (173; emphasis in original). In this case,

the local site is the writing program, and the other places, times, and agencies are the nodes from and through which the impetus toward assessment was communicated to the program. The nodes and pathways (*actors* and *communications* to Latour) through which these historical communications traveled “leave many more traces in their wake than already established connections which, by definition, may remain mute and invisible” (Latour 31).² Figure 1 depicts the map of our original assessment network. The arrows in figure 1 demonstrate the flow of information and the power structure that initiated our assessment project.

We found as we examined the assessment history that, as is surely the case with many projects, the exigency of this one was the potential threat to funding. In 1999, our state legislature approved a statute that tied state moneys for higher education to performance indicators. To create performance indicators, the legislature required the BOR and institutions of higher education in the state to enter into performance agreements. These required the BOR to set goals for each institution and for those institutions to demonstrate “directional improvement.” Fortuitously, in 2004, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Initiative for Effective Education Practice conducted a site visit at our institution in response to high student engagement scores on the NSSE survey. The consultant-evaluator team then wrote their Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) report. Drawing from this report, the provost emphasized the quality of undergraduate education in both that year’s performance agreement with the BOR and the self-study for the Higher Learning Commission accreditation. In the performance agreement, the provost linked the BOR goal “Improve Learner Outcomes” to the institutional goal “Enrich the Undergraduate Learning Experience.” That same year, the provost asked the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to revise the general education goals and requirements. To involve all of the university faculty in changing the goals, the university’s Center for Teaching Excellence Teaching Summit in fall 2004 focused on a campus-wide discussion of the general education requirements. After the learning goals for general education were revised, the dean asked the departments to design assessment plans to determine how well students were achieving the revised goals. In 2006, the English department chair charged the writing program’s curriculum committee to work with the department’s assessment committee to devise a plan for assessing the courses. Finally, in 2008, the chancellor convened a Teaching and Learning Task Force, part of Initiative 2015. The task force recommended defining learning outcomes for all academic programs at the university.

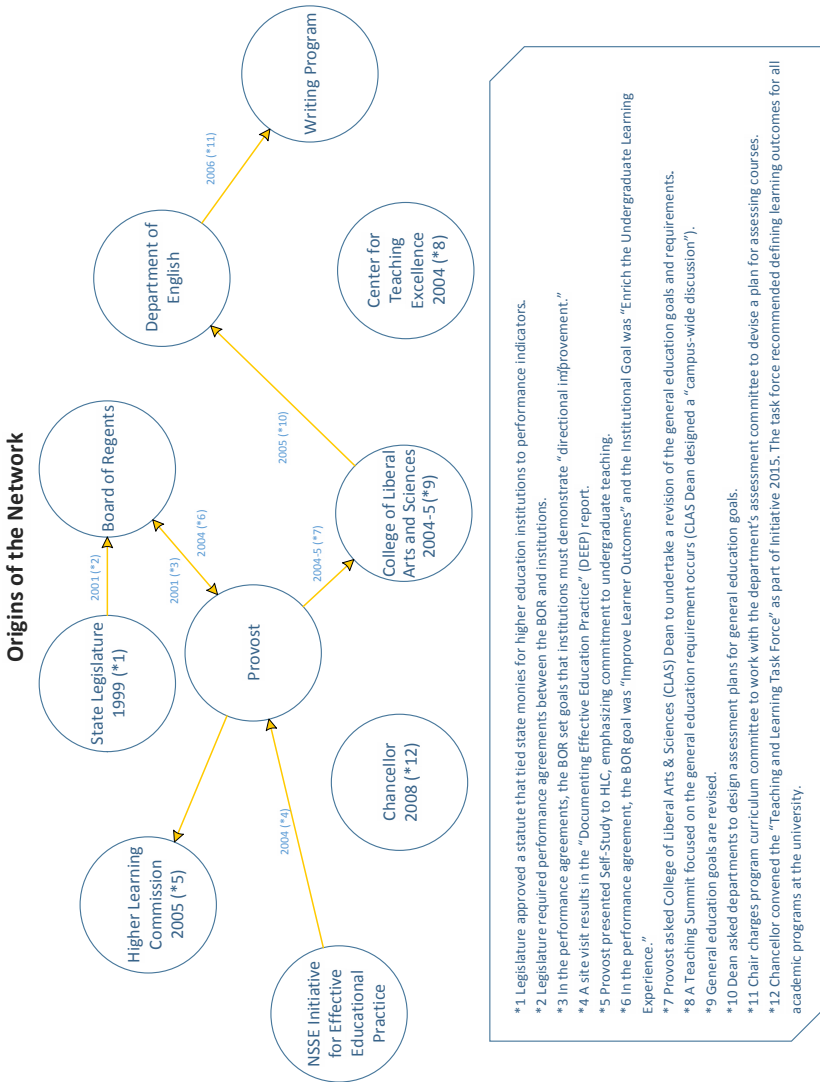


Figure 1. Origins of the Network

This historical account identifies the significant nodes in our assessment network and the movement of communication between them that ultimately prompted our assessment project. Additionally, this mapping reveals the two ways that nodes can act in our network: as intermediaries or as mediators. Latour says that in all groupings for communication purposes, intermediaries “transport meaning or force without transformation” while mediators “transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (39). In figure 1, we see the BOR and the provost’s office acting as mediators, combining and redefining the messages

from the state legislature that passes through them. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences also mediates by linking the message of improving learning outcomes to reforming general education, and the department acts as an intermediary, passing the message from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences directly to the writing program. Knowing whether a node is acting or might act as an intermediary or a mediator is important because “no matter how apparently simple a mediator may look, it may become complex; it may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role” (Latour 39). This potential for mediation, Latour says, adds an element of uncertainty to the movement of a message through a network (39). A node that acts as a mediator of one message may not act as one with another message, so a WPA who originates a message must be prepared for it to be mediated unexpectedly. That said, certain nodes in our assessment network seem inclined to mediation, so tracing the history of a network could predict where some mediation can be expected.

Our historical mapping also highlights how the network is subject to change. Specifically, we see that calls for measurable learning outcomes and directional improvement from the state legislature and BOR disrupted the network and prompted whole-scale rethinking of undergraduate education at the university. As a result, our general education requirement shifted from one based on a collection of courses to a set of measurable learning goals attained through various courses and experiences. This transition did not happen smoothly as new nodes and pathways were created to facilitate the transition and in response to changes in administration. Tracing the development of our network highlights its structural instability and alerts us to the possibility that our messages will be mediated. Consequently, it allows us to anticipate the structure of our current network and provides a starting point for mapping and navigating it. Specifically, it gives us the ability to compare our current network to the historical moves that inform it, to contextualize the pathways among nodes we see today, and to illuminate important traces of links that may have broken or weakened as well as those that have strengthened or been developed. This historical mapping is especially useful for orienting new members of our writing program and assessment team. Similarly, a WPA who is new to her institution or who may be the sole administrator overseeing an assessment project can use the information-gathering process needed to develop a historical mapping as an opportunity to build relationships with those who have that institutional knowledge and perspective. It also serves as a resource for explaining the context of an assessment project to department colleagues and university administrators.

MAPPING OUR CURRENT NETWORK

In mapping our current assessment network, we aimed to describe the connections and power relations between our program and other relevant nodes in our network as well as any strictures on communication between them. To that end, we began with Barábasi's descriptions of networks because they allowed us to represent our network's power structure and scale-free nature. In a random network, all nodes have the same number of links. As an example, Barábasi points to the national highway network, "in which the nodes are the cities, and the links are the major highways connecting them" (71). There, few nodes are more connected than others as "most cities are served by roughly the same number of highways" (71). Alternatively, in a scale-free network, the distribution of links is unequal because some nodes become highly connected hubs. Barábasi says that "this is very similar to the air traffic system, in which a large number of small airports are connected to each other via a few major hubs" (71). The power of the hubs in scale-free networks comes from the number of links they have and thus the number of communications that must flow through them. This increases the potential for a hub's mediations to have an unusually large impact if it chooses to mediate a message; however, it might be possible for a message to go through a large hub unmediated because of the volume of messages since one may not be noticed. Two powerful hubs in our assessment network are the BOR and the provost's office, as most information about the assessment moves through and often is mediated by them.

The second step to understanding our network, then, was to map it as a scale-free network organized into hubs, clusters, and the pathways between them (see figure 2). In figure 2, nodes appear as circles with dotted lines and hubs as circles with solid lines while arrows represent pathways of directional communication between nodes and hubs. Large ovals group nodes and hubs into clusters (some of which share hubs, e.g., the English department), which Barábasi describes as small, fully connected circles connected by strong ties. For Granovetter, strong ties occur between family and close friends, and "the strength of a tie is the combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" ("Strength" 1361). These close personal

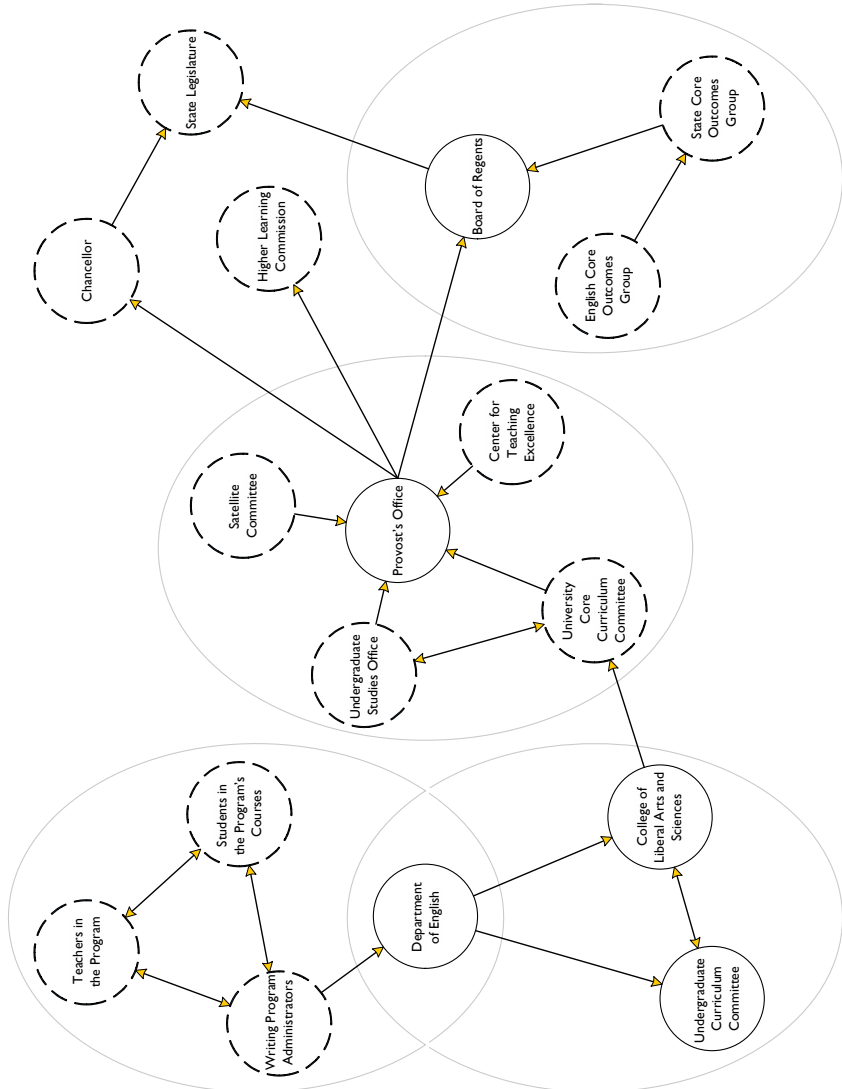


Figure 2. Current Network Map

ties can form clusters if the friends and family in one person's social milieu develop close personal connections to one another. For Barabasi, however, clustering is ubiquitous, a generic property of all complex networks (51). An example of a cluster in our network is the one containing the writing program and the English department. The administrators in the department and program are extremely collaborative, and there are many connections with the teachers in the program, who primarily are graduate students in the department.

In addition to the appearance of hubs and clusters, we also saw new nodes develop in the current network in response to the transition to assessing learning goals. The Satellite Committee and the University Core Curriculum Committee (UCCC) were formed to establish learning goals, approve courses for inclusion in the curriculum, and assess those courses. The BOR hub repurposed existing committees to form new nodes to approve common learning outcomes for core courses across institutions, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences added duties to an existing committee to approve courses for the core curriculum. All of these new nodes have the potential to act as mediators in the network.

The benefit of mapping the scale-free, clustered nature of our assessment network is that it highlights the varying levels of restrictions WPAs may face when communicating to particular nodes. As messages traverse the pathways, they must often obey pre-established rules governing the timing and direction of their movement that determine whether messages can reach certain nodes and to what extent they may be mediated along the way.³ Our mapping revealed that links between nodes in a cluster in our assessment network are largely unregulated and unmediated. For example, in the cluster that contains the writing program and English department, information flows easily in many directions, as between the writing program administrators, teachers, and students shown in figure 2. However, pathways between clusters are more constrained as only specific nodes in one cluster, usually a hub, have the ability to directly communicate with those in another cluster. For example, the arrows in figure 2 represent the institutionally sanctioned route that assessment information is expected to take starting at the writing program and moving toward the powerful hubs in other clusters that could allocate resources and effect change for the program. If we focus on this pathway through the nodes, we see that our report of assessment results will not be able to travel directly from our node to any other location on the network of our choosing. Thus, a message aimed at the BOR must pass through a series of intermediary and mediator nodes, including the English department, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the newly formed Office of Undergraduate Studies which now oversees the UCCC, and the provost's office before arriving at the BOR. Much of this movement occurs according to traffic laws that the writing program cannot control; however, by creating a record of our messages' movement and mediation, we may begin to anticipate how individual nodes will react to communications about assessment and craft messages with an eye toward using language that would accurately maintain the original meaning when extracted from the message and included in messages from the mediating nodes.

To demonstrate the transaction of a message on this network that was mediated in ways that we did not anticipate, we will examine what happened to one particular message that originated with the writing program but was mediated extensively before it reached its intended audience in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In response to the proposed changes to core requirements at the university, the College decided to revise its BA requirements. The undergraduate director in the English department asked the writing program to provide a statement about how we assess our courses so that she could argue that students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences need to take two English courses regardless of whether they fulfilled the core requirements or tested out according to placement. We gave her a copy of our initial assessment plan, a document created to describe the assessment project to the writing program and English department. The undergraduate director used language from the assessment plan in her rationale for the BA writing requirement but in a very different context than it originally appeared. Through these changes, the scope of the assessment became merely a “self-assessment proposal” whose implications would not go beyond our program. Sentences intended to place the assessment project within a broader scholarly context were taken out of that context and were instead used as an argument for the general importance of teaching writing, primarily for encouraging student engagement. The field of composition and rhetoric was characterized as “best practices in writing instruction is a research-based field in which the directors of [the writing program] participate,” followed by a description of teacher training.

This example of a message that was changed radically as it passed through a node reminds us of how little control the sender has of a message once it is in the network, even as it travels a sanctioned path. The message is a tool for shaping the thinking of people in the nodes through which it travels, and the message itself is changed by the nodes through which it travels. Steven Shaviro explains that a network is shaped by “the force of all the messages, as they accrete over time” (24). Because the documents and communications passing through the network are the network itself,

We cannot think of information as just a pattern imprinted indifferently in one or another physical medium. For information is also an event, not just the content of a given message but all the things that happen when the message gets transmitted. (16)

The message was mediated by the director of Undergraduate Studies, but the thinking of the Committee for Undergraduate Studies was also changed by the message. When the committee was considering the proposed requirements for the BA, the rationale for adding to the Core Eng-

lish requirement included information from the writing program's original assessment proposal linking the importance of writing to student engagement and touting the validity of the course goals because they were based on the WPA Outcomes Statement. Though this message was not precisely accurate nor did it reflect what we would have said about assessment, it did highlight for the committee that there was scholarship behind our writing courses. As messages pass through the network, WPAs should try to keep track of how and where the messages are mediated so that they can identify unanticipated or mediating audiences and think about future uses of documents and what parts might be extrapolated from these documents. In our situation, having our current network mapped might have helped us to anticipate the mediation of the document that the director of Undergraduate Studies was creating, and it might have been possible for us to suggest ways in which she could effectively incorporate the information about assessment. This experience also highlights the danger of repurposing a document that worked well for its initial audience without considering how it might work in a new context. Over time, the nodes through which a document travels change, and while no one can read every document and anticipate every movement, careful attention should be paid to these changes to the message.

CREATING NETWORK BRIDGES THROUGH WEAK TIES

Viewing our assessment as a network proved immensely helpful for understanding how information and power were communicated. But as we reflected on our assessment network, we often found ourselves discussing the interpersonal, unofficial connections that facilitated much of the assessment. These interactions proved difficult to plot on our network maps because the links were often active only briefly or were based on connections established by individual people. Nevertheless, some of these interactions allowed us to communicate more directly with remote areas of the network. In an effort to understand the power of individuals in our institutional network, we turned to social network theory and specifically to Mark Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" theory, which helped us understand how interpersonal relationships can be powerful within an institution.

The strength of weak ties lies in the ties' ability to provide bridges to and from clusters so that new information and perspectives can circulate into and out of the cluster (Granovetter, "Revisited"). Strong ties, in this formulation, connect an individual to close family and friends. As briefly mentioned above, strength here is measured by familiarity, closeness of relationship, and shared values and identities. Because any individual's set

of close friends and family are likely “in touch with one another” in close relationships, they tend to form “a densely knit clump of social structure” known as a clique (Granovetter, “Revisited” 202). A social network with many dense cliques of strong ties and few ties among those cliques can become fragmented; individuals in these clusters “with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (Granovetter, “Revisited” 202).

Whereas strong ties connect people in these close social relationships, weak ties are those that form between acquaintances. Through such weak ties, individuals can make their networks more diffuse, especially when a weak tie “becomes not merely a trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge” between individuals in previously unconnected parts of a network (Granovetter, “Revisited” 202; 218–21). Bridges provide ties through which information, values, and “innovations cross the boundaries of social groups” (Granovetter, “Revisited” 219) that present opportunities for individuals to interact with a diverse array of people and encourage empathy and cooperation while discouraging the social-network fragmentation that happens when clusters form (204–5; 226–7). This is an especially important feature of weak ties for WPAs to keep in mind as they consider how to build alliances and disseminate messages to stakeholders. Building bridges can be crucial because, according to Lois Steinberg, “where innovations are controversial, a mobilization strategy based on the activation of weak ties is more likely to facilitate adoption of the goal and integration into the [institution’s] decision-making structure” (qtd. in Granovetter, “Revisited” 225).

One example of an influential weak tie in our assessment network connects the cluster that contains the writing program to the cluster containing the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). Institutionally, per figure 2, the writing program has no direct connection to CTE. The associate director of the writing program and the director of CTE, however, developed a weak tie that bridged these two clusters. Using this bridge, the associate director worked on the statistical analysis of the assessment with a graduate student who also worked part-time at CTE. The graduate student often spoke about the writing program’s assessment with the CTE director, who then asked the writing program’s associate director to create a portfolio of the program’s assessment as a model of the assessment process that CTE could share with other departments at the university. This weak tie was not strong in terms of social network theory, but it allowed our program to promote our assessment process and findings across three clusters more expeditiously than we would have been able to using only established institutional links.

CTE also benefited from this weak tie because it offered a new opportunity for that office to share a helpful resource with others in the university.

In another example, the associate director of the writing program also serves on the BOR English Core Outcome Group (ECOG), which is part of the BOR cluster in figure 2. She carpools to state-wide meetings with the senior vice-provost for Academic Affairs, who chairs the State Core Outcomes group—which is also part of the BOR cluster—and works closely with the provost. As a result of the infrequent social contact that this institutional arrangement affords, the associate director has the opportunity for informal discussion of assessment in the university, including the writing program's assessment. These discussions affect the mediation of information about assessment in the provost node and through other areas of that cluster. The associate director's presence on ECOG also establishes acquaintance ties with other members of the ECOG and BOR nodes, and her bridge to the vice-provost in the cluster containing the provost's office allows her to share our program's perspective on assessment and influence decision-making that regular committee work might not.

Interpersonal relationships in our network also opened opportunities for institutional arrangements not directly related to our assessment work. For example, the writing program director served as the elected humanities representative on the UCCC in the year that the committee began its work. This bridge between the writing program node and the UCCC was temporary in nature because the position is filled by elected members from among humanities departments, and so the weak ties that the director established to other members of the UCCC could not develop into more substantial social ties like those that the associate director established with the vice-provost. The director's presence, however, influenced the development of the learning outcomes on which our assessment is based. The social ties in this situation were quite weak in terms of interpersonal relationships, but they provided an opportunity for someone from our program's cluster to provide a public face for our program's interest in assessment and communicate our discipline's best practices to the entire university.

Generally, WPAs can make the most of weak ties by identifying opportunities to build alliances. Mapping the origins and current structure of an assessment network can reveal such opportunities and clustered areas of the network not easily accessible to the WPA. For example, a WPA may be able to build a bridge directly to someone involved in a mediating node, developing an acquaintance tie. Both parties gain improved understanding of the other's motivations. Weak ties remind WPAs of the importance of interpersonal dynamics on committees and task forces and foster awareness of the social nature of network connections. While membership on

committees may rotate, positive acquaintanceships can become enduring bridges.

CONCLUSION

Network theory provides a helpful lens through which WPAs can understand communications regarding their assessment projects and any other activity they wish to implement on campus. Whether a writing program is within a large research university, a small liberal arts college, or a community college, it operates within networks, and while the nodes and pathways in any given network will vary, issues of power, directionality, and connectivity persist. We advocate a three-step process that maps the origins, then the current structure of a network, and explores the potential of weak ties to build bridges within that network. Most helpfully, this kind of analysis highlights the fluid nature of audiences as nodes and their ability to communicate or mediate (either positively, neutrally, or negatively) the messages that WPAs create. Additionally, it reveals nodes that WPAs otherwise might not have identified as important to their projects, as in the CTE example above. Initially, we did not recognize this node as a part of our assessment network despite its appearance on our maps because it was historically not a part of our sanctioned pathways (see Figure 1) and messages are not regularly routed through the CT node. Moreover, what network analysis makes clear is that a writing program's location and connectivity in a network shape and often limit the rhetorical options available to a WPA, especially in terms of how and to whom communications are disseminated, ultimately shaping the rhetorical power a WPA can wield through official and unofficial channels.

These insights, we suggest, provide a fuller theoretical framework from which rhetorical strategies outlined in the CWPA Communication Strategies document and other assessment scholarship can be implemented and developed. Armed with knowledge of their networks, WPAs can develop communication strategies that are informed by the actual structures of power and communication in which their programs are located, resisting the temptation to reuse existing documents or have them repurposed for us by mediators, as in the case with the BA requirements discussed above. For instance, when WPAs trace the origins and current structure of their networks, they can identify the locales in which their communications take place and act locally, develop alliances, and disseminate messages to develop partnerships strategically. In our own network analysis, we discovered that, over time, the dynamic nature of the network allowed the assessment project to be connected to wider projects of evaluation and reform

in our state education systems. This clarified many of the offices and individuals involved in our network as well as several situations in which they would receive and mediate messages about our work. At the same time, the connection of our local assessment work to state and national actions by the BOR and Higher Learning Commission diversified the scene of our work and imposed important implications on future dissemination of assessment results. As other WPAs face similarly diverse situations for local action, we suggest they allocate appropriate time and resources for undertaking their communications in the multiple locales that their networks dictate.

We also urge that WPAs be prepared to disseminate messages in the many genres of university communication. In lieu of preparing pointed, public messages for newsletters, newspapers, and campus events sites as the Communication Strategies document suggests, we often communicated about assessment during daily committee work and through the genres of university administration. Additionally, we learned we often had to disseminate messages well before the assessment was formally completed. Mapping our historical and current assessment networks allowed us to anticipate these situations and the explicit and implicit motivations that defined our audiences' interests. One place where we can see this in the maps is in the nodes that were created based on changes to the network. Committees, like the Satellite Committee, were created to write learning outcomes for the new core curriculum but disbanded after they created the goals. Other committees, like the Office of Undergraduate Studies and UCCC, were created to provide oversight of the core curriculum and the assessment of its courses as these functions became necessary. In these cases, our knowledge of the network allowed us to anticipate what nodes might be created and when nodes might be disbanded based on new requirements and mandates from powerful hubs. We suggest that network mapping can similarly serve other WPAs.

In addition to acting locally and developing and disseminating messages, this three-step process highlights in the Communication Strategies document the importance of developing interpersonal relationships that foster good working alliances among stakeholders. After tracing the origins and current structure of a network, WPAs can identify areas of the network that are either densely clustered or distantly connected. A WPA who needs to work with distant nodes might consider making strategic interpersonal bridges to them. The Communication Strategies suggests that after "identify[ing] the individuals or groups who seem to care (or should care) most about what [WPAs] do," it is important to ask questions of those individuals or groups and frame the message in ways that are consonant with their motivations and interests (2). Knowing that there is a wide range of

weak ties can help WPAs keep in mind that these interactions need not necessarily happen in formal settings. Viewing interactions with committees and various offices as opportunities for bridge building through personal connections can be a powerful conceptual shift; rather than seeing an opportunity to reframe our message in someone else's terms, WPAs can recognize the interpersonal connections that undergird all our assessment work as opportunities to learn from others and create shared values and goals.

The three-step process that we advocate in this essay is intended to assist WPAs, but we want to acknowledge that network analysis is not without its complications. As we learned through our own mapping process, not all pathways and nodes are clear on an individual or institutional level. Institutional documents can provide much insight into a network, but they often do not tell the whole story. In these cases, one can rely on institutional memory or others to piece together parts of the network. Even then, depending on one's position in the network, certain pathways and nodes—especially those that are far removed from a writing program—may not be visible. The goal with this analysis, however, is not necessarily to map the institution in its entirety; rather, the goal is to map and analyze the network with enough detail so that the WPA can roughly trace where communications will go, how they will get there, and what might happen to them along the way. The maps a WPA creates can be archived so that future WPAs don't have to start at the beginning but can look at historical patterns as a starting point.

A further complication is that the structure of a network is fluid; nodes and pathways can and do change. In some cases, nodes and pathways change or develop rapidly in response to administrative changes or pressures from governing and accrediting bodies. Other times, nodes and pathways change slowly as a result of other institutional developments. Given that networks are dynamic rather than static, origins mapping is especially useful as it grounds an assessment project and its communications in the structure that led to its creation, a structure that is likely to change over the span of an assessment project. Alternatively, current network mapping prevents that structure's reification, ensuring that WPAs track new changes that occur in the network that necessarily affect their communications. Constant current-network re-mapping seems unnecessary given the workload of a WPA, but WPAs might consider mapping or re-mapping their current networks when they are ready to disseminate the results of assessment projects, when key personnel changes are made, or when new projects or obligations are sent through the network. Moreover, as Jeff Rice observes, mapping one's current network constitutes a descriptive, genera-

tive method of assessment in its own right, one whose purpose is “to teach us about the relationships circulating in our own program that we have yet to see as being part of a given network” (38).

While network analysis presents some challenges that are important to keep in mind, the three-step process that we advocate nevertheless provides WPAs with useful and necessary insights into their communication networks. Network analysis could be applied to any program issue, allowing WPAs to map the various networks of communication in which they participate. For example, WPAs involved in revising a general education curriculum could benefit from tracing the communication network for that project. At our university, the assessment network could easily be modified to focus on communications about general education reform because many of the offices interested in assessment are invested in general education. In another example, WPAs responsible for developing majors and minors within Writing Studies or English departments might benefit from tracing a network containing advising, various professional schools, the honors program, potential employers, and others to recruit Writing Studies or English majors and minors. They also might benefit from tracing a network containing alumni, donors, endowment, and institutional sources of funding to develop scholarships for these majors or writing program interns. Overall, network theory allows WPAs to think strategically about their communications regarding any number of issues and concerns, and with this knowledge, they can more fully realize a writing program’s agency within complex and dynamic networks of communication.

NOTES

1. We designed a comprehensive, program-wide assessment of the three individual writing courses, as well as of the three-course sequence. It comprises three interrelated studies: a survey of student and instructor perceptions of how well students are achieving the individual course outcomes, an assessment of instructor assignment sequences to determine the extent to which the outcomes are central to the assignment sequences, and an assessment of student writing produced for the courses to determine the extent to which students are achieving the course outcomes. This assessment was modeled on the University of Kentucky’s assessment of their first-year writing course found in the Writing Program Administrator’s Assessment Gallery (<http://wpacouncil.org/UK>). Connie Kendall generously provided us with additional information and documents. Our assessment took place over five years, between the fall of 2008 and the summer of 2013.

2. Latour discusses actors and groupings instead of nodes and networks in his actor-network theory, but his discussion of tracing boundaries of groups, how actors are “always engaged in the business of mapping the ‘social context’ in which

they are placed” (32), and how groupings are constantly made and remade is very similar to how other network theorists, like Barabási, discuss networks.

3. Barabási describes similar “traffic rules” in his account of directed networks in which a path may exist to move from node A to node B, but the inverse path may not (165–67). Our assessment network is not a directed network of this kind, with different institutional nodes clearly governed by unchangeable traffic laws; our messages can and do travel in multiple directions. Still, individual messages are often obliged to travel network pathways following pre-established rules, suggesting that to some extent directionality characterizes our network. For example, all communication about assessment outside our department must go through the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and can often only be initiated by the chair.

WORKS CITED

- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2008. Print.
- Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Peggy O’Neill. *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. Print.
- Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Susanmarie Harrington. “Responsibility and Composition’s Future in the Twenty-First Century: Reframing ‘Accountability.’” *College Composition and Communication* 62.1 (2010): 73–99. Print.
- Barabási, Albert-László. *Linked: The New Science of Networks*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002. Print.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators. Communication Strategies. 1–7. PDF file. Web. 9 Feb. 2014.
- Granovetter, Mark. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973): 1360–80. Print.
- . “The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited.” *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201–33. Web. 30 Dec. 2012.
- Haswell, Richard H., ed. *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction Within a University Writing Program*. Westport: Ablex, 2001. Print.
- Haswell, Richard H., and Susan McLeod. “Working with Administrators: A Dialogue on Dialogue.” Haswell 169–85.
- Huot, Brian. *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment in Teaching and Learning*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2002. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- O’Neill, Peggy. “Reframing Reliability for Writing Assessment.” *Journal of Writing Assessment* 4.1 (2011) n. pag. Web. 9 Feb. 2014.
- Rice, Jeff. “Networked Assessment.” *Computers and Composition* 28.1 (2011): 28–39. Print.
- Shaviro, Steven. *Connected, or What it Means to Live in the Network Society*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.

White, Edward M. "Power and Agenda Setting in Writing Assessment." *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, and Practices*. Ed. Edward M. White, William D. Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri. Research and Scholarship in Composition Series. New York: MLA, 1996. 9–24. Print.

Heather Bastian participated in the assessment project from 2008 to 2010. Currently, she is assistant professor at the College of St. Scholastica in Minnesota. Her research interests include genre theory, composition pedagogy, and writing program administration.

Sonya Lancaster administered the assessment project from 2008 to 2014. She is associate director of the first- and second-year English program at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include assessment, literature and writing pedagogy, and writing program administration.

Justin Ross Sevenker participated in the assessment project in 2009. Currently, he is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests include histories of literacy and instruction, teacher education, and writing program administration.

E.A. Williams assisted with the assessment project from 2008 to 2011, first as a member of the writing program committee and later as the program's administrative intern. She is assistant professor in the English Department and writing director at the University of Saint Francis in Indiana. Her research interests include conceptual metaphor theory, writing and science, and writing program administration.

