MakeYourStory

Episode 3: Made Assignments

SH: Sarah Huber
BH: Brian Hitselberger
MM: Megan Miltimore

Part 1

SH: Hello and welcome to make your story where we highlight student making
across campus. My name is Sarah Huber. I am a professor in library science and the director of the Knowledge Lab, which is the library's maker space. I'm also one of the hosts of this podcast. Joining us today is Professor Brian Hitzelberger, senior lecturer in the Rueff School of Art and Design. Thank you for joining us today.

BH: Thank you so much for having me, Sarah.

SH: Our topic today is non-text based assignments or made assignments.
Examples can include work made from paper or fabric all the way to videos, podcasts, among other mediums and formats. I'm excited to talk with you today about your work and a particular assignment you wrote within a curriculum. We had a student use resources in the Knowledge Lab to make it. Her name is Megan Miltimore. She called her work "Owl Warrior." We have a photo provided with the podcast post and part two of this conversation is with Megan. Can you describe this project and the purpose of the project within your course?

BH: So the course is AD 106, also known as design 2 or 3d design. It's part
of a foundations curriculum that is one year long that includes design 1 or 2D design and also beginning drawing. So all art students take these classes, whatever their discipline is, or whatever their ultimate concentration or major is going to be. Industrial design, interior design, ceramics, photography, everybody takes them. And these design classes are really about introducing fundamental design concepts to students. First on a two-dimensional surface, anything flat, then in a three-dimensional, in a three-dimensional which is the case with AD 106, 3d design or Design II.

SH: Making this wearable sculpture. Was there something particular about it
being worn? Was there something particular about the medium that they had to meet?

BH: Yeah, I think I am interested in clothing. I've never really been like a
fashion guy, although I find that stuff interesting, but I never wanted to kind of work in it.
I would never say I'm like a fashion artist or a fashion obsessed person, but I think clothing is a kind of sculpture that we wear, and it is a designed object or a group of objects that we interact with on a daily basis. And I find the demands that clothing must meet in terms of the movements of the body to be totally fascinating. And it's also, I think, a really good entry point for students to start to think about design in three-dimensional terms because it's something they're familiar

with. We all kind of have our own relationship to clothes. We get dressed every day, and I think getting the students to start to think about how space can work, one of the ways that we do that in this class is through the means of their own body. So I was interested in making a piece that would be worn on the body and not necessarily act like clothing, because, as you've seen, these projects would never be mistaken for a uniform or anything you'd wear in the day to day. But they do use the body as a kind of sight, as a place of beginning, and also ask the student to really think about design, the design principles in relation to something that they are always with, which is their own form. I think that one of the challenges of this project is that it's often conceived of in parts. Students will sort of say, I know I really want this, I really want this, and I really want that, and I want to make this out of this material and that out of that material. But one of the challenges is actually how to get the parts to connect so that they can be integrated and that they can be kind of unified and worn. Students don't have to get out and run a marathon wearing these pieces, but they do have to wear them and move around in them. And designing a system by which discrete parts interact and are able to move as one uniform object or element along with you, that's hard.

SH: That's super hard.

BH: That's super hard.

SH: And it's this intersection as you're talking. I'm thinking it's an intersection of beautiful and practical.

BH: Totally.

SH: I want this to be stunning in some way, but it has to work. Do you have students from a variety of programs in your courses? If so, do you see a difference in how students approach assignments that are non-text based or made?

BH: I do definitely have students from a variety of disciplines, which is really part of the pleasure, because these are foundations courses, there are no prerequisites for them. Often these courses are the prerequisites for other courses in the art department. So to that end, they are available to really anyone at Purdue. And I think we just have students who are curious, who need a core credit that can be fulfilled by taking one of these classes. And one of the pleasures of having a class like this is that you get a lot of different types of thinkers. And I certainly sort of see different approaches based off of what that student's individual experiences or educational experiences is. Art students or design students, they're really used to taking a class where they make stuff, not so much with students from other disciplines.

I find our students are really very well prepared for things like test taking or writing, but to actively make something with their hands that can be kind of unknown territory for students from different disciplines. But because it's novel, I find it's often met with pleasure, or at least it can be. After some encouragement on my part, I think that one of the blessings of this class, I think, I don't want to use the word blessings. Yeah. One of the benefits of this class is that it really opens up making as just another way of learning and another way of knowing.

SH: Yeah. We get students from so many different programs in the Knowledge Lab where I ask that question over and over. Could you see doing an assignment with something you've made? You're coming here just because you enjoy it? A lot of times when I ask, I just want to make. I just want to decompress. Well, could you see using it in a business class? Well, I haven't seen that opportunity, but I'd really like to. I see professors' assignments all across campus, and I see more and more visual, more and more things that are made, and it's kind of novel on both sides. The students and the professors.

BH: Yeah, for sure.

SH: But it's the real world, right? Once they get out into the real world, there's a lot that's visual, a lot that's made. The text based reality is becoming slimmer.

SH: The real world is interdisciplinary.

BH: If you compare a text-based assignment to one like the wearable sculpture assignment, can you give a general comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of each?

SH: I think, you know, a text-based assignment, there is that familiarity there. I mean, our educational system in this country, again, it really does a lot to kind of prepare students for learning and demonstrating knowledge in those ways. Making based assignments like the wearable sculpture, that really asks students to function outside of their comfort zone. And I think that that can make students nervous, especially because I work with undergraduates. I work with undergraduates who are typically in their early years of their programs, and they're very, very grade motivated. And so that is encouraging students to try something. Maybe it won't work. Who cares? Fail forward. I mean, it's like all those things. It can be very, very difficult to integrate that into what your preexisting idea of success as a student is, which is good grades, high GPA, scholarships. And I think that that is a very real concern. I don't have the answer to that. I try and kind of create an interaction in the classroom, like in the moment where I'm not going to let a student fail 100% in their project. I take a lot of pleasure in kind of, like, working with students, and the classes are small enough that that can be done. These classes are capped at 18 students for that reason. So I think mediating the kind of nervousness of failure is a big part of that.

SH: And possibly some gray area. Possibly some gray area, because humans just learn from mistakes and getting things wrong. That's just how our brains work, and that's really kind of difficult to comprehend.

BH: Yeah, I don't know that I've fully grasped it myself. I mean, I certainly love to make a plan and execute it and have it succeed beautifully and get really frustrated when things that I want to see happen don't happen. And I've been doing this for a really long time. I do rationally know that I learn more from my failures than my successes. I know that, and I say that. [Laughter.]

SH: But no one wants to do.

BH: No one wants to hear that.

SH: And these are really. I mean, let's face it, our students are very accomplished. The people we work with are very accomplished, and so none of us want to publicly not get something right.

BH: Right. Of course.

SH: It is so hard. Yeah.

BH: Something that I've been experimenting with more lately, and I do think that this is something that non-text based assignments allow, is collaboration, because I think a minute ago I said the real world is interdisciplinary, and you and I have talked about this before. I also think that the real world is also collaborative, and the idea of an individual success story and kind of one person building and doing everything right and achieving everything on their own is just a fantasy. One that it is our responsibility, I think, as educators, to kind of wake our students up to is that I think the most innovative work and creative work is coming out of collaborations. So in my classes, everybody's got to do their own project. But I try and encourage students helping one another or looking around and seeing something that maybe another student is doing that maybe a version of that could help for them. The cool thing about a making based assignment is you have a whole group of people who are doing the same thing with basically the same materials in the same amount of time. And over the period of two or three weeks, they all become kind of experts in this process, and they can share their expertise with each other. So I

have them talk to each other about their work regularly and often in process and after the fact, and I find that they are able to kind of bring insights to one another that I'm not able to because I'm just overseeing it, whereas they're the ones that are actually doing it. And that kind of collaborative learning, I find, is more amenable to assignments like the ones that we're talking about.

SH: I think we talked a little bit about this already. I was going to ask, if you talk about how you assess a text based versus a made object.

BH: The truth of the matter is something I may subjectively term as excellent, another person may objectively term as good, or vice versa. And I just don't know that there's any way truly around that that is mathematical and repeatable and turns easily into language or a rubric. I think that's one of the really big challenges in teaching any kind of art, I think, or any kind of creative work, which is why I try not to put a ton of emphasis on the assessment and try to really emphasize the process more, because I think that's where the real learning happens. The true benefit is not the finished piece so much as the knowledge of what they're interested in, so that they can carry it forward into future classes and future work, in whatever form.

SH: Do you have advice for both students and professors who are relatively new to non-text based assignments? So that's in both preparing it for students and students completing it themselves?

BH: I always default to the fact that because I'm teaching in an art and design department, that my students, at least on some level, are visual learners. So I really believe in showing examples. I think students really need to see what it is that we're talking about, what has come before and what is possible. And I try to make sure that the examples I show are as different from one another as possible, to the chagrin of the students, because they might be looking for an answer. But I always try and show a lot of stuff from history. So for this project, we'll look at David Bowie's stage costumes, and then we'll also look at sound sculptures by the Chicago artist Nick Cave. And then we'll look at, you know, we'll look at different societies or different historical periods where costume and dress has been part of either social or spiritual rituals. And then we'll also just look at student work from previous semesters, things that other students did. And I try and show examples of things that worked out really well and things that worked out not so well. I also try and talk about the things in each example that are working better than others, because every so often, a project is kind of flying at a really high altitude on every level. But more often than not, things that are very, very inventive and very, very creative might suffer from a lack of construction or things that are very, very well put together and very well constructed might not be that visually engaging to look at. And so I think that it can be really helpful to kind of explode all the different parts of a project and talk about each one of them individually, because that is what you have to think about when you're making stuff like this. It's not a simple matter of, is it good? Is it bad? Will he like it? Will he not, is it an A? Is it an F? There's all these gray areas, and the rubrics reflect that, too. I evaluate things like visual texture, visual interest, construction, craft. I kind of, like, look at all these factors individually, and then to the degree that I'm able, I also demonstrate techniques that's hard with this project when everybody is truly doing something that is so, so different from one another. But there are some things that I can show students live and in person while they watch that can really, really help their own construction or their own efforts to imagine what their construction could be.

SH: I think those are really helpful examples because, A, you're asking them to do something, say visual, breaking it down for the different visual elements and showing examples and then doing some demoing. And for many professors, that might be just asking someone to come in and do it if they don't know if it's something made, if it's a video, if it's a podcast, doing something hands on seems very valuable, as opposed to, here's some examples out there on the Internet, right?

SH: Yeah. Also, if one student is doing something that's really interesting, I'm not shy about being like, do you mind if I show this to everybody right now? And I'll just hold it up

and say, I want everyone to take a look at what Teresa is doing here. I think that this is really successful for these reasons. I think that just kind of using the people who are in the room as examples for one another can be another really valuable tool.

SH: So what campus resources would you like to see expanded for not only creating nontext based assignments, but also the navigation of reading or comprehending these type of assignments?

BH: Well, we already have this wonderful Knowledge Lab, but I would love to see a Knowledge floor or a Knowledge building.

SH: I like this plug.

BH: The secret is out in the Knowledge Lab. I mean, it's always popping all the time. And so I think that speaks to a kind of enthusiasm for the resources that are here. And I don't think I'm alone. I think other faculty on campus are putting into place assignments or projects where the Knowledge Lab is really a helpful space to make those happen.

SH: Thank you. I'm so glad to hear that. As a librarian, I've been thinking a lot about this space and how it relates to information. And I have this trajectory of my research where we used to have these kind of what you call boutique libraries, your chemistry library, your math library. And the spaces were unique for that type of information. Well, of course, with budgets and everything being digitized, it all went into one space and became homogenized. And so everybody's going to this one library, often digital, and it's all online. And now you have makerspaces or the Knowledge Lab. You have these humanity spaces working with how to parse information and visualize it in different ways. So I can see it going off into these different locations of, how do you experience information in different ways and then create your own information? That's what I saw with Megan coming in here. Of course, she used books, which was perfect. I mean, it was a little sacrilegious as a librarian, cut them all up. [Laughter.]

BH: And make them into feathers, but it.

SH: Was also very beautiful. And so she took this idea and took this information, made literally and figuratively, made it into new types of information. I wonder if that's where we're headed. I would love to see this expanded, to explore that idea.

BH: Yeah, I do, too. And me personally, something I'm really interested in is in terms of kind of sites of collaboration. I mean, I actually am interested in books as a form for that. And something I've been exploring lately with other classes is making collaborative books with my students. For so many years, I kind of have been giving these prompts and coming up with these projects, and my students do really wonderful things, and they turn them in, and I get to evaluate them and talk about them and critique them, and they serve all their purposes, but I become interested in kind of having them live another life. And so I actually write before I came here today, I'm working on a collaborative book with my MFA students, where all this writing that they actually did is kind of coming together to form this collaborative book that I think could be really interesting as a work in and of itself, but also potentially as a resource for other students or for other educators. And so I think bookmaking facilities, we have a Riso printer here, which, of course, I'm obsessed with. And I would love to see the kind of bookmaking and RISO printing facilities also expanded.

SH: Touching on something I've been wanting to do for a long time as well, this kind of collaborative, again, knowledge making. So people are doing research to collaboratively create something that they're sharing with others. I imagine there's this modeling involved of experts on something, modeling information for novices in this really engaging way. Like, okay, my professors and my peers made this, and there can be drawing in it. There can be something that pops out. Writing. People are really good at writing. People are really good at visuals. Disciplines across

campus that can come and resource. And so you're learning during the process, and then you're sharing that knowledge.

BH: Yeah, I mean, it's funny, I feel like I keep coming back this idea, but the idea of the world being interdisciplinary. I think also the book is an interdisciplinary space, and libraries are clearly interdisciplinary. And I think the idea of a book is kind of. Maybe there's the physical form of a book, and making those takes skills, but also the book is a kind of collection of all these different ideas, a kind of suitcase that holds all these different things. And I'm interested in kind of making books that have as many different types of things packed in them as possible. And I have the pleasure of working with all these wonderful artists on a regular basis. So I think it was only a matter of time before I wanted to start kind of like putting some of those things in as well.

SH: Well, this is a great conversation. I'm so appreciative.

BH: Yeah, thanks for having me. This is so fun. Yeah. I really like this form. It's a way to make a conversation into something that can be shared. And I think talking about what we do and why we do it is always a great opportunity for reflection, but I really think that it can help somebody else sort of reflect alongside. So thank you for having me.

Part 2

SH: Hello, and welcome to make your story where we highlight student making across campus. Joining us today is Megan Miltimore. She is a second year or sophomore in graphic design and film and video production. Thank you for being with us today, Megan.

MM: Thank you for having me.

SH: We're going to talk about a wearable sculpture assignment you completed for your AD106 II Design. A sculpture made from pages of books that you titled the "Owl Warrior." Can you describe the course and the project?

MM: The course is a required course for most art and design students. So in the class I was with not just graphic designers. I had industrial designers and interior designers and then other people who are just art majors. So you got a wide range of abilities in the class. And Design II was focused on 3d design. So everything we made, we made 3d elements of.

SH: Did it have to be out of certain materials? What was it you were trying to communicate? What was the specific reasoning behind it?

MM: The criteria for the wearable object was it had to be like, found items. You couldn't use, "Oh, I just have all of this poster board that we've been using this whole time," or using something that's not conventionally used for wearing stuff. Like, you can't just use fabric or a sewing machine to make clothes. You had to find random pieces. Like, I know some other people would use bottle caps. A lot of people ended up using cardboard because it was good for the structure of it. I ended up choosing a book because it was the easiest thing that I could get to. I went to some thrift store and bought some books for like, $3 to tear apart. And I also used cardboard for my base.

SH: What was your favorite part of this project?

MM: My favorite part, and in most of my projects, my favorite part is being actually able to build something, especially with it being a physical assignment compared to, like, an essay assignment. You have a finished product. When you're done, you have something you can hold and show people. When you write a paper, most people don't want to read your paper.

SH: That's a really good point. [Laughter.]

MM: Like, when I'm at family events, it's like, oh, look what I made this semester. Do you want to read my six-page paper on it?

SH: That's an excellent point. You got so much attention in the makerspace for this. I mean, we were all over it and wanted to know. We wanted to know what it was being made out of, the purpose behind it, what you were going to do with it. It's just a way to engage. People are instantly engaged with it.

MM: It's so unique, too. And it's something that, like with thought processes, it's similar. Whenever you're making something that you have ideas and then some of them don't work, so you have to go back to the drawing board and rebuild. But just being able to create something with your hands and build upon that is so different from just writing a paper.

SH: Do you see yourself? Um, is it easier to go back to the drawing board to remake or adjust? Make tweaks with something you've made versus something you've written?

MM: I've never been a great writer, so I find it easier to do tweaks like that. But then also in my process of just creating something, when I'm given an assignment, I always end up making lists of all of the ideas and possibilities I have. And then whichever one I keep, like, my brain keeps going back to when I'm about to go to bed, which one am I thinking the most of, which one excites me the most? I usually end up going back to that one.

SH: That's a great process. I'm going to use that. Making a list and then what is it that I keep going back to? What am I most drawn to?

MM: Because then also when I get frustrated with it, because every part of the process isn't something I'm going to absolutely love. I already have that passion for at least this idea of it, that it's okay to get frustrated. I can keep moving past it because I already have that excitement and passion for it.

SH: Can you talk about how you approach making versus writing an assignment?

MM: So for SCLA, we read.

SH: And what's SCLA? Just a communications course?

MM: I don't know what it stands for, but it's SCLA.

SH: Okay.

MM: We have to read my version of the course because each teacher has a different set of books that they'll have the students read, but all of them involve speeches, and I get a little bit more bored in the writing aspect of things. And when you're done with the project, you're kind of just done with the project. You don't come back to it or revisit it. With some of my old designs, I might come back and revisit it and see with all of the stuff that I've learned, try and recreate it with all the knowledge that I've learned, even just from going through the project. Like with my owl warrior, it was made out of my suit of armor kind of part. It was all made out of cardboard base, but then I had attached the sleeves and different things with just some push pins to put in so that they could move a little. But going back and making some of that a little bit more movable because it's very hard to get on by yourself.

SH: You make a good point. I'm thinking about my own writing as a professor, writing journal articles versus things made as an artist or working in this makerspace. Once I've published it, once it's out, it's done, and I build on the ideas, maybe in the next article, but with something I've made, like if I'm painting, I can go over it with oil painting. I can rip something out

of something I've sewn and remake it. I am more prone to going back to something I've made.

MM: I've gone back to characters I've drawn or created in fifth grade, which I was not good at art then because I'm a fifth grader. But I've gone back and revisited those characters and drawn them in the way that suits me now, because also, as humans, we like to create. For me, creating stuff is where I figure out my emotions. I'm able to kind of release whatever's been built throughout the day and just going back to something that I created as my fifth grade self, to me now being 20 years old and making something. Yeah, it's very interesting to see that nostalgia and also where I've come from to where I am now.

SH: Yeah, you never let that character go, and it sounds like it matures with you in some way and matures and changes with you. And you're right, it works. Another part of us, the creative side of making stuff, actually feeling something with.

MM: Your hands, is something I will never get from writing. Because when I'm done writing, I'm kind of just done writing. But when I mold something, I can still hold it afterwards. When I work with clay, I always make it, like, how I can smooth it, and there's the different parts that my hands fit into it as I'm molding it, that I can always go back on that piece and know exactly where my hands fit into it.

SH: Your unique impression. Yeah. That's interesting. I like that. I work with professors across campus that are more and more trying to integrate made things as an assignment or some kind of visual media. So that can be video, photography. Again, made objects, not just the essay. And I'm finding there is a bit of guesswork going on with professors if it's not in their traditional field. They want this for their students. So students really know what's expected of them for written material. They know I need to do these paragraphs. I know, APA, I know the structure of something written. But you tell me to make something visual, you tell me I need to make something made. Maybe it gets a bit murkier on what the expectations are, if that makes sense.

SH: It does get a bit murky, but even for when I wrote papers in high school, because that's where I wrote most of my papers, I was always writing for that teacher because each teacher kind of has what they really like. I'd always do full circle endings in one of my classes because the teacher loved that, and that would help you get a better grade. And there's a bit of that still in art because it's all subjective. So with that, I've had some teachers that it's like, this project might be perfect for them, but with the same teacher. With a different teacher, same project, they might have a different view on it, knocking off points for certain things. A lot of our stuff is based on your composition and just how that flows. There's some classes where we could only do stuff asymmetrically. You couldn't have anything that was symmetrical in your piece or one portion of your grade is craftsmanship, because even with our digital pieces, we have to print them out, matte them on a board, and present them to the class. So when you're printing and matting, you have to make sure you cut it to the right sizes and stipulations and everything, and that will be part of your grade.

SH: I like what you said about.

MM: It.

SH: Sounds like you're very aware of the expectations of the teacher and that they can be quite different. It isn't the medium, it's the expectation of the teacher.

MM: You're always playing it for someone. Even if you're in a job, you're doing what your client wants.

SH: That's a good point. It's a very practical approach.

MM: There might be something that you like better, but the client might want it in purple, even though you know purple won't work.

SH: You're right. You're really preparing yourself for the workforce. I know. I didn't think like that as a student. I thought of, what is this teacher giving me for me to enhance my voice? What is this education giving me for me to craft my voice? And you're talking quite a different perspective. It's a very workforce perspective.

MM: Yeah. I feel like I've lived in that age a little bit more, too, because of all of our social media and stuff. With everybody on social media, they're all marketing towards their audience. They want people to stay on their page for more views to keep you coming back and keeping you engaged.

SH: Do you find yourself working more towards the grade than the creative process?

MM: A lot of these classes are more about your process and how your process works. We don't have super constricting things, and it's more about your process of getting there.

SH: Yeah, I'm hearing that more and more that giving students more freedom helps them to be more engaged.

MM: It's also a bit daunting.

SH: Right. It can be overwhelming sometimes. We love to just be given a list, and I'm going to check that list.

MM: Oh, yeah.

SH: As an outsider, that's one thing I notice. If it is something written, I notice a rubric is very detailed. And if the professor hands you a rubric, this is what should be included versus more made or visual assignments. There's more freedom to go these different directions. That could be daunting.

MM: Yeah.

SH: But some people don't let themselves be heard because they want to get an a. You know what I mean?

MM: Yeah. I'm sometimes one of those people. I care a little too much about the grade.

SH: I think that's very common here. Not as a bad thing. I don't mean that as a negative thing, but this is high stakes here. I mean, the bar is very high here. Is there a form of media you would like to explore deeper, to learn about new things and communicate them with others?

MM: I think we all should be kind of multifaceted in either learning things when teachers give it to us, because everybody learns differently, we all have different experiences that kind of guide how we take in information. That also, I am a graphic design and film major because I like both of those forms of communication. We, as humans need to communicate and having those different facets of knowing everything about graphic design and film. When I go to people who just know about one thing versus the other, I bring something more to the table. So if, like, an engineer was to learn more about graphic design, they would bring more to the table, more interesting ideas, something out of the box that you wouldn't think of, because we're combining things that normally don't go together.

SH: And I think that's what I see quite a bit across campus, too. It doesn't mean everybody has to be good at everything, but if they can better understand how their peers and colleagues gravitate towards learning about something, making something, it gives them a little bit more insight, and they're able to work across disciplines, and increasingly, it's transdisciplinary. We're working in teams to solve problems where everybody's bringing different strengths.

MM: At least some basics.

SH: Just some basics. Exactly.

MM: You can actually give constructive feedback.

SH: Yeah, exactly. If I'm working with someone and I don't have a clue how they approached it, I don't know the questions to ask, and I know something's not working, but I don't know how to give feedback. Well, what if you approached it this way or that way from your perspective? Right. It kind of puts me in a box. Yeah.

So, last question.

What campus resources would you like to see expanded for not only creating nontext based assignments, but also the navigation of reading or comprehending these types of assignments. I know you're in probably a very self-contained program that has things for you, but are there any gaps you've seen where you're just like, I really wish this was here at Purdue because of this idea I have.

MM: I feel like we have a few gaps in film. If you're not in the film major, you can't really access cameras and stuff.

SH: Okay.

MM: Which we do have an iPhone now that if you really want to create videos and stuff, you can just start with your iPhone. It's got a good enough video on it that I guess more of my question would be like, Adobe products and stuff. I don't know how much access everybody has to those. Yeah, because that's one of the main things that's used in just the actual workforce.

SH: Like Adobe Premiere and illustrator.

MM: Adobe Premiere, illustrator and Photoshop are the main ones used in film and graphic design.

SH: This is great. Thank you so much for being here with me today. I really appreciate this conversation.

MM: Thank you so much for having me.