The following two pages contain the most engaging assignment I have developed in three decades of university teaching. It is a junior level assignment in a core course of 230 students. Several students have conveyed to me that it is the favorite assignment they have ever had in a class at NIU. This is the version I will be using in Fall 2014 in COMS 302 Introduction to Organizational Communication which is part of the NIU Course Transformation Project. A majority of students take this course as part of the core requirements of the org/corp communication emphasis. So, a course about organizational and corporate life where students learn project management software and building personal brands is not a course where most enrolling for it expect to deal with feelings.

Three components make this assignment particularly engaging.

It is nonlinear.

It connects to students' personal web of experiences.

It provides a concrete application of the unit of the course exploring the tensions between individual identity and organizational membership.
“The Wall” Assignment – Individual Analysis of One's Relationship to NIU (100 points)

This assignment is an analysis of your relationship as an individual to NIU as an institution through the lens of Pink Floyd's 1979 The Wall album.

I start with two disclaimers. First, there are some lyrics in this assignment that may offend some of you. Just pass over those parts—they are not essential for completing this assignment. Second, I know that this musical genre will not appeal to many of you. You may not be familiar with them, but this album was voted in 2003 as number 87 of the best 500 albums of all time by Rolling Stone magazine. The album is a concept album that many consider to be the best rock opera ever done (the other contender is the also thought provoking Tommy (Pinball Wizard ring a bell?) by the Who).

This assignment focuses on the relevance of the metaphor of a wall found in Pink Floyd's The Wall 1979 album. It is about a central character named Pink that we mainly know from the movie that followed in 1982 who has a lot of parallels to the boyhood of Rogers Waters from the band who drove the story line of this album. Your analysis can be excellent without dealing with the historic context of Roger Waters and the band. The album just serves as a catalyst for you to think about your role as an individual and your identity as an NIU student who is part of the larger institution known as NIU. This tension between your identity as an individual and as an employee of an organization will continue to exist as long as your working life exists and even into your retirement.

I realize the cut The Trial has some lyrics that may offend some people. Just skip that song or any song lyric that offends you. You can complete the assignment without reading those cuts. You probably can do much of what you need from The Wall parts 1, 2, & 3.

Visit the following link to lyrics from The Wall (Parts 1, 2, & 3). It may help you get into the spirit of things if you find the actual sound tracks on the Internet and listen to them as well. 


The most famous of the cuts was The Wall (part 2) and is very relevant to us in an educational setting. Note that the band has said that they were not anti-education. They were just against the type of education some of them experienced growing up in England.

Think about what they are saying in Comfortably Numb.


Examine the lyrics of the cut The Trial. How do you see the tearing down of the wall?


Finally consider who is outside the wall in the cut Outside the Wall and which students are outside the wall at NIU.


The paper starts with an introduction culminating with a thesis about the metaphor of “the wall” as it applies to your experience as a student at NIU. Think about whether you as an individual student feel that NIU as an institution imposes “thought control” on you like in the lyrics of The Wall Part 2. So, do you think NIU robs you of your individuality by making you another brick in the wall or do you like being a part of NIU as an institution and what it represents? It does not have to be fully one way or the other. As a faculty member, I have chosen to remain a brick in the wall here at NIU, but I have many former colleagues who have found pastures greener at another institution (some have also regretted leaving NIU). Just be honest. It is okay if you are entirely negative, positive, or mixed in your reactions. After you have graduated, email me and tell me whether your impression of NIU as a wall changes.

Alternatively, you may make the case that the metaphor of the wall is no longer relevant or never was relevant to students at NIU. The big thing in your reaction paper is to have a thesis statement and then support it with arguments from the text of the lyrics. Outside sources are not required, but document them in one of the standard academic styles if you use them.

The final product is a two-page paper (single spaced) that assesses how the metaphor of “the wall” from Pink Floyd's 1979 The Wall album is relevant to your experience at NIU.

The key for the paper is to have a short introduction, a clear thesis relating to its contemporary importance, and two or three supporting points related to the lyrics. You do not need to be comprehensive. For example, you could focus only on whether your experience is as a student outside the wall at NIU. It might be about your experiences a part of the wall. Is being a brick in the wall always a bad thing in your experience? The paper could focus on the action of tearing down the wall or where we are left at NIU after the wall is destroyed. What are NIU students are really getting at in regard to education? It could be that you see new technology as having a particular impact on the institution positively or negatively. As the NIU Football team has had great success recently, many students find some value in identifying with NIU and its winning team.

You might reflect on whether you identify with the winning team or other successful groups and activities at NIU. Some do not experience a connection with any sport at NIU, but instead have found a place on a debate team, creating a documentary, engaged in musical performance, or as part of the Greek system. Others work full time while taking classes and supporting a family; they may feel they are outside the NIU wall.

It is not required that you stay faithful to the motives of Roger Waters who wrote the lyrics of most of this album. This album is classified by many as a rock opera with the Who's Tommy being its only rival in the scale of its performance. It followed Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon that remains one the classic rock albums of all times. There are likely several different motives intertwined in these lyrics. The movie that appeared a few years after the album deviated somewhat from the original plot developed Roger Waters. Roger Waters was actually fired from the production team that produced the movie. Ultimately, Roger Waters left the band after tensions with other members became too great. Recently, Waters has been very involved with the Wounded Warriors Project helping wounded soldiers make music again.

Your perception of the metaphor of the wall may be different if you only listen to the lyrics or if you also watch the video. Either path is fine with me. The wall will not be the same for all people. Some may see the wall as a personal barrier to protect oneself while others may focus on the way the wall is a formidable force for good that will likely have great future influence through continued associations with one's sorority or fraternity. Others may see it as formidable barrier that stands between them and their career objective. Your grade depends on the quality of your thesis and the quality of arguments that support your thesis. Individuals experiencing alienation from the NIU wall have often generated compelling papers in the past receiving high marks. Whatever your experience with NIU as an institution can be a foundation for an excellent thesis.
**Intention of Assignment**

My original intent for this assignment was to create an assignment that would reach atypical and nontraditional students in this mass lecture class of 230 students who might be feeling some sense of alienation. It had been my prior experience that many students in this large, junior-level core class knew few others in the class and very few students on campus. Many of them had transferred recently from a junior college. Focusing on the theme of alienation, I searched my memory for musical artifacts that might connect with those listen to a lot of music. I was seeking to enter their worlds through an entry point that did not use traditional, linear logical presentation. I settled on Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* because some of the most prominent lyrics appear on the surface to contradict why students were attending the university in the first place and to encourage them to get a real education by thinking for themselves.

**Problems with the Linear PowerPoint World**

We are now in our second decade of PowerPoint’s existence. It was not, however, the first of the presentation software packages—initially competitors like Astound had more advanced features that enabled elaborate effects for presentations in that era. In those early years of my career, I thought I could better maintain attention using animation effects and really bad clip-art images.

I discovered four things. First, I became aware of a large body of literature that was emerging about split-attention effects finding that it was not a good idea to place a picture or diagram in a book that was not connected in close proximity to the text discussing it.

Second, I discovered mediocre students were copying the slides exactly believing that the content on the slides was the most important thing to learn for exams. They focused on the literal points and not the meaning of the points. Students focusing on the PowerPoint slides were so busy copying the points that they did not think about the application of the material. The could parrot back the slides, but not apply the content very well to new situations.

Third, I started providing the slides before the class started. Attendance dropped until I started using clickers, but students still were not doing well at application.

Fourth, I moved to a question-oriented approach more like Plato's dialectic method instead of the more linear, efficiency model that was largely a product of an Aristotelian world. I still used PowerPoint, but gave students the questions they needed to answer from the readings if a quiz were to appear.

**The Wall Assignment Allows Engagement through Non-linear Channels**

*The Wall* assignment as I use it does not dissect the artifact and attempt to nail down the exact meaning of the relevant lyrics. There is ambiguity in the way the wall metaphor is used in the lyrics where it can be a self-fulfilling construction of a personal barrier isolating oneself from the rest of the world, but the wall can represent institutional barriers.

One could go into the historical issues behind the lyrics such as Roger Waters’s (I know I still live in a Strunk & White world) reaction to governmental control after losing his father in WWII. That is evident in reaction to Margaret Thatcher handling of the Falklands in Pink Floyds album *Final Cut*. Yet, feelings about the inadequate education received in the British educational system are most clearly found in *The Wall*. Although some students will go there, focusing on the NIU wall as a metaphor of their own experience really does more at engaging them at a level deeper than a cognitive analysis.

**The Wall Assignment Connects to Students’ Experiences**

One of my basic assumptions is that we as learners operate within a framework of an associated memory network which is a nonlinear web of connections rather than a bunch of mental file cabinets where our memories are stored.
Many students listen to all or some of the album as they read the lyrics from the included hyperlinks. It is also an opportunity to discuss how we often mindlessly listen to music without examining the lyrics.

Others watch the video on Netflix. Their analyses often go very different directions because some engage the assignment from the perspective of the main character Pink in the movie.

**The Wall Assignment Fosters Application to Their Own Worlds of Course Content**

Initially I was conflicted whether students would take this assignment seriously, but more students took this writing seriously than any assignment I previously used in a course. I read 230 of these assignments in Fall 2013 and it changed me. I was not prepared for the range of applications made by students as result of doing this assignment.

My intent for this assignment was to reach those who do take a core course to just get through the requirement. A strange thing happened, some of the best students in class loved this assignment too. Two of those students are working as peer mentors in my class in Fall 2014.

There are dangers to this assignment. One talented student contacted me a few weeks ago asking for career advice. He mentioned this assignment in his email and how it stimulated his thinking. After completing three years at NIU and being actively involved with student activities, he was questioning whether a degree from NIU was going to get him where he wanted to go for his career. He mentioned some very successful people who did not get their degrees. I encouraged him to finish his degree whether it be at NIU or elsewhere because my experience has been that many students later regret not finishing. I suggested it is not a good thing in life to leave a lot of things unfinished because it attacks a sense of accomplishment that is an important foundation to build one's life.

This individual was offered a very good job that he feels will be a positive step in realizing his career objectives while being in close proximity to a couple of other fine universities where his new employer may actually assist him in finishing his degree. I am pleased that this student carefully explored his options and decided to follow his passions. I am pleased for him even though I would have liked for him to have a degree from NIU and to be a proud alumnus.

This example, however, does not discourage me. Many surprising revelations happened for those happy about their identification with NIU and their various affiliations here. Several students concluded they were comfortable playing a role as a brick in the institutional wall and without them the wall would not exist. Others concluded being outside the wall was not as much the institution's fault as it was the other commitments they had in life. Yet, there were students of color, those with disabilities, older returning students, and others not in the mainstream who discussed their isolation and what the institution could do to change this. It was quite a range of varied responses, but this crazy, offbeat assignment certainly engaged a lot of students.

My central message is identify your teaching objectives first. Form follows function. Creative approaches to teaching make little sense if you do not meet your content objectives. Then, think of innovative, and perhaps, crazy nonlinear ways to engage the imaginations and passions of your students to reach those objectives. After all, if your goal in graduate school is to prepare for an academic career, you already are a bit crazy.