

**Barriers to Writing Transfer: Writing in the Major at the ‘2+2’ University**  
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**2011-2012 CCCC Research Initiative Final Report**

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This brief report summarizes our writing transfer research, which began in September 2011 with funding from a WIU University Research Council grant and continues today thanks to funding from CCCC and CWPA.

### **Summary**

We recently concluded data collection and are shifting our focus to publication of preliminary findings based on holistic analysis. After we complete interview transcription, we will complete formal coding of data and publish more comprehensive findings.

Our key accomplishments include:

- A) Developing a pool of 16 student and 14 faculty participants, representing 13 different majors from all over the university, then conducting 187 interviews with these participants, including analysis of their writing for both required writing courses and often workplaces or other contexts;
- B) Presenting preliminary findings at CCCC, CWPA, the Elon Critical Transitions transfer conference, and through multiple talks at WIU;
- C) Establishing a publishing agenda which will see our work published in a variety of scholarly venues in the next year;
- D) Laying the foundation for publishing a website sharing our findings with a broad, general audience by working with CWPA locate long-term server space for the website, and recruiting a graduate student to create user-profiles and other useful content;
- E) Writing external grants which target the long-term funding of the project, especially the analysis and publication of findings.

### **Abstract of findings**

With grant support, we have been able to sustain a long-term longitudinal study, which has allowed us to study writing transfer over time. Our project is unique in this regard—most studies of writing transfer span a year or even less time. We have no doubt this research design has enabled us to learn much about transfer not possible with the shorter term common in much transfer research, and we believe our work nicely compliments other research as a result.

Preliminary findings include the following:

- A) We are documenting the metaphors used to describe transfer, given that they often shape it, both in education and research. For example, writers who understand transfer as *movement* imagine that it can be easily achieved, regardless of the truth of that assumption. Those who use metaphors such as *remixing* are more aware of the difficulty of realizing transfer.

- B) Two well-intended and long standing trends in composition instruction negatively impact transfer: the belief that writing can be easily learned and taught, and encouragement of a powerful but simplistic sense of ownership of one's own writing. Writers who seek to control their own ideas without reservation often fail to adapt them in contexts where doing so would help realize the potential of past skills, knowledge, and experience.
- C) Internships and similar work-to-learn environments offer rich sites for transfer—but often underperform when novice interns lack knowledge or the flexibility to adapt it, or when expert supervisors underestimate the conscious work required to enact transfer.
- D) Student writers who are very mindful of their grades make decisions which favor short-term rewards but negatively impact transfer on the long term—they can engage less productive forms of transfer poorly suited for capitalizing on their skills and experiences.
- E) School-only genres such as the research paper do not offer writers transferable knowledge or approaches which support transfer, and may have negative impacts. Their lack of attention to contexts presents models of writing and writing transfer are particularly damaging.
- F) Learning to write in two very different contexts, such as double majors, or when work, hobbies, and/or school are very different, may help writers develop the ability to transfer. Students in our study with diverse writing experiences (such as majoring in one technical and one artistic field, or studying the natural sciences while writing documentation at work) are far more likely to enact complex forms of transfer.

We also note that two of our graduate research assistants have developed a successful transfer-focused research agendas. Susan Reid presented the results of her study of writing transfer at Southeastern Community College at CCCC 2013 and is preparing a manuscript for *TETYC* based on her research. Ruby Nancy is currently collecting data for a thesis project investigating connections between intersectionality, sexual orientation, and writing transfer.

### **Future work and recommendations for future study**

We recommend the following for future studies of writing transfer. As we transition from data collection to publication of our findings, we hope to use our data set to investigate many of these issues and help others do the same:

- A) Our field of writing studies needs more research which investigates the balance between contextual and individual influences on transfer (community, genre, and tools vs. dispositions and abilities).
- B) Our field needs more quantitative, cross-institutional research investigating (1) the relationships between writing transfer and negotiation, ease, and ownership, and (2) the efficacy of teaching for transfer strategies to foster students who can strategically engage in sophisticated forms of transfer.
- C) Given their missions and institutional locations, community colleges and writing centers are revealing sites of writing transfer, but few studies engage these contexts specifically. More research should include participants from these very important institution types—while recognizing their heterogeneity as well.

- D) While we did not achieve racial diversity in our pool, the three Latino/a participants in our study suggest the need for more inquiry into how writing transfer is connected to race, genre, and sexual orientation.
- E) Because of the longitudinal nature of our study, we have been able to witness the emotional impacts of making successful connections to past knowledge as well as the lows when connections are not recognized or accepted. We encourage more research that bridges writing transfer with affect theory.
- F) How our participants remembered and narrated past experience with writing had terrific impact on writing transfer: several told their stories in ways which either over- or underestimated their ability to affect transfer. This suggests the need for more research on memory and writing transfer.
- G) We encourage research on what King Beach calls *heterochronicity*—why learners make connections at different points in time.
- H) Given that transfer often involves tacit knowledge, a phenomenon quite difficult to study, we also encourage work intended to develop appropriate research methods to complement existing techniques such as the discourse-based interview.
- I) Finally, given what several of our participants said about how they benefited from participating in our study, and what we learned from the very labor-intensive work of attempting to conduct research which truly benefitted our participants, we encourage continued attention to research ethics and beneficence.
- J) It can be difficult to conduct research in the teaching- and service-intensive environment of the state comprehensive university. We benefited from college and university support not typical at SCUs. Our field needs more infrastructure which supports research outside of traditional contexts such as the flagship university.