

## First Steps Beyond First Year: Coaching Transfer After FYC

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### ABSTRACT

*Critics have argued that the General Writing Skills Instruction (GWSI) model of First Year Composition (FYC) be transformed in order to better prepare students for future writing expectations. Such a course might introduce knowledge transfer strategies such as reflection and genre analysis in order to expand awareness of the various writing situations students will encounter. For this exploratory study, the author first collected data on student and faculty perceptions of course content in several traditional GWSI/FYC classes, then followed eight students from this cohort into their first semester as post-FYC sophomores. When these students dealt with new instructors and writing assignments, the author responded by introducing them to genre and discourse community analysis and reflection strategies. Based on student interviews, group discussions, and responses to surveys and other writing, the author concludes that students who complete a GWSI/ FYC course sequence may believe the writing done there has helped them generally prepare for the academic rigor of writing in college classes. But for these same students, reflection, genre analysis, and “bridging” strategies may have a more developmentally appropriate impact outside of FYC during the transition period between FYC and more advanced courses in the major when they are experiencing a range of cross-disciplinary expectations.*

Critics of First Year Composition (FYC) have strongly argued that no generalized benefit exists from what has been called “general writing skills instruction” (GWSI) (Petraglia). Writing across the Curriculum theorists, linguists, and compositionists (Russell, Freedman, Crowley) have questioned whether the curriculum of many FYC classes has any influence on the writing students do in other courses or later in life, citing researchers who completed longitudinal studies of how students write across disciplines and appropriate the conventions of writing in particular disciplines (Her-

rington and Curtis, Chiseri-Strater, Walvoord and McCarthy). This critique of the legitimacy of FYC based on its lack of transferable disciplinary content exacerbated its identity crisis. Process pedagogy had already dismantled “current/traditional” instructional pedagogy based on five paragraph theme formulas and grammar and usage instruction. Looking beyond process meant not returning to literary analysis or personal experience essay assignments, but to teach about and assign writing on language itself (Dew) or writing on writing (Downs and Wardle). This emphasis attempts to describe an FYC sequence that not only creates a more legitimate disciplinary model, but also better prepares students for writing in other disciplines by emphasizing genre and reflection strategies that enhance knowledge transfer (Bawarshi; Wardle, “Mutt Genres”; Nelms and Dively; Beaufort).

In this exploratory study, I draw on student perceptions of writing in both FYC and other courses to consider whether asking students to participate in reflection and other transfer activities at opportune developmental moments in a cross-disciplinary setting might help them develop as writers in ways they may not yet be ready for in FYC. Survey data was gathered about what faculty value when they teach FYC and what students feel they get out of the course sequence<sup>2</sup>. I then followed eight of the students from these courses into their first semester as sophomores to examine what happens when “teaching for transfer” concepts are introduced and applied to the writing assignments these students encounter after FYC. At the end of their first semester as sophomores, students reflected on what they initially said they learned about writing in FYC compared to what they said they learned about writing in their content area classes and in the out of class discussions we had about that writing.

Downs and Wardle have emerged as strong critics of the GWSI/FYC classroom and advocates for substituting an overly general “learning to write” pedagogy with “learning about writing,” so that FYC is transformed into an “introduction to writing studies” course that introduces students to academic writing by teaching them about composition scholarship. In this model, students come to appreciate the range of writing situations academic writers face and in theory employ a wider range of strategies to address these situations due to their enhanced understanding of writing and rhetoric scholarship. FYC is also more likely to be taught by composition experts, thereby enhancing the status of the discipline, the credentials of those who teach FYC, and the quality of instruction.

Wardle’s (“Mutt Genres”) criticism of “learning to write” pedagogy is based in her research and criticism of decontextualized FYC assignments that lack focus and purpose in relation to the writing required in other courses. She emphasizes that these assignments are insubstantial and inf-

fective imitations of genres students will encounter later, and that without better FYC instructor understanding of the expectations of other disciplines and an increased emphasis on student awareness of their own writing strategies, transfer of any writing abilities learned in FYC is unlikely. Awareness is also unlikely given that genres “are context-specific and complex and cannot be easily or meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations and exigencies”(“Mutt Genres,”767), a perspective grounded in activity theory derived from the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues in the 1920s. In this model, an individual wishes to complete a task, which is mediated by the tool that will help complete that task. The task may remain the same, but the tool may vary depending on the individual’s level of development (Vygotsky studied children) and the interaction of the individual with others in dialectical situations that may influence the outcome in complex ways. Learning and literacy theorists have focused on Vygotsky’s notion of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), in which the learners are not able to complete a task by themselves, but together with others, may learn by contributing to the completion of the task. Genre theorists apply this principle by arguing that, as Russell puts it, learners acquire the genres used by some activity field “as one interacts with people involved in the activity field and the material objects and signs those people use (including those marks on a surface we call writing)” (56). In other words, students learn best how to produce specific forms of academic writing by interacting with scholars and researchers interested in producing that specific form of writing.

In this view, students only truly learn particular academic and professional writing genres in context. They learn how to write by being involved in situations that require specific forms of writing as a response to a particular need that arises in that situation. That context may be a content-specific classroom, a job-related task, or a community-based need. But the context must exist. Russell’s analogy is that a GWSI/FYC class has as much value as a course in “ball-handling” would have to teach someone how to play a specific sport. “General writing skills instruction” is a context-free abstraction that doesn’t help students learn “how to write” because such a class doesn’t recognize that genres (like sports) are specialized and socially constructed discourse/practices and that writing is evaluated on the basis of whether the needs of a particular discourse community have been met. The argument that general writing skills instruction teaches students a “universal educated discourse” is discredited as myth, since aside from what Russell calls basic “scribal skills,” every discipline (and the writing genres within that discipline) has its own expectations of what is effective or necessary. Even when FYC instructors attempt to replicate assignments that might appear

in diverse contexts, such as courses in the student's major, these assignments are criticized as imperfect based on the FYC instructor's lack of awareness of particular genres used in that particular subject area (Freedman). Hence Downs and Wardle's seemingly sensible focus on the genres and discipline specific nature of Composition Studies in order to adopt the most meaningful context they could legitimately call their own.

But if writing situations and conventions vary from one discourse community to another, the teaching of transfer strategies becomes the key to helping students make connections between the writing they do in one community compared to another. Transfer scholars start with the work of Perkins and Solomon, who described two types of transfer. "Low road" or "hugging" teaching techniques facilitate what they call "near transfer" by engaging students in activities very much like what they would be doing once the class is done. For example, asking students to actually write a proposal rather than reading and studying proposals would lead to a better ability to write proposals. "High road" or "bridging" techniques facilitate "far transfer" and emphasize applying more abstract concepts learned in a course to a range of situations. For example, a student might learn to apply the concept of "interpretation" or "argument" learned in FYC to the writing done in some other very different class. "High road" transfer then appears to be in conflict with the view of disciplinary values learned only in context, but Wardle reconstructs "high road" as either "individual" or "self-motivated" transfer, in which students seek out or create situations to apply what they've learned, or "context" transfer, in which students apply learned patterns of interaction across situations (approaching behavior expectations in a discourse community). Wardle ultimately prefers the term "generalization" rather than "transfer" to describe the application of both learned tasks and social organization knowledge. The right combination of learning activities within and across social situations (in FYC and other classes), and reflection on that learning, can promote generalization (Wardle, "Understanding Transfer"). This process is also described by Carroll as "transformation" when the emphasis is on the role students come to play as writers.

Context-specific writing instruction is brought to life, as Bazerman describes, through genre analysis of the writing required in a particular context, since genres influence how we think about a topic and how we communicate and relate to each other in specific social situations. Bawarshi also emphasizes context by arguing that genre analysis is a key to helping students "become more effective and critical 'readers' of the sites of action within which writing takes place." He sees genre analysis as an "analytical skill" that is "transferable and does not require immersion in disciplinary cultures" (165), suggesting that some distance from a specific writing

context may be acceptable in efforts to facilitate transfer. Wardle (“Mutt Genres”) imagines a closer relationship with disciplinary contexts by asking what we can teach FYC students about specific academic genres that will help them in other courses, echoing Smit, who similarly asked what aspects of a genre should be made explicit. Wardle has speculated that teaching specific genre forms in FYC might be beneficial if FYC instructors knew what writing students would be doing later, what aspects of those genres should be taught, and if methods can be identified that would help students transfer (or generalize) what they learned in meaningful ways (“Mutt Genres”, 771). Genre analysis might even serve as a starting point for cross-disciplinary discussions between FYC instructors and WAC or WID instructors.

### FACILITATING TRANSFER OUTSIDE OF FYC

Along these cross-disciplinary lines, my goal was to consider less the transformation of FYC and more the potential linkage of existing FYC outcomes with post-FYC disciplinary contexts in order to evaluate the role genre analysis and reflection might play in facilitating transfer (generalization) across these contexts. Russell argues that “if neophytes have some skillful help from adepts in this activity system, through conscious-even systematic and explicit teaching, they may learn to perform an action more quickly and more easily than if they simply ‘picked it up’. [To learn genres], students “need specific, conscious coaching, mentoring, or formal instruction in those genres of writing” (70). While this assistance might ideally come from teachers who are disciplinary experts, the involvement of an individual outside of the discipline who has some awareness of what is happening in more than one activity system might help students cross disciplinary boundaries with greater ease.

A range of responses to the question of what might be done to enhance transfer already exists. As previously noted, Downs and Wardle, as well as Russell and Bawarshi, have emphasized the “writing about writing” approach, arguing that teaching students about writing/composition research during FYC will enhance an appreciation of diverse genres, audience awareness, and multiple writing processes, which will be internalized and transferred in a “high road” fashion to other courses. Others have suggested changes to the FYC curriculum, including exploring more discipline or workplace-based assignments (Nelms and Dively, Bergmann and Zepernick), more research-based assignments (Fishman and Reiff), or service-learning based assignments in “communities of practice” (Bacon). Nelms and Dively have also argued for better training of instructors who teach

writing intensive courses about how to teach writing, what transfer entails, and the importance of teaching about and practicing reflection.

In one of the few longitudinal studies of college writers that emphasizes the role of FYC, Carroll describes FYC as a space in the curriculum to think about conventions in general and practice skills in more complex ways so that FYC is a place to “explore and practice new forms of literacy” (76). Beaufort, based on her longitudinal study of a college writer, has suggested specific instructional activities that would help students begin to recognize the contexts that influence how they might approach a writing situation and gain an understanding of how they might respond to those shifting contexts. Although these activities could be adapted to either FYC or WAC courses, their portability also raises the question of how they might facilitate cross-disciplinary reflection in alternative locations. For this study, I first wanted to get a general sense of what FYC students at my institution felt they got out of the two course sequence, as well as what instructors valued in those classes. I then wanted to know how students from these classes would respond to the transfer strategies recommended by Beaufort if they were introduced *after*, rather than *during* FYC in a cross-disciplinary setting where they were writing individually for a broader range of classes and purposes.

#### METHODOLOGY/PHASE ONE

I began by surveying students and teachers in eight different second semester FYC courses towards the end of the 2008-2009 academic year. A total of 112 students were surveyed. Six instructors were surveyed. Classes were selected on the basis of convenience- only faculty members who agreed to participate were surveyed, and only full-time faculty members were asked to participate, but these six faculty members represented all but two of the full-time total. Because no random sampling methodology was employed, the results of these surveys cannot be generalized. Because 31 sections of FYC were offered in the spring semester (most taught by adjuncts), no conclusions can be drawn concerning the overall FYC curriculum at the institution. However, since adjuncts must require the same number of assignments and emphasize writing to learn concepts, the results probably reflect common pedagogical values of the faculty overall. The research methodology was approved by the Institutional Review Board.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the student surveys was to get a sense of how students saw themselves as writers, what they thought about FYC, and what progress they thought they had made during their first year. I asked process pedagogy questions because I suspected students across sections of FYC would

be familiar with questions about their writing process (or lack of one), how important “college level” skills or abilities such as research or reading were to their coursework, and their views of the value of the course generally, including its influence on their writing and any assignment they thought particularly helpful or important (see WPA website for copy of all surveys and worksheets used). The questions were Likert-type (a continuum of agreement choices) with open response options.

The goal of surveying teachers was to get a sense of what they thought they were teaching in FYC and what was particularly important to them in their approach to teaching the course. I adapted the teacher survey used by Nelms and Dively for this purpose. A list of 50 items appeared on this survey representing specific pedagogies or course content or activities that might be discussed or practiced. As with the Nelms and Dively survey, instructors were prompted with a range of FYC practices and content in order to help them decide what was most important to them. The survey also gave faculty an opportunity to name teaching practices not on the list, and to identify particular assignments they felt were important.

Survey research has been employed to learn what students think they got out of FYC and to a lesser extent what instructors value. Mercier and Mercier surveyed juniors and seniors to evaluate what they thought they learned about writing in their freshman composition classes, listing approximately 50 items related to writing skills development and asking students to evaluate the extent to which they learned these skills in Freshman Writing compared to courses that required writing in their major areas of study. They concluded that student perceptions of Freshman Writing varied according to the major, with humanities and social sciences majors most likely to rate writing in the major as more valuable than writing done in Freshman Writing. Coxwell Teague used open writing prompts to learn more about the ways students write after leaving First Year Writing classrooms. She concluded that students don't see the connection between FYC writing and writing done in other classes, but that about half of the students do later use some of the techniques taught in FYC, and that the use of these techniques increases as students advance to junior or senior status. Nelms and Dively surveyed graduate teaching assistants in order to learn more, as I did, about what instructors valued in their FYC courses. Their survey data indicated that instructors frequently interacted with students in discussion of process, peer review, main ideas, audience, development of ideas, analysis of texts, structure of arguments, supporting claims, organization, using sources, and citations. The most common types of assignments were rough drafts, analytical essays, persuasive essays, response journals, and research papers. They concluded that most of their students “were

being exposed to a process paradigm including the drafting and revising of their papers” (Nelms and Dively 221).

### THE TEACHER SURVEYS

Instructors most often, as a group, labeled the following items as “very important” (five or six instructors identified these as such): process writing, personal conferences, evaluating student essays, narrowing topics, formulating main ideas, analyzing audience, paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing, supporting claims, structuring arguments, paragraphing, introductions, conclusions, organization, evaluating library sources, incorporating sources into texts, evaluating on-line sources, avoiding plagiarism, and creating works cited pages.

Individual instructors also named the following concepts/activities as valuable or important:

- Outlining ideas, group oral reports on literature, individual persuasive speeches, globalism/current affairs
- Defining and sustaining a community of writers and readers
- Identifying writing purposes, varying levels of formality/informality in writing, developing voice/style

Twenty-six types of assignments were also listed on the survey (also drawn from Nelms and Dively) for possible selection. Of these, the following were most often indicated, meaning at least four instructors assigned them at some point: annotated bibliographies, persuasive essays, analytical essays, literary analyses, summaries, personal experience essays, research papers. Other items not on the list but named by instructors included the following: proposals, memoirs, reaction papers to campus cultural events, and timed, in-class writing.

Overall, these instructors shared values such as process pedagogy and close reading of texts, but assigned a range of genres (some poorly defined) and texts. Some were clearly most interested in engaging students in literary analysis (typically the literature faculty), while others were more interested in analysis of political or cultural texts. None of the assignments, with the exception of an assigned research paper in their major, were directly linked to the work they might do in another discipline, and reinforce Wardle’s argument that genres in FYC are created for the purpose of FYC, and the writing they do there is not likely to be done anywhere else. None of the teachers named what Wardle (and Beaufort) see as the most important pedagogies that would encourage transfer- reflection, abstraction of prin-

ciples about the genres students will encounter later, and “mindfulness” of the rhetorical situation in which their writing is located (“Mutt Genres,” 778), although one instructor did ask students to write “reflection” statements about final drafts submitted at the end of the semester. The emphasis overall was instead on initiating students into a process of creating drafts of evidence-based arguments that relied on academic rather than popular sources and that were organized and presented in a reader-friendly way.

### THE STUDENT SURVEYS

Students generally understood the limitations of thinking of writing in a predetermined and overly structured way devoid of considerations of purpose, audience, and content. For example, one-draft writing was common for shorter and less complex assignments. Some students were more enthusiastic than others about the value of a particular strategy or the course in general, but the range of responses tended to be similar across class sections and instructors. Even when instructors valued some genres over others (literature analysis vs. cultural critique, for example), the values instructors shared and emphasized, such as process pedagogy, were usually reflected in student responses.

Overall, FYC students saw FYC as a course sequence that helped them to develop as college writers, but in a general way that was sometimes hard for them to explain. Most students felt that by the end of the second semester, “their abilities had been elevated,” primarily because of “all that writing we did,” and because they were able to produce “good writing” more quickly and confidently. Students who felt they had made the most progress tended to be those who also saw the research paper assignment as the most important assignment, primarily because they had put so much work into it and now saw themselves as “academic writers.” So whether a “universal educated discourse” really exists or not may be less important than whether students think it exists. If students see this sort of writing as meaningful, and if they see themselves as attaining some proficiency in this phantom form, this perception may enhance their image of themselves as writers and make them more likely to put effort into their writing later.

A similar conclusion was reached by Sommers and Saltz, who argued that the most successful FY students were those who accepted the novice role in their first year and as a result worked harder to become better writers in subsequent years. Could students’ perception of themselves not necessarily as “novices” but as “college writers” based on their experience in a traditional FYC course pave the way for teaching transfer strategies after rather than during FYC? Yancey has argued that teachers need to work to

increase student confidence, since writing confidence transfers and means students may be willing to take more risks as they develop as writers (as cited in Colby). Might some of their less developed abilities and awarenesses, especially adapting to different types of readers and writing, be better left to when they were actually facing these different readers and writing? The student survey seemed its own reflective stage in that developmental process, one that might not only help nurture FYC students' awareness of themselves as developing writers, but also be used later as a tool for enhancing transfer.

#### THE FIRST YEAR IS OVER, SO WHAT'S NEXT?

By the end of the first year, most students believed they knew what "worked for them" as writers in order to produce effective papers in their College Writing classes (but not beyond). Most students had shifted from valuing "personal" writing to more "academic" forms that required the use of outside sources. Although most students did not particularly enjoy the process of producing this "academic" writing, when they were successful, they enjoyed a sense of accomplishment that affected their sense of themselves as both writers and college students (see Fishman and Reiff, as well as many institutions that publish FYC student work). As these students moved into their sophomore year, how would they adapt to their new coursework? Would learning and talking about genres, discourse communities, and "mindfulness" (Beaufort's recommendations for enhancing transfer) help them to transfer what they knew about academic success generally to academic success in particular contexts? Carroll argued that sophomores need guidance as they make that transition, but what guidance would they need? Would "teaching for transfer" strategies help students move from what Carroll calls "giving the professor what she wants" to an awareness of "disciplinary conventions?"

#### METHODOLOGY/PHASE TWO

In her first study of transfer based on a limited number of more advanced students, Wardle argued that the skills learned in FYC were either not needed to complete writing assignments in other courses ("Understanding Transfer", 73), or the larger activity system of schooling meant they had to make choices about how much time to spend on writing assignments (76). If too much time and effort was required to complete an assignment, students tended to reject unnecessary strategies emphasized in FYC and take short-cuts. Similarly, Carroll found that sophomores needed different kinds of guidance as they negotiated new assignments and took on a new stu-

dent role. What were these new writing circumstances and would teaching transfer strategies after FYC help students adapt to and expand their sense of themselves as college writers?

From the student survey pool, I chose respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in fall discussions, then selected participants from FYC sections taught by different instructors so that a range of student FYC experiences would be represented. From this cohort, potential participants were chosen based on diverse fall course schedules. Faculty members who would be teaching these students were contacted to determine if they would be requiring writing in their fall courses. On the basis of this information, the number of potential participants was narrowed so that the group represented students drawn from a range of FYC instructors and enrolled in at least two courses that would require writing in the fall. From this group, eight students representing seven different majors (plus one undeclared major) agreed to participate.

These students were invited to participate in a project that would require five to six hours of their time, for which they would be paid to participate. In the initial meeting, study participants got to know each other, revisited some of their responses to the survey data from the spring, and discussed the writing assignments they would face in the coming semester. Students also were introduced to the purpose of the study and meetings were scheduled. I met with each participant once during the semester in a one on one session designed to introduce them to the concepts of genre and discourse community and asked them to complete a brief writing process journal on a work in progress. I did this by asking students to respond to three worksheets adapted from Beaufort's suggested "teaching for transfer" materials in order to focus on three "knowledge domains" Beaufort sees as key to transfer: genre awareness, discourse community awareness, and meta-cognitive, or "mindfulness" reflection. After the initial meetings, I met with students once in groups of three or four to talk about their writing processes and the genres and discourse communities they had encountered. I also gave them an opportunity to support one another and cross disciplinary boundaries by discussing how they wrote about various course concepts. Finally, the entire group met at the end of fall semester in order to reflect on their writing and how they had developed as writers.

## THE FIRST MEETING

The students began the study by again discussing the value of their FYC coursework, the writing they thought they would be doing as sophomores, and the help they thought they might need during the semester (see Appen-

dix B for a description of these students by gender and major). When these post-FYC students revisited their FYC experience, some activities were now seen as “pointless,” such as journal writing that wasn’t used by them later or read by the instructor, and one student thought the entire first semester was a re-hash of high school writing. But most students still expressed some value in the experience. As they discussed what made it worthwhile, students often used the word “practice” to describe what happened. Students associated doing a lot of writing with improved quality. As one student said, “three pages of writing in high school was hard; doing three pages of writing now is nothing.” Students felt they were “learning how to learn to write, learning what it takes to get the job done.” They also felt they were beginning to understand the need to write for different audiences, the value of selective revision, and how they bring different strengths and weaknesses to different sorts of writing assignments. One student said she couldn’t imagine doing the writing assignments she was doing as a sophomore without first having completed the difficult “academic” assignments of second semester FYC. Out of eight students, only two reported reflection as an FYC activity, and that was at the end of the semester.

The writing assignments students described doing as sophomores were primarily school genres: article summaries, interviews, take-home exam writing, reaction papers, reflections, interviews, position papers, and research papers (see Appendix A for a list of the assignments they reported). Students felt that this writing was going to be “more serious” than in FYC, perhaps because these were not seen as “mutt genres” disconnected from an identified purpose, but as academic genres linked to course content. Students seemed eager to prove themselves through successful completion of discipline-specific writing assignments, and felt what they learned in FYC about writing for different audiences and the amount of time required to prepare would benefit them. They hoped to get help from someone who could act as an editor, but also who could help them “get started and understand the assignment,” and saw little value in getting this help from a peer reviewer. One student felt that the best assistance would come from the professors themselves, while another worried that writing would be more difficult without their FYC instructor there to help.

#### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Most of the assignments students named (and which I confirmed through examination of syllabi) reflect what Melzer describes as “student to examiner” kinds of writing. Melzer’s study of 787 writing assignments from undergraduate courses in 48 colleges and universities in the U.S. updates

Britton and Applebee's examination of school-based writing assignments, and concludes that not much has changed in twenty years. Most writing assignments continue to be "transactional" or informative, and tend to be short answer exam questions directed to the "teacher as examiner." Melzer did find an increase in the amount of exploratory writing, especially journal writing, and noted that "the assignments that provide students with interesting and complex rhetorical situations rather than the traditional lecture/exam format" are often taught in writing intensive courses where faculty may have been exposed to writing across the curriculum influences.

The assignments discussed by these eight students generally match Melzer's descriptions. Student writing assignments represented six departments and eight subject areas, including criminology/sociology, education, English literature, religion, history, rehabilitation studies, physical therapy, and social work. Students were assigned a fairly limited range of types of writing, mostly "student to examiner." Most assignments either reported on information learned in the course in order to demonstrate an understanding of course content (short answer exams and traditional research papers), or were designed to both demonstrate content area knowledge and analyze or evaluate that knowledge (journal writing, response/evaluation papers, or reflection papers). Research papers assigned focused on topics within the area of course study.

#### THE WRITING ABOUT WRITING MEETING

Yancey has argued that developing writers need to be introduced to a "critical vocabulary" that they can use to move beyond dualistic (right or wrong) thinking, or even relativistic (all knowledge is relative) thinking, to a reflective stage that allows them to create flexible conceptual models (as cited in Colby). In this meeting, I briefly introduced the concepts of genre and discourse community to students using the matrices suggested by Beaufort, and also asked them to complete a process journal on a particular writing assignment they were working on using questions derived from her suggestions aimed at achieving "mindfulness."

#### *Genre Analysis*

After being introduced to the concept of genre using public/professional and school-based examples, students were asked to choose an assignment they were currently working on and describe the rhetorical purpose, typical content, and structural and linguistic features of that genre. Students described eight different assignments, all but two (a "position statement" for business writing and fiction writing) school-based genres. Some genres were

more easily named, such as “in-class exam,” “article summary” or “fiction,” while others were more difficult for students to label. For example, one student struggled to label the genre of an assignment not even the instructor had identified in writing, but had discussed in class as an “educated reaction paper.” The purpose of “reaction papers” was sometimes unclear to students. Some identified the purpose of this genre as “proving what you know to the instructor” while others as an expression of the writer’s “opinion” about the text or visual media being responded to. Students emphasized the importance of adopting the language of the course being taught and usually used the language of GWSI (complete sentences, block paragraphs) to discuss genre features. One student had difficulty distinguishing between a description of a *particular* assignment and the *type* (or genre) of assignment he encountered. So the genre of the assignment (in this case, a “reaction paper”) was no different than the title of the paper he was writing.

### *Discourse Community*

Students were then introduced to the concept of discourse community using a similar matrix as the one for genre. The matrix defined discourse community and gave examples of both public/professional and school-based discourse communities. Students were asked to name a discourse community that would read their writing and describe its goals, values, typical genres used, and standards for good writing. Most students were able to do this based on the course label, but had more difficulty imagining or explaining what the values of that community might be or what other genres might be used by that community. When students were able to articulate discourse community values, it was because they were put into a position of emulating the writing of that community (such as in a business or fiction writing class), rather than demonstrating an understanding of course concepts. The more specialized the course content (i.e. early British literature or the American Court System), the more difficult it was for students to see the writing they did as part of the written interaction between members of a group with a common interest. Courses designed as introductory or survey courses tended to preserve an authoritative relationship between instructor and student that discouraged an understanding of discourse community.

### *Process Journal*

Students were asked to respond to several questions that invited them to think meta-cognitively about the writing assignment they were working on. They were asked what they learned about writing by doing this assignment, how they learned it, how what they learned related to what they already

knew, how they would apply what they learned in this and some other class, and what they learned about working with this genre. Students' responses emphasized focus, structure, use of textual material, and understanding the requirements of a particular genre as they were linked to either the structure of the course and/or interaction with course reading or viewing materials. Focus tended to mean staying on topic (for example, writing that elaborated on course themes in a criminology class), use of a particular writing strategy appropriate to a genre (such as a particular technique used to write fiction), getting "in-depth" by building on quotations for a reading journal assignment in a disability class, or "identifying each step" for a reaction paper in a film class. Structure meant learning to combine textual evidence with interpretation (literature class), not trying to write in an essay format for a take-home exam (sociology class), or learning to take notes while reading in order to use them later when summarizing (disability class). Students usually struggled to relate "old knowledge" to "new knowledge," even though we had begun the semester by discussing what they had learned in FYC. By mid-semester of their sophomore year, students seemed to have put FYC behind them, having internalized whatever lessons had been learned as they focused on their new writing tasks. They seemed to find it easier to think about how they would apply what they learned this time to the next writing assignment, but without any fine distinctions between writing for this particular class or some other. Generalizing from their current task to future, unspecified tasks led to a return to structure and organization homilies, but also to an emphasis on close reading of texts and writing that, as one student said, is "focused with force" on course concepts. With the exception of techniques used to create poems and short stories, students did not report on learning writing techniques for specific forms of writing, although one student learned how to make compromises with others when working on a group paper, and another how to eliminate bias from a journal writing assignment.

#### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Once the one-on-one meetings were completed, two separate focus group discussions of four students each were held. The purpose of these discussions was to allow students to talk about their writing in progress using the newly learned concepts of genre and discourse community, if possible, and to engage in what I called "crossing over" discussions, or what Perkins and Solomon might call "bridging." I wanted students to both share their struggles and successes with each other, but also generalize about the significance of their writing beyond the classroom.

### *Genres*

These students shared some useful insights based in genre analysis that probably had a positive effect on the quality of their writing. For example, one student described “reaction papers” as not just “reporting back” but also as a way to “individualize” what he had learned compared to some other student. Another student described his experience with an “interpretive argument paper” as learning when “in my opinion” is valid and when it’s not, or what’s arguable and what’s not. Students also easily recognized the differences in language expectations for research papers (more formal) compared to short stories (more “candid”). But these students also continued to struggle with genre expectations, perhaps due to their limited experience with a range of genres or less than clear explanation of genre expectations by the instructor, or as Yancey might suggest, their inability to adapt “old knowledge” about writing to a new situation (as cited in Colby). For example, a student who was clearly aware of multiple genre forms used in his major, (journalism) felt strongly that all the papers written in his major required the same structure: introduction, thesis, five paragraphs, and a conclusion. And generally these students still saw research papers in a formulaic and painful way, exclaiming that “we’ve written this stuff all our life” and “it stinks.” So even though they had taken pride in their research efforts as the culmination of FYC, they seemed less able, even as sophomores, to imagine how the research paper form might be different now compared to the past because of the new writing situations they faced.

### *Discourse Communities*

Although most students felt they had a better understanding of what someone in their major studies, most could not generalize about the kind or type of discourse studied in that major. Students could name the topics studied (for example, chronic illness for a disability studies major) or genres (sports writing for a journalism major), but not what disability studies or journalism scholars studied or wrote about. One student did see her major (sociology) as helping her to “interact with others without being judgmental by studying a body of knowledge about people and their conflicts,” thereby coming close to explaining what a sociology discourse community does by channeling it through her own experience. As a group, students were able to discuss discourse communities in the abstract by reflecting on how some courses’ content focused on “stories” while others focused on “facts and lecture.” But discourse community discussion didn’t help these sophomores understand what the point of writing in that major was.

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### *Bridging Exercises*

Students were asked to “cross-over” by applying the use of a class concept or form of writing to a different class or form. For example, three students named three different concepts (the wealth gap, due process, and gender roles) from three different classes (Poverty and Wealth, American Courts, and British Literature) and talked about how each concept might be approached in the other classes:

Class	Poverty & Wealth	British Literature	American Courts
Topic: Wealth gap (PW)		Historical gap between rich and poor in 18C England	Due process discrimination towards poor
Topic: Due process (Courts)	Inability of some to afford legal representation	Women’s lack of legal rights in early 18C	
Topic: Gender roles (BritLit)	Wage gap between men and women		Parental Rights cases

This exercise was meant to show students that disciplines don’t necessarily “own” a concept but rather interpret it through their own lens. The point was not necessarily to challenge the course authority, but to illustrate how that authority might be framed. The “bridging” was also intended to expand students’ conceptual maps of how topics might be approached. Students were invited to consider how a particular form of writing required for one class might be applied in a different class. For example, two students, one in a business writing class and the other in an art appreciation class, were asked to “exchange” assignment forms. The business writing student was asked to think about how she would write a “comparison” paper and the art appreciation student asked to think about she would write a “proposal.” In the first case, the business writing student easily imagined comparing different solutions to a business problem, and the art student imagined writing a proposal for dealing with a controversial art show. Neither assignment was typical for that course, but introduced students to thinking “outside the box” of prescribed writing assignments while also helping them see how certain discourse communities value certain genres of writing.

## END OF SEMESTER REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The entire group met once more at the end of the semester to reflect on the writing they had done and to look back once more at their own writing processes and the value of FYC. Surprisingly, students' perceptions of FYC had softened compared to the beginning of the semester. Students felt that FYC had helped them in many ways, such as preparing to write, building structure, adding transitions, and generally preparing them for writing assignments this semester. The only exception to this was from the student who argued that the "process" (primarily achieved in this case through literary analysis) practiced in FYC didn't work for writing in the sciences. But overall, students felt their writing processes were now more informed by work with outside sources, and they valued feedback from "experts". Most students described their experience in developmental terms, with FYC as the gateway to academic writing. But these students were clearly still figuring out the social relations inherent to academic writing, especially academic writing in their majors. For example, one student reported on a conflict with a professor who told him that he had the "wrong" sources for a research paper. The student reported that since the professor was an "expert" on the topic, he would have to revise the paper using the teacher's sources rather than those he had collected.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Others who teach novice college writers may have a different assessment of the students they encounter, since students bring a wide range of experiences and talents to different institutions. But certain themes from this project may resonate. First, as compositionists have known for years, students' development as academic writers begins in FYC but in no way is completed there. Students may still see college writing as figuring out "what the professor wants" rather than "what is expected in a discourse community" for some time to come. And because of that, students may not recognize that their writing processes may change for valid reasons related to shifting writing contexts. Reflection that leads to awareness or a particular insight that will in turn lead to changes in writing behavior can be difficult for students to achieve and for instructors to teach. But reflection may help students to appreciate the size and complexity of the landscape before them and cultivate awareness that all is not arbitrary in academe. Facilitating awareness of writing expectations and strategies through genre analysis and reflection may help some students to see the big picture. This study raises the question of when and where to do that. Are most students ready for this in FYC?

The emphasis in most transfer literature to this point has been on teaching for transfer within FYC or training WAC or WID instructors to teach for transfer. But “doing more” at these sites may be perceived as “piling it on” at some institutions, since most FYC and WAC instructors already feel overwhelmed by the “burden” of teaching students “how to write.” Replacing the traditional GWSI/FYC writing course with a course “about” writing seems less feasible at less prestigious institutions, since departments may not be able to hire teachers with that level of expertise or be ready for a change that shuttles process pedagogy to WAC programs, if they exist at all. Perhaps more importantly, if teaching for transfer through activities like genre awareness or reflection is best done in an authentic “activity system,” should students not be writing for an authentic disciplinary activity system when they are reflecting rather than a “mutt genre” activity system (or a “comp studies” activity system) that assumes students will put what they learned into practice perhaps years later?

Although this may sound like an argument for locating transfer strategies in WAC or WID courses, the widest discussions of genre and the richest opportunities for “bridging” and expanded conceptual thinking came into play in this study when students were not only talking about writing that was in progress, but also hearing from others who were working on different writing projects in different activity systems. This discussion is less likely to happen in either FYC or in a WAC/WID course, but might find a home in a “third space” environment where writers can reflect across disciplinary boundaries and generalize about what they’re learning outside of the activity system of their work in progress. Mauk’s explanation of “third spaces” aimed to shift the focus from asking how to teach to asking where different kinds of teaching might happen in order to meet the increasingly diverse needs of college students.

Grego and Thompson applied the concept of third spaces to offer an alternative to basic writing through Writing Studios, small groups of students meeting regularly to discuss the writing they were doing across a range of FYC sections. They argue that “geographies of knowledge in higher education institutions are traditionally defined by a curriculum that is structured analytically rather than experientially,” thus minimizing student backgrounds and how that might affect their ability to engage in what is presented as knowledge in higher education (119). Studios take students where they’re at, both developmentally and institutionally, since the expectations of different FYC instructors must be negotiated. When students ask Writing Studios leaders about a grade or an instructor’s comment, “we respond in terms of the program, discipline, experience, or assignment and other relevant factors, acknowledging that there are differences in respond-

ing to and grading work (Grego and Thompson 142). Studio students get this feedback about their own assignments as well as the assignments of other students, and begin to expand their terrain of knowledge about writing in higher education.

Writing centers also present obvious opportunities for “third space” cross-disciplinary discussions. Lerner describes the “situational learning” turn of writing center work away from simply changing individual behavior and toward social interaction strategies that make use of members of “communities of practice” (55-57). As members of these communities, tutors offer “explicit guidance in terms of how they would approach a writing task...making visible the thinking and problem solving that the novice writer needs to learn” (69). Writing skills develop in this “third space” nested within specific disciplinary contexts and facilitated through an apprenticeship model. Lerner imagines “multiple, disciplinary writing centers on a single campus” that allow students and tutors to work together to “articulate disciplinary and task specific knowledge in ways that allow both participants to learn” (70). It’s easy to imagine genre-analysis and reflection strategies being used by tutors in these non-FYC, non-WAC spaces as well.

Alternative teaching spaces offer students an opportunity to “connect the dots” and expand their conceptual writing maps when they are both developmentally and strategically ready. Students can be helped to “make the leap” from what they’re doing in one form or rhetorical arena to another and appreciate that every time they make such a leap, they are transforming their writing topography. Students who have experienced some version of process pedagogy in FYC might encounter others engaged in a range of school-based writing situations and adapt what they “know” about writing, using genre-analysis and reflection strategies to move beyond constructing the latest version of “what the professor wants” to understanding what is rhetorically necessary.

The coaching I was able to do here and imagined I could have done more of was grounded in the work students were doing now, helping them to understand what they knew about writing (or thought they knew) from FYC and adapting that knowledge to the genres and purposes they currently faced. Criticism of “teaching about writing” has thus far focused on the usefulness of reflection, asking whether helping students to become more aware of their own writing processes and the study of writing will have any actual effect on writing performance (Kutney). My work with these students suggests that “teaching about writing” in FYC may enhance the status of Composition as a discipline, and may help students see how writers work, but may not be as important for some students as developing their own writing process and then adapting that process to the actual,

evolving requirements of new forms of academic writing. Reflection at key developmental moments that facilitates a broader awareness of the varied academic terrain ahead may help students move beyond writing preconceptions tentatively formed in FYC, and genre analysis may be one tool for accomplishing that outcome. Reflective activities based in genre and discourse community analysis may be a way to connect what students learn in a traditional GWSI/FYC class to what they have yet to learn in WAC or WID courses. This “bridge” is yet to be built.

## NOTES

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2. Copies of all surveys are available from the author by email to [dfraizer@spfldcol.edu](mailto:dfraizer@spfldcol.edu).

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## APPENDIX A

### *Types of Writing Assignments Discussed by Sophomore Study Participants*

<b>Name of Class</b>	<b>Type of Writing Assignment</b>
Music Appreciation (Visual Arts)	Personal reaction paper to musician or form of music
Spirituality and Healing (Religion)	Book reviews and formal research paper
Principles of Rehabilitation (Rehabilitation)	Book reviews and reaction paper
Psychology of Disability (Rehabilitation)	Reaction papers
Violence and Victimization (Criminology)	Reaction papers
Poverty and Wealth (Sociology)	Take home exams
Introduction to Social Work (Social Work)	Research paper and summaries of articles
Creative Writing (English)	Poems, short stories
Art Appreciation (Art)	Analysis of work of art
British Literature (English)	Interpretive argument essay
Introduction to Film Studies (English)	Film analysis paper
Business/Technical Writing (English)	Resume, letter of application, position statement, proposal

APPENDIX B

*Student Study Participants by Gender and Major*

	Male	Female
Physical Therapy		1
Education		1
Sociology		1
Criminal Justice	1	
Psychology		1
Communications/Sports Journalism	1	
Rehabilitation/Disability Studies	1	
Undeclared	1	

