

Review

Reconsidering Content in First-Year Composition: A Study of “Teaching for Transfer”

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Yancey, Kathleen Blake, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak. *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. Print. 191 pages.

In a 2007 *WPA: Writing Program Administration* article, Elizabeth Wardle challenged the field to undertake further research on the issue of transfer in first-year composition—that is, on how writing knowledge and abilities learned in first-year composition are abstracted and applied within new writing contexts. Given the institutional positioning of composition as a required course and its accountability to various stakeholders (students, administrators, policy makers), Wardle argued that it “would be irresponsible not to engage the issue of transfer” (66). Over the past eight years, WPAs and writing researchers have stepped up to the challenge, producing a rich body of research on transfer.

One of the most recent contributions to this body of research on transfer is *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak. Winner of the 2015 CCCC Research Impact Award, *Writing across Contexts* is a hybrid project that comprises both a comprehensive synthesis of transfer research and an innovative study of teaching for transfer. As they participate in the field of inquiry on transfer, the authors identify various sources that motivated their inquiry, including an interest in students’ reflective practice in the classroom and an interest in what should constitute the content of first-year composition courses, which leads to their central claim: “that a very specific composition course we designed to foster transfer in writing, what we call a Teaching for Transfer (TFT) course, assists students in transferring writing knowledge and practice in ways other kinds of composition courses do not” (4–5). While several studies on transfer conclude with pedagogical implications or applications to teaching—such as assignment

sequences designed to facilitate transfer (Beaufort); approaches based on metacognitive reflection or meta-awareness (Reiff and Bawarshi; Wardle); and ideas for re-envisioning first-year composition as an interdisciplinary learning community (Nowacek)—there are few, if any, studies that systematically study curricular design or test the effectiveness of pedagogies that teach for transfer. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak’s study remedies this and fills a much-needed void in transfer research.

To situate their study, the authors provide a comprehensive overview of transfer theory and research. Chapter one is a valuable resource for WPAs, teachers, and researchers who want to learn more about the issue of transfer, from its survey of early research in the fields of psychology and education—including the work of David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, aptly labeled by the authors as the godfathers of transfer—to various conceptualizations of transfer that explore the role of the task, the effect of individual dispositions, and the influence of sociocultural context on transfer. Following this synthesis of transfer scholarship is a thorough review of empirical research on transfer. After establishing the territory of transfer research, the authors carve out a niche for their own study, noting two dimensions of transfer that have not been as well researched: the role of content knowledge and the role of reflection in fostering transfer.

To further contextualize their study, chapter two provides an overview of transfer-based curricula. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak begin by bringing research on transfer within the field of rhetoric and composition into conversation with the field of educational psychology. In particular, they focus on the “little referenced but rich source of research on transfer,” the National Research Council-sponsored *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School (HPL)*, which explores the kinds of learning experiences that lead to transfer, including the role of expertise (104; Bransford et al.). They then provide overviews of pedagogical models that facilitate transfer, including Writing about Writing (Downs and Wardle) and Writing about Language (Dew)—courses that make rhetoric and language the content of the writing course—and the “agents of integration approach” (Nowacek), which is based on linked classes that promote concurrent transfer.

Moving next to their own curricular model and the focus for the study—the TFT approach—the authors identify three main components of the course: 1) a focus on key terms and writing concepts, 2) the integration of reflective practice, and 3) students’ development of a theory of writing. The course design includes a sequence of four units and assignments, each of which incorporates key terms, such as *genre*, *rhetorical situation*, *existence*, and *discourse community*. Through focus on these concepts, combined

with reflective practices, students work toward developing their own theory of writing, which “helps [them] create a framework of writing knowledge and practice they’ll take with them when the course is over” (57). While their study compares the TFT course to other types of first-year composition courses, it would be interesting to compare the TFT approach to other various curricular approaches to transfer surveyed in this chapter and with a focus on the ways that the TFT course extends other curricular models—through integration of key terms and a focus on reflective practice.

In order to test their curriculum and the role of content in facilitating transfer, the authors carried out a comparative study of their course and two other courses with varying content, one of which is a course based on an expressivist approach (focused on how cultural identity shapes the writer’s perspective) and the other a course based on media and culture (focused on how media shapes culture and writing). As described in chapter three, all of the courses took place at Florida State University and fulfilled the second required first-year composition course, which is focused on research-based writing. The research participants included seven students, with representation across the three types of courses, and data was gathered through student and instructor interviews, analysis of student writing, and analysis of course materials.

While the findings are much richer than can be fully reflected here, the researchers found, overall, that “content in first-year composition does matter, contributing in very specific ways to students’ intentional transfer of knowledge and practice in writing” (61). In addition, the key terms of the TFT course played a central role in this transfer. A major finding is that when students are given the language and vocabulary to talk about and conceptualize writing, they are better able to abstract and apply this knowledge in other contexts. The findings, overall, seem to support a “writing about writing” approach in first-year composition where the focus is on both the subject of writing and the act of writing. As the authors explain, in the TFT course, “The subject matter is thus composition itself, which, when combined with practice and reflection facilitates transfer” (138). Because the researchers so usefully distinguish between students “adopting writing strategies” and “developing conceptual knowledge” about writing, it might have been interesting to learn more about how the TFT course develops conceptual knowledge of key terms such as genre, discourse community, and audience (94). The syllabus included in the appendix notes the integration of a few theoretical texts on writing (Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation”; Yancey’s “On Reflection” and “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key”; two chapters from *HPL*) combined with other readings (essays, speeches, TED talks, blogs, interviews, and photo essays).

This raises the question of the extent to which it is necessary to integrate theoretical perspectives that could enrich students' conceptualization and reflection on these key terms. These theoretical readings seem especially crucial to facilitating connections between key terms—for example, with Bitzer's article clarifying the connection between the concept of *rhetorical situation* and the concept of *audience* as a constituent of situation. Could Rick, for example—who understood discourse community but not audience and was able to conceptualize genre but not rhetorical situation—have benefitted from perspectives that explore the interdependence of audience and discourse community (Porter) or genre and situation (Miller)? Given that the student's development of a theory of writing is “a signature of the course” (57), it would have been interesting to hear more about the theoretical readings that developed students' understanding of the conceptual anchors of the course.

Following chapter three's report on findings, which includes detailed and engaging portraits of student writers and integration of students' voices, chapter four reports on unexpected or “surprising” findings regarding the role of prior knowledge in transfer. The authors create an intriguing typology of how students use prior knowledge through 1) *assemblage* or “grafting isolated bits of new knowledge onto a continuing schema of prior knowledge,” 2) *remix* or “integrating the new knowledge into the schema of the old,” and 3) *critical incident* or “a failure to meet a new task successfully,” which prompts rethinking (112). While remix captures high road transfer, the focus on failure or a critical incident that prompts a conceptual breakthrough (leading to high road transfer) is especially interesting and relevant, particularly within the context of how the role of novice vs. expert affects transfer. Also intriguing is the suggestion that it might be useful to integrate within the TFT classroom case studies of these “critical incidents.”

In their final chapter, the authors highlight issues and questions for further exploration, such as the role of failure in transfer or the role that transfer metaphors (such as assemblage or remix) might play in a TFT course. Future research, they suggest, might explore the linking of a TFT course to another disciplinary course or the adaptation to another institutional context or student population. Finally, the authors question how we might engage teachers and the field in general in teaching for transfer.

As a member of the field who is fully engaged with this issue, I found that Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's study prompted much useful reflection, particularly regarding the content of first-year composition and the role of reflective assignments—such as the innovative final assignment to develop a theory of writing—in fostering transfer. One distinction, though,

that gets slightly blurred is the distinction between course *content* and *subject matter*. While the authors sometimes align content with Beaufort's domain of subject matter knowledge, they also acknowledge that the TFT curriculum incorporates all five domains of knowledge (*discourse community, genre, subject matter, writing process, and rhetorical knowledge*) and that course content encompasses both writing *knowledge* and *practice*, encouraging students to simultaneously articulate and practice a theory of writing. This is an approach supported by a recent National Research Council study of transfer (Pellegrino and Hilton) that examined how "deeper learning" (the process of building and applying knowledge to new contexts) relies on "both knowledge in a domain and knowledge of how, why, and when to apply this knowledge"—a blending of content knowledge and related skills that leads to what the researchers call "twenty-first century competencies" (70).

Prompting further reflection on the interactive relationship between conceptual and procedural knowledge, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak pose the question in their conclusion of how it might be possible to reconcile a theme-based or instructor-centered course with a TFT approach. Just as the TFT course folds together theoretical readings in the field and various other types of texts/genres, might it be possible for courses with specific themes to incorporate theoretical texts, key terms and concepts, and reflective assignments and practices that build toward a theory of writing? In terms of building conceptual knowledge, an expressivist course, for instance, could potentially include theoretical readings on expressivism (like those by Donald Murray and/or Peter Elbow) while the media and culture course could integrate perspectives on multimedia rhetoric (such as Yancey's "Writing in the 21st Century"). In terms of developing procedural knowledge, the media and culture course included sets of key terms (*analysis, audience, message, medium*) that had the potential to be used reiteratively and reflectively, aligning the course with more of a TFT approach. In addition, the expressivist course included assignments that asked students to repurpose previous projects and remix genres, creating opportunities for integration of key concepts and reflection on how to negotiate different genres and situations that could have been shaped toward a final theory of writing. Reconsidering the content of first-year composition, then, might mean rethinking the (inter)relationship between the domains of knowledge and performance, with reflection serving as a bridging mechanism. Overall, just as reflection is the centerpiece of their study and of the TFT curriculum, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's final chapter, "Upon Reflection," prompts us as a field to further reflect and speculate on the role transfer will play in future first-year composition curricula and on how first-year compo-

sition content—through intertwined knowledge and skills—can promote “twenty-first century competencies.”

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