Writing Transfer and the First-Generation Transfer Student

Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer session I.2, “Writing Transfer and the State Comprehensive University.” Wednesday June 26, 2013, 1:30pm.

Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger, Western Illinois University

We share preliminary findings from an interview-driven, multi-year case study of writing in the major at a state comprehensive university. Today’s presentation focuses on four first-generation students (three of whom are transfer students), and the relationships between negotiation, ownership, ease, and their writing transfer.

Research questions

1. What classroom practices, curricular elements, habits of mind, and cultural forces act as barriers to transfer for writing in the major?
2. How do student identity groups common to SCUs universities experience writing transfer? (How is writing transfer conceptualized by first-generation students? How is transfer impacted by the rise of the “2+2” model?)
3. How can writing researchers be truly beneficent to our participants?

Research design & methods

Like a lot of contemporary empirical investigations of writing, our study is shaped by what David Russell (2009) calls WAGR, or writing, activity, and genre research. Our research design enables us to collect extensive data about the genres which our students engage at school and in the workplace. We also endeavor to learn about the activity systems which shape their writing and their understanding of academic and professional discourses.

In Fall 2011, when our study began, we recruited participants through classroom visits to writing instruction in the disciplines (WID) courses. We used representative random sampling to select 10 participants at random from our pool of approximately 50 applicants, striving for a diversity of majors. We were also able to achieve good diversity in socioeconomic status, levels of academic preparation and interest, and methods for satisfying our composition requirement. In Fall 2011 and Spring 2012, the first year of our study, we interviewed all but one of our ten student participants seven times. We are building writing portfolios for each student by collecting writing from them continually.

In Fall 2012, the start of our second year, we conducted repeated interviews with three students from our first year, and a smaller number of interviews with three students who had graduated. We also returned to WID classrooms to recruit six new full-time participants, targeting majors not well-represented in our original participant pool, and paying special attention to recruitment of first-generation students. A table which describes all of our student participants appears at the end of this handout.

Five types of interviews shape our work. Literacy history interviews help us understand prior writing environments such as first-year writing and writing in the major. Writing process interviews offer understanding of participants’ approaches to the work of writing. Faculty interviews with instructors teaching the WID courses of our participants help us evaluate the writing contexts in which students attempt to enact transfer. Extensive discourse-based interviews offer more about the writing choices students make with regard to our research questions. These interviews have been extremely important for our work, in several cases radically changing our thinking about students. Finally, member-check interviews ensure our participants have a voice in our study. Our series of interviews is helping us build a history of each student as a writer, while giving us insight into the ways their teachers understand the role writing plays in their WID courses and majors in general.
In Fall 2013, we will add one participant from our School of Nursing, due to their unique curriculum. We will continue frequent interviews with participants who remain in school full-time, with other participants interviewed at least once, depending on availability. Intensive analysis of data will begin at this time, as we develop complete data sets for participants and finish transcription of data. As our number of interviews decreases, our time devoted to analysis of data is increasing. Interviews will conclude in Spring 2014.

While labor intensive, this research design provides the depth we are looking for: we feel we have the data needed to understand the barriers to writing transfer for our participants in their courses and workplaces. We have also followed students long enough to capture critical transitions in their lives—changes of major, new jobs—and to learn how these incidents are shaped by and shape writing transfer.

Our research is supported by a WIU University Research Council Grant, a Council of Writing Program Administrators Targeted Research Grant, and the Conference on College Composition & Communication Research Initiative.

**Institutional context**

Jessie Moore (2012) calls for studies from “other institution types, geographic regions, and identity groups,” arguing that most transfer studies to date have been conducted at large, research-intensive universities. The two identity groups common to SCUs we have chosen to examine today clearly demonstrate how negotiation, ownership, and ease interact to enable and hinder transfer, adding to the map Moore has begun to sketch.

In 2012, Western enrolled 12,200 students. 55% of Western’s new freshmen did not have a parent or guardian who ever attended college, and 75% of new freshmen did not have a parent or guardian complete a 4-year college degree. 33% of Western’s total enrollment for 2012 were community college transfers. Indeed, we expect transfer students to become the norm rather than the exception at WIU, as our state legislature encourages the “2+2” model, where students complete most if not all of their first two years of coursework elsewhere. Like many state comprehensives, Western Illinois is aggressively pursuing this approach, with our provost recently announcing a goal to establish 2+2 articulation agreements for every program at WIU.

**Defining negotiation, ownership, and ease**

**Negotiation:** We understand writing as an act of negotiation. In every writing moment, writers make decisions which balance their intentions and desires with the demands of writing situations. When encountering new situations, writers consciously or unconsciously ask: What previous knowledge should I draw on? What knowledge should I hold onto, and what should I relinquish? These questions are asked **internally** during composing and revising. However, we also note that such negotiation can occur **externally**, as students ask faculty questions when we present assignments or during unscheduled teaching moments after class or office hours. We note that writers struggle with much more than writing choices when they negotiate. Writing is one of the key ways we express our identities as professionals, and one of the ways those identities are established over time. The extent to which we are comfortable with and are able to reflect on these types of negotiations has terrific impacts on our ability to transfer. For more, see Donahue (2005); Bawarshi & Reiff (2011).

**Ownership:** We define ownership as how much writers are invested in and seek to maintain control of their writing. Many of the participants in our study that engage in near transfer when situations require far transfer hold simplistic understandings of ownership. When negotiating ownership, they imagine it must be all or nothing—her idea or my idea—rather than seeking direct or indirect compromises. Some students had such a strong sense of ownership that they disregarded all comments from their instructors; others had such a weak sense of ownership that they relinquished it completely, seeking ways to find out what instructors wanted, and delivering that as much as possible. In contrast, the students able to engage in far transfer had a complex sense of ownership, moving fluidly between these two extremes. They knew when to entrench themselves, when to negotiate, and when to relinquish control. For more, see Spigelman (2000) and Tinberg (1997).
Ease: We believe there are patterns in the ways people approach the complexities and difficulties of all technologies, including writing. Most people seek to learn how to use technology by making it easy—and by that we mean embracing a specific set of values: seeking ways to avoid discomfort or disorientation; favoring simplicity over complexity; valuing pragmatism and immediate application over abstraction and long-term generalization; avoiding deliberation and seeking expediency. In our study, we see ease operating in three critical ways. First and foremost, for participants, the pragmatic bent of ease favors near- and low-road transfer (application), and discourages the deferred benefit associated with the mindful abstraction of far- and high-road transfer (recontextualization). Secondly, the values of comfort and transparency can discourage the negotiations of identity and ownership which we know are critical for advanced transfer. Thirdly, for instructors, there is tremendous pressure to deliver experiences which are rigorous enough to meet academic expectations but at the same time satisfy pragmatic goals without crossing a very nebulously defined line of difficulty. This is especially true at our state comprehensive university. For more, see Dilger (2006, 2008).

Defining transfer

We define transfer broadly, drawing on transfer scholars who recognize different kinds of contexts (e.g., Thaiss and Zawacki's compact, diffuse, and quasi disciplines) and different relationships among contexts (e.g., Beach's (2003) lateral, collateral, encompassing, and mediational transitions). Scholars have also become highly conscious of transfer as a metaphor for application, prompting research studying more robust metaphors for transfer, such as repurposing (Roozen 2010), recontextualization (Nowacek 2011), and transformation (Brent 2011). This work suggests that moving writing-related knowledge across contexts may require substantial revision of previous knowledge.

This list, though not exhaustive, moves from simple to complex forms of transfer—along a path Perkins & Salomon (1988) would call “low to high road transfer” or “near to far transfer.”

1. Application
2. Accommodation
3. Transition (Beach 2003)
4. Integration (Nowacek 2011)
5. Generalization (Beach 2003; Frazier 2010)
6. Repurposing (Roozen 2010)
7. Translation
9. Transformation (Smart & Brown 2002; Brent 2011)
10. Recontextualization (Nowacek 2011)

Preliminary findings highlighted today

1. Many students carry a simple sense of ownership of writing into contexts where a far more nuanced sense is more valued (not “her work or my work,” but a continuum which acknowledges both single-author and collaborative work). This can discourage complex forms of transfer.
2. First-generation college students often carry tremendous pressure to succeed in the classroom but at the same time limited resources for understanding it constructively. Sometimes this results in focus on the short-term (being a good student) not long-term academic or professional benefit.
3. The association between writing and ease—the drive to seek to make working with technologies such as writing easier—can have negative impacts for transfer, as it encourages habits of mind not conducive to rich forms of transfer.
Other areas of finding

We expect our research to offer specific findings in these areas not discussed today:

1. Impacts on internships, which we’ve seen as very rich but under-studied sites of transfer;
2. Research practices which emphasize respect for participants and which we hope are truly beneficent—learning from and encouraging participants’ successes more than failures;
3. Improved research methods, especially techniques for uncovering the tacit knowledges of writing through discourse-based interviews.

Future work

As we move into our last year of data collection, we are refining our methods for analysis, shifting from what Kevin Roozen calls “interpretive and holistic” analysis to more systematic analysis of coded data. Among other things, we will be devoting considerable to the implications of the findings we shared today:

1. Considering the impacts and approaches of programs which encourage “being a better student;”
2. Better understanding resistance to self-reflective or intellectual identity;
3. Comparing critical incidents to transfer which happens over time;
4. Considering King Beach’s four types of consequential transitions: lateral, collateral, encompassing, and mediational.

At this time we are beginning to share preliminary results in articles, with two planned for submission by October 2013. First, we hope to share much of today’s presentation in an article. Secondly, we are examining the role of internships for several of our participants, given their critical importance but relative lack of attention in English studies. Our use of discourse-based interviews (DBI) has convinced us of their value as a method for recovering tacit knowledge about writing processes and writing transfer. We hope to edit a special issue of a journal which examines the DBI and other techniques for understanding tacit knowledge.

We are also working hard to share our work with non-specialists. Each semester, we have presented workshops and talks on campus which target broad audiences, and followed up with audience members to ensure good reception of future work. We envision sharing our work in the NCTE Council Chronicle, Inside Higher Ed, and similar venues.

Contact us

Our web site includes some of our previous conference presentations and more information about our research: [http://faculty.wiu.edu/cb-dilger/transfer/](http://faculty.wiu.edu/cb-dilger/transfer/)

Questions? Comments? We’d love to hear from you.

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Bibliography


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Kapp, R., & Bengeni, B. (2005). “I was just never exposed to this argument thing;” Using a genre approach to teach academic writing to ESL students in the humanities.” In A. Herrington & C. Moran (Eds.), Genre Across the Curriculum. Logan: Utah State UP.


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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Transfer student?</th>
<th>First generation?</th>
<th>Study start and status</th>
<th>Participant notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>Forensic chemistry</td>
<td>Transfer &amp; comm. college</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; currently participating.</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2012, Took internship Summer 2012.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elbow</td>
<td>Forensic chemistry</td>
<td>Comm. college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; dropped from study Spring 2012.</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2012 after required full time internship. Started own business, seeking law enforcement position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>Law enforcement &amp; justice admin</td>
<td>WIU</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; currently participating.</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2013. Considered graduate school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kariina</td>
<td>Forensic chemistry</td>
<td>Comm. college &amp; WIU</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; current contact</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2013. Considering graduate school.</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td>English (was English Education)</td>
<td>WIU</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; currently participating.</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2012 and moved to attend law school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Early childhood education</td>
<td>Comm. college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Junior Fall 2011; currently participating.</td>
<td>Left English Ed after Fall 2013 due to issues with certification test.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
<td>WIU</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Senior Fall 2011; currently participating.</td>
<td>Graduated Spring 2013. Will seek teaching position for Fall 2013.</td>
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All names are pseudonyms. Star (*) in “First generation?” column indicates that neither parent earned a college degree.