

WRITING KNOWLEDGE TRANSFERS EASILY

Ellen C. Carillo

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the very notion of writing instruction is based on a myth. Writing courses, like courses in many—maybe all—fields, are arranged in what we would call a vertical curriculum with students enrolling first in introductory courses like freshman English. This course may be followed by a research-writing or similarly advanced writing course and then, perhaps, by a more intense writing course that often serves as a capstone seminar in the student’s major. Certainly, there are variations of this model, but the structure is largely consistent across American post-secondary institutions in that students are expected to take introductory writing courses before taking more advanced ones. The reason curricula are designed in this way is so that students apply what they learn in those introductory courses to the more advanced courses that follow. This sounds like common sense, no? Yet, it is a myth that students will automatically apply—or transfer (the term most often used in educational psychology and composition studies) what they learn in their lower-level writing courses to their upper-level ones. They simply won’t.

Anecdotally, writing instructors see this all the time: students entering a second-semester writing course as if they had no previous college-level writing course (let alone one linked to that second-semester course), or students struggling with the writing component of their senior seminars despite their taking the required introductory writing courses and writing-intensive course(s) in their majors. Any number of variables might account for the experiences these anecdotes describe, but research corroborates that students don’t automatically transfer what they have learned about writing from one class into the next. The key word here is “automatically.” Transfer is not impossible, but it shouldn’t be taken for granted. It

is a bad idea for writing programs and instructors to simply rely on curricula design to do their work for them—students will continue to be unprepared for their next writing course, let alone a course where writing is only one of the components.

Before describing the research that indicates why writing programs and instructors should not assume that knowledge transfer will automatically occur, it is perhaps wise to define the term *transfer* and offer some of its history. Transfer is a concept that has been studied for years by educational and cognitive psychologists, only recently becoming an interest of those in composition studies who teach and research writing development. Educational psychologists Gavriel Salomon and David Perkins define transfer as “instances in which learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials.” Research on transfer dates to the turn of the 20th century. Educational psychologists Edward Thorndike and Robert Woodworth conducted the earliest experiments in 1901. They found transfer to be rare and only successful when there were identical elements in the situations or contexts. Less than a decade later, educational psychologist Charles Judd challenged these findings and showed that if the learner was capable of understanding the abstract principle informing the problem or idea, she would be able to apply it in a different context even if all the same elements were not present. Judd showed that transfer was, in fact, possible in situations that were not characterized by identical elements and that the learner herself was an important component in the process.

While Judd showed that transfer was possible, he did not prove that it was automatic; it is the automaticity of transfer that is too often assumed in the teaching of writing. There is simply no basis for that assumption. Writing professors Anne Beaufort and Elizabeth Wardle both found in their research that even when students described their first-year writing courses as valuable, they were largely unable to generalize its teachings and thus imagine how that writing connected to other courses. For example, Wardle explains that students “did not appear to make even near connections of those skills, much less transfer those skills to very different contexts... no students suggested they were being asked to write a persuasive paper to be able to write persuasively in other courses.”

Although Judd’s experiments in 1908 indicated that transfer was possible, it would take nearly a century for those who teach and study writing to begin thinking about what to do about this.

In fact, it was less than a decade ago that these scholars regularly began asking questions such as: If transfer is possible, are there certain ways we can teach writing to promote transfer?

The affirmative answer to this question is the antidote to this bad idea. Curricula must be redesigned with the concept of transfer in mind, and instructors must be trained to teach toward the goal of transfer. No matter how one teaches for transfer, the one consistent recommendation for doing so involves incorporating metacognitive exercises into writing courses. Metacognition literally means thinking about thinking, so metacognitive exercises in the classroom would ask students to think about what they are thinking and learning. These exercises give students opportunities to reflect on what they are learning about writing and—as such—potentially position students to transfer what they are learning. The same applies to everyone who suspects they will want to or need to transfer something they are learning to a future context. It would be useful to reflect on that learning and even anticipate where else it might be useful for people to transfer that knowledge to other situations since it will not automatically transfer.

Most recently, Kathleen Yancey and her colleagues tested the benefits of deliberately teaching for transfer. They found that students in courses with instructors who taught for transfer did transfer their writing skills and knowledge more regularly than students who were in other types of writing courses. My sense is that more studies that corroborate these findings are on their way. If that's the case, and these studies are taken as seriously as they should be, colleges and universities will see the emergence of new curricula and teaching practices that no longer perpetuate the myth of automatic transfer. The broader implications of studies on teaching for transfer are just as striking. By studying transfer, all of us come to a better understanding about how we and others learn in our everyday lives and what types of learning experiences facilitate transfer not just in academic contexts but across all the contexts we inhabit, including—but certainly not limited to—school, home, and work.

Further Reading

For foundational work on the transfer of learning from the field of education, see David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's article "Are Cognitive Skills Context Bound?" and summarizing encyclopedia entry, "Transfer of Learning." Building upon this work, scholars in

rhetoric and composition have written extensively about how learning transfers from one writing course or writing situation to another. For scholarly books on problems of transfer, see Anne Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond*, my book *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's *Writing Across Contexts*, and Rebecca Nowacek's *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*. For journal articles, see Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick's "Disciplinarity and Transference: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write," Christiane Donahue's "Transfer, Portability, Generalization: (How) Does Composition Expertise 'Carry'?", Julie Foertsch's "Where Cognitive Psychology Applies: How Theories about Memory and Transfer Can Influence Composition Pedagogy," Dana Lynn Driscoll's "Connected, Disconnected, or Uncertain: Student Attitudes about Future Writing Contexts and Perceptions of Transfer from First-Year Writing to the Disciplines," and Gerald Nelms and Rhonda Leathers Dively's "Perceived Roadblocks to Transferring Knowledge from First-Year Composition to Writing-Intensive Major Courses: A Pilot Study."

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Ellen C. Carillo, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut and the writing program coordinator at its Waterbury Campus. Her administrative work involves directing the Writing Center, supervising the first-year writing program, and supporting faculty who teach writing-intensive courses across the disciplines. She has written a book, as well as articles and chapters about the importance of teaching for transfer. She incorporates this approach to teaching into the literature and writing courses she teaches. Ellen has earned two grants to explore transfer in different settings and has served as an advisor for graduate students who are completing dissertations on transfer.