From *Understanding Writing Transfer:*

Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education

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The following is an excerpt from the unedited manuscript.

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CHAPTER 1

FIVE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPALS ABOUT WRITING TRANSFER

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Writing curricula in higher education are constructed under a foundational premise that writing can be taught – and that writing knowledge can be "transferred" to new contexts. In the United States, first-year composition is often required for all students with the assumption that what is learned there will transfer across "critical transitions" to other coursework, to post-graduation writing in new workplaces, or to writing in graduate or professional programs. Arguably, all of modern education is based on the broader assumption that what one learns *here* can transfer over *there* – across critical transitions. But what do we really know about transfer, in general, and writing transfer, in particular?

From 2011 to 2013, forty-five writing researchers from twenty-eight institutions in five countries participated in the Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer. As part of the seminar, Elon's Center for Engaged Learning

facilitated international, multi-institutional research about writing transfer and fostered discussions about recognizing, identifying enabling practices for, and developing working principles about writing transfer. Over the final year of the seminar, participants developed the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* to summarize and synthesize the seminar's overarching discussion about writing and transfer, not as an end-point, but in an effort to provide a framework for *continued* inquiry and theory-building (Anson & Moore, 2016). While that document exists as a resource for disciplinary scholars in writing studies, this collection focuses on five essential principles about writing transfer that should inform decision-making by all higher education stakeholders. Following this introductory chapter, six Critical Sites of Impact chapters examine programmatic and curricular sites that could be enriched by additional focus on these essential principles for writing transfer. Finally, six Principles at Work: Implications for Practice case studies illustrate the essential principles' implications for practice, curriculum design, and/or policy.

This collection concisely summarizes what we know about writing transfer and explores the implications of writing transfer research for universities' institutional decisions about writing across the curriculum requirements, general education programs, online and hybrid learning, outcomes assessment, writing-supported experiential learning, e-portfolios, first-year experiences, and other higher education initiatives. Ultimately, this brief volume aims to make writing transfer research accessible to administrators, faculty decision makers, and other stakeholders across the curriculum who have a vested interest in preparing students to succeed in their future writing tasks in academia, the workplace, and their civic lives.

WHAT IS WRITING TRANSFER?

Briefly, writing transfer refers to a writer's ability to repurpose or transform prior knowledge about writing for a new audience, purpose, and context. Writing transfer research builds on broader studies in educational psychology and related fields on transfer of learning, and many of the terms used to describe writing transfer are borrowed from these other realms. Here is a quick primer on some of the terms and concepts used in this collection:

David Perkins, a founding member of Harvard's Project Zero, and Gavriel Salomon, an educational psychologist, introduced two sets of terms often invoked in transfer studies, including writing transfer studies: near transfer and far transfer, and high-road transfer and low-road transfer (see Salomon & Perkins, 1989; Perkins & Salomon, 1988, 1989, 1992). Near transfer refers to carrying prior knowledge or skill across similar contexts (e.g., driving a truck after driving a car), while far transfer refers to carrying knowledge across different contexts that have little, if any, overlap (e.g., applying chess strategies to a political campaign). While this first set of terms focuses on the contexts for transfer, the second set focuses on the learner's use of knowledge in those contexts. In low-road transfer, something is practiced in a variety of contexts until it becomes second nature and is automatically triggered when a new context calls on our use of the knowledge, skill, or strategy. High-road transfer, in contrast, requires the learner's mindful abstraction to identify relevant prior knowledge and apply it in the new context.

King Beach, a developmental psychologist, offers an alternate way to conceptualize use of prior knowledge, introducing the idea of consequential transitions. Beach suggests that transition refers the generalization of knowledge across contexts. A consequential transition "is consciously reflected on, struggled with, and shifts the individual's sense of self or social position" (Beach, 2003, p. 42). Building on this concept, Terttu Tuomi-Gröhn and Yrjö

Engeström (2003), from the Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning, situate consequential transitions within activity systems, which shape and are shaped by learners and other participants. Successful transfer requires learners to implement new models based on their analyses of prior knowledge and to consolidate new and prior practices. Learners become boundary-crossers and change agents, intertwined with evolving social contexts.

The Bioecological Model of Human Development, theorized by Urie Bronfenbrenner and colleagues, and Etienne Wenger's work on Communities of Practice help educators understand learners' interactions with those social contexts. The Bioecological Model attends to the context of learner development, extending the focus on the individual in the system to consider the impact of the individual's interactions with his/her context over time (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applied to transfer studies, the bioecological model suggests that learner's dispositions can impact willingness to engage with transfer and can have generative or disruptive impacts on the learner's context. Similarly, Etienne Wenger and others suggest that communities of practice are collectives of individuals and groups sharing values, goals, and interests, with the community shaping the individual and the individual shaping the community (see, for instance, Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Communities include both novices and experts. Part of the dialogic process of moving from novice to expert involves learning how to learn within communities. As we think about learning transfer, then, we should look for the enabling practices that help students develop those learning-how-to-learn strategies that apply across contexts or communities.

Jan (Erik) Meyer and Ray Land (2006), building on David Perkins' notion of troublesome knowledge, challenge educators to identify concepts central to epistemological participation in disciplines and interdisciplines. Often these threshold concepts are

transformative; when learners fully grasp the concepts, their disciplinary view changes. Yet that transformative nature also creates liminality, as students grapple with ideas or new knowledge that may be counterintuitive or inconsistent with their prior knowledge. If students successfully work through the transitional space of making sense of the threshold concept, it likely will have an integrative impact, helping students synthesize other disciplinary knowledge and concepts. Threshold concepts typically are implicit markers of disciplinary knowledge, but once educators explicitly identify those threshold concepts that are central to meaning making in their fields (i.e., their communities of practice), they can prioritize teaching these concepts, in turn increasing the likelihood that students will carry an understanding of these core concepts into future coursework and contexts. Writing studies scholars Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2015) have led efforts to identify the threshold concepts for writing, and the essential principles in this volume in essence reflect the threshold concepts for designing university curricula and teaching for writing transfer.

SUCCESSFUL WRITING TRANSFER REQUIRES TRANSFORMING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Principle 1: Successful writing transfer requires transforming or repurposing prior knowledge (even if only slightly) for a new context in order to adequately meet the expectations of new audiences and fulfill new purposes for writing.

Successful writing transfer occurs when a writer can transform rhetorical knowledge and rhetorical awareness into performance. Students facing a new and difficult writing task draw on previous knowledge about genre conventions (e.g., reader expectations for memos or lab reports or patient reports, etc.), logical appeals, organization, citation conventions, and much more. They

repurpose prior writing strategies ranging from brainstorming activities to strategies for eliciting and responding to feedback on writing-in-progress. Whether crossing concurrent contexts (e.g., courses in the same semester, university coursework and a part-time job, etc.) or sequential contexts (e.g., courses in a major's or minor's scaffolded sequence, high school to college, a university degree program to a post-graduation job, etc.), individuals may engage in both routinized (low-road) and transformative (high-road) forms of transfer as they draw on and utilize prior knowledge about writing.

When students tap that prior knowledge, they must transform or repurpose it, if only slightly. Writing studies scholars Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011), for instance, introduce the idea of "not-talk." They suggest that one part of repurposing prior knowledge is recognizing when a new task calls on writers to compose a genre that is *unlike* a genre composed before. In other words, successful transfer requires writers to recognize when the new task is not a five-paragraph essay, not a literary analysis, not a lab report, not a memo, and so forth.

Of course, genre knowledge is only one element of each rhetorical situation for writing. Successful writers also are attentive to the knowledge and expertise they bring to a writing task, the expectations and backgrounds of their readers, their available choices for the content and form of the actual text, and the larger context encompassing their communication. Being attentive to this rhetorical situation (as illustrated in Figure 1.1) enables writers to make strategic choices about their prior knowledge that might be applicable to – or adaptable to – each new purpose for writing.

Figure 1.1: Elements of a rhetorical situation for writing
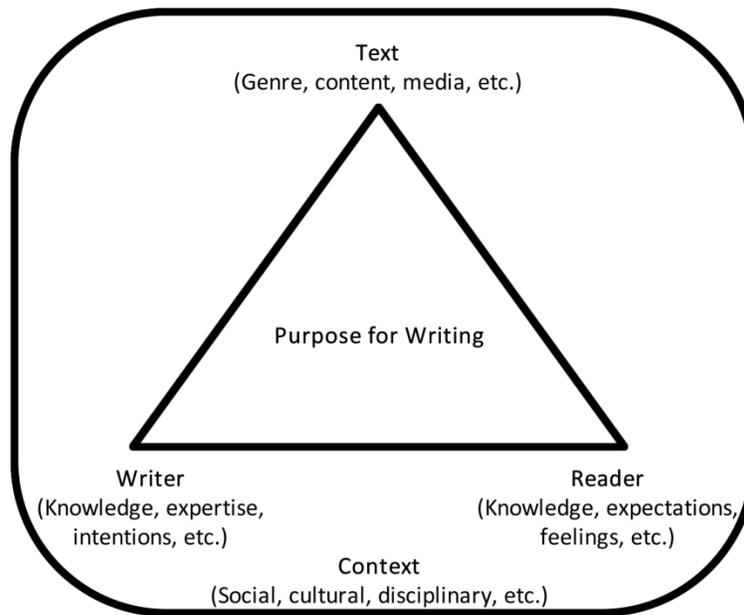
Writing studies scholar Rebecca Nowacek (2011) highlights the challenges inherent in transforming and repurposing writing knowledge for new rhetorical situations. Because students' transformation attempts typically are not visible to others, teachers often do not recognize those attempts. At the same time, the attempted transformation might not be appropriate for the new rhetorical situation, course, or writing context. Yet if a teacher does not recognize that a student attempted to transfer prior knowledge, feedback to the student likely won't include strategies for more effective repurposing of that prior knowledge.

Given the significance of prior knowledge, higher education curricula must be attentive to the foundations laid in secondary curricula (see chapter by Farrell et al.), in first-year courses (see chapters by Robertson & Taczak, Boyd, and Gorzelsky et al.), and in prerequisites throughout students' coursework.

WRITING TRANSFER IS A COMPLEX PHENOMENON

Principle 2: Writing transfer is a complex phenomenon, and understanding that complexity is central to facilitating students' successful consequential transitions, whether among university writing tasks or between academic and workplace or civic contexts.

Writing transfer is inherently complex. It involves approaching new and unfamiliar writing tasks through the application, remixing, or integration of previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions. If the new context does not trigger automatic use of prior knowledge, as in low-road transfer, writers must systematically reflect on past writing experiences that might be relevant, cull the prior knowledge that contributed to the success (or failure) of those past experiences, and adapt the knowledge for the new circumstances (high-road transfer).

Writing studies scholars Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey (2012) describe the varied ways students use new writing knowledge relative to prior knowledge. Some "take up new knowledge… by grafting isolated bits of new knowledge onto a continuing schema of the old," forming an assemblage, while other students revise and remix their prior knowledge to integrate new strategies and concepts, increasing the likelihood of success in their attempts to adapt and apply that cumulative, remixed knowledge to future writing tasks (Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2012).

In addition to the differences in how individual students assemble or remix prior knowledge, each new context for writing also provides affordances and constraints that impact that use of prior knowledge. Writing studies scholars Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger (forthcoming), for example, highlight how internship tasks and related mentoring can trigger – or fail to trigger – transfer, and how students' dispositions compound the likelihood of success. Similarly, Nowacek (2011) reminds us that subsequent contexts for writing may not trigger

students to reflect on relevant prior knowledge, both because the new context may be too different from the old context (cases necessitating far transfer) and because others in the new context (e.g., teachers, supervisors, etc.) may not offer prompts signaling that they expect the writer to draw on and adapt prior knowledge. Furthermore, reductive understandings of the complexity of writing transfer, like those found in the Common Core Standards, will hinder students' future writing transfer attempts by introducing false constraints (see Linda Adler-Kassner's chapter in this volume).

Ultimately, writing transfer successes and challenges cannot be understood without exploring how individual learners are processing prior and new knowledge or without attention to learners' social-cultural spaces, including the standards and curricula that shape them. Adding to this complexity, stakeholders across university campuses often have different expectations for students' writing knowledge and practices, as Carmen Werder (this volume) explores.

STUDENTS' IDENTITIES INFORM THE SUCCESS OF THEIR WRITING TRANSFER EXPERIENCES

Principle 3: Students' dispositions (e.g., habits of mind) and identities inform the success of their unique writing transfer experiences.

Writing transfer is not a discrete point along a student's educational path. Rather, writing transfer across critical transitions (e.g., from first-year writing to writing in the major, from writing in a capstone course to writing in the workplace, etc.) reflects one, in-flex moment in students' multi-dimensional lives. Everything else that forms students' identities – prior experiences, concurrent interests, values, beliefs, and so forth – continues to shape students' transfer attempts. Encapsulated in those identities are the dispositions or habits of mind that determine how

learners use prior knowledge – whether, for instance, they will approach new knowledge as assemblage or remixing. Writing studies scholars Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells (2012) emphasize that dispositions can be generative or troublesome and context-specific or generalizable. Some dispositions seem to better afford engaged rhetorical problem-solving. We are only starting to explore what such dispositions might be, so pedagogy that promotes transfer needs to be attentive to dispositions research.

Alison Farrell, Sandra Kane, Cecilia Dube, and Steve Salchak (this volume), all participants in the Elon Research Seminar on Critical Transitions, examined students' critical transitions from high school to public and private universities in the US, South Africa, and Ireland. Students at all three sites were optimistic about their ability to improve as writers, but they differed in their confidence in how well their high school courses had prepared them for university-level writing. Therefore writing curricula must be attentive to individual identities – including confidence levels – as they teach for transfer.

UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS CAN "TEACH FOR TRANSFER"

Principle 4: University programs (e.g., first-year writing programs, writing across the curriculum programs, majors, etc.) can "teach for transfer." Enabling practices that promote writing transfer include constructing writing curricula and classes that focus on the study and practice of rhetorically-based concepts (such as genre, purpose, and audience) that prepare students to analyze expectations for writing and learning within specific contexts, asking students to engage in activities that foster the development of metacognitive awareness, and explicitly modeling transfer-focused thinking.

First and foremost, writing programs should construct writing curricula and classes that focus on the study of and practice with writing knowledge. Teaching rhetorically-based concepts, such as genre, purpose, audience, and other elements of rhetorical situations, enables students to analyze expectations for writing and learning within and across specific contexts. With explicit rhetorical education, students are more likely to transform rhetorical awareness into writing performance (see, for example, this volume's cases by Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak; Diane Boyd; Mary Goldschmidt; and Gwen Gorzelsky, Carol Hayes, Dana Driscoll, and Ed Jones).

Second, writing programs should engage students in activities that foster the development of metacognitive awareness. Teaching students to ask good questions about writing situations and helping them develop learning and problem-solving strategies for analyzing unfamiliar writing situations will improve the likelihood of both low-road and high-road transfer. Both "Teaching for Transfer" (Robertson & Taczak, this volume; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014) and "Writing about Writing" (Downs & Wardle, 2011, 2014; Gorzelsky et al., this volume) curricula forefront rhetorical knowledge, terms, and concepts that students will need to apply in future contexts. These approaches typically also build in reiterative opportunities for developing metacognitive awareness. As a result, they equip students with tools and strategies for successful boundary crossing.

Third, faculty across the curriculum should explicitly model transfer-focused thinking and the application of metacognitive awareness as a conscious and explicit part of learning. Although teaching for writing transfer curricula often are implemented in first-year writing contexts, courses university-wide can include reflection activities about both generalizable and discipline-specific writing strategies. Helping students develop strategies and tools to think about how writing functions in different rhetorical situations – and across different academic

disciplines – prepares them to draw effectively on prior knowledge when they encounter writing in new settings, whether writing for a major, writing in a workplace, or writing for extracurricular activities.

RECOGNIZING WRITING TRANSFER REQUIRES MIXED METHODS

Principle 5: Recognizing and assessing writing transfer requires using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods looking at both critical transition points and longitudinal patterns of learning.

Given the complexity of transfer, assessments of learning and research on writing transfer should use multiple methods to identify moments of transfer and to examine how writers repurpose their prior knowledge. As writing studies scholar Elizabeth Wardle (2007) notes, how you conceive of transfer will inform what you look for. As a result, university campuses must be attentive to misalignments in expectations (Werder, this volume) when they assess writing transfer.

Similarly, different methods will highlight different elements of the writer's activity system. Surveys and interviews may provide a glimpse of a writer's perception of their use of prior knowledge or a teacher's understanding of how a student might be repurposing writing skills and strategies. Textual or discourse analysis across time may show developing patterns of writing practices. Classroom observations may illustrate some affordances or constraints for a discrete writing task. In isolation, though, none of these research and assessment methods give us a complete picture of how curricula help students develop writing knowledge, when writing practices become routinized (for low-road transfer), and how students work through repurposing and transforming prior writing knowledge for new situations with new audiences and purposes (for high-road transfer). As Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) emphasize, understanding the complex

boundary crossing that writers practice as they move among and write within varied activity systems requires using multiple methods.

Writing transfer studies, therefore, use a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to identify evidence of and measure transfer, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, classroom observations, text analysis, discourse analysis, composing-aloud and think-aloud protocols, group discussion logs, and analysis of students' course work and faculty comments. While students often are the primary participants in transfer studies, researchers also interact with and collect data from teachers and community partners. Most transfer studies are short-term (one or two terms), but additional longitudinal studies and studies that examine both writers' academic and non-academic activity systems are needed to extend higher education's understanding of writing transfer and to assess the effectiveness of writing-related curricula.

Many of the Principles at Work cases in this volume reiterate the value of using mixed methods across multiple contexts to achieve a scalable understanding of writing transfer – enabling teacher-scholars both to focus in detail on specific communities of practice and activity systems *and* to zoom out to examine working principles of writing transfer that apply across multiple contexts. For this reason, both short-term and longitudinal studies will enrich higher education's understandings of transfer, particularly as scholars examine learners' development as writers, not merely their transitions from one context to another. Adding student voices as participants, or even as co-inquirers (see for example, Wardle & Clement, this volume), facilitates this more holistic examination of learners' development, boundary-crossing, remixing, and integration.

Cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural collaboration enriches the discussion about writing transfer and allows new perspectives to become visible. Even if multi-

institutional research is not feasible for a specific writing transfer study, testing the applicability

of findings to other higher education contexts is crucial to understanding which curricular

strategies for teaching for writing transfer are generalizable and which are context-specific.

Therefore tenure and promotion systems should value these crucial efforts to replicate research

across contexts.

The chapters and research cases that follow illustrate these five essential principles in

more detail at critical sites of impact across higher education and explore their implications for

practice, curriculum design, and higher education policies (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Essential Principle	Critical Sites of Impact	Principles at Work: Implications for Practice
(1) Writing transfer requires transforming or repurposing prior knowledge.	Chapters 2, 3, 6 & 7	Chapters 8, 9, 11, 12, & 13
(2) Writing transfer is a complex phenomenon.	Chapters 2, 3, 5 & 6	Chapter 13
(3) Students' dispositions and identities inform their writing transfer experiences.	Chapters 3 & 6	Chapters 8 & 10
(4) University programs can "teach for transfer."	Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6	Chapters 9, 10, 11, & 13
(5) Recognizing and assessing writing transfer requires multiple methods.	Chapters 4 & 7	Chapter 13

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