

# Transfer and Dispositions in Writing Centers: A Cross-Institutional, Mixed-Methods Study

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**Abstract:** Taking a dispositional view of transfer and applying Joanne Lobato's "actor-oriented transfer perspective," we analyze student perceptions of writing center visits at three very different institutions. We find that, as a nonevaluative space where university students can develop metacognitive awareness across disciplines and over time, writing centers are a prime site to examine knowledge transfer. Our study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess writing center users' perceptions of transfer: exit surveys (n=2270) and focus groups (n=37). Most, but not all, of our participants were repeat visitors. The data show strong similarities in student perceptions across institutional borders, irrespective of demographics. As a result of writing center sessions, students report 1) regularly engaging in actual past transfer, both near and far; 2) regularly engaging in high-road transfer; 3) gaining confidence and other positive dispositions towards writing; and 4) transferring knowledge to their general writing practices. These findings of students' regular and successful transfer from writing center work point to productive outcomes, including greater self-efficacy and other dispositions supporting learning, not only for writing centers, but also for the classroom.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Introduction

While the term "transfer of knowledge" remains contested, the study of if, how, when, and why transfer happens remains an ongoing research priority in multiple educational fields. In the last decade, composition researchers have been variously defining and evaluating transfer in, between, and beyond classrooms.<sup>[2]</sup> This trend in composition parallels an even longer project among educational scholars to widen their lens from an exclusive focus on the application of cognitive skills to an examination of environmental, social, and dispositional factors (Royer, Mestre, & Dufresne, 2005; for examples of this shift, see Bereiter, 1995; Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000; Slomp, 2012). The additional shift in research focus from the classroom outward and from internal to external factors creates a prime space for writing centers to contribute to transfer conversations.<sup>[3]</sup> Because most writing centers are removed from what foundational transfer researchers David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon have identified as the artificial constraints of discipline-specific, term-delimited classroom environments (2012, p. 253), writing centers are particularly well positioned to investigate student dispositions (Schmidt & Alexander, 2012). Dispositions, according to Perkins et al. (2000), refer "not only [to] what people *can* do ... but what they are disposed to do" and are often "a consequence of a developing sense of self-confidence within a positively reinforcing environment"

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(pp. 270, 286). One compelling way to evaluate student dispositions, including confidence, and thus transfer, is to interrogate student perceptions of experiences in the writing center.

Our study investigates student perceptions of knowledge transfer at three very different types of institutions using data gathered both from exit surveys and focus groups of writing center users. Our data, largely from repeat writing center visitors, show five major findings. First, examining student responses to survey questions about transfer, we find no statistically significant differences based on demographics. Second, through surveys and focus groups, students demonstrate both inclinations to future transfer and actual previous transfer of specific writing-related strategies. Third, students cite regularly engaging in transfer in ways that manifest their metacognitive awareness. Fourth, students attest that their writing center sessions have caused them to gain confidence and other positive dispositions about writing. Finally, students report transferring knowledge from their writing center sessions to their general writing practices. Our findings, that students perceive transferring knowledge related to writing tasks, processes, and dispositions as a result of writing center sessions, carry some important new implications for both classroom and writing center practices.

## Transfer: Definitions and Dispositional Approaches

Like most transfer researchers' definitions of transfer, ours begins with the work of Salomon and Perkins. Salomon and Perkins distinguish the concept of "learning" from the concept of "transfer," defining learning as continued application of knowledge in more or less the same context as the original and defining transfer as something learned in one context applied in a different context (1989, pp. 115-16). However, the term "transfer" implies a concrete portability (the literal transport of knowledge from place to place) that ignores the situated nature of knowledge acquisition and use. We therefore incorporate Elizabeth Wardle's idea of "creative repurposing for expansive learning" (2012). Nonetheless, because "transfer" remains the most common term in the field, we adopt it to incorporate applying, reinterpreting, repurposing, and/or transforming knowledge in contextually situated ways. We also find it helpful to distinguish between "near transfer," in which the new application occurs in conditions that are very similar to the original condition for learning, and "far transfer," in which the two situations are substantially different (Royer et al., 2005, pp. x-xi). Finally, we consider all transfer as either high-road or low-road (Salomon & Perkins, 1989; Perkins & Salomon, 2012); in the words of Perkins and Salomon: "High-road transfer involves deliberate reflective processing, whereas low-road transfer depends on pattern recognition and the reflexive triggering of routines" (p. 251). We focus here on high-road transfer, especially as it occurs in the following dimensions: knowledge, process, and self-efficacy/confidence.

Several recent works provide thorough summaries of the evolution of transfer research to date in the fields of composition studies (Moore, 2012; Robertson et al., 2012) and educational psychology (Lobato, 2012; Royer et al., 2005). While our definition of transfer is drawn from the more traditional cognitive perspective, we align ourselves with composition studies' recent move towards dispositions in the study of transfer (Driscoll & Wells, 2012); specifically, to understand dispositions, we incorporate Wardle's adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*: "dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways ... [that] generate practices, perceptions, and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any 'rule'" (Wardle, 2012, para. 13). Wardle also broaches a concept that is especially applicable to writing center-based transfer research: problem-exploring dispositions, which "incline a person toward curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and toward a recognition that more than one solution can 'work'" (2012, para. 13). Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014, p. 14) helpfully connect these "problem-exploring" dispositions with Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi's "boundary-crossers," those students who question genre knowledge and repurpose it (2011, p. 314). Reiff and Bawarshi link boundary crossing with high-road transfer (pp. 325-29). Combined, this understanding of dispositions exemplifies the work of writing centers as nonevaluative (or, at least, ungraded) spaces for writers to experiment with multiple solutions to writing

"problems" without the risks associated with performing before a class or an evaluating faculty member. Indeed, one might say that problem-exploring is built into the writing center model.

Despite transfer studies' new interest in dispositions, however, researchers have not given as much attention as they could to studying *student* perspectives or motivations as indicators of dispositions. We use Joanne Lobato's (2012) "actor-oriented transfer perspective." As opposed to previous approaches that focus on students meeting specified goals set by teachers or researchers, Lobato's approach allows us to look at how learners make use of prior knowledge in a new activity "even if the result is non-normative or incorrect performance" (2012, p. 235). In other words, we take learners' perceptions of their own learning into account. Methods that do not explicitly elicit student perceptions or voices may miss essential information. We believe that this perspective allows for more nuance—crucial when analyzing data that are based on the sometimes-questioned method of collecting student self-perceptions.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Methodology

Our IRB-approved study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to examine student perceptions of transfer as a result of writing center visits at three different writing centers: at a large, public, land-grant university (LP); at a medium, private, doctoral university (MP); and at a small, liberal arts college (SLAC). Responses to our exit survey were anonymous, and, as a result, we could not link students' survey responses to students' focus group participation. Surveys enable us to understand students' expectations that transfer will occur, while focus groups enable us to solicit students' actual experiences of transfer. Combining surveys and focus groups is a typical strategy; we employed focus groups after our survey, a common sequence enabling us to "corroborate survey findings [and] explore in greater depth the relationships suggested by the survey findings" (Wolff, Knodel, & Sittitrai, 1993, p. 121). All focus group participants were given a copy of the survey for their reference, and they completed a short questionnaire immediately before the focus group about their previous writing center visits. Focus group data from those students who told us they had taken the survey previously clarified for us students' understanding of the survey questions as well as providing reports of student perceptions of transfer experiences. Focus group data from those participants who may not have taken the survey, on the other hand, still offered an opportunity for students to report their perceptions of transfer. Most of the survey and focus group participants were self-reported repeat visitors.

At the time of the study, our three writing centers were staffed by peer undergraduate and/or graduate tutors with training in rhetoric and composition theories. During the 2009-10 academic year, our tutors administered the same, voluntary student exit survey. This strategy enabled us to collect 2,283 submissions: 393 at the SLAC, 409 at the Large Public, and 1,481 at the Medium Private. Among total submissions, 1,478 (65%) of the surveys were completed by students who reported visiting the writing center at least once. Survey questions were primarily quantitative, based on a 5-point Likert-scale, with 5 as *strongly agree*, 4 as *agree*, 3 as *does not apply*, 2 as *disagree*, and 1 as *strongly disagree*. We did not pretest the survey to assure validity. We asked each of our consultants to invite every student with whom they met to complete the survey for all appointments they had during the academic year. Students completed the survey immediately after their appointment. It is important to note that there could have been selection bias. Not all tutors asked all students to fill out the survey, and not all students who were asked to take it actually completed it. From our conversations with our tutors, we understand that while some tutors asked all students, some tutors asked none. We have no evidence that any selection bias was substantial since almost all students signed up to meet with tutors at random and tutors reported that their invitations to take the survey were unrelated to the session just completed.

While immediate post-visit surveys have been shown to produce higher positive responses to questions than surveys taken several weeks after appointments, Bell (2000) found that even two months after their appointments, a vast majority of students still felt positive about their experiences in the writing center.

Based on the number of appointments recorded at each center, 38-48% of students visiting the writing center at each institution completed the exit survey—well within a review study's proposed benchmark for collecting data from individual surveys (Baruch & Holtom, 2008, pp. 1154-55).<sup>[5]</sup> In addition to demographic data, we find that many of the survey-takers and focus group participants were repeat users, whose visits may predate our study. Our recent *Writing Center Journal* article draws on the same survey data and determined that none of these types of demographic data impacted students' overall satisfaction (Bromley, Northway, & Schonberg, 2013).

Because our current study examines data collected from voluntary writing center exit surveys and focus groups, it was not experimental. We chose these means of data collection because an experimental situation in a writing center setting would have altered normal usage patterns of student visitors (see Schmidt & Alexander, 2012). We find it valuable to use statistical tests to analyze our survey data to elucidate the statistical significance of points of similarity and difference. A university statistician we consulted analyzed our data using the GLIMMIX procedure, a generalized limited mixed model, which took into account the correlations and nonnormality that are inherent in our dataset (SAS, 2005). GLIMMIX evaluates whether, at all three institutions, there is a difference in student responses to the survey questions based on writing center visits by testing the null hypothesis that writing center visits did not make a difference in students' responses to these questions. We evaluate the results of these tests at the 0.05 level; if the tests found results  $p \leq 0.05$ , then we are 95% confident that there is a statistically significant difference, and we can reject the null hypothesis that writing center visits do not make a difference in students' responses in favor of the alternative hypothesis that writing center visits do make a difference in students' responses to this survey question. For example, students were asked whether, as a result of their consultation, they had a clearer sense of next steps for their paper than before the students came. Without the statistical analysis, we would only be able to report that a vast majority of students at all campuses agreed that a clearer sense of next steps resulted from the consultation. With the statistical analysis, we can determine whether any differences that we see between groups of users are actually statistically significant, that is, not simply the result of chance.

Focus groups gave us an additional, more nuanced way to ask students about their experiences in the writing center, which was especially important because of potential issues with the validity and bias of our survey questions. Drawing on the statistician's concerns that some of our questions' wording potentially contained bias, prompting socially acceptable answers (a common issue in this type of research, as noted in Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012, p. 552), we drafted focus group questions that would resolve these biases. The statistician then approved these questions. We opted to conduct focus groups, rather than one-on-one interviews, as focus groups would enable us to gather information produced in a collaborative conversation. Focus groups also simplified recruitment of participants because a group setting often helps students feel more comfortable sharing views (Creswell, 2013, p. 164). Comparing the focus group responses of students from all three campuses allows us to examine more broadly the way that students define terms related to transfer, such as "breakthrough," and to understand what students take away from their sessions (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

In Spring 2012, we recruited interested tutors across the three schools to revise the focus group questions with us, to ensure the wording of questions would be meaningful to students, and to conduct the focus groups. We generally followed the protocol set out by Tara Cushman, Lindsey Marx, Carleigh Brower, Katie Holahan, and Elizabeth Boquet (2005), which specifies how best to train writing center tutors to lead focus groups of writing center users (see also Bartholomae & Matway, 2010). In our training, which included mock focus groups, we emphasized the importance of asking open-ended, unbiased follow-up questions, not intervening too soon, and allowing participants to respond in their own ways to each question. Each focus group was facilitated by two or three trained tutors. While there are drawbacks to having the focus groups led by tutors from within a campus writing center, such as pressure to provide socially acceptable answers, participants might be more willing to be honest with someone from a community they know. We

felt the benefits of having students who were familiar with both the writing center and the goals of the research outweighed any potential risks.

To encourage students to take part in focus groups, all three writing centers sought participation from recent users; because they had a smaller sample to draw from, the Large Public and the SLAC invited all visitors from that academic year, while the Medium Private invited a random sample of that academic year's users. Focus group attendees were given snacks and a small gift certificate to thank them for their participation. Each focus group was video-recorded. We had 2 to 4 focus groups per institution, with 1 to 8 participants in each group, for a total of 37 participants across all three schools. Certainly, students who came to the hour-long focus groups represented a self-selected population of writing center users. While two of the focus groups consisted of just one participant and two leaders, making them more interviews than focus groups, the responses from these smaller sessions aligned with those from the traditional focus groups. From the pre-focus group questionnaires, we note that 5 students reported visiting the writing center once, 5 twice, and 27 three or more times.

We transcribed each focus group and analyzed the transcripts systematically to arrive at themes and to categorize results. This approach allowed us to assess frequency (how often something was mentioned), extensiveness (how many people said something), and specificity (how detailed comments were), as outlined by Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey (2009) in the most prominent scholarly text on focus groups. We did not include counts or percentages, thus following Krueger and Casey's lead, who note that including counts is "unwise" because in small sample sizes those figures do not signify anything (2009, p. 127). As a result, we adhere to Krueger and Casey's instruction to "use modifiers like *no one*, *a few*, *some*, *many*, *most*, or *all*, to describe how many people talked about an issue in a particular way" (2009, p. 127; emphasis in original). In our analysis of focus group discussions, we introduce student voices that explore next steps, similar assignments, and breakthroughs to arrive at important themes; for every quote, we note the institution of the participant and indicate the frequency of that type of comment.

## Results and Discussion

Using data from survey and focus groups, we find that most student visitors to the writing center report engaging in all types of transfer, with a large majority practicing far transfer. Students also recognize that writing center sessions help them develop dispositions that facilitate the transfer of writing knowledge. Below, we focus on findings derived from two sets of data—survey questions and focus group responses—that relate to the following types of questions: 1) students' perceptions of their capacity to take next steps and pursue a similar assignment because of their writing center consultation and 2) students' perceptions of having breakthroughs about their writing processes. The data from responses to these questions show several kinds of transfer occurring as a result of writing center sessions: knowledge of processes, knowledge of writing tasks, and metacognitive awareness/self-efficacy.

Our survey asked students to respond to the following statements that relate to the learning necessary in order to facilitate eventual transfer or to exhibit a disposition to transfer:

1. Because of the consultation, I have a clearer sense of the next steps for my current writing project than I did before I came [next steps]
2. Because of the consultation, I feel better prepared to handle a similar assignment in the future [similar assignment]
3. During the consultation, I made a significant discovery or felt I had a breakthrough about my text [text breakthrough]
4. During the consultation, I made a significant discovery or felt I had a breakthrough about myself as a writer [writer breakthrough]



Our focus groups asked students to respond to an additional series of questions about potential and actual transfer:

1. What are some of the next steps that you typically take after a session? How do you come to decide on these particular steps? [next steps]
2. Can you think of a time when you took things you learned in your writing center appointment and applied them to other assignments? Explain what that looked like. Does this happen often, or was this an unusual occurrence? Have others of you had that experience? [similar assignment]
3. One of the questions we asked on the survey was about having a breakthrough in writing. What does it mean for you when you say that you've had a breakthrough? Can you give us an example? Is this a major change or a more minor one? Is having a breakthrough important or not? Is it more often about an assignment or about your writing in general? How often does this happen in your writing process? How often does it happen in a writing center session? Does a breakthrough have to happen *during* the session or can it happen afterwards? [text breakthrough; writer breakthrough]

## Demographics

We began by exploring the demographics of student survey-takers and focus group participants to assess whether demographic information influenced students' experiences with respect to transfer. We do not have complete data on demographics of all writing center users at two of the institutions; nor do we have demographic data for unique survey takers because the survey was anonymous. However, the demographic data available from all Medium Private and SLAC writing center users indicate that the Medium Private and SLAC survey takers are a relatively representative sample of the population of those writing center users (e.g., for the MP, 29% of survey takers were Asian and 27% of all visitors were Asian; for the SLAC, 55% of survey-takers were first-years while 60% of all visitors were first-years). Given the representative nature of the available demographic information, we have no reason to believe that survey respondents are not a reasonably representative sample of the population of visitors in other respects as well. At all schools, 62-70% of survey-takers were repeat visitors.

Because of the relatively small number of focus group participants (37), we did not expect these students to mirror the demographics of students who took the survey or visited the centers. We note that, of our focus group participants, we had more students presenting as female than male, more presenting as white than minority students, more native English speakers than English language learners, and more undergraduate than graduate students. With respect to field of study, we had students pursuing a wide range of disciplines, including biology, city planning, education, English, management, psychology, and sociology.

Our first step was to determine whether demographics play a role in students' survey responses to questions about transfer. GLIMMIX results indicate that there is no difference in survey responses of students of different races and ethnicities, class year, gender, or language background with respect to any of the transfer questions: next steps, similar assignment, text breakthrough, and writer breakthrough. This is true of student responses to all four questions at all three institutions ( $p \geq 0.10$ ).<sup>[6]</sup> That there is no difference with respect to students' quantitative responses based on demographics is a major similarity across our diverse institutions. While Rebecca Nowacek (2011, p. 140) has called for studying the capacity for transfer of different and diverse student populations, and while there has been recent important work on writing centers and these populations (e.g., Condon & Young, 2013), our findings, at least, do not reveal any significant difference; from our research perspective, Nowacek's question may not be the most pressing need in upcoming transfer research.

Given that demographics do not affect student responses to these questions, we examine all students' perceptions of transfer, regardless of demographics. Below, we demonstrate through statistical analysis of our survey results that students at all three campuses expect to transfer knowledge gained in their writing center sessions and believe that they had breakthroughs about their writing project and about themselves

as writers. We also illustrate, through our focus group analysis, that students believe that they are regularly engaging in near, far, and, most interestingly, high-road transfer as a result of their writing center consultations, and that consultations are fostering dispositions that promote the transfer of writing task and writing process knowledge, specifically problem-exploring dispositions.

## Next Steps and Similar Assignments

For transfer to occur, a writer needs to have learned something *to* transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 2012, pp. 249-50). To discover whether such learning transpires in writing center sessions, our survey asked students about their next steps for their current paper, hypothesizing that students would feel better able to identify next steps if they felt they had learned something initially. We find that more than 80% of students surveyed agreed that, as a result of their writing center session, they had a clearer sense of next steps for their current assignment; as result, we infer they learned something in their session. In addition, more than 80% of surveyed students agreed that they felt better prepared to handle a similar assignment in the future. For both questions, we can reject the null hypothesis that writing center visits do not make a difference in favor of the alternative hypothesis that writing center visits do make a difference in enabling students to identify next steps for their assignment and feel better prepared to handle similar future assignments ( $p \leq 0.0001$ ). Our statistical analysis of survey findings demonstrates that students *do* report that they have identified next steps for their current assignment and anticipate that they are better prepared to handle similar assignments in the future. Focus group findings reveal that this type of learning did in fact occur. As discussed below, students explain that they learned specific strategies and approaches in the writing center that they transferred to later work, with most reporting precise occasions of far transfer occurring on a regular basis as a result of writing center sessions.

## Breakthroughs

Both our surveys and focus groups asked students about breakthroughs experienced during or after writing center sessions, either about their texts or about themselves as writers. In order to discuss a breakthrough, students have to describe their learning retroactively, demonstrating the metacognitive awareness necessary to develop the flexible knowledge base for successful transfer (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, pp. 49, 191) and indicating the possibility for high-road transfer. Using information from focus groups, we present student discoveries occurring in three areas: the transfer of knowledge about writing tasks (e.g., the steps necessary for that particular assignment), the transfer of knowledge about writing process (e.g., reading aloud), and the transfer of metacognitive knowledge about both tasks and processes (e.g., confidence). Data from our surveys and focus groups suggest that students, especially repeat writing center visitors, are regularly engaging in high-road transfer as a result of their writing center visits.

Survey responses show that, at all three schools as a result of their consultations, more than 80% of students agreed that during their session they actually had a breakthrough about their current writing projects (text breakthrough). In addition, a majority of students (more than 55%) agreed that they had a breakthrough about themselves as writers as a result of a single session (writer breakthrough). For both questions, GLIMMIX results enable us to reject the null hypothesis that writing center visits do not make a difference in favor of the alternative hypothesis that writing center visits do make a difference in students having breakthroughs, both about their texts and about themselves as writers ( $p \leq 0.0001$ ). Consequently, our statistical analysis of survey findings shows students reporting that they had breakthroughs about their current writing projects and about themselves as writers during single writing center sessions.

**Writing task knowledge.** Surveys tell us whether students *expect* to transfer; in focus groups, our participants report, long after their writing center sessions, that they *actually* transferred knowledge, whether of process or task, or metacognitive awareness, in either near or far contexts. Furthermore, focus groups enabled us to categorize what transfer meant for students, specifically knowledge of writing tasks,

writing processes, and metacognition. Asking writers during focus groups if they had experienced breakthroughs about their writing or about themselves as writers, either during or after their sessions, we find ample evidence indicating high-road transfer (text breakthrough; writer breakthrough).

In discussing the transfer of knowledge related to writing tasks, some students report transferring strategies for organization, and others note transferring knowledge related to clarifying their writing. Consider the following representative example:

I've applied [organizational strategies] to certain research reports that I've done .... "Oh, I learned this in the Writing Center!" ... Ever since I've visited the Writing Center, I'm constantly—I remember what I learned back then. So I'm able to incorporate that in any of my future projects or ... with writing in general. It's always been helpful. It will always probably be in the back of my head. (LP)

We see here evidence of intentional, or high-road, transfer of knowledge about writing tasks. In addition to organizational approaches, focus group participants identify new strategies for keeping readers focused. For example, a student explains, "The Writing Fellow pointed out that I write enormous sentences, that I just want to put the whole thought in one sentence. He made me very aware .... So now when I want to put everything together in one sentence, I find a way to break it up" (SLAC). Another student comments, "I think I did have a breakthrough here as a writer at the Writing Center ... from coming repeatedly. Finally, it just sank into my head that I had to define terms on a paper; you can't ... include them without a sentence or two about what they mean" (SLAC). Not only students who repeatedly visited the center, but also students who visited one time reported that they had experienced writing task knowledge transfer. For example, a student commented, "I was new to APA so ... one of the most helpful pieces of advice I got was the [Purdue] OWL APA site. That I've applied to not every paper because a lot of the time I can remember some of the things. But when I have a new APA problem.... It's been useful quite a few times" (MP). As a result of their writing center visits, these students arrived at ways of transferring writing task knowledge in order to communicate their ideas, to keep their audience focused, and to convey their writerly intentions more effectively.

**Writing process knowledge.** Students not only explicitly describe instances of writing task knowledge, but also recount high-road transfer related to their writing processes. Writing centers, working with students across multiple contexts and disciplines, are uniquely positioned to address what both educational researchers and compositionists have identified as one of the key barriers to learning and transfer—namely that while "students often have been taught writing processes and skills that would assist them throughout their educational careers.... [S]tudies show that they are often unable to draw upon that knowledge and instead perceive each situation as entirely new and foreign" (Driscoll, 2011, para. 5). Writing centers, therefore, can help at the moments that Perkins and Salomon (2012, p. 256) have termed "connect and detect," helping students to *connect* prior learning with a new situation and *detect* that each writing situation is not, in fact, new.

Many focus group participants note specific process-related strategies (e.g., outlines and reading aloud) that they intentionally applied from their writing center sessions to other work. The proliferation of strategies can be one indication, as Reiff and Bawarshi have suggested, of the "boundary crossers," who are likely to engage in high-road transfer (2011, p. 327). We see this application illustrated in the following typical exchange:

Student A: When I'm writing other papers, I still apply the thought process that they had me do in the Writing Center, like when they have me sit down and read it out loud. If I'm ... writing my own paper outside the Writing Center, I do that myself now ....



Student B: Yeah—I think that the big one is just reading out loud. I mean you sort of always know that you're supposed to do that, but you know when you go there and you do it and you realize how much you catch, then you're like, "yeah, okay, I really *should* do that." And that's when you do it to other papers. (MP)

The intentionality, at a temporal remove, with which these students discuss reusing these process strategies indicates high-road transfer. This exchange also illustrates the use of strategies encouraging a recursive revision process, examples of the problem-exploring dispositions fostered by writing centers.

**Metacognitive awareness, confidence, and dispositions.** While the information above indicates a type of writerly self-awareness, whether applied to task or process knowledge, we also saw more explicit discussions of self-awareness and self-efficacy. Questions are emerging as to the importance of metacognitive awareness in developing successful far transfer (see, for example, Donahue, 2012, p. 155); transfer scholars identify metacognitive awareness, nevertheless, as a key ingredient in successful high-road transfer, as such awareness allows students to be intentional not just about the opportunity to transfer and the knowledge they will transfer, but also about their own process in doing so (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999; Beaufort, 2007; Robertson et al., 2012; for a useful summary, see Donahue, 2012, pp. 154-56).

Many focus group participants articulated the development of metacognitive awareness. This trend can be seen in a description of a student's breakthrough, illustrating both transfer of processes and self-efficacy:

I can pinpoint the Writing Center appointment where I had a very tangible breakthrough—the second essay [from my first-year seminar] last year. I ... realized the way that I write best ... [is] a question-answer format.... That was a breakthrough that I had during the Writing Center appointment that has been extremely helpful .... The way I wrote ... never had been made explicit to me.... It made me more aware of what I write, which has been helpful, was helpful, and continues to be helpful for future assignments, to have that conscious realization. (SLAC)

In addition to the student identifying a realization he made about his writing process, this comment makes a clear connection between a writing center experience and an "a-ha moment" (in Nowacek's words, 2011, p. 27) of newly gained understanding about oneself as a writer, clearly indicating intentional, or high-road, transfer.

This newly acquired understanding is often interpreted by many of our focus group participants as gaining confidence in themselves as writers as a result of writing center sessions. In fact, one student remarks, "I think at the center of every session is confidence" (MP). Another student explains, "I'm more confident with my writing .... It definitely helped to prepare me for my harder classes" (LP). A student from another institution notes, "I think it [visiting the writing center] makes me build confidence .... Confident, because I know that I made some improvements in my language and ideas and building ideas" (SLAC). These findings confirm those of a recent study of student experiences in an Irish writing center reporting that approximately 80% of tutees extemporaneously noted that they "left their sessions feeling greater confidence" (O'Sullivan & Cleary, 2014, p. 62). Increased visitation of the writing center also results in more confidence (Carino & Enders, 2001, p. 98) and in higher self-efficacy (Williams & Takaku, 2011, p. 13; as was the case in our study, Williams and Takaku found no difference based on gender or language background). These studies usefully highlight confidence as a widespread outcome of writing center sessions.

Unlike in previous writing center studies, however, we consider comments about confidence in the context of students' perceptions of increased self-efficacy and find that, for our respondents, the two are often linked. In fact, Ellen Lavelle has found that "writers' beliefs about writing play a powerful role" because they help to "determine their aspirations" (2009, p. 415). We align ourselves with education scholar Frank Pajares (2003) who interchangeably uses self-efficacy and self-beliefs with "confidence;" he describes past self-

efficacy studies as focusing on two types of confidence: having particular "writing skills" (e.g., mechanics and organization) and accomplishing a "writing task" (e.g., finishing a research project), both in opposition to self-concept (p. 143). His own work reveals that "students' confidence in their writing capabilities influences their writing motivation as well as various writing outcomes in school" (p. 141). Our results also provide evidence that many students experienced increased confidence in the areas of specific writing skills and task completion. Referring to newly acquired task knowledge, one student remarks, "the Writing Center ... gave me so much confidence and just inspired me to create an academic research paper that I feel like I could do [it] again now" (MP). Referring to skills rather than tasks, another student notes that learning about how to apply what was learned in this session to a future assignment "gives you a sense of ... your ability.... [I]n order to know what I should be doing next, I need to know what I can do already" (MP). Going beyond skills and task knowledge, some students see writing center sessions promoting broader metacognitive awareness of their abilities as writers. One student explains, "I think in terms of the actual Writing Center building up your confidence as a writer, that's something that stays with you past assignments, past whatever goals you work towards in the future. I think the consultants really do help ... establish your abilities. And that stays with you past academics" (MP). Our data show that first-time visitors also had similarly long-term effects as a result of one conversation with a tutor. For instance, in response to a request for more explanation about an example of "really clicking" with a tutor, one student elaborated: "When you're more than listening to their advice, saying, 'Ok, I'll do that, and do that.' But when you actually weigh the pros and cons of what they are saying and don't just take it as direction, but as a suggestion, and when you make it more of a conversation and build on their ideas and *make it your own question and answer*" (SLAC, emphasis added). Since self-efficacy is a disposition that multiple researchers identify as a necessary step for successful learning and transfer (Bereiter, 1995; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002), this finding is crucial to understanding students' growth as writers.

These students' breakthroughs about themselves as writers, or burgeoning metacognitive awareness, are examples of dispositions. As noted above, dispositions have increasingly been seen by researchers as crucial elements in fostering transfer (e.g., Driscoll & Wells, 2012) and can be thought of in the sense of *habitus* (Wardle, 2012). In fact, Perkins and Salomon (2012) specify that high-road transfer "by definition demand[s] extended cognitive effort and hence requir[es] significant motivational or dispositional drivers" (p. 251). Mary Jane White and Roger Bruning take this correlation further, arguing that beliefs about writing directly influence writing behavior and quality (2005, pp. 178-79). Many of our focus group participants understand writing center sessions as a means of fostering positive dispositions and beliefs about writing; these dispositions enable students to transfer writing task knowledge as well as writing process knowledge.

## Conclusions

Our cross-institutional, mixed-methods study of writing center sessions investigates students' perceptions of self-efficacy and dispositions. While our study is small in scale, we find evidence that writing centers are fostering both anticipated transfer, for more than 80% of our survey participants, and actual transfer, for most of our focus group participants. A significant finding is that most student participants, largely repeat visitors, identify high-road transfer either in terms of writing task knowledge or writing process knowledge, and in most cases, this transfer can be classified as far transfer. Moreover, many students develop increased confidence, demonstrating metacognitive awareness and positive dispositions. These findings have implications for writing center practitioners as well as for classroom teachers and transfer researchers more generally.

For writing center practitioners, our findings have ramifications for the role of writing centers within the larger assessment goals of universities: transfer is measurable and therefore reportable. In particular, because our study isolates the role of the writing center, as opposed to the classroom, this research underscores the importance of writing centers in the broader university curriculum. Our study offers

empirical evidence to address the question of whether writing centers are helping writers, and not just individual texts, improve. The answer from our respondents is a resounding "Yes!"

Both writing classrooms and writing centers are working toward the same ends—encouraging student learning and transfer—and our study's demonstration of some types of transfer resulting from the writing center provides useful models for other academic spaces. For example, while we found transfer occurring for one-time visitors, suggesting that transfer does not occur only through repetition, our study shows that repeated visits to the writing centers allow for recursive learning over time and at a pace set by the student, which together strongly encourage transfer. It is worth prioritizing continuity of knowledge in learning environments, an area which researchers are beginning to explore in more depth. Many writing centers and composition instructors already practice what Randi Engle, Diane Lam, Xenia Meyer, and Sarah Nix (2012) term "expansive framing," contextualizing learning beyond the bounds of a particular session or class. Our study confirms the value of this practice in writing centers and suggests that transfer will likely increase as a result, especially if tutors and instructors intentionally foster dispositions that facilitate transfer. Other opportunities include constructing course sequences with curricular continuity or creating co-curricular or out-of-term writing experiences, such as internships or service learning.

The breadth of approaches taken by transfer scholars has led to revelations—disciplinary and methodological—about what we value from talking about transfer. While sometimes this variety has led to a proliferation of research paths that fail to intersect, a focus on dispositions, specifically self-efficacy, may provide a common thread that, for example, allows genre-focused and activity systems-focused work to be in easier communication. An attention to self-efficacy is also important because studies demonstrate that when students have higher self-efficacy, they put in more effort and the quality of writing is higher (Pajares, 2003, pp. 140, 146). Our study suggests that students' self-efficacy is promoted by writing center work, as is the transfer of process and task knowledge, due to the problem-exploring dispositions facilitated by the writing center. We agree with Christiane Donahue's (2012) statement that composition studies is "now in a position to contribute back to the broader cross-disciplinary research about transfer done in other fields" (145). Writing centers are well positioned to add to this conversation.

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## Notes

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[2] This work on transfer includes, among others, Beaufort (2007), Bergmann & Zepernick (2007), Brent (2012), Navarre Cleary (2013), Driscoll (2011), Lettner-Rust, Tracy, Booker, Kocevar-Weidinger, & Burges (2007), Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey (2012), and Wardle (2009). For comprehensive considerations of the current state of research on the topic in composition studies, see Donahue (2012); Driscoll & Wells (2012); Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak (2014).

[3] Nowacek (2011) has noted the "underappreciated contribution of writing centers to the undergraduate curriculum" (p. 142), even as the presence of writing centers is growing.

[4] Recently some scholars of transfer have argued for the value of student perceptions; see, for example, Thelin & Taczak (2013, p. 13). Other studies demonstrate that students' self-efficacy and perceptions align with their actual ability (for a review of the literature, see Pajares, 2003; for a recent study comparing student nurses' self efficacy and writing achievement, see Miller, Russell, Cheng, & Skarbek, 2015).

[5] Our survey response rates were 42%, or 393 responses from 935 appointments (SLAC); 48%, or 1,481 responses from 3,076 appointments (MP); and 38%, or 409 responses from 1,057 appointments (LP).

[6] Because there were smaller samples of different races and ethnicities at all three campuses, the statistician evaluated responses comparing whites to nonwhites, and students for whom English is a first language to students for whom English is an additional language; each class year (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate student) and gender (male and female) was also evaluated. In our focus groups, we did not recruit students or code students' responses based on demographics. As a result, our focus group findings remain silent on this issue. However, our quantitative results demonstrate that demographics do not play a role.

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