

# Review

MYA POE

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

The topic of transfer is undeniably one of the hottest topics in composition studies today. Transfer, though, is a knotty subject—one that begs us to consider such questions as: What do we mean when we study transfer in writing, how do we study transfer, and ultimately, is it possible to teach transfer? To answer these questions, I think it's useful to consider what researchers, such as Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak in *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, are attempting to do in the context of the composition research tradition on writing development and assessment.

Transfer research isn't simply about writing development as Yancey et al. demonstrate. For them, it's also about what we should be teaching. I see this union as bringing together sociocultural research on writing development, circa 1990s–present, with more recent assessment pressures placed on writing program administrators, circa 2000s to the present. Methodologically what this means is that, in contrast to longitudinal research on writing development that looks across college writing experiences (e.g., Beaufort, 2007; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sternglass, 1997; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990), research on transfer (e.g., Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Jarrett et al., 2009; Nowacek, 2011; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Wardle, 2007), and emerging threshold research (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012), question what we should be teaching in first-year writing to promote the transfer of writing knowledge.

Now, the need to justify first-year writing is not a new question, as David Russell and others have pointed out. What's different today is that composition studies—as a bonafide academic discipline—can claim a certain expertise about writing. We know a lot about writing development and writing assessment. And that's important given the external assessment pressures placed on us, especially in relation to retention and graduation. A craft or practitioner sensibility (e.g., Murray's *The Craft of Revision*, 1990; Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*) just doesn't cut it today for many writing program administrators. We need to claim our expertise on the subject of writing to retain control of our curricula.

In bringing us the first book-length study of transfer in composition studies, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak provide us a contemporary view of such exigences surrounding writing research today. Their project was guided by two questions:

“What difference does the content in composition make in the transfer of writing knowledge and practices and how can reflection as a systematic activity keyed to transfer support students’ continued writing development?” (p. 33). As they explain, their project was “a detailed research study into the efficacy of a certain kind of curriculum intending to facilitate students’ transfer of writing knowledge and practice” (p. 33). It was also a “synthetic account of scholarship” as well as a “text theorizing transfer of writing knowledge and practice” (p. 34). The impetus to study the efficacy of a particular curriculum, thus, is really an assessment question delivered in a grounded qualitative method.

The curriculum studied was a model developed at Florida State University by Yancey and colleagues called Teaching for Transfer (TFT), which is based on four features: “key terms, theoretical readings, writing in multiple genres, and reflective practice” (p. 35). Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak offer a clear rationale for each of the four features in the TFT curriculum (of which I found the rationale for “key terms” most interesting but also most problematic because I’m not convinced that academic terms are the best key terms for everyday writers). The researchers studied seven participants in three classes: three students in a TFT course, two students in an expressivist-styled course, and two students in a media and culture-themed first-year writing course. Students were interviewed over two semesters—the semester they were in the writing course, which was the second of two required first-year writing courses, and the following semester when they enrolled in general education courses. Teachers of the three first-year writing courses were also interviewed and an analysis of course materials and student writing was conducted.

The findings of the TFT study point to four conclusions. First, students who have been successful writers have little incentive to change their relationship to writing or writing practices, regardless of the course curriculum. In short, students transfer their writing identities from previous schooling experiences. Second, some students are able to reflect and reassemble their writing practices due to failed transfer or critical incidents. Third, courses that do not make writing content explicit leave students with the perception that first-year writing is disconnected from other university writing. Finally, a first-year writing course that asks students to develop their own theory of writing and to reflect on that theory through multiple avenues can be a vehicle—for some students—to transfer writing knowledge to other contexts. This was especially clear in situations where students were writing concurrently in various classes.

Following the chapter on the TFT study is a chapter on how students make use of prior knowledge. This chapter introduces us to students not profiled in the previous chapter but who were part of the TFT class. What I liked best about *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* was this discussion of

how students use prior knowledge in shaping their subsequent uptake, or not, of writing instruction. Here, the theorizing is rich and the case studies illuminating. For example, Yancey et al. write about the role of assessment as a “point of departure” in students’ conceptions of themselves as writers and its influence on learning to write: “Without their own standards for assessing their work, students participating in this study were also especially sensitive to grades” (p. 107). Drawing on Applebee and Langer’s research (2011), they go on to explain how narrow conceptions of writing found in high school often leave students “absent prior knowledge” about many genres of writing commonly found in college, although they make no speculations as to how the Common Core State Standards might change this landscape.

In conclusion, Yancey et al. offer six recommendations for effective teaching for transfer in first-year writing courses:

1. be explicit;
2. build in expert practices;
3. tap prior knowledge and concurrent knowledge;
4. include processes and link them to key terms and a framework;
5. consistently ask students to create their own frameworks using prior knowledge;
6. build in metacognition, verbal and visual, balancing big picture and small practices. (pp. 138-139).

There is much to like about *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Designing a writing curriculum that fosters transfer is a valuable enterprise. The curriculum developed at Florida State is thoughtful. Likewise, I appreciate the connection to Yancey’s previous work on reflection and the attention to prior knowledge as a source of meaning-making. In many ways, what I liked best about this book is what came at the end, as I was less interested in the shortcomings of other first-year curricular models and more interested in how different students experienced the TFT model (i.e., what were the various affordances of the curriculum for different students?).

In considering *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* in relation to the future of transfer research in writing, I found myself wanting three advancements. First, I want literature that draws on other writing research traditions. The literature on transfer is vast, and it’s useful to build connections to a variety of transfer and transfer-like research in the field of psychology. *How People Learn* from the National Research Council, for example, is an excellent resource. One of its co-authors, John Bransford, has spent his career working on studies of adaptive expertise. Of more interest to me, however, is that composition researchers

look to literacy research in education, which has a rich research tradition on how students transfer literacy practices from home to school. Likewise, researchers working in the English for academic purposes and English for specific purposes tradition provide other ways of theorizing the development of writing knowledge, and they are especially valuable in considering the multitude of learning approaches used by culturally and linguistically diverse students. And, finally, the field of technical communication has a long tradition of investigating what practices and knowledge students transfer from college to workplace writing. All of these traditions have much to offer the transfer discussion in composition studies.

Second, I want detailed methods. While we may debate whether Haswell's (2005) argument that replicable, aggregable, and data-supported are the three features that should predominate our empirical research agenda, it can be said that the last decade might be characterized as empiricism on faith. What I mean by that is that many studies today don't have a full methods section. We learn how many students were interviewed or surveyed; we learn something about the various instruments used and we are told that the interviews or focus group data were coded by theme. What we don't hear is much about data analysis and, for studies that are trying to make generalizable claims, we rarely see any statistical analysis of survey data. Does it matter that methods go unstated? I think it does if we're moving beyond claims about localism or research for the sake of research. If we want to make large-scale curricular changes based on transfer studies, then we should be able to demonstrate a clear trajectory in our empirical projects from research question through implications. Without that connection, we're relying on curricular innovations that may not serve all students very well. In the case of *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, I'd like to see an online supplement, which would be invaluable for writing program administrators looking to follow the Florida State TFT model.

Finally, in making claims about curricular change in relation to writing development, we must consider the scope of our claims. Did one course or one kind of curricular innovation really lead to changes in student writing development more generally? Under what conditions? For what kinds of students? What about the students for whom the curriculum failed? Do the gains or losses hold over time? What length of time? These are all questions that can inform transfer research, especially if we are looking for curricular solutions. What I'd like to see is a discussion of the methodological entanglements when we set out to validate certain kinds of curricular experiences—when we marry writing development research with assessment research.

In the end, Yancey et al. capture the crux of the problem with studying transfer of writing expertise: "It's not merely that situations are different; it's that situations, even when they look similar, are located in very different activity systems and are contextualized by different goals, participants, and tools" (p. 43). In our desire to

make writing meaningful for students, I welcome the desire to learn what they bring to sites of writing and what they carry with them.

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