

## CHAPTER 6

# DOUBLE BINDS AND CONSEQUENTIAL TRANSITIONS: CONSIDERING MATTERS OF IDENTITY DURING MOMENTS OF RHETORICAL CHALLENGE

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## INTRODUCTION

Scholars in rhetoric and composition, as well as other fields interested in teaching and learning, have debated the concept of knowledge transfer for some time. As the opening chapters of this book explain, there is much we do not know about transfer, but we do agree that achieving transfer of knowledge can be difficult. Thus far, scholarship in composition studies has considered various *sites* of transfer, including the individual, the context, and the task (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003); examined the types of *genre knowledge* that students carry across activities (Devitt, 2007; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Rounsaville, 2012); detailed learners' *perceptions* of the relationship between contexts (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Jarratt, Mack, Sartor & Watson, 2009); and critiqued the *terms* used to think and talk about transfer (DePalma & Ringer, 2013; Donahue, this volume). Most recently, scholars have begun exploring (or re-exploring) the role of *dispositions* (see glossary) in transfer (Driscoll & Wells, 2012), including the kinds of individual and systemic dispositions that afford or constrain the problem-solving attitudes necessary for meaningful transfer of knowledge (Wardle, 2012; Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2013). However, we are only beginning to inform transfer research with theories of identity. Given the important relationship that theorists have posited between learning and the construction of self (Bakhtin, 1986; Beach, 2003; Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Scollon, 1996; Wenger, 1998), this connection feels long overdue.

Our field and closely related ones such as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) are full of studies about the ways that literacy and

identity are inextricably interrelated (Burgess & Ivanik, 2010; Casanave, 2002; Cushman, 2008; Hartman, 2006; Ivanik, 1998; Kitchens & Larkin, 2004; Norton, 2000; Soliday, 2013). These concerns echo those of scholars in other fields who note the connection between identity and learning. Educational theorist Wenger reminds us that “learning is first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings” and that such learning “transforms our identities” (1998, pp. 226–227). Similarly, as noted in the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* (2015; Appendix A), developmental psychologist Beach (2003), in his seminal chapter on knowledge transfer, uses the term *transition* to describe the ways that “knowledge is generalized, or propagated, across social space and time” (Beach, 2003, p. 42). Such a transition, he argues, is “*consequential* when it is consciously reflected on, struggled with, and shifts the individual’s sense of self or social position. Thus, consequential transitions link identity with knowledge propagation” (Beach, 2003, p. 42). Consequential transitions “weave together changing individuals and social organizations in such a way that the person experiences becoming someone or something new” (Beach, 2003, p. 41). When a person experiences a consequential transition during which home and school activity systems are in conflict, Beach calls that experience a “collateral transition” (2003, p. 44). Consequential transitions present some of the greatest challenges of higher education, although it is likely that teachers are frequently unaware when their students experience such challenges.

When individuals experience rhetorical challenges that entail consequential transitions, they must find creative ways to respond to and navigate what Beach calls the “discontinuities and contradictions” at play during these times (2003, p. 42). The discontinuities and contradictions inherent to consequential transitions may place literate learners in what activity theorist Engeström describes as a *double bind*: “In double bind situations, the individual, involved in an intense relationship, receives two messages or commands which deny each other—and the individual is unable to comment on the messages, i.e., he [sic] cannot make a metacommunicative statement” (1987, Chapter 3, par. 15).

Individuals will respond to consequential transitions differently depending, in part, upon what Bourdieu (1999) calls *habitus*, which he describes as “a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1999, p. 12). *Habitus* “provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. It ‘orients’ their actions and inclinations without strictly determining them. It gives them a ‘feel for the game,’ a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not” (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1999, p. 13). As the *Elon Statement* (2015; Appendix A) also suggests, the set of dispositions that literate learners possess when they encounter consequential transitions can either afford or constrain their abilities

to navigate those transitions; in any case, that set of dispositions will certainly affect how they understand the transition, and even whether they encounter such a transition at all. For example, if a literate learner's dispositions incline him or her to be an obedient problem-solver no matter what the context, then the learner may encounter a critical transition when attempting to read and write assigned coursework as the teacher directs, even though material conflicts with the learner's home values and beliefs. Another literate learner whose dispositions do not incline him or her to follow the teacher's directions and earn a good grade may simply refuse to engage in work that conflicts with his or her home values and beliefs, and in this way the learner may avoid experiencing a consequential transition.

In this chapter, we draw on data from a case study that we conducted together in order to illustrate the notion of consequential transitions, and we consider how one literate learner encountered and navigated the double bind presented during a consequential transition. While the rhetorical challenge the student faced entailed many of the usual challenges described by transfer research, it also entailed challenges deeply tied to identity issues of family, gender, values, and cultural experiences and beliefs.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

While multiple methods are necessary for rhetoric and composition scholars to gain a fuller understanding of writing-related knowledge transfer, case studies are useful for providing in-depth understanding of how concepts and phenomena work in specific contexts. While larger data sets can provide more generalizable data about what happens, smaller and richer data from case studies can provide more nuanced explanations of why and how transfer happens. In this chapter, we discuss some of the data collected in a study wherein Nicolette Clement served as both the focus of the case study and a co-researcher with Elizabeth Wardle. Below, we explain in more detail why we felt this collaboration was important, and how we carried out the study.

Nicolette was a pre-nursing student when she enrolled in Elizabeth's Honors Composition II course during the fall of her first year at the University of Central Florida (UCF). Nicolette conducted her research in that composition class on repurposing, looking at how students at different levels of college responded to new writing situations and how easily they were able to repurpose what they knew in order to respond to those situations. Her research suggested that repurposing remains "persistently difficult" as students encounter new discourse communities across their coursework, or are asked to delve more deeply into the knowledge of the discourse community of their majors.

After the composition course ended, Elizabeth asked Nicolette if she would like to be a co-researcher in a project on how college students engage rhetorical challenges. Nicolette agreed. As the *Elon Statement* notes, “Adding student voices as participants, or even as co-inquirers, facilitates [a] more holistic examination of learners’ development, boundary-crossing, remixing, and integration” (2015, p. 6; Appendix A). Together, we considered how best to gather data for this project. Many previous studies of knowledge transfer (including Wardle, 2007) predetermined the data points; for example, the researcher set out to examine how the material in first-year composition informed how students write in subsequent history or biology courses. However, predetermining data points in this way entails making a number of faulty assumptions, including that we know what (and how well) students learned in a particular setting, that the subsequent setting is one in which students need that prior knowledge, that the subsequent setting requires prior knowledge from that previous setting, and that the prior knowledge a student draws on is actually drawn from that one setting and not some other setting not included in the study.

For this project, we wanted to predetermine much less and be open to challenges and use of prior knowledge in whatever context and form they might occur. We did not want to assume that Elizabeth knew in advance what rhetorical tasks would be important to Nicolette, or what prior knowledge would be relevant in tackling that rhetorical task. This is why it seemed particularly important to understand Nicolette’s role not only as case study participant but also as a co-researcher. Only she could know what tasks were challenging to her and why, and only she could consider the broad history of her prior knowledge and consider what she was bringing to bear on any given task. Thus, after an initial interview and discussion of Nicolette’s literacy history, we agreed that Nicolette would text Elizabeth whenever she encountered what she felt to be a challenging rhetorical task. She would then upload to the software Evernote® all the documents related to that task (including drafts, assignment instructions, etc.), and the two of us would meet and discuss the task and how she approached it. This process worked well, and several times Nicolette determined that she should also record herself conducting think-aloud protocols as she drafted some texts and/or keep a log of her invention process. She also uploaded to Evernote everything she wrote each semester. Due to the material we covered in Nicolette’s composition course, she also brought some analytical lenses and knowledge of writing-related research methodologies to the study. The composition course goals included “studying writing as situated, motivated discourse” and “studying the conversational and knowledge-creating nature of researched writing.” Students read about activity theory, intertextuality, and genre theory and studied examples of research that used those theories before conducting their own liter-

acy studies. As a result of this experience, Nicolette was able to talk reflectively and analytically about her experiences (for example, describing affordances and constraints and pointing to the lexis of new discourse communities as problematic) and also make informed suggestions about new ways to collect data (for example, she recommended using a think-aloud protocol when she drafted a text she felt would be challenging). This research process adhered to many of the principles outlined in the Higher Education Academy's (n.d.) "Students as Partners" document: authenticity, inclusivity, speaking with and not for, and taking time to build trust.

At the time final revisions of this chapter were submitted, Nicolette just completed her junior year, having successfully completed the first two semesters of her nursing program. Together, we have conducted seven interviews and collected 30 documents over seven semesters.

This data set has been analyzed and coded by a team of faculty researchers at UCF as well as by members of Elizabeth's cohort at the 2011–2013 Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions, and by Elizabeth herself. We examined the interview transcripts for indications of rhetorical challenge, what made the tasks challenging, and the affordances and constraints Nicolette perceived and drew upon in responding to them. We have been particularly interested in Nicolette's perceptions of the challenges, affordances, and constraints at play in her writing experiences. Very often, for example, she considered tasks to be challenging due to what she perceived as a lack of support that a researcher would never have recognized without Nicolette's participation. For example, in her western civilization class, she noted that the teacher did not provide examples or instructions related to the content and that this effect was such that she would rather take a low grade than approach him for help. We conducted additional analysis of some of the texts Nicolette indicated to be challenging. For the purposes of this particular chapter, we analyzed the papers she wrote in her honors seminar to see how she textually navigated the challenges she had named, and whether the strategies she had explained in interviews had enabled her to effectively complete the rhetorical task. In other words, we wondered whether the prior knowledge, strategies, and skills she brought to bear were effectively used and whether they were sufficient to enable her to complete the challenging tasks. In addition, we looked at the context of the rhetorical challenge to see what supports and new knowledge were made available to assist her in repurposing and successfully using prior knowledge and skills. Several times, we went back and conducted text-based interviews after analyzing the papers so that Nicolette could talk further about specific strategies or difficulties. The concepts of the double bind and consequential transitions emerged as important after the analysis, enabling us to understand what we had seen emerge from the data.

For this chapter, we draw on Nicolette's course papers in her honors seminar, teacher instructions and comments regarding those papers, and interviews we conducted before, during, and after she enrolled in that course. This data illustrates how Nicolette grappled with the double bind she experienced during the consequential transition in that course.

## NICOLETTE'S DISPOSITIONS AND HABITUS

Nicolette is from Lakeland, a conservative town in central Florida; she has lived in Florida and attended public schools her entire life. As an oldest child and only daughter, she describes herself as having some dispositions that are almost stereotypically associated with that role: a desire to do well, a need to set a good example for her younger brothers, and a deep unwillingness to accept failure. Her first memory of reading was her impatience with the time it took to master: "I was really young . . . but I thought I should be able to do it immediately." Her parents' expectations of her were high and were ones that she internalized: "I was expected to do well . . . good grades, be polite, be a good kid. That is rooted in me very deeply and that is why I always expect myself to do well."

Neither of her parents attended college. Her father earned a General Education Development (GED) certification, and most of her father's side of the family, including all of her cousins, did not graduate from high school. Her mother attended a vocational school for a while. Nicolette believes that one reason her mother pushed her was because she herself had not been pushed; in other words, Nicolette's parents wanted for her what they did not have themselves in terms of academic opportunity. As a result, she enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and her parents supported her desire to go to college; however, since neither of them had attended, she looked to her high school's college and career office and to her AP literature teacher for help. At UCF, 20% of first-time in college (FTIC) students are, like Nicolette, first-generation students; also like her, they are typically high-achieving, with an average SAT for entering FTIC students of 1261 and an average GPA of 4.0. At UCF, first-generation college students graduate at the same rate as other students. Nicolette was admitted to the Honors College at UCF, which she also attributed to her parents' expectations: "I was expected to do well, get As, and my parents just really encouraged it, there was no other option. I couldn't even think about oh, getting a C; no, that is not even a possibility."

This combination of parental expectation for academic success, coupled with lack of family experiences to support that success, imbued Nicolette with a "tenacious problem-exploring disposition" (Wardle, 2012, para. 27). Across her courses and writing assignments, she has demonstrated the ability to methodi-

cally and strategically look for and find multiple resources when she encounters rhetorical challenges. She finds sample texts when she can and looks for similarities and differences across them; she pays close attention to teacher feedback; and she frequently relies on feedback from others—classmates, roommates, and even family members.

During her first year of college, she made efforts to connect her college activities with her home activities. She mentioned several times that she asked for her mother's feedback on school assignments to which her mother could relate. For example, she asked for her mother's feedback on an email to a high school principal that she wrote as part of a service project for her LEAD Scholars course.

In sum, Nicolette's dispositions and family support inclined her to be consistently successful at most of the challenging rhetorical tasks she encountered in school. She brought with her a desire to succeed and please her teachers, as well as the critical thinking and analysis skills that enabled her to puzzle out solutions to new rhetorical problems. She cultivated support networks and took teacher feedback seriously when she received it. Her abilities enabled her to transfer prior knowledge and build on it to learn new rhetorical skills and knowledge in a variety of school situations. Many of her experiences illustrate how a literate learner can successfully transfer and repurpose prior knowledge during moments of rhetorical challenge (see Wardle, 2012; Wardle & Clement, in press).

However, in her second year of college, Nicolette encountered a collateral, consequential transition (Beach, 2003, p. 44) wherein her experiences within her family and home community activity systems affected and constrained her experiences in a classroom activity system, and her school tasks asked her to engage in critiques of her family culture.

## THE CHALLENGES OF HONORS SEMINAR

In the fall of her sophomore year, Nicolette enrolled in what she described as “an honors interdisciplinary seminar on high culture, low culture, good taste, and bad taste.” This class was co-taught by one philosophy and one literature professor, both of whom had won multiple teaching awards. In writing for the honors seminar, Nicolette encountered a whole host of challenges: the conventions of writing for the humanities were new to her, the co-teachers took turns grading the papers so she was not sure what to expect from paper to paper, and the class readings were in different genres using different conventions, so she struggled to know what examples to follow in her own writing. These were the sorts of challenges she had already demonstrated time and again that she could overcome with the set of problem-solving behaviors she had been honing throughout her school life.

However, the challenges of this course went beyond the rhetorical challenges she had been accustomed to overcoming. The material of the course was theoretically difficult and asked her to consider matters of race, class, gender, and sexuality that were outside of her experiences thus far. To be clear, Nicolette enjoyed the class, describing it as fun and complimenting the teachers. But her experiences and identities as a high-achieving oldest daughter, a conscientious student, a first-generation college student from a working-class family, the product of a conservative family and community, and a pre-nursing science student resulted in a complexly laminated set of difficulties that had as much to do with who she was as with her writing abilities. The ideas she encountered in the course were not only unfamiliar but also in direct conflict with her home values and experiences; the work of the course asked her to accept these new views and, further, write about them as though she accepted them—all without acknowledging the double bind in which that rhetorical activity placed her.

In the honors seminar, Nicolette wrote papers on a work of art called *Black Mona Lisa*, on a drag queen named Vaginal Davis, and on pornography and *Lolita*. The initial grades she received were not up to her usual standards or expectations: She received a C- on the first paper she wrote, a grade she found entirely unacceptable: “I was overwhelmed,” she said afterward. “I wanted to walk out and cry . . . this is not me.” She was able to rewrite that first paper and receive a B, but the work of this class remained “persistently difficult,” to use her own words from her first-year composition research study. The work of the seminar continued to challenge her in ways that illustrate the complex interactions of identity, culture, and knowledge during consequential transitions.

In this section, we discuss three of the most difficult challenges that the rhetorical tasks of this course posed and examine how those difficulties manifested themselves in Nicolette’s writing, how her teachers responded to those difficulties, and how she worked through the challenges.

### **FIRST CHALLENGE: CONTENT KNOWLEDGE**

The first unit’s paper was on what Nicolette described as “art and avant-garde versus kitsch,” the latter of which were terms she had never heard before enrolling in that class. She thought other students were better prepared: “I felt like that was kind of a disadvantage, too, because most of the kids in the class already knew what they were talking about a little bit. And I had no idea.”

In an interview, she explained that art was not something she had any prior experience with: “I don’t think art has ever come up in conversation in my family at all. So I guess that would be another reason that it’s very new to me, because it’s just not in my background at all.” Although she had been to several



museums before, she had “never had anyone explain anything significant about them”; rather, she had been “one of the ones who ‘like it because it’s pretty,’” not because she “appreciate[d] a statement it makes or a design.” The other students, she explained, worked at art museums and were humanities majors: “They’ve already kind of been exposed to all of these thing. But I’ve never taken an art class.” The work of the class, according to Nicolette, suggested that “it takes practice and conditioning to truly appreciate art.” Nicolette noted that she did not have that practice.

Nicolette was helped with these challenges by class discussions: “Every time we have class, the class is basically us just talking about the article we read the night before. So even if there’s a lot of references in the article which I don’t get—which usually happens every time—we talk about the important aspects of it in class and that helps me kind of understand what they are talking about. It’s . . . the details, and the terminology and, you know, specific references.”

## SECOND CHALLENGE: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The second paper was equally unfamiliar. She wrote about drag queen Vaginal Davis and discussed issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality in that paper. All of this, she said, was “pretty much new to this class.” Her only prior experience thinking about these differences came from leaving home for college: “There’s a lot of people here,” she said, “that aren’t exactly like what society would deem ‘normal.’”

Nicolette’s difficulties, then, were partially about content knowledge and partially about her upbringing and attitudes: She certainly knew what the terms gender, race, and class meant, but she had never experienced them as matters to be explored and theorized. She was only beginning to consider consciously the idea of difference as she encountered people in college who were clearly unlike what she had grown up understanding as “normal.”

She was open to what she learned about cultural differences, though, and reflected on that learning during one of our interviews:

I think I kind of see things differently just because my eyes are opened up to things I didn’t really know were out there at this point. Like with Davis’ drag, I thought, you know, a drag queen’s like “oh girly girly but I’m a man.” I didn’t know there was drag like on this deep level that really made people think and was really subversive to a lot of, like, norms of society and stuff like that. So I think I see things a lot differently just because I feel like my mind is more open to what’s out there . . . [Now] if I did . . . meet a drag queen . . . I would probably be

thinking about what they were portraying, what they represented, why they were doing what they were doing—instead of just being like “oh that’s fun.”

While the course material was challenging and unfamiliar, it helped her think differently: “I see things differently just because my eyes are opened up to things I didn’t really know were out there at this point.” She says that now looking back, although she did not “feel successful during the class, the class was useful and did what it was set out to . . . I learned how to see things through a different lens and analyze the ‘why’ behind a lot of formerly unquestioned behaviors/ideas.”

### **THIRD CHALLENGE: ALIENATION FROM FAMILY**

Although the ideas of the course were challenging, new, and provided insight into cultural differences Nicolette had not considered before, she was open to learning them and was assisted in this learning through class discussions and teacher feedback. However, the fact the topics being taken up in the class were ones she felt at that time she could not share with her family was a challenge less easily overcome.

I think a lot of the things from college are just things that would set me apart from [my family] . . . my family has very conservative views. And even though I’ve never been a very conservative person, I think college has made me more liberal than I have been before. Just in like social aspects I guess . . . there’s things I don’t want to talk to my family about because I feel like it would just start an argument, there wouldn’t be any productivity from it. It’s things you would avoid in my house, like politics, religion, social norms I guess. They wouldn’t be things I would talk to them about.

Regarding the drag queen essay, in particular, she noted that sharing it with her family had never crossed her mind: “They’re going to be like: ‘You’re paying tuition for WHAT?!’” When the topic of sharing her essay with her mother, as Nicolette often did in other classes, came up during one of our interviews, she emphatically noted, “She does NOT know what’s going on in this class!”

### **FACING THE DOUBLE BIND**

Although Nicolette was willing to engage with the new and challenging material in her honors seminar, the three challenges we have outlined above, combined

with her dispositions, all came to bear on the double bind in which she found herself when she sat down to write the papers in the honors seminar.

On the one hand, Nicolette embodied the role of the good student who wants to be successful and ambitious and who is willing to work hard and be “open to new work/ideas” to succeed at the school tasks she is given; as she said, a C “is not even a possibility” for her. On the other hand, the school tasks she was expected to master in her honors seminar were ones that her family would neither understand nor approve. Thus, in order to succeed at these school tasks, she had to engage in work that pulled her away from some of her communities. However, she points out, this double bind may have been eased slightly because “I never really held the same ideas and values as my family or small-town conservative neighbors.” The ideas in the class were new to her because she was “never exposed” to them before. Although the ideas in the class did not mesh with the ideas of the community from which she came, she says she was open to them because she felt that although she was a product of that community, she was not like the others in that community. In addition, she notes that she and her friends from home who went to college “are in the same boat as far as coming from working-class families, trying to rise above how we were raised and become conscientious, analytical adults who can improve their worlds in some way.” Thus, although the work of the class was difficult for her in many ways, she did not feel completely alone in her efforts to embrace that work.

The assignments required her to critique her own class and culture. The content of the course readings presented a choice between working-class conservative values and elite liberal values; Nicolette’s dispositions to “get it right” and never give up, combined with her sense of herself as not really sharing the values of her home community, led her to work diligently to respond to the teacher’s comments and the voices of the scholars she was reading, reconciling the ways these conflicted with her own history and upbringing. These attempted resolutions placed her in what Engeström (1987) calls a *dilemma situation*, and the dilemmas were evident in the papers themselves.

Nicolette began the first draft of the first paper like this:

There is no question that within every culture, there are representations of good art and bad art. How we define good versus bad art, however, always quickly proves to be a challenge.

Next to this, the teacher had written EM; according to the detailed key code she provided, it meant “empty phrase.” Nicolette went on:

Much of what the masses are exposed to on a daily basis that they may term “art” or describe as “artistic” can be argued to

be garbage based on the perspectives of some of these critics. As arguable as any is a digital work by NegroSaki titled *Black Mona Lisa*.

Nicolette's history and cultural experiences were being brought to bear as she wrote these words. Not least of all is the fact that in Nicolette's family experience, there was no discussion of art at all. Nicolette set this aside to try to restate what she had read and heard in class, but her phrasing suggests some discomfort, or at least lack of exposure. There is a lot to wonder about in this paragraph: Would the objects of attention and beauty in Nicolette's home be considered kitsch by the critics to whom she refers? Would they argue that this meant her family was misrecognizing such artifacts as art (even if they did not call them art) when they are, instead, what she calls "garbage"? Engaged in the double bind, Nicolette was silent about such questions.

Nicolette continued:

Clement Greenberg in his essay . . . makes the argument that avant-garde art is respectable, meaningful, and indicative of enjoyment within the higher socio-economic classes . . . while kitsch is something enjoyed superficially by the masses.

Nicolette went on to try to explain why *Black Mona Lisa* would not be considered avant-garde, but she struggled trying to apply Greenberg's distinctions—kitsch is watered down, mechanical, formulaic, synthetic, a debased copy, he tells us. She seemed unable to comment on his assertions; after all, she was a member of the group she was calling "the masses," whom Greenberg (according to her own analysis) accuses of only superficially enjoying formulaic and debased copies.

Rather than comment, she asked a series of questions: "What is more mechanical than . . . What is more synthetic than . . .?" The teacher wrote and circled RQ next to this segment, instructing her to "avoid excessive rhetorical questions in your writing." Here we can see Nicolette caught between two competing messages "which deny each other" and finding that she "cannot make a metacommunicative statement" (Engeström, 1987)—so she asks questions instead.

The teacher focused on the phrase "genuine culture," asking Nicolette what she meant. This is, of course, the seminal question. Considerations of culture and art were new to Nicolette, and she was struggling to speak about them. What is culture? What is art? And what statements could she make about them, given her own positionality?

Nicolette could have resolved her double bind by commenting on the course material from her own positionality, speaking to her own experiences growing up as a member of "the masses," interacting with what the authors she is citing might

consider kitsch. But she did not comment; her own experiences remained absent.

The activities of the course, the focus of the readings, and the teacher comments simply glossed over Nicolette's experiences and identity. As a conscientious and ambitious student, she learned the material she was asked to learn and attempted to stand outside herself and her experiences, commenting on them as though they were not her own, using a language that was not her own, coming to conclusions that she wrote as questions. In other words, she was critiquing the experiences and values of people who were very much like her, or at least the people who raised her, in the way that a cultural theorist would—without acknowledging her relationship to what she was critiquing.

Nicolette's silence in the face of the course material was even louder when she tackled Bourdieu's view of art. In her paper, she writes that Bourdieu notes "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, the code." She might have been able to grapple with Bourdieu's theories by directly considering her own upbringing, which did not give her access to this "code" and did not even introduce her to the idea of art at all; but she avoided her own experience, concluding that *Black Mona Lisa* is not art because its fans "seem to love it without much deep thought." In response, the teacher corrected her BQ (incorrect use of block quote), CP (incorrect citation of page numbers), WO (wordy phrasing), and R-O (run-on sentence) and suggested that she "rephrase for greater clarity and efficiency of prose."

To engage in the work of this class, Nicolette bracketed prior knowledge, experience, culture, and beliefs—that is, she attempted not to transfer and repurpose those in order to embrace the material of the class. The responses of the teacher seemed to encourage that sort of bracketing. Whereas transfer researchers might hope for a literate learner in this situation to draw on and use what she knows as a way in to the difficult material, this class did not seem to provide an invitation for Nicolette to do that. Instead, she attempted to engage the material as though she did not have any prior knowledge and experience about it. In fact, she did, but her experience was more of a lack, an absence, a source for elite academic critique, than an affordance she felt she could bring to enrich the task and make it more meaningful to her.

## CONCLUSION

Nicolette's consequential transition included the struggles that transfer research has taught us to look for: difficulties with new material and with writing about it using new conventions, for example. But her experience in her honors seminar also illustrates what transfer research has not as clearly described: the ways that a challenging rhetorical task can place learners in a double bind regarding their

identity and sense of self, wherein they receive competing messages from home and schooling activity systems that make completing new writing tasks difficult.

Nicolette's attempts to resolve these competing messages engaged her in what Wenger calls the "work of reconciliation," "constructing an identity that can include . . . different meanings and forms of participation into one nexus" (1998, p. 160). Her attempts at reconciliation, at resolving her double bind, were colored by her dispositions to be, among other things, a good student who always works diligently to succeed at doing what her teachers ask of her and to embrace and understand new ideas. She forged ahead in tackling material in her honors seminar that critiqued her home culture and her family's values, responding carefully to her teacher's comments and bracketing the experiences and values she was exposed to at home. This work pulled her away but did not completely disconnect her from her other "activity systems of family [and] neighborhood" (Russell, 1997, p. 532).

While in our interviews Nicolette acknowledged the divide between home and school, she remained silent about it in her writing. Her very silence and her writing "leaked clues" (Rubin, 1995, p. 4) about her struggle; she used language that was not her own to come to conclusions she could only write as questions. Wenger warns us that the "work of reconciliation can easily remain invisible" (2003, p. 161), and in Nicolette's case, it certainly did: Nicolette's leaked clues were glossed by her teachers and ignored by her. In our interviews, she focused on grammar and punctuation, problems easily corrected with a little more revision, rather than on the concerns of the texts she was writing about.

Nevertheless, the clues are there, present on every page and in our interviews, testifying to the difficult double bind presented by her consequential transition. This transition, as Wenger reminds us, is not a one-time experience: "the process [of reconciliation] is never done once and for all . . . Proceeding with life . . . entails finding ways to make our various forms of membership coexist" (2003, pp. 160–161). Wenger reminds us that this process is not secondary; "it is at the core of what it means to be a person" (2003, pp. 160–161).

Despite the tendency of researchers to fixate on one moment, class, or assignment, literate learners keep moving on and engaging in new experiences, experiencing growing and changing identities. Nicolette completed her honors seminar, and then she moved on toward her nursing degree. She has not experienced another class like the honors seminar since, and the activities of her subsequent schooling have not focused on the questions and ideas that had produced her dilemma situation in the honors seminar. She moved on to rhetorical challenges that more closely resembled the ones she was skilled at mastering—learning the new genres and lexis of nursing—with the sort of scaffolding and collaborative learning that enable her to flourish. The struggles of the honors

seminar soon became a distant memory, part of, but in no way the primary structure or fabric of her identity. Looking back now, however, she notes that she has changed in the interim:

At that particular time, I would not have been too comfortable talking to my family about the topics discussed in this class. However, *now* is a different story. I feel like I have authority in my own life and am much more of an adult than at that time, which gives me more of an “I’m an adult so shoot me if you don’t agree with me or think what I am talking about is obscene” kind of attitude, for better or worse.

Her perspective helps us to consider that a rhetorical task that might present a consequential transition at one point in a literate learner’s life might not be a consequential transition if encountered at another point. As a new college student, she felt uncomfortable sharing ideas about art, drag, and pornography with her family; now as a junior nursing student, recently married, and living independently, she might well have an entirely different reaction to the material in the class if she were encountering it for the first time today.

Nicolette’s experiences in this regard are also a caution to transfer researchers not to attribute too much to any single course or experience. It might be easy to look at Nicolette’s growing confidence and her embodiment of values more liberal than those she was exposed to growing up, and to attribute these changes at least in part to the work of her honors seminar. Seeing such a correlation would be satisfying to researchers, but Nicolette’s experience suggests that such a correlation would be false. That one course was part of an ongoing experience of being and becoming, of proceeding with life. She engaged in the work of the course early in her college years, even as she was already recognizing her values as distinct from her family’s values, but at a time when she was not yet able to speak back to her family about them. In other words, the honors seminar did present a consequential transition and a double bind for Nicolette, but those did not exist acontextually. They were part of a larger fabric of life, meaningful and consequential because they occurred at a particularly kairotic moment.

## IMPLICATIONS

What are the implications of this case? What can we learn about literate learners and times of transition? What can we learn about how best to study such transitions?

First, this study underlines the importance of methodology and study design. Without Nicolette’s active engagement in the research project, it would have

been impossible to understand what was consequential and what was not, and also *why* some transitions were consequential and others were not. In addition, it would have been easy to overemphasize the importance of some aspects of the transition, or to attribute too much meaning to any one rhetorical challenge or learning moment. In addition, Nicolette's experiences underscore the fact that researchers should be cautious about predetermining the sites of transfer. Anticipating what students have learned and where they might use that knowledge is extremely limiting, given the complexity of literate learners' lives, histories, and experiences. Of course, many courses are designed to assist students in later courses, and thus we should study how effective they are in that regard. However, we should be open to attributing students' successes or failures in the later courses to more than what occurred in the one prior course.

Second, Nicolette's case affirms the importance of class discussions, teacher comments, peer and other feedback, and personal dispositions in helping to facilitate effective learning transfer and students' abilities to engage in new and challenging rhetorical tasks. Teachers can assist students by integrating and considering these variables when designing activities and assignments. Yet Nicolette's experience in the honors seminar also indicates that rhetorical challenges and their accompanying affordances and constraints go far beyond effective assignment design and revision opportunities. At times of consequential transition, the learning and growth may simply be difficult. Failure may be an unavoidable part of how students learn something new and integrate their previous experiences and knowledge into their current experiences and learning. Nicolette says that "looking back . . . although I didn't feel successful during this class, the class was useful and did what it was set out to for the students enrolled . . . even though I didn't do as well as I wanted, I certainly am what I would consider a successful alumni of the class."

There may be ways to assist students during these times of struggle; that assistance, however, may not lead to better grades but simply to a better understanding of what is occurring, and to clearer ways to integrate and reconcile previous knowledge with new and competing knowledge. For example, the honors seminar teachers in this case might have assigned some low-stakes assignments asking students to consider how the ideas in the course readings relate to their own previous experiences, values, and knowledge. What is their relationship to and experience with art, pornography, and drag, for example? How do the ideas in the readings correspond to or conflict with the ideas students bring with them? Students might be invited to actively explain the relationship of what they are learning to what they already know and believe. Such reflective, low-stakes assignments might not make the higher-stakes analysis easier, but they may assist students in understanding why the assignments are difficult and assist teachers



in knowing why some students might be struggling. None of this work of integration may be visible in the course grades, but it might enhance and deepen the learning.

Perhaps these suggestions will be difficult to implement given the current climate of higher education. The focus on measurable outcomes, higher grades, retention, reduced time on task, and predictive analytics intended to steer students away from experiences where they might struggle may all simply be incompatible with what we know and are coming to understand about how learning happens. However, this is a reason for us to continue conducting this type of research and find clear and persuasive ways to share it with stakeholders who design tests, curricula, and funding models.

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