

A Review of Two Edited Collections on Student Writing Transfer: *Critical Transitions* and *Understanding Writing Transfer*

Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer. Edited by Chris M. Anson and Jessie L. Moore, 2017. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse, Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, [ISBN 978-1-60732-647-2. 370 pages (paperback).]

[<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/ansonmoore/transfer.pdf>. 370 pages (online)]

Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education. Edited by Jessie L. Moore and Randall Bass, 2017. Sterling, VA: Stylus, [ISBN 978-1-62036-585-4. 165 pages, including index (paperback).]

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Discussions of transfer in writing studies have considered dispositions, genres and assignments, timing, and, frequently, the likelihood (or not) of transfer happening at all. These two new books on transfer don't start from the question of whether transfer happens, but instead deal primarily in what transfers and how, with an emphasis on the implications of our current understanding of transfer for teachers, researchers, and policymakers. The books build upon prior research into how students use knowledge from their writing classes in other writing situations, as well as offer new implications in and applications for this growing area of concern within writing studies. Moreover, they gather both theoretical and empirical work into two collections, creating a body of accessible resources on transfer that the field has been thus far lacking while also moving the transfer conversation forward into more complex considerations of the ways that educators can foster and research writing transfer.

Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer, edited by Chris M. Anson and Jessie L. Moore, and *Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Jessie L. Moore and Randall Bass, originated in an Elon Research Seminar, “a multi-institutional research seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer from 2011 to 2013” (CT, p. 3). The seminar responded to the need for further research on and discussion of transfer, leading not only to these two collections, but also to the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer*. The *Elon Statement* establishes parameters for the work of both books, summarizing the existing research on transfer and laying out “Working Principles” for engaging in transfer-oriented research and teaching. Thus, these books share connections to the *Elon Statement*, as well as some structural commonalities. More importantly, they have a common fundamental purpose: prompting further inquiry into writing transfer, within writing studies, across the curriculum, and beyond. They start from a common premise and question, too: If we know that writing transfer can happen—even with difficulty—what does that mean for research, teaching, and policy? They diverge, however, in their target audiences. *Critical Transitions* is written for an audience of writing studies teachers and scholars, while *Understanding Writing Transfer* is geared toward an audience outside the field of writing studies, particularly administrators and other policymakers.

Because the collected essays assume a familiarity with theories and research in writing transfer, *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer* will be most useful to writing studies researchers and teachers. (In their introduction, Anson and Moore speak to a “we” that includes writing teachers [p. 7]). The chapters extend “prior learning and transfer theories to ask *what* writing knowledge should transfer . . . , *how we might recognize* that transfer . . . , and what the *significance* is—from a global perspective—of understanding knowledge transformation related to writing . . .” (p. 11). The intent of the collection is not to simply dwell on familiar and well-established principles, such as the importance of metacognition and context, or the limitations of a “skills” view of transfer, but to look forward and consider more deeply what is involved in transfer research. In fact, in their afterword, Anson and Moore note, “there is still much to discover” about writing transfer (p. 336).

Critical Transitions is broken into two parts. In part one, “Understanding Writers’ Transitions,” the four chapters deal in concepts and theories related to writing transfer, such as threshold concepts, the role of the writing subject, and international scholars’ work with transfer. Part two, “Supporting Writers’ Transfer at Critical Transitions,” presents empirical studies related to transfer and the principles in the *Elon Statement*. Many of the recurring themes of the book are established in chapter one: the importance of metacognition, context, and the learner’s prior knowledge and dispositions, grounded in threshold concepts, an idea that is currently central in

work on learning and transfer. In this chapter, Linda Adler-Kassner, Irene Clark, Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey argue that “a writing curriculum informed by threshold concepts” is integral to teaching for transfer (p. 20). Other chapters in this part similarly explore foundational transfer concepts that are likely familiar to a writing studies audience, such as knowledge domains, prior knowledge, and remix, but they expand and complicate them to create space for further research. For example, Stuart Blythe supplements Anne Beaufort’s familiar model of writing expertise with more attention to the learner’s, or “subject’s,” transitions in his chapter. In her discussion of global transfer research, Christiane Donohue challenges the current scope of American transfer research by surveying international projects and work in other disciplines to argue for the inclusion of other perspectives and approaches, including RAD research into writing transfer.

The seven chapters in part two—“Supporting Writers’ Transfers at Critical Transitions”—present empirical studies related to the *Elon Statement*. These studies are more context specific than the chapters in part one; they explore a single element, theory, or implication related to the *Elon Statement*, such as consequential transitions or activity theory, and take the current understanding of transfer into new areas in writing studies. For example, Regina A. McManigell Grijalva takes the *Elon Statement*’s emphasis on activity theory to examine learning transfer in a summer bridging program for new college students. Similarly, Gwen Gorzelsky, Dana Lynn Driscoll, Joe Paszek, Ed Jones, and Carol Hayes elaborate on the central role of metacognition in current understandings of transfer. Adapting a taxonomy of metacognition from the field of psychology to writing studies, they add another element, “*constructive metacognition*, a metacognitive move that demonstrates a critically reflective stance likely to support transfer of writing knowledge across contexts” (p. 216). This study helps to amplify our understanding of a main tenet of “teaching for transfer” by taking the general concept of metacognition and breaking it down into different metacognitive moves that can be modeled and taught, studied, and incorporated into curricula.

Together, the two parts of *Critical Transitions*, along with the *Elon Statement*, provide a framework for not only understanding writing transfer but doing something with that understanding, whether it be further research or “strategies for supporting writers’ transfer at key critical transitions . . .” (Anson & Moore, p. 11). With the unifying foundation of the *Elon Statement* and the premise that writing transfer can occur, the authors in this collection move our understanding of transfer into more specific applications and implications: self-sponsored digital writing (Paula Rosinski), L2 and international students (Gita DasBender; Stacey M. Cozart, Tine Wirenfeltd Jensen, Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, Ketevan Kupatadze, and Scott Chien-Hsiung Chiu), and the role of student identity (Elizabeth Wardle and Nicolette Mercer Clement).

Writing studies teachers and researchers should find this collection to be a valuable resource for current theories of writing transfer and for new examples of occasions for and means of transfer, as well as empirical methods for studying those occasions and means. Such empirical research continues to be necessary, a need underscored by Anson and Moore in their afterword. They call for continued research into writing transfer, especially the relationship between “what’s ‘outside’ the writer—in the writing context—[and] what’s inside” the writer (p. 336).

In their afterword, Anson and Moore also call on “the field of writing studies” “to foster an understanding of transition among a broader range of publics” (p. 336). *Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education* can be seen as a response to that call. Co-editor Jessie L. Moore notes in chapter one, “this brief volume aims to make writing transfer research accessible to administrators, faculty decision makers, and other stakeholders across the curriculum who have a vested interest in preparing students to succeed in their future writing tasks” (p. 2). The audience, in other words, is composed of higher education stakeholders beyond writing studies faculty. This collection extends work in writing transfer by foregrounding writing transfer as a central concern of higher education. While the audience extends beyond compositionists, writing studies faculty will find the arguments thought provoking. WAC directors in particular will find useful talking points to bring to faculty in other disciplines and to university administrators—theories and research about locations and means of fostering transfer that could enable more substantive conversations about the role of writing in the university.

Like *Critical Transitions*, *Understanding Writing Transfer* has a set of chapters covering concepts and issues (“Critical Sites of Impact,” such as e-portfolios and digital writing), and another set with empirical research (“Principles at Work: Implications for Practice Case Studies”). In the first chapter, Moore provides a brief primer on transfer before describing the “five essential principles about writing transfer” (drawn from the *Elon Statement*) that anchor the rest of the book (p. 1). Unlike Anson and Moore’s collection, this text assumes no prior knowledge of writing transfer theory or practice, and in fact, in their foreword, undergraduate education scholars Betsy O. Barefoot and John N. Gardner admit, “before we read this manuscript, . . . we had never heard of writing transfer!” (p. ix). In line with the audience of administrators and other nonwriting studies stakeholders, the five anchoring principles, such as the role of prior knowledge, the importance of learner dispositions, and the necessity of teaching for transfer, are evoked explicitly and consistently so that readers can easily see how the components of the book work together. But the arguments are not simplistic. In fact, *Understanding Writing Transfer* expands discussions of writing transfer beyond writing classrooms into other areas of higher education and pushes institution-wide conversations about writing into writing transfer.

Part one, “Critical Sites of Impact,” links writing transfer to such perennial issues in higher education as diversity, Common Core standards, composing in digital environments, and high-impact learning practices. Taken as a whole, these chapters argue for the centrality of writing transfer in higher education by connecting it to some of the dominant topics in higher-education policy. For example, in his chapter on high-impact practices, Peter Felten claims, “Explicit attention to transfer in the implementation of HIPs has the potential to substantially enhance student learning” (p. 50). Felten makes a strong case for the importance of not only writing in HIPs but also the metacognitive moves that foster transfer. Similarly, Rebecca Frost Davis demonstrates the 21st-century importance of writing and transfer in her chapter. She notes that “graduates will increasingly pursue their personal, professional, and civic lives” in “digital ecosystems” (p. 27), and she thus examines both learning and transfer in digital writing outside the classroom. The topics in part one reflect many of the hot-button issues for administrators and other stakeholders in higher education. Aligning writing transfer with those issues creates opportunities for compositionists, especially WPAs and WAC coordinators, to argue for support for writing transfer across their institutions.

In part two, “Principles at Work: Implications for Practice Case Studies,” the six chapters present empirical studies that “illustrate the essential [five transfer] principles’ implications for practice, curriculum design, and/or policy” (Moore, *UTW*, p. 2). These studies are focused, concise, and accessible—easily digestible for busy administrators. The first chapter in this section continues the project of part one by focusing on issues of student access and inclusion, another important topic for a variety of stakeholders. Alison Farrell, Sandra Kane, Cecilia Dube, and Steve Salchak present research from three universities in Ireland, South Africa, and the US to argue that support for writing transfer should be part of other support systems designed to help students successfully integrate into college: “We suggest that writing transfer at this point of transition is an access issue . . .” (p. 82). Connecting writing transfer to student access to higher education demonstrates the importance of writing and transfer research beyond the writing classroom. Overall, *Understanding Writing Transfer* provides additional perspectives on transfer, taking the discussion away from questions of whether and how it happens and considering it in relation to the issues that university administrators are most concerned about. The conversation about writing transfer evolves from these arguments into one in which the institution as a whole has a stake.

These two collections build on prior transfer research, amplifying the concepts and applying those concepts to new situations. They do not provide a unifying theory of transfer; to do so would run counter to Christiane Donahue’s important call to resist the overly simple “master

narrative” captured by the term “transfer” (*CT*, p. 108). Instead, they use the *Elon Statement* as a sort of stasis text: Here’s what we know about writing transfer. That text creates a coherent foundation for the examinations of concepts, theories, practices, and implications that follow. *Critical Transitions* provides WAC directors, WPAs, and classroom faculty with concepts and strategies for strengthening writing instruction in FYC and disciplinary courses. Perhaps more importantly, though, the variety of explorations should *get them thinking*—about writing, about transfer, about students. It provides the material that would allow one to continue the work of the Elon Seminar—a long-term, broad discussion of writing and transfer—within one’s institution. *Understanding Writing Transfer* moves that work beyond the writing studies program. Taken together, its chapters form an effective argument for the centrality of writing transfer to the mission(s) of higher education. Writing faculty and WAC program directors could use ideas from this book not only to expand conversations about writing instruction, but to argue for support for more robust WAC programs that foreground writing transfer.

Understanding Writing Transfer and *Critical Transitions* effectively move our understanding of transfer into new areas while remaining solidly grounded in accepted theory and research. They engage with the current theories of transfer in writing studies, including threshold concepts, metacognition, and the role of activity systems. The collections move past prior research that established the conditions under which transfer doesn’t happen to elucidate the ways in which it can. Thus, in synthesizing, amplifying, and applying up-to-date work in transfer, the books provide numerous ways to think about writing transfer. In this way, they are generative: both texts should prompt readers to question and extend their knowledge and practices. *Critical Transitions* and *Understanding Writing Transfer* are not the last word on the topic of transfer—far from it. Many questions remain, including how we might develop empirical methods, beyond learners’ self-reports, of measuring transfer; as Anson and Moore say, “there is still much to discover” (p. 336). But in their stance of “here’s what we now know, and here are some ways we can push that knowledge further,” these two books continue to complicate and develop conversations about writing transfer—a process that lies not only at the heart of learning, but at the core of education itself.

References

- Anson, Chris, & Moore, Jesse L. (Eds.). (2017). *Critical transitions: Writing and the question of transfer*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.
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