The Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences: Using the Voices of Real-World Writers as a Bridge Between the Classroom and the Conference Room

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Introduction

There is a disconnect between how writing is taught in the academy and how it is performed in the professions. This can make for a very difficult transition from college to the workplace (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017), as noted consistently by both hiring managers and business leaders as well as by the individuals trying to adapt to these new writing environments. This transition remains challenging despite an emerging emphasis on professional writing in college curricula and long-running work in Writing in the Disciplines and Writing Across the Curriculum. These programs attempt to better understand how to teach writing to students in an effort to prepare them to think, write, and communicate in a range of contexts, but very often, according to recent research, the actual transfer of these skills from one situation to another still seems either not to occur or to occur in ways that are unexpected or unintended (Brent, 2011).

Part of what makes this transfer of skills from the university to the workplace so complicated is the tremendous variation in writing genres, requirements, and expectations from industry to industry and organization to organization, meaning that students often encounter a less-than-specific version of professional writing in the classroom. They develop what Anson and Forsberg (1990) referred to as problematic "generic skills," making it difficult for them to adapt to specific workplace contexts in what Nowacek (2011) categorized as challenging "reconceptualization" efforts.

To address this problem, we have developed the Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences (https://www.workplace-writing.org), an online audio archive, with transcriptions, of interviews from working professionals in a variety of different industries. For this project, interviewees are asked to discuss how and what they write in their specific workplaces, how they translated college writing skills to that work, what successful writing looks like where they are, and what students across disciplines need to develop in their writing as they look towards the future. Interviews also explore new ways of considering concepts central to transfer, such as genre and metacognition. We have made the Archive available to students, professors, and the public to serve as a learning tool and as an ongoing repository. But perhaps most importantly, it serves as a crucial link between the university and the "working world." As students hear the voices of those creating real workplace writing, they are exposed to these authentic writing situations, and they begin to see the extremely complex and diverse audiences, purposes, and modes that will be expected of

them when they enter the workplace. Imagine, for instance, a student interested in working for the State Department. She accesses the Archive's interview with a [Foreign Affairs Officer](#) and listens to him describe the security-related and bureaucratic challenges of writing specific kinds of documents on the job. This first-person, "insider" narrative likely provides more detail and complexity than any generic assignment she might encounter in her typical college class, even if such an assignment or lesson were to be focused specifically on government writing. The interview offers the student a more realistic sense of the work done by professionals, allowing her to set more realistic expectations. It is our hope that listeners of the Archive are better able, then, to think critically about their own writing when they eventually enter the workplace.

The Need for Authentic Accounts
Many professors, while impressive experts in their disciplines, are very far removed from the kinds of writing that their students will ultimately spend their professional lives doing. Classrooms often struggle to model authentic and relevant writing assignments with "consequences in [their] context" (Freedman & Adam, 2000, p. 46), instead opting for broader assignments (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Pare, 1999). While students might, at best, be asked to mimic common professional writing forms their professors imagine they might write in the future—a generic memo or a business letter, perhaps—students have surprisingly little access to professional writing in the fields they wish to pursue.

The Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences is rooted in theories of learning transfer, which address questions of how an individual can demonstrate skills/strategies in different and adaptive ways, even in new or unfamiliar contexts (Nowacek, 2011). The act of engaging with these new writing situations and responding to them appropriately and effectively requires students to think about not only audience and purpose, but also genre and context. Transfer is generally accepted to be "fraught, elusive, difficult to measure and by no means automatic" (Brent, 2011). It is crucial at the outset to first recognize the ways in which transfer goes beyond simply learning; *transfer is a demonstration of critical thinking*. When we try to better understand how transfer happens, we are interested not in how an individual learns something in order to recall and recite or even demonstrate a skill in a context very similar to the one he or she learned it in. Rather, we are interested in how he or she can use these skills, knowledge, or strategies in very different ways or in a context that looks potentially very different. Most transfer research focuses on students transferring writing skills from either high school to the university or from first-year writing to the major (Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, 2013). Less research, particularly recently, focuses on the transfer of writing from the university to the professions, especially writing done by those individuals that Brandt (2015) called "workaday writers." The research that does focus on this moment of transition (Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Beaufort, 1999, 2007; Kohn, 2015) provides us with a strong foundation for understanding some of the challenges these writers face and the moves they make in an effort to become successful workplace writers.

For example, Anson and Forsberg (1990) asserted that student writers struggle in this transition because of the rhetorical limitations of classroom writing and its tendency to focus on "generic skills" rather than on "developing strategies for social and intellectual adaptation," which one might apply across writing contexts, both academic and professional (p. 201). Thus, students often find that even when writing in modes or genres for which they

are prepared by the classroom, they later struggle with these same genres because of the "gap" between what is done in class and what is expected in the workplace. In a limited case-study, in which the progress of six student-interns writing in the workplace for the first time was tracked, Anson and Forsberg (1990) found that the transition from the academic to the professional was marked by three major stages: *Expectation* (in which the students, confident in their knowledge due to successful in-class writing and excited by the prospect of the new workplace context, feel prepared and motivated); *Disorientation* (which occurs when the reality of their new writing context clashes with their expectations and is compounded by negative or non-existent feedback from supervisors and feelings of underperformance and uncertainty); and finally, *Transition and Resolution* (wherein student-writers begin to feel more confident, adapt to the new writing context, and "may begin to take on greater initiative" [p. 208]). Our efforts speak to these findings as we hone in on specificity at the level of the workplace, industry, and organization. Listeners to the Archive can hear what these different stages actually sound like in different industries and at various degrees of writing experience. Students are exposed to especially honest and otherwise inaccessible insights from interviewees: a Business Analyst describes "disorientation" in his first job; a Certified Public Accountant conveys the "resolution" found after significant feedback and practice, allowing her to feel more confident and take on more complex writing projects.

Approach to Developing the Archive
One of the issues many students face is that "professional writing" is often thought of as one "type" of writing, both in terms of genre and strategies that are key to success. Students write a report, for instance, often without understanding that a report in one field looks very different from a report in another field. Central to our project is the acknowledgement that different industries, organizations, and even teams frequently employ very different types of professional writing, and to better understand transfer, or patterns of transfer, it is crucial to examine how writing differs between industries and organizations. To that end, a goal of the Archive is to collect interviews focused on how workplace writers perceive this transfer of skills and how they come to understand the actions they take in this process in specific contexts. The research questions guiding this inquiry are the following:

- How do new workplace writers in specific industries and positions perceive the process, including the challenges and strategies they employ, by which they transfer the writing skills they learned in college?
- How do these writers understand and describe the writing process, both at the organizational and individual levels?
- How do new workplace writers define "successful" writing, and how does this understanding shift from the academic context to the professional?
- How can we better teach transferability of writing skills to the workplace?

We recruited interviewees through word of mouth as well as through an IRB-approved project Facebook page. Selection criteria for participation requires that interviewees (1) be willing to discuss their writing background, processes, and strategies; (2) have earned a bachelor's degree; and (3) currently have a job that requires some writing,

whether substantial, long-term projects (e.g., reports, white papers, etc.) or less formal communication (e.g., email). The Archive employs purposeful selection in an effort to achieve "representativeness or typicality of . . . individuals" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 98) across a broad range of industries, fields, organizations, and positions.

A Digital Repository of First-Hand Workplace Writing Experiences
The Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences serves as a resource in multiple ways. The primary and most direct use of it can be found in the Resources Collection. It's on this page that we've gathered together assignments, activities, and lesson plans developed in response to specific interviews. In most cases, these resources can be used to address skills, strategies, writing scenarios, or challenges that specific interviewees expressed as relevant or important. Each assignment prompt is focused on one or several rhetorical skills. One assignment for first-year writers, for instance, asks students to mimic the methods of the Archive itself by interviewing a professional in a field of their interest in order to analyze authentic writing situations performed within that field, paying particular attention to genre, audience, and purposes of the interviewee's workplace writing. Other prompts are rooted in particular interviews. For example, a Director of Business Development discusses the different writing personas he inhabits as his writing medium and audience shift, and the accompanying assignment highlights these shifts by asking students to consider the concept of "authenticity" in social media writing and in their writing more broadly. The aim of this activity is for students to learn to identify and interpret writing "personas" as well as to consider goals and purposes in online writing. It also asks students to grapple with their own online personas and representations. Similarly, a Content Manager and Contributing Editor of a lifestyle blog recalls how vastly the style and tone of her academic writing experiences differ from the online writing she now does. The accompanying assignment asks students to analyze writing styles in formal academic and professional writing sources (scholarly journals, trade magazines) and a public-facing online source (blog or subreddit) and then draw conclusions about the distinct writing modes and what makes each successful and engaging. These assignments and lesson plans are meant as starting points—malleable and remixable to suit varying student and curricular needs. Each of them offers teachers an opportunity to help students develop a flexibility in their thinking, as they work to inhabit various writing roles, each with its own complexities and constraints, and adapt to modes and genres across contexts.

Instructors and students also have full access to the Archive interviews, which at this time includes 48 conversations with different professionals. Professors in various fields are welcome to use the interviews collected in the Archive for any number of educational purposes, from "listening" assignments that simply offer their students access to professionals discussing their progression as communicators in their field to more substantial writing exercises that go beyond the current Resources Collection. The interview format allows listeners to examine gaps between perception (at all stages—student, new employee, established workplace writer), expectation, and experience as well as between the modes and authenticity of writing in the classroom and in the workplace (skills which were useful, or transferred, and those which were not). It is our hope that this will allow students to think not only about their future genres, but also about how they might best prepare themselves for the inevitable writing challenges they will face once they leave the university. We can imagine professors using excerpts or full interviews, available in audio

and transcript, broadly as texts for student reading in first-year writing and professional writing classes, but also in more specific disciplinary programs. A computer science program might ask students to consider the Archive's Software Developer or IT Network Engineer interviews. A business program might be interested in examining the interview with the Marketing Director or one with a Business Analyst. Arts programs might find value in the Archive's interview with a TV Commercial Director or with the freelance Illustrator. Ultimately, this use of the Archive provides previews of authentic writing for students across majors.

The Archive also enables us to examine how transfer occurs across disciplines/fields and to try to reduce the *Disorientation* phase (Anson & Forsberg 1990) by highlighting (for students, educators, and employers) authentic moments of struggle and successful strategies in composition, revision, and feedback. Consider, for instance, the experience of an Intelligence Analyst (2016) for the Federal Government:

> . . . in the intelligence field for the US government, it's good to have good academic chops. The documentation is important, but there are writing styles that are different. The consumers of your reports are going to be looking for something that's a little bit more journalistic. They want the bottom line up front. That's something that you'll hear a lot and that'll be a common constructive criticism that you'll receive. In academia, academic papers that you read, they want to take you on the journey with them through the paper and show how they came to this great conclusion, which is fine, and it can be very interesting if it's well written, but that won't fly with a policymaker who doesn't have the time or doesn't want to—they want to know the news. (para. 36)

And that of a Marketing Director (2017) for an educational software company:

> I didn't spend time learning different audiences that different industries might be marketing to or selling to. My first job out of school was working at a publishing company that specialized in executive-level newsletters to companies in the Fortune 500 and that sort of thing. Nothing in school prepared me how to write a communication for that type of person, nor the next type of audience that I worked with. Again, I wish I had a little bit more of an understanding of the different types of business audiences that are out there that are receptive to different types of marketing and selling, because it does change [. . .] There was never any preparation for anything like that [. . .] it was all just sort of learning about it as I went. (para. 45)

These excerpts are representative of the authenticity of the writing experience typical of these specific workplaces as well as those of nursing, the arts, accounting, and other fields in the Archive. It is both this raw language and the metacognition we as teachers and researchers know to be central to transferability that allow for the interviews to serve as productive starting points for teachers to develop the Archive's interview responses into tangible classroom and workplace applications. Still, Kohn (2015) acknowledged that utilizing such "case study documents" meant to model real-world exigencies "cannot

recreate the complexity and dynamics of the workplace" (p. 169). However, it is our hope that combining these case-study scenarios with genuine first-person accounts of workplace writers detailing their experiences with these complexities might aid students' transfer of skills from the limitations of the classroom to the realities of the workplace.

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