

# Transfer Two Ways: Options and Obstacles in Staff Education for Transfer

Jody Cardinal

State University of New York at Old Westbury

Scholars in composition (e.g., Beaufort; Nowacek) and writing center studies (e.g., Devet; Hill) posit that writing centers are on the front lines of transfer with unique opportunities to help students adapt writing knowledge and skills from prior to current and current to future writing tasks.<sup>1</sup> Since transfer is more readily achieved when learners are prompted to transport knowledge across contexts (Ambrose et al. 111), tutors are well positioned to facilitate transfer by helping writers access prior and current writing knowledge and identify new uses for it.

To consider how tutors might effectively be prepared to fulfill this important role, my colleague Christopher Petty and I sought to explore what pedagogical methods tutors find most helpful in understanding and applying the concept of transfer.<sup>2</sup> At our writing center, new and returning tutors attend a two-day initial training followed by four professional development meetings each semester. Accordingly, we investigated what strategies might be effective at facilitating tutors' understanding of transfer without the benefit of a semester-long training course. Since our initial training does not cover transfer, I introduced transfer theory in two subsequent professional development meetings after which tutors responded to a survey about the meeting activities and potential changes to their tutoring. Results show that tutors perceived changes in their tutoring and valued a variety of active learning approaches. At the same time, introducing transfer theory after initial training posed challenges ironically related to the complex process of transfer for the tutors themselves.

## STUDY DESCRIPTION

In spring 2017, I devoted two ninety-minute professional development meetings to tutoring for transfer. Building on Heather Hill's recent work on transfer-focused tutor training, I similarly grounded our staff education in the concept of "transfer talk" developed by Rebecca Nowacek (qtd. in Hill 79, 85). For

Nowacek, transfer talk occurs when tutors discuss the relationship between writers' prior knowledge and a current task, or between their current learning and future writing, thus helping writers adapt learning about writing to new contexts (Hill 85).

While Hill used lecture and discussion for staff training (80), I aimed both to concretize the abstract concept of transfer talk by breaking it into component parts and to provide activities through which tutors could actively engage in learning and applying the concept. As described below, I used five activities across the two transfer meetings: presentation of transfer theory via a PowerPoint and handout, small group analysis of a hypothetical dialogue using transfer talk, small group dialogue writing, watching of role plays using transfer talk, and an improv activity.

**PowerPoint and Handout:** In a handout (first meeting) and a PowerPoint (second meeting), I introduced Bonnie Devet's definition of transfer as "The ability to take something learned in one context and apply it in another" (119) and clarified key terms. I noted that positive transfer occurs when "learning from one situation assist[s with learning] in another situation" while negative transfer occurs when "learning from one situation interferes with learning from another situation" (Melzer 80, 79). Tutors shared examples of positive and negative transfer from their own learning and tutoring experiences. We discussed, for instance, how generating ideas for a history paper using brainstorming strategies learned in first-year composition is an instance of positive transfer: such strategies facilitate learning in the new context. On the other hand, avoiding personal pronouns in an application essay because "I" was forbidden in research papers is an instance of negative transfer: prior knowledge impedes success in the new context.

I also divided transfer talk into three parts labeled **Prior, Future, and Transparent (PFT)**:

- Ask about similarities and differences between **PRIOR** writing tasks and the current one.
- Ask about **FUTURE** uses of concepts, skills, or strategies discussed in the session.
- Be **TRANSPARENT**: discuss abstract concepts that transcend the specific situation.

Explaining the abstract concept that is the focus of a session (discussing, for instance, the rationale and nature of thesis statements in general rather than simply working to improve the specific thesis statement at hand) is vital in helping writers

identify larger writing concepts and processes that can transfer among prior, current, and future writing tasks (Hill 81).

**Analyzing dialogue:** At the first meeting, staff members worked in small groups to identify examples of effective transfer talk in a hypothetical tutorial dialogue. Small groups shared their findings.

**Writing dialogue:** Working in small groups, at the first meeting, staff revised an excerpt of a poor hypothetical tutorial dialogue to add transfer talk. At the second meeting, they created an original dialogue including transfer talk on an assigned aspect of writing (thesis, paragraphing, or analysis).

**Watching role plays:** At the second meeting, the assistant director and I performed weak and strong tutorial role plays illustrating transfer talk about citation. While the weak version focused merely on APA citation format, the strong version explained the larger concept and purpose of citation.

**Improv:** At the second meeting, staff role-played helping a writer make connections to prior knowledge around assigned genres like a literature review, aspects of the writing process like brainstorming, or higher order concerns (HOCs) like using evidence.

## **PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD**

Nine undergraduate and three professional tutors, ten of whom attended the first transfer meeting and eleven of whom attended the second, responded to an IRB-approved survey administered eight weeks after the second meeting. The fifteen-question survey contained both Likert-scale and open-ended questions asking tutors to define transfer talk, identify the activity most conducive to their learning, rate their comfort level engaging in transfer talk, and assess changes in their tutoring.

Focused on a small group of tutors in one setting, this study is limited in size and scope. Additionally, while nine tutors attended both meetings, three undergraduates attended only one, thus missing some activities, which undoubtedly affected their responses, particularly their selection of the most helpful learning activity. Nonetheless, all tutors received some degree of transfer education. Their responses thus provide insight into tutors' perceptions of staff education on transfer and suggest the potential value of future research.

## **PREFERRED TRAINING ACTIVITIES**

Survey results indicate that providing multiple entry points to the concept of transfer was valuable since each activity was selected

as most helpful to learning by at least one tutor: *PowerPoint* (2); *Analyzing Dialogue* (5); *Writing Dialogue* (1); *Watching a Role Play* (2); *Improv* (2). Analyzing a sample written dialogue was the most highly preferred activity, chosen by five of twelve tutors, including both professionals (2) and students (3). Moreover, when asked for suggestions to improve transfer training, two of nine respondents specifically valued analyzing written dialogue. One professional tutor commented, “[M]aybe reading through more examples of dialogue that demonstrates transfer talk would be helpful,” and a student tutor noted, “By the end of the analysis of dialogue, I was able to get a better understanding of transfer talk and how to use it.” These results suggest that modeling transfer talk through written dialogue may be an especially useful tool in teaching tutors how to facilitate transfer.

The tutors also favored active learning: only two preferred the PowerPoint explaining transfer theory, and when asked how training might be improved, four of nine noted the value of hands-on activities. One student tutor stated, “[It] helped greatly that I was engaged in a hands-on manner which has always helped me learn way better than a PowerPoint ever could.” Two professional tutors recommended more role plays. One explained, “Mock sessions might be the best thing, and maybe a transfer talk checklist that we can use to reflect upon our tutoring in those sessions... .” This comment highlights the potential value of combining active learning approaches with reflection.

### **IMPACT OF TRAINING ON SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF TUTORING**

The tutors’ survey responses complement empirical data gathered by Hill on the value of introducing tutors to the concept of transfer (88). The majority (11 of 12) reported feeling *moderately* (4) or *significantly* (7) better prepared to engage in transfer talk, and all felt at least *somewhat* better prepared. Similarly, two thirds (8 of 12) felt their tutoring practices changed either *moderately* (6) or *significantly* (2).

Tutors’ qualitative responses similarly indicate at least some implementation of transfer talk. When asked to explain “what you adjusted or changed about your sessions and why,” eight articulated specific positive changes to their tutoring. Seven reported activating prior writing knowledge and/or discussing future applications of current learning. Perhaps because our staff was already familiar with the concept of transparency (discussing larger abstract concepts) from initial training, only one tutor described an increase in transparency.

Tutors also thoughtfully analyzed the benefits of transfer talk. Among the four who reported inquiring more about prior knowledge, one professional noted its value for easing writing challenges: “I definitely became more aware of the importance of using writers’ past experiences . . . . I find myself trying to come up with questions . . . that can help them approach their assignments from an angle they might be more familiar with.” Similarly, a student tutor noted increased productivity:

By noting the writer’s previous experiences, . . . I can more quickly find the negative transfer that is inhibiting the development of their writing, or engage the positive transfer to move the session along without as much explaining. This also helps to engage the writer greatly . . . .

Of the five tutors who incorporated more future talk, one noted, “I started to explain to writers how they can use what we had learned within the session on their own, outside of the writing center and outside of this particular assignment.” Another similarly commented, “I was able to remember that the writer has to learn or take away something from the session so I made sure to emphasize certain aspects of our session.” These comments suggest that an awareness of transfer theory may encourage tutors to foster long-term learning in sessions.

## **OBSTACLES**

While the survey results indicate that training on transfer enriched staff education and tutoring practice, such training also posed challenges related to the tutors’ own transfer of prior knowledge. Comments at the first transfer meeting and on the surveys suggest that some staff members had trouble incorporating transfer theory into their existing knowledge about tutoring. All staff had completed initial training prior to the transfer meetings, so all brought prior tutoring knowledge to those meetings. Additionally, eleven of twelve had tutored for at least one full semester before encountering transfer theory. Ironically, in some cases, this prior knowledge and experience seemed to impede rather than facilitate learning about transfer.

At the first transfer meeting, some tutors had trouble conceptualizing transfer talk as distinct from a generalized notion of good tutoring. As they evaluated the hypothetical written dialogue, for instance, they noted good tutoring practices, including the tutor’s patience and use of open-ended questions, but struggled to identify specific instances of transfer talk. Similarly, when three groups rewrote a poor tutorial dialogue, two produced more comments about good tutoring practices than

instances of transfer talk. One group wrote, for instance, “analyze assignment sheet,” “compliment first,” “open-ended questions,” and “avoid mixed messages.” Another group noted, “Progress toward a goal in the session” and “Explain the differences between genres of writing (genre awareness).” These responses demonstrate a successful application of prior knowledge of good tutoring practices but one that seemingly displaced the production of concrete forms of transfer talk. Limited time and the brevity of the sample dialogues may be primarily at fault. Even so, as some staff members collapsed transfer talk into good tutoring, they had trouble seeing specific features of transfer talk, like an emphasis on prior knowledge and connections to future writing. Transfer talk risked becoming just another name for a catch-all bag of tutoring strategies, like open-ended questions and using praise.

In contrast, other staff saw too much of a distinction between transfer talk and principles covered in initial training. When asked, “How much of a difference do you see between tutoring for transfer and general good tutoring?” the majority (8 of 12) found either a moderate (5) or significant (3) difference. One professional suggested transfer talk and good tutoring might be mutually exclusive, noting, “It would be difficult to answer this question, as a tutor would have to have the same session with a writer in each condition . . . to fully compare the two.” Two student tutors constructed substantial differences between transfer talk and good tutoring by overlooking the emphasis in initial training on long-term learning as the goal of a tutoring session. One student tutor noted, for instance, “[T]utoring for transfer ensures that the writer is really gaining knowledge that will remain with them throughout the future whereas with general good tutoring the immediate problem is solved.” While transfer theory may have enhanced tutors’ understanding of the importance of fostering long-term learning, this understanding led some tutors to position tutoring for transfer as an opposite rather than an enrichment of principles learned in training.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF EDUCATION**

In retrospect, it seems likely that these paradoxical responses resulted at least in part from inadequate attention to the tutors’ own prior knowledge and specifically to how their prior knowledge on tutoring was organized. As Ambrose et al. note, “When students are provided with an organizational structure in which to fit new knowledge, they learn more effectively and efficiently than when they are left to deduce this conceptual

structure for themselves” (53). I had not done enough in the meetings on transfer to activate the tutors’ prior knowledge of good tutoring practice and to assist them in integrating the new knowledge on transfer within their pre-existing mental schemas. There was a better way.

In fact, our staff already has a workable organizational structure for knowledge about tutoring, one introduced at initial training. I use the structure of the tutoring session with its opening, middle, and closing to help staff organize information about tutoring. The opening is devoted to establishing rapport, gathering information, and learning about the assignment; the middle to reading aloud and addressing one or two main priorities; and the closing to reviewing what has been learned and planning next steps. Since research suggests that “knowledge organizations are most effective when they are well matched to the way that knowledge needs to be accessed and used” (Ambrose et al. 49), the opening-middle-closing structure is likely to effectively support tutors in their work as it relates directly to the sequence of tasks they perform in a session.

Prompting staff members to consider new information about transfer in relation to this organizational structure might better facilitate learning and reduce interference between prior knowledge and the new material on transfer. Ideally, one professional development meeting would address each of the three components of transfer talk as they apply to a particular stage of a session. Certainly, each form of transfer talk can occur at any point, and identifying the abstract concept at issue (transparency) can facilitate connections to prior and future writing tasks. Nonetheless, rearranging the letters from **PFT** to **PTF** highlights the specific relevance of each component to a particular stage: asking about **prior** writing tasks in the opening; **transparently** discussing the abstract concepts addressed in the middle, and looking ahead to **future** writing tasks in the closing.

Each staff meeting might begin by asking tutors what they know about a particular stage of a session, thus activating their prior knowledge “to aid the integration and retention of new information” (Ambrose et al. 16). Next, we might consider how the concept of transfer enriches our practices at each stage. What changes should our session openings undergo if facilitating transfer is a primary purpose of the opening? How will our discussions with writers in the middle of sessions change if being transparent about the larger abstract concepts being addressed becomes a priority? How can we use closing strategies that help

writers connect what they've learned to future writing? Paired with a variety of active learning activities like those discussed above, this approach might better enable staff to incorporate new knowledge about transfer into prior knowledge of tutoring.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, transfer-focused staff education foregrounds transfer not only for writers but also for tutors. As we prepare tutors to facilitate transfer for writers, we should consider tutors' own process of learning transfer. Particularly in continuing staff education, prompting meaningful connections to tutors' prior forms of knowledge organization may aid acquisition of new knowledge about transfer. Such connections may also help tutors understand transfer theory as an enhancement of initial training rather than as entirely different material or a repetition that blurs the particularity of new knowledge.

While further research is needed to confirm these findings, this study suggests that active learning approaches and explicit modeling of transfer talk may be particularly helpful in staff education for transfer and that such education may increase tutors' attention to long-term learning. It also suggests that timing matters. Administrators introducing transfer theory to experienced staff will want to do so thoughtfully in relation to what staff members have already internalized about good tutoring.

## NOTES

1. I thank Bonnie Devet, Dana Driscoll, the *WLN* editorial team, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback on this essay.

2. I'm grateful to Christopher Petty, co-principal investigator in this study and former assistant director of our writing center, for assistance in designing staff meeting activities and for enriching my thinking about our data. I also thank the staff members who generously participated in this study.



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