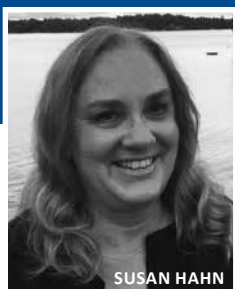# Some of These Things ARE Like the Others: Lessons Learned from Tutor-Inspired Research about Transfer in the Writing Center

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Transfer-related scholarship in composition studies—which has been prominent since about 2007—suggests that many factors influence the degree to which writers engage in transfer-related behavior, or the habit of applying what has been learned in one context to another. While many writing center scholars agree that "[writing] centers already teach for transfer every day" (Devet 120), and "that writing centers are fostering both anticipated transfer . . . and actual transfer" for a number of writing center users across institutions (Bromley et al.), we argue that tutors can do more to foreground transfer with student writers. Our practice-based research at two small liberal arts colleges (SLACs) leads us to offer four suggestions for educating writing center staff to "facilitate moments of connection-making for writers" (Hughes et al.), or, put another way, to tutor *for* transfer.

Conclusion 1: We should assign readings about transfer as part of tutor-education curricula.

Prior to 2013, a review of our centers' exit surveys revealed that writers generally did not leave a session consciously thinking about transfer. Thereafter, we assigned readings about transfer to new undergraduate peer-tutors, anticipating that conversations about these articles would foster more dialogue about transfer, more priming for transfer, and more modeling of how to transfer writing knowledge from and to other contexts during sessions.[1]

Of the texts assigned, new tutors seemed most engaged with Elizabeth Wardle's "Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC," which explains transfer and reports that Wardle's small cohort of honors students did not perceive that they needed to transfer knowledge from first-year composition to other courses (76).[2] In class discus-

sions, our tutors reported that her article helped them understand transfer's importance and led them to generate ideas about how they could facilitate transfer in tutorials. As directors, we were initially most interested in forward transfer, or using tutorials to generate awareness that writers could apply present learning to future contexts (Nelms and Dively 218). Our tutors, by contrast, perceived that writers rarely placed new assignments in context with older ones and encouraged us to emphasize backward transfer: the ability to draw on memories of previously learned material that are related to current tasks (Nelms and Dively 218). Our tutors' sense that writers neglected to build on prior knowledge made us consider what specific moments within a tutorial are most ripe for engaging writers in transfer-related discussions and behaviors and led us to our second conclusion.

Conclusion 2. Tutors should emphasize transfer particularly at the beginning (backward) and ending (forward) of tutorials.
To facilitate this emphasis, tutors at Institution A, one of the SLACs represented in this study, added this question to the center's intake form: "Does the assignment you want to work on today remind you of any other assignments you've ever written? Be as specific as you can be." The tutors argued that this question would prime writers to think about how current writing tasks draw on prior ones. In fact, tutors reported that writers' responses provided them with openings for transfer talk, such as "So this is your second sociology journal. What kind of feedback did you get on the first one?" or "It looks like you're not used to writing about non-fiction. How do you typically approach new writing tasks?" Transfer talk engages students in thinking about how to apply what they already know to new writing tasks, provides occasions for filling in gaps in prior knowledge that students may or may not know they have (Yancey et al. 126), and/or explores future applications in which such knowledge can be applied.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, 861 writers at Institution A completed the intake form on which the transfer question appeared. About 30% of the time (N=251), students left that question unanswered. Though several factors could contribute to the blank responses (e.g., lack of motivation, time constraints, or not having a sufficient "writing vocabulary"), it is also possible that respondents did not have prior knowledge upon which to draw for a particular assignment. In *Writing Across Contexts*, Kathleen Blake Yancey et al. note that most first-year composition students experience "an absence of prior knowledge" related to "key writing concepts" and "non-fiction texts that serve as models" (108).

So, writers may have left the transfer question blank—rather than writing "no" —because "they enter[ed] college inexperienced in the kinds of writing and reading the first year of postsecondary education demands" (Yancey et al. 108); thus, their new writing assignments do not, in fact, remind them of any prior high school or college writing tasks. We suggest tutors can begin facilitating backward transfer by simply asking writers about past writing attitudes and assignments.

Though sometimes rushed, session endings are also crucial moments for building transfer awareness and are especially fertile moments for forward transfer. "What did you learn today that you can carry forward to future papers?" a tutor might ask. Such an open-ended question can engage writers in transfer by prompting them to think about written tasks as interconnected and to take ownership of their writing process.

Conclusion 3: In addition to assigning readings about transfer and foregrounding it as a concept during tutorials, we should educate tutors to identify similarities among different types of writing assignments.

While we have found such practice is common in many writing center and WAC initiatives, we also wonder whether the trend toward specialized disciplines has eroded writers'—and maybe even our own—conviction that some writing strategies transcend genre and discipline. In 314 responses (37%) to Institution A's intake question about the similarity of the current assignment to previous ones, writers wrote "no," implying that their assignments were providing new and different types of challenges. Occasionally students elaborated, writing explanations like "This is my first time writing a book summary," "This essay is a new category," and "This is the longest paper I've ever had to write." Such responses indicate these (mostly first-year) writers were experiencing new genres and new expectations regarding length (and, presumably, what constitutes "adequate development"). We note particularly that in such comments, writers focus on what is different about their present assignments without mentioning what they already know. While it seems probable, for example, that all of these writers had previously been asked to write a summary, the fact that they are summarizing something lengthy, or that the assignment includes a response, reflection, or evaluation component, seems to cause them to overlook the assignment's familiar portion. Our analysis echoes Wardle's finding that "simply having previous experience similar to the new and engaging writing task was not enough to ensure generalization" ("Understanding 'Transfer'" 80).

One first-year writer's responses to our intake form during her eight tutorials for three different classes in her first semester highlights Wardle's point. When the student sought help with a psychology paper, she said the assignment was familiar because it was her "second journal in psychology." For two FYC papers, she reached further backward: "I had a research paper in high school . . . about pharmacists and what they do. I struggled with it a lot" and "Yes, in high school [a comparison] between two movies we watched." In these instances, the writer focused on genre. Interestingly, in her four other tutorials, she responded "no" to the transfer question three times and the fourth time, "Not at all. It's my first summary and strong response." In this last comment, she, like many others, focused solely on the different part of the assignment. Responses like hers surprise us because while our intake form question is admittedly an imperfect snapshot of students' prior writing knowledge, its wording also hints at similarities (by virtue of the word "reminds"). It would be surprising if this particular student—who, in high school, wrote a research paper on pharmacists and a comparison of two movies—did not have summary-writing knowledge on which to draw for this new assignment.

One important component of transfer talk is emphasizing the rhetorical elements shared by different assignments; for example, all summaries identify a source's main ideas, even if those sources are longer than students are accustomed to, even when a source is non-fiction rather than fiction, and even when an assignment combines summary with additional tasks. Guiding writers in the retrieval of information they already know is an integral part of tutoring for transfer, so a tutor's role should include deliberately, explicitly helping writers access their prior knowledge. We found that encouraging tutors to highlight similar rhetorical features helped them engage in transfer talk more regularly.

Although we recognize the risk in overgeneralizing students' responses to the intake form question, their answers suggest that instructors' assignment sequencing is not always visible to our students. The small composition program at Institution A adheres to a fairly uniform, deliberate progression of FYC assignments, moving from *analysis* of a single source, to a comparative analysis of two sources, to a researched essay requiring students to *analyze* multiple sources. Nevertheless, Institution A students who used the writing center more than once for the same FYC class sometimes indicated on the intake forms that later assignments did not remind them of previous ones; their responses often fo-

cused on assignment *differences*, not *similarities*, both within the FYC curriculum and when they wrote in other disciplines. Similarly, in our conversations with tutors, we often hear them corroborate this sense that writing assignments–whether assigned within a single class or across disciplines–are as different from one another as the desert and the ocean. While we acknowledge disciplinary differences in writing, the concept of transfer presupposes that there are effective writing strategies that student writers can take with them as they move through courses and disciplines. Examples of effective writing strategies include statements that assert a main point or argument; logical progression of ideas; evidence to support assertions; citation and attribution to acknowledge sources; and transitional words and phrases to help readers follow the writer's thinking. Therefore, we propose that tutor educators continue to emphasize features of effective writing that are similar across contexts so that tutors can use dialogue about such strategies to facilitate—rather than to unintentionally discourage—the transfer of writing knowledge.

Conclusion 4: Tutor educators should emphasize with tutors that individual writers will display varying levels of receptivity toward transfer depending on the writing task.
About 35% (N=296) of writers affirmed that, "yes," their writing assignment reminded them of a previous writing task.[3] Some writers, particularly juniors and seniors, referred to a "previous college course," frequently "English" or "first year seminar [sic]," and sometimes courses in the disciplines that required similar papers. Writers whose assignments had autobiographical components often identified "personal experience" as a familiar genre. Other writers reported that assignments reminded them of something they wrote in high school, and the remaining "yes" responses were a hodgepodge that included previously written "essays," "four-page papers," and "compare/contrast essays."

The differing responses to our transfer question may be attributed, in part, to students' dispositions. Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells have argued that "student dispositions [are] critical to success in transfer of learning." In other words, writers' orientations toward learning may be more important in fostering transfer than educational contexts like classrooms and curricula. Wardle ("Creative Repurposing") characterizes students as having either more "problem-exploring" or more "answer-getting" dispositions. She argues that students with a problem-exploring disposition— which is characterized by curiosity, recursive thinking, and the desire to solve problems—are more prone to transfer knowledge

than students with an answer-getting disposition, which is characterized by distractibility and the desire to quickly find a single, correct answer.

It is tempting to conclude that students who responded to the intake form's transfer question with some version of "Yes, I'm reminded of a previous assignment" are more inclined to transfer. However, in our analysis, few responses indicated true problem-exploring dispositions, and few responses represent true answer-getting dispositions. Even though about 30% of writers in our sample left the transfer question blank, tutors' session notes seldom suggested that these writers were averse to the problem-exploring nature of tutorials. Many tutor session summaries like this one hinted at writers exhibiting some level of problem solving: "[The writer] talked and I took notes on specific occurrences she could tie into her paper." Similarly, among the 35% of writers who affirmed and engaged in backward transfer by describing a similar, previous writing task, some demonstrated little curiosity. For example, one writer with a weekly appointment displayed an answer-getting mentality even though she always affirmed that the assignment she wanted to work on reminded her of a previous one. Her standard transfer question response was, "Yes. Dr. M," which was shorthand for a professor who notoriously required students to eliminate all instances of passive voice. Understandably, this writer wanted help eliminating passive voice. However, our tutors did not perceive that she was engaged in transferring the ability to write in active voice from one assignment to another. Rather, tutors read her simple duplication of "Dr. M" and her resistance to applying the previous weeks' strategies for recasting passive voice to new assignments as the "answer-getting" behavior Wardle describes. Yet, this student's disposition is not strictly an answer-getting disposition because she displays the "problem-solvers'" awareness that a repeated writing task ("Write in active voice!") should draw on prior knowledge.

Moreover, while it might seem that writers who responded "no" to our question about similarities between present and previous assignments demonstrate dispositions that are less transfer-prone, their responses sometimes display considerable reflection. In a tutorial for a paper assigned in her honors course, one writer reflected, "No. I've never gone into this much detail about a historical event." The writer seems to be struggling with the amount of "detail"—perhaps evidence?—required for this particular paper, and her response articulates this difficulty. In this instance, hers might be considered a hybrid disposition toward transfer—part

answer-getting, part problem-solving—and a transfer-educated tutor could help her understand how to more effectively develop her ideas by probing for more information about how much detail she's used to providing, and how adding more details helps to meet the intellectual demands of the paper and the course.

Research into dispositions that Driscoll and Wells as well as Wardle have conducted would suggest that in writing center contexts, writers, not tutors, are most responsible for transfer. However, by focusing on what individual writers say about the relationship between past and present assignments, tutors can help writers who display "answer-getting" tendencies, or who appear less prone to engage in transfer-related behavior, to adopt more "problem-solving" strategies. In fact, tutors at Institution B saw transfer talk as a way of moving from "directive" sessions ("fixing" the paper) to more nondirective, generative sessions, and the kind of conversation that Andrea Lunsford defines as a "collaborative environment" (74).

Because so many different writers, assignments, and disciplines intersect in them, writing centers are ideally situated to act as hubs for transfer. In our view, an effective writing center session should help a writer think intentionally about how to apply and adapt writing knowledge to new contexts. As a result of conversations about transfer in our tutor education courses, tutors have generated provocative ideas for helping writers negotiate backward and forward transfer, and in so doing, they have helped some writers adopt problem-solving dispositions that facilitate transfer. Moreover, our findings suggest that when instructors and tutors intentionally include transfer talk in their conversations with writers, they help writers make connections among their writing tasks and generate a climate that facilitates transfer.[4] Intentional focus on students' prior knowledge and future applications can create powerful learning connections for the immediate assignment and for the process of facing the next assignment: some of these things ARE like the others.

NOTES

1. Heather N. Hill recently reported that "learning about transfer theory does cause tutors to explicitly engage their students in transfer talk more often" (92).

2. We also drew texts from the Fall 2012 *Composition Forum*, which was devoted to transfer-related research.

3. Interestingly, 81% of international students in our sample appear primed to transfer and answer "always or usually" to the question: "Have you ever thought about 'transferring' knowledge from your session to another paper?"

4. Space constraints prevented us from discussing a four-year longitudinal study that followed 15 writers at Institution B; Hahn presented that research at the

2013 CCCC. This study also contributed to our understanding of how students engage in transfer.

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