

Is Knowledge Repurposed from Tutoring to Teaching? A Qualitative Study of Transfer from the Writing Center

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As I transitioned from writing tutor to writing instructor, I wanted to equip myself to become the best teacher possible. Thus, I actively considered how my pedagogies influenced each other. At that time, I hadn't yet investigated the scholarship on transfer. Discussed by scholars of rhetoric and composition since the 1980s, transfer means the repurposing of knowledge from one context to another (e.g., Herrington; Moore; Taczak; Wardle, "Creative" and "Understanding"). In reviewing the literature on transfer, I found, as others have (e.g., Devet; Wardle, "Creative" and "Understanding"), that transfer is less studied in the writing center than in other areas. Scholars contend, however, that the writing center is a prime site for transfer research (e.g., Devet; Driscoll; Driscoll and Harcourt; Hagemann; Kenzie).

By conducting my own research, I hoped to get a better sense of how other people who both tutor and teach feel about transferring knowledge from the writing center to the classroom. My research question was simple: Do teachers transfer knowledge from their work in writing centers to the teaching of writing in their classrooms? Ultimately, I found that participants self-reported that transfer occurs. This essay adds to the existing research on transfer by examining how teachers' experiences as writing center tutors shape their time in the writing classroom—in both their classroom teaching and office hour visits with students.

METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed methods approach that combines grounded theory and general qualitative analysis methods, I investigated if tutor-instructors self-reported transfer. Grounded theory is a rigorous qualitative research strategy in which the researcher builds theory from the data itself, rather than using a framework for analyzing the data. Thus, the study is 'grounded' in the data (Charmaz 2). Both Kathy Charmaz and Johnny Saldaña explain that grounded theory coding consists of two stages: initial coding and

focused coding. For initial coding, the first step in building grounded theory, researchers generate as many codes as possible using gerunds to capture action (Charmaz 109-113; Saldaña 100). Then, researchers employ focused coding by locating the most important and/or frequent terms from the list of all the initial codes. Researchers lastly re-code the data set using these most salient codes. The most frequent codes reveal participants' experiences.

I designed a 10-question survey asking participants to state their tutoring and teaching backgrounds and training, describe their tutoring and teaching philosophies, and respond to transfer-specific questions. For the transfer-specific questions, I asked participants if they found that writing center pedagogy transfers to their teaching and if they consciously implement writing center methodology in their teaching. With these two questions, I applied grounded theory methods to build analytical categories for analyzing and understanding the self-reported data.

Participant Demographics. Because I desired to find participants who had taught or tutored writing at Kansas State University between 2011 and 2016, I sent emails to past and current staff members, using our email directory when necessary. Some participants had tutored first and then began teaching; this allowed them to reflect on how tutoring transferred to their teaching. Other participants were graduate teaching assistants who taught for a semester and then joined our writing center. Their reflections allowed them to notice changes to their teaching practices after tutoring for a semester. As a note, my study does not draw conclusions based on which role came first. My sample size was 13 participants, and, therefore, the findings are not generalizable to the entire population of tutor-instructors. I did not ask participants for demographic information, such as age, gender, or ethnicity. Instead, I designed the demographic questions to get a sense of experience levels and participants' training. Participants provided the number of years they tutored and taught. In addition, participants selected tutoring and teaching training opportunities from a set list (or they could supply their own answers).

Short-Answer Coding. For my two short-answer questions, I first employed initial coding and garnered 155 codes in total. For my subsequent focused coding, I utilized four analytical categories:

CODE:

Valuing a center methodology: [value held]

Employing center methodology: [method]

Attempting to employ center methodology: [method]

Benefitting from center methodology: [method]

The focused coding was conducted twice. In my first round, I had not separated “attempting to employ center methodology” from “employing center methodology.” Because I noted a specific pattern that emerged, I engaged in an additional round of focused coding. As I coded, I noticed my participants often used hedging language, a form of linguistic politeness that uses hedging modifiers—such as *might* or *could*—to preserve the autonomy of the person spoken to (Brown and Levinson 62). Because hedging is linked to the writing center practice of nondirectiveness and student agency, the appearance of hedging terms affirmed the need to apply the additional round of focused coding.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

In my analysis, I coded short-answer questions about how participants’ tutoring knowledge is repurposed for teaching. To clarify, participants described both the classroom and one-to-one conferences. In line with the existing research of writing center transfer scholars (Hagemann; Driscoll and Harcourt; Kenzie), my findings show that tutors learn invaluable skills that can transfer from the writing center to their teaching. Each of the following findings are relevant for writing center transfer research:

- Participants noted benefits of tutoring in a writing center; these benefits represent self-reported transfer.
- Participants employed specific writing center methodologies and attempted to employ others; this finding calls into question what kind of knowledge is easy to repurpose.
- While all participants believed writing center methodology transferred to their teaching, not all participants believed this transfer to be conscious.

Participants noted self-reported benefits of tutoring in a writing center. Eight (61.5%) participants mentioned benefiting from writing center tutoring. They indicated their writing center tutoring helped them empathize with student writers (4 participants), ask better questions (3 participants), employ nondirective methods (2 participants), provide feedback (2 participants), and communicate (2 participants). Participants were asked to explain if they saw the effect of writing center training on their teaching, and if so, to provide an example. One participant stated: “In the writing center, I learned a lot about asking students questions and letting them come to conclusions themselves.” This response is representative of how participants self-identified what skills transferred from tutoring to teaching.

Participants employed specific writing center methodologies and attempted to employ others. After analyzing how participants used hedging in their responses, I realized participants differed in

actions they *employed* versus actions they *attempted to employ* by using hedging language. The terms “near transfer” and “far transfer” (e.g., Reiff and Bawarshi; Rounsaville) can help explain the emergence of this hedging language. *Near transfer* describes a form of knowledge that is more easily moved from one context to another. An example of near transfer is learning to apply a scientific formula during a class lecture and then using that process on an exam question. In this example, transfer can happen more easily because the contexts are virtually the same. By contrast, *far transfer* describes knowledge that is less easily moved from one context to another. An example of this type of transfer is writing a thesis statement for an English essay and then for a Music History essay. While there are some generalizable principles of thesis writing, applying the knowledge from one genre to another can be more difficult than repeating a process almost exactly. As Susan Hahn and Margaret Stahr contend in this special issue of *WLN*, one way to make this process less difficult is by emphasizing what’s similar about the two types of knowledge. This helps students more easily transfer knowledge.

In total, ten participants (76.9%) noted they had employed a writing center methodology. Of these ten participants, five did not use hedging language to describe employing their pedagogy and five did use hedging language. I found that tutors repeatedly described conferencing (4 participants) and empathy (2 participants) without using hedging language. For instance, one participant stated that they “meet with students one-to-one to talk through parts of their papers...” For these participants, conferencing and empathy emerged as examples of *near transfer*, or skills that more easily transferred between the two contexts. As conferencing with students can simply replicate a writing center tutorial, I am not surprised that participants report this skill transferring. Similarly, writing center tutors take pride in empathizing with student writers from all backgrounds (e.g., Denny; DiPardo; Rafoth). Empathizing with a student, then, could be a skill for tutors to transfer easily to teaching.

By contrast, participants used hedging language when describing the use of talk (3 participants) and questioning (2 participants). For example, another participant used hedging language (‘generally’ and ‘try’) when talking about the use of questions in class discussion: “During class discussions I generally try to ask a lot of questions...” Moreover, the use of talk and questions were both examples of *far transfer* for participants. While talk and asking questions are common writing center practices, these practices

might be less engrained than the actual structure of a tutorial or empathizing with student writers. For instance, the use of questions lands us in the middle of the debate over directive versus nondirective methodologies (e.g., Brooks; Carino; Kavadlo). While this scholarly debate has lasted several decades, tutors may find themselves grappling with the directivity continuum in their teaching practices—and this struggle may have been reflected in the lessened ability of participants to comment on the transfer of talk and questioning from the writing center to the classroom. Another reason may be that, in some cases, the skills are simply more difficult to apply in practice. Many tutors would say that it's easy to empathize with the student they're working with, but it might be more difficult to employ open-ended questions.

Not all participants believed transfer to be conscious. When asked if writing center pedagogy affects their teaching, thirteen participants (100%) responded “yes.” However, when asked if they consciously implement writing center pedagogy into their teaching, the results were mixed: nine participants responded “yes,” one participant responded “no,” and three participants responded “unsure.” One participant expressed that transfer may happen through a natural process: “One supposes that the constant exposure to student writing and papers will naturally filter into improved student feedback as a teacher.” Similarly, another participant directly stated that transfer is not a conscious act: “...as far as how I do my day-to-day lesson planning, I don't enter into that work thinking, ‘For sure, let me implement some minimalist tutoring methods.’” This participant added, “[T]he practice of being a writing center tutor is there in all of my teaching.” I point out this area of analysis because there's a difference between a tutor *knowingly* transferring skills versus a tutor *reflexively* transferring skill. If a tutor knowingly transfers skills, they can actively draw from their tutoring arsenal to maximize their teaching work. However, if a tutor reflexively transfers skills, they may be unaware of the potential to equip themselves with strategies they've learned.

CONCLUSION

Participants in this study did self-report the transfer of tutoring insights to teaching. This finding helps the study contribute to the literature on transfer in the writing center by:

- agreeing with scholars who posit the center as a prime site for transfer research
- isolating specific variables—in this case, types of knowledge repurposing—researchers can investigate further
- understanding that not all knowledge gained in writing center work may easily transfer

- explaining that transfer might not always be conscious.

For directors, this study also has outcomes that affect practice. It is not uncommon for writing center staff to simultaneously serve in tutoring and teaching capacities; encouraging such staff to consider their pedagogical transfer of knowledge may encourage best practices in both the tutorial and classroom. For example, best practices for tutoring may differ from best practices for teaching (teaching includes an evaluative role while tutoring is thought to be non-evaluative). If we provide tutors with opportunities to examine their own practices, strengths, and areas for growth, they can consciously transfer this knowledge to their classroom teaching.

Perhaps most importantly, given that some practices are not consciously transferred, I argue directors can help their staff become more aware that transfer from the writing center to the classroom does occur. Directors can ask their staff to reflect on skills gained as tutors, and how they can apply these skills to new contexts, whether in the classroom or in other forms of employment. Then, their tutors will be able to more consciously transfer knowledge from the writing center to other locations. My anxieties as a first-year teacher made me hyperaware that I was relying on writing center pedagogy. But for others, the link between tutoring and teaching may be less obvious. Directors can make this connection clear and help tutors understand the implications of transfer from the writing center to the writing classroom.



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