

*Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum*

By

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## Introduction

The goal of this thesis project is to develop an anthology for entry-level college writers to master critical thinking, reading, and writing skills while simultaneously encouraging the transfer of knowledge across the curriculum and into the workplace. To achieve this goal, the anthology must be suitable for a diverse population of learners; therefore, the material presented in the anthology will be based on a Universal Design for Learning principles. The anthology is based on the belief that making learning widely accessible creates better student outcomes and ultimately leads to a greater occurrence of transfer. The literature review will address three areas associated with the goals of this thesis project. The first section will review research material focused on the transfer of knowledge. The second section is comprised of material discussing the principles of a Universal Design for Learning, and the third section is dedicated to background material and classroom techniques for teaching composition.

## Literature Review

### Transfer of Knowledge

The importance of first-year composition (FYC) cannot be overstated. In just one or two semesters, FYC instructors are expected to foster the development of academic reading and writing skills that can easily transfer from one writing situation to another, as students advance across the disciplines and the move into the workplace. In “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies,’” Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle posit there is no universal academic discourse; therefore, it is an unattainable goal in a FYC course. The authors suggest there is a common misconception

among teachers of composition that writing instruction easily transfers to varying writing situations. Rather, they believe, writing is contingent on content and context, and it should not be considered either basic or universal. Transfer research inspired Downs and Wardle to develop a Writing about Writing (WAW) FYC writing studies course designed to be a successful precursor to writing across the curriculum classes. WAW course principles are deeply rooted in writing pedagogy and are highly reflective to encourage students to explore their own writing practice. Additionally, WAW incorporates proven methods of transfer, such as abstraction of principles and alertness to content, into the design. This source offers a useful framework for inquiry and context within FYC which are two elements needed to accomplish high road transfer.

Encouraging students to think about writing is only one step in a process needed to develop writing skills that can be refined over a lifetime. Another logical element for teaching the successful transfer of knowledge is to introduce students to the many different ways in which they will be asked to write. Anne Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction* asserts that students must gain expertise in multiple genres and discourse communities if they are to become expert writers. The author points out that each discourse community has its own linguistic and content related features, which can lead to confusion for the student when trying to transfer knowledge; therefore, the FYC student requires guidance on those features when he/she is assigned material across the discipline. Beaufort conducts an extended case study on the transfer of knowledge by interviewing a student who has graduated and entered the workforce. The information collected during the interviews highlights the participants previous learning experience in FYC as it is being transferred to real world situations. For instance, the participant was able to write using new genres such as emails, memos, and operation protocols after considering the recipients as an audience. Additionally, the

participant realized that he must adjust his writing when multiple readers with different backgrounds would be reading the memo or email. In other words, an engineer possesses a different knowledge base than an executive assistant; therefore, the writing must be adjusted for both. Although the participant did not transfer information easily, his errors forced him think about writing, and he was able to apply the skill to new situations.

In *Writing Across the Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Kathleen Yancy, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak studied student outcomes from three different FYC classes with one being designated as a Teaching for Transfer (TFT) course. The remaining two courses were highly individualized pedagogy per the instructors chosen methods of instruction. One of the most pertinent findings in this study was how the role of previous knowledge influenced transfer. It was this data that prompted the authors to develop three models to demonstrate how students respond to new writing tasks. The most successful of the three is called a remix model in which students integrate old and new knowledge; also, there is a critical incident model that occurs when students are able to advance their writing by working through a problem. Finally, the least successful mode of transfer occurs when students graft new information into the old. Another salient finding was students benefitted from a broad vocabulary of writing terms. By the end of the TFT course, students possessed a good understanding of the writing process, and they were asked to develop their own theory of writing. Reflection was a key component to ensure students were incorporating terms in an articulate manner instead of repeating information. Additionally, this source includes an informative overview of more than one hundred years of transfer theory.

## Universal Design for Learning

In order to facilitate writing across the curriculum, it is necessary to incorporate the proven elements of transfer into textbook and course design; however, it is also important to provide flexible material to meet the diverse needs and preferences of learners. The first step in teaching for transfer is ensuring that all learners have equitable access to information. Nearly thirty years ago, neuroscientists working at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) developed an approach focused on providing equitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities. A Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework requires that varied, flexible materials are utilized to offer learners a choice. In *Universal Design for learning: Theory and Practice*, scientists Meyer and Rose place the limitations on the curriculum, not the learner. UDL curriculum stimulates the affective, recognition, and strategic networks in the brain. The approach helps students learn about their needs as well as encourage them to become pro-active about their own learning. This book is an excellent source to reimagine how classrooms and textbooks can be created to meet the varied needs of all students. The groundbreaking studies at CAST remain an important foundation for designing materials and curriculum suitable for all types of learners.

In the early days of UDL, focus was placed on accessibility, but the advances in technology have shifted the UDL framework to access. Thomas Tobin and Kristen Behling expand the idea of UDL in *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone* to include a diverse population of nontraditional students. In other words, UDL should be an approach that can work for a multitude of learners: learners who work for a living; learners who care for others; learners who travel with sports teams; or learners who speak English as a second language. The authors advocate for making materials available to the growing number of students who use mobile

devices for their educational purposes. As an example, a busy mother can listen to lecture slides that have an added voice feature while running errands. While some instructors may feel that adopting a UDL approach is burdensome, Tobin and Behling suggest a “plus – one” approach which adds just one more option to the assigned task. Providing two pathways to assignments, slides, and lectures removes more barriers to learning. This is an excellent source to develop a deeper understanding about the individual variability of learners.

### Teaching Composition

An examination of composition theory and practice is necessary to determine the successful ways in which the transfer of knowledge can be incorporated into pedagogy. Exposing students to a variety of learning options is fundamental for both transfer and UDL. One of the most appealing features of *The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession* by Jim Burke is his deep understanding of embedding options for reaching students in the classroom. The author notes that today's students have great opportunity for choice outside the classroom, and they expect a variety of materials and technology to be available to them. It is variety that engages students; moreover, they benefit from reading from a diverse selection of materials to better prepare them for the real world. Burke coins the term “balanced diet” when selecting reading materials for students. The source also gives attention to various means of class discussion. Burke asserts students must learn to speak with one another if they are to become successful adults.

The recursive nature between reading and writing requires FYC instructors to teach critical reading skills that will transfer to different situations over a lifetime. Yet, without an understanding of the barriers preventing deep reading for students, instructors may not be able to deliver this valuable skill. In *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher offers evidence of the shallow teaching

methods in elementary schools and in high schools that are leaving young readers unprepared for college. The author concludes that these intuitions are preventing students from becoming deep thinkers and becoming book lovers. Gallagher, like Burke, is a proponent of giving students a variety of materials to read; moreover, he suggests that students should have a curriculum of reading that includes newspapers, magazines, blogs, and websites to prepare them for the real world. This book highlights the challenges in teaching critical reading in FYC courses by succinctly analyzing why students have a gap in critical thinking and reading skills. Although Gallagher does not write about the subject of transfer, he does suggest that students need to be prepared for the real world; read the material adults read. This readies young adults to successfully enter into society and not just pass an exam.

Research into composition theory and practice indicates a need to support students while simultaneously challenging them to move forward to learn new skills. This concept is a delicate balance. The textbook *They Say/I Say* achieves this balance with easy to use templates designed to support students, as they learn the writing process. The language and format of the text is simple and straightforward, and it is very inviting to students. The source is a good example of an approachable anthology written for a diverse set of learners. Using a straightforward, accessible approach gives learners more confidence to move forward with new tasks that require risk.

In addition to being strong readers and excellent writers, teachers of composition must be grounded in rhetoric. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* translated by Lane Cooper is a text that is conveniently organized for ease of readability. This source contains challenging material, but Cooper glosses important definitions and concepts in the margins making the material easier to comprehend. This text provides an extensive, yet understandable, background information for

instructors of composition. Cooper's translation can also be useful as a reference tool when clarifying terms, meanings, or ideas.

When students develop an understanding of how rhetoric influences the world, it is important for them to join the conversation. In the article "Discovery Through Questioning: A Plan for Teaching Rhetorical Intervention," Richard Larson constructs a plan to help modern students explore personal experiences to determine when it is important to join the conversation. The author discusses classical invention and reframes the concept to fit the student's "world." Larson asserts that rigorous questioning can affect student perceive experience both in and out of class. The article culminates in a series of questions that can be utilized as a plan for teaching rhetorical invention. The question lists are comparable to the templates found in They Say/I Say. Both are a good example of building a framework to guide FYC through difficult content.

*Teaching the Universe of Discourse* by James Moffett has been a staple for English teachers for many decades. The book is lofty at times while quite practical at other times; this enduring text is an excellent source because of its occasions of practicality. Moffett presents sound theory on group discussion and recommends that all students from kindergarten to college should participate. The author states that students are a natural audience and learn best from each other in discussion. In other words, teachers should guide discussions at the beginning then release the discourse to the students. Moffett also asserts that errors are a valuable tool for learning, and learners should not be penalized. Subsequently, the author recommends that feedback is vital during the drafting process instead of at the end. Perhaps the most salient point of the text is that Moffett encourages instructors to blend their own pedagogy into his theories.

As stated at the beginning of this section, a comprehensive review of composition theory and practice is needed to determine the best way to incorporate methods that encourage the



transfer of writing skills. To ensure the inclusion of varied material, a *Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers* by Richard L. Graves was selected for this review. The collection of essays serves as an open door into the classroom; the tone of the material resonates with personal experience. This is an excellent source for reimagining ways to develop both transfer activities and UDL design due to the practical nature of the essays.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to create an anthology that is accessible to entry-level college students that is appropriate for varied learning preferences or needs; subsequently, increasing the opportunity for the transfer of critical thinking, reading, and writing skills to other writing situations in college and the workplace. Instructors of composition are tasked with preparing students for a lifetime of writing. As stated in the literature review, the transfer of writing skills does not easily occur. No two students learn the same way, so there is no one size fits all solution for achieving transfer. Teaching for transfer is further complicated when students lack access to equitable learning opportunities. Although some learners may have been diagnosed with a learning disability and receive outside assistance, other learners may not understand why they struggle in school. Additionally, more students than ever are considered nontraditional which poses new obstacles to learning in the classroom. Applying a UDL framework supports learning by removing barriers to materials and information. As educators, it is our responsibility to develop a curriculum that aids all students, regardless of ability or situation, to succeed in the classroom as well as prepare them for the real world. Increasing access to flexible learning material will assist educators in teaching for transfer; therefore, UDL should be the first step in planning when teaching for transfer. The current literature supports the

benefits of UDL and the benefits of transfer; however, there is a gap in the discourse regarding the advantages of combining the two distinct pedagogies. The goal of *Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum* is to address this gap literature by incorporating UDL principles to improve the incidence of transfer of knowledge for students in FYC courses. Another goal of this anthology was to introduce students to different discourse communities and the writing genres within those communities to further facilitate transfer.

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