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Elizabeth Busekrus
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A Conversational Approach: Using Writing Center Pedagogy in Commenting for Transfer in the Classroom

Elizabeth Busekrus

Student Writers Studio

While some studies suggest that teachers' written comments help students transfer writing skills across contexts (Wardle, 2007), the literature on feedback's role in the transfer process has yet to be fully explored. Research has indicated that feedback that is intentional, specific, and reflective benefits students' writing growth and the transfer process. To rethink this process of providing feedback, this article discusses how writing center principles can be applied to commenting for transfer in first-year composition and writing-intensive courses. Writing centers offer an individualized, student-centered, conversational approach to learning. Universities have incorporated the writing center into the classroom through writing fellows programs. This article will cover how instructors can more effectively foster transfer, implementing the writing center through goal setting and dialogism in their feedback. One narrative in a writing-intensive research methods course illustrates the benefits of this pedagogy.

Keywords: transfer, writing centers, tutors, feedback, first-year composition

“What [my teacher] comments on isn’t enough to build or better my next paper. It’s more like little things that she talks about.” –Susan

“I wish we could have more time on the papers and with the course to really completely understand some things like the specifics and even something minor like ways to write better to help you down the line.” –Peter

Transfer of learning is becoming a common topic within composition studies. Within the classroom, instructors can (and should) construct an environment that encourages transfer. One factor that plays a role in this process is teacher feedback (Wardle, 2007). The above remarks were made within a five-week English Composition II course, taught by Catherine Lewis,¹ at a Midwestern university.² Commenting on the minimalistic, unspecific nature of Lewis’s feedback, Susan and Peter did not know how to apply their instructor’s comments to future essays. They did not regard feedback as fleshing out the goals from the syllabus or building skills from essay to essay; transfer, to them, was not integral to the classroom. The narrative of Susan and Peter was one of my first instances in investigating the correlation between teacher feedback and transfer. Though transfer failed for them, their story caused me to reflect on how I provide feedback in my interactions with students, both within the classroom and the writing center. Writing centers offer a space for goal setting, presenting a persona of collaboration and encouragement through tutor-to-student conversations. My claim is that the feedback process within the writing center can be applied to the classroom to foster transfer.

Transfer scholars have redefined what transfer is and how to cultivate it within the classroom. Commonly, scholars have defined knowledge transfer as the ability to reason and take information from one situation for use in others (Wardle, 2007). Much of the initial conception of transfer involved learning a list of prescriptive skills. In composition studies, one controversial, often-debated claim is that academic writing is one universal genre (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014, p. 2). While this writing center community generally does not hold this belief, we, as a field, need to consider what skills and processes we want students to acquire from writing (Donahue, 2012). In the writing center, tutors decide what

1 All names in this anecdote have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

2 The institution’s original name has been changed to protect its identity.

to help students develop based on student need, teacher expectations, and their own observations. Individual tutoring sessions can risk being too focused on a writing assignment, but there is the possibility of transfer by attending to the writer and his or her skills. Since the mantra of “better student writers, not better writing” (North, 1984, p. 438) resonates throughout the center, transfer finds itself here.

Once practitioners decide what skills to transfer, the *how* must receive attention. Perkins and Salomon (1988) mentioned techniques for low-road transfer (across similar situations) and high-road transfer (across dissimilar situations). Hugging requires instructors to point out connections between the classroom material and the real world, and bridging involves a process of generalization, whereby strategies are taught that apply across many subjects. This transfer process has been depicted as elusive and random in its patterns (Donahue, 2012), especially since writing requires such situational metacognition. Studies have continued to critique, reframe, and rename transfer to determine how it works in first-year composition (FYC) and other writing-intensive contexts. Recent theories include boundary crossing (Beach, 2003), threshold concepts, and activity-based systems (Wardle, 2007). Each theory points to a different conception of transfer. In boundary crossing theory, Beach (2003) renamed transfer a process of generalization; he stated how transitions refer to the generalization or circulation of knowledge throughout socio-cultural circumstances. Because of this process, learners become metacognitive about personal and social identity. Brent (2012) also reframed transfer to center on transformative learning. Teachers can transform students’ learning through a holistic writing curriculum. Similarly, tutors can scaffold this transfer process. According to Hughes, Nowacek, and Hall (2016), transfer occurs on a spectrum: (1) monologuing (only tutor talk), (2) asking questions, and/or (3) forming a co-constructed dialogue. The further along this continuum the tutor and student venture, the more transfer increases. For these latter two behaviors, tutors listen to what students say about themselves and their writing processes. Tutors then help students connect processes and implement knowledge across contexts, much like a teacher does within written feedback.

In considering how transfer and feedback correlate, I decided to modify a recent definition of transfer. Anson and Moore (2016) provided a new

take on transfer as “the phenomenon in which new and unfamiliar writing tasks are approached through the application, remixing, or integration of previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions.” Transfer requires reflecting on prior knowledge and processes to connect with new material. Since I am investigating teacher feedback’s correlation with transfer, for this article, I revised Anson and Moore’s (2016) definition to involve “the application, remixing, or integration” of teacher feedback from one writing context to another.

Encouraging transfer within feedback involves clear expectations and the positive, constructive framing of comments. Transfer must be intentional and reflective. Bergmann and Zepernick (2007) noticed students did not transfer skills from FYC to writing in their majors because they saw each writing situation as distinct. Susan and Peter, the students from Mr. Lewis’s class, also perceived each essay as separate from one another. Regarding their instructor’s feedback, they commented on the lack of specificity, implying that the learning goals were not clarified as she provided feedback. According to Peter, her expectations were unclear or “vague.” Susan reiterated, “I wouldn’t know what she wanted so I would just write the same way I had been writing.” To increase transfer, students must be taught mindfulness regarding rhetorical differences and the process of modifying writing behaviors to account for these differences (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007). Metacognition is a central strategy for fostering writing transfer (Anson & Moore, 2016); in this cognitive process, students learn how to restructure, connect, and generalize learning (Macaulay, 2000). Another significant factor in the transfer process involved the tone of feedback. Students value feedback that is constructively critical and engages with their argument (Sommers, 2006). Regarding her sixth essay, Susan said, “I got a perfect score and no comments. But not very helpful.” Those with no comments or only praise comments are not “engaged in a dialogue that challenges their own thinking” (Sommers, 2006, p. 251). With no comments or minimalistic ones such as “good intro,” Susan considered the feedback unhelpful for future essays. Susan and Peter show one perspective of transfer in the classroom.

While this anecdote is not a representation of all classrooms, it caused me to rethink how feedback impacts the transfer process in the classroom

and in the writing center. To determine how feedback affects writing growth, research must be more holistic, focusing on the students' role in this process (Anson, 2012). While teacher and tutor feedback differ in their structures (written versus verbal) and their hierarchy (student/teacher versus student/tutor), drawing on the conversational nature of writing center pedagogy benefits commenting for transfer in the classroom.

Writing Center Pedagogy and Its Transferability to Teacher Feedback

Though the writing center has a different framework, it provides useful principles that translate to the classroom. Moore (2012) called for this collaboration between disciplines, thus filling in the gaps that are apparent in the transfer field. Responding to that call, I paired transferable elements in the writing center with teacher feedback. In the writing center, feedback is given via one-on-one interactions that address specific writer concerns. Though the student may focus on the writing, the tutor builds the writer with encouragement and collaboration on ideas, writing process, and discourse. The tutor can “suggest writing strategies, diagnose writing problems, ask questions, review misunderstood or missing information, listen to writers, and help them gain a perspective on their writing” (Harris, 2006). This model demonstrates how writing centers operate. Writing center feedback includes principles central to commenting for transfer: intentionality and specificity through goal setting and metacognition through a conversational dynamic.

Goal Setting Increases Student Understanding and Reflection

While the tutoring session can fall into the trap of becoming hyper-focused on one essay, the constricted timeframe also incites more reflection on the student's writing process. In my university's Writing Lab, we layer this process, setting the agenda in the first few minutes and finishing the session with a discussion of goals. These first few minutes call attention to these key questions:

1. Student Perspective: What does the student view as a weakness or weaknesses?
2. Student Goals: Where does the student want to be in his or her writing?

3. Tutor Perspective: What does the tutor view as an area of improvement for the student in this class and for university writing?
4. Instructor Perspective: What are the instructor's expectations for this class and this assignment?
5. Writing Process: What is the process the student used (or is using) to obtain this work of writing?

These questions situate the student's mindset, writing capabilities, and goals and give direction to the tutoring session.

One writer who frequented the Writing Lab needed help with transitioning ideas from his argumentative speech to a problem-solution essay. In his speech, he argued that social media perpetuated racial stereotypes. Framing this issue, he used video examples that depicted the Black Lives Matter movement. During our initial tutoring appointment, he showed me the speech manuscript in which he used pathos and logical evidence to create his argument. To discuss purpose, we looked at the variances between thesis statements in the two writing assignments (see Figure 1 for Writing Action Plan). This action plan assisted him in understanding thesis statements within different contexts, encouraging him to apply his knowledge of constructing a thesis statement to his problem-solution essay. Forming this plan with the student allowed for the goals to be made transparent.

For writing centers, this process involves an organic conversation about what skills and habits of mind need development. In "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," habits of mind are defined as "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students' success in a variety of fields and disciplines" (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National Writing Project, 2011, p. 1). Johnson (2013) connected the habits of mind with writing transfer, arguing that transfer signifies more than acquiring a skillset to use in different writing situations. Beaufort (2007) and Nowacek (2011) agreed that these habits encourage transfer. They engage students, allow for flexibility in their writing growth, and connect with metacognitive behaviors. Since tutors help students to engage in the process of learning as well as develop as

writers, the habits of mind are a cohesive part of writing center dialogue. Connecting goals with habits of mind increases the likelihood for transfer to other writing contexts.

Applying this student-centered, goal-setting approach to the classroom requires intentionality and scaffolding in the commenting process. Wardle (2012) remarked that the process of transfer, or “creative repurposing for expansive learning,” occurred within the problem-exploring framework, which “[inclines] a person toward curiosity, reflection, consideration of multiple possibilities, a willingness to engage in a recursive process of trial and error, and toward a recognition that more than one solution can ‘work.’” Encouraging this disposition requires an approach to learning that seeks to understand general concepts. Wardle gave the example of Iowa State University’s computer science program, whose objectives require students to learn how to problem solve rather than how to use specific programming languages. These skills allow students more flexibility in transferring knowledge across computer languages.

In a writing-intensive classroom, the instructor and students should create writing goals as a class, discussing the applicability of each goal across writing contexts within the class and elsewhere. After the first essay, the instructor and each student then collaborate on the student’s personal goals. For example, they may determine an area of struggle to be thesis statements, as seen in Figure 1. Other goals may include, but are not limited to, brainstorming strategies, outlining, critical thinking development, argumentation, evidence integration, and style and formatting. These goals become discussion points within the students’ essays and an effective method of marking progress. Sommers (2006, p. 254) argued that students found the most beneficial comments as those that “straddle the present world of the paper at hand with a glance to the next paper.” Goal setting provides this transferable element through inquiry and connectivity. Feedback that intentionally mentions classroom and personal student goals can be used as the foundation for creating action plans in class or in teacher-student conferences, leading to a more scaffolded approach.

Creating Dialogue: Framing the Persona to Further Metacognition

Embodying a certain persona also affects how and if transfer occurs. Writing centers position the tutor as a reader rather than a judge of the

student's work, balancing listening to and directing the student. Giving negative undertones prevents students from engaging with their writing, which discourages transfer. The dialogic model

1. addresses specific praises in students' writing strengths and motions ways to build on those strengths;
2. allows the student to talk, inquiring about their ideas and giving validity to them;
3. connects purpose, audience, context, and genre into the conversation; and
4. shows how a skill may fit into the larger context of learning and future applications of the skill.

In the Writing Lab, one example of this approach centered on a psychology major needing assistance on a book review. I provided this student with an opportunity to talk through her ideas, praising any strong critiques she had. In our session, we discussed similarities between this assignment and the summary-critique essay from the FYC classroom. Connecting these two genres caused the student to better understand the book review genre and reference skills that she could apply to other essays. Within these tutoring sessions, I created a persona that emphasized the conversational element to give voice to the students' perspective and help students see connections between prior writing experiences.

Integrating these tools into classroom feedback takes on many forms. One model, called Comparative Genre Analysis (CGA), draws on familiar genres and compares the similarities and differences between them and unfamiliar genres (in topoi, argument tactics, citations, etc.) to form conclusions about both genre groups (Wolfe, Olson, & Wilder, 2014). Nowacek (2011) argued for instructors to guide students in reflecting on prior genre knowledge when writing in unfamiliar genres. The key is to help students reflect on their genre knowledge and personal experiences to connect to new knowledge and new genres. This approach creates more metacognition, one of the habits of mind significant for transfer (e.g., Johnson, 2013; Anson & Moore, 2016). Within the classroom, the instructor could use the "read, analyze, and practice" approach. First, the students read sample essays of a new genre; then, they analyze the organization, rhetoric, content, and stylistics of this typology, comparing

this essay with others they have written in the past. For the last step, students practice writing in that genre, receiving feedback on their writing. To facilitate transfer within teacher feedback, this process can be replicated on a smaller scale with the instructor directly pointing out or asking about similarities and differences between genres or writing assignments.

Another significant tool to instill a conversational lens in feedback is the art of thoughtful questions. Kjesrud (2015) discussed the Lore within the writing center field of directive and nondirective questions. Moving beyond this binary, she placed more attention on the students' reactions to the tutors' questions. Questions can be framed in numerous ways, including (but not limited to) noninterrogative (Give me more information about the author's point.), leading (Isn't this approach too simple?), tags (The author does not give facts to support it, does she?), and open-ended (How does the author further this discussion throughout the book?; Kjesrud, 2015). A thoughtful question emphasizes what the student has said in previous essays, what the student's ideas are in the current essay, and how these thoughts connect to future contexts.

Implementation of Writing Center Pedagogy in the Classroom

When transfer is a focus in the classroom, a greater wealth of learning takes place across the curriculum. Within one FYC program, the curriculum was revised to include more "genuine inquiry and research" and "rhetorical instruction." At this university, the goals of the English 102 course were "emphasizing the investigation of a subject from multiple perspectives, methods, and methodologies" and looking at the topic with a metacognitive lens that went outside of the classroom (Fishman & Reiff, 2008). These changes encourage students to see writing situations as interconnected. Writing center pedagogy parallels with Fishman and Reiff's (2008) inquiring, reflective approach.

Many instructors have tangibly brought the writing center into the classroom through writing fellows programs. Such programs are integrated into writing-intensive classes, where a strong student writer (writing fellow) comes into the classroom to individually coach students with their writing and incite collaboration (Hughes & Hall, 2008). Dvorak, Bruce, and Lutkewitte (2012) investigated the effectiveness of a writing fellows

program. Students felt that this program benefited learning the course material, and their writings were stronger due to working with a writing fellow. Instructors also noticed the benefits on student learning in collaborating among the three parties: student, writing fellow, and faculty member. Fellows help faculty members understand students' perspectives and students understand the writing process within their discipline. This process occurs through fellows inquiring and collaborating with instructors and discussing the field's discourse with students, creating transparency and communication for both parties (Mullin et al., 2008). These mentors mimic the process of integrating into a discourse community. Mullin et al. argued that transfer can happen only when "the inner dialogue actively contends with authoritative discourse, and unless that discourse is visible, integration into a discipline will continue to be an arduous process for students and a frustrating one for the faculty who teach them" (2008, "Theories into Practice," para. 1). Writing center pedagogy accentuates this dialogue.

Writing fellows programs are not feasible for some universities though, so the question remains, how can instructors use this pedagogy in their feedback? Over the course of four semesters, I taught a writing-intensive course, Research Methods in the Social and Behavioral Sciences, where I implemented the goal-setting and dialogic techniques of the writing center. The capstone project in this course involved students designing a research study and finding literature to support this structure. Sections of the project were due throughout the semester, but students revised each section until the final project's due date. As students completed the drafts, I offered formal written feedback. The guiding question became, "How will your research study impact your field and society?" Questions of this nature changed students' frame of mind toward big-picture ideals; goals became to understand the value of research on this scale and to learn research skills that apply in different writing situations, such as surveying and interviewing, data analysis, and literature review research. Within their literature review and methodology drafts, I asked questions about how the students' study functioned, what their perspective brought to the discussion of this topic, and how this genre operated within their field.

For a student who wrote about the ill effects of cocaine, framing written comments meant

1. asking questions regarding the various perspectives about these drugs, such as “Besides the negative mental effects of cocaine, what do other scholars mention about cocaine’s effects? How do they present their perspectives?” and
2. connecting student’s drug knowledge with various syntax and rhetorical structures, such as stating “You demonstrate information about the medical effects of cocaine, presenting sentences with many ‘to be’ verbs. Practice using different sentence structures to present the medical effects, such as action verbs or metaphors.”

At the start of the semester, the class did several activities where they identified, in writing, their purpose in this study and their goals in what they wanted to gain through the composition of a research proposal. Feedback also encouraged students to reflect on previous knowledge and previous sections of their research proposal, allowing them to transfer what they knew to better understand what they did not know. I did not comment heavily on grammar, except in the context of style—helping students recognize certain stylistic features of the research proposal genre.

Students responded positively to this process, understanding disciplinary writing more because of this style of feedback. One student designed a research study to evaluate a juvenile delinquency detention center. She was having difficulty conceptualizing this process since there were many dynamics at play within this center. In my feedback, I encouraged her to narrow the study to one dimension of this detention center. After she decided to assess the educational classes juveniles take at the center, I asked questions to cause her to think about tangible, realistic ways she could determine the effectiveness of education there. Though the capstone involved designing, not conducting, the study, she treated this project as an authentic context, where she could learn more about the inner workings of a detention center and gain practical research strategies to use in her career. She recognized the reality of and significance of forming a research proposal. Because of this feedback framework, many of the other students within the course felt challenged in their ability to understand the genre and the field through writing, therefore immersing themselves more in their writing development.

Concluding Statement

The thesis of this article is that teacher feedback must be intentional and dialogic to be transferable—meaning the social context must be taken into consideration. Writing center pedagogy places a conversational angle to writing, benefiting instructors in seeing the whole picture of the learning process. Contextual, specific, and reflective feedback can help students in transferring writing skills across multiple contexts. Hughes et al. (2016) encouraged this talk to “connect writing-related knowledge, attitudes and identities previously associated with an earlier context to a new context.” Teacher feedback is no longer a boxed-in categorization system. Providing connections that students can relate to and respond to means individualizing feedback to where the student is and who the student is. Feedback is as much metacognition for the instructor as it is for the student. The instructor’s pedagogy offers the framework, but transfer requires the student’s voice to be a part of the feedback process.

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Student: Joe Smith			
Training Intervention: Thesis Statement Development			
Date: November 28, 2016			
My Support Team			
Writing Coach:		Student:	
Specific Areas to Improve: Improve the ability to form an appropriate thesis statement. (Think about distinct accomplishments and activities to be achieved.)			
Problems to Overcome: Understanding how thesis statements fit into different contexts. (Describe the barriers that must be eliminated or reduced and how this will be done.)			
Detailed Specific Actions in Sequence (Include regular progress reviews with the support team as a part of the specific actions.)	Resources	Date/Time*	Changes to Look For
Step 1. Read sample essays and identify the thesis statement	Sample essays (student and real-world essays from varying disciplines)	December 1, 2 p.m.	Identification of thesis statements
Step 2. Review thesis construction based on thesis statement handout; create sample thesis statements with student	Thesis statement handout	December 3, 2 p.m.	Understanding of handout

Step 3. Rearrange previous thesis statements from old essays	Previous essays	December 2, 2 p.m.	Structure of thesis statements and their application in different contexts
Step 4. Participate in action plan review; revise and/or update plan depending on progress to date	Action plan	December 17, 2 p.m.	Understanding of thesis statement construction for current essays
Step 5. Create a strong thesis statement that correlates with current essay	Current Essay	December 20, 2 p.m.	Ensure proficiency matches standard
Commitment of Support Team: I support the plan described above and will complete the actions assigned to me. If unable to complete an activity, I will modify the plan accordingly.			
Signature of Learner:		Date:	
Signature of Writing Coach:			

Figure 1. Writing action plan. Action plan courtesy of MBU Writing Coach Jeannie Buchanan.

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