# Metaphors for Writing Transfer in the Writing Lives and Teaching Practices of Faculty in the Disciplines

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## Abstract

*Writing transfer scholarship has established a consensus about the metaphors used to describe writing transfer: simpler concepts like "application" suggest movement, but do not reflect the cognitive work transfer requires for writers. Adaptive concepts such as "transformation" or "recontextualization" are more accurate. But has this consensus been operationalized in writing programs, particularly in WAC and WID? How do writing instructors in the disciplines define transfer? We offer answers based on fifteen instructor interviews from our longitudinal study of transfer at Western Illinois University, a state comprehensive university. We find that while many instructors recognized that transfer is complex and adaptive when considering their own intellectual growth, most used simpler metaphors and approaches when teaching writing. Few instructors in our study encouraged their students to see transfer as complex and adaptive. Instead, most used a simple model, and many ignored or forbade engagement with prior knowledge entirely. We describe the metaphors our participants used to approach transfer in teaching, compare these instructors' professional development with their classroom work, and conclude with implications for instruction and program design.*

## Introduction

**Neil Baird:** Do you talk about how the writing abilities you're teaching might help them out in the future?

**Darrell Helf:**[1] I don't. I figured that was obvious. *(Laughs.)*

**Bradley Dilger:** Do you think your course is really positioned to give them that knowledge? Do you think other faculty really rely on what students learn in your course in terms of writing?



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**Darrell Helf:** Not so much. Because for one thing, this is a 400-level course, and students tend to take it in their junior and senior years. There's not a lot following it.

In "Mapping the Questions," Jessie Moore notes that writing transfer research has focused on eight critical transitions, many of which concern the vertical transfer of student writing knowledge, such as Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick's research on student perceptions of writing instruction, or Gerald Nelms and Ronda Dively's study of barriers that discourage students from enacting transfer when learning to write in the major. In this article, we consider the critical transitions of faculty across the curriculum: how do they become writing instructors? How do they understand writing transfer and operationalize it in their teaching? This is crucial for all kinds of WPA work, including in FYW, writing centers, WID/WAC, and other contexts where faculty teach writing, often with little formal training in writing instruction.

Our instructor data comes from a three-year, interview-driven longitudinal study of writing transfer sited at Western Illinois University, a regional state comprehensive university. Between fall 2011 and spring 2014, we interviewed sixteen student participants and the fifteen instructors who taught their Writing Instruction in the Disciplines (WID) courses, seeking to complement transfer research revolving around first-year writing by focusing on writing in the major. Since WID courses are often positioned as gateway courses at Western, our goal for interviewing instructors was to learn about the writing contexts of our student-participants. As we discussed curricula, classroom practices, and writing transfer, most faculty members highlighted formative experiences as undergraduate and graduate student writers, what Susan Jarratt et al. term "pedagogical memory" (49–50). And, most importantly, many of these instructors tried to duplicate these experiences in their writing classrooms, with varying degrees of success. For example, describing how she learned to write as a psychologist, Ashlee Westgate told us, "I had a great experience as an undergraduate—one I wish I could give my students." However, Westgate and others like her often felt constrained by curricular elements and cultural forces in their departments, leading to classroom practices that failed to support transfer.

Of the fifteen faculty members we interviewed, ten observed that they had learned that writing transfer was a complex process, no simple matter of moving from one context to a second venue. That is, the process of transfer was *adaptive*, as Michael-John DePalma and Mark Ringer call it: faculty learned to actively repurpose or transform writing-related knowledge, skills, and experiences to mobilize them in both the academic and


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extracurricular contexts of their writing lives. However, only three of fifteen faculty taught in a manner that recognized or encouraged adaptive models of transfer. More problematically, many instructors began courses with no references to transfer at all, or only spoke of it negatively, meaning that students' prior knowledge was either not valued or explicitly excluded from classrooms. Some of these faculty came to speak about transfer as their courses progressed—but few changed their approaches radically, and as a consequence, most students were exposed only to simple concepts of transfer, if they encountered any at all.[2]

The core research question guiding our study is, "What are the classroom practices, curricular elements, habits of mind, and cultural forces that influence transfer for students writing in the major?" In this article, we approach this question through the fifteen interviews we conducted with WID instructors, focusing on the metaphors they used to describe and define transfer. Our research joins studies of teacher talk and faculty in the disciplines, most notably Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines,* adding depth to our understanding of instructor perceptions about transfer, especially those outside of writing studies or composition. Research has shown the importance of transfer for writing instruction, illuminating important questions about the interplay between individual and contextual influences on transfer to the transfer strategies of specific demographic groups. Given this diversity of scholarship, we review only the most relevant work below. For a more complete review, we suggest Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's *Writing Across Contexts*, Moore's previously mentioned review essay in the fall 2012 special issue of *Composition Forum,* and Rebecca Nowacek's *Agents of Integration,* which advances "recontextualization" as a model for adaptive transfer.

## The Metaphors of Writing Transfer

Doug Brent's 2012 study of six students in work-to-learn settings first drew our attention to the metaphors used to conceptualize transfer. Students often ask, "What will I get out of this class?" Teachers sometimes describe "takeaways" or "deliverables." A metaphor of movement underlies these comments, suggesting that transfer is the act of moving, wholesale and unchanged, what we learn in one context to another. In this model, the cognitive workload required to enact transfer is low. But as Brent shows, transfer scholars across many fields, including writing studies, have questioned this simple conceptualization, suggesting a more dynamic model such as *transformation* rather than *transfer.* "I can't stress enough," Brent



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writes, "what difference a change of one word makes in the sense of what is happening here" (565). Like other scholars we mention above, we agree. Given the rhetorical function of metaphor, the metaphors we choose to talk about transfer have important implications for curriculum design, classroom practices, and assessment. If, as DePalma and Ringer suggest, transfer is normally adaptive, and thus requires reshaping knowledge, not moving it, the scenes of transfer are dynamic, not static—meaning effective teaching for transfer requires intensive pedagogical attention, as well as metaphors that reflect adaptation, and reject simplicity

Research employs many metaphors to conceptualize transfer. We have chronicled over twenty different transfer metaphors in writing scholarship alone, including "application" and "recontextualization" (Nowacek), "generalization" (Beach), "boundary crossing" (Reiff and Bawarshi), "repurposing" (Roozen), and "reengineering" (Brent). As we explain in our discussion of methods, despite this abundance of metaphors, we believe six are sufficient to describe the variety of transfer concepts our faculty participants use when they describe their own experiences learning to write and when they discuss the teaching of writing. In DePalma and Ringer's terms, faculty used three simple and three adaptive metaphors for transfer, as shown in table 1.

In simple metaphors, movement is a common characteristic, and concepts of writing remain largely unchanged as a result. We use "no transfer" to recognize instances when no movement of prior knowledge is encouraged. Two metaphors from the scholarship highlighted above—"application" and "assemblage"—describe subtle distinctions between conceptions of transfer associated with movement. Application suggests moving a concept of writing between contexts wholesale and unchanged; in assemblage, some new knowledge is integrated into prior concepts of writing, but contextual frameworks are relatively unchanged. In contrast, with adaptive metaphors, concepts of writing undergo significant transformation. We use "negative transfer" to recognize when prior writing knowledge is not valued, requiring writers to transform or abandon their knowledge. Both "remix" and "recontextualization" suggest the adaptation of prior concepts of writing. However, recontextualization suggests this adaptation is the result of careful consideration of context, whereas remix does not.



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Table 1
Metaphors for Transfer

| Metaphor Type | Metaphor | Definition/Demonstrates |
|---|---|---|
| Simple | No Transfer | Prior concepts of writing are ignored or have minimal value. |
| | Application | Concepts of writing are moved wholesale and unchanged from one context to another. (Nowacek 25) |
| | Assemblage | Small amounts of new knowledge are added, perhaps inelegantly, onto prior concepts of writing. Because context is not carefully considered, concepts of writing are only slightly modified. (Yancey et al. 112–16) |
| Adaptive | Negative | Prior concepts of writing are not valued. Students are encouraged to abandon that knowledge. (Nowacek 37–38) |
| | Remix | Prior concepts of writing are significantly revised to incorporate new knowledge, though explicit consideration of contexts may be limited. (Yancey et al. 116–20) |
| | Recontextualization | Careful consideration of contexts requires significant adaptation of prior concepts of writing. (Nowacek 18–34) |

## Methods

At our institution, which enrolled 11,700 students in 2013, students take first- and second-year composition, then satisfy a Writing Instruction in the Disciplines (WID) requirement. Usually this requirement is a single, three-credit, writing-intensive course, but some programs require more courses, or distribute the requirement over several courses. Courses that receive WID designations are designed to introduce students to expectations for writing within their disciplines, providing opportunities to practice the genres valued in these communities. But commitments to WID vary widely, not only between departments, but also among individual


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instructors. Challenges to sustaining a culture of writing also arise from the large number of students (about 25%) who transfer to Western after completing associates degrees at community colleges, meaning common experiences are infrequent not only across the upper division but in composition as well. Given this diversity, we conducted multiple interviews with student participants over one- to three-year periods, developing complex, detailed insights into their writing lives in and out of school, including the multiple contexts in which they wrote.

For this article, we focus on the fifteen semi-structured interviews we conducted with the faculty who taught our student participants' WID courses. (See appendix A for a table of faculty participants.) We asked faculty about their own experiences learning to write, their approaches to teaching writing, and their understandings of transfer. We irregularly used the term "metaphor" when discussing transfer with participants, given that much of the scholarship we highlight above was not published until after our study began. Our questions, however, engaged transfer directly, allowing us to extract and classify the metaphors at work for each participant. (See appendix B for our interview questions.) Interviews were transcribed and the classroom practices, curricular structures, habits of mind, and cultural forces that influenced transfer were highlighted for each participant—for example, what genres were assigned? Was writing imagined as general or disciplinary? We were then able to establish and compare the metaphors faculty used to define and describe transfer in their own experiences learning to write in their disciplines, and the metaphors they used to define and describe transfer in their WID courses. These metaphors often changed, if only a modest amount, so we recorded those used at both the beginning and the end of each course. Triangulation with student interviews helped us confirm the accuracy of our analysis.

As noted above, we observed considerable repetition in the metaphors of transfer faculty used, so we reduced the number to six codes derived from writing transfer research: no transfer, application, assemblage, negative transfer, remix, and recontextualization. Again, faculty rarely used these terms in interviews; we are applying them through iterative coding. In a follow-up study we are now conducting, we are returning to our participants to explicitly consider the question of metaphor using the terms we've repeated here from scholarship, as well as the changes in transfer metaphors we often observed during the course of a given semester.



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## Results

In this section, we describe the metaphors faculty used to explain their own development as writers, then compare those to the transfer metaphors they used in teaching, noting how and if faculty changed their approaches as courses progressed. A sampling of experiences from across our participant pool demonstrates the reasons faculty provided for their pedagogical choices.

### *How Faculty Conceptualize Transfer in Their Own Writing Lives*

Ten out of our fifteen faculty participants used adaptive metaphors when describing how they learned to write in their disciplines, as shown in table 2. No faculty characterized their development negatively or indicated transfer was not involved.

Table 2
Metaphors for Transfer That Faculty Used to Describe Their Own Development as Writers

| Simple Transfer | | Adaptive Transfer | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Application* | *Assemblage* | *Remix* | *Recontextualization* |
| Carnahan | Myers | Fite | Edge |
| Fitch | | Helf | Kato |
| Hershey | | Larios | Kwan |
| Wunderlich | | | Messer |
| | | | Orrick |
| | | | Westgate |
| | | | Wingfield |

Four of the faculty members we interviewed discussed their prior writing experiences in terms of application. Gerald Carnahan earned his undergraduate degree in business management, but his first job changed his trajectory. Upon writing an employee manual and designing part of a learning module as a member of a collaborative team, Carnahan "fell in love" with instructional design and pursued advanced degrees in this area. Comparing the academic work he performed as a professor with his professional consulting work, Carnahan noted, "in our field the content varies, but the procedures are pretty much generic. They really cross over to academia or the corporate world . . . though [in industry] you don't have as much time and flexibility." Carnahan's "generic" notion of "cross over," which prioritizes


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content over flexibility, suggests minimal concern with context: transfer as application. Regina Fitch, discussing how she learned to write as a communication scholar, highlighted the role her advisor played: "My advisor would very closely rewrite stuff that I wrote. I'd write a draft, and he would go through and very closely, on a sentence-by-sentence basis, cross things out and rewrite them. I would look at that a little bit and try to figure out what he was doing." But rather than learn why this rewriting occurred, Fitch applied the same process to later work, inviting colleagues to heavily edit her writing. We view this engagement of the same strategy in a different place and time as application.

Diana Myers's prior writing knowledge changed, but only slightly, meaning her transfer strategies are simple, not adaptive. Myers was a double major in journalism and another humanistic field, and her first job required her to write for the "Life and Style" section of a newspaper. However, "within three months, I realized I didn't want to be a journalist," she noted, given her difficulty reconciling her writing values with those of journalism:

> My articles always got cut. They were always too long. They wanted only ten inches, twelve inches, fifteen inches, and I'm turning in 1,000 word pieces. "Oh, but this person's story is so interesting," I'd say. "I need more space for this article, c'mon!" And, they said "no," so I realized my human interest extended more than would be in a newspaper.

Rather than adapt her writing knowledge, Myers left journalism for anthropology, a discipline she believed would allow her to study people and communities through the narrative writing she valued. Explaining her narrative style, Myers said, "I'm always interested in story, but I'm interested in the story behind the story." Myers's approach to transfer, then, is assemblage: grafting discipline-specific ways of writing in anthropology onto the knowledge of narrative writing she valued from her prior experience. As we note below, many writing habits from journalism persisted in her teaching, despite her stated desire to leave that field behind.

Ten faculty participants described learning experiences that forced them to radically transform prior knowledge. Three of these faculty adapted prior knowledge, but offered little evidence they carefully considered writing contexts: transfer as remix. For example, like Fitch, Darryl Helf credited his advisor in learning to write as a zoologist. Helf suggested his experience wasn't universal, noting some advisors would "send you away, write some comments, and send you away again." In contrast, Helf and his advisor wrote side by side:


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> He'd have me write to start and then we would go over things together. We'd spend hours together at the computer talking. He'd say stuff like, "This doesn't accomplish quite what we need it to," and then we'd both think about what we could say instead. It was real collaboration in that sense."

Through this process, Helf revised his prior knowledge of writing, learning that writing in a "scientific way was learning to think about things in a logical way but also in an optimistic way." Thanks to his advisor's guidance, these values superseded his prior knowledge (the cut and dry world of scientific textbooks).

Greg Larios described a different approach to remix. He started out as a journalist before pursuing advanced coursework in political science, but struggled in transition: "When you are learning to write a news story for a newspaper, you learn a very specific structure, which details to include, and what order to put them in. After a long time, when I started to write, I had trouble including the amount of detail that I needed to include, or creating the amount of depth that I needed to create." As a result of these struggles, Larios revised his prior writing knowledge as he learned the discipline of political science, though not because of careful attention to context, but because of his belief in his "intellectual development more generally." For Larios, writing for political science was similar to the academic writing he had engaged as an undergraduate. So he could remix academic moves he saw as universal, such as the appropriate balance of external sources and writers' arguments with disciplinary features such as "applying abstract ideas to real world events."

Seven out of ten faculty participants described transfer as recontextualization: significantly adapting prior knowledge and painstakingly considering writing contexts. For example, after receiving his PhD in political science, Phillip Kato spent ten years as a police officer in a large city before becoming an academic. Doctoral work helped him learn to write arguments, but not effective police reports, so Kato adapted his knowledge of argumentation to the narratives of police reports by evaluating contexts. Discussing how his first police report was used in court, Kato told us, "From that point on, anytime I wrote a report, I thought about it from a defense attorney's perspective." Kato noted that different types of crimes required different types of writing, and he was able to describe these varying contexts in detail, providing examples of specific changes he would make to meet the legal contexts of, for example, domestic violence, or drug-related crimes. Just as Kato's job required that he adapt his writing to different contexts, psychologist Ashlee Westgate's research agenda invited publication in very different journals. As a result, she became conscious of


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the ways these disciplinary contexts influenced writing, which required significant adaptation: "I have to do it on a case by case basis. I can't do it on a general approach either. They are both my audiences. I want both groups to see my research." Like Kato, she was able to describe "looking at the journals" and considering how the specifics of writing—in her case "the balance of theory versus pragmatic stuff"—were shaped by the different "schools of thought" of the two audiences she targeted.

*How Faculty Conceptualize Transfer in Their Writing Courses*

Almost all faculty participants reported building writing pedagogies around their prior writing experiences, regardless of their own concepts of transfer, simple or adaptive. However, when faculty discussed writing transfer in their courses, simple metaphors were most often used. Our coding revealed that nine out of fifteen did not consider writing transfer, or used simple metaphors, at the start of their courses. Table 3 presents a comparison of metaphors of transfer for faculty's own learning and their teaching, sorted by ascending complexity of metaphor. Because teaching methods frequently changed over time, metaphors are noted for the beginning and ending of courses, and we indicate if changes were deliberately planned to facilitate transfer.

Table 3
Comparison of Metaphors of Transfer for Faculty's Own Learning and Their Teaching

| Faculty Name | Transfer in Their Own Writing | Student Transfer | | Change in Transfer Metaphor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Beginning of Course | End of Course | |
| Hershey | Application | No Transfer | Application | Deliberate |
| Wunderlich | Application | No Transfer | Application | Unplanned |
| Fitch | Application | Application | Application | n/a |
| Carnahan | Application | Application | Assemblage | Deliberate |
| Myers | Assemblage | Negative Transfer | Assemblage | Unplanned |
| Fite | Remix | Application | Application | n/a |
| Helf | Remix | No Transfer | Assemblage | Deliberate |
| Larios | Remix | Negative Transfer | Negative Transfer | n/a |
| Orrick | Recontextualization | No Transfer | Application | Deliberate |
| Edge | Recontextualization | Negative Transfer | Application | Deliberate |
| Kato | Recontextualization | Negative Transfer | Application | Unplanned |
| Westgate | Recontextualization | No Transfer | Assemblage | Deliberate |
| Kwan | Recontextualization | Assemblage | Recontextualization | Deliberate |
| Wingfield | Recontextualization | Recontextualization | Recontextualization | n/a |
| Messer | Recontextualization | Recontextualization | Recontextualization | n/a |

*1. Prior writing knowledge is often unacknowledged*

We were surprised that five faculty participants began their courses with no engagement of transfer at all. For example, describing the ways her writ-


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ing assignments asked her pre-service teachers to take up the identities of teachers, Debbie Hershey explained: "This is their first writing where they are really trying to put themselves in that role of 'I'm the teacher' or 'I'm a specialist.'" Our interviews with Hershey's students suggested that their prior courses had, in fact, done so. But Hershey ignored this knowledge. In addition to assuming little experience with disciplinary identity, other faculty participants also assumed an absence of rhetorical training. Describing what students in her business communication courses found most difficult, Sheila Wunderlich told us, "That's probably one thing that is hard for students today, to understand that they are writing so someone else understands it, instead of writing so they understand it. They don't understand fully the receiver's frame of reference." Again, in contrast, student interviews suggested prior courses had provided Wunderlich's students with strategies for considering audiences. Other faculty felt constrained by curricular structures that failed to ensure prerequisites had been completed. Westgate told us, "I can't rely on that previous semester's worth of instruction. . . . I honestly feel like I'm in survival mode in terms of just getting to the material, the basics." She regretted not being able to "do so much more" for students who she thought would benefit from being challenged to mobilize their prior knowledge.

Three faculty participants used simple metaphors for transfer from the start of their courses, such as Leonard Fite, who saw writing transfer as application. In order to focus on the large amount of content he felt he needed to cover, Fite provided multiple handouts and very structured assignments, and seldom engaged teaching writing in class. He explained, "I've found that to structure an assignment page or a handout quite clearly and to spell things out, so to speak, allows students a framework within which to excel." Fite believed his handouts, which covered writing abstracts, conducting research, analyzing musical compositions, and other elements of music writing, would help his students "apply" that knowledge in each of the writing situations presented in his course and in subsequent courses.

*2. Adaptive metaphors for transfer are rare in teaching*

Six faculty used metaphors of adaptation when conceptualizing transfer at the beginning of their courses. However, four of these six involved negative transfer. For example, explaining the importance of close reading, Douglas Edge said, "What [this critic] says about close reading is that close reading was actually kind of astonishing, even if sort of cramped and stupid in its way, because it asked the student to get beyond the clichés and received wisdom that passes for knowledge in the humanities." For


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Edge, that meant students had to "let go and not know," and try to "write without received knowledge." He thus asked students to set aside all prior knowledge, even though he acknowledged how difficult and labor intensive this often became for both him and his students. Like Edge, Myers began from negative transfer. When she discovered her "assumption, the erroneous assumption, my students knew what it meant to write in the social sciences," she responded by changing the course schedule and distributing "some handouts on things like topic sentences and thesis statements." Because she wanted to encourage anthropological ways of thinking as well as anthropology-specific writing, Myers asked students to set aside prior writing knowledge to write in the more narrative style she valued. Asked explicitly if students could understand and engage a concept of transfer later in the course, she acknowledged that "application" would be possible, especially if students had more training in writing, but she did not expect students to understand the benefits of the hard work associated with recontextualization.

Only three faculty members ended their courses with adaptive definitions of transfer. Alison Messer and Larry Wingfield both asked their students to pay attention to context from the beginning of their courses, indicating an understanding of transfer as recontextualization, and their recognition of the work required to teach for and enact transfer. Messer encouraged her students to adapt their prior writing knowledge across different contexts, a process she called "game playing." As a result, she required her students to write in several different genres that required adaptation, a skill she thought teachers needed to be successful in a rapidly changing educational culture. In addition, Messer stressed authentic writing, so the multiple, multimodal genres she assigned required students to not only adapt prior knowledge, but also to pay careful attention to contexts:

> They basically design the context. They make up a fake school or go looking for a real school. I tell them to do some kind of research . . . They make some assumptions about their students, who their students are, what grade level, what the students do well in writing, what they don't do well in writing.

For Messer, this engagement with context would help her student teachers learn to "actually think about writing" and "write outside of the classroom," both necessary to their becoming effective teachers of writing themselves. Though she began with assemblage before moving to recontextualization, Shelley Kwan also taught deliberately for transfer, and asked students to attend carefully to contexts—as we will discuss below. But these three faculty's complex approaches to transfer were the exception, not the rule.


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*3. Metaphors usually shift only slightly over time*

For eleven of fifteen faculty participants, transfer metaphors changed as the course progressed. Sometimes this seemed coincidental, as in Wunderlich's gradual shift from ignoring transfer to considering it as application of knowledge learned throughout the semester to subsequent assignments. As we note in our methods, because transfer metaphors emerged as a theme in our study over time, we were not always able to tell if change was intentional. But in many cases, these changes were quite obviously planned. For example, Edge saw broad applications in his challenges to students' received notions of writing and reading: "Once you click into close reading, I think that then you can take it anywhere else. You can apply that to anything you are reading—criticism, literature, whatever it is. That should be applicable." Edge thus moves from negative transfer to application. For him, despite the early shock of negative transfer, and the extra work involved for him to grade revisions and meet with students in office hours, this shift helped students grow into more difficult writing. Scaffolding was also behind Helf's decision to begin without acknowledging transfer but end with assemblage. For Helf, opening with "verification" or "cookbook" labs, a simpler form of lab work common in science education, provided an "efficient" method to "give students certain experiences." As Helf explained, these labs were "pretty reliable," even though they did not "give students a complete preparation" and for some educators "don't make students think scientifically." But verification labs provided a base of core knowledge to which students could add as they learned scientific principles—a form of assemblage Helf saw as pedagogically useful. As his course progressed, students created their own experiments, a more inquiry-based approach that involved "more scientific" thinking, which would be useful in future courses.[3]

Education instructor Kwan began with the metaphor of assemblage when considering transfer, by subtly adding knowledge about writing lesson and unit plans onto material taught previously in other courses. Her students moved as a small cohort through the program, encountering Kwan at key moments of writing development. When she first met the cohort, Kwan explicitly stated, "Everything that I have you do connects with something else and builds to what you're doing at the end." As students progressed in the program, Kwan gradually moved from metaphors associated with assemblage to those associated with adaptation, especially at the end of her WID course. For Kwan, teaching this adaptive approach was essential because prescriptive standards were making creative pedagogy more and more challenging for teachers. Explaining the value of Rubistar, Kwan told her students, "You know, you don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There



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is lots of great stuff out there. Find what you want, adapt it, adjust it for yourself. Why wouldn't you? Teachers are so busy!" Kwan encouraged this type of transfer by asking students to reflect on their own writing, compare it to the writing of their students, and consider the influences of contexts on both, especially in a concluding reflective essay.

Chemistry professor Matthew Orrick offers an interesting case of metaphor shift: he ignored transfer when it came to prior *writing* knowledge, but approached it as recontextualization for chemistry content. When first assigned to teach a WID course, Orrick consulted the course catalog to learn what "WID" meant: "It said 'Writing in the Disciplines,' and when I read what that meant, it essentially meant you have to go out in your field and write a paper people aren't going to laugh at. So I said students need to write lab reports which reflect that." Orrick asked his colleagues how they taught lab reports, but got little response. Without a department culture to offer best practices or a sense of students' prior knowledge, Orrick modeled lab reports after those he started writing his junior year, closely resembling those written by practicing chemists, in stark contrast to the "cookbook labs" his students usually wrote. He explained, "I assigned the first lab report and got a pretty big upheaval. 'Whoa, we don't do that.' 'It's too much work.' I said, 'Well, that's too bad. That's the way it's gonna be, and we're gonna do it this way.'" Thus, Orrick largely ignored his students' prior writing knowledge, shaping his course towards application of lessons learned in future courses and similar laboratory contexts.

Orrick, however, clearly sought to activate prior knowledge when it came to chemistry content: "I will say things like 'Do you remember your general chemistry?' or 'Back in general chemistry' . . . I point out those are things that they've learned before, which they should not forget." So for disciplinary content, Orrick engaged recontextualization, not only application, since he encouraged students to adapt chemistry knowledge variously, according to both content and contexts:

> In general chemistry, they teach you a lot of things. Some of them are very important, and some of them aren't important, and as you go through your career, you should recognize which ones are important because they come up all the time.

Orrick recalled using scenarios about workplace chemistry while talking with students in the lab, both to motivate students and to provide examples of contextual influences. Indeed, Orrick valued thinking about context so much he planned trips to scientific labs across the state in order to improve his own knowledge of the forensic chemistry emerging as a focus at Western. Notably, Orrick not only made clear that he valued students' prior


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chemistry knowledge, but explicitly taught students how to adapt it as they begin to learn more specialized content—just not for writing.

In summary, our analysis found that most faculty participants drew upon adaptive metaphors for transfer when describing their own development as writers, but used simple metaphors in their classrooms. Though most faculty participants engaged more complex metaphors as their courses progressed, and seven of ten whose pedagogy changed were mindfully attempting to support transfer, simple metaphors of transfer still dominated.

## Implications

What can WPAs learn from Wingfield, Messer, and Kwan, the three faculty in our study who created environments where students think about writing transfer adaptively, as recontextualization? To offer some implications, we first consider four ways these faculty teach for transfer, drawing contrasts to faculty who taught simpler forms of transfer—or did not address it at all. We then conclude with four concrete actions WPAs can engage to support teaching for writing transfer, not only for WID/WAC instructors like our participants, but for writing teachers and writing supporters across institutional contexts.

### *Four Best Practices of Faculty Who Teach for Recontextualization*

*1. Faculty can create writing environments that provide challenges and offer the support needed to confront the difficulty and complexity of adaptive transfer without over-simplification.* Before all else, Wingfield, Messer, and Kwan's success indicates that adaptive models for transfer are not too complex or difficult: they can help students learn to draw upon prior writing skills, experience, and knowledge. All three explicitly acknowledged the difficulty of their courses, both in our interviews and to students, but sought to *manage* that difficulty rather than *avoid* it. Messer pushed her students to write authentically, engaged their writing outside the classroom, and asked them to "do a bunch of new types of writing they have never done." For her, this wasn't just a matter of assigning particular genres—"Anything can be a school genre"—but required open discussion about how genres work in educational contexts. Messer described multiple instances of challenging students to improve their work. However, she was conscious of the difficulty students faced adapting their prior knowledge, and she sought to mitigate this difficulty by simplifying the assignments for the course, even when a colleague objected to this approach. Similarly, Wingfield expected his journalism students to write very well, holding up examples from national media as standards, and expecting them to grow as he did,


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but seeing both sides of that equation. He told us, "I try to always go back and remember where I was when I was that age, too. I recognize they are no worse than I was at that same age." This care extended explicitly to prior knowledge, which he expected students to discuss with him and other student writers. We contrast this with other faculty, most well intended, who identified undergraduates as incapable of the judgment necessary to evaluate their prior knowledge, or who expressed reluctance to teach for transfer because they worried it would raise the bar too high for students. The successes Wingfield, Kwan, and Messer describe suggest direct engagement with adaptive transfer is not only valuable for students on both the short and long term, but more rewarding for teachers as well.

*2. Faculty are less likely to teach adaptive concepts of transfer if they begin with simple concepts.* Shelley Kwan was the only faculty participant who moved from simple to adaptive transfer—a shift she carefully planned as a focus of her course. She told us, "I feel like everything I do is for transfer. I really believe in what I'm teaching them." We believe the considerable change in metaphor she effected was possible because of this concerted effort and careful design. While twelve of fifteen faculty participants offered a more complex take on transfer over time, nine of those twelve began without discussing transfer at all, or engaging it in only negative terms (outlining approaches to writing that their students should avoid). In other words, these transformations over time represent only modest gains because so many of the faculty we interviewed began near the bottom of the transfer scale, with little active support of transfer, and ended presenting transfer as application. This suggests faculty should begin with more advanced concepts of transfer, such as assemblage, even if they prefer a more scaffolded approach, or, like Wingfield and Messer, they should employ advanced adaptive models like recontextualization from the start.

*3. Faculty can shape their classroom practices to support transfer, regardless of curricular structures.* Among our three instructors who taught transfer as recontextualization, we saw varied curricular influences. Even though she worked in arguably the most structured program in our study, with a rigorously sequenced curriculum and student teachers who moved in a cohort, Kwan still considered transfer mindfully. Working in a major where prerequisites were often waived to avoid low enrollments, Wingfield all but ignored other courses in the curriculum, focusing on students' writing experiences holistically, and focusing on future publishing opportunities rather than future courses. As we note above, Messer felt confident pushing back against other colleagues' expectations for her course content. While


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these approaches differ, they share an understanding that curriculum is not the sole determiner of transfer success: horizontal curricula do not make transfer impossible, nor do vertical curricula guarantee it. Unfortunately, many other teachers shaped their teaching as if one or both were true, giving up on transfer in the absence of structured course sequencing (Wunderlich, Myers, and Westgate), or assuming it would be automatic if one was present (Hershey, Edge, and Fite). New faculty were particularly likely to conform their classroom practices to curricular pressures even if they recognized the negative impacts for writing transfer.

*4. Faculty can both teach for writing transfer and attend to disciplinary content, disciplinary ways of thinking, and/or correctness and mechanics.* Neither Kwan, Messer, nor Wingfield identified covering certain content, teaching disciplinary thinking, or attending to correctness as barriers to teaching for transfer. Wingfield, for example, believed students learned better from making mistakes and correcting them on their own—even if this resulted in errors appearing in the newspaper. He joked with his students about his own errors, told them of particularly embarrassing mistakes he'd made with the school administration, and used these stories as teaching moments. However, too many other faculty took a simple approach to writing transfer because they worried that a focus on transfer would result in their giving short shrift to content, disciplinary ways of thinking, or correctness. Several stated this explicitly, especially in the case of content pressures: "There's too much for me to cover to do that." Sometimes attention to writing was separated from other course content, static abstractions like "elegance" or "creativity" rose above consideration of transfer, or teaching writing was reduced to pushing for correctness or the error-free use of certain styles. However, we note that several faculty took adaptive approaches to transfer where disciplinary content was concerned, suggesting this type of thinking could be leveraged to suggest the same for writing.

## How WPAs Can Support Teaching for Transfer

We opened this article with an excerpt from Helf's interview to feature two contradictory but common beliefs among faculty participants: (1) transfer is easy and automatic, requiring little explicit support, and (2) curricular structures can easily frustrate adaptive transfer. To counter these themes, we offer four interventions that WPAs can promote to support engagement of adaptive transfer by instructors interested in teaching for transfer.

*1. Use transfer metaphors as a framework to help faculty better understand their prior writing experiences and better transform those experiences into classroom*



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*practices.* Our study suggests that faculty have transformative writing experiences they want to share with students—but also that they do not realize the differences between the ways they learned to transfer and the metaphors for transfer shaping their teaching. WPAs should help faculty understand the necessity of negotiating with prior knowledge and experiences in three critical spheres. First, faculty should reflect on their writing lives to better understand the roles prior knowledge played in the writing experiences they want to recreate for students. Second, faculty should find ways to acknowledge students' prior knowledge and experiences—even in situations where they want to ask students to rethink it—and seek to understand and shape, rather than exclude, the internal negotiation of prior knowledge all of us must engage when writing. Third, explicit reflection on teaching practices can help faculty understand how writing transfer is or is not taking place in their writing classrooms. WPAs can discuss prior experiences with program stakeholders, provide examples, and model best practices for engaging the negotiation of prior skills, knowledge, and experiences. In current research and workshops for WID faculty, we are developing instruments that demonstrate the differences between simple and adaptive transfer metaphors as a way to help faculty reflect on their approaches to teaching writing.

*2. Encourage all stakeholders in writing programs, but especially faculty, to learn the limitations of simple models of transfer, and share adaptive models broadly.* As we highlight in our literature review, research has shown that simple models of transfer shortchange the intellectual work involved. Our study, like the others we highlight here, suggests strong pedagogical advantages from adaptive models for transfer. WPAs can explain the limitations of simple concepts of transfer, and point out where adaptive models are more accurate. As we note above, this is especially important given that so many faculty began their courses without considering transfer at all, or by considering it only as the exclusion of undesirable prior knowledge, even though adaptive transfer played important parts in their own writing lives. Had faculty begun teaching using concepts of transfer that were more complex, the possibilities for writing transfer would have expanded radically. Faculty like Wunderlich, Myers, and Kato, who planned no engagement with transfer, could be encouraged to make their pedagogy more deliberate. And those who begin by ignoring or excluding transfer should be invited to critique their assumptions about students' engagement, writing abilities, and the roles writing should play in learning. Student interviews suggest instructors who begin with negative transfer support the harmful tendency of students to see every teachers' approach to writing as idiosyncratic and unarticulated to disciplinary norms (as Bergman and Zepernick


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argue). Indeed, the potential value of the writing skills and knowledge students develop in first-year writing—and thus the efficacy of our writing programs—is limited by the widespread deployment of simple or negative metaphors for transfer.

*3. Encourage the development of curricula intended to facilitate transfer, but show that classroom practices are critically important too.* WPAs are often asked to consult regarding curriculum development: both the designs of individual courses and the creation of structures explicitly intended to build writing skills in several courses over time. While this work is certainly valuable, and WPAs need to engage it, we also need to remind stakeholders that classroom practices are more powerful than curricular structures. Approaches to prior knowledge at the classroom level—indeed, at the day-to-day level—can engage transfer or exclude it. WPAs can simultaneously demonstrate teaching practices that encourage transfer and encourage thinking about curricular structures that do the same. We should also encourage campus leadership to recognize that faculty who teach for transfer are not attempting to subvert curricula or exceed the boundaries of single courses. That is, WPAs should point out when department cultures have a chilling effect on classroom teaching, whether through limitations faculty impose on themselves because they fear others will react negatively, or when faculty who would like to collaborate with their colleagues to facilitate writing transfer feel that effort would not be reciprocated or recognized.

*4. Provide concrete frameworks to explain the complexity of writing, teaching writing, and writing transfer.* As we have shared some of the preliminary results of our research with faculty and administrators in our institutions, we have repeatedly had to explain the complexities of writing, which are well known to WPAs, but less familiar to faculty outside of our departments and programs. Explaining why the broadest expression of our research question includes four distinct spheres of influence—classroom practices, curricular forces, habits of mind, and cultural forces—has allowed us to help faculty deepen their engagement with writing transfer. For example, which behaviors are more individual? Which are more embedded in collectives? Those differences suggest different responses. We believe WPAs sharing a taxonomy of transfer metaphors and directly addressing the definitions of transfer that shape teaching would be an important step. Frameworks such as Anne Beaufort's five domains of writing knowledge have helped our faculty partners find ways to better see the complexities of teaching for transfer in relation to their own pedagogies. They have helped us engage adaptive models of transfer in our own classrooms and our own programs, and we


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see considerable promise for them, especially when coupled with the other actions we suggest WPAs can take to energize conversations about teaching for transfer.

## Notes

1. In this article, all names are pseudonyms and some participant details have been altered to protect confidentiality. This research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Western Illinois University and Purdue University.

2. We refer explicitly to skills, experience, and knowledge here. Other references to only one of these three are for shorthand purposes only—we consider all important for transfer research.

3. We explored several participants' engagement with so-called "cookbook" or "authentic" labs in depth in our 2016 CCCC presentation, "Remixing the 'Cookbook' Lab," and plan to publish those findings separately.


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## Appendix A: Table of Participants

| Instructor | Discipline | Student |
|---|---|---|
| Gerald Carnahan | Information technology | Scarlet |
| Douglas Edge | English | Jordan |
| Regina Fitch | Communications | Nicholas |
| Leonard Fite | Music | Mitchell |
| Darryl Helf | Zoology | Alison, Karina |
| Debbie Hershey | Early childhood education | Sophia |
| Philip Kato | Law enforcement | Ford |
| Shelley Kwan | Elementary education | Billie |
| Greg Larios | Political science | Jenna |
| Allison Messer | English | Jordan |
| Diana Myers | Anthropology | Hazel |
| Matthew Orrick | Chemistry | Steve, Elbow |
| Ashlee Westgate | Psychology | Lenore |
| Larry Wingfield | Journalism | Scarlet |
| Sheila Wunderlich | Economics | Blake |

## Appendix B: Faculty Interview Questions

1. How did you learn to write in your field?
2. What problems did you experience learning to write like a ______?
3. How did you overcome these problems?
4. What does it mean to think like ______?
5. What are the disciplinary standards for writing in your field?
6. What kinds of writing are you assigning in your WID course?
7. What role does this writing play in your course?
8. Tell us about the ways you teach writing.
9. What problems do students have trying to write as a ______? How do you help them overcome these problems?


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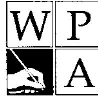



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