

## **A Transdisciplinary Approach to Writing Knowledge Transfer: Applications in Teaching and Research**

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Nowacek, Rebecca S., Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, and Angela Rounsaville. *Writing Knowledge Transfer: Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. Parlor Press; The WAC Clearinghouse, 2024. 454 pages.

Implicitly or explicitly, the existence of first-year writing (FYW) courses has been, in part, dependent on claims about the generalizability of writing knowledge and its potential to be transferred—whether it can be adopted and adapted appropriately for use in students’ academic and professional lives. While writing studies scholars’ reinforcement of and evidence that transfer does and can occur under certain conditions has worked to address what Rebecca S. Nowacek in 2011 described as a prevalent disbelief in generalizable utility that threatened the “abolition” of FYW courses (12), transfer continues to be a major concern for writing studies, be that in “the quiet presence of transfer” in WAC/WID (Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville 208) or in studies and courses explicitly designed through transfer theory and principles. The question of writing knowledge transfer is imperative for the work of WPAs as they develop FYW curricula, instructor training programs and support resources, and WAC/WID courses as well as gauge their programs’ effectiveness and make pitches regarding program funding. However, writing studies scholars have been limited by the lack of transdisciplinarity in our methods for supporting and studying transfer. And, in terms of program building and pedagogical applications of transfer research, WPAs and writing instructors have had limited access to comprehensive transdisciplinary resources for what has been learned from transfer research.

In *Writing Knowledge Transfer: Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, Rebecca S. Nowacek, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, and Angela Rounsaville offer a much-needed synthesis in the field of writing studies that combines transfer research from 596 articles and 138 books across various disciplines (315). They take a transdisciplinary approach which emphasizes how the siloing of disciplines restricts what and how we can know about transfer and limits possibilities for our students to transfer writing knowledge, hoping to “reposition writing studies at the intersection of multiple transfer research

strands" (315). Through their forging of cross-disciplinary connections, they cover a lot of ground, compiling a thorough text that captures the true complexity of transfer as a phenomenon in all areas of learning. The authors take a distant to local approach to expand transfer through already-established lines of thought in other fields by introducing those further from writing studies before delving into conversations more closely linked to writing studies. They first present their approach, goals, and overview of the book in chapter 1, "Introduction," problematizing the "carry" metaphor that has historically been adopted by transfer scholars. In chapter 2, "Cognitive Psychology and Situated Learning: Foundational Research on Transfer of Learning," they bridge writing studies' transfer research and transfer's early history in psychology and education to highlight the necessity of both individual and contextual foci in transfer research. This necessity is further supported in chapter 3, "Transfer of Training and Knowledge Management: Research from Industrial Psychology, Human Resources, and Management," where they review work on the training of individuals, the impact of relationships and workplace environments, and the value of error in transfer processes. In chapter 4, "Transfer in Sports, Medical, Aviation, and Military Training," we learn about the role of the body's memory in supporting transfer as these disciplines emphasize "the body and the body's relationship to cognition and context" (91) through attention to situated learning and contextual fidelity.

Shifting toward those disciplines positioned closer to writing studies, chapter 5, "Transfer Implications from Sociocultural and Sociohistorical Literacy Studies," presents concerns about how transfer should be understood as intertwined with various systems of power that reserve transfer benefits for students whose home and cultural experiences align with school practices and values (113–14) which underscores a persistent goal in writing studies to value students' multiliteracies. Second language writing becomes a focal point in chapter 6, "Research on Transfer in Studies of Second Language Writing," where language is presented as one of the "dynamic factors" (138) of transfer that requires us to address how writing knowledge moves among contexts and languages (131). The authors also pair this discussion with highlights on the positive outcomes that result from genre-based writing instruction. Chapter 7, "Transfer in First-Year Writing," and chapter 8, "Infrastructure for the Transfer of Writing Knowledge: Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines," cover transfer's existing role in writing studies, including concerns with prior knowledge, genre, and dispositions. Chapter 8, in particular, traces how WAC/WID are shaped by transfer principles through their focus on disciplinary writing tasks that guide students toward connections across fields.

Such courses support students' ability to transfer and our ability to support transfer through exposure to specific genres and situations students might encounter later (207). Writing centers' role in the transfer of writing knowledge is discussed in chapter 9, "Writing Centers: An Infrastructural Hub for Transfer," emphasizing the need for tutors to learn transfer and genre theories to better benefit students writing in other disciplines. Chapter 10, "Writing across Contexts: From School to Work and Beyond," further centers situated learning through the lens of workplace preparation and reinforces the fact that students' activity systems are constantly interlocking and overlapping to contribute to each transfer act, which should prevent us from drawing too stiff a boundary between school and work contexts.

As a transfer scholar myself, this book reads in part as a review on traditional studies of transfer, including connections to the work of notable transfer scholars, such as David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon; Nowacek; John D. Bransford and Daniel L. Schwartz; Dana Lynn Driscoll; Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi; Elizabeth Wardle; Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak; and Edward L. Thorndike and Robert S. Woodworth. However, the book is refreshing and stimulating as Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville's comprehensive synthesis provides relief and generates excitement about the many possibilities we can imagine through the unity of multiple disciplines invested in a similar interest. Beyond giving hope and broader range to those already invested in transfer research, this text is accessible for those with any research focus and at any stage of their academic career, while synthesizing knowledge in ways that will be readily applicable for WPAs. For writing studies readers who do not define themselves as transfer scholars, the book will prove useful in showcasing the universality of transfer in our field, whether they work in writing centers, second language writing, teacher education, literacy studies, FYW, or lead writing programs. Through their self-proclaimed meta-approach, Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville expect action to result from one's reading of this text, making it both a toolbox and a model for supporting the transfer of learning as they make connections between fields for us, supporting our own transfer of knowledge to inspire all scholars and instructors in writing studies to adopt and use said knowledge.

Such an adoption is made possible through the accessible nature of the text. Each chapter begins with an outline of the usefulness of transfer work in other fields for supporting writing knowledge transfer. This makes the necessity of our investment immediately apparent and cues and primes us for how we might employ this initial learning in our research and teaching. They are transparent about their "'synthesis' approach" and explain the purposeful organization of the chapters, for example, that the sections

in chapter 8 are “organized by researchers’ common problems or questions about the transfer of writing knowledge in WAC/WID” (209). This approach results in an abundance of transfer research examples that act as evidence for the subsequent claims about their application in writing studies, such as in their review of Dan Fraizer’s approach to departmental communication, which presents a “dialogic model that promotes faculty awareness of transfer” by fostering ongoing conversations about how to apply disciplinary threshold concepts (225). As the authors move through the sections, they review the literature intentionally and propose clear directions of thought and action; their tone is never demanding but welcoming, asking us to further engage our creative and critical capacities to unfold greater possibilities for writing and transfer studies and, thus, our students while leaving space for theories to be left up for debate in their juxtaposition of transfer findings. For example, in chapter 4 they write, “This work might ask us to consider how disaggregating features of writing from their genres and communities does not necessarily disrupt or support the ways writers have deeply internalized when and how to use certain skills and strategies over others” (92). Moreover, the sections are productively succinct and outlined within the table of contents for easy navigation based on the interests and goals of the reader. All of the chapters’ concluding sections explain what has been discussed and why, providing implications for writing studies—for example, in “Methodological Implications from Literacy Studies” (122), “Curricular Recommendations and Innovations for Transfer in First-Year Writing” (193), and “Conclusion and Avenues for Further Inquiry in Writing Studies” (104).

*Writing Knowledge Transfer*’s discipline-specific chapters are followed by chapter 11, “Conclusion: Transfer and Transdisciplinarity in Five Themes,” which is solely devoted to outlining five key transdisciplinary themes within the research—individuality, intentionality, fidelity, directionality, and simultaneity—which arose out of the authors’ composition of the volume and are drawn from the scholarship reviewed therein. These themes are presented as “pathways” and “entry points into new frames” for approaching “transfer of writing-related knowledge and activity” along with examples of how each theme might manifest in writing studies research and praxis (315). Each theme speaks either to transfer studies’ units of analysis, central questions, contexts or relations, spatiotemporal elements, or the complexity of an individual transfer act and together guide us toward “future frames” for harnessing the transformative potential of a transdisciplinary approach to writing transfer research and instruction. In addition, they provide a glossary that is helpful for familiarizing oneself with some of the highly theoretical content and which links such content to its respective scholars,

some of which are selected for presentation in an annotated bibliography to further inspire engagement with transfer research.

Through their posing of productive challenges, Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville build a text that can be used by WPAs in a variety of ways and within a range of contexts. They might, for instance, use this text to guide their own research and instruction whether they are a long-time transfer scholar or using the book to familiarize themselves with transfer key terms and studies. The authors also indicate the necessity of greater attention to transfer in our curricular design for “intentionally making writing knowledge transparent, explicit, and relevant to students’ lives” (210), since “explicit instruction of disciplinary writing values, beliefs, genres, expectations, and practices is essential to transfer” (221). This explicit instruction could be paired with emphasis on peer-to-peer interaction and instructor support and feedback (62), which respond to both the social and individual elements that contribute to the success of transfer rather than “the ways transfer research has consolidated around individuals” (316) since “individual characteristics exist in a dynamic relationship with social contexts for learning” (59).

A central argument within these lines that might particularly resonate with WPAs is that teacher training needs to more purposefully teach transfer research and principles. At many universities, FYW courses are taught by graduate student instructors making the pedagogical implications and approaches presented in chapter 7 an important point of focus for not only readers in transfer studies and WPAs, but also individuals new to teaching writing (e.g., 193–95). This book deserves space within teacher training to help instructors design courses that support goals and outcomes consistent with theories of writing knowledge transfer and convey writing tasks’ relevance to students. Using this text to inform teacher training programs also represents its utility in producing and revising course learning outcomes that are more explicitly informed by transdisciplinary transfer principles. Since they consistently refer to preceding and succeeding chapters throughout, each can be read alone or in varied combinations for new and/or more experienced instructors.

In the section “Teacher Knowledge about Disciplinary Writing Transfer” in chapter 8, the authors argue for more consistent transdisciplinary work among instructors, stating “instructors across programs and departments need a shared vocabulary about writing to dismantle . . . roadblocks to transfer” and suggest “venues like WAC/WID workshops to support increased communication and interdisciplinary exchange around writing concepts, skills, genres, and student attitudes” (223). Thus, this text can be used as justification for greater investment in disciplinary writing courses

and programs and, with the “guiding assumption that the authenticity of the workplace helps to facilitate the transfer of learning from school to work” (302), WPAs are called to create more opportunities for students to participate in service and immersive learning, classroom-based interactions, and workplace-based internships that are more authentic.

What particularly struck me as both a transfer and disability studies scholar was the emphasis on embodied cognition in chapter 4. In their conclusion, Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville emphasize how “the body is always active and present in learning” (320) and it is therefore “a crucial element of cognition” (321). Because memories are lived in the body, how we engage with objects, ideas, and concepts (i.e., writing) makes transfer physical as well. Historically, high-road and far-reaching forms of transfer have been valorized (35), leaving more “automatic, embodied, and non-verbalized forms of transfer” (88) to go undervalued or worse, ignored or labeled as “negative” transfer. Thus, we need to better value low-road or automatized transfer rather than casting our attention solely toward high-road transfer. For example, in “medical education, so-called high-road transfer must be coupled with low-road transfer for quick thinking and automaticity of action” (96–97), and in cognitive psychology, this concept is called dual processing: the stimulation of (a) unconscious or automatic transfer and (b) deliberate or conscious transfer (33). This push toward countering traditional views of transfer as always intentional also echoes Nowacek’s argument in *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act* that there is no negative transfer but “unexpected” transfer that does not align with what instructors and researchers anticipate. To me, attention to the body’s role in writing could be a call for WPAs to continue advocating for multimodal-specific courses and encouraging instructors to assign multimodal and embodied forms of composing that emphasize the body as part of the process. This could be an opportunity to provide instructors models for metacognitive tasks that involve reflections on students’ movement, location, and affect as they complete an assignment. Although the authors inspire us to opt for “more complex and dynamic” transfer models (334) through their fronting of the bodymind connection and argue for “a transfer curriculum that centers students’ histories, languages, and identities in ways that fully integrate social and linguistic justice in the aims and methods of the course” (199), they do not delve into conversations about how disability could impact transfer of learning. The idea that disability is potentiating for challenging traditional views of writing and writing practices, for example, remains an area worth further exploring and could guide WPAs toward even more accessibility-informed standards for teaching and assessing writing.

In short, Nowacek, Lorimer Leonard, and Rounsaville's *Writing Knowledge Transfer* demonstrates that a transdisciplinary emphasis in transfer studies, writing studies, and writing program administration is essential since we can become better instructors and researchers by adopting and expanding on knowledge about transfer from other fields. This book is what we need now when transfer is becoming more central to writing studies as well as when new and conflicting perspectives on transfer are arising. It asks writing studies scholars to slow down (much in the way we need students to for mindful abstraction) and embrace those connections between disciplines. For me, *Writing Knowledge Transfer* came at a time when transdisciplinarity and other unifying initiatives and perspectives are prevalent and is beneficial for what it both explicitly and implicitly suggests about transfer research in writing studies, making a compelling case that, because transfer is for everyone, this book is for everyone.

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