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Beyond Composition: Teaching Students to Transition from Composition Classes to Business Writing Classes

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Introduction

The problem: students entering business writing are often unprepared to do the assignments required of them, or they fail to apply skills learned in Composition to their business writing class.

Writing for Business: Theory and Practice (GEB 3213) at the University of West Florida is an upper-level undergraduate class taught in the College of Business. English Composition I and II are both prerequisites for Writing for Business, just as they are for most upper-level writing courses. Because students must have two writing classes prior to taking Writing for Business, the assumption is made by faculty and administrators that students come into the class with adequate writing skills; unfortunately, that is not the case, and most students in this upper-level writing course show incredible weaknesses in writing and lack basic knowledge of grammar and sentence structure. Assessments given during the first two weeks of class reveal problems such as incoherent sentences, poor spelling, lack of transitions from one point to the next, and many others that affect the clarity of the writing and conveyance of ideas. If these students have already taken two writing classes, then why do they show such deficiencies in their writing? The assumed answer to that question, at least from the perspective of upper-level business faculty and administrators, is that the composition instructors are not doing enough to teach students to write. The real answer to the question, however, is not that simple. Students in the business writing class do not all have the same experience in meeting the composition prerequisites. Some students attend the same school for all four years, whereas others attend a school that is less expensive, such as a community or junior college, to meet their general studies requirements and then transfer to another university for the courses that are in their major. Within the last couple of decades, more students are completing college requirements while still in high school; so the composition requirement is achieved through

dual-enrollment credit. With such diverse backgrounds of composition experience among students, the problem cannot be summed up as the fault of the composition instructors.

The problem: students leave composition under the impression that they will not need to use the skills practiced in Composition in new contexts, or they are unable to “transfer” the skills to new contexts.

This deficiency seems especially problematic since an express purpose of composition as a “gateway” course is to initiate students to the foundations they will need to tackle the writing they will do in college and beyond. This posits composition instructors as “boundary brokers” (Wenger, 1998) ideally facilitating the transition to college-level expectations, introducing skills and knowledge for the purpose of transferring these to contexts within and beyond the college. Our task as composition instructors seems to be to teach for transfer—a course that exists to support students’ work in other courses. However, just as college instructors complain that high school graduates often lack the foundational skills necessary to tackle college-level writing assignments, college instructors in other disciplines often complain that their students coming from composition courses still can’t write. When these expectations aren’t met, composition instructors are an easy target for blame—yet the difficulty in encouraging transfer is more than a question of adequately preparing students for their future classwork. In order to help students make the transition into academic writing and from academic to business writing, instructors on both ends of the spectrum need to create learning environments and assignments that explicitly encourage transfer by cultivating not only skills, but moreover, habits of mind that best aid their transition.

The solution: A dialogue on transfer.

Rather than engaging in a blame-game, composition instructors and instructors of writing-intensive courses like Business Writing should engage in a dialogue on how to bridge the gap between freshmen writing skills and upper-division demands. This dialogue can be used to help instructors develop assignments that enable students to see each class as an opportunity to further improve their writing skills, encouraging the “transfer” of skills learned in one setting to new academic and professional contexts. We will examine several

ways in which to encourage a broad view of writing that will shape students' rhetorical awareness, leaving them better prepared not only to develop their writing skills but also to apply those skills to new contexts. The focus on transfer is both forward- and backward-looking, with composition instructors drawing on students' past experiences and prompting them to anticipate future writing exigencies in which they will need not only to utilize but also to adapt their skills.

The Problem of Transfer in Theory and Practice

A key principle behind students' ability to apply what they have previously learned is often referred to as *transfer*. Transfer occurs when "something learned in one context has helped in another" (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p. 22). Although educators often assume that transfer "takes care of itself," students often do not utilize knowledge and skills they have learned when faced with a new set of circumstances (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Moreover, transfer as a metaphor is somewhat inadequate because "learning is more fruitfully viewed as an ongoing process rather than as a series of acquisition events" and viewing learning as a product carried from one context to the next implicitly separates what is learned from its context and learner (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009, p. 620). This inadequacy has led to descriptions of this ability in terms that more accurately encompass the network of relationships among the learner, the knowledge or skills, and the context. For instance, Guile and Young (2003) describe transfer as "a process of transition between learning activity systems" (p. 77). Wardle (2007) asserts that educators "should attempt to account for the ways in which knowledge and skills are *transformed* across contexts" (p. 69) so as not to overlook skills that students may have learned but not implemented recognizably in the new context. She further maintains that the term *generalization* describes students' application of their learning. Generalization, like transfer, implies the ability to use prior knowledge in new contexts—but it goes past transfer to examine the ways in which individuals construct and belong to social organizations. Knowledge and skills that are treated as entities distinct from the writing context and situation give educators a skewed view of how these abilities are carried from one context to the next—and often make transfer difficult to recognize when it does occur.

A student's apparent failure to generalize what he or she may have learned is evident in both the transition from high school to college and the transition from first-year composition to business writing, largely as a result of how students perceive writing situations as independent modules rather than an interconnected web of skills and situations. Many new college students have difficulty adapting to academic writing, which seems artificial and is very different from writing done in high school. At the high school level, standardized tests, such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), gear students toward a style of writing that is formulaic and allows for quick and easy grading. These students expect a formula for constructing an essay, but suddenly find that the previous formula learned in high school does not work for academic writing where critical thinking is necessary. Once students adapt to academic writing in composition classes, they must then learn yet another type of writing when they take classes within their majors. For business writing students, this sudden shift to a new form of writing can be especially frustrating. There is no thesis statement in a memo, and writing must be concise yet precise so that it fits onto one page. From the student's perspective, everything learned about writing in high school and in composition classes in college is null and void; therefore, the writing learned in business classes will probably also become null and void after graduation. The student fails to see the connection from one writing class to the next. If the student fails to make the connection, then it becomes unlikely that the student will apply what is learned in one class to another. To the student, each class is a box to be checked off on his or her degree plan, and the goal is to complete the degree plan. As Graff (2003) notes in *Clueless in Academe*,

most students experience the curriculum not as a connected conversation but as a disconnected series of courses that convey wildly mixed messages. As students go from course to course and subject to subject, the comparisons that the mind needs to identify points of contrast and common ground between disciplines and subfields are effaced. (p. 27)

It is this lack of continuity and connection that inhibits students' ability to apply their writing skills across the curriculum or in the workplace.

Academic writing and workplace writing are different, and students need to be aware of these differences (Vasquez, 2013). However, students need to understand that what they learned through academic writing is still applicable to business writing. Organization, clarity, purpose, and basic understanding of grammar rules and sentence structure are crucial when writing business documents (Vasquez, 2013). The business writing instructor needs to emphasize that there is a progression in writing skills as the student moves from composition classes to upper-division courses. If students can see that what they learned previously—essential writing skills—is being used in another class, then the students' views about writing would more likely be positive; thus the student would see the need to apply skills learned in one class to the next class.

Tactic #1: Tell them! Expansive framing and metacognition.

In order to bridge the gap, instructors can start by simply alerting students to how their prior knowledge applies to the current context and how skills used in the current context will apply to future contexts. We can frame assignments expansively by linking them to past learning experiences and explaining how the content will remain relevant in the future (Engle, Lam, Meyer, & Nix, 2012). As Wardle points out,

If students are taught decontextualized “skills” or rigid formulas rather than general and flexible principles about writing, and if instructors in all classes do not explicitly discuss similarities between new and previous writing assignments, it stands to reason students will not see similarities between disparate writing situations or will apply rigid rules inappropriately. In other words, one reason for lack of transfer is instruction that does not encourage it. (2009, p. 770)

Instructors should be careful to cultivate a meta-awareness among students—a consciousness of how they are using their writing and what future instances may call upon them to employ such strategies again. If students are never alerted to the relevance of past instruction to present instruction, or of the relevance of present instruction to future exigencies, how can we expect them to make those connections? The first step in fostering an environment conducive to transfer is to make students aware of how and when they may employ the skills

they are practicing—whether it is in composition or in business writing. As Wardle (2007) notes, “Beyond meta-awareness about language, the burden for encouraging generalization seems to rest on assignments given in classes beyond FYC” (p. 82).

In fact, the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s statement of learning outcomes (2014) explicitly calls on both first-year composition instructors and instructors in other disciplines to call attention to the connections and distinctions among rhetorical exigencies: “As students move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, their abilities will diversify along disciplinary, professional, and civic lines as these writers move into new settings where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014, Introduction, para. 4). We need to remind students of this reality as a first step to increasing their awareness.

Tactic #2: Agency and ownership.

Wardle (2007) finds that students find their best opportunities for implementing transfer when they are challenged by assignments that force them to draw upon prior knowledge and skills—and to adapt these skills to new contexts in which they are invited to exercise agency—that is, to come up with creative ways of meeting the rhetorical demands of the assignment. According to Wardle’s (2007) longitudinal study, a significant roadblock to transfer or generalization of skills is the lack of challenging and engaging assignments in classes other than composition during the first two years of college. Instructors can encourage transfer of skills by calling upon students to create assignments that challenge them rather than allow them to coast through without being held accountable for the skills they should be exercising. Similarly, in his study of college students adapting to the rhetorical exigencies of workplace writing, Brent (2012) finds that students are most prepared to handle these writing situations when their college work has encouraged in them a flexible rhetorical knowledge (consciously or unconsciously assimilated) in which they have had the opportunity to learn “how to extract genre features from models, how to analyze an audience, and how to use genre knowledge to interpret

information will help students develop rhetorical knowledge that they can transform when thrown into the deep end of rhetorical environments” (Brent, 2012, p.590).

Tactic#3: Provide meaningful feedback.

Feedback is yet another component of cultivating meta-awareness and encouraging transfer. In order for this progression in writing skills to occur, all instructors across the curriculum need to be aware that the type of feedback given to the student is important. In one study, Melzer (2009) points out that the short-answer essay question is a common writing assignment used across the disciplines, yet this type of writing puts the teacher in the role of “examiner” who is looking for the correct answer. Feedback in which the teacher acts as the examiner limits engagement of the student. However, when the instructor assigns work that is done in multiple stages and drafts and offers comments for the next stage, the instructor then becomes a coach rather than an examiner (Melzer, 2009). The student is then brought into a dialogue with the instructor as both work together in a way that enables the student to see his or her own progression in developing better writing techniques. The short-answer essay has its purposes, but the instructor of the writing-intensive course, such as composition or business communications, needs to remind the student of its purpose—to provide a correct answer—and show the student how this knowledge can be applied to other forms of writing. For example, in a persuasive memo or letter in a business communications class, the student has the correct answer or solution to a problem but must persuade the reader, who may be resistant, that this solution really is the best way to resolve the problem. The instructor then provides feedback regarding the effectiveness of the written message and allows for a revision of the message. The instructor is now a coach rather than an examiner, and the student is more willing to learn better writing techniques and apply those newly acquired skills to the next class or to a real workplace situation.

The writing instructor’s written comments on graded work, rather on the rough draft or the final draft of an assignment, can have a negative effect on the attitudes and behaviors of students. Unfortunately, the grading of writing assignments often involves negative comments such as grammar, spelling, and mechanical

errors that need to be addressed in the hopes that the student will not repeat the same errors on the next writing assignment (Bowman, Branchaw, & Welsh, 1989). This method of grading puts the instructor into the role of examiner, and the student erroneously believes that writing is a matter of giving the instructor “the right answer.” While these types of surface errors have to be addressed, the instructor can also provide oral feedback as a coach rather than examiner, so that there is dialogue between the student and instructor. Because oral feedback takes a lot of time, “most schools reserve this method for the worst students,” sending these students to writing labs to receive individual tutoring and remedial instruction (Bowman et al., 1989, p. 326). Instructors can, however, reserve the oral feedback for one or two primary assignments during the semester either by short sessions during the instructor’s office hours or through the use of technology, recording and posting verbal comments in an online setting such as Blackboard or eLearning. Another option is to provide oral feedback during class time after returning a reviewed draft and elaborating further on the most prevalent problems. The students are given the opportunity for discussion with the instructor and their classmates prior to revising and resubmitting the assignment. Instructors can then show how what was learned from this one assignment can be transferred to future writing assignments either in other classes or in the workplace. Providing oral feedback helps the students to view the written comments as constructive criticism that allows for improvement rather than to view the comments as negative criticism. The more positive the perception, the more likely the student is to transfer this new knowledge about writing to other situations outside the classroom.

Tactic #4: Create opportunities for peer collaboration and feedback.

Another way to improve students’ perceptions about writing and build confidence in their own writing skills is to collaborate with peers. One such collaboration that can be very effective is the writing workshop. These sessions done during class time allow students to review each other’s papers and offer feedback. Instructors guide the students on what to look for and how to make constructive comments, but otherwise, this type of activity does not require intense involvement from the instructor (Mascle, 2013). The primary benefit of the workshop is that students realize they are not alone in their struggles with writing; and as they work

together, they learn “to take control of their own writing development rather than focusing solely on the instructor’s assessment” (Mascle, 2013). In the business classroom, the workshop can be modified so that students work together to write a memo or letter. Students collaborate in small groups to analyze a particular problem (as specified on the assignment instructions) and work together to construct the message. This engagement not only builds their writing skills but also develops their critical thinking skills as they must share ideas on how to resolve an issue before writing out the message. The problems or issues given as assignments can be taken from real-life examples from the business world so that students can see that what they learn in the classroom will be used later in the workplace. Wardle (2007) found that peer interaction was a helpful component in creating the meta-awareness that promotes transfer. Also, when students feel that they have a real, live audience (apart from the instructor), they are prompted to think about writing in terms of its audience and its reaction—a valuable skill that will serve them well in a business environment.

Conclusion

Instructors across disciplines need to recognize that the best way to help students succeed in the various writing exigencies they will encounter is to help them recognize “writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent and irreducibly complex” (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p.558). Instead of focusing on punishing students for not making the connection or blaming their past teachers, we need to collaborate to create an environment from first-year composition to upper division and beyond that instills a rhetorical awareness in students and challenges them to adapt their skills to meet the demands of the situations they will encounter in the academic and business worlds.

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