Metacognition and Reflection: First Year Composition and Knowledge Transfer

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

Elizabeth M. Fogle-Young

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Dayton, OH

August 2009

Strain, Margaret

Faculty Reader

Hughes, Sheila

English Department Chair

APPROVED BY:

Bardine, Bryan

Faculty Advisor

Morgan, Thomas

Faculty Reader

Strain, Margaret

Faculty Reader

Hughes, Sheila

English Department Chair

ABSTRACT

METACOGNITION AND REFLECTION:

FIRST YEAR COMPOSITION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Fogle-Young, Elizabeth M.
University of Dayton
Advisor: Dr. Bryan Bardine

In this thesis, I report on the results from a study completed with two first year composition courses after looking at the role course content plays in student portfolios and final reflection letters. Using qualitative research methods, I interviewed students and the instructor in addition to reviewing students' final portfolios for the course. My hope was that course content would play an active role in the students' final reflection letters, but didn't turn out to be the case. With the findings turning out differently than I'd anticipated, the remainder of this thesis focuses on an approach to teaching first year composition, the writing about writing approach. In addition, I address how this approach can better foster metacognitive thinking in students to better assist with transfer of writing related knowledge to other writing situations. My hope is to highlight the promotion of the writing about writing approach while also advocating for a strong emphasis in reflection and metacognitive monitoring to further assist students in learning about their own writing in first year composition courses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My special thanks to Dr. Bryan Bardine, my advisor, for providing so much of his time for both my thesis and the independent study course that led up to my thesis. Between weekly meetings and constant emails, I learned more about qualitative research methods through his willingness to work with me and through his expertise.

I would also like to express appreciation to everyone who has helped me with this work. This includes Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle for introducing me to the writing about writing approach, conferencing with me by phone and email, meeting me at conferences to discuss my work, and in general, giving me much needed support and guidance; Kathy Yancey for answering my questions about reflection and portfolios; and Emily Burgess for editing and giving me suggestions. I also appreciate Drs. Tom Morgan and Margaret Strain for taking the time to give me feedback on my work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

When we as writing teachers ask our students to reflect on their own writing and their learning from our courses, what knowledge are we asking our students to access to answer these questions? Often, the responses we get are vague ("I've improved significantly," "I've learned a lot," "I know more about my writing process," etc). But what are our students actually telling us? Not much. How can we begin to *know* what our students have learned if they do not *use* the knowledge taught to them in first year composition courses to explain their growth, or lack of growth, as writers? Through the results of a study completed in the spring of 2009 and subsequent research, I have come to see that students should be accessing declarative knowledge learned from first year composition courses, at least within the final portfolio reflections, in order to explain the procedural knowledge they have employed to improve their writing throughout the course. Reflection, as shown by scholars and will be addressed later, gives students the means by which to think back on what they have learned and then apply that knowledge to their own writing and their future in writing. This becomes important because proper reflection has the potential to greatly improve students' abilities to transfer knowledge in other writing situations.

My interest in declarative knowledge, more specifically its appearance in student reflection, stems from research in transfer. Though widely discussed, researched, and written about, transfer from writing courses to students' writing in other courses has not

yet been proven (Bergmann and Zepernick; Downs and Wardle; Nelms and Dively; Perkins and Salomon; Wardle "Mutt Genres;" Wardle "Understanding"). Even with such a bleak outlook on transfer, scholars continue to revisit theories of transfer as they design their own studies searching for how to teach students to transfer written knowledge. Lately, concern for transfer has resurfaced again, in journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, this time considering how specific course content influences knowledge transfer. It is in light of these discussions that I too felt the issue needed to be explored further.

Although far transfer, described by Perkins and Salomon as the ability to apply knowledge to situations not necessarily reminiscent of the situation in which the learning occurred (1), is the goal of writing courses, we as composition scholars need to agree on the content and tools to facilitate near transfer first, the ability to apply knowledge from one context in another that is similar (1), and then worry about getting those ideas to transfer farther later. To do just this, I advocate the writing about writing approach (an approach championed by Downs and Wardle) in conjunction with Kathleen Blake Yancey's ideas on reflection (Downs and Wardle; Yancey *Reflection*). If students are taught using specific writing content while also consistently reflecting back on their own writing in reference to the specific knowledge, students may have a better chance of transferring writing knowledge from writing courses to other writing situations. The possibility for transfer increases because students will have been given the tools by which to understand *why* they are told to do something specific with their writing instead of just told to do something without any reasoning or scholarship to back up a professor's assertions.

2

To know whether or not students have learned anything about themselves as writers—and if they have learned, what they have learned—scholars look to metacognition as a means by which to gauge growth. Scholars often attribute the term "metacognition" to John Flavell in his article, "Metacognition and Cognitive Monitoring: A New Area of Cognitive-Developmental Inquiry." Flavell describes metacognition as the "knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena" (906). Although this definition is similar to the laymen terminology, thinking about thinking, Flavell goes further to advocate for *knowledge* about thinking and not merely pondering. However, Flavell's example of the difference between cognition and metacognition is helpful in the context of this paper. Take, for instance, studying for an exam. If a student wondered if she was prepared for her exam and decided to reread the course material to gain further knowledge, this act is a cognitive experience. However, if this same student was to answer questions about the exam material from a study guide or other source and then monitor how well she was able to answer questions, she engages in a metacognitive experience. In his essay, Flavell shows how both the cognitive and metacognitive experiences combined help students to better understand what it is they are learning (910). Flavell verifies my thinking that holding students accountable for both cognitive and metacognitive experiences in the same course, with the same material, may return the most desired results because students are pushed to think more critically about their writing and are therefore delving deeper into understanding writing.

Jennifer A. Livingston's "Metacognition: An Overview" furthers our understanding of metacognition and its applications in student learning. Livingston also

shows how the simple definition of metacognition, thinking about thinking, may not be enough to help students understand what we are asking them to do in writing classes:

> Metacognition consists of both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences or regulation. Metacognitive knowledge refers to acquired knowledge about cognitive processes, knowledge that can be used to control cognitive processes [. . .]. Cognitive strategies are used to help an individual achieve a particular goal (e.g., understanding a text) while metacognitive strategies are used to ensure that the goal has been reached (e.g., quizzing oneself to evaluate one's understanding of that text). (1-2)

In applying Livingston's definitions to the composition classroom, cognitive knowledge is the content knowledge students gain in the classroom whereas metacognitive knowledge is the students' ability to articulate how the goals of the course have been met—in the case of the writing classroom, how the students have grown as writers through reflection in the portfolio and elsewhere. In seeing the close connections between cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, it is imperative to recognize how important course content then becomes for students writing reflective letters that are intended to show what they have learned and how they have applied that learning to their writing. Therefore, if we are asking students to think critically about their writing and to show us that learning through/in a metacognitive reflection letter, it becomes necessary for students to understand what we are asking for when we ask them to "reflect."

If we use Livingston's thoughts on cognitive knowledge, a concept discussed by Anis Bawarshi called "uptake" becomes of interest for our students (3). According to Bawarshi, in a conference address, "uptake constitutes a specific relation between the

known and the new, repetition and divergence. What's important to note here is that the relation between imitation and invention defined by uptake is not absolute or learned once and for all" (4). Basically, uptake is the ability for students to begin an assignment while making it their own without specifically restating the writing prompt within their own writing. Uptake is sometimes described in students' ability to take up an assignment, where "to take up" means that students reframe the assignment to make it relevant to them and not just something that they happened to be assigned out of a given context. The ability to correctly uptake comes of interest because if our students are taught, cognitively, how to take up an assignment while making it their own, they will understand the assignment and be better able to complete it successfully because they have not merely regurgitated what the professor has assigned; instead, the students reframe the assignment to make it relevant to them and place the idea within the context of what is important to them and their writing.

Further, for reflection, students must understand the assignment they are being asked to take up before they can do so in the manner in which we expect. In regards to a reflection letter, the students must understand not only what the prompt says but also what to expect from their professor. If the professor asks students to reflect on what they have learned throughout the semester and why this learning is important to future writing in which the students will engage, students who merely state that they have "learned a lot" will not complete the assignment successfully. The student who uses this assigned prompt as a springboard to discuss what she was like as a writer before the class and then specifically state what has changed about her writing and whether those changes are helpful or not is more successful because she has taken up the assignment to be relevant

to her. In the context of the study I completed, the students were successful according to the professor because they answered the question as the instructor requested. For my purposes, the student answers were not detailed enough and did not promote provocative thinking about their writing specifically; thus the students would need better directions from me in which to accurately uptake a different reflective prompt and still be successful. In a course that combines both cognitive *and* metacognitive experiences, students may not have prior knowledge of how to accurately uptake the reflective components of a writing course and will not be as successful as stringent metacognition without proper preparation and practice. With reflective practice, students gain the ability to effectively think on their writing before, during, and after learning about writing in first year composition and thus have a greater probability of transferring that knowledge to later, unrelated writing situations because the students have learned how the strategies of the writing course specifically affect them and their writing.

For the purposes of my research, Livingston's insights on cognitive versus metacognitive knowledge are supported by previous research completed by Michael Carter, who offers a discussion on the differences between general and local knowledge and their roles in the writing classroom. According to Carter, "Novices, because they are new to a knowledge domain, must rely on certain global strategies to act on whatever limited knowledge they possess about the domain" (270). If we expect our novice writers to move beyond the general knowledge that they already bring to writing situations to continue to improve their writing, we must be willing to teach students local knowledge specific to composition studies to help them understand why they are asked to do certain things with their writing. For students to understand the importance of incubation (i.e. the

act of mulling over a subject for some time before writing about it) and invention (i.e. the acquired ability of creating new writing knowledge) in writing, students must first be taught those concepts through an understanding of the terminology and the concepts beyond such ideas. Composition content can give students the "why" behind what they are asked to do in writing courses, and once students understand that "why," they can better transfer that knowledge to other writing situations. While Carter describes a distinction between general and local knowledge that will be discussed shortly, Carter first explains John R. Anderson's ideas on declarative versus procedural knowledge, which are also important to the discussion of knowledge in this paper:

> the shift from novice to expert as the transformation of declarative knowledge (verbalizable data gathered from previous experience) into procedural knowledge (internal knowledge about working within a specific domain) [. . .] the need for general strategies diminishes as the learner's knowledge becomes more procedural, but [general strategies] are not necessarily eliminated. They can be applied again in situations that may not be covered by the procedural knowledge. (273)

Students must have both declarative and procedural knowledge, where declarative knowledge gives students the reason behind the procedures they employ within their writing. Declarative knowledge then assists in the acquisition of general strategies that students can then transfer because students are learning about strategies that can work in many situations before learning about specific strategies that only work in specific situations. To link this back to metacognition, cognitive strategies not only assist students in understanding why they are asked to reflect on their learning but these strategies are

7

informed by declarative knowledge taught to students that they can then use in their writing processes.

Not only is there declarative and procedural knowledge, but Carter also offers a distinction between general and local knowledge, which helps to show how learned strategies are applied different based on the context of the situation:

one teaching goal, then, is to aid our students in the acquisition of general knowledge about writing. The other goal is to help our students to acquire appropriate local knowledge, to become a part of a writing community as defined by certain domain-specific knowledge. Writers who possess this local expertise can work fluently in a domain without having to rely on general strategies. (281)

Knowledge is not only declarative, the *why* behind writing strategies, or procedural, the *how* in writing strategies, knowledge is also both general and local. General knowledge is that knowledge which can be applied in many situations: for example, writing that is grammatically correct. Whereas local knowledge is domain specific in that it only applies to certain groups or contexts: for example, different citation styles for different types of writing. Knowledge in first year writing courses, then, must be both general and local in order to best prepare students for the plethora of writing situations they will encounter. The guiding factor for students, though, will be the metacognitive strategies students are required to employ to understand their own writing first and how to apply their learned strategies in new writing situations.

Even if we employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies in conjunction with general and local knowledge, what exactly are we asking of our students when we look for transfer of writing skills to other situations? As previously mentioned, the way in

8

which transfer operates, if at all, is not fully understood. Still, researchers are confident that the correct alignment between strategies and course content will allow students better success with knowledge transfer. Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick completed a study within a small technology university that attempted to "discern how students perceived their own process of learning to write and to understand this attitude among students" (125). These researchers found that

> the attitudes expressed by our respondents suggest that the primary obstacle to
> such transfer is not that students are *unable* to recognize situations outside FYC in
> which those skills can be used, but that students *do not look for* such situations
> because they believe that skills learned in FYC have no value in any other setting.
> (139)

For these researchers, transfer would be much more prevalent if students felt that what they learned in FYC was worthwhile knowledge and that students understood how to transfer that knowledge successfully. King Beach discusses how traditional views of transfer are more closely linked to "generalization,"

> [which] includes classical interpretations of transfer—carrying and applying
> knowledge across tasks—but goes beyond them to examine individuals *and* their
> social organizations, the ways that individuals construct associations among social
> organizations, associations that can be continuous and constant or distinctive and
> contradictory. (qtd. in Wardle "Understanding" 68)

If students can learn the strategies to generalize, by being asked to complete different writing tasks using the same strategies, they would have a better chance to use those skills later on. One way that teachers who don't necessarily advocate for specific,

9

writing-related content promote the idea of generalization and transfer is by asking students to metacognitively think on their learning and show their thinking through reflection; most often, this reflection is found solely at the end of the course in the reflection letter of the final portfolio.

For decades, teachers of all levels have used portfolios as a means of assessment in courses. From mere collections of work assembled as an example of work completed to strategic, dynamic compilations that encompass the best and worst student samples with reflections, portfolios come in many shapes and sizes within writing courses and throughout different disciplines. In fact, because of the apparent success of portfolios, many scholars have created their own compilations of work that argue for the use of portfolios. From Laurel Black et al's *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment: Reflective Practice, Critical Theory, and Large-Scale Scoring* to Kathleen Blake Yancey's *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, James Berlin, Roberta Camp, Peter Elbow, Sharon Hamilton, William Thelin, and Edward White all discuss the metacognitive benefits of portfolios. These same scholars have found that portfolios "increase student responsibility for their learning about writing" (Camp 4). This responsibility, though, is not found in the students' preference for a portfolio, since most often these assessments are assigned; rather, the students' responsibility usually falls within the portfolio's reflection letter, where students must reconsider their writing in order to see their growth as writers from the beginning of the course to its end and even beyond as they continue to grow as writers. For students to be able "to see their own writing separately and then together, in context [the context of the portfolio]" allows students to think about the knowledge they have gained throughout the course in relation to the contents of their

10

portfolios (Yancey 104). Students then are assessed not only on their writing but also on their ability to reflect on the choices they have made as writers and how what they have learned has helped them to grow as writers. Thus, the reflection letter becomes the pivotal point within the students' portfolios because it is where students decide what it is they have learned, how they have learned it, and why that learning is or is not important to their future as writers.

Alice S. Horning, in her article "Reflection and Revision: Intimacy in College Writing," states:

> First, reflective statements shed important light on the form and content of students' written work. Second, they help students become aware of their preferred approaches to writing, and enable them to take risks to try new and more productive strategies on a particular task. Third, when revising, students may examine their reflections on their earlier process of writing and consider alternative processes or approaches. Fourth, reflective writing produces an intimacy between students and teachers that enables teachers to respond to and encourage students' growth in writing skill. Lastly, the reflective statements give teachers insights into students' thinking and development not normally accessible otherwise.

Reflection gives students the ability to take control of their writing and make their learning about writing make sense to them in their own contexts. Instead of professors saying that students have learned something and why it is important, reflection allows students to decide exactly what they have learned and how they see it as important or not in their writing. Also, if reflection is found throughout the course, instructors can constantly address what students think they have learned and then guide them to new

11

ways of learning, thus promoting critical in-depth learning about writing. Horning's ideas

on reflection are all imperative to the learning community in the first year writing

classroom because of the constant interaction between what students think they are

learning and the redirection or further influence of the professor guiding students to learn

and improve it—which then may lead to students transfer of knowledge. With transfer

being the main goal of the course, metacognitive thinking through the portfolio process

shows what the students will take from the course and highlights their growth as writers,

another goal of the course. Horning is only one of many scholars who explain why

reflection in portfolios is so important for students, but Kathleen Blake Yancey, a former

National Council of Teachers of English president and author of several books on

reflection, has been one of the most quoted and notable scholars in the field of reflection.

Yancey's *Reflection in the Writing Classroom* has become a must-read for both

students and scholars of reflection. What Yancey promotes is not just reflection within a

reflection letter but also reflection throughout the entire writing process. According to

her, "we learn to understand ourselves through explaining ourselves to others. To do this,

we rely on a reflection that involves a *checking* against, a *confirming*, and a *balancing* of

self with others" (11). In other words, students must look back on what they've learned

and show that learning through a discussion of their reflection in the context of their

writing so that the students articulate their learning without relying on the professor to tell

them what they have learned. However great reflection is, though, Yancey does

acknowledge that students must first be clear about what the teacher is asking for when

she asks for reflection so that they can properly take up the assigned task of reflection. If

a teacher sees texts that are too short, uniformed, or lacking rhetorical thought, she knows

12

that the difficulty was in the clarity of the students' understanding and not necessarily their ability to reflect. For students to be able to successfully complete the final portfolio reflection, they must have practice at reflection throughout the course that gives them the ability to understand what reflection means to them and their class. Students should then be asked to reflect before, during, and after writing situations to see where they have come from as writers and where they are going; this is important because growth can only be seen if students know where they were as writers *before* learning occurred and can then describe the process of changing because of that learning. Overall, students must understand the framework of reflection, the course, and the knowledge they have gained in the course to successfully reflect on their writing and what they have learned about their prose. If students are able to reflect successfully, then they have a better chance of transferring the knowledge they have gained to future writing situations. However, this reflection may fall apart, if students are asked if they've learned *to* write versus if they have been learning *about* their writing.

Moreover, Bergmann and Zepernick see another goal for FYC that moves beyond traditional notions: "A solution [. . .] could be provided by a FYC course that introduced students explicitly to the concept of disciplinarity and focused less on teaching students how to write than on teaching students *how to learn to write*" (142). With this modified goal, students can take more control of their own learning and thus will take responsibility for what they need to take out of the course for their future careers. Further, teaching students "how to learn to write" might be more measurable in that students can identify specific strategies learned about instead of generalizing their degree of success. One approach to FYC that brings together specific content and teaching students how to

learn to write is the writing about writing approach. It is through the study of this approach and all its projected positive outcomes that I first became interested in how students *use* the declarative knowledge taught in writing about writing classrooms. Because of my interest in revamping course content, the following research project aims to see if—and how— course content shows itself in students' final reflection letters. To do so, I discuss portfolio reflection letters in conjunction with a small study completed with students in two sections of an undergraduate first year writing course. It was my original hope that course content would play a role in the students' reflections, and show how that course content affected students' abilities to clearly articulate whether or not they have grown as writers. If course content did not appear in students' reflections, I planned to look at what students *were* saying in the reflections and see how those ideas were reflected in their revisions and in their interview responses.

METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

The research design becomes an important factor in any study's success. The target group of students for this study was two different sections of a first year composition course taught by one instructor, Ms. Thompson, from the University of Dayton, a private, Catholic, liberal arts school of 7,000 undergraduate students in Dayton, Ohio. The sample size was determined by how many students volunteered for the study. Originally, five students from one section of the course and five students from the other section made for a combined total of ten students in the study—four male, six female. Students were informed that their volunteering meant that they could also opt out at any time during the study. By the end of the study, eight students remained—three male: Jamie, Mike, Brent and five female: Natasha, Carrie, Brooke, Kalie, Meghan. In addition, students were not given any compensation or incentive by myself or the instructor to complete the study, so students did not feel compelled to give me the answers they thought I wanted. To protect both the students and the instructor, pseudonyms are used to discuss the results of the study to ensure confidentiality.

I used qualitative research methods to collect data for this study: field observations, interviews with both the students and the instructor, reviews of student writing throughout the semester, and most importantly, document analysis of the students' final portfolios and reflection letters. The field observations allowed me to observe how the class design and course content impacted students' thinking about their

15

own writing while the interviews allowed me to ask specific questions of the students about their writing. Throughout the semester, I also looked at all papers turned in to the instructor to see how the students progressed through each draft. Finally, I reviewed the students' reflection letters at the end of the term and compared their observations with what I saw in their final paper revisions. Originally, I hoped to see if what students *thought* they did aligned with what actually *happened* in the revisions, and I planned to code the reflection letters against the revisions. What happened in reality changed the way I looked at reflection letters and revisions, which will be discussed in the results/implications sections.

This study had many limitations that affected the research. First, the sample size was small. However, the eight students were enough to gain some preliminary insight on course content appearing in students' reflections of their writing; and if course content did appear, how did the course content appear in the reflections. All students were from two sections of a class taught by the same instructor, which didn't allow for much variation in how the class was taught. The length of the study was constrained to one semester to allow me to complete this project on time. And finally, the analysis of documents was subject to my interpretation of the students' reflections and how those reflections manifested in revisions. This possibility of subjectivity can be problematic especially when I wasn't present for most classes to see what ideas the students may have picked up from course content that weren't delineated by the instructor's plans or goals for the course. Overall, this was an initial and tentative attempt at seeing whether or not the issue of transference in conjunction with specific course content warrants further investigation.

FINDINGS

Classroom Observation

Before conducting interviews, I observed Ms. Thompson's classes on three separate occasions between February 12th and February 19th, 2009. On the last day of observation, I spoke to the class, explained my study, and asked for volunteers. Ten students filled out consent forms on the spot and were accepted into the study, although two later withdrew.

Ms. Thompson scheduled student workshopping days during my first two observations. Before coming to the class, I received the guidelines for the assignment on which students were working:

Summary/Critique – In the Critique essay, you will summarize and critique a scholarly article of your choice. You will identify positive and/or negative aspects of the text and construct an argument based on those elements. You should choose to critique an article on a topic that interests you because this assignment can be the start of the research for your final research paper. (Thompson "Summary")

According to Ms. Thompson, the goals for the workshops included: "ensuring students understood the assignment; making sure students were addressing the assignment in the writing they had done and brought to class; helping students look at and critique article choices; and helping students look at completed paragraphs to see where they could

17

expand on the analysis/critique portion of the essay" (Thompson). Even with these overall goals, however, the instructor did account for the fact that different students would have different needs depending on where they were in the process of completing the assignment. Overall, Ms. Thompson wanted time in class to discuss with each student her progress and find ways to be the most successful.

Upon my first observation, students appeared confused as to the purpose of the workshop class. Instead of using their laptops to work on their papers, as suggested by Ms. Thompson, students were chatting with one another. Some students took the time to ask the instructor questions about the upcoming conferences, but as I saw through students coaxing their friends to speak up but refusing to do so, other students had questions that they refused to vocalize to the class. Ms. Thompson began passing back the students' article choices, which prompted many students to ask questions about the instructor's feedback. Fifteen minutes into the class, the instructor pulled the class together for a discussion on graphic organizers to help students think about ways to organize their papers.

Afterwards, Ms. Thompson began speaking each student one at a time at his or her desks to see what help students needed. Conversations ranged from picking an article and a topic to write on to specific writing questions—like thesis statements and organization—to questions about how to make an argument. Frequently, the instructor asked most of the questions and talked more than the student. Still, a few students seemed to have a lot to say, and these students received most of Ms. Thompson's attention. At one point, the instructor called the class back together for a discussion on thesis sentences. She asked for a volunteer to read his/her thesis to the class. One student, Jamie

18

who eventually joined this study, read his thesis to the class: "This article was persuasive in some ways but not in others. My paper will look at the persuasiveness of the article." The instructor called on students to give their opinions on the first student's thesis. One student asked, "Aren't you only supposed to say one side?," to which the instructor answered with a brief lecture on the types of things students can do with their thesis sentences. Throughout these two classes, students mostly worked alone or one-on-one with the instructor but were pulled together from time to time for these types of mini-lessons. Ms. Thompson ended these classes by making sure students were aware of the due date for their essays and what she would be looking for when she reviewed their final drafts.

On the third day of my observations, Ms. Thompson talked to students about supporting claims and how to use evidence in their papers. The class worked together to create acceptable topic sentences for different arguments. The first class did not seem to get to the point that the instructor was hoping for because she continually redirected their thinking. For example, when asking about which topic sentence best fit the theme of the paragraph, students picked sentences that were more supporting sentences than they were topic sentences. However, the second class picked up on her line of questioning much more quickly and had more time to work on their own topic sentences for their papers because they showed that they understood the difference between topic and supporting sentences. As they did so, the instructor moved throughout the class talking to the students and answering questions. Many students asked questions and received assistance on supporting their topic sentences and citations. At the end of class, Ms. Thompson did a mini-lesson on citation and plagiarism issues in the papers. In a sidebar after class, the

19

instructor spoke to me of the importance of the mini-lessons in helping students combat writing issues before they became a problem for the entire class. She felt that it was more beneficial to address the entire group instead of singling students out with particular problems; in this way, Ms. Thompson was able to review important concepts with all students to prepare them for future writing situations.

First Interview Set

The first interviews with the students took place on February 24th during the students' classes. The goal of these interviews was to gain insight on how the students described their class, the goal was for their class, and the point of the instructor's use of portfolio evaluation. When I asked students to describe their class, they offered a variety of responses. Two students, Mike and Carrie, commented on the "Humanities Base principles" that the course promoted. These comments are relevant in that on page one of the instructor's syllabus, students are informed that "all of this reading, writing, and critical thinking will be grounded in the Humanities Base Theme: 'What does it mean to be human?'" (Thompson "Syllabus"). These two students pulled from both the syllabus and the readings of the course to understand that part of the class was based on the university's goal of bringing awareness to social issues. Others picked up on the social issues idea by talking about the class being "argument based." Out of the eight, three commented on argumentation as a focus of the course: Carrie, Meghan, and Brent. These same three students discussed "current issues" as a focus as well. Although being argument based or discussing current issues is not directly connected to the Humanities Base themes, these three students did discuss the themes along with their description of

the class. In sum, five total students commented on the themes when asked to describe

the class, while the other three students described the class as having more to do with

writing. Jamie said that the instructor "explained how [writing] should be" and how to

make changes in writing, and Brooke described how the class helped students "develop

papers." Kalie found that the course helped her "brainstorm ideas" with other people.

Another student described the class more negatively. Natasha said the class

included a lot of "irrelevant work." When asked what she meant by the comment,

Natasha noted the "grammar packets" the instructor used to teach some basic writing

skills. Although most of these students only described the class briefly, in addition to his

first description, Mike said part of the class focused on teaching how to "analyze literary

devices." From the three observations, I see where students assimilated these ideas.

Having seen mini-lessons on citation, paper organization, and sources, the students

learned about the writing process and researching through problems brought up in class.

One of the course objectives also states that students will be able to "adopt a process

approach to writing" (Thompson "Syllabus"). Since students are told at the beginning of

the course that they should be looking at their writing process, the students' comments on

"how to write papers" appear to be valid.

Further, some students focused more on the atmosphere of the class in parts of

their descriptions. I told them to describe the class to me as if I were a friend or another

student looking to take that specific instructor's class. With this in mind, Jamie

commented on how "laid back" the instructor was while Brooke said that the class was

very "interactive and involved." Several students discussed how comfortable they were in

the class; however, three students did comment on the "unnecessary" nature of some of

21

the readings. When asked to clarify this observation, one student, Mike, described the readings on the Humanities Base Theme as being "irrelevant." Although the comments about the Humanities Base Theme were few, they appeared when discussing the activities of the course. The student who commented on the "grammar packets" felt that the information was too "high school oriented" and not relevant to her as a college student. Although some students saw the more basic aspects, such as citation and organization of papers, as being "too basic," the majority only commented on argumentation and the Humanities Base Theme. With such differences in opinion among students, I struggled with understanding how the class promoted student retention of writing activities.

In addition to describing the class, I asked students what they saw as the goal of the course, knowing that students had already received their course syllabus and introductory classes. Six of the eight students, Jamie, Natasha, Brooke, Kalie, Meghan, and Brent, said the goal of the class was either to "teach students how to write" or to "prepare students for the rest of college." With such a lack of consensus in the descriptors of the class, I was surprised that the students overwhelmingly agreed on the goal of the course. However, Mike said he had "no clue" what the course goal was, but he guessed that it had something to do with the Humanities Base Theme. Finally, Carrie described the goal as being "to integrate humanities themes and ethical issues" into writing. Although only two students differed in their opinions on the goal of the course, I understood the differences for the same reasons that there were differences with the descriptors of the course; similarly, students responded quite differently when asked about the goal of the portfolio in the course.

Since it was still toward the beginning of the semester, I knew that students hadn't been discussing the final form of evaluation for the course often, but I wanted to see what students understood so far about portfolio evaluation. Two students, Natasha and Meghan, conceded that they had "no idea" what to make of the portfolios, while three other students, Jamie, Brooke, and Brent, gave some version of the portfolios being "to evaluate teachers." The three final students, however, found that the portfolios were more to "see how their writing evolved over time" or to "show students' growth as writers." Again, the students had varying opinions on the goal of the portfolios, but I knew I'd compare student responses from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. Overall, I learned more about student perceptions at the beginning of the semester from the syllabus they had received and the activities the students completed in class.

Instructor Interview

My interview with Ms. Thompson, the instructor, took place the week prior to the second set of student interviews. My goal for this discussion was to see how she thought the class had been going. I also wanted to see what Ms. Thompson thought her students would see as the goal of the course, knowing that they had received goals on their syllabus but that what they did on a daily basis would dictate their thoughts more than that piece of paper distributed at the beginning of the semester. In general, my intention was to get the instructor's viewpoint before speaking with the students.

When I asked Ms. Thompson about how she thought the class was going, she said that she had found her students weren't trying as hard on their first drafts of papers because they were relying on the revisions. She also stated that most students were

23

putting off their revisions to the end and finding it a daunting task. However, she thought she'd reached her goal of making her students more aware of their audience when writing and how to critically read articles and other texts. She clarified her conclusions by saying that students were improving and showing that they understood her as the audience because subsequent revisions addressed the issues she pointed out to students.

In the interview, I inquired as to what Ms. Thompson hoped the students would say they've learned throughout the semester. She highlighted eight concepts that she hoped students would comment on: how to create an argument based on research and driven by their ideas; how to negotiate scholarly sources better; how to find and read sources; how to read and understand sources; how to better handle reading scholarly sources; how to successfully provide support and detail for engaging analysis; how to translate outside "reflection" to learn its usefulness; and how to improve writing and become more confident in themselves as writers. These ideas are presented in the order in which Ms. Thompson gave them to me in the interview. Overall, she hoped the students would comment that they'd learned more about their writing and become more aware of the things they commonly do—as well as having become more open to revising their papers.

Second Interview Set

The second set of interviews took place on Thursday, April 23, and as it was the last day of the course, students also spent time completing the final evaluations for the course. The focus of these interviews was to have the students reflect on the semester and see what they thought the goal of the course was at the end of the semester. I planned to

24

compare their statements to those stated at the beginning of the course. Another aspect of these interviews was to see what purpose the students saw in the final reflection letters assigned to their portfolios and then what they were thinking of writing in those reflections. As a whole, the students were very positive about the semester and thought they'd learned a lot.

Before discussing the reflection letters, I first asked students what they thought they'd learned in the course. Out of the eight students, three students, Jamie, Meghan, and Brent, commented that they learned how to better organize their papers and being better able to develop their ideas for their papers. Natasha, who was the most negative of students in the first set of interviews, commented that the only thing she learned was that she writes differently than others and that she would need to keep that in mind for the future. Kalie, Carrie, and Brooke all commented in more detail about what they specifically learned about their ideas. Kalie said she learned how to actually make assertions within her papers while Brent said he'd learned how to properly support those assertions he was making. Carrie commented that she worked hard on being more concise and being better able to simplify her ideas to make them more understandable to her readers. Mike, though, found that the only thing he'd learned about his writing was how to fix "silly mistakes" that he made on papers and that he didn't feel he'd had to do much work other than that. All eight students found something to take away from the course that in some way had to deal with their writing.

When asked about the overall goal of the course, five of the eight students claimed the goal was to become a better writer—in almost those exact words—which correlates with the ideas they pulled from the course. However, these students were not

25

able to discuss in detail why they thought learning to write better was the goal of the course. Jamie said, "I don't know. It's pretty general, but I don't know." Brooke said that the goal was to be better at writing because "we need to recognize what we need to work on." These students could give examples for the things they did in class that they thought helped fulfill that goal. For example, Meghan said that the instructor "encouraged students" and promoted "free writing"; Mike described how they wrote "a lot of papers, just practiced"; and Carrie stated that they learned "how to write in the real world." So although students couldn't discuss the actual goal in detail, they could back up how they thought the goal was being met.

On the other hand, the other four students had a mixture of reactions to the goal of the course. Natasha felt that the goal of the class was "just to experience portfolio grading, because [she'd] never done that before" and to "introduce a couple different styles of things you may have to write in the future," although she said she personally didn't know why or how to use those styles later on. Kalie thought the goal of the course was to "express [themselves] more" as writers and to learn how to "make assertions with evidence because a lot of fields require you to know exactly what you are saying." Both Natasha and Kalie were able to describe their ideas in much more detail than the five students who said the goal of the course was learning how to write better. Further, Brent described how the course helped him to "develop more as, like, I think of like more of a well-rounded person" and how to "explain our beliefs better" based on the Humanities Base Theme.

As with the first interview set, some students gave multiple goals for the course. Natasha also said the goal was to experience portfolio grading; further, she said the

26

course was meant to expose students to different writing styles, although she didn't know when she'd need those styles again. The students who did not specifically state that becoming a better writer was a goal of the course explained their answers in much more detail than did those who simply stated that the goal was to become a better writer. It is interesting to note this difference because the students who said the goal of the course was to become a better writer assumed that I knew what they meant by being a better writer. Even when prompted to give more detail, students rarely were able to give concrete examples of how the goal of the course was prevalent. The students who thought of other goals felt the need to explain those goals more, almost as if justifying their reason for the course goal *not* being to learn more about writing. Those who didn't talk about learning to become a better writer were able to discuss their ideas in more detail, giving examples of what they meant by their assertions (citation, organization, etc). However, those who said the goal was to learn to be a better writer were more brief, less descriptive, possibly because they thought this goal was more self-explanatory.

The final part of the interview was to get the students' perspectives on the final reflection letter. First, I asked students what they thought was the purpose of the reflection letter was. Jamie said that the reflection letter was to give the teacher feedback on the course, but he didn't "know who reads those [letters]." Another male student, Mike, said that the letters were for the instructor's reference, "to see what she needs to correct" in the course to make the letter better. Five other students, Meghan, Kalie, Carrie, Brooke, and Brent, said that the letters were meant to show where they were as writers before the course and where they ended as writers at the end of the course, thus showing growth as writers. Natasha, thought the letters were meant to show "that maybe

27

part of the class wasn't a waste of time" and that she "did get something out of [the course]." Overall, five students talked more about the students improving as writers while the other three directed comments more toward the instructor or justifying the course.

The second question I asked of students was what they thought they would put into their own reflection letters. Although student opinions differed as to the point of the reflection letters, all students then commented quite similarly as to what they would put into their reflections. Brooke said that she would "probably talked about how like she pointed out things I liked improved on, like word choice and phrasing." Carrie said that she would point to the "revisions and how my writing's improved even just a little bit." Kalie didn't point to anything specific she would say just that she knew it was meant "to see if you actually learned anything." Following Kalie, Mike also didn't discuss what he would put into the letter so much as how he thought that "this semester was more of like a review, like going deeper into each [type of writing]." Natasha was the only student who hadn't thought about the reflection at all and had no clue what she would write in her reflection. Meghan, however, said that she would talk about everything she learned about "writing research" and "how to organize" her papers. In contrast to Natasha, Jamie had already completed his reflection by the time of the interview and said that he'd discussed "what I'm doing to improve my writing." Brent saw the reflection as a culmination of the course from where he'd come from as a writer to where he currently was as a writer. In all, the students mostly commented about learning about writing in some way, and I believe this says a lot about the instructor's ability to bring all students together under a common mission for the class. Students discussed putting what they were doing to improve their writing in their letters; others discussed what they'd learned

about their writing in general; still others said what they'd learned about their writing

very specifically; and finally, some students said they would write about their growth

from one point as a writer to where they'd like to be as a writer. Together, these

comments all discuss the students' writing abilities.

Reflection Cover Letter

From the handout given by the instructor, the following are the guidelines

students received as to what to include in their "reflection" cover letter:

> **Cover letter, 2 pages.** Please write a cover letter in which you reflect on the work
>
> you did this semester. Discuss what you did well, what areas you need to improve,
>
> and what your future writing goals are. What have you learned this semester? How
>
> have you developed as a writer? Feel free to express yourself as honestly as
>
> possible – the content of the letter will not impact your grade. (Thompson "Cover
>
> Letter")

The students were given this description as well as the other assigned contents of their

portfolio.

Out of the eight students, five students wrote reflections formatted as essays while

the other three were formatted as letters. Two students specifically spoke to a "you"

audience, and from the comments, that audience would be the instructor of the course.

Two other students wrote to the "portfolio reader" and the "portfolio committee," either

of which could include the instructor. Five of the students wrote to a general audience,

shown by their use of "the instructor" and "English 102." Reflections varied in length

from one-and-a-half pages to three-and-a-half pages. The differences were surprising to

me since the instructor specifically stated that the reflection was a "letter" and was to be "2 pages" in length (Thompson "Cover Letter").

Meghan wrote the beginning of her reflection as a review of the assignments from the course and gave a description of what each paper was and what she wrote for each. Following her brief descriptions of the course assignments, Meghan reflected on her writing, briefly, by describing how she'd improved her sentence structure through the class. She then commented on her dislike of the portfolio grading system and finished her letter by saying that the course was a good experience overall. Meghan's reflection didn't go into much detail about her writing or writerly growth, but her overwhelming focus on describing the course assignments. The fact that she addressed her letter "To Whom It May Concern," lead me to believe that she did not feel her instructor was her audience.

On the other hand, Natasha did write a lot about what she'd learned about her writing style. She found that she was more creative and vague than her instructor seemed to like; she clarified this by saying that she didn't give as much detail and assumed her reader knew what she was talking about and that the instructor didn't want her to assume. She had to learn how to be more clear and concise with her ideas. Although she expressed frustration with the course and the assignments, she said she learned from revising and that she had to alter her writing habits. Natasha's frustration, though, I felt throughout the entire semester. She was the student who thought some aspects of the course were "irrelevant" and "unnecessary." However, I believe that her feelings intensified because of a clash between her and the instructor. In her final interview, Natasha made a remark about the instructor being "barely older" than her and that the instructor treated the students in the class as if they were "babies." Natasha's interviews

30

were by far the most negative toward the professor and the class, which wasn't surprising since she had trouble with Ms. Thompson and plagiarism.

Like Meghan, Kalie also wrote most of her reflection as a reflection of the course assignments. She used over a page and a half describing each assignment, analyzing why she chose certain assignments, and commenting on how she thought each paper turned out. She described how she learned how to explain her assertions and how to elaborate more in her writing. Kalie felt a great need to include personal details in not only every choice in the portfolio, but she also showed how each essay contained pieces of personal experience so that her audience could better connect with her writing. This response was not surprising since, in both interviews, Kalie spoke about her personal experiences and how they impacted her writing. Overall, she said she learned throughout the semester but did not give many specifics since her focus was on the assignments.

Mike, though, focused his reflection less on his personal experience and more toward what he thought the instructor should and should not do the next time she teaches this course. He made comments on the course being more of a review but that he liked most of the readings. At one point, Mike said that the instructor "should make sure [she] previews the material that [she] assigns" to the class. The comment came after his description of how unprepared students were for some classes. He said that the students were very obvious in that they hadn't completed the day's reading, and he felt that the instructor was unprepared for those days. In a discussion with my advisor, he asked about this students' position, and I surmised that this student felt that the teacher had the burden of having other activities ready when students had not followed their end of the bargain for class discussions. Mike observed that the instructor didn't have anything prepared in

31

case students either refused or couldn't discuss the reading due to lack of preparation. He also commented that he generally liked the professor and that he thought he learned a lot from revising papers, but he didn't give any specifics as to what he learned.

Brent described things that he'd done well in the course, but the following are not necessarily writing related: turned all work in on time, didn't miss many days in class, participated a lot in class, was attentive when in class, turned in "quality" work. Brent responded as though he was defending whatever grade he received or thought he would receive. He also described things he didn't do so well, and these were more writing related: "silly mistakes" in writing and trouble with citations. Brent described things he liked about the course and that he didn't like the portfolio grading system at all because he didn't know what his actual "grade" was throughout the course. The ending to his reflective essay was vague and wasn't very helpful in giving me information about him, his writing, or the instructor's class.

Jamie went further than other students in describing what "you" (the instructor) had done to help him understand the mistakes he was making in his writing: conferencing with him and writing suggestions on his revisions. He found that he learned a lot about organizing and developing his papers, but he still felt like he had more to learn. Jamie used a half a page to describe how different writing for this instructor's class was compared to scientific writing. He felt that the writing in this class required more "figurative language and fluff" than he'd ever have to write in the future. He ended his essay by describing how "cool" the instructor was and how well she related to students.

Brooke was the most brief of all the students in her interview. She wrote that she learned a lot, but like other students, she didn't go into any specifics. Brooke commented

that she still has things to learn but that she can now identify the areas she struggles with in her writing; again, she didn't go into any detail about what she struggled with or what she thought she'd done well. Since I couldn't question her because interviews had taken place before reflections were turned in, Brooke's reflection didn't give me much with which to work.

The final student, Carrie, described each assignment in detail, as if writing to someone who hadn't been in the class. She then described how she felt good about the content of her papers and that she knew she still needed to improve on sentence structure and grammar. In the future, Carrie described how she plans to work on her procrastination so that she can address her writing concerns. She concluded her essay by describing what she learned about correcting citations in her papers. Carrie was one of the students who pointed specifically to something she'd taken from the class.

Overall, the students were not specific about their progress when they were writing about it in their reflections. Although my intention was to compare what students were saying in the reflection letters with what they did in their revisions of their papers, I found that I had nothing to really compare. Most students did not point to anything specific that could be found in their revisions as they were very general. For example, I had expected students to share how lessons on citation helped them to better use secondary sources and then be able to see well-used source citations in their papers; however, I did not find any specifics. For transfer to occur, I knew it was important to look at what students thought they'd learned and how it has specifically impacted their writing; without such detail in their reflections, I am not sure that the students have shown that they actually did learn or how they can use that learning in the future—

students did not show that there was much for them to actually transfer to other writing situations. If the reflection assignment sheet had specifically required that students give concrete examples, then I may have been able to compare those specifics with what students did in their revisions. Since what I found wasn't what I'd expected, I had to rethink how the results I had gained squared with what I was hoping to find.

RESULTS

Because the findings from this study turned out differently than I'd anticipated, the following results and implications do not necessarily answer the questions I'd originally asked. In light of this information, this section will focus on what I did learn from the study, while the implications sections will show the direction this study will have to take in order to address the questions I'd originally sought to understand.

To review the purpose of the original study, I began looking to see if/how course content played a role in students' reflection letters. If course content was evident in the letters, I wanted to see how that content affected students' abilities to clearly articulate their growth as writers. However, if course content didn't appear in students' reflections, I planned to look at what students actually discussed in their letters and see how those ideas manifested within the portfolio revisions. From my perspective, though, course content didn't much affect the students' reflections, and the ideas on which they did reflect didn't point to anything specific I could assess in the portfolio revisions. With this in mind, I've come to see that there are many factors that influenced students in their reflection letters that were at odds for this study; most importantly is the fact that I assumed I would find something that I did not. In order to address what I did think I would find, I will look at these factors and what would need changed in a future study to address my concerns.

My first observation was that the students' perspectives on the course changed throughout the semester. At the beginning of the term, many students focused on the "Humanities Base Theme" as being the goal of the course; however, by the end of the course, the majority of the students' thinking evolved and they said the goal of the course was actually "growing as writers." From what I learned in the instructor's interview, the students learned exactly what the instructor had hoped they would, though the university's expectation of assisting students with moral choices deterred students at the beginning of the course because many students thought the goal of the course was centered on the Humanities Base Theme. Not only was the instructor's goal realized by students, but students also felt that the instructor achieved her goal. All eight students found something that they had learned in the course. From student interviews, the instructor interview, and reflection letters, students were overwhelmingly positive about their progress as writers and what they'd learned—which is one of the first steps in being able to retain their learning for future use.

Even though students were optimistic about the fact that they had learned, many did not point specifically to the things they had learned or how they'd learned them, probably because they were not *specifically* asked to do so. Even in their reflection letters, where I hoped they would articulate this information according to the prompt, students replied in various ways, causing me to wonder why they did not fall back on things they had specifically discussed in the course that affected their learning. One reason for this may have been that students understood the assignment did not count toward their final grade; therefore, they did not take the reflection seriously. Another reason for this could be that the prompt did not specifically point students to the type of

36

students did learn about their writing in the instructor's class. By her words, the instructor felt the students learned. And judging by the reflection letters and interview questions, I can see that the students did, indeed, feel they learned; however, when asked, students did not articulate how this "learning" occurred or how it would assist them in future writing situations. For the students to *show* that learning occurred without just *telling* me or the instructor, these students needed an actual prompt telling them exactly how to reflect on the semester. It is my thinking that the implementation of reflection in the writing classroom in conjunction with the writing about writing approach to teaching first year composition would better assist these students in being able to articulate their growth as writers and to show how that growth may assist them in the future because students would have practiced reflection throughout the course and have been prepared for the final task of reflecting on the entire semester. Not only would this help students with their first year composition course, but students would also have a greater chance at transferring the learning that did occur if they could better articulate what they actually *did* learn. With the students having shown a basic ability to reflect, I can only assume that near transfer is possible and not far transfer. However, if students were able to show a greater ability to reflect and to be able to apply their knowledge in more critical ways, these same students might have a greater chance at far transfer of writing-related knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The major goal of this study was that I would either find course content within the students' reflections or some other learning that I could then refer to in students' portfolio revisions. Since neither of these occurred, I feel that my study is incomplete. The following section of my thesis will focus on what I need to do next in order to answer my questions and highlight the research behind these ideas.

From my research, I have found that students must have concrete knowledge in order to effectively reflect on what they learned through the course of a semester. According to Bower, "to be effective, reflective thinking should be bound up in the philosophy of writing as a whole, recognizing that the development of reflective ability is highly individualized and creatively cognitive" (64). Reflection "bound up in the philosophy of writing" seems to speak to a specific course content that would give students the common knowledge set to talk about their writing not only to themselves but also to others in the course. If we consider Livingston's ideas on metacognition, which highlight what reflection is asking students to do, students need to know about their "cognitive processes [and] knowledge that can be used to control cognitive processes" (1). Students need common course content to be able to first understand what growing as a writer means and how to analyze not only their own writing but others' writing as well. Once students have knowledge of cognitive processes, they can then begin to think metacognitively, using higher order thinking skills to analyze their own writing and thus

create a better opportunity for the possibility of transfer. The difficulty here, though, is that little current course content in first year composition has proven to give students the cognitive knowledge to then use in metacognitive contexts—thus the reason for this research.

In order to gain cognitive knowledge, students can be required to read research and essays on writing and the application of writing knowledge in order to better understand their own writing, such as Sondra Perl's "Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers". Students could then learn from students who had trouble with writing in college to place themselves within the spectrum of good to improving writers. Also, if students saw that many types of writers, both good and poor, have issues and that there are ways to combat said issues. If students were taught using this method, they may be better able to acknowledge what they do and do not know about writing in general and be able to apply successful strategies to their own writing. Currently, several scholars are advocating a "writing about writing approach" to first year composition.

Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have written about this new approach to FYC that may not only give students the declarative knowledge needed to move from cognitive processes to metacognitive thinking but also assist students in transferring that knowledge to other writing situations. In their pivotal article, "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" Downs and Wardle espouse a "writing about writing approach" that "seeks to improve students' understanding of writing, rhetoric, language, and literacy in a course that is topically oriented to reading and writing as scholarly inquiry and encouraging more realistic understandings of writing" (553). In this type of course,

40

"students read writing research, conduct reading and writing auto-ethnographies, identify writing-related problems that interest them, write reviews of the existing literature on their chosen problems, and conduct their own primary research, which they report both orally and in writing" (558). With this approach, students are given declarative knowledge in a class built around helping them understand writing in general then pushing students to address their own writing using what they've learned. This approach has many possibilities and was the source of inspiration for my study when I found that Downs and Wardle did not discuss portfolio reflection letters as a means by which to evaluate if the goals of the course actually came true for students. However, my studying a course not as aligned to the goals and ideals of a more writing about writing centered course as I would have expected made for an inconclusive study for me. My next step, then, is to use a course whose pedagogy supports these principles and then see if/how the course content affects students in their metacognition and final reflection letters. The following will describe such a class and how it may better assist in helping students understand their own writing.

For this class, I will combine aspects of the writing about writing approach with an intense reflection focus, drawn from Yancey's research. To begin this course, students will write a Literacy Narrative in which they will discuss their literacy background and preconceived notions of good and poor writing. From this activity, I will be able to see where students' ideas are about writing and literacy before diving in to a different style of learning about writing than most students will be used to. Using ideas from Downs and Wardle, students will then read scholarly research in composition studies, such as: excerpts from Donald Murray's *Write to Learn*; excerpts from Janet Emig's *Composing*

41

Processes of 12th Graders; Carol Berkenkotter's "Composing Processes of Unskilled

College Writers"; Anis Bawarshi's "Genres as Forms of In(ter)vention"; John Swales'

"The Concept of Discourse Community"; and Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy."

In using scholarship such as this, students will discuss issues such as uptake, incubation,

writing processes, good/poor writing, literacy, etc. In this way, students will be able to

learn more about writing through working with and experiencing writing, not through my

lecturing them on writing correctly. Students will use the writing scholarship as a

springboard to think of their own literacy questions, which they will then research with

both primary and secondary research and sharing their findings with their classmates. In

order to do this type of research, students will learn both about conducting their own

research with data collection and supporting their research with secondary sources.

Students will complete a variety of writing assignments dealing with their research,

including: paper proposals, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, conference

papers, and then students will present their findings to the class. In addition to their own

research, students will discuss the scholarly articles to provide insight on their own

writing and will workshop all major writing assignments to put their critiquing skills to

good use.

To finish the course, students will compile a portfolio of their best writing from

the course and will be asked to complete two assignments in addition to their paper

revisions. First, students will be asked to evaluate their own portfolio using the ideas

they've learned throughout the course. Students will have to access the cognitive

knowledge they've gained to discuss why they made the revisions they did and in turn

what they learned about their own writing. Second, students will be asked to complete

portfolio reflections that address their metacognitive needs. This component of the portfolio, though, will follow up on the metacognitive activities asked of them throughout the semester.

In addition to students learning based off the Downs and Wardle approach, students will learn more about their own writing through metacognition and reflection, courtesy of Yancey's ideas on the two subjects. For the greatest chance of success, Yancey suggests that students complete three types of reflection: reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, and reflection-in-presentation (13-14). Reflection-in-action is "the process of reviewing and projecting and revising, which takes place within a composing event, and the associated texts" (13). For this type of reflection, students will complete reading responses in which they must respond to course readings and show how those readings relate to their own writing or not. Constructive reflection includes "the process of developing a cumulative, multi-selved, multi-voiced identity, which takes place between and among composing events, and the associated texts" (13). Students will complete reflections for each writing assignment and the associated workshopping for that assignment. Here, students will address what they've learned about their own writing and about writing in general. And finally, reflection-in-presentation is "the process of articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variable of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience" (14). To address this type of reflection, students will complete a reflective letter at the end of the course to address their learning, both cognitive and metacognitive. To further facilitate metacognitive learning, students will keep a journal of all reading responses and reactions to course discussions. Overall, students will reflect before, during, and after writing assignments

43

and will be asked to use course content to explain their thoughts on their own writing. Combining the writing about writing approach and an intense study of reflection and metacognition, students will read about writing research, discuss research, complete their own research, and apply their learning to their own writing and their peers' writing.

However, not all instructors have the freedom to completely switch over to this combination of writing about writing and an intense study of reflection. Instructors who cannot change the readings of their given courses can use the readings they do have to push students to think about how the readings directly influence their own writing. These students may even have to think more critically outside the context of the writing about writing approach in orders to create their own context for written assignments. Mostly, for professors outside of writing about writing, structuring the assignments so that students can adequately take them up successfully becomes an important aspect of assisting students with learning about their writing. Reflection then becomes the key stone while the course content is the foundation for which reflection is built upon.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Not only will I complete a preliminary study with my own class, but another aspect of the research will have to come from other instructors teaching the writing about writing approach. If I collaborated with others and surveyed their students' final reflection letters, I would get a more complex view of how this approach affects student metacognition and the application of cognitive knowledge. This method would allow me to see how a variety of people teaching the same course content affected student metacognition, normalizing the study by removing the variables of specific teachers' styles. Also, if researchers outside of composition began studying how our classes either foster or do not foster metacognition, we may get an even clearer picture of how reflection functions in a classroom with specific course content. These ideas, in turn, can move toward addressing the idea of transfer, which as mentioned before, has not been proven to happen in writing classes.

Part of the research in transfer, though, has to do with *course content*. Writing specialists need to work together to research the best course content to teach in first year writing. Currently, some instructors teach using literature; others use current events; still others use a variety of topics and allow students to choose from what interests students most—though this makes sense because of academic freedom in teaching. With such a plethora of course content found in first year composition courses, though, it becomes difficult to say what best helps students access writing knowledge. The question of

45

agreed upon course content will have major implications for the field of composition studies because it will determine whether or not the literature of the discipline can "out do" decades of teaching with literature. The course content debate, then, will either further the agenda of writing specialists or will solidify the place of writing within traditional English departments. However, teachers will still have to find ways to maintain academic freedom to ensure that the courses are indeed their own and that they believe in what they are teaching. A study that compares and contrasts the perceived learning of students using different types of course content would be a first step in deciding on successful course content for promoting both near and far transfer in student learning about writing.

In addition to addressing course content, education specialists will need to address the question of what *strategies* best promote learning and far transfer. From the previously identified research, first year composition strives for far transfer, and those researching reflection advocate reflection as the means by which to achieve far transfer. As suggested before, far transfer is how students apply the knowledge they gained in the composition course to remote writing situations. If we want to know that students are indeed learning, we need to know what strategies are proven to actually help students transfer the learning that occurs in the classroom to outside situations. For example, researchers may set up a study where students are taught the same section of a writing course, at the same university, with the same expectations and course content, but the difference would come in the strategies used to teach each course. Both student and instructor interviews would be useful in conjunction with classroom observations to discuss the success of the strategies in regards to near transfer. Researchers would then

have to continue working with students from these courses throughout their time at the university to see how the success of the strategies in future writing situations to see if far transfer occurred.

The combination of researching both course content and teaching strategies that can be acknowledged as most successful will go a long way in assisting our students with becoming better writers.

CONCLUSION

The combination of my research in transfer, metacognition, and reflection with my interest in the writing about writing pedagogy have led me to believe that the best way in which to assist first year writing students is to teach them about their writing and how to constantly reflect on that writing. From an email interview with Kathy Yancey, I have come to realize that the writing about writing course content is what will give students the "framework" that they should access when being asked to complete the difficult task of reflection. Without this framework, students must rely on whatever general strategies with which they entered the course. What we are asking students to learn, though, moves beyond general strategies toward specific, declarative knowledge that they can then access when explaining their learning. The writing about writing pedagogy without consistent reflection is just knowledge not put to use. Reflection without the guidelines of a proper framework sets students up for failure in applying writing knowledge. On the other hand, if we combine the two, students have *both* the framework and the practice to actively and successfully interact with their writing knowledge and how to continue growing as writers. The task then becomes researching this combination in more detail.

Based on the primary and secondary research from above, I have determined that for me to answer the questions I am researching, I will have to continue this study in the fall with my own sections of first year composition. If I am to truly see whether or not

course content can better help inform students' metacognition and reflective practices concerning their own potential writing growth, at least according to the parameters I outline for the study, I will have to study how I teach my own classes that reflect the type of course design I seek to analyze. I know that my study will be limited because I will be studying my own students; however, I hope to find an independent, third-party colleague who would be willing to interview my students to decrease the chance that my students give me the answers that they think I want to hear. Using my own class will allow me to control certain variables and provide me the base information I will need to address my research.

My research, though ambitious at my current institution, is not entirely unique. In fact, many universities, including Central Florida State, are investing in researching courses based on the writing about writing approach and the outlying implications from teaching said course content. More universities should seek the advice of writing specialists and provide the funds to complete the needed research in course content, reflection, metacognition and the combined effects on transfer of student writing abilities in order to best assist their own students. The future of first year writing programs and of composition studies hinges on being able to properly prepare students for writing situations outside of the university and to fulfill our promise as writing educators that we can teach students *about* their writing.

WORKS CITED

Bawarshi, Anis. "Genres as Forms of In(ter)vention." Originality, Imitation, and

Plagiarism: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on Writing, 24 Sept. 2005,

University of Michigan.

Bergmann, Linda S., and Janet Zepernick. "Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students'

Perceptions of Learning to Write." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31.1-2

(2007): 124-149.

Black, Laurel et al, Ed. *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment: Reflective Practice,*

Critical Theory, and Large-Scale Scoring. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

Bower, Laurel L. "Student Reflection and Critical Thinking: A Rhetorical Analysis of 88

Portfolio Cover Letters." *Journal of Basic Writing* 22.2 (2003): 47-66.

Camp, Roberta. "Portfolio Reflections in Middle and Secondary School Classrooms."

Portfolios in the Writing Classroom. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Urbana, IL:

NCTE, 1992. 61-79.

Carter, Michael. "The Idea of Expertise: An Exploration of Cognitive and Social

Dimensions of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 41.3 (1990):

265-286.

Downs, Douglas, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting

Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication* 58.4 (2007): 552-584.

Flavell, John H. "Metacognition and Cognitive Monitoring: A New Area of Cognitive-Developmental Inquiry." *American Psychologist* 34.10 (1979): 906-911.

Horning, Alice S. "Reflection and Revision: Intimacy in College Writing." *Composition Chronicle: Newsletter for Writing Teachers* 9.9 (1997): 2-5.

Livingston, Jennifer A. "Metacognition: An Overview." 1997. State Univ. of New York at Buffalo. *ERIC*. Roesch Library, University of Dayton. 19 Jan. 2009 <http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/fas/shuell/cep564/Metacog.htm>.

Nelms, Gerald, and Ronda Leathers Dively. "Perceived Roadblocks to Transferring Knowledge from First-Year Composition to Writing-Intensive Major Courses: A Pilot Study." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31.1-2 (2007): 214-240.

Perkins, David, and Gavriel Salomon. "Transfer of Learning." *International Encyclopedia of Education*. 2nd Ed. Boston: Pergamon Press, 1992. <http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/docs/traencyn.htm>.

Thompson, Y. Personal Interview. 14 April 2009.

---. "Cover Letter Assignment." English 102. University of Dayton. Winter 2009.

---. "Summary/Critique Assignment." English 102. University of Dayton. Winter 2009.

---. "Syllabus." English 102. University of Dayton. Winter 2009.

Wardle, Elizabeth. "'Mutt Genres' and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?" *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (2009): 765-789.

---. "Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal

Study." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31.1-2 (2007): 65-85.

Wilcox, Bonita L. "Writing Portfolios: Active vs. Passive." *English Journal* 86.6 (1997):

34-37.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: A Final Reflection."

Portfolios in the Writing Classroom. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Urbana, IL:

NCTE, 1992. 102-116.

---. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom.* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998.

VITA

May 1, 1986   Born- Columbus, Ohio

2007   B.A. Language Arts Education, Ohio Northern University, Ada, OH

2007-2009   English Teacher, Life Skills Center, Dayton, OH

2007-2008   English Tutor, Metropolitan Certified Teachers Association

2009   M.A. English, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH

CONFERENCES

"New Visions of FYC: from Basic to Advanced Writers"

College English Association of Ohio, Athens, Ohio - April 2009

"Metacognitition and Reflection: First Year Composition and Knowledge Transfer"

Conference on College Composition and Communication,

San Francisco, California, Research Network Forum - March 2009

"Transitioning from Breadth to Bullet: Understanding Student Reading"

College English Association, St. Louis, Missouri - March 2008

"Are We There Yet?: Creating Our Own Road to Professional Success"

National Council of Teachers of English, New York, New York

Session E.50 - November 2007