

# Portable Skills Workshop Notes

**Date:** 3/4/13

**Time:** 1:30-2:30

**Room:** Allen 129

**In attendance:**

Administrators: Barbara Heifferon and Christy Foreman

Presenters: Benjamin Bergholtz, Vicki Davis, Christine Jeansonne, Melanie Griffith, and Dena Marks

Teachers: Tori Moore, Teresa Iverson, Cristina Rosell, Ali Mullin, Dotty McCoughy, Ann Martin, Anna West, Bobby Matthews, Tyler Smith, Chris Tusa, Josef Horacek

Students: Will Kallenborn, Rachael Fajoni, Nicole Musthaller, BJ McDill, Joe Hagan, Autumn Lovelace, Brittany Chaisson, Jasmine Wells, Casey Broussard, Alexandra Yu, Sarah Steppe, Alexandra Simpson, Anthony O'Neal, Lauren Guidry, Antonina Irwin

## **I. Opening Remarks**

1. Vicki introduces group: We are EGSA Knowledge Transfer Group: Vicki Davis, Dena Marks, Christine Jeansonne, Melanie Griffith, and Ben Bergholtz

## **II. Topic 1: Vicki's Presentation-Defining Knowledge Transfer and Metacognition**

1. Vicki's basic introduction to knowledge transfer and metacognition

- a. Low road transfer involves using skills in similar situations (writing a Rhetorical Analysis, then an Issue Analysis)
- b. High road transfer involves using skills in different situations (writing a Rhetorical Analysis, then a lab report)
  - i. Requires mindful abstraction and conscious application
  - ii. Metacognition is thinking about thinking, being aware of cognitive processes (mindful abstraction)
- c. Metacognition requires reflective thinking and student monitoring of own learning
  - i. One strategy: Have students set specific writing goals at the beginning of the semester. At the end of each project, ask students to think about their improvement toward those goals, what they're doing to achieve them, what else they might do to keep working toward them, and what can the instructor do to help?

## **III. Topic 2: Dena's Presentation-Teaching Strategies for Three Phases of Transfer**

1. Building off of Vicki's definition of knowledge transfer, Dena offers teaching strategies to promote the three main factors that influence students' ability to transfer knowledge to other facets of their lives:

- a. The effectiveness of the initial learning experience
  - b. The contexts for both the initial learning and the new situation to which it may apply and the ability of learners to compare those contexts
  - c. Learners' metacognitive abilities to reflect on and monitor their own learning.
2. Teaching strategies to promote learning with the goal of knowledge transfer:

- a. Take a “less is more” approach, provide students with ample time to digest and manipulate the information they are taught
  - i. Don’t crowd writing assignments but give students adequate time to write and revise their papers while maintaining the minimum word limit
  - ii. Focus on writing process, which is a transferable skill
- b. Motivate students by letting them know that you recognize their capabilities.
  - i. Relate material to other contexts that are relevant to students, using their language: Venn Diagrams, for example
  - ii. Allow students to choose their own topics so that they will find the material interesting and they can practice transferring writing skills to their majors
3. Transfer: Create a simulation of a context in which they might use writing outside of the classroom.
  - a. Use classroom time to ask them to write for contexts they might encounter in other disciplines or in the workspace: Business email, letter to editor, report written for your firm, press release, or paper in the disciplines.
  - b. Focus on general structures that are shared by both contexts such as rhetorical theory.
  - c. Encourage students to draw comparisons across contexts, noting not just what is similar but also what is different
4. Metacognition: Students who reflect on their own learning and especially on the transferability of the skills they’ve learned are more likely to actually transfer those skills
  - a. Teach students’ self-monitoring, self-evaluation practices during peer review or in reflective writing
  - b. Have a discussion or have them write about: How writing for your discipline is different or similar to the methods I’ve taught here? What general structures apply to both?
5. Christine will talk more about how you can use rhetorical theory to promote knowledge transfer

#### **IV. Topic 3: Christine’s Presentation-Teaching Technical Majors**

1. My part extends from Dena’s discussion but I’m focusing more on the rhetorical strategies for teaching writing to students in technical majors. Because we often don’t get a classroom full of English majors, there is a challenge in teaching them the value of writing transferability in their lives.
2. A few weeks ago, we listened to a talk given by Dr. Sandra McGuire, and she explained that there is “no such thing as smart students but students who learn strategies.” Learning these strategies can foster their natural abilities as writers.
3. We went here on campus to find what those in the Communication Across the Curriculum program are doing to instill this type of learning for writing for science majors; CxC is a program that prepares students in all majors with necessary communicative skills. In particular, we spoke with a technical communications instructor, in the Communication Studio in Engineering. He has an MFA in writing and teaches composition mostly to Engineering students.
  - a. He explains- science majors in particular respond to a certain type of rhetoric, one that incorporates their general approaches from technical classes to writing. They want the tasks to be prescriptive and functional. Bowles says the best way to grab their attention is to give it to them in their terms.
4. Teaching strategies to reach technical majors

- a. If we can translate to them that writing is a process--a process that resembles their projects, perhaps, something that takes time, it will become less foreign of a procedure. This is how they work on a daily basis in their careers as technical students. If we can get them to transfer that to their writing, instead of cramming words onto the page the night before, this will be a worthwhile investment of everyone's time.
- b. The teacher should try to shift criteria from what is right or wrong to seeing the effects of language, what it can do--give them new expectations for their writing.
- c. Writing can be collaborative-a communal experience.
- d. Another technique is establishing our ethos-exhibiting sincerity and true belief in their natural abilities as writer. This applies to teaching all students in composition classes. Let them know your credibility- and why the material itself is credible.
- e. Finally, Bowles says we can appeal to them through avoiding obscurity as a common approach. This does not mean make it easy for these students or expect less of them, but instead to bring to the forefront the aspects of the course they already know to install confidence. For example, mentioning something as familiar as the rhetorical triangle. Recognition of concepts help the student feel like he or she has a grasp on the material and subsequently may feel more compelled to engage in the class.

#### **V. Topic 4: Melanie's Presentation-Metacognition/Knowledge Transfer in Relation to Accountability to an Audience**

1. I am a creative writer by trade. I entered the classroom as a composition teacher right after I finished my MFA in creative writing without any training in how to teach outside my "apprenticeship of observation" (to borrow from Dan Lortie (1975 "Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study"). I immediately had to find a way to reconcile a few things:
  - a. How do I teaching academic writing when I a) don't have training as a teacher and b) don't really *know* in concrete terms what "non-writers" use writing for in their daily lives/careers.
  - b. How do I balance my passion for and expertise in creative writing with the needs of students who come from different backgrounds and will go on to varying future careers? How do I get them to buy into creative assignments, translate creative skills to more "traditional" "academic" ones, and overcome a somewhat typical bias *against* composing graded writing?
2. So, once I had a name for the type of instruction that I found valuable, I began to think about the ways in which some tools from the creative writer's toolbox already enhance knowledge transfer and metacognition in ways that traditional academic composition instruction might not:
  - a. Creative writers think about their accountability to an audience. This accountability to audience translates more seamlessly to writing done in the student's hypothetical future work place—in that they will be writers/professionals who must appeal to specific audience expectations—than does traditional academic writing wherein students write into the vacuum that is the teachers' grade book.
  - b. Secondly, if we define metacognition as a type of "mindful abstraction" wherein there is a conscious application of strategies and a focus on students monitoring their own learning, we can and perhaps should borrow something akin to the writing workshop structure in our composition classrooms to help students monitor each other's learning and to make more tangible/immediate a sense of what it is like to write for a wider audience.

- c. And both accountability to audience and a sort of collective metacognitive approach could be implemented in the composition classroom by borrowing from the workshop model of writing instruction. The workshop in its modern form started largely with The Iowa Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa (established in 1936 under the direction of Wilbur Schramm and furthered by IWW alum Paul Engle).
  - i. Practical examples: workshop speed dating, looking at each other works at every stage, including final drafts, conference approach (more than once a semester, or built into a course), etc.
  - ii. It's also important to stress writing as an art and as a creative enterprise because *that's what it is*. That's what makes writing unique, and that's what we all love about it. That's love is what lead most of us to become instructors/teachers of writing in the first place—a life-long love of reading.
  - iii. And it's good for our students to be invested. If they "like" the writing their doing, it stands to reason they will be more successful not only at the initial task but at the transfer of those skills.
  - iv. It's also good for our quest towards a more perfect idea of critical or transformative (or dare I say *transferable*) pedagogy. According to Freire, "the humanist, revolutionary educator" must practice a critical pedagogy that is "imbued with profound trust in people and their creative power."
- d. "Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned with *reality*" and I would argue authentic, high quality writing "does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication." Recalls collective metacognition/writing workshop/audience.

## **VI. Topic 5: Ben's Presentation-An Alternative Approach to Teaching Composition "Writing about Writing"**

1. "Writing about Writing" has gained steam since 2007 article by Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs called "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies'" was published; this approach has gained attention and spurred serious debate, and has been implemented at several universities, including the University of Central Florida, as well as led to the creation of a textbook for a WAW course.
  - a. Downs and Wardle note that a) knowledge transfer doesn't usually take place in FYC courses b) student apathy is big problem, as are false notions that this isn't a 'real' class, that anyone can teach it, etc . . .
  - b. Their argument, in part, focuses on fact that on one hand we promise to help students learn how to write analytically and argumentatively and allow them in our classes to 'write about anything,' but on the other our own research suggests that writing is always contextual, something we also insist our students understand. If we say writing is always contextual, we can't really promise that the skills we can give to students will work in any situation, we become analogous to sophists, promote stereotypes about Composition courses, etc . . .
2. The idea of writing about writing is that you implement a metacognitive approach to writing itself by forcing students to think about and write about writing as a discourse. From this students have to do research to really understand and become part of this discourse, the class has a common group of texts to situate discussion around, they can get more in-depth in their research; class also undoes some misconceptions about writing and results in more realistic goals.

- a. From this, when they go to other classes, the thing that transfers isn't so much a set of “skills” but an understanding of process, and of the complex relationships between audience and author, and in theory they are better able to understand how to fit into whatever discourse they enter. In essence, they argue, this approach hammers home metacognitive point that you always have to think about your own thinking whenever you want to write argument/analytical paper, as you always have to think about context, and from this you are better able to understand how to fit into whatever discourse you enter after this class (i.e. whatever major you choose).
3. Open the discussion to students: What strategies did you learn in your writing classes have applied elsewhere?

## **VII. Topic 6: Discussion**

1. To students: What types of skills have you transferred outward?
  - a. B.J. McGill: I transferred from 2000, analysis and reading comprehension. That class helped me to use rhetorical analysis to find out what is useful in different topics.
  - b. Anthony O’Neal: I’m a psychology student. Learning argument has been helpful because I’m trying to write an application essay to get in to nursing school. It’s good for me to learn how to explain why I should get in. To express my ideas and reasons.
  - c. Nicole: I’m a biology major. Writing class has helped me with my physics labs. For those, we have to break down what we learn. Analysis taught me how to talk about what I get out of measuring a spring, for instance.
  - d. Casey Broussard: Learning the process is helpful. The idea of taking a less is more approach. I never learned how to start a paper until this semester.
  - e. Ali: I had them read “Shitty First Drafts” to get them thinking about how to draft a paper.
  - f. Casey: Learning to write the thesis first, then the introduction is less overwhelming. You can focus on what you’re doing.
  - g. Ben: I found I was assigning too many chapters. Students weren’t reading them, then I would give quizzes to punish them. And, their writing wasn’t improving. Now I try to focus on developing writing slowly.
2. We’ll open the floor now to teachers who want to discuss strategies to promote knowledge transfer in the classroom.
  - a. Dorothy: Become friends with a librarian. Christina gave a dynamite introduction to basic research. It helps to link library science to 1001. Helps to teach students to go beyond Google.
  - b. Student: I didn’t get to take 1001 which turned out to be a problem for me. I didn’t learn research and didn’t know how to use the library databases effectively.
  - c. Strategy developed by Christy Collins: To explain databases, she fills a basket with journals. Shows students that this is where articles are.
  - d. Ann: Meeting with a librarian should be a requirement. Most people have problems with research.
  - e. Student: The appeal of Google is that you don’t have to leave the couch. I didn’t know about the library’s website until my teacher showed it to me.

- f. Bobby Matthews: Director of Assessment and Teach English 2000. The problem in Gen. Ed. is that disciplines do not talk to one another. I went to a Gen. Ed. conference and I can say you are way ahead of the curve on knowledge transfer.
- g. Student: My teacher explained the first day very specifically about how this could relate to all majors: chemistry, biology. I can say that it has helped me to write lab reports. My teacher also asked what ABCDF means to us and related it to us in our terms, creating an analogy to Harry Potter.
- h. Chris: I teach in the Ag college and that changed my class. I follow the idea that if students don't take ownership, the class won't be worthwhile. I try to teach students to communicate with someone outside the classroom. Instead of thinking about them as writers or editors, I look at what they need to do for themselves. They write letters to people in their field. Interview them. I use words like "communicate" instead of "write." I also don't teach for the college setting but for the workplace. I have to learn about those fields. I talk to people (such as bank tellers) about how they write. I use Tiger Network (through Careers to Geaux) to find people that will mentor students in their majors. After I made this switch, my evaluations went from average to much better. The approach is counterintuitive but it's more useful for them if they engage in professional assignments, shadow someone in their field.
- i. Bobby: We've got to engage students in big, interdisciplinary questions.
- j. Anna: I had my students go to election forums on campus last year. They engaged in discourse analysis of the forums they attended then they had panel discussions in the classroom. This was not only about information transferring out of the classroom but also information transferring in. It was one of the best days of class we had.
- k. Tyler: I have a question about transferring to digital media, my students are building websites. Do you have any advice about how to teach them to transfer knowledge to that medium?
  - i. Melanie: For radio, we wrote a report and then covered it up. Then we tried to say the report from memory. It was interesting to see how we changed bits and pieces to communicate orally. I'm not sure how to transfer to digital media though.
  - ii. Tyler: I also have my students write peer reviews and exploratory letters where they talk about what they read and what kinds of skills they learned that apply elsewhere.

### **VIII. Closing/Next Meeting:**

You are all welcome to stay after and chat.