



Teaching for Transfer in a First-Year Writing Course

Recent work by scholars within composition studies—most notably the work of Kathleen Blake Yancey, Lianne Robertson, and Kara Taczak—suggests that the transfer of knowledge from English 101 to other courses and contexts may be possible if teaching is focused explicitly on transferring the learned skills. In other words, rather than hoping that somehow our students will be able to take the skills they learn and apply them to their writing after English 101, Teaching for Transfer (TFT) assumes a writing curriculum that boldly charges students to develop a portable theory of writing applicable across broad and varied contexts, including the workplace.

Introducing Threshold and Troublesome Concepts

At the center of the TFT theory are so-called “troublesome” or “threshold” concepts, the understanding and application of which mark students’ entry across the threshold into the ways of a discipline (Meyer and Land; Adler-Kassner and Wardle). Such entry is rarely easy; indeed, the concepts that need to be understood are often difficult and “troublesome,” but transformative in the end (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick). Within composition, for example, a “threshold concept” might be that “writing is a social and rhetorical activity” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 17).

I turned to TFT in order to bring that level of awareness to my students. Through a series of mixed-genre readings, weekly reflective blog posts, and major writing assignments, my students have been generating a theory of writing that I hope will serve them well beyond the course.

Developing a Theory of Writing

TFT consists of two critical elements: (1) a set of organizing and foundational key terms and (2) a sequence of writing assignments, informal and formal, that help students understand and deploy those terms. The course is organized around terms critical to an understanding of writing:

- Genre
- Composition
- Audience
- Rhetorical Situation
- Peer Review
- Reflection

- Exigence
- Knowledge
- Context

Students define these terms, attempt to see relationships among them, and apply them to their own work and the work of others. Throughout the course, students are asked to develop a theory of writing that incorporates these terms, and any other terms that may have been generated throughout the course, into class discussions.

Exploratory Weekly Blog Posts

Each week, the instructor prompts students to reflect on blogs in ways that prepare them for major course assignments and the overall course objective to promote a theory of writing. The posts typically ask students to reflect on key concepts, grounding their reflection in the assigned works for the week. For example, in week one, I ask students to reflect on the question, “What is writing?”:

- What is writing? What are the definitions, ideas, thoughts, and/or expressions that you associate with writing?
- What defines successful writing for you?
- What type of a writer do you see yourself as, and why?
- Create a list of five to eight key terms that define writing for you.

For the **second part** of students’ posts, they read an assigned commencement address, then answer the following questions:

- What do we learn about writing from this text?
- Is this text “successful” according to the criteria you defined earlier? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What else might you say about this text to help you classify the text as successful or unsuccessful?
- Do you want to revise your list of key terms based on this reading? If so, explain what you would revise (or not) and why (or why not).

In subsequent blog posts, I ask students to reflect on other key terms and apply those terms in an analysis of given works. Blog posts also provide a space for students to explore and propose topics for major assignments, as well as reflect on works in progress or on the process of producing a work.

Major Assignments

For the first major assignment, students are asked to write a **source-based article** that employs the concepts of genre, audience, and rhetorical situation in an analysis of three given sources. For example: *How does a commencement speaker express his understanding of the genre of the commencement address? How does he undermine the conventions of that genre? As another example: Why does an author, in debunking western stereotypes of Africa, choose to deliver her message in the genre of the Pecha Kucha—a slideshow consisting of 20 slides, each of which is shown no longer than 20 seconds?* After engaging in such analysis, students are then asked to reflect on the relationships among the terms—genre, audience, and rhetorical situation—as a critical, early step toward developing their own theory of writing.

Research is a key component of TFT; however, rather than understand research as thesis-driven (i.e., establish a thesis and then locate sources in support of that thesis), the TFT curriculum constructs **research as inquiry** and often open-ended. Students are encouraged to ask big questions—questions that may yield multiple and perhaps contradictory or counter-intuitive answers.

To prepare students for their research, I ask students to view a TED Talk in which a compelling case is made for the social good that gaming is able to produce. Additionally, students watch another TED Talk, in which a writer invites us to think of innovation as not a solitary activity, but one that is deeply social and often a product of happenstance. And rather than limit students' choices to school-sanctioned sources, students are asked to provide a range of primary and secondary sources: an interview, a personal observation, peer-reviewed sources, and popular, web-based sources, such as TED Talks and BuzzFeed.

Staying with their research topic, in their next assignment, students must construct a target audience and communicate what they've learned about their research by way of a **composition in three different genres**, one of which needs to be an infographic. Students choose from a list of other possible genres, such as a public service announcement, musical composition, or short video. Students reflect on their purpose and the rhetorical choices that they've made in their compositions. Throughout the course, students have been analyzing various genres—written and visual—now they put their knowledge into action.

Finally, as a culminating course project, students produce a **reflection-in-presentation**. That is, in a genre of their own choosing, students look back at their writing during the semester and address the following questions:

- What is your theory of writing at this point in the semester?
- What was your theory of writing coming into English 101?
- How has your theory of writing evolved with each composition?
- What contributed to your theory of writing the most?

- What is the relationship between your theory of writing and how you create(d) knowledge? In other words, what uses, generally, does a theory of writing have in your own learning?
- How might your theory of writing be applied to other writing situations inside and outside the classroom?

Similar in purpose to a cover letter for a portfolio, this piece requires that students review the work they've done in the semester, taking stock of the changes they've made to their writing. In that sense, this assignment, like the cover letter, promotes metacognition—awareness of one's own thinking and behavior—a key component of transfer knowledge. Yet, what separates this from a standard, reflective cover letter is its focus on a theory of writing as it has evolved throughout the course. In order to take what they've learned in the course to other writing situations, students must not only adopt a metacognitive habit of mind, they must also have a portable theory of writing—their passport to the writing curriculum. Each writing situation will no doubt pose its own particular challenges; however, when in possession of a theory-of-writing passport, community college writers likely will be better prepared to meet those different challenges no matter the genre, be it a marketing plan, an annotated bibliography, or an essay of literary criticism.

Implications for Writing Beyond the Classroom

Given the importance of workplace training in the community college mission, this theory could come to good use as students move into the workplace where written communication and record keeping commonly is expected. Genre knowledge may play a large role for novice nurses, for example, as they come to understand the expectations and constraints of a nursing log or care plan. And an understanding of purpose and audience will not doubt assist budding grant writers, who must fashion a request for funding support in ways that maximize their chances for success. Given that community college students—indeed, millennials as a group—are among the most mobile demographic, providing them with the means to transfer from one learning context to another can only lead them further toward success.

What strategies do you use to help students transfer learned skills? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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