AFTERWORD

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As the contributions to this volume have shown, deploying knowledge and abilities across complex communities of practice that exhibit the ongoing development of communicative practices and the evolution of both context-specific and shared genres represents significant challenge for writers at all levels but particularly for students. Although most undergraduate students won't find themselves assigned to write highly specialized kinds of discourse in their coursework, the varied constructions of even common academic genres such as "term papers" or "analyses" mirror the contradictions, complexities, and idiosyncrasies of many types of writing found beyond academia. Regardless of preparation, all students face the difficulty of applying what they've learned about writing in one context to a new and less familiar one. As Ambrose and colleagues conclude,

> Most research has found that (a) transfer occurs neither often nor automatically, and (b) the more dissimilar the learning and transfer contexts, the less likely successful transfer will occur. In other words, much as we would like them to, students often do not successfully apply relevant skills or knowledge in novel contexts. (2010, p. 108)

Plentiful anecdotal evidence for these conclusions can be found in what first-year college students say they learned in high school about good writing—or how they interpreted their teachers' advice. And just as high school-to-college transitions can be confounded by mislearned strategies, misapprehended expectations, mistaken assumptions, and new contexts and genres, so college-to-workplace transitions can suffer from the learning that happens in that liminal domain of writing, "conditional rhetorical space" (Anson & Dannels, 2004). The activities in such spaces don't always help students to apply what they've learned about writing in their majors to the work they're asked to do when newly employed after graduation, as Stuart Blythe (this volume) and others have documented. To make matters worse, the generic labels given even to common forms of writing (such as the "afterword") mask widely disparate underlying contextual uses of those forms, which are indeterminate and socially constructed (Miller, 1984). The question at the heart of writing transition, and to which the contributors to this volume have committed the research facilitated by the Elon transfer project, is whether anything we do *can* help writers, especially novice student writers, to

move effectively across and into different communities of practice. To echo Donahue (this volume), what teaching practices facilitate transfer, how, and why? The answers to these questions must lie both in the individual's capacities and in the nature of the community in which that individual is trying to write (including the varied functions and nature of its genres).

The history of writing research and the study of literacy more generally is a chronicle of the place of transfer and transition in our thinking about writing development. Pre-1960s formalism so fully neglected agency in writing that transfer was of little or no interest (see Nystrand, Greene & Wiemelt, 1993) and is mentioned infrequently. The constructivism that led to early research on writing processes still saw the writer as a self-contained entity, adapting rhetorical and composing knowledge to all tasks. Although theories of invention touched on the process of transferring thoughts into texts (see Rohman and Wlecke's 1965 distinction between specific and nonspecific transfer), everything focused on what was in the writer's head. This "autonomous" view of writing eventually gave way to a social-practices orientation that sees learning as highly contextual and based on human actions, relationships, and participation in joint activities (Gee, 1996; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1993). As Brandt puts it, literacy is "not the narrow ability to deal with texts but the broader ability to deal with other people as a writer or reader" (1990, p. 14) This view soon generated interest in questions of diversity and the kinds of prior experiences and knowledge students were bringing into new writing contexts.

The implications of these literacy orientations become clearer when we instantiate them in scenes of people learning how to write new kinds of texts in new settings. Imagine that students in an upper-level undergraduate course in art history are assigned to write an *object condition report* based on artifacts found in the storage area of a campus museum—an actual assignment that we have encountered at more than one university. Most people who are not art historians will plead ignorance of this genre. Without sustained study, even the typical first-year composition instructor would find guiding students to write an object condition report as challenging as teaching a unit on the genetic mutation of *P. aeruginosa.* Lacking prior experience and the discourse schemas it creates, students faced with an assignment to choose an artifact in the museum and write an object condition report on it would—like almost all of us—floun.der, at least at first. What would we do?

In an autonomous orientation, the "ability" to write the report is located in the learner, without regard to context. The better the learner, the more facile the transfer. In this view, successful previous instruction guarantees successful transfer; when transfer fails, the prior instruction—and instructors—are blamed for not training the student to be a good, versatile writer. For this reason, transfer is

not supported but expected, and its facility becomes a measure of performance and a way to rank and sort students based on what they bring in and/or can do. Because there is little sensitivity to prior (or future) contexts, there is little articulation among different contexts: courses exist as self-contained microcosms of knowledge. Good learners figure out what's necessary to do well wherever they go, intuiting idiosyncratic expectations of teachers or twisted versions of well-known genres like the "term paper." On the whole it's up to students to piece everything together. The operative phrase here is that *transfer happens.* From this perspective, there's no interest in what students do or need to do to write the assigned paper. Pedagogy comes by way of trial and error; learning takes place after the fact and is based on what can be intuited from the judgment of the instructor—an expert in the genre of object condition reports—and whatever written comments convey it. (Such practices remind us that while it's possible to trace the history of scholarly trends in writing studies, earlier stages are not simply the dusty archives of bygone eras; daily they still are enacted by teachers who inherit and then pass on deeply-rooted traditions.)

A social-practices orientation acknowledges that discourse exists within contexts and that success is determined in part by those who inhabit it. Our focus shifts away from the individual's generic abilities and skills and toward how writing is situated within and defined by social and institutional contexts. Learners must "read" or "figure out" how to write effectively when the domain of knowledge, genres, ways of creating and mediating information, and sedimented processes and practices for communication may be unfamiliar. However, based on new investigations of transition and transfer, including studies in this collection, we might propose two versions of the social-practices orientation, in parallel to Brent's (2011) summary of scholars' orientations toward transfer as either "glass half empty" or "glass half full." In the *learner-centered* social practices orientation ("glass half full"), it's possible to equip writers with various forms of awareness or metacognitive strategies so they can efficiently analyze a new context and figure out how it works. Educationally, it becomes important to prepare the learner for what's to follow—to provide common language and concepts and to show how to integrate prior and new knowledge for writing (see Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, and Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2014). The more self-aware the writer, the better prepared she'll be to face the demands of unfamiliar genres in new communities of practice. Instruction provides heightened awareness of other contexts but doesn't articulate with them; they may represent alien worlds, but students are supposed to parachute into them with enough intellectual gear to adapt quickly. The operative phrase here is *transfer happens through awareness and metacognition.*

As several chapters in this collection demonstrate (Adler-Kassner, Clark, Robertson, Taczak & Yancey; Gorzelsky, Driscoll, Paszek, Jones & Hayes;

Wardle & Mercer Clement), adaptation to new contexts for writing may be sped up or facilitated by making explicit the rhetorical and situational needs required to perform effectively. A student prepared in this way might recognize that the genre of the object condition report requires detailed description based on close observation. She would then "remix" what she knows (Yancey et al., 2014), deploying skills developed in an experiential assignment in first-year composition or a lab report from a general-education course in chemistry. The student might also ask questions about the genre, such as its structure and purpose, and find examples of object condition reports to study such features as their style, use of specific terms or concepts, and implied audiences. The assumption is that many contexts won't provide much support for figuring all this out; support comes from what students have learned previously in courses that provide explicit instruction in the processes of transfer.

In a *context-centered* social-practices orientation ("glass half empty"), learning is seen as highly situated—depending at least as much on the characteristics and inhabitants of the context and its discourse as on what the writer brings into it. As Russell puts it, writers

> do not "learn to write, period." Nor do they improve their
> writing in a general way outside of all activity systems and
> then apply an autonomous skill to them. Rather, one acquires
> the genres (typified semiotic means) used by some activity
> field, as one interacts with people involved in the activity field
> and the material objects and signs those people use (including
> those marks on a surface that we call writing). (1995, p. 57;
> see also Wardle, 2009)

For this reason, transition is never easy and often starts with weak approximations of successful performance or with outright failure (Anson, 2016; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Smart, 2000). The focus is on intentionally bringing learners into the context with the understanding that they already carry prior knowledge and experience with them but need to learn anew—sometimes entirely. There's little question that *something* comes in, but it may be of little use or even of detrimental influence depending on how rigidly the writer deploys prior learned practices to meet new demands. Teachers in the new settings build on prior contexts, but they realize that students need to *reconstruct* existing knowledge or acquire entirely new knowledge (of genre, composing practices, tools, and the like) within a new activity system. Sometimes teachers even assume that students should discard prior knowledge gained *outside* the classroom, downplaying the potential rhetorical awareness that, as Paula Rosinski (this collection) reminds us, students routinely exhibit in their

daily, non-academic writing. The operative word is *enculturation*. As Russell has put it, "One cannot learn to write (or think, or reason, or solve problems) apart from the activities of some historically-situated human community(ies)" (1993, p. 186). Instructors in each new course, therefore, intentionally provide mentoring and guidance—one of the major goals of faculty-development and curricular consultation in every writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-in-the-disciplines program. "In this view," Russell continues,

> growth in writing means that students would move toward acquiring the genres, the habits of discourse, the voices of social groups involved in organized activities *while* students more and more fully participate in (either directly or vicariously) the activities of those groups and eventually contribute to and transform them—not *before* they participate in them. (1997, p. 186)

Ideally, teachers and administrators collaborate to align their different courses and curricula so that students' learning can be appropriately scaffolded. But this is quite rare.

From a context-centered social-practices perspective, learning is a "process of understanding through participation with others in ongoing activity" (Jawitz, 2007, p. 186). For students struggling to write an object condition report, instructors would acquaint them with the genre and explore the prior knowledge and experience they bring to it (or lack thereof). The instructor demonstrates how the text works and why it's important in art history, describes the multiple, complex audiences for the reports, and explains how the reports are used in the preservation, curation, display, storage, and transportation of art objects or historical artifacts such as a Civil War frock coat. Should the report mention areas in need of repair? Should it include an accession form or deed of gift, a catalog sheet and card, an incoming condition report, or a donor questionnaire? While helping students to understand how object condition reports can vary across different museums, auction houses, and private collections, the instructor might also constrain or define the assignment in ways that answer these questions.

Finally, the processes of transition and transfer must also acknowledge the role of the writer's ethos and authority within the social context of discourse. Those with the most power and prestige can violate certain norms of discourse with impunity (sometimes even setting in motion changes to the genre within its community). While the newly-hired underling in a corporation tries almost desperately to "follow the rules" when writing memos to various members of the hierarchy (Brown & Herndl, 1986), the CEO may not care. While the freshly minted assistant professor cites a hundred scholars in an article submitted to a

journal—partly to show that he really knows his stuff—the world-renowned scholar doesn't feel compelled to cite anyone at all; her work is what others cite. While novice writers express near-desperation about knowing "what the teacher wants" in a paper in a general-education course, seniors and graduate students may find themselves asking permission to push the boundaries of a genre or create something unusual. The willingness to shape a genre to meet local or discursive needs, redefining its borders and restructuring its rhetorical activity, usually comes with experience and the freedom borne of authority, as several of the chapters in this volume suggest.

Thanks to the scholars in this collection, we are now learning much more about the relationships between writers' knowledge and the complex characteristics of communities of practice. But there is still much to discover, including especially how writers and their prior knowledge—their dispositions, their adaptation of writing practices employed successfully in other contexts, their additional languages, their comfort with writing technologies, and other social inter- and intrapersonal dimensions—shape these communities and students' transitions and transfer of knowledge within them and to them. In addition, most studies of transfer have focused on developing writers—students enrolled in high school and college courses. Such a focus is clearly of great importance as scholars and teachers try to understand more fully what knowledge and abilities students carry from one course or discipline to another. But the challenges of transfer are not only about what's "in the writer." Highly skilled writers who find themselves needing to write in unfamiliar contexts also experience severe difficulties—even total failure initially—in spite of all their prior experience and practice (see Anson, 2016; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Smart, 2000). In fact, years of writing in the same contexts and genres may solidify or sediment mature writers' practices to the point that they experience challenges perhaps different in kind but not in degree to the challenges faced by struggling novice writers in educational settings. This work suggests that transfer as a phenomenon is as much about what's "outside" the writer—in the writing context—as what's inside, and that we should be more fully investigating the relationship between the two.

In addition to a door wide open to research on the transfer of communication abilities, the field of writing studies also faces an opportunity—we might say a necessity—to foster an understanding of transition among a broader range of publics, including policymakers, parents, school boards, and educators who spend little time reading or thinking about the nature of writing and its development. Prevailing mythologies of writing still see it as a skill to be learned once and deployed well thereafter. From this perspective, shock about students' poor abilities and the blame of their previous teachers is understandable if misguided. But unlike some concepts in the field, it's not difficult to shift these concep-

tions through an understanding of transfer. Everyone who has ever struggled to write in different settings knows what it means. But few have carefully and critically considered what it means for educational practice, especially in the realm of testing. Among those broader publics are teachers of disciplinary content—in the schools, those who do not teach the language arts; in colleges and universities, those who daily walk into their physics, musicology, plant genetics, civil engineering, or psychology courses—who don't see themselves as being charged with or trained for the support of students' writing development. It sometimes takes radical steps to demonstrate to faculty the difficulty of moving across contexts, as Sheila Tobias did through a series of cross-enrollment experiences among experts who were asked to study subjects outside the realm of their training (Tobias, 1986, 1988; Tobias & Abel, 1988; Tobias & Hake, 1988). So used to their familiar contexts and disciplines, the faculty in these experiments were jarred out of their disciplinary complacency when they realized that they were struggling to learn and even failing. Fascinating and at times amusing, such experiments are, of course, impractical as a way to reach broader publics about the importance of transfer as a phenomenon that ought to play a central role in rethinking educational practice. But reach them we must if we can expect more principled educational programs, curricula, and pedagogies.

We might start by sharing claims in the *Elon Statement*: It *is* possible to teach for transfer of writing knowledge. To do so, we must construct writing curricula that focus on the study of and practice with writing's threshold concepts that enable students to analyze—and respond to—expectations for writing within and across specific contexts. We must engage students in asking questions about writing situations and developing strategies for examining unfamiliar writing contexts. And we must have leeway in education policies to build curricular spaces for explicitly modeling transfer-focused thinking. Of course, successful transfer also requires new contexts that are receptive to transfer; students need the tools to adapt to new contexts, and those new contexts must include people (teachers, employers, etc.) who acknowledge the challenges of transfer and are ready to support new learners (students, employees, etc.) in making the transition.

As this collection demonstrates, the field of writing studies has by no means started closing the door on the research on transfer and transition. If anything, it has cracked it open wider, revealing that there is a lot more light beyond that hasn't yet flooded into our thinking about how writers move across different communities and struggle to produce the discourse found there. With that ongoing research, we will be better prepared to do the important work of translation—of moving out of our academic communities and finding ways to deploy our communication abilities to reach many other people who have a stake in educational policy and practice.

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