

Chapter 6. Teaching for Transfer in the First-Year Composition Course: Fostering the Development of Dispositions

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Reflect Before Reading

Before reading Chapter 6, think about your own FYC course. What mindsets about writing do students bring into your course from their prior writing education? What beliefs do your students hold about writing when they come to your class, and where do these beliefs come from? In what ways does your course reinforce, or ignore, or attempt to change students' incoming beliefs and mindsets?

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“Writing is power.”

—Ashley, first-year composition student

One mid-August, a few weeks before the start of the fall semester, I received an email from a student who would be in my ENGL 101 Composition I course during the upcoming semester. Ashley introduced herself and expressed interest in discovering what the course would entail. I was impressed and intrigued; I had never before heard from a prospective first-year student. I replied to Ashley's email, letting her know that I looked forward to meeting her and attached the course syllabus for her to read through. It was later that I learned from Ashley that she had been both nervous and hopeful about her ENGL 101 course—nervous about what would be expected of her as a writer and hopeful that writing assignments would be anything but five-paragraph essays.

Shortly before receiving Ashley's email, I had finished redesigning my ENGL 101 as a result of my interest in encouraging the development of ways of thinking about writing (dispositions) in first-year composition (FYC). My interest in the development of writing dispositions had arisen, in part, from working with first-year (FY) writers over several semesters, during which time I eventually realized that I had to foreground and attend to what students believed they had

“learned” about writing in their secondary English language arts classes in order to better meet their needs as FY college writers. I had discovered that my FY writers, through no fault of their own, had some understandings about writing (and themselves as writers) that had to be addressed, for they were not only inaccurate and misinformed, but also an obstacle to the development of proficiency with written language (and confidence about the ability to become proficient). My reconceptualization of my FYC course had also resulted from my interest in transfer, the “ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts” (National Research Council 51). I was wondering what learning my students might transfer from my FYC course to other writing contexts, academic or otherwise. Finally, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’ scholarship regarding writing about writing FYC courses had elicited my interest. Like Wardle and Downs, I perceived problems with the nature of and reason for the existence of “college writing” courses, understanding that “college writing” as a monolithic form doesn’t actually exist, given the many forms that writing in college can take.

Ashley, then, would be participating in an ENGL 101 course that looked rather different from my previous 101 courses. I was excited by the prospect of promoting ways of thinking about writing in the course and offering the opportunity for students to examine and reflect on their writing experiences up to this time along with their understandings of themselves as writers.

What follows is a look at the concepts of transfer and dispositions and an overview of some of the assignments I used to help my FY writers develop writing disposition. Ashley’s voice, along with that of a few of her FYC peers, is featured to demonstrate ways of thinking about writing that developed and that I hoped would transfer to other contexts to inform and assist with the writing expected in these different contexts.

Transfer

The enduring existence of FYC in colleges and universities may result from the belief that what students learn in FYC courses, such as rhetorical knowledge and skills, will assist them with the writing they do for other courses, i.e., provide a service of sorts. While the acquisition of rhetorical knowledge and skills is key to effective college, workplace, and public writing, implicit in the design of most FYC courses is the belief that students will transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired to other academic contexts—that they will bring this knowledge and these skills to bear when they are writing a paper for a political science course or a response to an essay question for an introductory theater course, or that they will be able to integrate source material into a research paper for their psychology course. Yet, what is known about transfer, the ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to different contexts, suggests otherwise.

As noted earlier, transfer is the “ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts” (National Research Council 51). Doug Brent points

out that notions of transfer evolved over the past century, from the belief that transfer occurs only if the “source and target situation” are nearly identical to a belief that learners must have a good understanding of principles that underlie skills in order for transfer to occur (561). Researchers ultimately found fault with narrow conceptions of transfer, preferring to understand transfer as re-creation of new skills that are demanded by new situations, these new skills arising from earlier learning (563). Brent also shares that “[m]any studies of transfer reveal a disturbingly uneven pattern of results. Frequently, learning acquired in one context seemingly evaporates when the learner is asked to apply it in another, even when the contexts seem relatively similar” (562).

Carl Bereiter refers to a “widespread pessimism about transfer” owing to research indicating that learned intelligent behavior doesn’t typically transfer, nor do specific strategies, such as problem-solving strategies (28). Bereiter also alludes to “conceptual understanding” and the importance of prior knowledge for learning, citing research that suggests that conceptual knowledge, especially put to use to develop further learning, does transfer. Finally, though, and particularly germane for my purposes here, is his notion of “transfer of dispositions”—that it may be more possible to transfer dispositions, a propensity to act in a certain way, rather than skills, noting that mindfulness and openness to learning can work to help one act intelligently in any context (30).

I suggest, then, that providing opportunities for students to develop dispositions about writing, in addition to knowledge and skills, may increase the likelihood of their ability to transfer what they learn in FYC to other contexts that will demand different types of writing. However, before discussing how instructors can promote the development of appropriate dispositions about writing in their courses, it will be helpful to have a fuller understanding of dispositions and how dispositions, knowledge, and skills are related.

Dispositions

A helpful generic definition for dispositions comes from Harvey Siegel: “a tendency, propensity, or inclination to behave or act in certain ways under certain circumstances” (208). In other words, dispositions are habits of mind that bring about the use of skills and the application of knowledge. For my purpose here, dispositions are ways of thinking about writing (and about oneself as writer) that can be the impetus for students to put their capabilities as writers to use; that is, dispositions help bring about appropriate behaviors—including behaviors related to writing.

How do dispositions, knowledge, and skills relate? Rhetorical knowledge implies what one has learned about writing. Skills imply mastery—the ability to put the learning to use. Dispositions are different from knowledge and skills, yet the three are not mutually exclusive, given that understandings of intelligence have evolved to include not only ability but also how ability begets action—a dispositional view of intelligence. In other words, intelligence is “cognitive capacity” but

also the ability to use “emotions and other stimuli as cognitive cues” (Tishman 49). Dispositions include, then, an ability to apply knowledge but also the predisposition to do so that results from awareness that an opportunity is available to use the learning (Tishman et al. 2).

Having made the case that teaching FYC should include strategies to help students develop relevant dispositions about writing and having asserted that dispositions transfer more successfully than do knowledge and discrete skills, it is time to address the “how” of teaching writing dispositions in our FYC courses.

Developing Writing Dispositions in FYC

Referring to Bereiter’s work, Brent notes that dispositions can be taught most effectively through “long-term immersion in contexts that nurture the desired disposition in complex ways” (563). Shari Tishman et al. characterize this immersion as “enculturation,” which must take place in a “sustained cultural context” that includes the “full educational surround” (6). Furthermore, they state that for enculturation to occur, there must be “cultural exemplars, cultural interactions, and direct instruction in cultural knowledge and activities” (6). Finally, they contend that attending to the acquisition of skills only is not adequate to foster tendencies to apply these skills in different contexts (9).

Furthermore, this notion of enculturation, including course design and teaching, works to create a culture of thinking in the classroom that is informed by a sociocultural theory of literacy, a theory that posits that literacy is both socially and culturally situated (Perez 5), given that different disciplines within the academy operate as communities of disciplinary cultures with their own literacy practices. Thus, an environment of enculturation in an FYC course will include introducing and acclimating students to the behaviors, values, ways of communicating, and norms of the discipline of composition, encouraging the development of ways of thinking about composition along with attention to the acquisition of rhetorical knowledge and skills.

James Paul Gee’s concept of “Discourses” is relevant here. Gee posits that to understand and appreciate language (and here we can include written language), we must always place it within its social context (2). Gee’s “Discourses” (“big D Discourses”) are comprised of behavior, interactions, ways of thinking, and systems of values along with ways of reading, writing, and communicating (3). Our FYC students, then, will be enculturated into the Discourse of writing and of FY composition; they will learn not only writing but also how to act and communicate like a writer. The Discourse of the FYC course includes writing and reading (like a writer), interacting (with instructors in conferences, with peers in peer response groups), and thinking about writing in ways that go beyond what they think when they enter the course—that writing is formulaic, one-size-fits-all, and “correct.”

Next, I examine an FYC course as a sustained cultural context within which students can develop ways of thinking about writing through enculturation.

Teaching Writing Dispositions in the Sustained Cultural Context of FYC

Remember that Tishman et al. assert that within a sustained cultural context, enculturation results from the use of “cultural exemplars, cultural interactions, and direct instruction in cultural knowledge and activities” (6). So to encourage the development of dispositions about writing in the FYC course, instructors must share examples of dispositions, provide opportunity for interactions among students and between the instructor and students that use the dispositions, and directly teach the disposition.

In the following section, I illustrate how to teach dispositions that follow Tishman et al.’s recommendations, sharing strategies to promote enculturation and the development of dispositions about writing.

Getting to Know FY Writers

New learning involves transfer based on previous learning; thus, before I have students reflect on their beliefs about writing (their habits of mind concerning writing), I want to ascertain students’ current understandings of writing. This information is important, also, because we FYC instructors, along with our colleagues in other departments, know little about our FY students. Our FY students come to us with a variety of experiences with writing, some of which resulted from the high-stakes testing environment of most public schools, where a great deal of effort is dedicated to preparing students to write on demand for standardized tests. Our students’ perceptions about academic writing are thus often skewed by these efforts, so it is important for us to determine our students’ previous learning and thinking about writing prior to any attempts to change that thinking and to provide opportunity to develop new understandings. Furthermore, as Kara Taczak, Liane Robertson, and Kathleen Blake Yancey note in this collection, this prior knowledge can affect, in sometimes adverse ways, what students attempt to transfer into FYC and other writing contexts. As I do, Taczak et al. advocate for affording opportunity for students to remember and articulate prior learning and experiences with writing to construct what they call a conceptual foundation that will later allow for a reframing of this learning to accommodate different writing demands.

The first piece of writing that Ashley’s class did and subsequent FYC classes do is a response to the question: What do you expect to learn in ENGL 101? Their responses help me understand and categorize their dispositions about writing while yielding information that can inform subsequent teaching.

The responses to this question that Ashley’s class gave indicated dispositions about writing that reflected a belief in the necessity for and importance of “correct writing,” such as “I expect to be able to correct my own errors . . .,” “[learn] correct usage of grammar and mechanics,” “create . . . grammatically correct papers,” and “I would like to be able to write a perfect paper by the end of this

course.” Also evident was a concern with the development of “skills” and “techniques”: “improve the skills we already have” and “learn techniques of writing.” There were also references to writing five-paragraph essays; one student wrote about her frustration with having to “stick with five paragraph essays” and “time limits” (perhaps a reference to writing on demand).

These responses illustrate previous learning and writing dispositions, some of which may get in the way of what I hope my students will achieve. For example, a concern for correctness and a belief in “perfect” writing can thwart the process of writing; getting started with a piece can be challenging when a writer is worried about making mistakes. The perception of writing as merely a set of skills, likewise, can hinder the development of style and voice. And, certainly, writing only on demand in response to prompts often results in very limited and misinformed understandings about how writers organize pieces when they consider purpose and content and the needs of their readers.

But, nonetheless, before I provide an exemplar of a more productive writing disposition, it is important to both acknowledge this prior learning and ways of thinking about writing and to probe a bit to determine the genesis of the learning and dispositions. For instance, FY students’ focus on the need for “correctness” or “structure” may be a result of preparing for writing on demand that often requires a five-paragraph pattern of organization, given that it is an expedient way to write to prompts on standardized tests. Thus, subsequent to my reading through students’ responses to my question about their expectations, I initiate a discussion during which I share what I learned from their responses and invite them to talk a bit about high school writing instruction, prompting them to explain, say, a concern for correct writing or asking about the importance of grammatically correct writing. To facilitate this discussion, I share a list of their expectations, categorized to demonstrate the “big ideas” about writing that emerged. For example, one list of expectations derived from this first piece of writing was divided into expectations related to improving and developing skills, correctness, and looking to the future/one’s profession.

After discussing their expectations and what they suggest about understandings of writing, it is helpful to discuss “good” writing and to ask students to identify features of “good writing.” Not surprisingly, given the many expectations that relate to “good writing,” “better writing,” and “proper writing,” correctness is mentioned along with “structure.” I then share a piece of writing that provides opportunity to reconsider what “good” writing is—a piece that is less structured in the conventional sense of the term but is, nevertheless, indicative of effective writing. (I have had success using Alice Walker’s “Father.”) Here, then, I share an exemplar (my appreciation for the essay resulting from Walker’s shuttling among past, present, and future, her judicious use of one-sentence paragraphs,¹ and the essay’s contemplative

1. The use of these is especially surprising to my students, many of whom have been taught that paragraphs *must* have at least five sentences. They are often so taken

and reflective tone), after which I offer opportunity for discussion about “correct” writing, followed by direct instruction about “good” writing and the problematic nature of narrow perceptions of “good” writing. Simultaneously, I am sharing my own way of thinking about writing—that what counts as “correct” writing is culturally mediated, as writing is a social endeavor dependent upon the situation in which it is occurring. I also suggest that forcing writing into a predetermined pattern (at least in most cases) counters what we know about how people write and ignores the fact that a great deal of writing transcends form—that these “forms” are really genres that “are ways of being and acting in the world” (Dean 7).

Another activity gets students thinking about writing while it shows them that writing is ubiquitous in their lives. When FY students are invited to think about writing, they often default to academic writing, the school-sponsored writing that they have done. However, of course, they engage in a great deal of writing that is not school-sponsored, such as to-do lists, emails, texts, and workplace writing. An assignment completed early in the course, a record of writing over the course of a few days, helps students see how common writing is in their lives. Again, as with the previous assignment, the intent is to initiate a new disposition about writing and about themselves as writers. While sharing my own record of writing, I also offer my way of thinking about writing (that in my life it is just as useful and necessary as reading), after which further discussion is conducted that includes a minilesson about the different purposes that writing has (and can have) in our lives—pragmatic, functional, as a tool for learning. The lesson culminates with students reflecting in writing on what they learned about their own uses of writing and themselves as writers through keeping a record of their writing. A component of dispositions, reflection begins with hard thinking but also includes “thoughtful consideration of one’s assumptions, values, and ramifications of one’s thinking and actions” (Schussler 263), thus serving to help students better comprehend the “why” of their thinking and how this thinking may affect their writing in the future.

In summary, these beginning writing assignments help me discover my FY students’ understandings and knowledge about writing as well as, by extension, their beliefs about writing—their dispositions. Because all new learning is based on transfer from previous learning, it is imperative to access previous learning and habits of mind before moving forward with attention to meeting FYC objectives and learning outcomes—which will include the development, I hope, of different ways of thinking about writing.

The Writer’s Profile

This writing assignment presents students with the task of sharing their perceptions of themselves as writers. Prior to beginning work on this assignment, stu-

with the rhetorical effect of a one-sentence paragraph that they use them in their own pieces.

dents read a model writer's profile (written by a previous FY student), and we discuss content, tone, and organization as a means to begin (or augment) the development of rhetorical knowledge and skills. However, as with the previous assignments, I am interested in ascertaining dispositions.

For this assignment, I ask students to write an essay in which they describe themselves as writers; I provide some questions to generate content, but there is latitude with regard to what content to include. As with the assignments mentioned earlier, these profiles yield insights into dispositions about writing that can, if necessary, be addressed. Furthermore, as students have, by this time, read a few pieces about composing (Donald Murray's "All Writing is Autobiography" and Sondra Perl's "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers"), they are beginning to question and critique their beliefs about writing and about themselves as writers. At the same time, the reading and discussion of these pieces have allowed for enculturation. We can discuss, for instance, how a research study is written and the form that it takes and compare it to Murray's "All Writing is Autobiography." This discussion can lead to the realization that the type of writing called for is culturally determined, leading to the notion of discourse and discourse community, concepts that are introduced later in the course, with opportunity to revisit the concept of genre and predetermined forms, such as the five-paragraph essay.

A look at Ashley's writer's profile will demonstrate what she was learning about herself as a writer and some of her ways of thinking about writing that are changing. In her piece, Ashley described her writing process and was able to make a distinction between revision and editing as a result of having read Perl's article: "I make sentence-by-sentence changes which are referred to as 'changes between drafts,' and not editing, according to Sondra Perl. . . ." Here, Ashley is describing how she writes a piece that she refers to as "the strict five paragraph format," what most of her high school writing consisted of. Later, she wrote:

My previous years as a writer in high school and middle school have consisted of following the strict format of the five paragraph essay. No matter what the topic, I was always asked to prove my point in a highly structured set-up. The . . . format called for so many rules and restrictions including a minimal number of "to be" verbs, no personal pronouns, and zero contractions. This prohibited me from being able to let my personality show and like Donald Murray says . . . "I do not think that we should move away from personal or reflective narrative in composition courses, but closer to it. . . ." I completely agree with Murray. . . .

Ashley's writer's profile, as well as those of other FY students, includes writing dispositions—and reveals how those dispositions may be problematized by the culture of our FYC course. For instance, Ashley always had to "prove my point

in a highly structured set-up.” Two ways of thinking about writing are implicit in this statement: that writing is always thesis driven and that it follows a predetermined pattern of organization—a “set-up” that is “highly structured.” Another student wrote in her writer’s profile that she never thought about what kind of writer she is because “I never considered myself much of a ‘writer.’” Like the basic writers Helen Sitler features in this collection and the multilingual writers that Brian Carpenter features, this FYC writer was predisposed to think of writing as only academic writing, as her profile referenced only school-sponsored writing. Thus, for her, as well as for many other FY writers, it was difficult to see herself as a writer until opportunities were provided to perceive intersections among academic and everyday language literacy practices.

My FYC course challenges these dispositions. I provide an exemplar (a different way to think about academic writing, that it is not always explicitly thesis driven and that form should follow function), followed by reading models of academic writing that challenge the current ways of thinking about writing and then some discussion during which students are invited to articulate a new way to think about academic writing. I also circle back to the record of writing that students generated to remind them that not all writing that they do is academic—that they do a great deal of writing that is not school-sponsored, as a majority of students write only about themselves as academic writers in these profiles.

Writing About Rules

Subsequent to the record of writing and the writer’s profile and after students have begun to consider themselves as writers in a different way than previously (I hope), students complete a journal entry in which they identify and discuss a writing “rule” that they were taught that didn’t make sense to them. This idea comes from Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’ *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*, in which the authors share with students what they call “misconceptions” about writing and discuss “constructs” about writing (4, 5).

Not surprisingly, my FYC students have been taught many “rules” about writing that, while they gamely tried to follow, did not make much sense to them. Many of these “rules” relate to what they usually call the “five paragraph format.” A student wrote, “It seems insane to . . . minimize someone’s writing into just five paragraphs,” while also sharing that while “it’s a structure to help, I . . . disagree when . . . teachers force their students to use it.” Another student also referred to five-paragraph essays while including related rules: “Three writing rules that I always felt have been absurd were the five paragraph format due to PSSAs [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment], five to eight sentences per paragraph and the no ‘I’ rule.” This student enumerated reasons for finding these rules “absurd” and referenced Murray’s “All Writing is Autobiography” when finding fault with the no “I” rule: “Donald M. Murray has made me realize that all writing we do has pieces of us in it. Therefore, why can’t we use . . . ‘I’ in some cases?”

Interestingly, several students cited the “no ‘I’” rule. “Never use ‘I’ in a piece of writing unless the writing is an autobiography,” a student wrote, then went on to comment, “I never . . . understood the reason I shouldn’t include my personal thoughts and stories into my work. . . . I feel as though all writings should include the writer’s voice. . . .” Another writing “rule” that students found perplexing concerned what they deemed to be unreasonable restrictions on their writing in addition to the aforementioned “no ‘I’” rule. For instance, students noted that sentences should not begin with the words “and” or “but,” and it is not acceptable to repeat certain words, such as adjectives, within a piece of writing; also, contractions were never to be used. Unreasonable directives were shared as well, one of the most common being that all paragraphs must have five sentences.

Ashley’s journal entry about writing rules was particularly interesting because it contradicted, at least to some degree, what she had written in her writer’s profile. For example, she stated that the “rules and techniques of each [type of writing] seemed to serve a purpose” and that the rules “seemed comprehensive and easy to understand.” However, she did refer to rules for “papers that required a bibliography,” writing that “I struggled to cite sources correctly and had trouble compiling an organized list of author’s [sic] works in the proper format.” She also expressed confusion about comma splices, sharing that she would receive lower grades on papers because of this type of error. And she went on to write that “[t]o be honest, the whole concept [comma splices] still doesn’t quite register with me and continues to confuse me.” Her journal entry ends by stating that she does not believe that any of the “rules of writing” are “senseless or unnecessary because they are what the English language is made up of and they define literacy vs. illiteracy.”

While I was somewhat surprised by Ashley’s journal entry because of what she had written in her writer’s profile, I believed that additional writing, discussions about writing, and reading mentor texts and research and scholarship about composition would provide opportunity for Ashley to continue to rethink and revise understandings about writing (and writing “rules”) and to develop ways of thinking about writing that would be helpful to her development as a writer.

It occurred to me, too, as I had been getting to know her better, that Ashley was experiencing a kind of tension or conflict about the “rules.” Even though she didn’t enjoy being confined to writing five-paragraph essays in high school and actually hoped to learn to produce different kinds of writing, it was clear that she had followed the “rules” because she wanted to excel in school. In “My Literacy Ladder” she wrote:

My lack of patience and . . . need to take everything and anything to the next level by my own means is what led me to become such a climber. I climbed trees . . . fences, rocks, and countertops. I found it necessary to climb the social ladder, my way

into a multitude of extracurricular activities and elite athletic teams, and even academically to win [my parents'] attention.

Referring to her interest in reading and sharing a recognition of the power of words, she wrote about literacy as a “necessary tool for survival” and attributed to her competence as a reader “power and advantages over other students.”

At the point, then, at which Ashley wrote this journal entry, while she was beginning to rethink writing and was reading and producing writing that was not formulaic, she nonetheless still perceived rules of writing in a strict sense. Even after the semester ended, she shared that she believed that this assignment [writing about rules] was not as “helpful” as some of the others, in part, because “some people still don’t . . . know all of the proper rules of writing.”

While these journal entries gave students a chance to vent about writing “rules,” the responses also indicated that many students possessed solid understandings of “good” writing despite the rules and teaching that they found incomprehensible. As noted earlier, one student referred to the importance of “voice” in writing, and another wrote in reference to the “no I” rule: “Facts only hit home when we have [sic] personality to them. In my opinion, people are more likely to believe you when there is feeling behind what you’re saying.” Finally, one student shared this understanding of good writing: “My idea of good writing is expressing yourself in a way that the reader is into what your [sic] saying but at the same time you still get your point across.”

The knowledge that I gained about students’ present ways of thinking about writing through their discussion of writing rules informed lessons that focused on the development of rhetorical knowledge and skills and writing dispositions. For example, I wanted students to reconsider writing “rules” as “guidelines.” To achieve this objective, I taught a lesson on punctuation as a rhetorical tool that began with a discussion of the difference between “rules” and “guidelines.” We then proceeded to talk about the reason for punctuation and examined some excerpts from texts in which writers use punctuation in ways that are unconventional or that deviate from rules. I also gave students a concise guideline for using commas, semicolons, colons, and end marks, although I also reminded them that in some cases it would be okay (or rhetorically effective) to ignore these guidelines. This lesson serves to help students develop rhetorical knowledge and skills and encourages them to rethink writing “rules”—and fosters a new way to think about writing, including “correct” writing.

Writing About Discourse Communities

Finally, my students write about a discourse community in which they participate. As with the journal entry about writing rules that cause confusion, this assignment comes from *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*. After I introduce the concept of discourse community to my students, I ask them to create a

diagram that illustrates the discourse communities in which they participate and any connections that exist among them. (A helpful resource for introducing discourse community is “Does Coming to College Mean Becoming Someone New?” by Kevin Davis in *The Subject is Writing* 2nd edition, edited by Wendy Bishop.) I also share a diagram of the discourse communities in which I participate. Then students are asked to choose one discourse community and to write an essay in which they explain how the group qualifies as a discourse community. Because discourse communities include different ways of using oral and written language, this piece of writing helps students understand and think about writing from another angle—a social context—and thus they add to their previous learning about “academic writing,” that what counts as acceptable academic writing is contingent on the discipline or field in which one is writing.

These assignments and the lessons that derive from them work to promote ways of thinking about writing that, as Bereiter maintains, may transfer to other contexts in which writing is used. Also, students are simultaneously acquiring rhetorical knowledge and skills through writing, reading, responding to peers’ writing, and conferencing. While I am focusing on the development of dispositions, it is important to remember that dispositions, knowledge, and skills are closely related and that the “intelligence” about writing that students are developing is dispositional intelligence.

Now for some evidence that students acquired writing dispositions in my FYC course.

What Writing Dispositions Do Students Learn?

Having asked students at the end of the semester what they learned in ENGL 101, I can provide some evidence of their having learned dispositions about writing. Some responses to this question related to thinking about themselves as writers: “I can write a good piece,” “I know I’m capable of good writing,” and “Anyone can be a writer.” I would argue that if students do, indeed, perceive themselves as writers, then this represents the acquisition of a key disposition—that we all can be writers, that the ability to write proficiently and effectively is not limited to only those who possess unusual skills and talents.

Acknowledging that they see themselves as writers, students often referred to learning about their own writing processes: “I know now that my writing will improve if I just let my thoughts flow on the first draft,” “Writing, for me, is a process and not something that can be done in a short period of time,” and “Writing takes time.” Another student noted the idiosyncratic nature of writing processes: “I learned the way I write and my thought process can be different than other people’s.” Finally, responses reflected a disposition about writing that demonstrated an understanding of the many forms that writing can take and that there is no one right way to write: “Writing is a wide range of methods, not just the 5-paragraph format.”

Ashley, with whom I remained in contact and who collaborated with me on a department colloquium session on FYC, shared her thoughts about what she learned in FYC in an email. With regard to the record of writing that she kept for a few days, she remarked that she had never realized how much writing she did until she kept track of it. Writing that she came to understand the importance of being able to write clearly on a day-to-day basis, she added, “Writing is power.” She also referred to the discourse community assignment:

I found myself thinking about the discourse communities discussion/assignment . . . and how valuable it was for me . . . because . . . as I’ve gone further into concentrating on Industrial Organization Psychology and have been getting into the groove of some of the business courses I’m enrolled in this semester, I’ve found that it’s . . . key to knowing the kinds of discourse . . . that is [sic] apart [sic] of that community. . . . I’ve realized that it’s quite difficult to communicate with others who are well-seasoned in the area. Knowing the type of vocabulary for, say, my Business Technology Education course or my Economics course, allows for an efficient and easy transfer of ideas and information.

Ashley also told me that writing about a discourse community in which she participated “changed my perspective on writing forever.” She went on to say that our FYC course “helped me to see that there are so many different ways of writing” and that it is “imperative that we first year writers heading into classes geared directly toward our . . . majors understand what type of writing is required in order to succeed . . . as members of our professional discourse communities.”

Although I have evidence that my FY students did acquire productive writing dispositions, I am uncertain to what degree these dispositions transferred, if at all. However, Ashley’s chapter in this collection will illustrate how dispositions about writing played out for her beyond our FYC course.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the existence of FYC courses in our colleges and universities suggests a belief that what students learn in FYC will be useful to them when they write for other courses or for the workplace, yet research on transfer calls this “service” into question. I argue here, though, that attending to the development of writing dispositions in our FYC courses is a “service” that we can and should provide. As noted earlier, these dispositions, ways of thinking and propensities to act in certain ways, are more likely to transfer, rather than specific rhetorical skills. Ways of thinking about writing, however, combined with familiarity and mastery of rhetorical skills demanded by different writing contexts, will enable students to successfully write beyond FYC.

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion After Chapter 6

1. Chapter 6 emphasizes the value of getting to know our students and their current understandings of writing early in an FYC course. What writing or discussion activities do you currently employ to learn who students are as writers when they come into your course?
2. Jo-Anne mentions several texts that her FYC students read as models for

their writing and as sources of knowledge for conversations about writing. What texts about writing have been most inspiring or instructional to your students in the past? What model texts beyond those she mentions might you have your students read as they prepare to write about their own writing beliefs or histories?

Writing Activity After Chapter 6

Make a list of all the writing “rules” you have learned, intuited, or adopted over the years for the writing you do. Consider rules for all types of writing, such as writing emails, memos, or social media posts in addition to any traditional academic writing you do. Which of these rules have you chosen to follow? Which have you broken, and with what results? How might sharing stories of your own rule-following or rule-breaking as a writer in the classroom benefit your students?

Further Reading

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