



Podcast Transcript

Stories from First-Year Composition co-editors Jo-Anne Kerr and Ann Amicucci speak with chapter co-authors Kara Taczak and Kathleen Blake Yancey

[Intro music]

Jo-Anne: Hi, I'm Jo-Anne Kerr, host of today's conversation and co-editor, with Ann Amicucci, of *Stories from First-Year Composition: FYC Pedagogies that Foster Student Agency and Writing Identity*, published in the WAC Clearinghouse Practices and Possibilities series. You can read this and other books published by the WAC Clearinghouse at wac.colostate.edu

Today's conversation features Kara Taczak and Kathleen Blake Yancey. We'll hear Kara and Kathi discuss the Teaching for Transfer [TFT] curriculum, explaining how two assignments in particular, the Theory of Writing assignment and mapping, enable first-year composition writers to understand and be able to meet different expectations for writing in different contexts, academic and otherwise. They will also share how the Teaching for Transfer curriculum can be adapted to meet the needs of students at different college and university institutions.

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Ann: And hi, I'm Ann Amicucci, co-editor with Jo-Anne of *Stories from First-Year Composition*.

Jo-Anne: We thought we would begin by asking you to introduce yourselves and to tell us what positions you currently have.

Kara: I'm Kara Taczak, I'm at the University of Denver, and I'm a Teaching Associate Professor in the writing program. I also am Director of ePortfolio Initiatives and Faculty Development on our campus.

Kathleen: And I'm Kathleen Yancey. I'm at Florida State University. I'm the Kellogg Hunt Professor of English and also a Distinguished Research Professor.

Jo-Anne: Thank you. Kara and Kathi, along with Liane Robertson, have written a chapter titled "Framework for Transfer: Students' Development of a 'Theory of Writing'" in *Stories from First-Year Composition*. And this chapter is one of several publications discussing pedagogical aspects of Teaching for Transfer curriculum. Listeners are encouraged to check out Kathi, Liane, and Kara's book *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*.

Ann: In *Writing Across Contexts*, you explain that given all the ways that students are writing in their lives, “there are abundant opportunities for concurrent, or cross-transfer” (27). Could you speak about how concurrent transfer works for first-year student writers?

Kathleen: So, when we were engaged in the research that we reported out in that book, and then as we’ve gone forward with this project, and it’s worth noting that in addition to the chapter in this book, there’s also a chapter in the book I edited called *A Rhetoric of Reflection*, we had an article that came out in the WAC journal last December, we have another article coming out in *CCC*, and those latter pieces are the product of two CCCC research grants. So all of that just to say as context, there’s been a lot of activity around Teaching for Transfer, and it’s now involved eight campuses, very different institutional types.

And one thing that’s become quite clear in all of this work is, as we know, students are writing in lots of different places. Now, they write in classes, to be sure, but that’s not necessarily the major place that they write. It’s where we work. It’s not necessarily the major place where they’re writing. They’re writing of course in their personal lives, they’ve got self-motivated writing, of course. They’re also, many, something like forty-some percent of students nationally have jobs while they’re in school, so many of them are writing, you know, on the job.

A lot of them are writing in co-curriculars. One of the things that we know is that, if you want students to really engage with the campus, they have to engage again in areas outside of the classroom, and most places where students flourish find that one way to help create that kind of stickiness is to help students figure out sort of where their affiliations are. Are they very interested in student government? Are they interested in the student newspaper? Are they interested in a Bible study class? We’ve tracked all of those and more besides. So even in the first year, in fact maybe especially in the first year, is a good time for students to find other sites around the campus where they can write.

And then some students start engaging in undergraduate research and/or in internships early on. So at Florida State, for example, we have a program called UROP [Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program], which is designed to engage first-year students in undergraduate research, with a faculty or a graduate student mentor. There are lots of places where students are writing in the first year and beyond.

Kara: We have so many great examples and Kathi mentioned several of them where we’re just seeing how students write so much more than I think we ever thought they did, and the ways in which they understand where they’re writing, how they’re writing, in those contexts, I think, and also told us that writing is so much a part of their lives in really rich ways, and so it’s much more than just, I think nowadays we think of it as, *Oh, sure, students engage in like social media, and so of course they’re writing, or they text or whatever*, but they really write in ways that we have almost never thought about before, so writing an email to their children’s soccer team or even their own soccer team or putting together flyers for that to promote it, or, at DU we have a lot of highly ambitious students who put start-ups together, and I had one student in particular who was writing legal documents because he was trying to get an imprint going while he was taking the TFT course. So it’s been really fun to see and learn how students engage in writing in the twenty-first century.

Jo-Anne: Sure. In chapter 9, “A Framework for Transfer: Students’ Development of a ‘Theory of Writing,’” you talk about the Theory of Writing, one assignment within a Teaching for Transfer curriculum “in which students articulate their understanding of writing.” In your chapter, you write that “in the Teaching for Transfer curriculum students are asked to develop a theoretical approach to writing by drawing on both prior and new knowledge and practices. In addition, in developing writing knowledge *and* practice, students find the Theory of Writing instrumental; in combining cognitive and reflective practices, the Theory of Writing assignment, and the activities leading up to it, relies on the type of mindful abstraction necessary for transfer. Students who engaged successfully in developing their Theory of Writing were able to see themselves differently as writers.” How does mapping work within the Theory of Writing? And, in connection to our collection’s focus on student agency, how do you see the Theory of Writing fostering student efficacy or student agency?

Kara: I’ll start with the mapping because it’s something that we definitely developed . . . Erin Workman who was part of our second phase, she developed a series of mapping activities, and Kathi of course has done a lot with mapping way before the transfer research. But we use mapping as a conceptual type of map, and we define it as, you know, something as simple as a type of visual organizer to help represent a particular knowledge of a subject, which is writing. But we do it in both literal and figurative ways.

In other words, we attempt to widen this definition of a conceptual map so that they can explore . . . about writing. And so, for me in particular, inside of my classes, I have them do, even in a quarter, anywhere between three to four maps, and the maps follow their Theory of Writing. And because it follows their Theory of Writing or I guess like parallels their Theory of Writing, every time they start to theorize about writing, they compose a map. And I have three guiding questions that helps to situation the map.

So one is, *What constitutes effective writing for any type of writing situation? How has your prior impacted your understanding of writing? And what set of key terms do you think about before writing?* And I use those questions to help guide the students. They are just kind of an overlay for them to think about as they develop their maps. I’ll start with a very traditional type of conceptual map, in that they can create anything that they want, so long as it’s a map, like a literal definition of a map. So they do everything from more of a graphic organizer with hierarchical . . .

Kathi: Structures.

Kara: Structures. Yes, thank you. They do cities map, road maps. I have several who just love to do like a pirate map. So they all do like literal definitions of a map. And then we move to, several weeks later, we move to doing a more abstract map. And one thing I’ve been playing around with is having them doodle, based on this idea that doodling frees your mind and allows you to really explore in new ways. And I have them just start with one word that, at this point in the quarter, is their representation of how they understand writing, particularly their writing, and whether or not it’s going to be effective for different situations.

So then we move to their favorite map, the third map that they do, is a walking map of their key terms. And they have to take their key terms that they associate with good writing, and they have to map them onto specific locations on campus, and then they have to represent that with pictures that they take, and then theorize about why these locations and spaces represent their key terms and thus create a walking map. And then the final thing they do is, they map their Theory of Writing. They create a map. And a lot, I [keep] this one pretty open, I get a lot of metaphors. So like, a dancing metaphor, for example, or a flower, or something like that, and they show the evolution of their Theory of Writing from the entire quarter and include the varying maps and the development of that final iteration.

Kathi: The thing about mapping is that it allows students to visualize the concepts that seem to be highly abstract. And when you look at the vocabular that we in the field have used to describe writing, back in the day, let's say prior to 1949 when CCCC was founded, the terms were mostly textual, so thesis, paragraph, topic sentence, you know, that kind of terminology, highly inflected by grammar, I might say. Then in the heyday of the process movement, we developed another vocabulary that didn't replace the textual vocabulary but certainly became a kind of remix, if you will. So terms like drafting, revising, you know, all the kind of process terms. Sometimes including some genre-related terms and sometimes not.

And what we think and believe and hope that TFT has added to the mix is a set of conceptual terms for writing, so, borrowing from Anne Beaufort's work for example, things like genre and discourse community, also things like rhetorical situation and then reflection, and we're very impressed by the argument in the 2000 version of *How People Learn* that experts' knowledge is located in key terms. So key terms have been very important, in fact they're critical to the TFT curriculum, one. That's point one. Point two is that mapping allows students a) to identify those key terms but also b) to show key terms in relationship to each other. So the question is, what is the relationship of those key terms.

And also, this mapping process, especially the kind of process that Kara has just outlined, allows students to bring in their key terms, which are often not the key terms we're introducing to them, and our research has shown that successful writers tend to have a remix of terms, terms they brought in with them, terms like voice for example, as well as our key terms, for a unique set of key terms. And, third, what students tend to like about the mapping is that it permits for a kind of creativity, and you heard that in Kara's description, that students bring something of their own insight and their own values into that mapping process, so that again, it operates at the intersection of what we want them to learn but also what they bring to the task.

And fourth, to your question about agency, what's terrific about this is that students say that this set of key terms and mapping activities that accompany them allow them to have a kind of control of their writing, that they don't feel that they've ever had before. That they understand writing as a phenomenon in a way that they haven't previously and that they can draw from that knowledge, as its represented in the key terms and their cognitive map of key terms. They can draw on that as they enter new writing situations. When you look at what helps people develop at then exert some agency, it's largely a function of understanding contexts and feeling some self-efficacy that you respond appropriately, and what the students say over and over again is that *This gave me a language and that language gave me a way of being as a writer.*

Ann: So we'd like to hear your ideas for how teachers can adapt the Theory of Writing assignment and the Teaching for Transfer curriculum to their own contexts. And you've already given us a lot of ideas for using mapping within the curriculum. What ideas can you share for adaptations, maybe of the Theory of Writing in particular, and what advice do you have for first-year composition teachers who hope to implement your ideas?

Kathi: Let's start with the curriculum. One adaptation, and again I'm really drawing on research that our colleagues have done. Especially our colleagues Howard Tinberg, Sharon Mitchler, and Sonja Andrus, all of whom teach at community colleges. Howard is at Bristol Community College, Sharon Mitchler is at Centralia College, and Sonja Andrus is at Blue Ash. Well the first question we ask was, *Can TFT serve students in very different university and college locations, with very different populations?* And the answer was yes, so that was great. And then a second question was, *If it can do that, what adaptations do people need to make?* So the adaptations issue has been very important to us.

One of them has to do with the readings. The TFT curriculum does not have a prescribed set of readings. It's clearly very oriented to a position as a discipline, but it's not necessarily vested in introducing students to writing studies. So the readings that we use really run the gamut. But the readings that you choose for TFT are probably going to be locally inflected.

So I'll give you an example. One of the things that's been interesting, and Howard has been pretty vocal about this, I think in a very helpful way. His view right from the beginning was that the students that he teaches at the two-year campus, students might come in, they might take one course and then go into work, or they might be working full-time. And it's also true that at many even four-year schools now, you have a lot of non-traditional students who in fact are working full time. That's been going on for decades. But if the students that one is teaching are more interested in the workplace than maybe some of your more traditionally four-year school students might be, then some of your readings might have something to do with the workplace.

Because what you're interested in is helping students think about the genre that a writer is working in, how the genre shapes what the writer has to say, how the genre fits within a rhetorical situation. That's the first assignment. The first assignment is to look at different genres and think about how rhetorical situation and genre work together to help shape a piece of writing, with a real interest also in audience. Because our research has also shown that students, many of them, have come to us thinking that their main job as a writer is to express themselves. And while we think expressing yourself is a very good thing, as we're doing right now, we also think that being able to write to an audience is a very good thing.

And that's another local issue: *What are some of the audiences that you might be writing to?* So what, you know, given the genre you're looking at, given the audience that you want to address, you know, what kind of an adaptation do you have to make there. That gives you, you know, one idea.

Let me give you one other that is directly related to the Theory of Writing. And this has actually come from, not only from our own participants but then from other people who are doing really

interesting work. So, Richard Matzen, for example. Richard is at Woodbury in Los Angeles, working not only with his own classes but, also, he's now leading a program-wide effort, which is, you know, just terrific. And he's found the same thing that some of us have found, and that is that students not only don't understand the word theory, but they're really put off by theory.

And they also, for a third point, think that theory belongs in a certain field of endeavor and it doesn't belong in another field of endeavor. So if you say to them, *theory*, they think *Physics*. *Well, Physics is entitled to have a theory, but writing is not. Writing wouldn't have a theory.* So the first thing that happens that might involve some adaptation is helping students understand a) what a theory is. And you know, something like, you can refer to *Law & Order*, you know, where the detectives have a theory about who committed the crime. That theory is not necessarily something that is highfalutin, that we all theorize all the time. Okay.

So, introducing them to, really, *How does, What is a theory? How does theorizing work?* That that's been really important. And you'd have to do a lot of that kind of work before you could even begin to think about what a Theory of Writing would be. But the other part of that is that you can't theorize writing unless you understand writing as something that is worthy of theorizing. You have to have a larger conception of writing in order to theorize it. If writing is nothing more than some grammatical structures and a topic sentence or two, there's not, frankly, there's not a lot to theorize.

So that's why the Theory of Writing, and Kara explained it, is very much a progressive activity. People are not going to be theorizing in a very robust way in the very beginning because they don't understand theory, and they don't understand writing very well. But if they, if you could help them understand theory, and you could, and they're learning about writing as they write and as they learn the key terms and they're working with the key terms, then the Theory of Writing begins to be something that is exciting and energizing, and especially, I think that's the case, to go back to the issue about concurrent, if students can be invited to bring into that theorizing of writing what's also going on in their writing while they're taking the TFT class, and that's yet another adaptation.

Not everybody's done that, but that seems to make a difference for students because it makes it clear that writing is this thing, again, that happens inside the writing classroom, or the TFT classroom in this case, that it's going. So to the extent that students can bring in other writing that they're engaged in concurrently, that makes writing much more complex, much more sophisticated, and it endows students with a kind of authority over their own writing but also over writing more generally, and that helps them develop more agency.

Kara: I was going to add something a little more surface-level, that when Liane and I first moved from Florida State to our two current institutions, we noticed right away that we had to adapt the TFT curriculum. I moved from Florida State, which was a sixteen-week semester, to a ten-week quarter, and that alone presented, you know, any number of challenges, so then I had a two-quarter first-year writing sequence that I did not have when Liane and I and Kathi developed the TFT curriculum so many years ago, so we just started trying lots of different adaptations, and that's kind of how, I think, what's been really amazing and cool to see is how, starting at just the three institutions that we did, and then expanding outward to so many diverse institutions. It's

been fun to see the ways that it has worked effectively for students and learning about writing and themselves as writers, and so, I think adaptation means everything from what Kathi said but also quarters, writing program goals, but I think the thing that we've learned is that it is adaptable.

Kathi: That's the great thing, is that it is flexible. You know, our research shows so far, as long as you keep the three interlocking parts, and that's the key terms, the systematic reflection, and the Theory of Writing. As long as you keep those interlocking parts, you've got a lot of room to adapt it, as you need to adapt it. And as we've indicated, there are many dimensions along which one might adapt.

Jo-Anne: This has been really fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing this curriculum. Is there anything that you haven't so far addressed that you'd like our listeners to hear?

Kara: The question that we got so often when we first started presenting on TFT: *Can't we cherry pick? Can't we just use your key terms? Can't we just use your Theory of Writing? Can't we just use one thing or the other?* And so, we were like, *Of course not*, but to make sure we could back up what we were saying, we've actually pulled the curriculum apart and had people just use the Theory of Writing, or just the reflective framework, or just use the set of key terms, and what we have found is, it just doesn't work. It's not as effective.

Students do not pick up on the nuances of writing or the development of their own writing processes and practices, and it's because the curriculum was created to have those three components of it work together. And so I definitely think that's something very important since it has been a big question and concern for a lot of instructors considering using it. We have just found, one hundred percent, no, it does not work if the components are not used together.

Kathi: I think the other thing I would say is that we started out, of course, with a focus on first-year comp and maintained that focus, but we have widened it, also. So we have some research now on upper-level classes, we have some research on interns, we have some research on teaching assistants. It's worth noting that all those other pieces have provided the same evidence base, the efficacy of TFT. That's really heartening, too.

Our current project, one of the things we're doing is writing an article based on the eight sites. One thing we're looking at is students' uptake of key terms, because we're beginning to see a pattern of uptake, and we think it can be helpful to try to articulate what that pattern is and to think about why the pattern is what it is, so we hope that we'll have some new findings to share with people.

Jo-Anne: It's really exciting. Thank you again.

Ann: It's been a pleasure to speak with Kara Taczak and Kathi Yancey. Listeners who'd like to learn more about the implementation of the TFT curriculum at various institutions are encouraged to look for an article by Sharon Mitchler, Howard Tinberg, and Sonja Andrus in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and an article by Erin Workman, Matt Davis, Liane

Robertson, Kara, and Kathi in *College Composition and Communication*, both of which are forthcoming in late 2019.

Music on this podcast is by Dan-O at danosongs.com. We encourage you to visit the WAC Clearinghouse website to check out additional podcasts and more materials related to the book *Stories from First-Year Composition*.

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