Transfer and Writing Assignments across the Curriculum: Broadening the Knowledge and Practice of Rhetorical Contexts beyond First-Year Composition

Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing, by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak. Logan and Boulder: Utah State UP and U of Colorado P, 2014. 191 pp.

Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of Writing, by Dan Melzer. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. 160 pp.

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As the director of university writing at my institution, I found Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* and Dan Melzer's *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of Writing* both timely and extremely useful. While my institution does not feature a formal writing across the curriculum (WAC) program with a director separate from the first-year writing program and the writing center, my role as campus writing director involves designing curricula for first-year writing, developing learning outcomes for writing-intensive courses across the university, and running WAC workshops for faculty across the curriculum, among other responsibilities. As such, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak and Melzer provide useful ways for those of us in similar situations to perform our jobs more effectively and reflectively. Taken together, then, these books get to the heart of the intersection between first-year composition and WAC-type initiatives that many of us as writing program administrators (WPAs) engage in on a daily basis.

Those of us who work as WPAs do so in contexts where it is increasingly important to show that student writers in first-year writing courses are learning the kinds of rhetorical skills necessary to succeed in other academic contexts and beyond. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak provide one of the first studies in which they explore the competing ways transfer is defined, in examining how the first-year composition curriculum at Florida State University achieves transfer through its curriculum and teaching. Melzer, meanwhile, focuses broadly on the types of writing assignments faculty use across the curriculum at 100 different U.S. colleges and universities, to show the positive influence WAC initiatives have had on writing instruction outside English departments. As well, Melzer stresses that many colleges and universities still need to provide resources and space for WAC programs in order to improve writing instruction across the curriculum. Both Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's and Melzer's work appear

at an opportune time in composition studies because they offer WPAs, WAC coordinators, graduate students, and others who collaborate to teach college writing evidence supporting the value of transfer and the connection between clear writing assignments in the disciplines and successful student writing as a result of those clear assignments that many of us already assume but may not have had confirmed by research.

Transfer, of course, is a timely topic in composition studies, and Yancey and colleagues respond to recent work by focusing on the necessity to define and understand the concept, on the need to rethink curriculum design in the composition classroom and how it is designed for transfer, on the importance of addressing the role writing outside of school plays, and on the actual experiences of students who have made the challenges of transfer visible. In doing so, the authors argue that writing courses whose curricula focus overtly on teaching for transfer (TFT) aid students in transferring rhetorical knowledge and practices to other contexts in ways that other writing courses do not. In addition to adhering to a generalized concept of transfer—students being able to replicate a task or skill learned in one context for another—Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak draw strongly from the recent work of Elizabeth Wardle, who theorizes transfer as "repurposing," a concept the authors adapt to what they call "a common practice of writers in the 21st century—that is, the repurposing of texts for new rhetorical situations and/or media" (10). Yancey, Roberston, and Taczak unite definitions of transfer as generalizability and as repurposing to create a definition of transfer with two implications: the first implication holds that transfer of knowledge and practice should be a priority for institutions of education. The second implication leads to a fuller, more complex understanding of transfer that allows WPAs and instructors to create more effective curricula that promote transfer in multiple rhetorical contexts. This definition of transfer and its use of Wardle's notion of "repurposing" is particularly useful for those of us who direct writing programs at institutions without formal WAC initiatives because it provides a theory and a language of transfer that lead us to design curricula that encourage transfer of writing skills across the curriculum.

Writing across Contexts reviews multiple curricular models that address the transfer of rhetorical knowledge and practices in first-year writing classrooms. On one end of the continuum, the authors note, is David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies*, in which Smit argues that transfer of rhetorical skills and practices is unlikely except "for surface constructions like spelling, punctuation, and . . . syntax" (43). On the other end of the continuum, they acknowledge, is Doug Brent's vision of what they call a "naturalized" version of transfer in which "students draw from the *entirety* of their academic writing experiences as they encounter new writing situations" (45). They also identify three other

models that fall in the middle of their continuum, work by Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, Debra Frank Dew, and Rebecca S. Nowacek. Building on these models, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak then provide an overview to their own TFT course, which is described further in chapters three and four. As a first-year writing program director, one of the things I appreciate about this chapter is how the authors' description of different curricular models allows administrators of first-year writing to apply a theory of transfer to their own curricula and to discover where their program falls on that continuum—allowing administrators to gauge how to, if necessary, rethink and revise that curriculum to make its focus on transfer more overt.

The heart of their study is a review of the TFT course developed at Florida State University, as well as a description of how students' "prior knowledge" contributed to both their writing development and lack thereof. Specifically, the course teaches four assignments that focus on learning key rhetorical terms, engaging in theoretical readings, writing in three different genres of the student's choosing, and reflecting on the students' work over the duration of the course to develop their own theory of writing. The researchers compared their TFT course to two other first-year composition courses at Florida State, each with a different focus: an expressivist course and a themed course on media and culture. Over a two-semester period, the investigators interviewed seven students. Three of the students came from the TFT course, two came from the expressivist course, and two from the media and culture course. They interviewed these students during the semester they enrolled in their composition course, the second semester of a two-semester sequence, and the following semester, when students were enrolled in general education courses.

Results from these interviews and from the study at large, investigators note, suggest that students who reported to have been successful writers show little incentive to change and continue to draw from previous writing experiences. The authors argue that students used prior knowledge in several ways. Students with little-to-no prior knowledge from which to draw used it whether the knowledge was relevant or not. Some students used prior knowledge in conjunction with new knowledge learned from the course (remix model). Other students found that prior knowledge was not useful when encountering new writing challenges. In all, these interviews showed that students in the two non-TFT courses believed their writing in the course was disconnected from the writing they perform in other university courses, while the TFT course, as noted in the student interviews, provided the tools these students needed to transfer knowledge and practice to new writing contexts. Thus, what I find most useful in *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* are these rich discussions of students' prior knowledge and how different composition courses contribute in varying ways to their understanding of their

writing and to how they transfer—or not—rhetorical practices and knowledge to new contexts. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's discussion of different types of composition courses, courses common at my institution—among many others, I am sure—allows WPAs like me to rethink how the first-year writing assignments we develop may or may not lead to the kind of knowledge transfer we hope will occur.

From this study, the researchers offer six recommendations for instructors that will allow first-year composition students to enact transfer to other contexts: one, be explicit. Two, build in expert practices. Three, tap prior knowledge and concurrent knowledge. Four, include processes and link them to key terms and a framework. Five, consistently ask students to create their own frameworks using prior knowledge. Six, build in metacognition, verbal and visual, balancing big picture and small practices. In all, these recommendations sum up many of the best practices many of us as writing teachers and WPAs, particularly those of us without an official WAC program who tie first-year writing courses to writing in other courses, try to do daily. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's work provides a theoretical and practical road map for us to rethink and reflect on our own curriculum so that we are serving our students in ways that allow them to succeed in writing contexts across the university.

For those of us looking for broader information about how our colleagues across the university design writing assignments and how WPAs' knowledge about those assignments impact our work as WPAs, writing center directors, WAC coordinators, and first-year writing teachers in general, Dan Melzer's *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of Writing* proves an invaluable resource. In his study, Melzer responds to Chris M. Anson's call for large-scale research into disciplinary writing and comes away with a rich view of how teachers outside English and writing departments construct writing assignments. Building on the early research of James Britton and his colleagues, as well as Arthur N. Applebee, Fran Lehr, and Anne Auten's foundational large-scale research of student writing, Melzer analyzes the rhetorical features of writing assignments in multiple academic departments from 100 various colleges and universities across the United States. In all, Melzer analyzes 2,101 assignments, from both writing-to-learn (WTL) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) theoretical perspectives. The assignments come from undergraduate courses in the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and business. Melzer's study provides a fitting companion to Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's work on transfer. If Yancey and colleagues provide a theory and practice for how to teach students for transfer in first-year writing courses, then Melzer's study shows us the specific kinds of rhetorical challenges students will be expected to address in multidisciplinary settings.

Melzer lists five research questions for studying the assignments, as well as the theoretical lenses he uses to analyze these assignments. First, for what purposes are students asked to write in different disciplines? Second, what audiences are students asked to address? Third, in what genres are students asked to write? Fourth, how do academic discourse communities differ? Fifth, how do assignments vary across types of institutions? In addition to answering these questions with qualitative and quantitative data, Melzer also uses WTL and WID theories to "consider the implications of those findings" (15). This multi-lens approach, Melzer argues, is valuable "because the findings of the study suggest the influence of both approaches, as well as points of connection between them" (16). In doing so, Melzer's study not only expands the work of Britton and others, but it also shows how compositionists can interpret the findings of WAC studies through an integrated WTL and WID approach.

Melzer then addresses the rhetorical purposes and audiences of the various assignments, noting that most purposes are restricted to transactional discourse written for an audience made up almost exclusively of the instructor for the purpose of regurgitating information. He also points out some inconsistencies between assignments and criteria, mostly that students were asked to write for one purpose but were given assignment criteria that suggested another purpose. For instance, a common issue he discovered is that many assignments might ask students to analyze information, synthesize concepts, or place ideas in social and historical contexts, yet the assignment's criteria would focus almost exclusively on grammar, mechanics, and correctness. This inconsistency, as well as the limited rhetorical situations proposed by the majority of assignments, suggest "a continued need for WAC practitioners to help instructors in the disciplines become more aware of the value and uses of writing for expressive and poetic purposes," as well as for audiences that go beyond merely the instructor (39-40). Melzer's study pairs suitably with Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's study of transfer, in large part, because Melzer's call for creating more complex rhetorical situations around writing assignments echoes Yancey and colleagues' insistence on making transfer overt in the first-year writing classroom. As such, TFT prepares students for the kind of rhetorical knowledge and practices that Melzer argues should be addressed in classes beyond first-year composition.

Much like Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, Melzer also explores the importance of explicit genre instruction in these assignments by examining the types of genres in which students are asked to write. Drawing from work in genre studies (Bazerman and Paradis; Devitt; Miller; Swales), Melzer focuses on genre as "responses to recurring rhetorical situations rather than simple templates of form and format" (12). The majority of the assignments, Melzer discovered, fall within one of two genres, the research paper or the short-answer exam. On the one hand, Melzer notes that most of the various research assignments he

studied "asked students to create knowledge and perform the meaning-making work of the discipline" (49). On the other hand, Melzer notes that almost a quarter of the assignments studied were short-answer exam questions, "the genre most lacking in rhetorical and social context" (49). The research assignment, according to Melzer, "is one of the most complex and dynamic genres in college writing" and one that leads students to think widely and critically in various disciplinary and nondisciplinary situations (51). Melzer's focus on genre, especially the diverse ways research is addressed in assignments beyond first-year composition, appears to speak in explicit terms to the role genre plays in the TFT course described by Yancey and her colleagues.

One of the implicit questions early in Melzer's book is made explicit in the second half of the book: "Are there qualities of academic writing that academic discourse communities have in common?" (18). In analyzing multiple assignments from this study, Melzer concludes that addressing discourse communities and their features across a broad spectrum of academic writing communities presents a paradox about academic discourse reflected in the assignments: a notion exists across the university that there are indeed universal, standard features of academic discourse. Although Melzer's study is unable to, in his words, "build theories about why discourse communities differ across disciplines, or understand how students respond to these disciplinary differences" (69), the scope of materials and evidence he collects in this study contributes to a growing understanding of the complex and varied rhetorical situations students experience in their coursework across the university. Indeed, one of the strengths of Melzer's study comes from the growing evidence he collects, evidence showing that differences in rhetorical conventions in academic discourse—even within the same department—far outweigh the similarities. Therefore, composition teachers, as well as WPAs, writing center directors, and other program coordinators, cannot treat academic discourse generically, or as Melzer reminds us when he quotes Judith A. Langer, "forms like comparison or summary can be discussed in general ways, but then the particular uses of those forms in particular disciplinary contexts is lost" (70).

One of the main goals of this book is to reinforce the importance of the WAC movement and to point out the critical role WAC has played in furthering attention to strong writing instruction across university settings. While many of the assignments Melzer studies in this book still rely on nonrhetorical situations, he does note that researchers in his study who assign writing that addresses a wide variety of audiences, purposes, and genres and who teach writing as a process through peer review and multiple drafts all teach at a university or college "connected in some way to a WAC initiative" (71-2). Many of these courses, he notes, include self-reflective writing, assignments written for audiences that go beyond the instructor, and discipline-specific

research projects instead of midterm and final exams, and explicit instruction in genres common to the course's academic discourse. This focus on explicitness in instruction echoes Yancey et al.'s call for clear instruction in TFT. Indeed, both books strongly suggest that for writing instructors to achieve their goals, whether it is for transfer or for student understanding of specific academic discourses, instructors need to make their goals and assignments explicit. While this call for clarity in assignment design and in course goals is nothing new in composition and WAC studies, both Yancey et al. and Melzer do it in a way that, when considered collectively, integrates the call for transfer as part of first-year writing curriculum with cross-disciplinary assignment design.

Melzer concludes his book with a list of six implications this kind of integration holds for WAC, for writing centers, and for first-year writing. Several implications abound. One, based on the lack of expressive and poetic assignments his study identified, WAC initiatives should integrate WID and WTL approaches, using the genre of the journal as a point of leverage. Two, first-year writing courses and writing centers should provide opportunities for students to write for poetic and expressive purposes. Three, WAC initiatives should redouble their efforts to work against the lecture/exam model, using the research project as a point of leverage. Four, composition courses and writing centers should focus on rhetorical awareness of how genres and other discourse conventions function in academic contexts. Five, the single first-year composition course is not enough to ensure student success but rather universities and colleges should implement, at minimum, a second semester or sophomore-level writing course focused on writing across disciplines. Six, any institution serious about transforming the culture of writing for students and faculty should support a formal WAC program. I am not sure many of us in the field will disagree with these admirable and lofty goals. What I find useful here in Melzer's book is that these implications, while not uncommon for many of us who work as WPAs, are now supported by the scope and range of Melzer's quantitative and qualitative research on writing assignments. Many of us who work at institutions without formal WAC programs, but who still perform WAC-type duties, will be able to use Melzer's arguments and results as resources for faculty workshops and other WAC work at our institutions, while continuing to lobby for more formal WAC initiatives.

Because I strive regularly to do the kind of work Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak and Melzer describe and advocate for, even without a formal WAC program, I read both books through a terministic screen inclined to envision the possibilities both books champion. On the one hand, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak provide me with the theories and practical suggestions for designing a first-year writing curriculum that explicitly focuses on the goal of teaching students to learn how to transfer rhetorical knowledge and practices to multiple

writing opportunities. On the other hand, Melzer provides a broad review of how faculty across multiple academic disciplines design and implement their writing assignments in a way that enables me to understand further how to assist faculty at my institution to develop their own assignments that promote strong rhetorical thinking from their students. One of the significant commonalities in both books, then, is a focus on the integrations between what goes on in the classroom—both first-year writing and classrooms across the university—and broader WPA programs.

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