Works in Progress

First-Year College Students after EN101

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Composition teachers see only works in progress. I don't mean students' papers. I mean the students themselves. They pass through our classrooms, go on to other teachers in numerous disciplines, and only rarely cross our paths again as writers. If I encounter a former student on my university's campus, I always ask, "How are your courses going this semester? Are you doing any writing in them? Are you doing all those good things you know about writing?" Invariably, students respond that their courses are going well, as is their writing. But sometimes, I doubt that I am hearing the whole truth and am left wondering how, indeed, these students approach new writing tasks. I wonder, for instance, whether Jude remembers that Post-it® Notes helped him organize his ideas and if he's used that strategy for his political science paper. I wonder if Julie still highlights verbs to catch her tense shifts, or whether Nathan writes a problematic sentence at the top of a clean sheet of paper and develops his idea from there. In short, I wonder whether my former students remember and actively put to use anything at all from our semester in College Writing.

I know well enough, as all English teachers do, that faculty in other disciplines sometimes question what, exactly, we teach in EN101 College Writing, a required course for every freshman at my university. Faculty complain that students appear to have little or no command of their writing. At such moments, I sigh in frustration, knowing that most of those same students did, in fact, have command of their writing when they produced it in College Writing.

During the 1998-99 academic year, I found an opportunity to act rather than simply sigh and wonder. I was assigned to a small branch campus housing primarily first-year students. If I were to do research using these students, follow-up contacts would be relatively easy. In addition, my colleagues were interested in what a study of this sort might tell us about the underprepared students who are assigned to our branch and about ways we might better teach them.

Finally, by undertaking some research, I could discover what kinds of writers my former students were becoming. As works in progress, where were they? And had any elements of my College Writing course helped them to get there?

In spring 1999, I designed a study asking three questions: 1) Do students, in courses other than composition, use the writing strategies they identified as productive for them in College Writing? 2) If conditions students describe as conducive to good writing (peer response, for example) do not exist in their new courses, do they take any steps to create those conditions or to substitute alternative strategies? and 3) If students do not apply previously successful writing strategies, why not?

What I Might Expect to Find

In essence, I was asking about the classic concept of transfer: Do students apply anything they learned in College Writing to new contexts that require them to write? Transfer, defined as "the degree to which a behavior will be repeated in a new situa-
tion” (Detterman 4), appears in bleak terms in much of the literature. Comprehensive reviews of transfer studies all “are in almost total agreement that little transfer occurs” (Detterman 8). Composition literature that looks at freshman writers completing writing in other courses mirrors the literature on transfer: little carryover occurs (Chisleri-Strater 141-144, 158; McCarthy 245, 260-263; Nelson 426). In both transfer and composition studies, the problem is the same: few students recognize similarities across contexts. Detterman notes that only when situations are highly similar is transfer even likely to occur (6, 15). Yet classrooms are experienced by students as unique cultures, thus obscuring similarities and effectively derailing students’ attempts to discern from their College Writing course what, exactly, they might do to accomplish a writing task in any other course.

Amidst the dismal reports of transfer, however, there have been some rays of hope. Although individual classrooms represent unique discourse sites, studies also reveal that commonalities in writing tasks do exist across courses (McCarthy 243-244; Hillocks 126-132). Hillocks, in fact, argues that a carefully designed first-year writing course can accommodate students’ needs for multiple future writing demands (Hillocks 132). Both transfer literature and general literature about learning suggest that when teachers take steps to create particular conditions, students are more likely to transfer their learning. Some of these conditions include direct instruction with connections to life outside the classroom (Jacobson; Sternberg and French 35-36), a master-apprentice model for learning (Geisler 230; Greeno, Moore, and Smith 162; Jacobson; Smith, Understanding 190-191; Soldner), reflective activities (Gulob 1-8; Kutz, Groden, and Zamel 13-14; Soldner; Sternberg and French 35-36; Yancey), and an environment that recognizes social influences on learning (Bereiter; Dyson; Smith, Book 9-13). Given such conditions, students can more easily recognize similarities across situations and invoke prior knowledge.

With this research, I felt on firmer ground. My College Writing class was designed to bring life and learning together, we worked in a highly social context, and I routinely wrote along with the students as writer-model. In addition, my fall 1998 students had written short reflections for each of two portfolios and an extensive reflection called their “personal writing handbook” as their final exam. By mid-February of 1999 I had returned all these reflections to the students.

Eleven students from my fall 1998 College Writing sections volunteered to participate in the study. While these participants constitute a small sample, they represent a cross-section of my fall semester enrollees. The volunteers included students from three different fall 1998 College Writing sections. Five commuters and six residential students participated. The group included six females and five males, and it represented a range of writing abilities: three strong writers, five adequate writers, and three weak writers.

After interviewing each of the eleven students (with the help of a graduate research assistant), collecting their papers and records of their conferences in the Writing Center, and interviewing their spring 1999 instructors for courses that assigned writing, I was able to answer the three questions I had posed. Here are the short answers:

1. Do students from EN101 continue to use writing strategies they identified as successful? Yes and no. It depends on the demands of the class.

2. Do they create productive writing environments for themselves? Yes, they work with peer groups, go to the Writing Center, and give themselves adequate time.

3. If they do not apply previously successful strategies, why not? Because these strategies are not necessary for a good grade.

However, as is the nature of qualitative studies, other interesting findings beyond these basic conclusions emerged. What intrigued me was the manner in which students applied the practices they had learned in College Writing to subsequent courses. In general, students relied on three major strategies: verbal strategies, visual strategies, and commitment to process. Their transfer of and variations on processes we used often in College Writing reveal much about first-year writers who are solidly grounded in writing workshop.

**Verbal Strategies**

“When I talk, it helps a lot. I can’t just write.” — Hilary

Evidence has long existed that talk serves heuristic purposes. “Exploratory situations” require a use of language that is tentative and in which thoughts are not fully developed. A listener as a sounding board can play a key role (Britton et al. 11). In College Writing, students had worked in peer response groups all semester, both in and outside of class. Karen’s peer response group worked so well together that I asked them to videotape themselves, hoping to use the tape to train other peer response groups.

The videotape from fall 1998 reveals Karen as a perceptive listener. For instance, her questions about two peers’ papers (“What was that part about the older guy?” and “Could you conduct your surveys every two
works?"") zeroed in on points both writers needed to reconsider in their collaborative field study of a local Walmart. As the weakest writer in her group, however, Karen needed the input of others to isolate the weaknesses in her own paper, a collaborative study with a classmate of the use of space in two selected residence hall rooms. One peer responder pointed out Karen’s divergence from the primary goal of her paper: “You’re doing use of space, right? It seems like your paper is more compare and contrast . . . not how each room’s using their space.” A second responder also pushed for more information, asking whether “one guy touches another guy’s stuff” and whether “one girl uses three-fourths of the space in the room.” With this prompting, Karen’s paper was redirected toward information she had not yet included. She discussed the behaviors the environments in the two rooms encouraged. The talk in her response group helped her redirect the paper’s focus beyond a superficial comparison.

In the next semester, with no writing course and very little peer group work in her classes, Karen found other outlets for exploratory talk. She visited the Writing Center twenty-five times, more frequently than any other student on our campus. Nearly all of these occasions revolved around her Introduction to Literature course, which required a great deal of writing that spring. “I go to the Writing Center for everything,” she said. The Writing Center, however, was not her only outlet for exploratory talk.

In her residence hall, informal conversations and study groups of literature students sprang up, comprised entirely of students who had been in my College Writing sections the semester before. In one study session, Karen’s conversation with a classmate jump-started her work on her essay about Robert Frost’s poem “Birches”: “The storm [a snowstorm at the time students were reading “Birches”] actually helped me out, and then Cheryl and I ended up talking. We got into stories, recalled some memories, [thought] of things, and then I kind of got going.”

James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” proved more formidable. Understanding the reading itself was necessary before any papers could be written. Four students, including Karen and Amy—another student who was part of my study—formed a spontaneous study group. Amy reported, “Either we have in-class [peer groups] or there’s a group of us that [gets] together . . . Karen, me, Cheryl, and Rayna, we all didn’t understand the story so we just got together to do it.” Writing about “Sonny’s Blues” could proceed after this residence-hall brainstorming session to grasp the story itself. Karen described response meetings of this type continuing throughout the semester. “At dinner we always talk.” Karen’s transfer of exploratory talk with peers and the Writing Center tutors mirrors the actions of other study participants.

Universally, these students sought out response in a variety of venues. For some students, like Karen, the formalized setting of the Writing Center and, in some cases, the requirement that they go to the Writing Center, opened avenues for talk. Joe, for his work on a literature paper, said, “That’s where the Writing Center helped the most. I had two, maybe three people around bouncing ideas off each other . . . That really helped a lot.”

Response from others was not the only verbal strategy my former students practiced. Some described reading aloud to themselves. Reading aloud had been our approach to peer response in College Writing. So that peers would respond to content and not mechanics, we followed this rule: The writer reads to you; you listen and take notes. Prior to College Writing, few students had read their work aloud. Students learned how such reading helps a writer.

Jenny and Peter took this practice to their new courses. Peter, not referring to any particular paper, remarked, “I usually read [a paper] aloud instead of [silently]. It helps a lot more, I think.” He used this strategy primarily to catch grammatical errors. Jenny’s read-aloud strategy was more sophisticated. For her literature paper about Adrienne Rich’s poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” she described reading aloud to monitor coherence. After typing the draft, she said, “Then I go through and read it out loud . . . Somewhere in here I had a paragraph that was redundant. I just totally deleted [it] because it was not necessary.”

Talk was ubiquitous in students’ descriptions of how they managed their writing assignments. Hilary’s remark about her own working style represents, to some degree, every student in this study. She said, “If I get stuck, I always talk to somebody.”

**Visual Strategies**

“Oh, yeah, my book is all marked up . . . I write in the margins a lot.” —Mark

Students’ purposes in using talk and visual strategies overlapped in some ways, yet they also diverged. Students used talk primarily for generating, clarifying, and expanding ideas. Some visual strategies also helped with generating ideas, but students depended more heavily on the visual for organizing and editing. All eleven study participants identified visual strategies as part of their writing processes.
During College Writing, we often used color-coding. On some days, for instance, we spent mini-lessons highlighting verbs, pronouns, and punctuation marks to draw attention to mechanics.

Other visual techniques we practiced were intended to develop students’ sense of text as flexible rather than immutable. To begin a draft, we sometimes used Post-it Notes. To the prompt “Write everything you know about your topic,” students filled Post-its with quickly jotted ideas. Our rule—one idea per Post-it and keep it short—generated as many as twenty to thirty Post-its in three or four minutes of writing.

Then, with a partner, students arranged their Post-its into an outline, one infinitely flexible because the Post-its were so easy to move. If plan A for a paper failed, writers could move some Post-its around and try a new draft using plan B.

At other times, often during conferences in my office, a student and I literally cut papers with scissors (always a copy, never the original), rearranged sentences and paragraphs, and worked together to write new transitional text to link the rearranged pieces. This hands-on cut and paste signaled to students that they could reorganize while retaining much of what they had already written.

The study participants reported variations on the visual strategies we had used and sometimes combined them with strategies they had learned in other courses.

Jenny described her process of highlighting key words and phrases in the poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” for the paper she wrote. “I had some of the words in boxes or circled, and some of the phrases highlighted. I mainly talked about the words and some of the lines that insinuated [that the husband was controlling].” Amy’s strategy for her “Sonny’s Blues” essay was similar. She highlighted her textbook in order to focus her concentration and to locate needed information. “I tried to highlight where points were so if I would lose what I was thinking about or somebody distracted me, I could go right back to it.”

Other students used brainstormed lists as they had learned to do in College Writing. Victor, writing for political science, developed a list of the points he wanted to include in his analysis of the role of the media in the movie All the President’s Men. He then moved the items on this list around, adding and deleting points.

He said the “hardest part” of writing the political science paper was “getting it in order.” In his final exam refection for College Writing, Victor had articulated his problem with organizing material: “I was always troubled by how to organize my thoughts. I found the notepad exercise [Post-it Notes] to be a great way to lay my separate ideas down and move them around until I achieved the best setup.” In his political science paper, he had used the brainstorm list as if it were Post-it Notes, shifting the order of his ideas to better present his argument.

Once students had drafted, they resorted to other visual techniques. Several described a process of cut and paste, either at the computer or by hand with a printed draft. In an example noted earlier, Jenny described her deletion of an entire paragraph from her “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” piece because of redundancy. She added that she had done “a lot of cut and paste and deleting” while trying to work a personal anecdote into that same paper.

Mark described a similar process of adding and deleting at the computer. His revision of a literature paper was so extensive that the final copy barely resembled the first draft. He reported, “I cut out a big section and I had to make up for that [to meet required word length]. I had to add something to it.” In multiple steps, he cut, then pasted in new material, gradually creating his final copy.

During the editing process in College Writing, highlighting helped students catch errors such as tense shift, run-on sentences, and fragments. After College Writing, some students did not physically highlight their papers to accomplish editing but now knew which kinds of errors they were likely to make. Knowing that tense shifts were a recurring problem for her, Maureen searched for such errors in her literature paper, an analysis of two poems. She reported, “I took all the past tense verbs out and put all the present ones in. . . . I just eyeballed it on the computer.” In her final exam reflection in College Writing, Maureen had included a paper in which she had highlighted verbs in order to correct numerous tense shift errors; it was a reminder, she said, about tense shift and that she needed to watch for verb errors in other classes.

**Commitment to Process**

“I didn’t do it all in one day.”—Peter

Talk proved to be significant for students wrestling with ideas, while visual strategies pushed their papers into finished form. Equally salient in these students’ reports was their commitment to their own processes for writing. “All nighters” may be common among college students writing papers; however, this was not the case with these eleven student writers. Only rarely did any of these students turn in first-draft, done-in-one-sitting writing. When they did, it tended to occur at the beginning of the semester when students were testing limits.
of what was acceptable, or late in the semester when they had become bogged down with multiple assignments and close deadlines.

Mark was typical of a student who would test limits and then become overwhelmed. Two early literature papers were returned to him with the instructor’s comments “Unsatisfactory. Rewrite.” This notation from the instructor quickly clarified that night-before writing was to little avail. Mark did not do this again in his literature class; however, he did write a paper for another class the night before it was due. In this case, he had weighed the demands of two classes and made a choice. “I waited until the last minute [for a health paper]. I was working on a bunch of other things for [literature class]. Too much other stuff.” He invested his time in the literature papers, judging correctly that his literature professor would be the more demanding reader.

Students’ approach to time management in their spring courses mirrored our procedures from College Writing. Because we worked with portfolios, students at any one time had multiple drafts underway. When portfolio due dates drew close, writers selected their strongest drafts for further work. The notion of keeping multiple works in progress for several weeks was new to most students. Juggling the papers and then self-selecting which ones to complete raised anxieties in the first part of the semester. After the first portfolio, though, students grew accustomed to “multi-tasking.” In his final exam reflection, Mark wrote, “For me the only way to write a paper was to have more than one started at a time. . . . Whenever I got stuck on one paper, I always had another draft to fall back on. At first I was frustrated because I thought I would never finish a paper. Now I am glad I have approached writing that way.”

Realistically, first-year students have to learn that assignments for several courses may all fall due within days of each other. Multi-tasking is a skill successful students develop.

Nine of the eleven students spoke of their need for time. Off-task thinking was clearly an important part of their writing processes as they had practiced it in College Writing. About his history paper, Peter said, “I didn’t do it all in one day. If I did it all in one day, I never would have been able to do any of this [reorganize ideas and catch grammar errors]. Sometimes I go a week without doing any of it; I just think about it sometimes during the day like maybe when I’m at work. . . . If you think you have a good idea, you write it down on a piece of paper and come back to it later.” He had allowed himself three weeks to complete his three-page paper.

Having read Marica Dickson’s essay “Practicing What I Preach” in College Writing, several students referred to Dickson’s “not writing process” as part of their own working strategies (204). While apparently not working on their writing, they, in fact, were. “I always get my bowl of ice cream and sit down in front of my computer and start typing,” Hilary revealed.

Although multiple drafts, off-task thinking, and not writing were strategies encountered in College Writing, these techniques were only sparsely built into literature courses and not at all in any others. Students took management of this aspect of their writing as their own responsibility.

**Findings**

I believe my study reveals that, in the case of these particular students, transfer occurred. When course structures failed to support writing processes the students had come to rely on, they found ways to create them for themselves. At the close of the study, one literature instructor commented on one example of this phenomenon. He said, “Your students reproduce peer groups outside of class really well. . . . It shows there’s a kind of conversation going on among themselves that’s of a superior quality.” How did this transfer happen? Why, in the face of much research suggesting that transfer seldom occurs, did these College Writing students carry techniques with them to other disciplines?

Perhaps Bereiter’s notion of dispositional transfer partially answers that question. In his view, the issue with transfer is not a learner’s capability to reproduce particular skills but rather one of developing a disposition to self-create conditions that enabled successful performance of a task in the past. Bereiter maintains that learners who have experienced successful learning will later seek like-minded companions. In so doing, they will recreate an environment that will again foster positive experiences. Rather than transfer specific skills—as many of the studies that report little transfer expect test subjects to do—learners transfer the disposition to reproduce effective learning environments (31).

In their commitment to process, these College Writing students had recreated for themselves an environment that allowed them adequate time to complete writing assignments. With their reliance on both verbal and visual strategies, they appeared to be shuttling back and forth between the social and the individual aspects of writing. Their use of talk was highly social. Visual techniques they employed tended toward the solitary. As writers, they were choosing their moments: sometimes they needed
other voices; sometimes self-monitoring was appropriate. Once again, they were reproducing effective learning environments. They had developed the disposition to place themselves in productive learning situations.

The ability to assess what constitutes a productive environment can, I believe, be traced to students’ awareness of themselves as writers. We spent the semester de-mystifying writing by immersing ourselves in the doing of it, reading what others had to say about writing, and articulating our individual working processes. In short, students in College Writing had engaged in Golub’s reflective practice of “making the invisible visible” (1).

That fall, students learned they could not expect much of first drafts. They discovered that “not writing” is just as important to completing one’s work as physically moving pen across page (Dickson 204). They discovered that their own teacher’s drafts were numerous, often color-coded, usually cut and pasted, and quite different if readers were to compare any first copy with a final copy. In other words, they discovered that their teacher and professional writers, the supposed experts, have exactly the same struggles and anxieties as first-year college students. By semester’s end, students could articulate their own working processes, identifying which were effective and which were not.

Did students write only “A” papers in their spring 1999 courses? No. Mark discovered quickly that a weak effort would be unacceptable in his literature class. His revisions, entailing significant work and investment on his part, did reap the rewards of A’s and B’s. Papers in some other courses were, in my opinion, unacceptable as college-level writing. However, the students were savvy about reading their professors and earned above-average grades even on those pieces. Laura explained why she did not always invoke the relatively complex working strategies she had used in College Writing: “The kind of requirement for writing this semester is a lot less than last semester.” Joe added, “Professor X is looking for good papers, but with these things [papers in other courses], I basically just get the information down.” My College Writing students recognized that “the definition of writing changes” with each course (Anderson et al. 23-24). We had discussed writing not as monolithic but as multifaceted, depending on audience and purpose. To that end, students had composed narratives and persuasive pieces, had conducted short field studies, and had written a paper for an audience outside our classroom. Anderson et al. revealed that learning to adapt one’s writing to various contexts was the most valuable and most transferrable aspect of Writing 210 (26-27). It would seem that was also true of my College Writing students.

As works in progress, where were these students? They were students who still needed help. They needed peer input, numerous drafts, and assistance with editing. Considering the venue in which they were working—a branch campus populated primarily by underprepared students—the lack of supporting structures for writing in nearly all of their courses was a source of problems. However, they were also students who exhibited confidence in their ability to complete writing assignments in ways that were acceptable to their professors. In College Writing, they had practiced ways to get inside writing assignments and experience the doing of them. Those internalized processes left my classroom with these students. To their credit, these writers were works in progress with deeply embedded experiential knowledge and the disposition to use it.

Acknowledgments: I extend thanks to the University Senate Research Committee at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Their grant funding made this study possible. The work could not have been completed without the help of Jenny Staben, the doctoral student who assisted with the research. I also acknowledge my colleagues at the Armstrong County Campus (Pennsylvania). Their interest in continuous improvement of one’s teaching practice and their participation in the study itself supported my efforts from the proposal stage to completed work. Writers who gathered at the NWP Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in July 2000 offered their support and assistance. I wish especially to recognize Joe Check, Tom Fox, and Art Peterson for their responses to drafts during and after the retreat.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to the eleven students who participated in this study. Without hesitation, they shared their time, their papers, and their ideas. I am most grateful for what they taught their teacher.

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