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TRANSFER WITHIN FYC: TRACING THE OPERALIZATION OF WRITING-RELATED
KNOWLEDGE AND CONCEPTS IN COMPOSITION

by
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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This study traces the transfer of writing-related knowledge and concepts from the composition classroom into the writing assignments composed by students within the same course. Working in a first-year-composition classroom taught through a writing-about-writing curriculum, the researcher observed students as they navigated from the initial learning of concepts such as rhetorical situations, writing processes, and discourse communities, into an application of these concepts in various writing assignments, including rhetorical analyses and discourse community profiles.

By analyzing a composition instructor's objectives for her assignments and observing the interaction between students and their instructor in a single composition course for the duration of one semester, the researcher traced how students operationalized knowledge from the classroom and applied it in their own writing. After tracing this operationalization through interviews with the instructor, observation of class activities and analysis of assignment sheets and student papers, the researcher proposes that instructors may encourage transfer within their composition classrooms by adequately presenting assignment objectives to students, and by allowing sufficient scaffolding of writing tasks. In this way, the researcher explains that students may be able to understand the objectives of their writing assignments in a way that may encourage them to apply the knowledge they learned in the classroom to the writing tasks assigned by their instructor.

To V, my dear friend and colleague, without whom I would have never gotten through grad school. And to the army of support who is my husband, for always keeping me grounded.

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INTRODUCTION

As a new writing instructor teaching first-year-composition through a writing-about-writing curriculum, I struggled to understand how I could move from teaching students about writing-related concepts in the classroom to encouraging the application of these concepts in my students' own writing. Having been trained in a curriculum that emphasizes the role of meta-awareness in writing instruction, I understood the value of teaching my students about writing processes, rhetorical situations, and discourse communities as a way of encouraging them to acknowledge and transfer this understanding into their future writing tasks. Once I entered my own classroom, however, I saw my students struggling to apply the concepts that they had learned in the classroom in the writing assignments that they completed primarily on their own. My students seemed to exit my classroom with an understanding of the new writing-related knowledge presented to them, but their writing often failed to reflect this understanding.

Bridging this distinction between learning concepts in the classroom and applying them in writing is an issue of operationalization—the ability to transform a declarative or theoretical understanding of a concept or skill into a procedural or practical understanding of that knowledge. In a writing class, operationalization requires that students not only achieve an awareness of writing-related concepts that may be transferred across various contexts, but that they are also able to apply these concepts when they write. Such application, I have come to argue, may be crucial to the transfer of writing-related knowledge from composition, and requires that students adapt and re-appropriate the declarative knowledge from the writing classroom.

Though the need for and difficulties with transfer from the FYC classroom have recently gained emphasis in composition scholarship, what I hope to present through my work is a discussion of how writing-related knowledge is being transferred to and by students and instructors within the composition classroom. In FYC, students operationalize, or are being

asked to operationalize knowledge as they navigate through their writing assignments. As part of this process, they are being required to re-appropriate and adapt what is taught to them in the classroom, in order to transfer knowledge from class discussions and activities to their assignments. For this reason, I argue that before we discuss and identify problems with transfer from composition, we should analyze such transfer within our classrooms, as students are working to operationalize knowledge and transfer it into their writing.

What I present in this study is a discussion of transfer studies in both educational psychology and composition, where I elaborate on the distinction between learning and transfer that has previously been questioned by composition scholars. After identifying a need for the studying of transfer within composition, I present the results of my research in a single composition course, where I traced the students' operationalization of writing-related knowledge and concepts and the transfer of this knowledge across their writing assignments.

In my findings, I identify the potential for encouraging successful transfer within composition through scaffolded writing tasks and through the clear delivery of instructor objectives via assignment sheets and class activities, before presenting an example of how I have implemented my findings into a course planning tool that focuses on operationalization and transfer in the composition classroom. In addition, in my fourth chapter, I introduce the reflection and feedback from the instructor whose course I studied, as she describes the ways in which she has implemented the findings of this study and her experience as a participant in her own composition pedagogy. Through this discussion and examples, I hope to contribute tools through which composition instructors can encourage operationalization and transfer in their classrooms by providing their students with an opportunity to successfully apply their new acquisition of writing-related knowledge in their writing. In this way, I hope that we can continue to analyze

the potential for transfer in and from composition, with a new understanding of our role in this process as writing instructors.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Transfer

Dating back more than a century, studies of transfer are not, as Christine Donahue explains, “recent discoverables” (n.p.). David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon provide a commonly assumed definition of transfer, explaining, “The term ‘transfer’ applies when something learned in one situation gets carried over to another” (246). Stemming from Thorndike and Woodworth’s 1901 reports on transfer, we have continued to explore what educational psychologists describe as “The influence of improvement in one mental function upon the efficiency of other functions,” or the transfer of knowledge from one context to the next (246). In relation to education, recent studies have continued to redefine how we teach for and identify transfer in and from our classrooms, since “the entire enterprise of formal education” is dependent on the assumption that “something learned in one situation gets carried over to another” (Perkins and Salomon 2). As a result, definitions of transfer continue to evolve, redefining how we encourage and measure the application of knowledge across contexts.

Transfer vs. “Plain old Learning”

While the most common conceptions of transfer seem to focus on the application of knowledge across various contexts, some researchers have concluded that a distinction must first be made between the transfer of knowledge and what Perkins and Salomon describe as “plain old learning” (3). King Beach uses this distinction as the basis of the problem in teaching for transfer, since, “Transfer is distinguished from run-of-the mill learning by virtue of its distinct tasks and situations, yet it does not include the genesis of tasks and situations as part of the process,” leaving instructors at a loss for how to successfully elicit transfer from their classrooms (108). David Smit elaborates by clarifying, “The ability to transfer knowledge and ability from

one context to another is what we mean by learning in the first place,” while transfer is derived from the understanding that we cannot expect students to “transfer the kinds of knowledge and skills they have learned previously to new tasks” (130).

Beach suggests that no distinction between transfer and learning “presents a particularly compelling case” (108). While, “Some current accounts distinguish between learning and transfer by suggesting that learning is relatively effortless and occurs across very similar problems, whereas transfer is conscious and effortful and occurs across quite different problems,” others conclude, “transfer involves the application or use of learning products—knowledge and skill—in learning a new problem, but does not include learning as part of the transfer process” (Beach 108). Neither explanation prevents the distinction from being “fuzzy,” though “an analytically useful and practically important distinction needs to be made” between transfer and learning, in order to “help us understand learning continuity and transformation across multiple tasks and situations” (Beach 108).

Transfer requires that students use the skills they learned to operate in one situation in a new setting, where many of the initial variables in which knowledge was used may not be present. Beach suggests that while “transfer is necessarily a part of our moment-to-moment lives,” it “seems difficult to study and even more difficult to foster intentionally,” because we cannot account for all of the circumstances under which our students will be required to utilize their abilities outside (and even within) our own classrooms (101). While we may not be able to predict all of the future scenarios in which our students will need to apply the knowledge learned in our classrooms, I propose that a distinction is possible between transfer and learning, where transfer relies on the learners’ ability to not only apply previous knowledge to a new setting, but

also to understand how a particular concept or skill would need to be adapted in order to successfully function in that new environment.

If, as Perkins and Salomon explain, learning occurs “when it is reasonable to say that the learner has learned something within a limited range of contexts (for instance, independent of physical locations such as classrooms 13a and 13b), but whether the learner carries this over to other contexts is at risk,” then perhaps it is this very “risk” that signifies the distinction between learning and transfer (2). Learning occurs when a student engages with information in an initial setting, perhaps by learning the definition of a specific term applicable to the course. A student who has learned the term “audience” in reference to writing may be able to distinguish the term as one that references a person or group targeted in a particular discourse. Transfer on the other hand, as I will be using the term, applies when that student is able to utilize the term to fit the requirements of a different scenario, not by simply stating and understanding the definition of the term “audience,” but by also being able to successfully target an audience through writing. If the student is able to adequately apply prior (learned) knowledge to a new situation, then we can infer that she has transferred knowledge. This understanding of transfer rejects Beach’s suggestion that learning and transfer are unrelated, emphasizing this relationship in order to draw a distinction. Once we understand the application and adaptation of knowledge as necessary steps in transfer, we can begin to analyze the difficulties in teaching and identifying transfer in our classrooms.

Problems with Transfer

While the need and desire for transfer are of particular interest to educators, many reports on the transfer of knowledge have been alarmingly negative. As Eric de Corte explains, the data in support of transfer “are not compelling” particularly because “the conceptual or theoretical lens through which one looks at the available evidence is a stronger determinant of the

conclusion reached” (20). Beginning with Thorndike and Woodworth’s 1901 research, we have understood that even “the very slight amount of variation in the nature of the data necessary to affect the efficiency of a function-group makes it fair to infer that no change in the data, however slight, is without effect on the function,” making it difficult to identify the transfer of skills from one classroom to the next, or from any one function to the other (250). Since the transfer of knowledge learned in one setting requires the adaptation and application of multiple variables, identifying the process and conditions for transfer becomes increasingly difficult. In the classroom, transfer requires the consideration of the instructor’s instructions, the students’ perceptions of these instructions, and the various tasks and activities presented to these students. For this reason, drawing from Thorndike and Woodworth’s research, we can begin to understand the difficulties of studying and encouraging transfer from classroom to classroom, as students are faced with the challenge of applying knowledge learned in one context to tasks that may be given to them in several other settings.

In, “The Science and Art of Transfer,” Perkins and Salomon also use Thorndike and Woodworth’s research to reach a bleak conclusion, “We do not see the transfer we want simply because the prospects for transfer are poor. Knowledge acquired in one context does not apply that powerfully in other contexts” (5). They leave little hope for the transfer of knowledge in education (5). Consequently, Douglas Detterman argues, “The lesson learned from studies of transfer is that, if you want people to learn something [you should] teach it to them,” rather than teaching “them something else and expect[ing] them to figure out what you want them to do” (21). If “knowledge and skills are [understood to be] context-bound,” we can infer that the possibilities for transfer are “dismissible” (De Corte 556).

De Corte further expands on the seemingly impossible conditions necessary for transfer, arguing, “transfer depends on the degree to which tasks share identical productions,” thus requiring that both the initial context in which knowledge is acquired and the context in which it is applied be identical (21). This perspective, presumably stemming from Thorndike and Woodworth, has resulted in the perception of transfer as a “construct,” one that can not be achieved in the execution of any tasks (Beach 101). However, recent work has begun to expand on the complications with transfer, deeming the potential for transfer not impossible or entirely context-specific, but rather reliant on the ways in which transfer is encouraged and measured in its initial and subsequent settings.

In “Writing as an Unnatural Act,” Joseph Petraglia uses a cognitive approach to describe the ways in which problems with transfer can be addressed. He identifies two modes of problem-solving: “ill-structured” and “well-structured” (81). As he clarifies, “a well-structured problem is one in which we are given some systematic way to decide when a proposed solution is acceptable,” such as “chess playing and solving math problems,” where the “correct” answer can be deduced through a “checkmate or the mathematically correct answer” (83). In “ill-structured problem-solving,” such as writing, however, “contingency permeates the task environment and solutions are always equivocal,” with no singular “correct” answer presented (83).

As Petraglia clarifies through Reitman’s work, in ill-structured problem-solving, “The idea of ‘getting it right’ gives way to ‘making it acceptable in the circumstances’” (83). We cannot teach students how to “address audiences” in general, since their targeted audiences will vary consistently. The problem with transfer, and with transfer in ill-structured situations especially, is that we are accustomed to teaching students information based on “well-structured problems,” where they are taught to seek the “correct” answers to problems within similar

contexts. In “real world” writing situations as Petraglia explains, such answers are not so readily available, thus preventing the transfer of knowledge that was initially presented via well-structured problem-solving (83).

Once students exit our classrooms, Petraglia contends, “we would have to concur that most of the ‘problems’ we confront on a daily basis lie on the ill-structured end of the spectrum,” leaving students to face problems that are “fundamentally and unpredictably different” from those that they have encountered in their education (83). Complications with transfer, in this scenario, lie not with the students’ inability to transfer information or with the teachers’ ability to teach for transfer, but rather with the manner in which content is presented to students in the first place. If we are teaching students in terms of well-structured problems, then we are only allowing them to learn within the constraints of our classrooms, and are consequently preventing them from engaging in transfer, where they would have to adapt such knowledge to fit the needs of a new situation.

In addition to Petraglia’s relation between transfer and problem-solving, Perkins and Salomon address two different forms of transfer, concluding, “Near transfer occurs when knowledge or skill gets used in situations very like the initial context of learning,” such as a mathematical formula that is used to solve two different equations, while “far transfer occurs when people make connections to contexts that intuitively seem vastly different from the context of learning,” such as the writing of a research paper on two different subjects (2). In academia, “far transfer proves hardest to come by,” while remaining of utmost concern to educators, since, “many of the settings [such as businesses and corporations that require communication skills, for example] where we would like youngsters to apply what they learn in school are not very much like classrooms or the tasks in classrooms through which students initially learn” (2). Hence,

using the contrast between near and far transfer, we can understand that the complications with eliciting transfer from our students are once again rooted in a conflict between what we are teaching them, and what we are expecting them to do. Much like Petraglia's distinction between ill-structured and well-structured problems, preparing students solely for near transfer without teaching them how they can respond to ill-structured problems may be preventing them from preparing knowledge for transfer across "far" contexts, perhaps when students exit academia and are required to communicate within the corporate world, where they may need to navigate several proposals and possibilities instead of being handed a direct answer (Perkins and Salomon).

Transfer and FYC

Though my discussion has touched on the complications with transfer across many facets of education, as Donahue explains, all of these questions represent the struggles that "the field of composition has faced and will continue to face" (n.p.). Studies on the transfer of writing-related concepts in composition have recently entered the conversation, working with what Petraglia describes as the "ill-structured" nature of writing, while attempting to teach students "how to write" across both near and far contexts. In composition, students and instructors are faced with the challenge of encouraging transfer not only from one course to another, but also from one writing task to the next.

Anne Beaufort describes a common conception of FYC as a "compulsory course," one that is "taught in isolation from other disciplinary studies at the university as a basic skills course," with the intention of preparing students to write in contexts that they will encounter in the future (9). The problem with the definition, Beaufort asserts, is that many FYC courses do not discuss the conventions of these contexts outside the realm of composition, leading "freshman writing to become a course in 'writing to produce writing' (Dias 2000), or to 'do school' (Russell 1995)"

(9). Unlike some of the well-structured academic contexts in which students participate, the ill-structured nature of writing calls for a writing course that teaches students to consider not only how writing may need to be structured within their own classroom, but also how this writing may need to adapt and change in contexts outside of composition.

The Sociocultural Approach to Transfer in Composition

As a course structured around the ill-structured nature of writing, where knowledge is consistently being negotiated in response to the context in which it is used, FYC must be considered in terms of its sociocultural implications. As Wardle explains, the “sociocultural approach” to transfer considers “the nature of the activity system in which the problems and learners’ interpretations are embedded,” thus accounting not only for the “tasks or individuals” involved in transfer, but also, perhaps more emphatically, for the context in which these skills are learned and applied (Wardle 68-9). “Usually,” Beaufort argues, “there is no overt linking [of FYC] to any intellectual discipline,” leading “the over-riding social contexts for students [to] become the institutional requirement of the course itself,” without really acknowledging the “real” contexts in which writing happens, such as particular discourse communities outside of the classroom (10). Rather than teaching to such fictitious contexts, the sociocultural approach to FYC encourages students to understand how “real” contexts function, and how writing conventions fall into the practices of individual discourse communities, thus using FYC as a transition between the seemingly artificial, well-structured context of school and the ill-structured settings in which writing can be used. As Beach suggests, the “sociocultural approach,” “understands continuity and transformation in learning as an ongoing relation between changing individuals and changing social contexts,” where “individual and contextual agency for transfer are not ontologically independent of one another,” but are instead codependent, particularly in relation to the fostering of transfer (103). Such a structure to FYC

considers the fluid nature of writing contexts, pushing students to examine these contexts and their individual writing practices, before attempting to communicate within them.

While this perspective accounts for the contextual factors involved in transfer, Beach clarifies, “At the same time, the role of individuals is not reduced to that of social context, nor is the role of the social context reduced to a group of individuals” (103). Instead, both the student and the instructor must work to understand the contexts in which transfer occurs, making adjustments to fit the needs of each scenario. Since “learning, development, and education are inherently cultural as well as personal enterprises,” we can extrapolate, “so is the phenomenon of transfer” (Beach 103).

Within the context of the composition classroom, the potential for transfer into other disciplines has often simply been assumed. Its existence and historic goals suggest that stakeholders often believe that all students who are required to take a first-year writing course should then be able to transfer writing-related knowledge into many other contexts, in the university and in the workplace (Bransford and Schwartz; Devitt, 2004; Perkins and Salomon; Wardle). The inferred “lack” of transfer from FYC, however, has caused some critics to suggest “that freshman writing as an enterprise in US institutions of higher education should just close shop,” since the “products” of our courses, “graduates of freshman writing are unfinished,” and “the gains are too minute so show up in most assessment processes” (Beaufort 7).

While in academia, the “tendency among students [is] to actively reject the idea that what they learned about writing in FYC courses could be applied to writing they were asked to do in other disciplines,” some would suggest that rather than dismissing the possibility of transfer from FYC, we should reconsider how we are to study the transfer of writing-related knowledge, in order to understand how it is exhibited in classrooms (Bergmann and Zepernick 124). Part of the

challenge with the assumption that writing skills can be reapplied in contexts outside of FYC is not only the task of promoting transfer for students, but also that of measuring such transfer in other contexts.

The Role of Teachers and Students in Transfer from FYC

Though the ways in which transfer is defined and identified play a large role in determining who is responsible for its application, many scholars have discussed the instructors' roles in encouraging the transfer of writing-related knowledge from FYC (Bergmann and Zepernick; Devitt; McCarthy; Perkins and Salomon). Lucille McCarthy's 1987 study of a novice writer's transfer of knowledge within three first-year courses revealed the "domination by the concrete" as an obstacle that "may often characterize newcomers' first steps as they attempt to use language in unfamiliar disciplines" (248). Since students, such as McCarthy's Dave, are focused on reaching the "right" answer in the writing that they do for other courses, they have little opportunity to make connections between skills across different contexts (248). It is the duty of the instructor, then, to make these connections for the students, showing them explicitly how one task correlates with the other.

In Wardle's pilot study of first-year students engaging in writing tasks outside of their composition course, students "indicated they would not use all of their writing-related knowledge and abilities unless an assignment 'engaged'" them, primarily by presenting "thought-provoking" and "rhetorical problem[s]" that are not limited by a " 'right'" answer (77). Such engagement, as Wardle acknowledges, often requires work on the part of both the teacher and the student, resulting in a more "difficult" assignment (78). Consequently, "students do not always earn the highest grades on engaging assignments," perhaps resulting in the failure to acknowledge transfer from one context to the next (78). As implied by both McCarthy's and Wardle's examples, if we base our identification of transfer solely on our students' mastery of

assignments outside of composition, then we are potentially neglecting our students' efforts in engaging with their texts in our classrooms. Though we can encourage broader transfer by studying the application of knowledge from our classrooms, perhaps we can assist our students in this broad application by encouraging transfer in its initial and near context.

Likewise, Perkins and Solomon conclude that teachers, along with textbook writers and administrators, must work to “shepherd” transfer from one context to the next, “establishing the conditions in the classroom that favor transfer of learning,” before expecting students to make the links themselves (6). As Wardle concludes, “Students did not often generalize from FYC—but not because they are unable to or because they did not learn anything in FYC. Rather, students did not perceive a need to adopt or adapt most of the writing behaviors they used in FYC for other courses,” specifically because, at least from the perspective of the students, instructors in other courses did not require such implementation (76). Often, teachers beyond FYC did not “succeed in engaging students and encouraging them to generalize, push[ing] them to put in the extra effort” when writing (76).

Through the lens that focuses on an instructor's role in transfer, it is clear that to encourage transfer, students should learn in an environment that pushes for transfer; they, “need to have opportunities to share and be inspired by a common motive for undertaking a specific learning task” (Guile and Young qtd. in Wardle 68). These opportunities, however, cannot be limited to the composition classroom alone, for the success of transfer is dependent on both the site of original knowledge and the new context in which this knowledge must be applied, usually assumed in classrooms and settings outside of composition (Bermann and Zepernick; De Corte; Donahue; McCarthy). In fact, Smit claims that writing instructors “get what they teach for,”

limiting them to “instructions in particular kinds of knowledge and skill and not broad-based writing ability” that can be transferred outside of the individual writing classroom (120).

According to Smit, the transfer of writing-related knowledge is not impossible, but “if we want students to transfer what they have learned, we must teach them how to do so,” a lesson that cannot take place in one classroom alone (134). Instead, “we must find ways to help novices see the similarities between what they already know and what they might apply from that previously learned knowledge to other writing tasks,” tasks that may extend beyond our classrooms (134). Teachers in all courses should “demand of the students mindful abstraction from the case at hand,” encouraging them to gather knowledge from other contexts, and then apply it to a particular task (Perkins and Salomon 8).

Meta-awareness and Transfer

Following the previous understanding of mindfulness as a factor in encouraging transfer, recent studies have called for the acknowledgement of transferable concepts and knowledge *about* skills, particularly in composition (Beaufort; Devitt; McCarthy; Wardle). As Devitt argues, teachers should “know better” than to “think that students could be taught writing in their first year and have it suffice for their senior year,” since, “Writing is so embedded in rhetorical contexts and social structures and institutions that to study one location for writing reveals only that location” (215-6). After conducting a number of ethnographic studies concerning transfer in both academic and professional settings, Anne Beaufort describes a “different view” on the “transfer of learning problem” (7). “Freshman writing,” she contends, “if taught with an eye toward transfer of learning and with an explicit acknowledgement of the context of freshman writing itself as a social practice, can set students on a course of life-long learning so that they know *how to learn* to become better and better writers in a variety of social contexts” (7).

The focus of FYC, according to Beaufort's findings, should be on teaching students how to approach writing, rather than attempting to teach them the different ways in which writing will be used in other contexts. While specific genre conventions practiced in FYC may require that students employ writing concepts and skills that are applicable in numerous writing scenarios, as McCarthy discovered in her study of Dave, even when the writing in different courses is "similar in many ways," students often fail to see the connections across contexts, particularly because they don't "know enough about a subject" to extrapolate individual skills (248). Dave's ability to write cohesively in his Composition course did not transfer into his Poetry class, where he was under the impression that his instructor was looking for the "true meaning" of a poem, rather than for a cohesive analysis (250).

What transfers from one setting to another, according to Devitt, are conceptions about genres, understood as "social acts stemming from perceived repetitions of situation" (216). Though "Genres might seem to represent generalizable writing skills that can move from one unique situation to another within the same genre," instructors must understand that "genres also differ from one another and in ways that reveal the situatedness of genres and all writing" (Devitt 216-17). For this reason, Devitt suggests that, without teaching rigid algorithms or well-structured problems, instructors can utilize genres as ways to encourage transfer, since the similarities of genres across contexts "might lead to some writing skills being transferable from one writing event to the next" (217). Since "a writer moving among locations carries along a set of writing experiences," Devitt contends, "knowing some genres gives the associate a place to start, a location, however different, from which to begin writing" (220). Hence, we should teach students about genres in order to build their "writing repertoires," allowing them to transfer this knowledge from one context to the next, if only to give students a place "to start" writing (221).

Also focusing on the teaching of concepts rather than context-specific skills, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle developed an FYC curriculum intended to “encourage transfer,” specifically by addressing what they perceived to be “the more common problems with many FYC courses (i.e., separating content from context)” (70). By promoting meta-awareness about writing within a writing-focused curriculum, Wardle suggests that we can teach beginning writers to “rhetorically reflect on and analyze current and past writing assignments,” emphasizing “one of the most transfer-encouraging behaviors” by focusing on meta-awareness (77).

With a curriculum focused entirely on writing, where “students read writing research, conducted reading and writing auto-ethnographies, identified writing-related problems that interest them, wrote reviews of literature on their chosen problems, and conducted their own primary research that they reported both orally to the class and in writing,” Downs and Wardle set out to help “students reflect on how writing is used in society and across disciplines,” rather than focusing the curriculum on specific skill-sets and genres that may or may not transfer into other disciplines (70-1). The goal of the curriculum is for students to acquire a declarative understanding of concepts such as rhetorical situations and discourse communities before engaging in their individual research, in this way merging declarative and procedural knowledge with the goal of encouraging the transfer of these skills and concepts into other writing contexts.

Transfer within FYC?

Taking into account the contextual implications of transfer and the role of meta-awareness in the generalization of writing-related concepts from FYC, many contemporary scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition have continued to redefine the ways in which transfer is traced and studied. However, while the question of transfer from FYC to other contexts has received much attention, and while many have acknowledged the role of initial

learning in encouraging transfer (Beaufort; De Corte; Donahue; Perkins and Salomon), our field has paid little attention to the ways in which students struggle with the issue of transfer as they are writing from assignment to assignment *within* FYC

In FYC, students are introduced to a variety of new writing-related concepts, and are then expected to apply this knowledge in the writing assignments completed within the same course. Though our field has begun to recognize the struggles that students may face as they attempt to apply these concepts in contexts outside of composition, I argue that we can begin to trace these struggles to learn and then transfer within the course itself. By focusing on near transfer with an emphasis on adaptation, composition instructors can teach their students to not only learn the concepts presented to them in composition, but to also operationalize these concepts by using them various writing situations. In this way, the near transfer of writing-related concepts can be directly used to support the potential far-transfer of these skills, as students are taught adaptation from their initial exposure to new tasks. Borrowing from the limitations of transfer described in previous scholarship, I conducted a study that analyzes the operationalization of writing concepts in composition, focusing on how students translate writing instruction into their writing assignments within a single composition course. By tracing the students' efforts to transfer knowledge across near contexts within the classroom, I hope to find clues regarding how to support transfer within composition.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

In order to trace transfer within FYC, I designed a study to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do students apply writing-related concepts learned in class to their writing assignments composed within the same course?
- 2) If students fail to apply the writing-related concepts learned in class to their writing assignments, how can we teach them to operationalize these concepts so that they can apply them more successfully?

These questions can be directly linked to the problems with transfer identified by composition scholars when discussing transfer from FYC, such as the difficulties of eliciting transfer across contexts (Beach; Beaufort; Perkins and Salomon) and the importance of encouraging transfer in secondary as well as primary settings, in order to encourage students to utilize learned knowledge in a new tasks (McCarthy; Devitt; Wardle). Though we may have little control over the ways in which transfer will be encouraged in secondary contexts outside of our classrooms, my goal was to study how transfer is encouraged within our same courses, as we help students navigate from one writing assignment to the next.

Data Collection

I conducted an ethno-semantic discourse analysis of one Composition I course, a course consisting of twenty-five college freshmen (MacNealy). This analytic method focused on discourse allowed me to trace the communication between the instructor and her students, as they navigated through class activities and assignments. The course was taught by a second-year Graduate Teaching Associate, and was structured as a combination of Writing about Writing and Service Learning pedagogies. The teacher titled the course “Writing for Change” and noted that it was intended to teach students rhetorical concepts such as analysis, audience, and delivery, and

to then allow students an opportunity to explore these concepts as they apply to specific social issues chosen by the students. By teaching rhetorical strategies and social issues together, the instructor hoped to provide her students with an opportunity to engage in writing that could potentially be used to communicate within organizations targeting social issues of interest to them. My data collection consisted of observations, interviews, and textual analyses.

Observations

In order to trace the interactions between students and their instructor as they maneuvered through various activities and assignments, I observed and audio recorded each fifty-minute class session for the duration of one Fall semester. During each class, I made note of the areas in which students seemed to struggle when being presented with a new writing-related task or concept. With the students' approval, I also sat in during small group activities, noting how students attempted to operationalize the instructor's directions into a product within a limited amount of time. I paid specific attention to the types of questions that students asked in these situations, both to other group members and to the instructor. My purpose through these observations and field notes was to trace both how students acquired or learned knowledge in its initial task-setting, and how this knowledge was (or was not) transferred into secondary tasks, such as those presented in small group activities and writing assignments in class.

Interviews

While class observations allowed me to examine how the instructor presented information in the classroom, I also wanted to compare these presentations to the instructor's personal objectives for each of her units. To accomplish this, I conducted three interviews with the course instructor, each preceding the introduction of a new unit and unit assignment. During these interviews, my goal was to analyze both the declarative and procedural goals set by the instructor for her students, in order to understand what she wanted her students to know about (or

learn) and what she then expected them to know how to do with this knowledge (transfer). I asked the instructor to identify the “declarative and procedural goals” for her students within that unit, and to discuss how she “planned to meet these objectives in class” (See Appendix A for other interview questions). In this way, I was able to understand and analyze how the instructor envisioned her students’ operationalization of knowledge, before beginning to assess how the students actually met these expectations in their writing.

Aside from understanding the instructor’s objectives for her students, I also wanted to discuss her predictions for how the students would receive the knowledge presented to them in the unit. I asked her to identify specific areas where students may struggle, and to describe specific class activities that she planned to conduct with the goal of targeting these complications. Through these interviews, my goal was to understand the intentions of the instructor for eliciting transfer from her students, asking her to describe how she planned to guide her students from understanding to operationalization with regards to writing-related concepts.

As I was gathering my initial findings, I also presented them to the instructor, in an effort to enhance the validity of my study through Teacher Action Research. In my fourth chapter, I present the instructor’s reactions to my initial findings, where she explains her perception of my observations and analysis, and her efforts to implement some of my suggestions in her current course. This section provides us with an overview of how my findings, even in their preliminary stages, can be considered and applied in the composition classroom, encouraging instructors to analyze how their own objectives can potentially be received by their students.

Textual Analysis

In addition to studying the ways that students translated writing-related knowledge within the classroom, my focus on transfer required that I explore the ways in which students transferred (or failed to transfer) this knowledge into their written products, those that were

generally completed individually in a context outside of the classroom. For this purpose, I collected the drafts of four case-study participants within the course. These participants were selected on the first day of the semester based on their willingness to participate in this study. At this initial meeting, these students agreed to send me electronic copies of their major assignments, to ensure that these samples were free from instructor comments and grading.

While the student sample papers would allow me to explore the operationalization of writing-related knowledge outside of the classroom, in order to analyze how these students were initially exposed to this knowledge, I also collected the assignment sheets pertinent to each of the three major units in this course. By collecting these assignment sheets in conjunction with the instructor interviews and the student papers, I was able to trace how course expectations were delivered from the instructor to her students, and from the students into their individual papers.

Data Analysis

Once I collected all pertinent materials for each unit, I began the preliminary categorization of transcripts and texts, starting with the instructor interviews and the major unit assignment sheets. Using the objectives of each unit and unit assignment as described by the instructor during her interview and through her assignment sheet, I developed coding categories to be traced in each transcript (See Appendix B for a description of unit objectives and coding categories). I used a T-unit analysis as an initial method to identify the major themes in each data-set, where each T-unit was represented by one main clause and all its modifiers (MacNealy). This initial quantification allowed me to count the number of instances that each code was used in each transcript, since each of my categories would be slightly adjusted in each transcript.

For example, in her interview for the first unit assignment, the “Writing Process Project,” where students were asked to discuss their writing processes, the instructor explained that students should “Discuss [their] writing practices,” “Reflect on [their] writing processes” and

provide a “personal reflection [about writing processes].” These three statements were categorized as SW (students examine or should examine their own writing processes), and were counted as three T-Units in the interview transcript. In the assignment sheet provided to the students, the assignment was described as one in which students would be “Writing about yourself [as a writer].” This statement was also categorized as SW (even though the term “process” is not directly mentioned), and was counted as one T-Unit in which writing processes were discussed within the assignment sheet. Lastly, the SW category appeared in the students’ papers, as they wrote phrases such as, “When I write,” “My writing process” and “My affair with writing,” each of which would count as a separate T-Unit under the SW category.

By using the T-Unit analysis as an initial method, where I counted the number of times that each category appeared in a transcript, I was able to see how much weight was given to each objective by the instructor, the assignment sheet, and by the students in their papers. In the case of this initial example, I was able to conclude that the instructor mentioned the students’ writing processes (SW) during 67% of her interview (or 67% of the T-Units in her interview transcripts) and in 22% of the assignment sheet (or 22% of the T-Units in the assignment sheet). The students mentioned their own writing processes during 57% of their own papers (or 57% of the T-Units in the three sample papers that I studied). In this way, I was able to identify any discrepancies between the instructor’s goals and what she presented to her students. For instance, in her third unit, “Rhetorical Analysis,” the instructor spent 48% of her interview explaining that students should employ rhetorical concepts in their analyses. However, only 7% of the T-Units in the third unit assignment sheet mentioned the use of rhetorical concepts, and consequently (I argue), only 10% of the T-Units in the students’ third unit assignments reflected the application of rhetorical concepts.

Though the T-Unit structure was only a preliminary method of analysis, such a quantification tool allowed me to identify the areas where students failed to operationalize the knowledge presented to them in the classroom, before beginning to explore why these discrepancies may have occurred. As presented in Appendix B, the coding categories that I used accounted for instances in which students used the concepts presented in class without referencing specific terms, such as a discussion of writing processes that does not entail the word “process,” for example. In such cases, rather than using coding software that targets the use of specific words, I coded each paper individually to trace the use of both terms and concepts, and to analyze not only if the students were mentioning particular terms, but also, more specifically, if they were operationalizing the concepts presented in class within their papers. In this way, my method of analysis accounted not just for the quantifying of words, but also for the application of concepts in different assignments.

Student Papers

I used a similar method for the coding and analysis of student papers. Working with another composition instructor to increase reliability, we individually categorized each T-unit within the papers of each student participant, in conjunction with the established themes from the assignment sheets and instructor interviews. My objective was to first trace how the major concepts taught in the classroom appeared in the students and the students’ papers. Since students can often operationalize particular concepts without referencing direct terms, I developed coding categories that accounted for instances in which students referenced terms directly and/or used concepts from the classroom without referencing the direct terms themselves (See Appendix B for all coding categories). In this analysis, I wanted to first trace where the concepts appeared, before assessing how effectively they were being used.

By using similar T-units as those established in the assignment sheets and interviews, we were once again able to quantify the number of times that a specific student completed each task presented by the instructor, and were then able to calculate these percentages in comparison to how often the student deviated from the objectives described by the instructor. In this way, our coding methodology allowed me to have a more concrete method for understanding how much and how often students did or did not fulfill the requirements of each assignment.

Class Observations

After identifying the major unit objectives developed for and presented to the students, and calculating the frequency of these themes in the written work of selected students, I began to analyze the process through which these students may have interpreted the objectives of their assignments. I began by studying my field notes and observation transcripts, identifying each instance during which the students and/or the instructor discussed the writing-related concepts pertinent to each major unit assignment. I focused primarily on the questions that students were asking during class in relation to their assignments, noting the ways in which the instructor addressed these concerns. Using the same T-unit method of analysis previously described for the instructor interviews, unit assignment sheets, and student papers, I coded the class segments during which each assignment was introduced verbally to the students by the instructor, identifying and quantifying the frequency of the major themes presented to the students. Through this methodology, I was able to explore the ways in which students perceived the instructor's expectations in class, before attempting to transfer this perception, in conjunction with the knowledge they acquired about the unit, into a written assignment.

By combining the textual analysis of paper evidence, such as students' essays and unit assignment sheets, with my transcripts and observations of student-teacher interactions (as well as the individual goals of the instructor) traced through each unit, I was able to assess the ways

that FYC students within this classroom strove to operationalize writing-related knowledge within a single course. After coding and analyzing each individual segment and unit, I began to see patterns in the ways that students struggled when using and applying new ideas, concepts, or approaches. These struggles, as I will continue to discuss, are frequently rooted in the miscommunication of objectives between the students and the instructor, leaving the students to decipher what they are “supposed to write” based on activities and assignment sheets that may not directly reflect the objectives of the instructor. By exploring these discrepancies, I hope to shed light on the possible complications that students encounter when attempting to transfer knowledge from the classroom into individual assignments. In addition, it my hope that this analysis may also help us identify the difficulties faced by FYC instructors, as we strive to translate our personal objectives for our students into lessons and activities that elicit such transfer.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

In my initial research question, I set out to explore the ways in which students apply the writing-related concepts presented to them in the classroom in their writing assignments completed within the same course. My findings suggest that within the course I studied, students rarely transferred the concepts presented to them in class to their writing assignments completed outside of class, primarily because the teacher's expectations for those assignments were not accompanied by enough scaffolding for successful application. In this section, I will discuss the students' failed attempts at operationalizing four writing-related concepts, and will explore the miscommunication between the instructor and her students that may account for this failure. In addition, I will present one student's successful operationalization, and will discuss the instructor's vital role in encouraging this student's transfer of knowledge from the classroom into her writing through scaffolding and meta-rhetorical reflection.

Comparing Writing Processes

The first unit introduced in the course I studied was intended to explore the students' own writing processes. As the instructor explained during her interview, the main purpose of this unit was for students to "start to build a relationship with writing," and to "learn that good writers are not born," primarily by "read[ing] texts about writing from professional writers with an eye on their own process[ess]" and "compar[ing] and contrast[ing] writing practices." To achieve this, the instructor assigned a "Writer Profile" and a "Writing Process Project" assignment, where students would first describe their own literacy stories and then compare these stories to those of a professional writer of their choice.

When I asked the instructor to predict where her students would struggle with this assignment, she explained, "I think [students] might hide their own process behind that of a professional writer and write a biography of them instead, because they might not understand

how these writers have also struggled to develop their own process.” In fact, when coding the sample student papers from this classroom, this was one of the weakest areas for these students. Rather than comparing their processes to those of professional writers, some students did, as predicted by the instructor, fall into writing biography of another writer.

One student, Angela, after choosing Alice Hoffman as her professional writer, approached the assignment in this way:

Alice Hoffman was born on March 16, 1952 in New York City but spent her childhood in Long Island, New York. Her skills for writing appeared during her college years as she received the Mirrellees Fellowship for Stanford Creative Writing Center where she was presented with a MA in Creative Writing. At the age of 21, Alice Hoffman wrote her first novel *Property Of* and after this successful publication, her creativity and driven continues throughout the years and are the blame for her other popular novels

Based on this excerpt, it is clear that Angela is focusing more on providing a biographical account of Alice Hoffman than of comparing her own writing process to her chosen author's. She references Hoffman's childhood and background, and lists some of Hoffman's initial works. Angela does not mention Hoffman's writing process, and does not make any references to her own process in comparison. Though Angela goes on to explain that Alice Hoffman “was a great teacher” who “taught me that you cannot write with guidelines and limitations,” her paper contained only three small mentions of her own writing process, none of which are directly related to Alice Hoffman's. In Angela's case, the instructor's prediction regarding her students' struggles with this assignment proved accurate.

Similarly, a second student, Jackie, used her Writing Process Project to present what was largely a biography of Roxana Robinson, stating:

[Robinson's] ability to strive to create possible outcomes of a situation allows her imagination to flow throughout her work. Some of her most notable work includes *Cost* (2008), which unravels around the effect that drug addiction can

have on the family environment. Another one of her well acclaimed works, *Streetwater* (2003), focuses on a woman who has lost her husband and as a result battles with her quest for identity, love, and a sense of belonging

Like Angela, Jackie also names Robinson's famous works, focusing on Robinson's professional background much more than her writing process. She elaborates on Robinson's novels, detracting more from the purpose of the assignment by providing plot overviews of these texts. Jackie mentions Robinson's creativity, but does not elaborate on how this creativity comes into play during Robinson's composing process. Also like Angela, Jackie does go on to make some loose connections between Robinson and herself, explaining, "When I read Mrs. Robinson's view on her creative process I became inspired. She reveals the little selfishness inside her to write from the purpose of coming to a conclusion, for her self-satisfaction." Like Angela, however, Jackie devotes more than half of her three-page paper to a biography of Roxana Robinson, leaving little room to explore the connections to her individual writing process.

Though I have only provided two isolated examples, what I can deduce from these papers is that the instructor was largely correct in predicting her students' struggles. She, like many instructors in FYC and other courses, knew enough about her material to understand where her students may need a little extra assistance. What she did not understand as well, however, was how to address these issues before her students approached this assignment. While we may assume by looking at the sample student papers that students did not understand how to compare their own writing processes to the processes of professional writers, what my data suggests is not that students did not know how to do this, but that they did not understand this to be the objective of the instructor for this assignment. Instead, by analyzing the assignment sheet for this paper in conjunction with the class discussions in which this paper was introduced, it became clear to me

that the students were actually fulfilling what they perceived to be the goals of the assignment, and were missing the mark in relation to the comparing of writing processes mainly because they did not understand this to be the primary objective of their papers.

While my study participants, like Angela and Jackie, did make some mention of their authors' writing processes, they devoted a significant portion of their papers (24% of the total T-Units for all three papers) to a biographical discussion of their individual authors. In this case, I could see that these students may have known how to compare writing processes, since they were able to successfully compare their own writing processes to those of professional authors in 19% of the total T-Units for the three papers. However, they made the choice to spend more time discussing the authors' biographical information, not because they did not know how to compare writing processes, but arguably because they did not understand this comparison to be the main objective of the assignment. The students understood the process of comparison, and they had learned about writing processes during the unit, but they failed to transfer this knowledge into their writing assignment because they did not understand the need for such transfer to be the objective of the assignment.

As I have shown through the example of Angela and Jackie, failures with transfer are not necessarily caused by failures with learning. In fact, there is little evidence in my data suggesting the students' failure to learn any of the writing-related concepts presented to them in class, while the class discussions during which students readily defined and discussed the concepts introduced in the course suggests that students were able to adequately learn the concepts. Instead, failures with transfer, at least in the case of writing processes for the purposes of this example, are frequently rooted in the miscommunication of the instructor's objectives. In this example, the miscommunication between the students and the instructor occurred within the

classroom, as the instructor introduced the assignment. On the date that this assignment was introduced to the students, the instructor explained:

Hopefully you can find connections about what they [professional writers] do and what you do to discuss there in your Writer Profile. Two to three pages of writing, double-spaced, so it's like one to two pages of actual typing. It should be a fairly easy assignment for you

Though the instructor mentions writing processes in this introduction, the focus seems to be on the other requirements of the assignment—the formatting and general length. What makes the assignment “fairly easy” is the fact that it is short and double-spaced, something that should make the students more comfortable as they begin writing. Though these instructions may reflect the instructor’s attempt to ease her students into their first assignment, this initial exposure to their writing task seemed to reflect the students’ own concerns as they continued writing. Following this introduction, the students continued by asking questions related to what they perceived to be the most important aspects of the assignment, mainly writing two to three pages that were double-spaced, all with some concern about professional writers. They asked:

Student 1: “Do we have to cite anything?”
Student 2: “Should we use MLA format?”
Student 3: “How should we title our papers?”

Though these may be valid concerns, the focus of the assignment shifted to the formatting of each page rather than the content, leaving aside any discussion of how and when students should be comparing their writing process to those of professional writers. Since the assignment was introduced in terms of formatting, the students followed with similar concerns, neglecting the instructor’s brief mention of writing processes.

The students’ initial concerns, after being supported by the instructor during the class introduction of the assignment, were also reflected in the assignment sheet that was given to

them on that same day. In the “Writing Process Project” assignment sheet, 38% of the T-Units coded were related in some way to the formatting requirements for this project, while the remaining 62% referenced the concepts in the assignment. The assignment sheet asked students to check their handbooks for instructions on MLA formatting, to deliver “2 to 3 pages of writing,” while simultaneously giving students a number of options for ways that they could “put this thing together.” The focus, once again, as students read this assignment sheet, remained on the formatting options and restrictions available.

Though I cannot make assumptions about the students’ concerns as they composed these papers at home, I was present on peer-review day, where students brought in their full drafts ready to gain some suggestions for improvement. Before class, I witnessed and recorded a conversation between three students, as they discussed their papers:

You didn’t double-space it?
Were we supposed to?
Well, that’s MLA format.
This is how you double-space, right?
Did I do it right?
Can I see your MLA book? I swear I checked and it didn’t say anything about double-spacing.

Again in this brief conversation, the students’ concerns reflected what they perceived to be those of the instructor, and those that they saw on their assignment sheets. The students understood that in order to successfully complete the assignment, they had to have two double-spaced pages of writing following MLA formatting, and they were worried about their abilities to meet these criteria. They frantically exchanged papers before the instructor walked into the classroom, looking for the errors that they believed could potentially cost them their grade. Once class began and the instructor entered the room, the students’ formatting concerns were once again supported by the class

discussion, as students engaged in peer review. They were instructed to switch papers with a partner, and to answer the following questions:

Format:

- Circle anything missing from the proper heading
- Is the paper typed and double-spaced?
- Is the paper 2-3 pages?
- Does the writer's name appear on the top right hand corner of each page?
- If direct quotes have been used, are they properly cited within the text? Y/N

Mechanical errors:

- Is the writing clear of grammar/spelling errors?
- Is the writing easy to read? If not, how/where can the writer improve?

Content:

- Is there a description of the writer's process in their own words?
- Connections made about their process and the writer
- Discuss what you learned from reading this draft

Though content is mentioned in this peer-review structure, as students are asked to identify "a description of the writer's process" in their peers' work, the central concern in these instructions, at least from the students' perspectives, seemed to remain with formatting. Before being asked to read their peers' drafts, students were asked to "circle" errors in the heading, to check the spacing of the document, and to verify that the papers were no less than two pages in length, leaving the discussion of content to the end of the review process. As a result, the instructions for peer-review reflected the students' perception of the instructor's objectives, even if the instructor herself did not understand this to be the case.

Not surprisingly, as they were reviewing each other's papers, students remained concerned with formatting, commenting:

- Student 1: I double-spaced. Is that wrong?
Student 2: You said we didn't need a Works Cited page, right?
Student 3: I don't even know how my paper is. It's not even formatted and stuff
Student 4: It's pretty good. You have two pages, but it's not in MLA

Based on these comments and on the structure of peer-review day, the message that students seemed to be receiving was much different from the one intended by the instructor during her interview. To these students, a paper cannot even be defined until it is formatted, and a “good” paper is one that simply follows MLA guidelines in addition to meeting the two page minimum requirement. Students were not reading their own drafts or the drafts of their peers with an eye on content, and thus were not addressing concerns regarding the differences between a comparison of writing processes and a presentation of biographical information not necessarily because they did not understand these concepts, but also because they were not being instructed to look for such issues. Facing an assignment that was introduced in terms of minimal lengths requirements and participating in a peer-review session that listed formatting as a primary objective, students proceeded to write their drafts with such concerns in mind. Though they did not transfer the instructor’s objectives as she perceived them during her interview with me, students did seem to be transferring what they perceived to be the goal of the assignment. For this reason, if we are to encourage the transfer of specific concepts from our classroom to our students’ work, then perhaps we can ensure that students understand these objectives as well as we do, and that such outcomes are presented as a priority in the assignment sheets that students receive. In this way, students will no longer struggle to understand our objectives, and they will (hopefully) place their attention on our desired outcomes, rather than focusing on formatting issues that do not reflect our primary goals.

Rhetorical Situations and The Concept of Discourse Communities

While my previous examples uncovered a discrepancy in student-teacher communication as a possible cause for the limitations of transfer, such miscommunication can also occur as we strive to move students from an understanding of a particular concept or skill to the application of such knowledge in a secondary context, a distinction that I argue signifies the shift from

learning to transfer. In the case of this particular classroom, this transition from declarative to procedural knowledge seemed to be one of the biggest obstacles limiting the transfer of writing-related concepts from the classroom into the students' own writing. In order to illustrate the students' struggles with translating the declarative understanding of concepts to the procedural application of these concepts via writing, I will focus on the introduction of the concept of discourse communities and rhetorical situations in the Composition classroom.

In Unit 2, students explored the concept of discourse communities as described by John Swales. As the instructor explained during her interview, she wanted students to “know what a discourse community is, and which ones they belong to.” She then also wanted students to use this knowledge in order to “recognize and understand that that’s what’s happening when they’re coming into a new writing situation,” particularly that they will “feel uncomfortable” with a new way of writing because they are not yet familiar with the language used by the discourse community in which that writing takes place.

The ways in which these objectives were translated into the “Discourse Community Profile” assignment for this unit also seemed to reflect the instructor’s goal of allowing her students to explore the challenges faced by newcomers when entering a particular discourse community. In this assignment sheet, students were instructed to “Tell me and your fellow students about a DC you are a part of, using Swales’ definitions of Discourse Communities.” The assignment sheet was then broken down into four subcategories: “Discuss your DC,” “Discuss your background within this DC,” “Discuss a social issue you care about connected to or involving members of this DC,” and “Formatting.” While these categories do reflect the instructor’s objectives for the assignment to some degree, what students seemed to miss, based on an analysis of their final papers, was the direct connection between how Swales defines a

discourse community and how they should identify the same concepts when studying their own communities.

When coding the sample student papers for the “Discourse Community Profile,” I found that students were in fact discussing the background of their discourse communities. They devoted 32% of the T-Units in their papers to such a discussion. However, though the students referenced the background of a particular DC, none of the students made any reference to Swales’ concepts in this discussion. Here is how Dara approached her “Discourse Community Profile”:

Becoming a part of the tennis community as a whole is one of the best decisions I’ve ever made, and becoming a part of the intramural community here at UCF is one of the best decisions I could’ve made for myself here. Tennis can help in many areas of your day-to-day life and is a positive community to be a part of. Therefore I encourage you, the reader, to pick up a racquet sometime and try it out. After playing for a while, you might come to find yourself becoming as addicted to tennis-related sounds as I am.

Dara is discussing her personal experiences with the tennis community, alluding to the benefits of being involved with tennis (“can help in many areas of your day-to-day life”) and she is also describing her decision to enter the community, another requirement described on the “Discourse Community Profile” assignment sheet. What she fails to address directly, however, are Swales’ defining criteria for discourse communities, those defined in class as “methods of intercommunication,” “public goals,” “a common lexis,” “balance of experts and novices,” “mechanisms to provide information and feedback” and “shared genres.”

By reading Dara’s excerpt alone, one could assume that she did not learn Swales’ criteria in reference to discourse communities because she did not discuss these concepts in reference to her own discourse community. However, what my data suggests is not that Dara did not learn or that she failed to fully understand these concepts, but that she may not have grasped how these

concepts can be extracted from the context of Swales' article and applied to other discourse communities outside of the text. To Dara, it seemed, the concepts introduced by Swales were static terms only pertinent to the discussion presented by Swales in his article. "Public goals" and "lexis" were not understood as general concepts that can be applied to many discourse communities. As a result, Dara's failure to utilize such terms in her assignment could have been perceived as her inability to understand the concepts introduced by Swales. However, by analyzing the class activities during which Swales was introduced, we can also understand that Dara may not have been given the opportunity to apply these concepts in other contexts, before being asked to apply them to her own discourse community.

During the introduction of the "Discourse Community Profile," the instructor addressed Swales' criteria in class, as students engaged in this discussion:

Instructor: The main reason I wanted you to read Swales is because nobody describes the six characteristics of a discourse community better than he did. And also, despite its dry nature, he does have a lot of things to say and hopefully you got at least those six characteristics out of that reading. So, who can tell me what the six characteristics are?

Student: You have to keep in touch with a newsletter or something

Instructor: Ok, do you remember what he calls that? Anybody? Ok, it's called intercommunication.

Student: You need to have an even number of new people and old people.

Instructor: Ok, so novices and experts, sure.

Student: Goals

Instructor: What kind of goals? Are they public or private goals?

Student: Public

Instructor: Right, public goals

- Student: They all have language?
Instructor: Close, What's it called in Swales though? Nobody? It's called lexis.
- Student: I think it's participatory mechanisms or something like that?
- Instructor: I think that would probably be intercommunication though. But yeah, the way members are, active or passive.
- Student: Something about like, you have to open up communication in order to be a member of the community. You can't just like, scan through it; you have to kind of participate.
- Instructor: Yeah, that's correct. If you don't read the newsletters, you're probably not going to understand the lexis, right?
- Student: Um, I'm not really sure what this means, but something about letters?
- Instructor: Genre, right. What does that mean when we talk about genre in regard to a discourse community?
- Student: I don't really understand it, but I think it means like something that you read or write, like a paper.

What students engaged in during this discussion was the learning of these terms in reference to the Swales article alone—they were not being asked to apply these concepts to anything outside of the initial context in which it had been encountered. They displayed a surface understanding of these terms by being able to identify them and define them in direct reference to the context in which they were originally learned, but they did not understand these terms as concepts outside of the article. During this initial discussion, students were still struggling to remember what they had read (“I’m not sure what this means, but...”) and had not yet discussed how these terms would apply to situations other than those introduced by Swales himself.

During the following class discussion, students still seemed unsure of how these concepts would apply to any community not discussed directly by Swales. Their discussion reflected an attempt at application, as students asked:

Student: Can you clarify? Lexis is just like a language?

Instructor: Yeah, lexis is...think of it like a group of words that you in your community understand. Like, a good example would be, when we talk about things like register, or we say DC. If you went into your biology class and started talking about those things, nobody would probably understand unless they had also taken Composition. So, there are certain words and terms and phrases, maybe acronyms, that your group understands, that defines you based on the type of communication that you have.

Student: I was gonna say something like jargon.

Instructor: Sure, if you would at a fast-food restaurant or a fine dining restaurant, you wouldn't necessarily understand the same terms and abbreviations, because it's a different DC.

Student: So, what exactly is a genre?

Instructor: Genre is format, it's structure, it's style. It's how you differentiate one thing from another. Let's say I bring in a stack of magazines and I bring in a stack of books and some mystery novels, sports' magazines. How are you going to differentiate between those magazines if I took the covers off? There would be different topics, formats, different styles of writing. Things that you would expect, So, a good way to think about genre is it's just about classification, but you have to apply that to written work. So, keep thinking about these groups that you're in, and try to see if they are DCs

Through this second discussion, students seemed to be attempting the translation from the textbook into things that made sense to them, and the instructor appeared to be assisting them in this regard. She made references to restaurants and magazines, and she put these concepts in terms that may have been more digestible to the students. However, at this point in their discussion, students were clearly still struggling through their initial learning of these concepts—

they did not seem to have the knowledge necessary to adapt Swales' criteria to their own communities and situations.

Since this was the last class discussion during which Swales was directly mentioned, students may not have had the necessary skills to transfer a knowledge of Swales' concepts into a writing assignment that required them to work with these concepts outside of the original article. When approaching their papers, students like Dara failed to apply Swales' criteria to a discussion of their own discourse communities, primarily because they were not taught how such applications would need to be made. They were told about discourse communities, but were not provided with scaffolded tasks that required them to apply this knowledge in their writing. This scaffolding would require that students learn about the concept of discourse communities and the criteria introduced by Swales and that they also practice how these terms could be applied to discourse communities not directly discussed by Swales in his article. Without such scaffolding, what students reverted to when drafting their papers, as we can see through Dara's example, was a loose interpretation of the objectives outlined in the assignment sheet, leaving behind the operationalization of Swales' criteria.

During a similar discussion in Unit 3, students were once again asked to define concepts that were to be later applied in a major writing assignment. The instructor divided the board into two sections, labeling one as "summary" and one as "analysis." She then asked her students to define each of these concepts, and students replied:

- Student 1: "Analyzing is when you go through it and pick out stuff"
- Student 2: "When you analyze you break it down and go through it and pick it out"
- Student 3: "When you analyze you ask questions, when you summarize you say what's already there"

These definitions were accepted by the instructor, as they reflected the students' declarative understanding of these terms. The students could state that analysis requires one to "go through" a text and "pick out" elements to "break it down" a text, but such a discussion does not reveal the students' ability to operationalize these words in their own writing. When the Unit 3 assignment called for the adaptation and application of these terms, students once again struggled to make the connection between what they had discussed in class and what they were being asked to actually do their unit assignment.

For the Unit 3 Rhetorical Analysis paper, students were asked to "apply your critical thinking skills in order to break down a text," in order to "articulate HOW something exists (analyzing), rather than just WHAT that something is (summarizing)" (emphasis in original). While one can see how these instructions clearly reflect the introduction of analysis and summary previously discussed by the class as a whole, students frequently failed to make the link between the class activity and the writing assignment. Here is how one student, Jamie, began her initial rhetorical analysis draft, where she was analyzing the Food Guide Pyramid:

Believing in what we know because we have been unconsciously taught to do so by our own culture is not the truth of what we are becoming and whom we really are. Sometimes, it is hard to admit that people with power are selfish enough to resolve in the sacrifice of humanity for their own sake. In this case it is our health, which has been suffering dramatic changes since the last centuries of evolution. Fortunately for some people like me, we have had an insight to this truth in a shocking but embracing way. It was about a year ago when my family and I met with a Holistic Lifestyle Coach that changed our lives forever. She revealed to us secrets from the modern human diet and why we have come to accept these standard guidelines that rule our daily food intake. I cannot describe what I felt when I realized how blind people have been all this time, and the role of the government was even more of a sorrowful news since I have been taught that the American system is not as corrupted as other governments.

Alluding to the "misleading" nature of the Food Guide Pyramid, Jamie begins her analysis by providing her opinion on the Pyramid's structure. She clearly states her

distaste for what she describes as the deceitful composition of the Food Guide Pyramid, and explains how she and her family were enlightened by their Holistic Life Coach. Though Jamie goes on to discuss two articles in which the deceit of the Food Guide Pyramid is also revealed, the purpose of her draft remains the same—to show her reader how the Food Guide Pyramid is an inaccurate way of measuring a person’s ideal diet.

What Jamie failed to do, at least in parts of her analysis, was to transfer the distinctions between “summary” and “analysis” previously discussed by her instructor and her peers. While she may have been able to identify the differences between analysis and summary during a class discussion, when faced with the application of this distinction in her writing assignment, Jamie did not seem to understand how these terms could be applied to the rhetorical situation presented by the author of her chosen text. Like her peers, Jamie may have learned about the differences between analysis and summary, but wasn’t taught how to engage in analysis rather than simply defining what analysis is.

The Scaffolding of Successful Transfer

While students struggled to understand the application of writing-related concepts in reference to discourse communities and summary vs. analysis, the instructor’s role in teaching analysis during her third unit allowed her students to begin the operationalization of the terms they had discussed in class. After being assigned their rhetorical analyses and writing their initial drafts, students were required to conference with their instructor. During these conferences, students were required to bring their initial drafts to an individual meeting with the instructor.

On her conference day, Jamie brought her draft and discussed her concerns with her instructor, explaining:

- Jamie: I marked what I wanted you to look at. Is my first paragraph confusing?
- Instructor: Well, I'm confused as to what exactly you are analyzing. Maybe you should think about the constituents that we used in class. Can you apply those to this analysis? What is the purpose of the Food Guide Pyramid, and how do the authors of your articles perceive these purposes?
- Jamie: I don't know if this is right, but the authors are writing show that that the Food Guide Pyramid is misleading.
- Instructor: Okay, yes, and what words made you think this?
- Jamie: Like when Dr. Willet says that the Food Guide Pyramid is out of sync with scientific evidence about the human body.
- Instructor: Right, so then you can break down her words to show her purpose, or her exigence.

What the instructor is doing with Jamie is guiding her from the distinction that she understands between analysis and summary into the application of these concepts to a text outside of the classroom. She uses the same terms discussed in class, such as analysis and exigence, this time in reference to Jamie's own writing, in order to encourage Jamie's meta-rhetorical reflection of what these concepts mean in terms of her own work. The distinction between analysis and summary is thus being operationalized by Jamie through her instructor, as Jamie herself points to the language used by Dr. Willet. Though Jamie required additional guidance to lead her from the declarative understanding of analysis to being able to actually do analysis of an academic text, her revised draft reveals that Jamie's ability to understand and transfer these concepts was attainable. In her final draft, Jamie applies her new understanding of analysis in the following way:

The original Food Guide Pyramid published by the USDA in 1992 is, by far, the highest recognized and most controversial nutritional device ever produced in the United States. Whether or not the pyramid is a good reference to our health, has been intensely criticized from positive and negative sides since its publication,

and it has caused a confusion on the people about whether they should believe on its guidelines or not. For instance, Nutrition Today published “In Defense of the USDA Food Guide Pyramid” in 1998 by Professor Marion Nestle, where she strongly supports the positive contributions of the pyramid guidelines to our health. The article is, at least on the surface, a strong persuasive text intended to obtain the audience’s trust by means of logos, ethos, visual analysis, and the arrangement of ideas in chronological order. Using these techniques results in a positive impact on the reader’s opinion and it enhances the credibility of the rhetor and creates a general convincement that it is a well-supported health guidance. Although I have strong personal reasons to believe that the claims of Nestle are not true, and that the pyramid is not an adequate representation of our nutritional requirements, I do believe that the delivery style in which Nestle wrote the article is well arranged to the point that the reader feels secure to trust her claims.

In her final draft, Jamie chooses to begin her analysis by describing the rhetorical situation that she will be analyzing. Rather than beginning with her personal convictions on the issue, Jamie chooses to give an overview of the situation, before diving in to her analysis of a particular article. While Jamie still mentions her personal opinions regarding the Food Guide Pyramid, these comments are inserted as an aside to her primary claim, mainly that Nestle provides a convincing argument for the validity of the Food Guide Pyramid. As she continues with her analysis, Jamie introduces evidence to support her claims, stating:

In an attempt to support the message of her article, Nestle makes use of visuals that the reader can easily understand to make a better comprehension of her facts. For example, table 1 summarizes the key events in the history of the pyramid, and table 2 shows the summary and classification of the principal criticisms of the pyramid. In this case, the condensed information of the tables was necessary to clarify the reading and to help the audience identify the claim of the rhetor

After being asked by her instructor during her individual conference to directly apply the “constituents discussed in class,” such as exigence, rhetors, constraints, and audience, to an “analysis” of the language used in her articles, Jamie began to operationalize the declarative concepts that she had previously learned. She analyzes Nestle’s use of tables and defines the rhetorical situation by looking at the impact of the rhetor’s choices on the potential audience.

Using her instructor's guidance during a conference, Jamie was able to not only understand how analysis could be defined in a class discussion, but to also transfer this understanding to an analysis of a situation outside of the initial context. In this way, the instructor's scaffolding of her lessons led Jamie from the declarative to the procedural, where Jamie was able to understand what she needed to do in order to apply the writing-related concepts presented to her in class.

As we can see from Jamie's example, Composition students seem capable of understanding the complex concepts that are introduced to them in the writing classroom. The challenge in encouraging the transfer of these concepts, based on my findings, has little to do with the students' ability to understand the information that is presented to them. In analyzing the writing of my study participants in conjunction with the interaction between all students and their instructor during class, I found that the problem with transfer within the composition classroom can often be one of miscommunication and lack of scaffolding. If we want students to understand what it is that we are asking them to do with the concepts presented to them in class, such as taking Swales' definition of a discourse community and applying it to discourse communities outside of the academic community, then we must work to scaffold our assignments in a way that leads students through this process.

CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

In my previous chapter, I discussed the process by which students transfer the writing-related concepts learned in class in their writing assignments composed outside of class, concluding that students often fail to achieve this transfer not because they are unable to understand the concepts being taught to them in the classroom, but because they are not always presented with scaffolded assignments that lead them to the operationalization of this knowledge. In this chapter, I hope to expand on my findings by suggesting ways in which composition instructors can work to develop a clear presentation of their expectations to their students via assignments that reflect the instructors' expected outcomes. Focusing on the role of writing prompts, assignment sheets and class activities in the composition classroom, in addition to addressing the significance of encouraging transfer through the scaffolding of writing tasks that consist of meta-rhetorical, reflective writing and discussion and the teaching of revision through peer-review, I will suggest that composition instructors can work to minimize the miscommunication between themselves and their students, consequently allowing for the successful transfer of writing-related knowledge within composition. Furthermore, as part of my Teacher Action Research, I will be using the instructor's own reactions to my research as a basis for exploring how my findings can be used to encourage transfer in the composition classroom.

Assignment Sheets and Writing Prompts

Using a T-Unit analysis a preliminary tool to determine how much weight was given to specific themes within the assignment sheets presented to students allowed me to analyze not only what was being asked of students, but also how these directions were prioritized by the instructor. As I discovered through the "Writing Process Project" analysis, one of the reasons

that students may fail to transfer knowledge into their writing is simply a result of their misconceptions regarding what they are being asked to write. As I had previously mentioned, in the assignment sheet for the “Writing Process Project,” 38% of the T-Units coded were related to formatting requirements rather than content requirements, leading the students to focus on these formatting guidelines when drafting their papers. Similarly, students’ misconceptions of their instructor’s expectations seemed to play a role (among other factors) in their failure to transfer the concepts of discourse communities and rhetorical analysis to their written assignments. What I can deduce from these findings is that despite what we may think as instructors, students really are looking at our assignment sheets with a critical eye, and they are using our instructions to decipher our expectations. Though we may become frustrated with our students when they fail to meet our expectations for a specific assignment, perhaps we should strive to ameliorate some of these disappointments when building and introducing our assignments.

Anis Bawarshi discusses the misinterpretation of expectations that can occur through writing prompts, explaining that students and instructors “reposition themselves within and between genres,” working together to negotiate the characteristics of these genres within the classroom (118). Though we may view the assignment sheet or writing prompt as a “transparent text” that communicates our expectations of these genres to our students, what Bawarshi suggests is that when we distribute an assignment sheets, we are actually beginning the writing processes of our students (127).

As Bawarshi explains through David Bartholomae, “it is *within* the prompt that student writing begins, not *after* the prompt,” meaning that writing prompts are formed with implications and contextual clues that guide students to where their writing should begin (emphasis in original) (127). Writing prompts thus “situate student writers within a genred site of action in

which students acquire and negotiate desires, subjectivities, commitments, and relations before they begin to write,” using these prompts as a guiding map to their writing (127). If we as instructors fail to include the adequate “cues” into our assignment sheets, then we are beginning our students’ work in the wrong direction, and we are making it less likely for them to reach our desired destination (127). Thus, if we want students to spend the majority of their papers comparing their writing processes to those of professional writers, then we should provide them with assignment sheets that reflect this priority. Likewise, if the formatting and length of our papers are of secondary importance to us as instructors, then we should strive to reduce the focus that we place on these criteria in our assignment sheets. In this way, our writing “cues” will be reflective of our own desired outcomes, and our students will be provided with an adequate roadmap for their work.

From the Instructor: A New Perspective on Assignment Sheets

When I approached the course instructor with my findings regarding the amount of weight that MLA formatting and length seemed to hold in her assignment sheets, she explained that rather than viewing these concerns as restrictions, she provided additional formatting guidelines on her assignment sheets because she wanted students to know that there were alternate ways for them to deliver their work. As long as students adhered to some basic guidelines, such as a properly formatted MLA heading and, in the first two assignments, a word-count minimum, students could be more creative with their methods of delivery, such as writing a letter to their high school English teachers for their “Writing Process Project,” for example. What actually happened, however, was that when students were presented with such lengthy formatting guidelines, they no longer understood the content of their work to be the focus of their writing. As the instructor explained:

I noticed exactly what you did – their concerns had nothing to do with stylistic delivery and everything to do with what they’ve been getting marked off on for years: MLA, spacing, length, grammar. I felt saddened by this and really couldn’t figure out why very few of them took liberties to go a different route since so many express feeling dread when it comes to writing papers.

What the instructor clarifies through this explanation is that her desire to allow students room for creativity (by giving them the option to write letters and screenplays instead of traditional papers) resulted in a misrepresentation of her assignment objectives. In this case, the instructor’s purpose for including numerous formatting guidelines in her assignment sheets was entirely misinterpreted by her students, and by my own assumptions when first analyzing my data. As a reaction to my initial comments, the instructor began to re-envision the ways in which she presents creative opportunities for her students, explaining:

Learning from last semester, I feel so much more confident about the way I presented the first, also “creative” assignment for this semester. What I value in their literacy narratives is that they are able to recognize and use storytelling in a narrative. However, when I taught this assignment in the past, I didn’t take time to tell them what I meant by “storytelling,” nor did I make that a bullet on the rubric. At present, it feels like the most obvious thing, but without being part of your study, I’m not sure I would have caught it yet. For this semester, I spent about 20 minutes in class talking about “storytelling” when I introduced the assignment and we discussed the first two readings – Malcolm X (“Autobiography” excerpt) and Sherman Alexie (“Superman and Me”) – as examples. I defined exactly what I meant by giving them some ways to make their writing more “creative” (sensory details to deepen thoughts, painting a picture with words, storytelling in both an imaginative and straightforward way) and had them do work in class to better understand what I meant by “storytelling” and “sensory writing.” When I re-visited what I meant by “storytelling” with them a few days before the paper was due and went back over the rubric (on which MLA was nowhere to be found), hands were up all over the place to define that back to me. The result? Two batches of the most “creative” narratives I’ve yet to read, with oddly, fewer MLA errors than I’ve had when I place MLA as a bullet on the rubric.

By reevaluating the ways in which her assignment priorities were delivered to her students, the instructor was able “cue” her students into producing texts that satisfied her

expectations, and arguably, that allowed the students to really explore the opportunities that she was providing. As the instructor explained in this discussion, the guidance given to students, even if only via a “bullet point” on a rubric or assignment sheet, frequently reflects where our students will “end up” in their writing processes, thus serving as evaluations of both our students’ abilities and our own strengths in explaining our expectations (Bawarshi 127).

After becoming more aware of the expectations being delivered through her assignment sheets, the instructor was able to encourage her students to be more creative, and to present her with papers that were clearly aligned with her own desired outcomes. As she clarifies:

I believe I have begun to not only define what I’m looking for more clearly with my students, but also reconcile what I’m looking for more clearly with myself. The literacy narrative assignment in the past has come with tons of student questions – much like the first assignment last semester did [The “Writer Process Project”]. This time, I believe I had a few questions about different types of metaphor (a term they brought in) and had one student ask me to look over his outline; I was shocked at how NOT confused they were – and how amazing the resulting papers were!

The lack of confusion sensed by the instructor is a quality that many of us seek from our assignments—we want our students to know what we expect from them, and we feel validated when they successfully meet our expectations through their writing. Though an analysis of our assignment sheets may appear to be a simplistic suggestion, allowing our students to understand what it is that we are asking them to do may be the first step in encouraging them to transfer what we teach them in the classroom into what they write on their own.

The Teaching of Revision through Peer-Review

In addition to identifying a discrepancy between the instructor’s personal objectives for her assignments and those that she presented to students through assignment sheets, I was able to trace a similar misrepresentation of assignment objectives during class discussions, where students were being first exposed to the method by which their papers would be evaluated. As is

the case with many composition courses in our department, one of the ways through which instructors teach strategies of revision for particular assignments is through peer-review. Though the peer-review structures employed by instructors are varied and serve different purposes, my analysis of the peer-review structure employed in this course suggests that students were struggling to transfer the concepts presented to them in class due in part to the ways in which they were being taught to evaluate their own work.

In their initial peer-review session for the “Writer Process Project,” the emphasis on grammar and formatting seemed to dominate student discussion. Being instructed to identify the accuracy of their peers’ headings and assignment length, students remained focused on these guidelines as the basis for evaluating their work, voicing their concerns regarding their own abilities to master MLA style and to write enough to cover two pages (see student discussion and peer-review structure in chapter 2). Though these concerns may have been valid, the amount of effort that students devoted toward these objectives clearly detracted from their focus on the content of their assignments, resulting in what we could argue to be a failure in transfer.

In addition to being a distraction from the main objectives of their assignments, however, this peer-review structure dominated by grammar and formatting also supported the revision tendencies already prominent with unskilled writers, thus further detracting from the students’ focus on the content of their papers. As Flower and Hayes explain in “Direction, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision,” when revising their work, “experts and novices make different kinds of changes with strikingly different frequencies” (18). While expert writers may be “using [the] reading of drafts to construct a sense of the text’s current gist and/or to form a rhetorical plan which will guide revision,” novices tend to maintain their focus “on convention and rule-

governed features,” thus paying little attention to the rhetorical moves and content-driven concerns that may be found in the global issues with their writing (18).

Taking this distinction into account, it becomes clear why many of the students in this course remained overly concerned with the formatting and “rule-governed” issues of their papers. Unlike the instructor (the expert) who was capable of shifting from local to global concerns in revision with great efficiency, the students (the novices) were not yet trained to surpass these minor local concerns. While the instructor may have included these formatting guidelines as a way of allowing her students to check off these requirements before moving on to the more significant global issues, the students remained at this local level, and did not take the time to consider the larger global issues at hand. In this case, transfer from the classroom to the students’ writing was not acknowledged or discussed by the students, mainly because they were led into the revision patterns that were comfortable and familiar to them, those patterns that limited their ability to consider content.

From the Instructor: Teaching Revision through Peer-Review

When I discussed the reasoning behind format-driven peer-review structures with the instructor, she explained that these initial formatting guidelines were in fact intended to ease students into the revision process. As she clarifies in her response:

Your observations about the peer reviews I created for them last semester are in perfect alignment with what I noticed as well. Looking back, I’m ashamed I even had them look for local issues on each other’s papers...but I think I had reconciled that they go right to that anyway so why not make it part of the process on their PR handout to make them feel more comfortable?

In this case, the instructor seemed to understand that students’ tendencies with revision usually begin at the lower-order level, as students “go right to” these issues when asked to review their own work. As students worked through multiple peer-review sessions through the course, however, the instructor admits to making adjustments to this structure based on her

students' concerns. She eliminated length requirements and led students through a discussion of what revision entails for expert writers, striving to shift their understanding of the revision process. By the following semester, the instructor claims to have "completely restructured" peer-review based on her own objectives as well as those of her students. She elaborates by explaining:

Our peer review approach is based 100% on feedback in-class about what they like, dislike and want from peer review. The result of this was about 30 minutes in each class having an open forum about what I struggle with, what they struggle with and what we can do about it. I even offered them that I'd gladly toss out PR if they didn't think it was helpful, which to my surprise, only about 1-2 students in each section actually raised their hands in favor of. What this open forum taught me is they actually look forward to reading each other's work; they just don't like having to comment on it because they don't know how. They've been doing PR since high school, but that's meant something different to every teacher and they dislike the high-pressure situation of having a teacher grade how they comment and other students possibly getting upset about their comments, not to mention, they don't know what they don't know. One student said this semester something to the tune of "I'm just a bad editor and I feel awful when someone gets me to look over his or her paper," to which I responded by asking him if he felt like he was a bad reader? He didn't, and that opened up a wonderful discussion about how just reading can be one of the most effective things you can do for another person's writing.

By discussing revision and peer-review with her students, the instructor has managed to address the limitations that novice writers often face when revising—she showed her students that being a "peer-reviewer" does not limit one to being an "editor," and that "bad editor[s]" can still be helpful readers. In this way, the focus of revision is once again returned to a discussion of content, encouraging transfer by teaching the students to look for the concepts that they learned in class in the work of their peers.

For the students in the instructor's new course, a restructuring of peer-review has resulted in an awareness of revision. After their discussion on the purpose for peer-review and the struggles that students face with revision, the instructor clarifies that her students

Finally settled on something that seems so simple it's kind of ridiculous: peer review teams. Yes, that's right, from the same students who suggested anonymity came the suggestion to be able to work with the same small set of peers for the whole semester so they can "get to know each other and each other's work" possibly allowing them to "notice patterns" and "learn each other's writing styles." I've paraphrased here, but they did also mention that small teams (who they asked me to assign) would allow them to read more papers per class than other approaches. (Yeah!). Finally, what really made this stick were their admissions about how they feel more comfortable commenting on their friend's papers and reviewing teams would allow them to make friends with the people they're reviewing so they can be more open with each other – and that reviewing with their friends would hold them more accountable to show up so as to not let their team down

Through this added awareness of what makes students feel comfortable with peer-review structures, the instructor is now able to assess the conditions under which revision can take place more successfully in her classroom. She understands that if prompted to look for local issues when revising, students may fail to surpass these concerns and move on to the bulk of their content. Though I cannot account for the success of peer-review and revision in this course, what I suggest is that by presenting students with revision strategies that echo our own desired outcomes for the work of our students, we may encourage them to operationalize the concepts presented to them in class by emphasizing these concepts as our primary guidelines for evaluation. If we teach students what it is that we look for when reading their papers, then perhaps we can encourage them to look for these same elements when reviewing their own work (or the work of their peers). Consequently, the transfer of knowledge within the classroom can be encouraged not only through our grading, but also through the students' self-evaluations.

The Combination of Declarative and Procedural Knowledge

Even in a Writing about Writing FYC course structured around complex writing-related concepts particular to the field of rhetoric and composition, students seemed to have little trouble understanding the concepts being presented to them in the classroom. During their initial exposure to discourse communities and rhetorical analyses, students participated actively in

discussions where they were asked to define these terms as they were presented by John Swales and Grant-Davie. When asked to incorporate their understanding of these concepts into their writing assignments, however, students frequently failed to make the connections between the definitions they had discussed in class and the operationalization that was also applying in their assignments. What was missing, based on my analysis, was the effective scaffolding of writing tasks that led students from a declarative understanding of these concepts to the procedural knowledge necessary to apply these concepts in situations outside of their initial contexts, perhaps by building smaller writing tasks that allowed students to understand how these concepts could be applied in the larger assignment. For example, if Dara had been guided to operationalize the concept of discourse communities in the classroom, perhaps by being shown examples of how communities outside of Swales' article develop public goals and mechanisms of intercommunication and then being asked to write about these examples in the classroom, perhaps she would have been able to understand how this operationalization can transfer into her writing about the tennis community.

This distinction between declarative knowledge and operationalization of knowledge returns us to a distinction between learning and transfer. One of the limitations of transfer studies, at least in their earlier stages, was to establish enough of a distinction between what we define as transfer and what Perkins and Salomon deemed to be "plain old learning" (3). Stemming from this discussion, and from Beach's suggestion that transfer and learning are unrelated, I defined the distinction between transfer and learning as one rooted in operationalization—if students can define a concept or term, then we can argue that they have learned it. If, however, they have the ability to adapt and apply this term in order to fit the requirements of another writing situation

(and are able to succeed in this adaptation), then we can argue that the students have transferred the knowledge from the original context into a new situation.

While in my previous example I discussed transfer as it applied through contexts across multiple classrooms and settings, the struggles with transfer experienced by students in my study also appear relevant to this discussion. There was little question, based on an analysis of the two transcripts in which students defined discourse communities and when they discussed the differences between summary and analysis, that the instructor of the course had succeeded in teaching her students about these concepts. The students understood that an analysis required them to “ask questions” and to “pick stuff out” from a text, and that discourse communities share a common lexis, which is “just like language.” However, it was not until the students met with the instructor for individual conferences that they began to see how these declarative concepts could be translated into their writing. After the conferences, students were able to understand how to *do* analysis rather than just talk *about* it.

Arguably, what the students had experienced in the classroom was the initial acquisition of knowledge, as they learned these concepts within the context of the classroom. The transfer of this knowledge, on the other hand, required additional scaffolding from the instructor, suggesting that if we want students to be able to apply the knowledge that we teach them once they leave our classrooms, then we need to ensure that they can apply this knowledge to the tasks that we provide for them within our courses.

Such a need to scaffold writing tasks in order to assist in our students’ operationalization can also be explained through Petraglia’s distinction between “ill structured” and “well structured” problem-solving (83). What our students do in other courses, and what they have done for most of their academic careers, is respond to “well structured” scenarios, where they can find a

definitive answer to the questions presented to them in the classroom. In writing tasks, however, such well-structured problems are not so readily available, as we struggle to show students that there are multiple ways of successfully completing the “ill structured” writing tasks that they encounter in our classrooms, and outside of them (83). Thus, if we are to view FYC as our students’ transition from well structured to the ill structured tasks of writing, then perhaps we can work to structure this transition in a way that will encourage the adaptation and manipulation of knowledge required from our ill structured assignments.

In my study, Jamie’s operationalization of rhetorical analyses did not occur until the instructor directly asked her, “What is the Purpose of the Food Guide Pyramid, and how do the authors of your articles perceive this purpose?” Until analysis was applied to her specific topic, Jamie had failed to see how she could use the concepts and tools presented to her in the classrooms. Her understanding of analysis was limited to what Petraglia would define as “well structured problem-solving,” where she could identify the “correct” definition of analysis, while still struggling to see how this definition could apply to an “ill structured problem” like the task of writing a rhetorical analysis. During her conference with her instructor, Julia began to transform her understanding of analysis into what James Paul Gee defines as “Meta-knowledge,” or “the ability to manipulate, to analyze, to resist while advancing,” by understanding not only the definition of a singular term, but also the necessary adaptation that may occur in the operationalization of a concept (532).

Instead of having a surface understanding of analysis from the classroom, the conversation between Julia and her instructor allowed Julia to reflect on her previously acquired knowledge of analysis and to adapt this knowledge for the purposes of her assignment. Through the conversation with her instructor, Julia was guided through the application of knowledge by

being instructed to dissect specific words used by the rhetor in her text. By participating in this scaffolded process, Julia was able to write a final draft that clearly reflects the operationalization of analysis.

Though the instructor eventually succeeded in teaching Jamie about analysis through scaffolding and reflection, perhaps she could have implemented discussions and exercises to ensure her students' transition from the understanding of the term to the application of analysis in other contexts. If Jamie, along with her classmates, had been asked to discuss not only what rhetorical analysis means, but also what a rhetorical analysis of her articles would entail, perhaps she could have commenced her transition into a procedural understanding of rhetorical analyses before her individual conference.

From the Instructor: Guiding Students to Operationalization

When I initially shared my findings regarding her students' struggles with operationalization, the instructor commented on what she described as "what struck me most about your findings – the words we use in class are NOT instantly part of a shared lexis, rather, it is up to us to facilitate that community knowledge!" Though she admits that she may not have been as "mindful" of the need to guide students through the operationalization of new concepts, the instructor explains:

I have taken this mindfulness into account when planning and structuring my lectures [in 1102]; since I need to start using the term "audience" pretty early in the semester, I stopped in class after I'd first used that word and checked for understanding, then moved on to talk about it and get some hands up to help me discuss how it applies to writing. No one who I had in class last semester seemed the least bit bored with talking about it again (which is something that scared me away from being explicit about these terms last time I taught 1102) and those who didn't know, I feel, got a pretty nice primer. The students who already knew could feel advanced by sharing their knowledge and the students who didn't know could learn the term early so that each time it's mentioned reinforcement is provided.

In this excerpt, the instructor explains that now she not only discusses the definition of the term “audience” with her students, but that she also “moved on” to discussing “how it applies to writing.” This transition is what seemed to be lacking in her previous discussions of discourse communities and rhetorical analyses, and signifies the meta-reflection from students that I think would have aided her students in operationalizing the concepts that they learned in their Composition I class. Based on the instructor’s mindful application of the study’s results, students in her Composition II are being guided from declarative understanding to a procedural application of writing-related knowledge. Though, as the instructor explains, “Being transparent in this way does not come easy and I don’t dare assume I’ve mastered it,” the difference between her Composition I course and her current Composition II course is that she is “aware of the fault-line between what I say and what they know,” and is thus better able to guide her students to transfer knowledge across multiple writing tasks.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

While analyzing transfer within the limitations of one course may present limit the potential for generalizable findings, one of the biggest contributions that I hope to make is based on a reconception of how we view transfer within the classroom, before we begin to theorize how to encourage transfer from it. If we view transfer as a dichotomy of “near” versus “far,” (Perkins and Salomon) or even as a concept limited to “well structured” or “ill structured” skills (Petraglia), then perhaps we are ignoring the continuum in which all of these elements operate.

In order to elicit far transfer across different contexts, I argue, we need to assess, evaluate, and encourage the near transfer of knowledge within singular settings. Particularly in the composition classroom, where we are asking that our students learn and apply writing-related concepts that are generally completely foreign to them, we should strive for an awareness of our own role in this transition, and for our students’ own awareness of how these concepts apply to their writing tasks. Borrowing from our understanding of the value that a meta-awareness of writing-related concepts holds for our students in their efforts across various writing situations (Beaufort; Downs and Wardle), we should work to achieve a similar level of awareness when crafting and presenting our own course objectives to our students. By analyzing not only what we teach but how we teach, we can begin to understand how our students are transferring knowledge across situations within our own classrooms, and can work to address the issues that they encounter in these efforts. As a result, we can use this understanding of transfer within our classrooms to evaluate transfer from them, perhaps alleviating one more challenge for our students and their future writing struggles.

In the case of my specific study and situation, the instructor’s open-minded approach and constant effort to encourage transfer from her students really shaped the potential value of my findings. By acknowledging and addressing the miscommunication and discrepancies that I

identified in my findings, the instructor of this course surpassed her initial agreement to participate in my study by applying these findings to her current pedagogy, presenting us with a model for the benefits that may arise out of our efforts to encourage transfer within composition.

As she concludes in her final response to my findings:

As stated in other ways throughout my response, I've come away from this experience far more aware and confident than I ever could have anticipated. No matter if it's using terms in class, delivering a lecture, choosing words on an assignment handout or fielding questions, I feel now that I am far more in-tune with my students and what they need to succeed in the course, something that is paramount to me as an instructor.

Most teachers I would imagine, feel the same desire to build a community and in a discipline so language-driven, in which we teach them about DCs and audience, lexis and choices as rhetors, I think a study like this provides much needed insight into the ways we 'practice what we preach.' I would be interested to share the final results of this study with future classes to open up a discussion about all of these things and how they start right in the classroom – perhaps if they see all the choices we have to make to try to ensure our audience understands us, some of that will transfer over to deepen that same discussion of how and why it's important to make those same kind of choices in their papers so they are understood by their audience(s). In many ways, this study, and what I have learned from it so far, reminds me of that 'elephant in the room' cliché – with awareness and discussion of our own need for transparency, that pachyderm becomes a part of our experience instead of a mysterious hurdle between teacher/student and rhetor/audience.

If nothing more, this ability to be “in tune” with our students as we guide them through our course may in turn encourage them to be more “in tune” with the skills that we are teaching them, thus allowing them to not only learn these skills in their initial contexts, but to also understand how these skills can be adjusted in other writing scenarios. Consequently, it is my argument that the prospects for far transfer are thus rooted in near transfer, and that such transfer can best be addressed within the context of our own classrooms. If we reconceive transfer as the adaptation of knowledge and we understand learning and operationalization in relation to transfer, then we can begin to encourage the application of writing-related concepts within our

classrooms, perhaps increasing the potential for this application in our students' future writing tasks.

In order to incorporate the findings of this study in my own course preparation with the hope of contributing a tool for considering near transfer within composition, I have developed a course planning guide intended to encourage writing instructors to consider the ways in which their course objectives and desired outcomes are being presented to and operationalized by students (See Appendix D for planning guide samples). Beginning with a description of the concepts or skills that students should learn about in each of their course units, this tool allows instructors to reflect on what students in their courses should learn in the classroom, before transitioning into an application of this knowledge through writing.

In addition, after identifying objectives for students, this planning guide asks that instructors identify how students will be operationalizing knowledge and concepts in the classroom, thus allowing us to see not only what our students are learning about in class, but to also see the correlation between this initial learning its operationalization through class activities. Finally, drawing on the operationalization of knowledge that takes place in the classroom, the planning guide leads instructors to identify what students are being asked to do in their writing assignments, as they transfer the knowledge that they operationalized in the classroom into the writing assignments that they compose on their own. By being mindful of the ways in which the operationalization of knowledge is being scaffolded in our classrooms, and by prioritizing our objectives so that they are clearly delivered to our students through our assignments, I suggest that we can strengthen the potential for transfer in and from our classrooms.

While the planning guide that I present appears to suggest a linear progression from learning to transfer, this transition is often recursive, with students continuing learn as they

operationalize knowledge, and with transfer occurring at various stages in this process. With the ill-structured nature of writing, the relationship between learning, operationalization, and transfer remains fluid. However, by acknowledging the distinction between these stages in the planning of our writing courses, we may be able to better understand where our students are struggling to meet our course objectives. Though there may be a fine line between encouraging transfer and assuring that our students do “what we want them to do” in our courses, if we are teaching within a curriculum that emphasizes the far-transfer of writing-related concepts, then we should consider the near-transfer of these concepts within our courses by scaffolding assignments that lead students to the operationalization and application of writing-related knowledge. In addition, by planning our courses with the objective of encouraging operationalization and transfer, we may begin to view our students’ successful operationalization not as simply meeting our personal objectives, but also as their success in preparing for future transfer from our classrooms.

APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Date:

Instructor:

Assignment/Unit being introduced:

- 1) What are the objectives of the unit and assignment, and how do you plan to meet these objectives in class?
- 2) What are the declarative and procedural concepts you want students to learn in this unit? What should they know about and know how to do?
- 3) Which do you predict will be the toughest concepts for students regarding this assignment? (the major assignment(s) for this unit)
- 4) What will this assignment contribute to the overall objectives of the course?
- 5) How will this assignment help to improve the students' overall writing skills?

APPENDIX B: LIST OF UNIT OBJECTIVES AND THEMES

Unit 1: “The Writing Process Project.” In this unit, students were to explore their own writing processes by comparing their processes to those of a professional writer of their choice. Students were to learn that writing is recursive, and that most writers use revision as part of their process.

Table 1: Themes Coded in Unit 1 Assignment

Codes and Descriptions	Examples in Instructor Interview	Examples in Assignment Sheet	Examples in Student Papers
SW: Students examine (or should examine) their own writing processes	<p>“Discuss writing practices”</p> <p>“Reflect on writing processes”</p> <p>“Thinking about their own processes”</p>	<p>“Perhaps you’ve never tried...”</p> <p>“Writing about yourself as a writer”</p>	<p>“When I write...”</p> <p>“My writing process...”</p> <p>“My affair with writing...”</p>
CW: Students compare (or should compare) their writing processes to those of their chosen professional writers	<p>“Compare on the differences between...in regard to writing”</p> <p>“They should know how to compare and contrast writing practices”</p> <p>“Will get them comparing process with that of professional writers”</p>	<p>“Discuss how your process is similar to theirs...”</p> <p>“Discuss examples from their process and your own”</p> <p>“Discuss what you’ve learned from their process that you can apply to your own”</p>	<p>“She/He also...”</p> <p>“Her writing is similar...”</p> <p>“I had never viewed writing like this before”</p>
PW: Students discuss (or should discuss) a professional writer, without relating to their writing processes	<p>N/A</p> <p>NOTE: Instructor did not mention the background of a professional writer as relevant to the assignment goals, yet she includes this element on the assignment sheet, leading students to include it in their papers.</p>	<p>“Explain who the writer is”</p> <p>“Pick a professional writer who interests you”</p>	<p>“He/She has published...”</p> <p>“Her most notable works include...”</p> <p>“She loves to...”</p>
F: Students format (or should format) their papers using MLA	<p>N/A</p>	<p>“ways you could put this together”</p> <p>“MLA formatting”</p>	<p>N/A</p>

Unit 2: “Discourse Community Profile.” In this unit, students were to explore the concept of discourse community as described by John Swales. They were to then identify a discourse community that they belong to, and to identify a social issue relevant to that community. In their assignment, students were to discuss how their chosen community qualifies as a discourse community based on the criteria outlined by Swales.

Table 2: Themes Coded in Unit 2 Assignment

Codes and Descriptions	Examples in Instructor Interview	Examples in Assignment Sheet	Examples in Student Papers
BDC: Students discuss (or should discuss) the background of their chosen discourse community. They describe (or should describe) this background using Swales’ characteristics.	<p>“Spend some time talking about different communities and different things done in these communities”</p> <p>“Understand Swales’ six characteristics of defining a discourse community”</p> <p>“Understand discourse communities”</p>	<p>“Discuss your DC”</p> <p>“What are its public goals?”</p> <p>“How do members gather information and feedback?”</p>	<p>“IMO’s public goals are...”</p> <p>“Being part of this discourse community involves...”</p> <p>“Caribbean student association focuses on...”</p>
SDC: Students discuss (or should discuss) their own involvement within the discourse community of their choice, including their struggles in joining and maintaining membership within this community.	<p>“...about ways that they are belonging members to communities”</p> <p>“They should know which discourse communities they belong to”</p> <p>“Thinking of communities that they are a part of”</p> <p>“They should understand identity shifts and personal struggles (within DCs)”</p>	<p>“Why/how did you become a member?”</p> <p>“Length of membership?”</p> <p>“What are the challenges you face in being part of this DC?”</p>	<p>“So I joined with enthusiasm”</p> <p>“Their moral and ethical values were similar to mine”</p> <p>“It felt good to be a part of it”</p>
LDC: Students discuss (or should discuss) the language practices of their chosen discourse communities.	<p>“If they work at a fast food restaurant, they call words to each other”</p> <p>“Different ways that language is used in these groups”</p> <p>Linguistic things based on the communities that they use”</p>	<p>“What genres of intercommunication do they use?”</p> <p>“What are some words in the lexicon?”</p> <p>“How do members intercommunicate?”</p>	<p>“A phrase used to...”</p> <p>“taught a Dominican word...”</p> <p>“postings on emails or Facebook”</p>
F: Students should format their papers using M L A	N/A	<p>“Your work should be 2 to 3 pages”</p> <p>“Please use MLA”</p>	N/A

Unit 3: “Rhetorical Analysis.” In this unit, students were to analyze a text of their choice using their understanding of rhetorical situations as explained by Grant-Davie. They were to identify rhetorical strategies used by the rhetors of their text, and to discuss how effectively these strategies were implemented.

Table 3: Themes coded in Unit 3 Assignment:

Codes and Descriptions	Examples in Instructor Interview	Examples in Assignment Sheet	Examples in Student Papers
RT: Students employ (or should employ) rhetorical terms in their analyses	<p>“Understand and apply constituents of rhetoric”</p> <p>“They should know what rhetoric is”</p>	<p>“Use at least two constituents of rhetoric”</p>	<p>“The main audience targeted”</p> <p>“By utilizing the method of pathos”</p>
AN: Students analyze (or should analyze) instead of summarize their chosen texts	<p>“View sources and texts as persuasive”</p> <p>“practice analysis vs. summary”</p> <p>“look at sources rhetorically”</p>	<p>“Break down a text”</p> <p>“How something exists rather than just what something is”</p> <p>“State the effect created”</p>	<p>“Used a lot of dialogue in order to...”</p> <p>“To evoke sadness and anger”</p> <p>“Uses language to...”</p>
SAR: Students develop (or should develop) an argument about their chosen texts, based on their analyses	<p>“I want them to really formulate an original argument based on analyzing”</p> <p>“Create an original argument”</p>	<p>“Have your own claim about the text and its purpose”</p> <p>“Come up with your own argument”</p>	<p>“To help reinforce those who are on the fence”</p> <p>“To persuade people to think twice”</p>
SU: Students summarized the text being presented, without providing an analysis	N/A—Instructor wanted students to analyze rather than summarize	N/A	<p>“This show have definitely had an impact on teenagers”</p> <p>“Pauley is known as fun and down to earth”</p>
Students should format their papers using MLA guidelines	N/A	“Please use proper MLA formatting”	N/A

APPENDIX C: T-UNIT DISTRIBUTION

Table 4 T-Units in Unit 1

Instructor Interview	SW	CW
T-Units in interview	12	6

Assignment sheet	SW	CW	PW	F
T-Units in assignment sheet	7	8	5	12

Student papers	SW	CW	PW
T-Units in student papers	106	35	44

Table 5: T-Units in Unit 2

Instructor Interview	BDC	SDC	LDC
T-Units in instructor interview	6	11	8

Assignment sheet	BDC	LDC	SDC	F
T-Units in assignment sheet	3	4	6	6

Student papers	BDC	LDC	SDC
T-Units in student papers	35	19	37

Table 6 T-Units in Unit 3

Instructor Interview	RT	AN	SAR
T-Units in instructor interview	21	15	5

Assignment sheet	RT	AN	SAR	F
T-Units in assignment sheet	1	6	5	2

Student papers	RT	AN	SAR	SU
T-Units in Student Papers	20	49	59	56

APPENDIX D: COURSE PLANNING GUIDE

Encouraging Learning and Application: Planning through Goals and Objectives

Purpose: This chart may be used and adapted by FYC instructors to trace the correlation between instructor objectives and class activities. By analyzing how we are introducing writing-related knowledge in our classrooms in addition to assessing what we want students to do with the concepts and skills that they learn in the classroom, we may be able to encourage the application of knowledge from the classroom into students' writing.

Name of Unit being planned and introduced:

Learning: What concepts/skills should students know about in this unit? What should they be able to discuss and explain? Why?

Operalization: What will you do in class to help students learn and understand these concepts? How will these activities help them understand?	
Activity	What students will understand through the activity

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APPENDIX E: IRB EXEMPTION LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**
To : **Laura J Martinez**
Date : **August 16, 2010**

Dear Researcher:

On 8/16/2010 the IRB determined that the following proposed activity is not human research as defined by DHHS regulations at 45 CFR 46 or FDA regulations at 21 CFR 50/56:

Type of Review: Initial Review
Project Title: Transfer within FYC: Tracing the Operationalization of
Writing-Related Knowledge and Concepts in Composition
Investigator: Laura J Martinez
IRB ID: SBE-10-07059
Funding Agency: None

University of Central Florida IRB review and approval is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are to be made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, please contact the IRB office to discuss the proposed changes.

On behalf of the IRB Chair, Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 08/16/2010 12:08:34 PM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janice Turchin". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a rectangular box.

IRB Coordinator

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