Twenty-First Century Composing: An Assessment of Transfer of Multimodal Composition Learning in First-Year Composition to Other-Than-Academic Writing Contexts

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Overview of the Project

This research assesses the transfer of multimodal composing understanding, knowledge, and ability to contexts outside of academic courses. Specifically, this assessment investigates how students' learning and use of multimodal composing skills in an online first-year composition course transfer to non-academic, and in particular, professional and civic, contexts. This assessment also examines what student reflections on the Writing Program Administration's Learning Outcomes and the Habits of Mind from the *Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Education* reveal about the transfer of these skills and knowledge. An understanding of how these skills and knowledge transfer will facilitate improvement in the design and implementation of this online program's curriculum and activities.

Significance of the Topic and Gap in Research

As recently as 2007, Elizabeth Wardle notes in "Understanding Transfer in FYC" that most studies of writing-related transfer were emerging from the field of professional communication. She cites only three studies that examined transfer of learning related to FYC writing, and she notes that those studies only incidentally examined the topic. As Wardle states, the pervasiveness of the FYC requirement in post-secondary education indicates the courses are widely considered to be essential for students to develop writing knowledge and skills they can apply in other classes and in other composing situations. Yet, at the time of her publication, there

was a dearth of evidence to support this assumption, and the evidence that did exist suggested that in fact such transfer was not occurring. Wardle argues that WPAs and other scholars working in the field of composition and writing studies must engage in research on writing-related transfer from FYC. In the less than 10 years since the publication of this article, transfer has become a compelling field of research in studies of FYC.

This study takes seriously Wardle's call, in particular the following assertion:

A more expansive study must look to the nature of writing activities, including other contexts in which students subsequently become involved, to understand whether and why students expand or generalize skills learned in FYC….Consequently, we should attempt to account for the ways in which knowledge and skills are transformed across contexts; otherwise, we risk overlooking manifestations of skills that have been adapted to meet the needs of a new activity system. (Wardle 2007)

We follow their research by building metacognition into the curriculum. Specifically, our curriculum incorporates assessment of digital portfolios, in which, as discussed previously, students are asked to reflect on their learning of multimodality in relation to the WPA Outcomes and the Habits of Mind as well as how they applied or transferred that learning to personal, professional, and civic contexts.

Our work also draws on Driscoll and Wells' "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions," who argue that learner "disposition" is crucial to transfer of writing skills. The authors identify several dispositions they assert determine students' sensitivity toward and willingness to engage in transfer and which can positively or negatively impact the learning environment. Rather than dispositions, however, we focus on students' engagement with the eight Habits of Mind (Curiosity, Creativity, Flexibility, Openness, Responsibility, Persistence, and **one more** Metacognition), which have been identified as key habits to success in post-secondary education. With this ongoing research, we intend to explore how students are able to transfer the Habits of Mind to other writing, composing, and communicating contexts. While our curriculum is designed to be transparent in communicating

to students the value of practicing the eight Habits of Mind in the FYC context, we will also assess whether students perceive the value in doing so, and how successfully we have conveyed that to students in our instruction.

Finally, our research draws on recent research in multimodal literacies. For instance, in the 2013 volume *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres,* the editors Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus assert that "new media writing spaces" enable students to explore "what else is possible" in composing practices. Students in our fully online FYC program engage with new media both in interacting with instructors and peers as well as in the multimodal projects and digital portfolios they compose. The editors assert that "what it means to be literate in the world today is changing and that the shapes and forms of academic knowledge within undergraduate writing are undergoing transformations" (4). Our ongoing assessment will examine how this transformation is impacting the way students are generalizing their learning to other contexts.

Background, Definition of the Project, and Research Questions

The Writers' Studio is a fully online first-year composition (FYC) program in the College of Letters and Sciences at Arizona State University (ASU). Like other FYC programs at ASU, the Writers' Studio offers students the option of completing their FYC requirement either through a two-course, two-semester sequence or through an advanced, one-semester course. We offer both 7.5-week and 15-week versions of our courses. Only about 20% of our students are "on ground" students, who typically are traditional college students attending as a first-time freshman right out of high school. About 80% of students in the Writer's Studio are ASU Online students, who are required to complete a 7 ½ -week version of the course. ASU Online students typically are non-traditional students returning to college after a hiatus, veterans and active military personnel, and older students seeking a second career. Thus, we serve a very diverse student population, particularly given the fact that most of our students are seeking their degree online.

The Writers' Studio's curriculum design promotes an active, learner-centered approach to teaching and learning writing, where faculty and writing fellows support students to develop and articulate a rhetorical stance in their writing through rigorous and recursive participation in the

process of writing. In the course, students are required to complete two projects consisting of essay, multimodal, and reflection components. Students complete invention work throughout the course, as instructor-graded assignments as well as discussion board assignments. The capstone project is a Digital Portfolio.

The Digital Portfolio assignment asks students to reflect on and assess their own learning in relation to both the Writing Program Administrator's (WPA) learning outcomes and the Habits of Mind from the *Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Education*. Throughout the course, students are encouraged to apply the learning we do in our courses to the composing they do in other areas of their lives, specifically, in the personal, professional, and civic arenas. This philosophy is articulated by Duane Roen, Glen Glau, and Barry Maid in the textbook students use for the course, *Writing for College, Writing for Life* and reinforced by the support students receive from instructors in the development of their portfolios. The portfolio assignment also encourages students to reflect on the composing they have done in these other areas and to bring in examples of this composing as evidence to support their claims about their learning.

In Summer 2016, the Writers' Studio administrative team conducted a preliminary assessment of whether and how students were reflecting on multimodal composing in other areas of their lives in their portfolio reflections. We assessed a random sample of digital portfolios submitted by students in the 2015-2016 academic year. We used a sample size of 10% of digital portfolios submitted by students who had consented to allow their work to be used for research purposes. The random sample was generated by the Digication support staff per our request and in accordance with the specifications we provided. We assessed student reflections according to the following qualities: reflects on multimodality in relation to WPA Outcomes and Habits of Mind, includes substantial evidence of how multimodality contributed to learning in relation to course learning outcomes, reflects on transfer of knowledge of multimodality to other courses or areas of their lives, and includes substantial evidence of how he/she engaged multimodality in other courses or areas of life. This preliminary assessment revealed that all students reflected on multimodality in relation to WPA Outcomes and Habits of Mind to some extent, and about two-thirds provided some evidence of how multimodality contributed to learning in relation to course learning outcomes. Only one student reflected on transfer of knowledge of multimodality

to other courses or areas of their lives, and no students included substantial evidence of how they engaged multimodality in other courses or areas of life. Based on this preliminary assessment, we redesigned the portfolio assignment to explicitly require students to include evidence of learning from other areas of their lives; to reflect on the transfer of that learning, especially related to multimodal composing, to professional, personal, and/or civic contexts; and to include evidence of how they have applied that learning to other composing contexts.

Outcomes

In light of what we learned through our assessment, we have redesigned our capstone project to potentially yield more specific student engagement with multimodal composition and transfer by more clearly communicating to students what the desired learning outcomes of the course are and that the learning in this can and should be applied to other contexts of their lives. We made the following changes to improve learning related to the digital portfolio assignment, specifically in relation to transfer and multimodal composing.

1. Explicitly require students to include evidence of learning from the course as well as other areas of their lives. *From the assignment:*

   As you craft your reflections, be sure to include the following elements:Clear evidence from your work in this class and outside the class that supports your claims about your learning and demonstrates you are able to apply and transfer your learning from this class in other contexts.
   a. Evidence from work **done in this class** can come from the following sources: excerpts from chapters in the eBook; excerpts from rough and final drafts of projects; examples from invention work and discussion board posts; feedback from instructors, writing fellows, and peers; the design and arrangement of the portfolio itself
   b. Evidence from **outside of this class** can come from the following sources: written or multimedia work in other courses; written or multimedia work you compose for a professional situation (e.g., emails to supervisors or coworkers, powerpoint presentations, reports); written communication with family members, including on social media sites, texts, and emails; writing you do for fun or as a creative outlet; composing you do in your community, for instance, a letter to the editor or a comment on a political blog

2. Explicitly require students to reflect on the transfer of that learning to professional, personal, and/or civic contexts. *From the assignment:*

Although you will draw much of the evidence of your learning from your work in this class, rhetorical writing requires skills you will use in many areas of your life both in and beyond college. Reflecting on your learning in this class will help you **transfer the knowledge and skills** you learn in this course to other writing and composing contexts.

3. Clearly tie the revised assignment to the digital portfolio rubric, which originally contained the following weighted categories: Organization of Content, Clear Sense of Purpose, Clearly Stated Claims with Critical Reflection, Sufficient Evidence, Addresses WPA Outcomes and Eight Habits of Mind, and Conventions. To align with the new assignment description, we created new rubric categories as follows: Organization and Design, Clearly Stated Claims about Learning, Critical Reflection on the WPA Outcomes and Habits of Mind, Sufficient and Varied Evidence, Relevance of Evidence, and Conventions. Thus, only one of six grading rubric categories remained the same (Conventions); all others were revised to better enable students to focus on the value of the ePortfolio (and the many reflections done within it) to their learning experience.

4. Develop teaching methods and tools to support student understanding and learning related to this assignment:

   a. Additional instructional videos to explain the value of assessment, the goals of the portfolio project, and the meaning and value of transfer
   b. Synchronous workshops to help guide students through the process of engaging in deliberate and systematic reflections within their ePortfolios
   c. More specific instructions within each week devoted to reflecting on the Habits of Mind and WPA Outcomes in the ePortfolio

d. Multimodal videos focused on each of the ePortfolio's grading rubric categories, including samples from student ePortfolios that exemplified thorough reflections with supporting evidence

e. Grade norming activities related to portfolio assessment for faculty.

Ongoing Assessment

In summer 2017, we will be assessing the impact of our revised digital portfolio assignment in order to determine the impact on students' transfer of multimodal composing skills and practices. We will analyze the survey data described above, and contact and interview students who have given consent. We intend to continue to investigate the following questions through a combination of digital portfolio assessment, student surveys, and data analysis:

1. How do students' learning and use of the multimodal composing skills in the online first-year composition classroom transfer to other courses and non-academic (professional and/or civic) contexts?

2. What do student reflections of the WPA Outcomes and the Habits of Mind reveal about the transfer of these skills and knowledge?

3. How might the data about transfer of these skills and knowledge facilitate the design or improvement of the online program curriculum and activities?

This study will collect data from two sources. First, we will assess student reflections in their capstone project, the digital portfolio. Second, we will conduct surveys with students at specified times throughout the next year. We will survey students at the end of the 7.5-week semester and subsequently at the end of each 7.5-week semester for the 2016-2017 school year. We have already received Institutional Review Board approval for the study and have distributed voluntary consent forms to students. Students who consent to being contacted for surveys will provide non-ASU email addresses.