

Supporting the Transfer of Writing Knowledge

Transfer refers to how people carry knowledge, strategies, and dispositions for learning across contexts. As teachers, we need to consider transfer because it helps us think about the connections between prior learning and current performances in our classrooms. When we find ourselves asking, “what did they learn in that class?” or “why aren’t my students connecting these lessons?,” we are then thinking about the transfer of knowledge.

Transfer of writing knowledge: A summary of research

Perhaps, the first thing to know about transfer of learning is that it is possible but it’s not automatic. The second thing to know is that transfer is influenced by both the individual learner and their contexts of learning. That is, prior learning, the current learning context, concurrent learning contexts, and students’ perceptions about future uses of learning can positively or negatively impact performance; they can also have no impact when learners don’t see the relevance of or aren’t prompted to make connections.

Taken together, this means that faculty need to actively support successful transfer of learning. To do so, faculty should help students connect prior knowledge and discuss how that knowledge should be adapted to current tasks and contexts. As part of this conversation, faculty should help students avoid transferring inappropriate knowledge that will lead to failed performances. Finally, faculty should help students generalize knowledge so that students can draw on it in future performances.

Some vocabulary for conceptualizing and talking about transfer

Generalization: abstracting knowledge from specific tasks and contexts

Repurposing: adapting generalized knowledge for specific tasks in new contexts

Absent transfer: the failure to connect relevant knowledge and learning experiences

Inappropriate transfer: using knowledge that doesn’t relate to current tasks

Hugging and Bridging: these terms refer to practices of teaching for transfer. Hugging refers to the use of approximations that closely relate to current knowledge and bridging requires the use of abstraction to develop connections across greater divides.

High and Low road; Near and Far; Vertical and Lateral Transfer: these terms help us to qualify the movement of learning across tasks and contexts. Near or low road transfer refers to similar tasks; far or high road transfer refers to dissimilar tasks; vertical transfer refers to knowledge used in a more advanced learning context; lateral transfer refers to knowledge used in a parallel context.

Strategies to facilitate writing transfer

Build in regular, structured reflection that prompts learners to recall and repurpose prior learning, generalize or abstract new knowledge, and/or relate learning to future performances and contexts. Analogies, metaphors, comparisons, scenarios, and predictions are often useful ways to aid generalization and repurposing.

Employ a core vocabulary that grounds conceptual knowledge of writing and enables students to talk about it. Clearly define this vocabulary and talk about how it might differ in other classrooms and disciplines. This vocabulary assists with generalization and repurposing and facilitates your ability to return to core concepts in your classroom and across different levels and contexts. Return to this vocabulary regularly throughout the semester.

A heuristic for reflection: Three ways to prompt for transfer

Reflect: draw on prior knowledge

Sample question: What do you already know about writing in college and the major?

Connect: connect prior knowledge to current tasks

Sample question: What writing knowledge and strategies will you draw on for this assignment?

Project: think about future performances

Sample questions: What have you learned about writing from completing this writing assignment? What do you need to learn? What writing knowledge will you carry with you from this assignment/course to other assignments/courses in the program and beyond?

Reflection during a writing assignment sequence:

Pre-process: put students in groups to analyze prompt and discuss prior learning. Have students compose a planning document.

Mid-process: reflect on process; what's working and what isn't; where are the bottlenecks and what feedback do you need to do to push past them. Have students revise planning document.

Peer review: reflect on feedback you gave and received; what was helpful? What wasn't helpful? Have students compose a revision planning document.

Post-submission: reflect on process and learning; what specific decisions did you make and why? What strategies did you develop that might be useful in the future?

Further reading

Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning. (2014). Elon statement on writing transfer.

<https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/elon-statement-on-writing-transfer/>

University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing. (2020). Cultivating reflection and metacognition. <https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/cultivating-reflection-and-metacognition.html>