Crossing Boundaries: Co-op Students Relearning to Write

This article reviews the deeply conflicted literature on learning transfer, especially as it applies to rhetorical knowledge and skill. It then describes a study in which six students are followed through their first co-op work term to learn about which resources they draw on as they enter a new environment of professional writing. It suggests that although students engage in little one-to-one transfer of learning, they draw on a wide range of internalized rhetorical strategies learned from across their academic experience.

As teachers and researchers of writing, we once assumed that if only we could teach students the skills they would really need in both their academic work and in their future personal and professional lives, they would be able to transfer those skills from the writing classroom to other writing occasions with little difficulty. However, since writing studies researchers began applying situated learning and activity theory to the question of learning transfer, we have questioned whether learning transfer can be accomplished as easily as we once assumed—or indeed, whether it happens at all. This is troubling for all teachers who hope that their students will find what they have learned useful somewhere else, but it is especially so for teachers of business and technical communication, who hope to prepare students for writing in the world of work.

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In fact, if transfer is impossible between one activity system and another, we have to question whether a rhetorical education really matters outside a given context.

In this article, I survey briefly some of the most relevant literature in the area of learning transfer, from the areas of writing studies and transfer theory. I then report on a research study investigating how students re-engineer their rhetorical knowledge to apply it to workplace situations. I followed six students from a variety of disciplines through their first four-month co-op work term, a period during which they were still technically students but also were expected to perform as novice professionals—what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call “legitimate peripheral participants” in workplace culture. In doing so, I hoped to learn more about the resources these students were bringing to bear on their new rhetorical environments and thereby to shed more light on what aspects of a rhetorical education—if any—transfer from school to workplace.

**Some Definitions**

We first need to know what we mean by a *rhetorical education*. A rhetorical education could be defined narrowly as the sum of courses or programs designed explicitly to teach rhetorical knowledge and skill: first-year composition, first-year seminars with an emphasis on writing, courses in advanced composition and rhetorical theory, whether generalized or discipline-specific, Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs, and the like. Or it could be defined in the broadest possible terms as the sum of all experiences in a person's life, both inside and outside formal educational settings, that help him or her develop rhetorical knowledge and skills. Either of these extremes has its advantages, the former perhaps best positioned to help us as teachers of writing with our concerns about whether what we teach has value elsewhere, the latter definition probably most helpful in a more general inquiry into how rhetorical knowledge and skill develop as a human being matures cognitively and socially. For my purposes here, however, I adopt a middle ground, defining a rhetorical education as the sum of institutionalized practices in the postsecondary education system that help a student develop rhetorical knowledge and skill, whether or not those practices are located in specific “writing” courses.

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students’ lives while leaving open the probability that these practices will not be confined to “our” courses.

This definition begs the question of what exactly we might mean by *rhetorical knowledge and skill*. David W. Smit devotes the first chapter of *The End of Composition Studies* to this question, which becomes ever more complicated as one peels back its layers. In his inquiry, Smit tends to use “rhetorical knowledge and skill” as a single double-barreled term without worrying too much about what, if anything, is the difference between these two terms. Where it is necessary to differentiate them, we might equate rhetorical skill roughly to what a linguist would mean by *performance*: an ability manifested in the actual production of writing. Rhetorical knowledge would then be what a linguist would mean by *competence*: the sum of what the writer is in principle capable of doing, based on internalized knowledge of rhetorical strategies, heuristics, and the like, whether or not that competence is performed in each and every act of writing. However, this distinction is not particularly helpful here, since it is difficult to reason back to what a person “knows” other than by observing what he or she seems capable of doing. Therefore I follow Smit and use *rhetorical knowledge and skill* as a single term—frequently abbreviated to just *rhetorical knowledge*, which implies skill—while keeping in mind that this term binds together two aspects of rhetorical ability that are not synonymous.

This still does not help us much unless we can explain further what rhetorical knowledge and skill consists of. Anne Beaufort (*College; Writing*) offers a more fine-grained model of what a rhetorically mature writer must “know.” Her model involves five heavily overlapping domains of knowledge: discourse community knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, genre knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and writing process knowledge. Beyond elaborating our conception of what a writer must know in order to perform well, Beaufort adds another level that is particularly important to any study of transfer: the broad mental schemas that allow a writer to adapt to new rhetorical situations, or what might even more broadly be called “learning to learn”:

The literature on expertise suggests that experts not only have very rich, deep, context-specific knowledge, but they also have mental schema, or heuristics, with which to organize knowledge and aid problem-solving and gaining new knowledge in new situations. So the question becomes, what knowledge domains best represent the mental schema employed in expert writing performances? And what knowledge domains—or mental schema—do writers need to invoke for analyzing new writing tasks in new discourse communities? If we can articulate these knowledge domains and apply them to shaping curriculum, we can then
contextualize writing instruction more fully and have a basis for teaching for
transfer, i.e. equipping students with a mental schema for learning writing skills
in new genres in new discourse communities they will encounter throughout
life. (*College* 17)

I leave my inquiry into rhetorical knowledge and skill there, since that is
enough to clarify what I am looking for, especially the schemata that promote
learning new writing skills for new occasions. But, since my theme is transfer, or
more generally, the crossing of boundaries, let me clarify exactly which bound-
daries I am interested in observing students crossing: the transfer of rhetorical
knowledge and skill from the academic world to the workplace—arguably the
largest reach for learning transfer, and also the one with the most long-term
consequences for students who may spend four years in the academy and
four decades in the workforce. It is therefore primarily a study of professional
writing, although its observations will be of interest to teachers of all forms of
writing more generally.

**Activity, Situatedness, and Learning Transfer**

The larger questions surrounding the transfer of learning from one environ-
ment to another—all learning, not just rhetorical skills and knowledge—were
initially studied by cognitive psychology, although learning transfer literature
has more recently taken a much more social turn. Some recent literature on
writing studies has begun to draw explicitly on learning-transfer theory, par-
ticularly the work of D. N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, when considering the
question of whether and how rhetorical skills and knowledge transfer across
domains of activity (Smit; Beaufort, *College and Writing*; Nelms and Dively;
Wardle, “Mutt” and “Understanding”). Yet the entire field of learning transfer
theory, particularly in its later forms, has much more to tell us about transfer
and what conditions enable it. Here I survey this territory only briefly in order
to provide background for my inquiry.

In one of the most famous studies of learning transfer, C. H. Judd took aim
at the then-prevailing view that transfer occurs best if the source and target
situation have as many identical elements as possible. Judd proposed instead
that transfer is facilitated when learners have a good understanding of the
general principles underlying the skills they must transfer. He had children
throw darts at targets under twelve inches of water. One group of children had
been explicitly taught the refractive principle that makes targets under water
look slightly to the side of where they really are; the other had not. Initially,
both groups missed their targets and required about the same amount of trial and error in order to become proficient. When the target was moved to four inches under water, both groups had to relearn how to hit it, again by trial and error. The group that had been equipped with general principles was able to relearn with much less practice than the other group. This seems to suggest that while an understanding of general principles alone may not allow one to learn a new skill, it can make practice more productive when relearning a skill for a new situation.

Although Judd’s research is now seventy years old, it has continued to provide a productive foundation for later studies. Terttu Tuomi-Gröhn and Yrjö Engeström suggest that it sowed the seeds of theories such as those of Brunner “that emphasize the understanding of deep structures and general principles in different curricular subjects as the basis of transfer” (“Conceptualizing” 21). Obviously many differences between transferring fairly basic sensorimotor learning and transferring rhetorical knowledge exist, but by casting transfer as relearning rather than as transporting knowledge, Judd’s insights set an important general direction for an inquiry into the transfer of rhetorical knowledge.

Many studies of transfer reveal a disturbingly uneven pattern of results. Frequently, learning acquired in one context seemingly evaporates when the learner is asked to apply it in another, even when the contexts seem relatively similar. However, it can be argued that at least some of the failure to transfer noted in educational research can be blamed on the narrow empirical conditions often imposed on such studies. Owing to the constraints of the laboratory situation, learners are often given a surprisingly short time in which to learn relatively complex concepts and are expected to reproduce them in a situation and according to standards that are often extremely narrow and prescriptive. Joseph C. Campione, Amy M. Shapiro, and Ann L. Brown argue that an over-reliance on such studies has led to a drastic underestimation of the human ability to reapply concepts.

In response, many later researchers reject the narrow conception of transfer, which suggests that skills are modular entities that can simply be picked up from one situation and dropped down in another, a conception that may result in many of the negative or equivocal results in studies based on it. These
researchers have suggested alternative terms such as *productivity* (Hatano and Greeno), *reconstruction* (Hager and Hodkinson), and *boundary crossing* (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström, and Young). These redefinitions of transfer reject the modular notion conveyed by the word *transfer* itself, replacing it with the idea that learners re-create new skills in new contexts by building on foundations laid down in earlier contexts.

An even broader view of transfer underlies literature on transfer of dispositions. Researchers in this school of thought such as Carl Bereiter suggest that although it may be difficult to transfer discrete bundles of skills from one context to another, it may be more possible (and ultimately more important) to transfer dispositions or “habits of mind.” Dispositions in this sense, such as *scientific thinking* and *moral reasoning* (we might add *rhetorical thinking*) more closely resemble character traits than bundles of skills. Studies in this tradition are often as frustratingly equivocal as other studies of transfer. However, the most encouraging ones emphasize long-term immersion in contexts that nurture the desired disposition in complex ways. Frequently, these studies involve entire classrooms (Campione, Shapiro, and Brown) and even entire programs (Pressley et al.), which become microcultures that nurture particular learning dispositions. Shari Tishman, Eileen Jay, and David N. Perkins see the goal of such programs as “enculturation” rather than simply teaching for transfer.

As noted earlier, writing studies literature has only recently begun to mine this deep vein of theory in any thorough and explicit way. Activity theory, also an import from cognitive and social psychology, has a much longer and more robust history in writing studies (dating back at least to our discovery of Vygotsky in the 1970s) and continues to exert a powerful influence on our understanding of how rhetorical knowledge is acquired and transferred.

Studies of writing based on activity theory sometimes shed disturbing doubts on the question of whether rhetorical knowledge can be transferred readily, or even at all, from one domain of writing to another. In “Wearing Suits to Class,” for instance, Aviva Freedman, Christine Adam, and Graham Smart observe students role-playing a business presentation. Despite the similarities between the basic operations that the students perform (the data they select, the structure of the presentation, the use of PowerPoint, etc.) and the operations they would perform in an actual business presentation, the two sets of operations serve very different purposes, and therefore the same clusters of operations are part of different *activities*. In a workplace setting, the presenters tell a client what their research has suggested about how best to operate
his or her business; in the classroom, they convince a professor that they have successfully applied the concepts covered in the course. The two situations are therefore so different that little of the knowledge acquired in the former will leak into the latter. When they are eventually immersed in the genres of work, the students will need to sense from the inside the nature of the social action entailed by these new genres: the instrumental and praxis-oriented social motives, the complex phenomena of multiple readerships (some remote in time and place), the different life-cycle of their texts, and the different literacy practices surrounding the texts (reading practices and collaborative composing strategies). None of this know-how will have been made available through simulations, no matter how realistically or elaborately staged. (Freedman, Adam, and Smart 221)

The most thorough and influential study in this tradition is Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré’s Worlds Apart, a study of students’ learning and professionals’ doing in a wide range of professional disciplines from architecture to social work. By applying a combination of rhetorical genre theory, situated learning theory, and activity theory, the authors conclude that the worlds of school and work have surprisingly little to do with each other. Each is a valid activity system in its own right, but without much transfer between them:

In Activity Theory terms, writing at work and writing in school constitute two very different activities, one primarily epistemic and oriented toward accomplishing the work of schooling, and the other primarily an instrumental and often economic activity, and oriented accordingly toward accomplishing the work of an organization. In that light, one activity, writing in school, is not necessarily preparation for successfully undertaking the other activity, writing at work. (Dias et al. 223)

In Lave and Wenger’s terms, writers at school are legitimate peripheral participants in an academic discourse community, and therefore they are not positioned to do more than pretend to adopt the discourse of work.

I have elsewhere called such studies (not unkindly, I hope) “glass half empty” studies (Brent). While they acknowledge that some very broad types of knowledge such as the general ideological and epistemological stance of a discipline may transfer from school to the workplace, these studies concentrate more on what does not transfer—the day-to-day knowledge of how things work, rhetorically and otherwise. Genre knowledge—the knowledge of what rhetorical moves are required in order to do what work at what time—appears especially
difficult to transfer because a genre is not simply a set of formal features but rather is a response to a set of context-specific rhetorical exigencies.

Not all applications of transfer theory see the glass as being half empty. A good example of “glass half full” studies is Graham Smart and Nicole Brown’s “Learning Transfer or Transforming Learning? Student Interns Reinventing Expert Writing Practices in the Workplace.” Smart and Brown note that although workplace interns do not seem to transfer rhetorical knowledge directly from school to work, students appear to pick up the rhetorical practices of their new environment with relative ease. Smart and Brown explain this phenomenon by changing the metaphor—in this case, from “learning transfer” to “transforming learning.” The interns, they claim, are able to learn new skills relatively easily because they have been armed with wide-ranging and flexible general knowledge that they can transform to meet the challenges of the new environment, not unlike the children in Judd’s experiment. Smart and Brown suggest that two skills appear to be particularly useful: reading rhetorical situations and writing collaboratively.

I can’t stress enough what difference a change of one word makes in the sense of what is happening here. If our goal in teaching writing (particularly but not exclusively professional writing) is to facilitate learning transformation rather than learning transfer, the implications for both research and pedagogy are enormous. One: although we may scale back any hope of teaching nuggets of rhetorical knowledge that can be unproblematically applied to new situations, we need not despair of being able to teach more general rhetorical knowledge that can help our students perform rhetorically outside our classrooms. Two: we need more research to refine our understanding of what knowledge is most amenable to transformation, and how we might help students acquire and use it.

**Seeking Transformable Knowledge**

This, then, is the theoretical background of the present study, which seeks to build on work such as Smart and Brown’s by exploring the repertoire of skills and knowledge that help workplace novices learn to function in new rhetorical environments.

I recruited students from business and arts programs at the University of Calgary, a mid-sized western Canadian research university, who had just begun their first work term in a co-operative education program. At the University of
Calgary, the co-op program involves three or four paid work placements of four months each, alternating with academic terms. The co-op office solicits placements from local, provincial, and national organizations, including businesses, government organizations, and not-for-profit organizations, and attempts to match students with placements that will give them opportunities to apply academic skills related to their majors.

Given the relative scarcity of organizations with the extra funds to offer such placements and the commitment that is required to make such a placement a productive learning experience, the co-op office cannot afford to be too choosy about what placements are accepted, as long as they have potential to offer some genuine educational experience. As a result, the match between the placement and students’ disciplinary skill sets is sometimes less obvious than others. The connecting thread between the academy and the workplace is also stretched thin while students are on their placements. The co-op facilitator visits students on the job at least once to ensure that the placement is going smoothly; at the end of the placement students must submit a formal work term report whose purpose, audience, and genre is not well defined. Nonetheless, the students on placement are still students as well as employees and are expected to be able to mine the experience for its epistemic potential, whatever shape that might take.

Although some of the students in this study had held various jobs in the past, their co-op placement was their first professional experience. These students were in the thick of boundary crossing, both students and neophyte professionals at the same time, and in most cases coping with the challenge of their first experience of a non-academic environment in which writing was an important workplace tool.

These students were in the thick of boundary crossing, both students and neophyte professionals at the same time, and in most cases coping with the challenge of their first experience of a non-academic environment in which writing was an important workplace tool. I did not attempt to select for students in particularly writing-related placements for a number of reasons. One reason was purely pragmatic: many students receive their co-op placements fairly close to the last minute, and it is often hard to tell in advance exactly what kind of placement it will be. Another
reason is that writing tends to happen in the most unexpected places. Had I rejected students whose job descriptions did not explicitly mention writing, I would have missed opportunities to observe students encountering, and sometimes generating for themselves, writing tasks as a by-product of a wide variety of work environments. Finally, I was interested in ways in which students’ general encounters with writing in their academic careers, not necessarily restricted to programs that prepared them formally for professional writing positions, either did or did not seem to provide them with scaffolding for life in the workplace. In short, I was prepared for students facing a wide variety of rhetorical challenges. I ended up with six volunteers with a wide range of academic backgrounds and in a wide variety of workplace situations, which I describe in more detail below. I interviewed these students every month or so throughout the four months of their work term. I asked them to tell me in detail what they were doing at work, focusing primarily but not exclusively on writing tasks. From time to time I would identify a particular rhetorical task and ask, “How did you know how to do that?” I also asked occasionally for explicit comparisons of workplace writing with academic writing and of academic writing in one discipline with academic writing in another.

However, I suspected that only a portion of my participants’ experience of transforming rhetorical knowledge would be available for explicit reflection. As Thomas L. Hilgers, Edna Lardizabal Hussey, and Monica Stitt-Bergh discovered in their study of transfer within a WAC program, even students who have been exposed to a considerable amount of explicit writing instruction can lack the vocabulary and the metacognitive development to be able to articulate what is happening to them. Because my participants might apply the same narrow definition of transfer that many writers have argued to be inadequate, they might miss more subtle occasions of transfer. As Elizabeth Wardle puts it, it is hard to identify apples when they have already been made into an apple pie (“Understanding” 69). Therefore, I used my explicit questions about transfer simply as conversation starters, pursuing the conversation where it led to find clues from which I could extrapolate more information about what knowledge, if any, these boundary crossers were bringing to the new tasks.

This method, relying as it does on the researcher’s power of inference more than on participants’ explicit answers to unambiguous questions, is more than usually subject to problems of researcher bias. The more one has to read meaning into a situation, the more likely one is to find what one wants to find. But I was willing to make this trade-off in view of the ambiguous and poorly defined quarry I was seeking.
I should also note that at the university at which this study was undertaken, explicit instruction in rhetoric is spotty, to put it charitably. Students in the communications studies major will take a few courses in the area, but even in that major courses in media studies outnumber courses in rhetoric and writing. Most students will at best access only a single one-term course in professional and technical communication, Communications Studies 363, which is required of business and engineering students but is also taken as an option by many others. That course attempts to go beyond the standard introductory professional writing course by giving some attention to genre theory, to the differences between an academic and a workplace audience, and to using both primary and secondary research as a basis for writing. Nonetheless, it would be easily recognizable in a thousand institutions, covering forms such as the proposal, the formal report, and the PowerPoint presentation, and mixing instruction in rhetorical moves with advice on using white space, making lists parallel, and all the other handy tips that a student might need in order to succeed in the rhetorical environment of the workplace.

Four out of the six students studied had taken or were taking this course; the other two were not required to do so. As a result, my study does not primarily address transfer from any particular intentional source of rhetorical instruction. For the purposes of this study, the fact that some students had a single one-term writing course is interesting, and I paid close attention when students mentioned it. However, in the end, this one course is incidental to my larger purpose. When explicit rhetorical education is so hit or miss, a study of rhetorical knowledge must concern itself at least as much with knowledge gained (or not) from coping with the varying demands of the diffuse but pervasive rhetorical environment of the academy itself.

In what follows, I first introduce each of my six participants separately and trace the development of their rhetorical experience over the four months of their work term. I then examine all six sets of experience for common threads or, in some cases, contrasts.

**Amy: Church Jill-of-All-Trades**

Amy was pursuing a double major in English and business and, like almost all the participants, was in her third year at the time of the study, the usual time
for students to begin their first work term at the University of Calgary. Simultaneously with her work term, she was completing Communications Studies 363. Her ideal career was to teach English at the junior high level, but she saw business as a backup in case teaching didn’t work out. She stated that she loved writing: she had been a member of the high school newspaper club and had maintained her own blog, largely to keep in touch with scattered friends, since grade 4 or 5.

Amy had created her own position by escalating the church volunteer work with which she had been involved for many years into a full-time job as children’s ministry assistant. Her main task was planning and delivering Sunday school lessons to elementary-grade students, but like many junior employees, she also found herself doing almost anything else that needed doing, including preparing posters, planning events, overhauling material for the upcoming summer program, and generally assisting the children’s ministry director.

While it may seem a stretch to apply the term “professional writing” to the writing done by an educator-in-training whose job is already closely aligned with education, it is important to remember a key lesson from activity theory. Regardless of the fact that two activities may involve highly similar operations, they are nonetheless different activities if they involve different goals and therefore constitute entirely different rhetorical exigencies. The writing that a teacher does in the process of his or her daily work is only superficially similar to what a student does in the context of his or her own learning (or at least the demonstration of it). We must see Amy, not as crossing a boundary from education to not-education, but as crossing a boundary from education in terms of her own learning to education in terms of the profession of facilitating others’ learning. Inevitably, her writing will be used in a very new way.

In fact, at first she did not feel that her job involved a lot of writing. However, if one used a sufficiently enlarged definition of writing, she was actually involved in manipulating text in a variety of ways. Preparing her Sunday lessons required making informal lesson plans for herself. Although she had never actually seen a lesson plan—she would not begin her formal teacher training until finishing her first degree—she had worked out the basic structure of a lesson plan by observing many Sunday school teachers at work. She also conducted Internet research into materials that might prove useful, communicating her results to her supervisor orally. She overhauled a skit that she had found on a DVD so that it would be more suitable for the context in which the church intended to use it. Finally, she wrote summaries of books on religious teach-
ing and biblical interpretation for the benefit of her supervisor. Amy felt that
she brought to this latter task a wealth of experience in studying textbooks
for her own benefit:

When I was studying for tests I would just go through the textbook and read
it from beginning to end, and try and summarize each thing into two or three
sentences, and then when I was reviewing for an exam I'd summarize those two
or three sentences into one sentence, and pretty much try and, I guess, consume
the textbook.

She came back to this point in her final interview. In her self-analysis as part of
her work term report, she stated that she had used very little of her academic
training during her work term, largely (she thought) because she had not yet
taken any education courses. But then she added, “I think the one skill I did
use more than anything else was critical writing,” which she defined as the art
of understanding an author’s point of view well enough to be able to condense
it into her “book reports” for her supervisor.

Amy told me that her chief takeaway from her professional communica-
tion course was that she had learned to write more concisely and directly. She
mentioned that this more direct style was even filtering into her blog posts,
which had become less “rambly.” As she discussed the evolution of her blog
posts, however, I noted other, more generalized rhetorical knowledge that
seemed to be at play—a greater sensitivity to audience:

More and more I’m finding that a blog will have more readers if—sometimes if
it’s about yourself because people like to read personal tidbits and whatnot, but
also if you’re thinking about the other person. So, lately I’ve been editing my blog
post a lot to think well, if someone wants to catch up on me, right, they probably
don’t want to read a very emotional ramble.

Another takeaway from the course was an increased sensitivity to infor-
mation structure. When reading quickly for information—for instance, when
reading books to summarize—she found that one of the books was especially
easy to summarize because “it wasn’t written in huge long chunks of paragraphs
and whatnot, but it would always be broken up by points, and the headings
were consistent.” She connected this observation to the fact that “I’ve been
picking up stuff from my technical writing course.” Because of that course, she
appeared to have more conscious appreciation of the rhetorical moves that the
author used to make the book more easily accessible.
She had also internalized some rules of evidence from both her business and her English courses and recognized that while the details were different in the two disciplines, the basic emphasis on evidence was common across them:

The biggest similarity, I would say, is that everything has to be backed up by facts or data. If it’s English it has to be backed up by the book, right, or some other critic, and then if it’s management, it has to be backed up by an article. And you can’t just throw facts in that are totally irrelevant either.

For her lesson plans, of course, the main source of evidence was the Bible. Nonetheless, she appeared to bring to her lessons for her six- to nine-year-old audience a form of the same evidential rigor that she brought to her projects in business and English, and she even noted that her way of interpreting the Bible had many resonances with the hermeneutical methods with which she was familiar from English studies.

Like many of the students I interviewed, Amy was resourceful when she had to learn how to handle a new genre. A friend asked her for a reference letter, which was not something she had written before:

I looked up sample reference letters on Google. . . . And so I took the information she gave me and sort of what you should put into a reference letter, from Google, and then I took one of the formats of my cover letters and just sort of sectioned it in.

This response to an unfamiliar genre—find models and tip sheets (almost always supported by Google) and then adapt them as necessary for new purposes—turned out to be a common theme in these interviews and a major survival skill in both school and work.

**Celia: Professional Summarizer**

Celia was pursuing a double major in economics and political science; because Communications Studies 363 was not required by either of her majors, she had not taken it. The amount of writing required by her courses varied a great deal, but at least one business course (taken as an elective) required a thirty-page collaboratively written business analysis. She also kept a diary and regularly wrote to friends on MSN and Facebook.

Celia worked as a research assistant to an experienced professor, searching through major newspapers for references to specific environmental controversies—first the food versus biofuel debate and later a debate over the possible risks of carbon capture and storage—and then summarizing the various
opinions cited. By the second month, having scoured the newspapers and date ranges requested, she created a chart showing the trends in the articles she had summarized. Finally she created very brief overviews of the major threads in the argument—effectively, a summary of her summaries.

In contrast to many of my participants, Celia was not faced with an avalanche of different tasks requiring rapid familiarization with a variety of genres. Rather, she needed to master variants of only one genre, the objective summary. Although media analysis is a major tool of political science, Celia had not encountered this type of work in her political science courses to date. It might not have mattered much if she had, since she was not really engaged in analysis. Rather, she was engaged in capturing data for the professor, who would do the actual analysis. Throughout her work term, the subjects of her summaries varied, but the genre itself did not. She was therefore in a good position to become expert at this task.

This summarizing work appeared to be fairly new to Celia. In contrast to Amy, she did not report writing her own summaries of classroom materials as study aids:

I normally read through the book once, as I was just going along with the course, and then before the test comes up I just read the important parts again because I already went through them briefly, so I kind of already know what’s important, and I just combined them with class notes.

Although she had written some “book reports” in high school, she found the work she was doing as a research assistant to be quite different. In high school, “you have to talk about the whole book, and what happened, and what you think about it.” Similarly, in writing summaries for a university psychology course, “I had to actually talk about what’s been said in the article, and what I think about it, and how I can apply it to our course, or to real life.” In contrast, her summaries as a research assistant had to keep as strictly as possible to an accounting of who said what to whom, with no editorializing and no analysis apart from the final summarizing of trends.

She received some direct instruction after she had handed in a few sample summaries:

At the beginning I wasn’t doing a good enough job identifying all the players, so she was a little confused who—like I have to identify everybody, like which organization are they from, and then their job title, and who are they representing, that kind of thing. So I worked a bit more on that and that’s pretty much it.
As she went on, she “became more fluent with it,” making her summaries more to the point and using more paraphrasing and fewer words lifted directly from the article. Aside from her initial instruction, she felt that she mostly learned how to write good summaries by the seat of her pants:

For the first few I was just experimenting as I thought I would just write out who the speaker was, and then pretty much just look for the word “biofuel” or “food price” or things like that, and then, I don’t know, I just kind of got better as I went on. . . . I don’t exactly know how I got better, but I guess it’s just as you do more of it you just kind of get the grasp of it.

Nor did she report using any models to guide her understanding of what this type of summary should look like. It appears that the features of the genre were sufficiently self-evident that she did not need to call on the various strategies that some of the other participants used. Yet she did display a sort of self-monitoring skill that manifested itself in her own growing understanding of how to streamline the process and how to make better summaries. We can perhaps attribute this self-monitoring skill to a general internalization of academic discourse. However, in this case it is extremely difficult to identify any specific instances of transfer. If she did bring to bear on this task some general rhetorical knowledge learned previously, she was not able to articulate the relationship despite my prompting.

Irene: Toiling in the Excel Sweatshop

Irene had been brought up in China, but had taken all of her high school (three years in the Canadian system) in Canada. However, she was still deeply hesitant in both spoken and written English. Her major was accounting, which she had chosen on the recommendation of her aunt, who was an accountant and enjoyed it. Unfortunately, none of her aunt’s interest in the field had rubbed off on Irene. She found it boring, and now that she was employed in a financial services firm on her co-op term, she found it not only boring but also confusing and exhausting, and she was seriously considering going on after graduation to seek a diploma as a personal care attendant instead.

My use of the word sweatshop in the title of this section refers to the way Irene viewed her routine of plugging numbers into Excel and Accpac as mostly drudgery. However, it should not be taken to suggest that her employers were indifferent to her well-being. They seemed to take a genuine interest in helping her fit in, regularly inviting her to lunch and including her in little office rituals such as birthday celebrations. They also sometimes invited her to work
upstairs with the more managerial members of the organization rather than downstairs with front-line workers. Unfortunately, she never felt comfortable in either location.

I think I feel more a part with the people upstairs. But my desk is actually downstairs, so where I’m sitting is not where my group is. The people upstairs are dealing with the numbers, and I’m helping them with the numbers, but I’m always sitting downstairs. But sometimes the boss will call me to sit upstairs so I’m kind of in-between.

Lave and Wenger cite H. Marshall, who discusses this type of problem in the case of apprentice meat cutters:

The physical layout of a work setting is an important dimension of learning, since apprentices get a great deal from observing others and being observed. Some meat departments were laid out so that apprentices working at the wrapping machine could not watch journeymen cut and saw meat. An apprentice’s feeling about this separation came out when a district manager in a large, local market told him to return poorly arranged trays of meat to the journeymen. “I’m scared to go in the back room. I feel so out of place there. I haven’t gone back there in a long time because I just don’t know what to do when I’m there. All those guys know so much about meat cutting and I don’t know anything.” (Lave and Wenger 78)

Similarly, Irene’s physical placement appeared to hamper her role as legitimate peripheral participant. Having little in common professionally with the people she sat next to, she did not have professional small talk to form a natural bridge to enter conversations. She was also cut off from “observing others and being observed” in the organizational milieu in which her work was most closely situated, and therefore, despite the best intentions of the other managerial staff, she had little opportunity to tap into this important resource for learning. Perhaps not surprisingly, I could find little evidence that Irene’s rhetorical skills developed over the work term, or that they needed to, since she spent most of her time entering rather than analyzing data.

Much of Irene’s more satisfying workplace activity, and her most obvious opportunities for social learning and social interaction, in fact came from far outside her co-op work term. Part way through the term, I learned that Irene was a part-time teacher of computer skills for a noncredit class offered by the Continuing Education division for an audience of Chinese-speaking adults. With the language barrier removed, and in a position in which she was more confident in her own knowledge and ability to contribute, she took pleasure in
her role as teacher; here Irene was able to deploy her rhetorical skills to good effect. She spent many late nights developing course materials in both Cantonese and English, for which her students expressed appreciation. She admitted to never having developed course materials before and to making a number of false starts. However, she was able to use other textbooks as models. “I have no clue at all, so I have to see the other books and how they do it, and like how should I start it.” She credited her education, including her English courses and her communications course, for helping her understand how to write instructions and lab materials for her students, but she had trouble expressing exactly how:

Generally, like in all English classes they teach you—teach me how to write out—like I have to write an outline, and you add some points, and you can like develop, and you can just—maybe if you have nowhere to start it you can just like write what you are thinking, just keep typing, and after that—and you can read it again and like see what you have to change.

Here we can see Irene struggling to express what Beaufort would call the “writing process knowledge” domain. Irene never styled herself as either a confident or a fluent writer in either language, in fact noting several times that the need to keep redeveloping her notes—which she suspected that few students read, despite frequently asking for them—“gives me a headache.” Nonetheless, she did use some consciously learned process strategies such as freewriting when stuck, even when writing in a very different genre than she would have practiced in her English courses, and she shares with many of the participants a sense of how to use models as a gateway to an unfamiliar genre.

**Emma: Finding Work to Do**

After two years running her own construction company after high school, Emma had begun university, had fallen in love with sociology, and was now a third-year sociology major. She described herself as an observer, a person who enjoyed both observing individuals and seeing larger patterns in human behavior—hence the attraction of sociology. She liked to write and kept both a journal and many random notes chronicling her observations of people. However, she noted that she had “struggled astronomically” with writing in high school and was not at all impressed with the instruction she had received:

They focused a lot on nouns and verbs and, you know, individual things like that, but they never taught you that this is, you know, a properly formatted sentence . . . . They gave me all these partialized things, but they never gave me the larger
picture of what I was doing. So if you give me unrelated segments it’s never going
to translate to working knowledge, you’re just going to have fragments, you know.
Fragments are of no use to me. I’m a big picture person.

In particular, she reported being “messed up” by the infamous five-paragraph
theme until a sociology professor showed her how to write more organically.
From then on she found papers, particularly sociology papers, easy sailing, in
part because she found that she could use the same thought process that she
used with her own notes-to-self about her casual observations of people, with
the exception of making her writing more structured and analytical for her
formal papers.

She had not taken Communications Studies 363 but had taken a first-year
course in academic writing, which was suggested to her after—still in her five-
paragraph-theme mode—she failed her writing placement test. She credited
this course, which concentrated primarily
on expressive writing, with helping her
build confidence as a writer; she credited
a course in legal studies with helping her
learn to write in a rational and systematic
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Emma spent her co-op term in a two-person business—herself and her
employer, Suzanne—which used a standard assessment tool to help clients
assess their workforce and recruit appropriate employees. The fact that the
company dealt in personalities and in social scientific measurement immedi-
ately appealed to the sociologist in Emma. In practice, however, she found that
the work dragged. The assessment tool created a computer-generated profile
on its own and generated a report for users that summarized the various traits
it discovered and plotted the traits against various parameters. Emma’s main
duty was to prepare notes for PowerPoint presentations that Suzanne would
use to interpret results for clients. Emma never had the chance to make such
presentations on her own. She also helped Suzanne find potential new clients
and prepare proposals for them, but again Emma did not get to pitch these
clients herself.

The writing tasks that Emma encountered on the job were varied. Much
of her work consisted of emails to clients, which she noted were extremely
short and unstructured compared to the writing she had become used to in
her academic work. She did not write many extended reports but did do the bulk of the work in fleshing out Suzanne’s rough template for a proposal to a client. She also designed a survey to gather information for a research project on prospective clients. For this, she used her knowledge of survey methodology from sociology, although she described her workplace survey as “way more primitive.” But none of the tasks she was asked to perform seemed to be enough to fill up her day, and she was reduced to finding work to do such as organizing Suzanne’s office: “You know, I’ve organized eight years’ worth of pictures.”

She didn’t feel that she got much chance to use either her sociology skills or her more general rhetorical skills at work:

And there hasn’t been much writing. . . . I miss writing, to be honest. I think I find the more that writing lacks in work, the more I write at home because, you know, when I’m writing papers at school I don’t have time to write other things.

And yet, when given the opportunity to muse a bit more on her work experience, she noted that she was beginning to see writing in a “bigger picture” way:

In school they give you all of these bits and pieces that you have to learn about, writing and so on and so forth, and then I find as you get into the work environment that you kind of see the bigger picture, you know what I mean, as what this is all useful for. . . . I have all of these different writing skills all plugged in, and even computer skills, organizational skills, and then you just start to see the practical application to them in the real world.

In her final interview, I asked her what she felt she had learned from the experience, and she kept coming back to writing skills. The torrent of emails to clients had, she felt, sharpened her ability to be concise. She reported that initially her writing tended to be overblown—her first attempt at an executive summary was three pages long. Suzanne modeled how it could be rewritten to half a page, which doubled as a template to guide Emma’s writing of the rest of the report. Overall, Emma credited Suzanne for showing her how to write in a business environment. She also credited the business environment with shaking her out of a tendency, learned in academia, to write and rewrite slowly: she reported that she had been able to produce in one eight-hour stretch a fourteen-page work term report for her co-op supervisor, which she described as “probably the best I’ve ever done.”

As to what she brought in the other direction, from her academic work to the workplace, Emma was initially much more reserved. She credited university life in general with helping her learn personal organization: “Right from first
year I learned that I had to hit the ground running in order to organize all the studying and assignments.” Despite her highly varied academic writing experience, she did not volunteer specific rhetorical strategies transferred or adapted from the academic world to the work world. But she did speak of common sense and offered this definition:

I think it is a combination of all the information that you learn in life, you know what I mean? And some people pick up knowledge quicker than others just like, you know—I do not know how to describe it exactly. It is probably my best explanation. Just a combination of everything I have learned in life.

The Emma that I saw—quick-witted, adaptable, able to access her supervisor’s guidance to master professional genres quickly, able to write a quick-and-dirty workplace survey by adapting her knowledge of survey writing from sociology—seemed to have a deep well of transformable rhetorical knowledge. Even though little in the rhetorical environment of the workplace resembled what she was used to in school, she crossed the boundary easily, based on “a combination of everything I have learned in life.” That she could not consciously pick apart that rhetorical knowledge and trace its origins seems to indicate how deeply internalized most of it was. Her university career, which she described as a collage of genres and thinking styles, punctuated by the occasional blinding revelation (you mean you don’t have to write a sociology paper in five paragraphs?) appears to have been a more significant part of everything she had learned in life than she perhaps realized herself.

Christina: Looking over Shoulders as a Professional Responsibility

Christina was no stranger to the so-called real world, having come to university by a somewhat winding path. She had taken three years off after high school to be a competitive figure skater, then managed a coffee shop for a while, took two years at a junior college, and finally transferred to the university. She was taking a double major in international business and sociology, finding the former more useful and the latter more interesting. In addition to a range of basic business and sociology courses, she had taken a variety of courses outside her majors, including the professional communication course required by the business school. She described herself as having “loved writing since I was a kid,” and sending her stories to be published in small regional magazines while in grade 6. She also described helping her friends and siblings edit their schoolwork and taking on responsibility for final editing of group projects.
During her work term, Christina joined a major national telecommunications company. She worked in risk management compliance, her initial role to audit control processes to ensure that the proper processes were being followed—in effect, occupying the position, unusual for a co-op student, of being a watchdog and enforcer of procedures. She would print out screenshots and documents reflecting a particular control process and physically write on the documents, adding either ticks where a process was being followed correctly or brief handwritten notes to explain where it wasn’t. She then synthesized these ticks and notes into a two-page summary appended to the beginning of the collection of printouts. Later she went on to process mapping, which involved looking at graphic illustrations of various processes in the organization, from answering a phone call to making ledger entries, her role to make sure that the map made sense and was easy to use as a template for completing the process, and to see that the textual explanations were both intelligible and grammatically correct.

Later in her work term, she was given new responsibilities for editing and redesigning process maps and the language that went with them:

I’m not doing the easy ones anymore, I’m taking the ones that make no sense, re-writing them completely so that they’re just in a better, more organized way. And I’ve also been writing up changes, which is something new that we’ve been doing.

This is a startling amount of responsibility and independence to be vested in a co-op student on her first work term and suggests that her supervisors recognized her as having not only maturity and intelligence but also extremely solid rhetorical skills.

She received what she described as a “five-minute orientation” to the process of writing a control audit. She had a document from the previous year to work from as well; however, as she tried to use it, she found that it was not a good model:

Even though it was signed off on, and everybody said it was okay, things were missing. . . . I went to my supervisor actually, and said to them, like this doesn’t make sense, where do we find this? And we went to the person who would have been able to help us, and they said you can’t do this. So the person who had done the work last year had done it wrong, and basically lied, saying they had done it correctly.

Consequently, her first report was not entirely correct because she had based it on a botched model. However, her basic rhetorical knowledge was sufficiently
sound that she knew not to accept the model blindly and to check with others as soon as she started to suspect that it was defective.

As with some of the other participants, this critical use of models was not a new experience. When I asked Christina how she had known how to write a major research paper for a business course, she speculated:

Properly what we were drawing on is looking at other research papers that we’ve seen through doing research, especially if you look at an academic paper that’s in a PDF file on the internet, what does it look like. . . . And one of them, there was previous projects that we were given to see so you’re always going to kind of try to model it after those, assuming that they were correct.

Her cautionary proviso, “assuming that they were correct,” suggests that even when she received a model from her professor, she did not automatically assume that it was perfect.

She singled out her communication course as having contributed valuable knowledge of how to write in a highly precise and condensed way—a particularly important skill when one is writing a two-page summary of even more concise handwritten notes. Other courses, she said, did not pay as much attention to writing as such and did not provide the steady stream of feedback that she and her group in the communications course could use to make their writing ever more clear, correct, and concise. The course also made explicit the basic structure of a report, which Christina found useful not just in writing her own reports but also in reading other people’s reports, which comprised a great deal of her job.

She characterized her job of making sense of other people’s documents as a task of interpretation:

Other people prepare the work, so you have to take what they’ve written and see exactly what it is you’re looking at from what they’ve said, and sometimes if it doesn’t make sense you’ll have to ask them for an explanation, and they’ll give you one, and you have to interpret that as well.

She said that she felt comfortable with this interpretive task in part because she had learned to write in a wide variety of ways across multiple disciplines. In addition, she drew parallels with the process of research in various contexts:

I think when you’re writing a business paper you have to use other people’s ideas in such a way that it’s true to what they were saying; you can’t warp people’s ideas. And it’s the same thing in sociology. If you’re using a theorist’s ideas you have to
stay true to what they’re saying. You can’t say they said something, and then write it in a completely different way so it doesn’t make sense.

Even though she described everything about her job as 100 percent new to her, she did not seem to have had trouble picking up what she had to do or how to perform the new genres she encountered, using mainly a tool that she described repeatedly as common sense:

But then a lot of it, too, is common sense. I’ve been given instructions from the people at [my company], and I’ll just do it, but I won’t always think about it. And then later on I’ll go through it, I’ll be like, what was I doing? This doesn’t make sense, and so I use my own judgment to figure it out.

This theme of “common sense” echoes throughout all of Christina’s interviews. While she was clearly using some very sophisticated rhetorical knowledge, she could not always articulate what it was or where it came from, and she expressed her felt sense of how a text should work or what it seemed to mean under the all-purpose rubric of “common sense.”

**Leslie: Learning the Rhetoric of Marketing**

Leslie had gone directly to the university from high school and was now in the third year of a marketing major, a path she had chosen because she liked being creative. She was working for a very small (six or seven employees) skin-care company, a new Canadian expansion arm of a much larger US company. Her “multitasking” position, as she described it, involved everything from reception and proofreading to preparing a proposal for a flyer campaign. She also ended up doing event co-ordination for a major product show, redesigning the company’s web page so that it would be more suitable for the Canadian market, and beginning to write a strategic marketing plan.

Like many of the participants in this study, she stated that she was a confident writer and had loved writing since childhood. She had excelled in English at high school. In university, she encountered writing tasks in a number of classes. Her marketing class required her to produce a major (thirty-page) paper backed by detailed research into a company for which her group was to
simulate a promotional campaign. Even very early in her work term, she was able to identify skills learned from that assignment on which she drew:

  Being detailed, and thorough, and professional, I think was something I really learned from that class just because it was the first time that I'd been doing something that was in my major and, okay, this is like kind of what I'm going to be maybe doing out there someday.

  Within her first week on the job, Leslie had written an advertising proposal and a flyer campaign proposal. Despite never having written a proposal of this type before, Leslie was able to gather a few pointers from the previous co-op student, pull an example from the files, and adapt it to her needs. She then adapted the format from her advertising proposal to the flyer proposal, and then to her next project, a proposal for an event booth. In effect, she was inventing the genre of the in-house proposal to meet her own immediate needs.

  A month into her work term, Leslie began working on a strategic marketing plan for a new branch of the company. She found this more challenging, as she had never seen a complete marketing plan:

  I don't think I've ever even seen a company marketing plan other than excerpts from text books. Even the ones in the library are market plan summaries. And laying it out in a good order that flows, that's correct, that's similar to other companies in the way that you arrange your information, that took a lot of research, just finding a template of what should be included in a marketing plan.

  Undaunted, Leslie turned to the student’s best friend, Google, and was able to locate both a variety of full-length marketing plans for other companies and tip sheets on how to write a strategic marketing plan.

  In addition, Leslie found herself writing mouseover text for the company’s website:

  We’re revamping our website, so all the categories needed descriptions for when you hover over the pictures. It was hard for me because I was still pretty unfamiliar with the products, so when it came time to writing them it was a lot of relying on looking at the manual, the catalog, the website and trying to put all those pieces together to make a really concise paragraph or blurb that’s going to tell the consumer that’s what that does or that’s why this is so great and be concise and short and to the point.

  Although she could rely on the website of the US parent company for some material, Leslie changed the rhetorical spin of the descriptions:
We’re revamping our website so it’s more appealing. We are doing a lot of videos, a lot of development, social media, just so that we can get ourselves out there and brand ourselves separately from the Americans. . . . Just rewording them so that it was a little bit more what we wanted to portray, which is a little bit more light and fun instead of very statement, statement, statement. More excitement about our products and enthusiasm.

Although Leslie could not point to any specific educational experiences that had given her this level of rhetorical sensitivity, she was no stranger to using strategies for learning new genres. Simultaneously with her work term, she was taking an elective class in community rehabilitation. Despite never having written or even seen a community rehabilitation case report before, Leslie was able to consult classmates and group members and to use as a template the paper of a roommate who had taken the course before. She knew not to use a template uncritically:

If it was done right previously then you should see what was done right, and maybe if it wasn’t done all the way correctly, say like my friend had only gotten a “B,” then maybe looking at why didn’t she get an “A,” so that we make sure that we don’t make those mistakes on our assignments either.

As the work term progressed, the major marketing plan for which Leslie had done so much preliminary research stayed half done, swept off the front burner by the rush of events. Leslie did not seem to mind that her work would likely be carried on by the next co-op student, if at all:

Even with the marketing plans, I went off what was left over from the previous co-op who was there doing the summer. And then what I’ve completed will go on to the next co-op and just keep adding. Projects keep coming up, going away, but they’re never truly gone. You just go “oh yeah, I remember Leslie did that, so you know, look that up.”

Although this form of serial collaboration is in many ways different from the typical school project that must be handed in, in polished form, at the end of term, Leslie did not find the overall multitasking experience, or the need to find information in the most efficient way possible, particularly unfamiliar:

I think it’s something I learned from doing research papers for school. But, obviously it’s something that has really been strengthened during this job and just digging around until you find what you are looking for and making it happen, finding it somewhere, someplace, anything you can gather pretty much and just doing it.
Managing five courses and several extracurricular activities had also prepared Leslie for the work environment in which she had to keep multiple balls in the air at once, putting aside one task for a time to turn her attention to another more pressing task. “I see that the effort I’ve put into managing and learning how to organize for school has really helped me to not feel overwhelmed or stressed by all the different projects that I’m working on at one time at this job.”

During her final interview I asked Leslie to summarize what she had learned in her four months. She reported that she had learned a huge amount about the workings of an organization, but she did not feel that she had learned anything precisely “new” about writing. She found the writing in the professional world to be “more narrative” as opposed to “trying to present your ideas” and more precise and accurate because the rhetorical stakes were higher: “So dealing with a client and you’re trying to get them to sign on as an account, one wrong word or a misinterpreted phrase and they could just be done with your company.” Overall, however, she saw a general correlation between the workplace and her education:

I don’t know if I learned anything that I hadn’t known, but I think just I was able to apply more of what I’ve known. In classes, I thought “When am I ever going to use that, this is dumb,” and [now I think] “okay, now I have to use it here.” Even if it’s the most basic form of something you learned in a class, you’re still applying it. And it was interesting to see just how your brain can just think, oh, we already learned that somewhere, and apply it to a task given to me at the office.

In contrast to some participants who had difficulty retrieving the sources of their rhetorical knowledge, Leslie had a strong sense of remaking and reapplying knowledge that she had brought with her from elsewhere.

Common Threads
In looking over the transcripts generated by these six participants, I am struck by the wide variety of rhetorical tasks they encountered. Some, like Celia, could keep plugging at variants of the same task for the full four months of the work term. However, Leslie’s experience seemed more typical, with new tasks rearing their heads almost daily, new genres presenting themselves as needing to be mastered almost instantly or reinvented to suit new occasions, and ongoing projects needing to be put on a back burner or held over for the next co-op student to make room for new ones. The students also expressed a wide variety of degrees of comfort with new tasks: Irene struggling painfully to figure out how to structure lab handouts and Christina sliding smoothly into
the language of control audits and process maps with little instruction and
only a few (sometimes broken) models to guide her.

As I expected, not all the students were able to make explicit connections
between school and workplace writing all the time, and sometimes when they
did, the connections seemed a bit forced—I suspected that sometimes they
were trying too hard to find them in response to my probing. Nonetheless, a
number of patterns emerged.

The most common takeaway reported from formal instruction in profes-
sional writing was clarity and concision. In the professional writing course that
four out of six students had taken, this aspect of writing is covered explicitly
during only one week of the thirteen weeks of
instruction. However, in all assignments, mark-
ers are relentless in their pursuit of these virtues.
Word limits are strictly enforced, and students
are expected to be able to relay a great deal of in-
formation within those limits. A number of students remarked that they were
surprised by, but ultimately came to appreciate, the volume of feedback that
they received in that course, which they reported as being seldom matched in
any other of their courses. Several students remarked that this sense of rigor at
the word and sentence level was reinforced by the exigencies of the workplace
to produce what they saw as a tighter, more professional style.

A more subtle takeaway from that course seemed to be a general sense
of professional format that influenced students’ ability to read as much as it
influenced their ability to write, particularly when deciphering other people’s
reports (Christina) or scanning quickly to pick out ideas when summarizing
(Amy). They did not report applying knowledge of any particular formats;
rather, they referred to a general felt sense of how writers arrange information
in hierarchies and how they use typographical conventions to signal those
hierarchies. This form of genre knowledge is highly generalized—one might
even say diffuse—but it appeared to be useful in helping students understand
and adapt to new formats when they met them in the workplace.

Beyond that specific course, and similar courses that focused explicitly
on writing, most students seemed to bring to their workplace environment a
flexible rhetorical knowledge that can be traced to much more general features
of the academic environment than to any particular course in which they
were “taught” it. In many cases, this knowledge took the form, not of specific
precepts for managing a particular task, but of highly general strategies for
managing new task environments. For instance, almost all students referred to using models to determine what might be said and how information might be laid out, and even appropriate phraseology to use, in both their academic writing and in the workplace.

Lee Clark Johns cautions that when new employees go to the filing cabinet for models, they often find outdated, ineffective forms that are then replicated by the new employees and perpetuated through time. However, I found little evidence of this problem in my sample. Despite the students’ novice status, they seemed able to adapt models freely to fit new circumstances and to learn fairly quickly when a model was inadequate or just plain wrong. In a few cases they drew on models that had been presented to them, but in most cases students had to ferret out their own models, either finding them on the Web (in professional contexts) or borrowing them from students who had completed courses previously (in academic contexts). In short, they demonstrated good rhetorical survival instincts that had been developed in order to survive varied academic writing tasks, but that appeared to carry over as a means of dealing with new workplace genres.

Almost all the students described themselves as doing research of some kind, both at school and in the workplace, and as drawing on some general strategies from the former in order to cope with the latter. However, none of the research that students described in either context mapped very well onto the academic ideal of research. Most writers on the subject of student-driven academic research espouse (ideally) a methodical process of using library and Internet resources to explore a topic, using sophisticated search tools to fan out from sources initially discovered and assessing the contributions of each item to the topic before narrowing to a conclusion (Fister; Schwegler and Shamoon; Nelson and Hayes). The professional research that the students described had none of these characteristics. Like most processes in the professional world, the agenda was to use the most readily available tools to find the information needed to get a particular job done and get out—as Leslie put it, “finding it somewhere, someplace, anything you can gather pretty much and just doing it.” In fact, the professional research process as described by the students sounds suspiciously like the process of desperate last-minute searching that is often cited as the one really used by many students, as opposed to the more meticu-
lous process that mirrors what scholars do and teachers espouse. Perhaps the survival-mode process of “desperately seeking citations,” to borrow Gloria J. Leckie’s apt phrase, which is often counterproductive in the epistemic environment of the academic world, ironically serves as a good basis for practice in the instrumental environment of the professional world.

Another common theme is awareness of audience: almost all of the participants repeatedly alluded to audience awareness when prompted to think about skills that they valued in the workplace. Amy spent much of her time adapting lesson materials for different audiences. Leslie adapted marketing materials for the Canadian market at the same time as she worked out the genre of a marketing plan for her superiors. No student could point to a particular academic experience that had taught her this skill, but almost all of them described their academic experience as involving a multitude of different discourse forms suited to different academic tasks and different disciplines. Christina in particular described moving easily from the precise legal language expected in her legal studies course to the more abstract and personal style of philosophy and the clinical and analytical style of sociology. The need to figure out “what the professor wants” about which some students (though none of my participants) sometimes complain seems to furnish a subtle but pervasive training ground for adapting discourse to audience in novel rhetorical contexts.

Critical reading, or “critical writing” as Amy somewhat oddly called it, floats through many of the interviews. Celia’s summarizing task called on reading skills in the most straightforward way, but Amy also referred to using reading skills honed in English critical studies in order to produce her “book reports,” and Christina referred to her task of making sense of other people’s (sometimes poorly structured) documents as a task of interpretation related to using sources accurately in a research paper.

Most generally, some also mentioned a general ability to juggle various tasks in a complex multitasking environment. Leslie leapt from task to task in the ever-evolving environment of a new company; Amy, indefatigable church gopher, moved from lesson plans to book reports to painting scenery for the church play; Christina toggled between control audits and process maps. All had difficulty explaining in detail on what prior experiences they might be drawing. But again, their descriptions of their complex work lives sounded eerily like
their descriptions of their complex academic lives as they bounced between the competing demands of various courses, often across two very different majors.

As noted earlier, students frequently subsumed most of the skills and knowledge they used on the job under the rubric of "common sense." As Celia put it, "I don't exactly know how I got better, but I guess it's just as you do more of it you just kind of get the grasp of it." This, too, is no surprise. As Michael Polanyi has pointed out, the better one is at using a familiar set of processes, the more they cease to be focal knowledge and become tacit.

This theme of "common sense" suggests how internalized these students' rhetorical knowledge had already become. They clearly possessed a good deal of "rhetorical maturity," to use Smit's phrase, along with the syntactic fluency to staple workable prose together quickly according to highly variable demands. Without always knowing how they did so, students were able to make complex rhetorical judgments about audience and genre, in some cases constructing for themselves ad hoc rhetorical genres such as the proposal, themouseover text block, or the lesson plan, using models as starting points and then modifying by trial and error.

The writing tips that students could remember from their communication course seemed to be helpful to them, even if only to help them be concise. However, this general rhetorical knowledge that they subsumed under the rubric of "common sense" seemed to be what made them quick studies in new rhetorical contexts. This "common sense" knowledge seems closely related to what Beaufort describes as the mental schema that writers can use for "analyzing new writing tasks in new discourse communities (College Writing 154)." Put more simply, it appears that the academic discourse environment as a whole, not just isolated courses on writing, had helped them learn how to learn.

Conclusions and Implications

In general, this study confirms Smart and Brown's observation that students who have a good sense of rhetorical knowledge are well positioned to adapt well to new rhetorical environments. My participants could articulate only sporadic instances of what might be called classical transfer: specific skills, such as concise writing, learned in courses designed to teach that skill and able to cross relatively easily over the boundary between the academy and the workplace. However, my multiple interviews with the students built a picture
of writers drawing on a large repertoire of mental schema and applying them in a variety of situations. In Smart and Brown’s terms, they were readily able to transform knowledge if not to transfer it.

This study also gives us a clearer picture of how this rhetorical knowledge plays out on a daily basis in the workplace, helping students transform their academic skills into practices that will help them meet the different demands of the workplace. It suggests, in fact, that the glass is considerably more than half full. Despite the fact that activity theory makes clear the differences between the academy and the workplace, most particularly in the motives for various operations—epistemic as opposed to instrumental motives, as Dias et al. put it—students seemed much better prepared to meet the challenges of the workplace than they might have been without the rhetorical knowledge they developed in the academic world. To adopt Bereiter’s terminology, the students seemed to be transferring not so much specific knowledge and skills as a general disposition to make rhetorical judgments.

In another respect, the study is somewhat sobering. Most of the students had received explicit rhetorical instruction in, at best, one single-term introductory course. Although they tended to come back to this course more often than any other, it is unthinkable that the degree of diffuse but apparently deep rhetorical knowledge that these students displayed could have been conferred on them by this one course. Perhaps that course focused their knowledge more than it otherwise would have been and gave them a more conscious understanding of what they might have learned elsewhere more tacitly. But it seems that students were drawing on a repertoire of rhetorical activities in a variety of courses both within and external to their majors and also on the general experience of attending the university and having to figure out how to serve multiple rhetorical masters in reasonable ways. Clearly, we as writing teachers are not the sole and perhaps not even the main source of students’ rhetorical education.

What does this tell us about what we should do as teachers of writing? It does not give us a detailed prescription for reforming the curriculum of professional writing courses. The fact that, for instance, students kept citing concision as an important takeaway does not necessarily indicate that we should cover this element more fully in future. On the other hand, a suspicion that students...
might have learned much of their rhetorical knowledge anyway should not be taken to indicate that there is no point to teaching some of this knowledge explicitly in a writing course or a succession of such courses. Rather, it suggests that if explicit teaching of rhetorical principles does anything for students, it does so because it works in concert with a complex rhetorical environment in which they must rapidly adapt to competing rhetorical exigencies. The academic experience as a whole enculturates students, in Tishman, Jay, and Perkins’ terms, into rhetorical thinking at the same time as specific rhetorical instruction gives them a more principled and more conscious awareness of the rhetorical moves they make.

Since Aviva Freedman’s seminal 1993 article questioning explicit rhetorical instruction, the jury has been deadlocked over how necessary or useful it is to help students be conscious of their rhetorical strategies. Transfer literature from Judd on, however, suggests very strongly that a conscious understanding of general principles is an asset to transfer (or transformation) of learning, as is what Perkins and Salomon call “mindful metacognitive activity”—that is, thinking consciously about certain aspects of one’s own thinking. King Beach puts this another way, suggesting that we should be aiming for what he calls “consequential transition”: “A transition is consequential when it is consciously reflected on, struggled with, and shifts the individual’s sense of self or social position” (42).

This study began with the question of what, if anything, we can legitimately expect a rhetorical education to do for students when they cross the boundary from our classroom into the classrooms of other disciplines or the much larger boundary between school and workplace. While the case studies I have presented don’t settle any details of exactly what a rhetorical education might look like, the study does suggest that an understanding of how to extract genre features from models, how to analyze an audience, and how to use genre knowledge to interpret information will help students develop rhetorical knowledge that they can transform when thrown in the deep end of new rhetorical environments. In addition, if we can help them become more conscious about what to observe and what questions to ask in new rhetorical environments, we will have gone a long way toward helping them transform, if not simply transfer, this knowledge.
Works Cited


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