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Co-Constructing Writing Knowledge: Students' Collaborative Talk Across Contexts

Misty Anne Winzenried
University of Washington

Lillian Campbell
Marquette University, lillian.campbell@marquette.edu

Roger Chao
University of Washington

Alison Cardinal
University of Washington

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Abstract: Although compositionists recognize that student talk plays an important role in learning to write, there is limited understanding of how students use conversational moves to collaboratively build knowledge about writing across contexts. This article reports on a study of focus group conversations involving first-year students in a cohort program. Our analysis identified two patterns of group conversation among students: "co-telling" and "co-constructing," with the latter leading to more complex writing knowledge. We also used Beaufort's domains of writing knowledge to examine how co-constructing conversations supported students in abstracting knowledge beyond a single classroom context and in negotiating local constraints. Our findings suggest that co-constructing is a valuable process that invites students to do the necessary work of remaking their knowledge for local use. Ultimately, our analysis of the role of student conversation in the construction of writing knowledge contributes to our understanding of the myriad activities that surround transfer of learning.

Introduction

In writing classrooms and diverse contexts across campus, students are talking about their writing all of the time. For example, during an interview with two first-year students both enrolled in the same writing course and theater course, the students described informal conversations about upcoming writing assignments as a common occurrence:

Mike: ...if there's an assignment, we'll be like "Dude, what were we supposed to do for that?"

Interviewer: So you do talk about how to do assignments?

Sarah: Yeah.

Mike: Yeah, not like specific things, more like "How do we do that?" like "I don't know" then... [laughs]

Sarah: We figure it out together [Mike: Yeah], I guess.

As we see from Mike and Sarah's discussion above, even these casual conversations provide opportunities for understanding how students collaboratively build their knowledge about writing.

In the field of writing studies, we value conversation both theoretically and practically, and this valuing is reflected through our emphasis on peer review (Gere; Spigelman), small group talk (Bruffee, *Conversation*), collaborative writing (Ede and Lunsford), and writing center pedagogies (Harris). In composition scholarship, however, there is a need to better understand

exactly how conversations help students develop writing knowledge and processes. What makes some conversations more productive than other conversations? What kinds of student interaction support students' development of writing knowledge? And what role does conversation play in helping students integrate their knowledge from various contexts and translate it to new writing situations?

Our study sought to investigate students' talk about writing across contexts by studying the collaborative interactions of four groups of first-year students enrolled in cohorts linked to writing courses. Our research design reflects the theoretical position that conversations are not merely evidence of individual students' thinking but themselves also shape, promote, and support students' shared construction of writing knowledge (Boone et. al.; Greeno; Jarratt et al.). Our analysis indicated that two different patterns of group conversation emerged among students: "co-telling" and "co-constructing," with the latter tending toward more nuanced or complex understandings of writing. Furthermore, we used Anne Beaufort's domains of writing knowledge—process, content, genre, rhetorical, and discourse community knowledge (*College*)—as a heuristic to examine student talk. We found that most co-constructing conversations supported students both in abstracting their writing knowledge beyond a single classroom context and in negotiating local constraints, with a few interesting exceptions.

Moreover, studying conversational exchanges between students concurrently enrolled in the same courses allowed us the opportunity to examine students' shared meaning making among their various disciplinary classroom experiences. Because our study shifted the focus from individual students within a single class to students' collective experience across classes, it shares its line of inquiry with transfer of learning scholarship. Framed this way, our findings have potential implications for the field's understanding of the phenomenon of transfer of learning. Ultimately, we argue that considering student conversation's role in the construction of writing knowledge is part of providing a rich picture of the myriad activities that surround transfer of learning.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Conversation and Transfer of Learning

Our study rests on the premise that both writing and the development of writing knowledge are grounded in and emerge from social contexts and interactions (Bazerman; Bizzell; Ede; Miller). Knowledge of, for example, genre conventions or reading audiences exists within the context of participation in social practice and community (Freedman and Adam; Wardle, *Identity*). This knowledge construction occurs at every level, from novice writers in First-Year Composition (FYC) to expert writers in the workplace. For example, Graham Smart found that expert writers learning a new genre in banking drew on knowledge that was both learned and held socially as they engaged in the editorial review process. Research in collaboration has further theorized how social interactions produce emergent writing knowledge within social contexts. Muriel Harris argues that "collaboration" is often used as a catch-all term, regardless of context, and that the types of collaborative activities that contribute to knowledge construction would benefit from further refinement. She claims scholars need to disentangle collaborative writing from

"collaborative learning about writing" (Harris 396). Our study seeks to enhance our understanding of the social development of writing knowledge.

One way that we have access to the social aspects of writing is through conversation, which plays a role in promoting learning, writing, and reflection (Greeno; Bruffee, "Conversation"). James Greeno argues that the shift from viewing learning as an individual or cognitive process to examining processes at the level of the group or system emphasizes the ways in which "conversation is *joint action* that constructs shared information," and in which "conversation mutually constructs meaning" (86). Compositionists echo this claim. Anne Ruggles Gere, in her examination of talk in writing groups, calls conversation "the instrument by which meanings are negotiated and created" (116). Similarly, Candice Spigelman points to the importance of collaborative talk about writing for the collective development of writing knowledge: "The knowledge that emerges through the synergy of talk in groups may bring with it new insights, and these insights may be quite different and, at times, more productive than the ideas of individual speakers and writers" (19). What exactly this "synergy" looks like in practice and what types of insights emerge from synergistic talk are in need of further study.

Studying the phenomenon of construction of writing knowledge through talk, however, is complicated by the myriad contexts students move in and among and the different disciplinary communities of practice they navigate. Students in their early undergraduate years are frequently moving from course to course and discipline to discipline, negotiating their knowledge about writing across contexts. While longitudinal studies have brought insights into how students build writing knowledge during these transitions, these studies often focus only on individuals' experiences of learning to write and not on how students' conversations impact their development of writing knowledge (Beaufort, *College*; McCarthy; Sternglass). While the scholarship on peer review does examine student exchanges (Artemeva and Logie; Zhu), this scholarship does not investigate how knowledge is jointly constructed by participants across contexts.

In literature that does address how students develop knowledge across contexts, student conversation is often not the focus of the research design. When it is, student quotes tend to be excerpted rather than studied as exchanges (Bergmann and Zepernick; Sternglass; Wardle, *Understanding*), likely due to publishing constraints. Even in Susan Jarratt et al.'s article, which compellingly contends that student memory about writing experiences is co-constructed in the space of the interview, readers see students' excerpted quotes at the beginning and end of the interview. These excerpts are used as evidence for how student thinking has been constructed over time—but it is difficult to get a sense of how meaning emerged *between* interviewer and participant (62). However, looking at length at student-to-student conversation allows us to see the ways in which students build from one another, respond to one another's ideas, and construct meaning together. Our study's focus on the meaning making that occurs among students in conversation joins emerging work by Bradley Hughes, Rebecca Nowacek, and R. Mark Hall, which examines transfer of learning in writing center exchanges.

Since we know that conversation supports knowledge construction, scholarship on transfer helps us to recognize what kinds of knowledge have an important role in promoting transfer of learning across contexts. First, metacognitive thinking has been identified as facilitating transfer

of learning (Perkins and Salomon; Reiff and Bawarshi). Similarly, Crystal VanKooten points to the importance of meta-awareness, which she defines as not only knowledge about one's compositional choices but, more importantly, the ability to articulate "how and why those choices are or might be effective or ineffective within a rhetorical context" (2). VanKooten argues that metacognitive moves are made visible in student's "verbal articulations and embodied movements" (4) as they discuss their writing experiences, and as such, can be seen through conversation. For VanKooten, articulation is not just a way to make meta-awareness visible—it is a fundamental component of the awareness.

Second, the initial scholarship on transfer emphasized the importance of cognitive schemas—frameworks, or skeletons of knowledge that students use to help them understand new situations and problems (see Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström for a review of transfer of learning theory). Recent scholarship in composition has built upon this interdisciplinary work to theorize what these knowledge domains look like in writing. Beaufort argues that experts' writing schemas can be organized as overlapping knowledge domains of writing process, content, genre, and rhetorical knowledge, which together constitute discourse community knowledge (*College* 19). Beaufort's domains have frequently been used in transfer research as a framework for conceptualizing relationships between texts, textual production, and context (Brent; Fishman and Reiff; Jarratt et. al). Beaufort, along with Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, suggests that to teach for transfer, teachers can introduce key concepts from composition studies that help students construct frameworks for writing. However, the field would benefit from giving more attention to how students construct those domains of knowledge, particularly in interaction with each other and across contexts.

Theoretically, our study is grounded in what Greeno described as a "situative perspective" such that "the actions of individual students contribute to the class's progress in achieving shared understanding, rather than simply being displays of the understandings they have already constructed cognitively in their prior interactions with textbooks, teachers, and computers" (84). This situated perspective, rather than asking what reflective moves help students individually construct the schemas that enable them to abstract knowledge, would ask what *conversational* moves support the collaborative construction of these knowledge domains. We believe that there is value in observing how students construct these domains for themselves through conversational exchange. By asking students to discuss their learning and the connections they saw across courses and writing tasks, our study was designed to elicit this collaborative talk and study the conversational moves by which it occurred. Considering conversation's role in students' construction of writing knowledge, particularly across contexts, provides insight into the field's understanding of transfer of learning.

Study Design and Methods

Our study investigated how groups of students taking cohort courses together (a General Studies course, a writing course, and, in all but one case, one other course) talked about their courses and their writing experiences. Using data from focus group interactions, this article seeks to address two research questions:

1. How do different types of conversational exchanges support students' construction of writing knowledge across contexts?
2. What, if any, kinds of writing knowledge do students construct through interactive conversation? Further, how does that knowledge relate to the kinds of knowledge we know support transfer of learning?

We designed a qualitative study of students enrolled in first-year cohort courses to examine students' collaborative talk about their classes and the opportunities those conversations afforded students' shared learning. Because it is new methodological territory to study the development of writing knowledge through the examination of conversations, we intentionally limited our data analysis for this article to students' interactions in focus groups, though we also collected additional interview and student writing data as part of the larger study.

The study was conducted at a large research university in the western U.S., and the cohort program enrolled groups of 20-25 students in two to three classes together during their first quarter at the university. About 50 percent of first-year students at the university opted into the cohort program as part of their first-quarter registration. In addition to their shared general education courses, students were also enrolled in a 2-credit General Studies course offered specifically to students in the cohort program. The credit/no credit General Studies course was designed to support students' transition to the university, their development of community, and their navigation of university resources. The General Studies course was facilitated by a peer undergraduate leader who had received training to lead on- and off-campus activities and support in-class and online discussions about critical thinking, academics, and vocational pathways. For our study, we selected cohorts that included a shared composition course and, in most cases, a shared third course. During and following the 10-week quarter, we met with four different groups of two to six students each and conducted three focus groups per cohort: at the beginning of fall quarter, the middle of fall quarter, and the beginning of the subsequent winter quarter. See Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Focus Groups and Participants.

Focus Group	Courses	Participants
Economics Cohort One	General Studies	Laura
		Daisy
	Composition	Brian
	Economics	Theo
Economics Cohort Two	General Studies	Darren
	Composition	Fatima
	Economics	Barbara

Cohort	Courses	Students
		Miguel
		Tony
		Michael
	General Studies	Kevin
Multidisciplinary Cohort	Composition	Anne
	[Individually selected third course]	Kara
		Sally
Theater Cohort*	General Studies	
	Composition	Mike
(Only one focus group meeting with these students)		Sarah
	Theater	

The focus groups were designed to not only study students' development of writing knowledge as it emerged in student conversations but also to facilitate three activities that engaged students in talking together about relationships between prior learning, concurrent learning, and future learning (Perkins and Solomon 26). Although these conversations took place outside of structured classrooms, they were facilitated by an interviewer. We explained to students that we were interested in "listening in" on their conversations and encouraged them to talk to one another. This enabled us to examine sustained student exchanges across multiple conversational turns to see how students built on one another's ideas.

We designed each focus group to end with a collaborative transfer activity. At the first focus group, we asked students to engage in a "backward reaching" transfer activity by inviting them to brainstorm and discuss relationships among their prior or antecedent genres (Reiff and Bawarshi). At the second focus group, we asked students to discuss the relationships between their learning in the three courses they were currently taking and engage in a "forward reaching" transfer activity by thinking about courses they would be taking next quarter. Finally, our third focus group, which took place at the beginning of winter quarter, provided a structured opportunity for "bridging"; here, we asked students to make connections between the writing skills they gained in their fall quarter composition course and the writing demands of their winter quarter courses.

We recognize that the excerpts we examine in this article reflect the participation of the interviewer alongside the students as meaning was constructed through conversation. Though we encouraged students to talk to one another, the interviewer played an active role in the conversations, both through the questions asked and through the collaborative transfer activities. (A complete interview protocol can be found in the Appendix.) In doing so, we created a unique learning situation that capitalized on the shared experience of the cohort but also went beyond it. We acknowledge that the focus group model, much like any research that asks students to think and talk about their writing practices, both draws students who might be particularly inclined

toward metacognitive thinking, and also might promote a particular kind of reflective thinking that is not necessarily naturalistic in nature (Frazier).

To code interview transcripts, we used two analytic strategies. First, because we were most interested in examining the process of student interaction, we identified patterns of conversation and participation structures that allowed us to track students' shared understanding and construction of knowledge. We parsed the data into two types of interactions: students responding directly to the interviewer questions and students interacting with one another. Because we were interested specifically in conversational exchanges between students, our data set for this study includes only the focus group transcript segments for conversations involving multiple students responding to one another and the interviewer, interactively discussing their experiences and knowledge. As we examined these exchanges, we used discourse analysis to code conversational turns that included moments of disagreement and building on or nuancing one another's ideas. We also identified points of realization or insight ("aha moments") and exchanges where the group arrived at a different or new understanding of the topic. Looking at the intersection of conversational moments and group realizations allowed us to identify two distinct patterns of conversational exchange, as discussed in our findings.

In our second round of coding, Beaufort's conceptual model of writing expertise served as a key heuristic for categorizing the various types of knowledge that were constructed in students' interactive conversations about writing in their courses (*College* 19). Beaufort's five domains of situated knowledge—discourse community, subject matter, genre, rhetorical, and writing process—provided an established schema for our coding process, which is frequently cited by writing scholars (Brent; Fishman and Reiff; Jarratt et. al). The schema offers an inclusive approach to coding that acknowledges the complexity of multiple knowledge domains within composition research, "a way of conceptualizing how the different aspects of writing are related and fit together" (*College* 17).

Coding for both patterns of conversation and Beaufort's domains involved an iterative process, and coding continued until the researchers reached consensus regarding the application of codes. Once the transcripts were coded, we used the coded excerpts to look for patterns in how types of interactive conversations intersected with Beaufort's writing knowledge domains. Using these intersections, we analyzed how students actively and collectively constructed an understanding of their writing, as well as how they talked about expected writing practices in their courses.{1}

Findings

Because we were interested specifically in how interactive discourse might enable students to collaboratively build rhetorical knowledge, we focused our analysis on those conversations during which students were interacting with one another. In our first findings section, we analyze two different modes of conversational exchange: "co-telling" and "co-constructing." In our second findings section, we examine the "co-constructing" conversations through the heuristic of Beaufort's five domains, ultimately arguing that these types of exchange tended to support students' collaborative development of domain-specific writing knowledge, with some notable exceptions.

Co-Telling and Co-Constructing

One thread of our analysis focused on how interactive discourse enabled students to collaboratively build rhetorical knowledge. From the data, a pattern emerged that differentiated interactive responses in which students took turns constructing a shared narrative of their experience from ones in which conversations seemed to produce a more nuanced or complex understanding of the topic. Thus, we argue that as students discussed their various writing strategies within different disciplines, they drew on two primary conversational moves: "co-telling" and "co-constructing."

When co-telling, students reflected upon a perceived shared experience, building on one another's details in order to form an agreed-upon viewpoint. Overall, the students' common coursework provided a foundation of shared experience and rapport that facilitated these exchanges. Since they shared experiences across two to three courses, students were often able to talk about their courses "in one voice." For example, in Economics Cohort Two's discussion about taking notes, students came to a consensus that the content of their composition course did not warrant note-taking:

Fatima: ... It's just mostly, like, grammar or claims. It's really simple. As long as you know how to apply it, you don't really need to review anything.

Barbara: And then [for] the little parts necessary for each paper, she gives a handout with everything, like, I'm expecting you to have this, this, this, this, this. [Miguel: Yeah.] So I don't really feel like it's necessary to write everything down cause it's already in the handout.

Darren: And if she doesn't mention it in class, she'll just send out an email to the entire class. [Miguel: Yeah.] So I don't really write anything down...

Here, individuals contributed ideas to the narrative of how learning occurred in composition, but the central claim about their experience went unchallenged throughout the conversation. Darren's conclusion that, "I don't really write anything down" simply reiterates points made by both Fatima and Barbara in previous turns.

Meanwhile, even when students were talking about their unique prior writing experiences, they tended to talk *as if* their experiences were the same even if their understandings might have been different. For example, in an exchange in the Multidisciplinary Cohort, the interviewer prompted the students to explain the difference between an argumentative and research paper after they had identified these as separate genres. Kevin, Anne, and Kara co-told experiences of these genres without questioning whether their background with them may have been different:

Kevin: Well, an expository paper is a paper where you kind of like explain something, so you go about explaining details of the topic you're describing.

Anne: I just remember that--I think this was maybe in elementary school, where we were taught there are two different types of essays [...] There's expository and then there's persuasive, so persuasive is where you want to convince your reader of your ideas, where expository you're like

elaborating or explaining it. So it's different in a way...

Kara: I just remember from my AP class in high school that expository always involved reading something and looking for metaphors or alliterations, stuff like that, and finding those to explain the author's main idea.

In this example of co-telling, students are each contributing their individual understanding to the discussion, but without truly engaging one another's response. Even though they each pick up on the name of the genre and build on each other's definition, the fact that each individual has a distinct understanding of "expository" remains unexamined by the group. Instead, the narrative of expository writing is built under the assumption of sameness, and we can see the silencing capacity of consensus-building conversations at play (Trimbur). In other instances, when students did contribute insights into the ways that their high school writing experiences differed from the group's norm, these experiences were framed as individual idiosyncrasies and not challenges to the group's shared argument about the experience.

Co-constructing conversations, on the other hand, also resulted in shared knowledge or understanding, but the process by which students reached that point was much more complex. In contrast to co-telling, co-constructing conversations demonstrated evidence of students' working together to come to a shared understanding of some phenomenon. Students had to complicate and nuance one another's ideas in order to jointly construct their understanding. That process often involved listening carefully to one another, stating and restating one's idea with nuance, and building on others' ideas in complex ways. In the following example, the Multidisciplinary Cohort discussed how they would use skills from their composition course in future courses. The conversation began with a co-telling exchange about how a composition course taught them to write longer papers. However, they added to this narrative, and it became increasingly nuanced as they began to acknowledge that more than length was changing:

Anne: Well maybe the papers, like the big papers I'm going to have due. I see the stuff we learned in English helping a lot with that.

Sally: Like how to approach a longer paper.

Anne: Yeah.

Kara: Yeah, this is kind of the first time we all had to write something this long [Anne: yeah] and so it definitely helped.

Anne: I mean that—that was like the point of it, was to make it long because we have to write papers that are going to be longer than that, so I guess practice is good.

Sally: But it's more—I feel like it's more practice of your own thoughts. Cause you can write a five to six [page] paper of research cause you're using a lot of people's ideas, and you're just putting them on paper. But when you have to analyze and then speak what—you know—write about five to six pages, it's harder. So I feel like it was just more of teaching us analytical skills or how to observe—like what we observe when writing it down on paper.

Sally's second comment in this discussion articulated a more complex claim about what the group had learned by practicing writing longer drafts. She indicated that the ability to analyze and the awareness of choices—her ability to "observe when writing it down"—were growing from working on these longer assignments. She insisted that it was "the practice of your own thoughts" that was going to be most useful to them in the future. While Sally was the one to articulate these insights, they represented shared work within the group rather than a single individual's perspective. Kara and Anne's initial claims prompted Sally to start reflecting on what made writing a longer paper a new experience. The fact that her turn was responsive to earlier statements, rather than merely "talking past" the previous person's contribution, is a particularly important feature of co-constructing conversations.

Because co-constructing conversations developed through attentive engagement with one another's responses, groups could end up with very different insights and conclusions even when the conversation began in the same place. In the following excerpt from Economics Cohort Two, the interviewer prompted the group to co-construct knowledge about the relationship between their learning in their Economics, Composition, and General Studies courses. Like the conversation among Anne, Kara, and Sally, this conversation began with a fixation on the length of papers they were writing across contexts:

Barbara: In the [General Studies] course, we have a lot of short writings to do, so I guess that's like kind of changing the audience cause it's not that formal either.

Fatima: So it's kinda like writing.

Miguel: And for Econ and English Composition it's, well, Econ for like any quizzes or test, the answer you're writing needs to make sense. So the instructor's teaching us in [our] English course, you need to use or have this to support your argument. Also, based off of what you said, this is like in Econ, we have to [write] something that's very concise and very accurate. Which, like, English definitely helps cause it helps you, really forces you to analyze and choose your words carefully.

Darren: One of the things that we covered in our composition class was audience and, like, when we're writing to our [General Studies] course, it's pretty informal kinda writing. When we write for Econ, we have to make sure we don't use terms, like, surplus--like the term surplus means something completely different in economics than it does in, like, if I were to say, I have a surplus amount of something here. And so we have to make sure we're writing to the right audience and our TAs and our professors rather than our cohort course leader because, it's like formal versus informal, so. And we learned that in our English class.

In the previous example, Sally really synthesized and complicated the ideas of the two other students, but in this excerpt, Barbara's ideas are developed and complicated over the course of multiple turns by both Miguel and Darren. Barbara began by mentioning "short writing" and "different audiences," but her insights remained vague. However, over the course of Miguel and Darren's turns, the idea of audience fueled much more specific and developed discussions of stylistic choices, use of vocabulary, and kinds of evidence in Economics and English, demonstrating a rich example of co-constructing knowledge about informal and formal writing

situations. In these excerpts, disagreement did not play a central role in complicating knowledge, but attentive listening was key. As with other co-constructing excerpts, Darren's turn nuanced earlier statements regarding formality and audience, rather than merely "talking past" the previous person's contribution. In this way, co-constructing conversations produced a more complex shared understanding through students' referencing and complicating of one another's ideas. The next section considers excerpts from a number of co-constructing conversations to better understand how they helped students to build writing knowledge in Beaufort's five domains.

Co-Constructing in the Five Writing Domains

For our study, we were interested in what effects, if any, the co-constructing process had on students' perceptions of what writing looked like as it moved between various courses and disciplines. Beaufort's five domains of knowledge served as a heuristic for our analysis, specifically in understanding how students were beginning to form their writing knowledge across various contexts. Like Beaufort, we see the ability to move beyond localized understandings of writing domains as a challenging task even for adult professionals, let alone first-year students (*Real*). However, our findings suggest that when students work together, they may be better able to *both* abstract writing knowledge for future learning *and* negotiate the constraints of local contexts.

Abstraction through Co-Construction: Process and Subject Matter Knowledge

In their conversations with one another, students' shared ability to abstract knowledge about writing process or subject matter (Beaufort, *College*) appeared to be positively impacted by their engagement in co-constructing conversations. Certainly, some group interactions reflected students' static views of process and subject matter knowledge, such as reiterating their teacher's directions about how information should be organized in a draft or not counting exam responses in Economics as "writing." When discussing their writing processes, students sometimes described process knowledge as specific steps to be followed and imposed from outside forces. Phrases like "have to" and "should" abounded. This is similar to Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick's finding that students often internalized writing process knowledge as "moral shoulds" (133).

Other conversations, however, showcased students' ability to abstract process or subject matter knowledge beyond the limits of a single assignment or course content beyond the domains of that course. Frequently, we saw these more complex perspectives on process knowledge and subject matter knowledge emerge through co-constructed conversation. In those instances, students offered a more situated view of process—tying their processes to specific goals and audiences. Often, this occurred in co-constructing conversations in which students compared more formulaic writing assignments in high school to the new expectations in their composition courses. For example, in the Theater Cohort, Sarah and Mike shared insights into how their writing processes were changing in college as they moved into writing longer drafts:

Sarah: When you're writing based on [including a certain number of] paragraphs you're like "Okay I need five sentences per paragraph and that'll be enough." But then when you have to

write a certain number of pages, and you really have to go into it and really elaborate for the person who's going to read it I guess.

Mike: Yeah, and then another thing that's different is the process that you go about doing it, cause in high school your teacher will be like "Oh you know you guys should be looking at this paragraph, looks like this"--like they'll show you examples and stuff [S: mhm]. Whereas here I mean, if you don't go in for office hours, like just in class time you don't really learn what to do per se. You kind of have to figure it out, but of course you can go in for office hours and e-mail him [mhm] but yeah it's a lot more independent.

Interviewer: So you feel like you're not getting models [S, M: Yeah] for writing like you used to?

Sarah: But that's okay because I feel like as you get older, your papers should follow a certain structure, but it can be like--I hate using that word but it can freestyle like...

Mike: Yeah. No, no I agree.

In this excerpt, Sarah and Mike co-constructed the knowledge about how the processes they were learning for college writing were changing along with the length of their drafts. Sarah began with the point that she could no longer just fill in paragraphs with a certain sentence count and instead had to "really elaborate for the person who's going to read it." Her focus on how audience influences content choices brought Mike to an insight about how much contact they had with college professors and the less frequent use of models. Together, they arrived at the observation that college writing provided more opportunity for "freestyle," while still tethering that flexibility to audience. Their co-constructed agential understanding of process stands in contrast to the view of process as something static and dictated from the outside. Moreover, we often saw co-constructing conversations around subject matter knowledge lead to similarly complex and abstracted ideas as students constructed new knowledge together. This can be seen in the earlier example of Economics Cohort Two's discussion of audience awareness across Economics and Composition courses.

Overall, in students' discussions of both process and subject matter knowledge, we saw the potential for them to arrive at cross-disciplinary insights during co-constructed exchange. In these excerpts, attentive listening was key. Students were able to pick up on a particular concept from one of their peers and nuance it in their own response. In this way, connections that were initially vague became developed and more complex over the course of the exchange.

Overgeneralizing vs. Nuancing: Genre Knowledge

In contrast to conversations in which students abstracted process and content knowledge, conversations about genre did not often lead to more rich descriptions, even when students were co-constructing. Instead, conversations tended to lead to overgeneralized rather than nuanced understandings of genre. In the context of the focus group, students discussing genres with their peers often described past genres as tasks, using common terms that masked differences. For instance, Economics Cohort Two described the assignments from their composition course as "essays" and focused on page length, with Barbara concluding the discussion with, "It's just like,

a normal length, similar to high school." In another instance, Darren described almost all the genres he identified by saying, "everything is analysis." While this kind of expansive connection-making could support Darren in drawing on prior knowledge in new contexts, the tendency to overgeneralize might have kept students from seeing the finer distinctions between genres across discourse communities. It was only with intervention—either by an interviewer and more rarely by a student—that the group could come to a more complex articulation of genre features. This indicates that co-constructing could result in students glossing over important differences between genres in their efforts to collaboratively construct genre knowledge.

Along similar lines, students rarely engaged in disagreement about what constituted particular genres and tended not to take up what Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi describe as "not-talk," or talk that establishes a genre's boundaries by identifying the genres it is not like. Instead, our students tended to take an "anything goes" approach to defining genre categories, allowing boundaries to grow increasingly expansive over each turn in the conversation to accommodate everyone's ideas. However, on occasion students were able to use co-construction to arrive at nuanced genre definitions through a willingness to disagree about boundaries. Focus groups that led to a more nuanced understanding of genre knowledge often occurred when students introduced an alternative perspective on the definition of a genre, and other students actively engaged with that definition. In a sense, this is the equivalent of group "not talk" about genres. For example, in the following excerpt from Economics Cohort One, students discussed the difference between lab reports and literature papers, with regard to the relationship between the two:

Laura: You know, for me, I know what happens in the lab. But then the rest of it is like, I don't know what they were actually thinking, so it's more, I question my writing a lot more but in a lab report I write it down, so like everything else, you have to go back and you have to edit because you could be wrong.

Daisy: Yeah, I agree with that.

Brian: For me, it's more like, if you're doing say a specific lab, maybe, what you did wasn't, maybe your results weren't the correct results. And if you're writing a persuasive paper, you could be saying complete garbage, and basically things that aren't, really like the author meant. [...] As long as you support it, what you said, it's still getting a good grade. Like if you supported it well and wrote it well. Whereas with a lab, if you got the complete wrong answer, and you still wrote it well on the answer, you'd still get a bad grade because you have the wrong answer. So I feel like persuasive writing is a little easier, at least in the sense that you...the precision of figuring out what happened.

Laura: I don't know. It's just like they didn't expect it, they just wanted facts, they didn't care what word choice you used or if you spelled things correctly. It was if you had the right numbers, you were good, and if you didn't, you were screwed.

Unlike in individual "not-talk," Laura and Brian did not explicitly negate one another's definition during this exchange. Instead, they hedged their points of opposition by stating "for me..." Still, Brian introduced a contrasting genre definition, and Laura considered and responded

to his definition. In this way, the students articulated two different views on how genres are categorized. While Laura wanted to differentiate genres based on whether or not evidence can be viewed as "wrong," Brian called attention to the relationship between genres and communities and how evidence is valued by different groups. Brian's turns represented a rare example of connecting genres beyond the local context of the classroom to community epistemologies and practices. This example shows that if there is willingness to disagree, even subtly, students can engage in a discussion that pushes them to jointly construct more nuanced understandings of genre boundaries.

Talk about Transfer: Rhetorical and Discourse Community Knowledge

When students' talk turned toward rhetorical and discourse community knowledge, co-constructing conversations enabled them to negotiate—and renegotiate—that knowledge and its potential to transfer to future contexts. First, we saw students utilizing co-constructing conversation to negotiate the localized nature of classroom rhetorical situations and imagine future contexts for transferring their learning. For example, in one exchange we saw students in Economics Cohort One discuss and critique a prompt from their composition course and ultimately initiate a discussion of transfer as they wrestled with the rhetorical context of the assignment. Laura and Daisy identified a conflict between the idea of an "open prompt" and the local expectations of the course and the instructor.

Laura: Like you have to cite these two sources.

Daisy: Like these two ... Yes. Two quotes from each source or something like that or relate it back in one certain way, but as far as you meet her bullet points, you can go any way you want.

Laura: Yeah, but sometimes it can be hard because it's like, well I don't like the sources, but I want to do this for the prompt but the source she has picked out ...

Daisy: Won't let me.

The students describe their challenge with the somewhat arbitrary request to use two class sources in their paper. Together their turns highlight the tension between what will count as success in the assignment ("meet[ing] her bullet points") versus their own intentions as authors of the paper ("I want to do this for the prompt"). At the end of this exchange, Laura notes, "Yeah, the purpose of us having to use sources is to learn how to contextualize an academic writing, so what I don't understand is, why do I have to use those two sources? Why can't I find good academic sources as well? Because that's what is going to be expected of me outside of this college world and in like the real world. To me that's confusing." Thus, we see Laura and Daisy attempting to make the very move that is rare and challenging for earlier writers—abstracting beyond their localized context to connect this assignment to other types of writing. Here, the connection is broad, not identifying any specific genres in the "real world" that might necessitate finding "good academic sources," but nuanced in its critique of the assignment's lack of transferability. In this way, the co-constructed conversation provided an opportunity for forward-reaching transfer, but one that was potentially limited by the students' lack of writing experience in new situations or exposure to other disciplinary genres.

In the quarter following their cohort experience, co-constructing conversations changed as students moved into new writing contexts. During the third round of focus groups, we found that students' new non-linked courses provided an exigence for them to renegotiate the writing knowledge they had constructed during their first quarter. In Economics Cohort 2, the interviewer asked students to consider what concepts from their composition course helped them think about writing in their new courses. Over a long exchange, Tony and Barbara discussed how their current disciplinary courses—Tony in American literature and Barbara in epidemiology— required them to draw on their writing knowledge in different ways. Describing her current experience in her epidemiology course, Barbara applied the idea of audience to a scientific context, saying that "you don't want to approach a Christian community and start talking about evolution and then be totally for it and that'd be totally like not considering the audience." In response, Tony observed that the notion of "stakes" was important for his writing in American lit. Over multiple exchanges, they arrived at the conclusion that audience was the most salient concept they learned that applied to both of their contexts. When Barbara spoke about the use of slang and academic discourse in a paper and its impact on the audience, Tony built on her response:

Tony: Kind of like not using slang you mentioned earlier, and I would say it's a little more like audience awareness.

Barbara: Yeah, so like that's tied more to the audience and not to knowing discourse so... I think discourse is like, it's okay to know, not necessary to know to write.

Tony: If you understand like the audience and the writing situation... you should be fine.

In this focus group conversation, the two disparate contexts provided the exigence for students' negotiation of the relationship between language use and audience. Unlike the previous example that relied on an imagined future context, in this example the new context prompted students to renegotiate their rhetorical and discourse community knowledge, considering its applicability both for their local writing contexts and more broadly across disciplines. This example points to the value of co-constructing as a process that invites students to do the necessary work of remaking their knowledge for local use. It also shows how writing knowledge necessarily evolves across contexts and over time. Collaborative exchange among peers is a vital practice students can use to continue to cultivate and expand their knowledge of writing domains beyond the purview of single writing course.

Implications for Transfer of Learning

While we recognize that students' talk about their learning across contexts is not itself transfer, our findings about collaborative interaction have implications for composition scholars' understanding of transfer of learning. While the field continues to wrestle with what transfer is and how to support it, our findings suggest that there is value in viewing transfer as a collaborative process that involves the situated remaking of knowledge for each new site. What we see when we look at these collaborative exchanges with an eye toward transfer is that co-constructing conversational moves seem to support metacognition. In VanKooten's recent article, "Identifying Components of Meta-Awareness about Composition," she describes the

relationship between students' metacognition and the articulations and movements they enact as they talk about writing. VanKooten acknowledges the difficulty of studying metacognition and yet argues that it is critical for better understanding of transfer. The articulations that make meta-awareness visible, then, become a way of studying the moves that might facilitate transfer of learning.

According to the literature, the factors that facilitate transfer are many, including a student's ability to abstract or generalize his or her knowledge (Perkins and Salomon), recognize similarity and difference in writing tasks or genres (Reiff and Bawarshi), and astutely "read" the demands of a new writing context (Beaufort, *College*; Devitt, Reiff and Bawarshi). Further, scholars suggest that students' engagement in forward-reaching and backward-reaching transfer allows them to contextualize their knowledge beyond a single course or assignment (Frazier; Perkins and Salomon).

In our study, we saw evidence of these important metacognitive moves throughout students' conversational exchanges. When students were constructing meaning about their writing contexts and their writing tasks, they were together engaging in two kinds of metacognitive thinking that are both necessary for transfer: discerning what knowledge is generalizable and what knowledge is local or particular. In some cases, students' co-constructed knowledge allowed them to abstract their learning beyond the limits of a single assignment or course, which we know has the potential to support transfer of learning through abstraction. In other cases, for example in some of their discussions about genre or rhetorical knowledge, we saw them paying close attention to the local constraints of their contexts. Both kinds of thinking support transfer of learning, and we saw ways that students' co-constructed conversations facilitated these thinking moves. What's more, we believe that students' ability to engage in co-constructing conversations is itself useful transferable knowledge. While our research cannot verify what students took away from their courses or their talk together, the very act of collaboratively building and nuancing knowledge is a practice that we believe has the potential to be transferable and should be investigated further. In addition, because conversations happen both inside *and* outside of classroom spaces, we join others' call for more transfer research investigating how students discuss their writing and make connections in non-traditional classroom contexts or "third spaces" (Frazier; Grego and Thompson; Lindenman; Nowacek). Our study's findings open up new methodological opportunities for studying the development of students' writing knowledge, or the development of what VanKooten describes as "meta-awareness."

Further, our study shows that through co-constructed conversations, students had the opportunity to build domains of writing knowledge that fit their own current situations and experiences. In line with Lindenman's recent work, our findings suggest that previous research in composition may have underestimated student's capacity for thinking in interdisciplinary ways because of our own limited heuristics. Instead, we imagine a far more agentic role for students and envision them both in the classroom and in research studies as agents of their own learning and transfer of knowledge (Nowacek). Past studies have emphasized providing students with the domains of knowledge that will support their transfer of learning (Beaufort, *College*). We found that while students relied on and made use of the concepts they learned in composition, co-constructing conversations enabled them to take ownership of that knowledge for their own purposes and for new contexts. Student talk captures the dynamism of knowledge construction and points to the

ways students make and remake writing knowledge across contexts and over time. In fact, if we are interested not in teaching students how to write but "teaching students *how to learn to write*" (Bergmann and Zepernick 142), then the process of co-construction is an essential part of this transfer puzzle.

Implications for Teaching

Studying transfer with attention to conversation shifts the emphasis from how teachers alone support transfer to how students create transferable knowledge together. However, the writing teacher can still play a role in helping students move toward more productive co-constructing conversations: first, by prompting students to co-construct and make connections across courses, and second, by teaching students to collaborate in ways that help them take advantage of their collective knowledge making. Our focus groups provided an environment that does not naturally exist, even among students who might share courses, but the environment we created might be replicated in the classroom with similar opportunities for student collaboration.

While we acknowledge that focus groups were not naturalistic, the conversations in the focus groups were similar to the types of conversations that might happen in a classroom environment. In both situations, conversations discursively draw from prior conversations and will continue to reverberate in other contexts. As Kenneth Bruffee, in his book on collaboration in higher education argues, "[n]o conversation happens just once. Every whole-class conversation repeats in part in the smaller-group conversations that precede it. Every small-group conversation is tested by conversation in the class as a whole that follows and incorporates it" (*Higher* 46). So while we did not observe conversation in a classroom, because we interviewed students all from the same cohort, we observed students drawing upon prior classroom conversations and experiences in the focus groups.

Because our study found that co-constructing leads to richer writing knowledge construction, a key focus of FYC curriculum and teacher training should involve helping students engage in this collaborative talk. A pedagogical approach that intentionally focuses on guiding students towards co-constructing can fundamentally shift the nature of the classroom toward what Irene Ward describes as a "dialogic" classroom that posits the role of the teacher as "fellow writer, editor, coach, facilitator, good listener, orchestrator of beginnings but rarely controller of outcomes" (180). However, as our study shows, there are predictable patterns of talk that we can recognize and encourage that lead to richer constructions of writing knowledge. In addition, Rebecca Nowacek found that students drew upon the types of connections that professors modeled in their own talk, which further demonstrates the importance of not only encouraging certain types of connections but modeling co-constructing.

Given that the richest co-constructing conversations involved students bringing to the table their different experiences and being willing to grapple with, nuance, or even disagree with one another's ideas, teachers can facilitate safe spaces in the classroom for this kind of interaction (Trimbur). Creating the conditions that encourage students to refine and nuance one another's ideas or offer alternative perspectives is essential. This might involve setting norms at the beginning that help students see disagreement as productive, or scaffolding co-constructing conversation through specific activities that allow students to "try on" or role play what it means

to disagree, complicate, or build on one another's ideas. However, teachers should also remain aware that some students will feel more empowered than others to disagree. Rather than ignoring or side-stepping issues of power, teachers should facilitate classroom discussion about the roles of privilege and power in conversation and create classroom expectations for what equitable contribution should look like. Although examining the role that gender or race played in conversational dynamics was beyond the scope of our study, future research on collaborative talk should further investigate the impact of power positions in students' co-construction of knowledge.

In addition, non-traditional classroom spaces such as linked courses and studio courses position students to practice the collaborative meaning making that can support transfer of writing knowledge across disciplinary contexts. While our study points to the unique opportunities cohort models provide for transfer, teachers in traditional writing classrooms can capitalize on students' diverse range of cross-disciplinary experiences. Teachers can support student talk about their other courses, their writing in other contexts, and the sense they are making across those contexts. The activities we used in the focus groups, such as having students construct a genre taxonomy or discuss similarities and differences across writing demands, are models of classroom activities that help students both reflect upon and together make meaning out of their writing experiences.

So while student talk about writing will always have a presence in university classrooms and other informal spaces, we cannot assume that all talk is equal. When students engage in co-constructing conversations, in which they collaboratively build writing knowledge, the conversational moves have potential to facilitate the metacognitive moves we know support transfer of learning (VanKooten). Moreover, the conversational strategies themselves have the potential to be transferable. Instructors can be intentional about how they support student conversation in the classroom, encouraging co-construction through connection-making, boundary-drawing, and nuanced discussion. Meanwhile, writing programs can support institutional spaces for cross-contextual conversation—from lounge chairs in the library lobby to studio courses and tutoring groups. At the same time, we value students' own efforts at negotiating and renegotiating their writing knowledge for new contexts. In viewing their efforts at knowledge construction as a necessary and situated attempt at connection-making, we recognize students' agency. In this way, we both acknowledge and honor the everyday processes by which students "figure it out together."

Appendix

Focus Group 1

Aim: Discuss students' initial experiences in college and especially the cohort program and engage groups in a backward reaching transfer activity about high school writing tasks.

I.   Questions regarding initial impressions of classes and college
   1.   So what three classes are you enrolled in together? How are they going?
   2.   What have you been reading or working on for those classes?

3. What are you most anxious about or what feels most challenging to you in your classes right now?
4. How is the work that you're doing in these classes similar to what was required in high school? How is it different?

II. Questions regarding cohort experience

5. Can you describe your experience being in the cohort program so far?
6. Can you describe a typical cohort class session for me? What kinds of activities or discussions happen?
7. Suppose I were a freshman considering being in a freshman cohort. What would you say to convince me to sign up?
8. So you're taking _____, _____, and _____ (insert classes). What are the similarities in the work you're doing for these classes? What are the differences?

III. Backward Reaching Transfer Activity—Antecedent Genre Organization

First, the interviewer asks two teams of 2-3 students within the focus group to brainstorm the kinds of writing they did in high school and make a large list together. Then, the interviewer asks them to develop an organizational scheme to capture the range of writing they listed. After the teams have organized their lists, they share with the group and the interviewer asks follow-up questions:

9. Definitions- One of the types of writing you put down was "persuasive." Pretend I'm a friend who just got assigned a "persuasive" paper and is very confused— what would you tell me to do for this assignment?
10. Connections- I see you linked persuasive writing to five paragraph essay. Why did you choose to link those two? What's similar about them? What's different?
11. Exclusions- I noticed you didn't include poetry on your diagram. Have any of you ever written poetry? Why do you think you chose not to include it?
12. Similar and Different Experiences- Does your drawing account for people's different writing experiences? (ie: Some people wrote research papers, and others didn't.) Is your previous writing experience generally similar, or really pretty different?
13. Comparisons Between Groups' Lists- What do you notice that is similar or different about your two groups' lists? What do you think about these similarities/differences?

Focus Group 2

Aim: Get students to vocalize the content and learning strategies of their courses by comparing notes from different classes. Ask them to start making connections across contexts and engage them in a forward-reaching activity to anticipate how learning in winter courses will compare.

I. Overview of learning across courses
1. What are you guys learning in your non-composition course(s)?
2. What are you guys learning in your composition course?

3. What are you guys learning in your cohort course?
   a. What connections do you see between the things you're learning?
   b. What about connections between *how* you're learning in your various classes?

II. In-depth discussion of connections using students' class notes

4. Look at notes from all of your classes and compare your notes to a peer.
   a. What similarities or differences do you notice in your note-taking strategies?
   b. Why did you take notes in a similar way? Why did you take notes differently?
   c. How do you decide how to take notes in a class?

III. Connecting learning strategies

5. Think again about the last things you learned in your composition class. How is it similar to what you are learning in your [non-comp] course? How is it different?
6. What are you currently learning in your cohort course? How is this learning similar or different to your other courses?
7. In terms of your learning strategies, what other learning strategies (in addition to note-taking) are you using for different courses? Why did you use those strategies?
8. How do you know if you've learned it? How effective were your learning strategies?

IV. Forward Reaching Transfer Activity: Winter Quarter/Bubble Chart

The interviewer gives the group a bubble chart developed by the university to organize all of the majors on campus by discipline. Students are asked to locate their winter courses on the chart and anticipate what learning will look like in these new courses.

9. What classes are you taking in the winter?
10. Locate where they are on one bubble chart. Together as a group, discuss:
    a. What do you think learning will look like in these classes? How do you know?
    b. What do these classes seem most like in your previous academic experience?
11. What are ways you might use your experience in these classes you're taking now to help you be successful in your Winter quarter classes?
12. Is there anything you did this quarter that you will do differently next quarter?
13. Is there anything you did this quarter that you will definitely do again next quarter?

Focus Group 3

Aim: Discuss students' initial experiences in their new courses and ask them to compare their learning to the previous quarter. Engage groups in a bridging activity identifying their learning in their composition course and then ranking that learning for usefulness in future contexts.

I. Overview of the new quarter
    1. So how are your classes this quarter comparing to last quarter?
    2. What did you learn last quarter that is proving most useful in your classes now?
        a. What did you learn about writing that's proving useful?
    3. Can you tell one another what kind of writing you will be doing this quarter?
        a. How is this writing similar to writing you did last quarter? How is it different?
II. Bridging Activity: Ranking of writing skills

The interviewer asks students to take out their cover letters from their composition course, which make an argument about how the students fulfilled the course outcomes. Students individually highlight their letters for things they learning in their writing course. Then, working as a group they list all of the things they learned and work together to rank the top five most important and bottom three least important things they learned.

    4. Why did you rank this learning as most useful or least useful?
    5. What about those skills you didn't rank, why did they end up in the middle?
    6. Pretend that you are talking to your composition teacher and feedback on the course. Which skills should she focus on the most when she teaches the class again? Why?
    7. Think about the courses you are taking right now. Which of the things on your group's list do you think will be the most useful to you for this quarter? Why?
    8. A lot of you mentioned that not getting grades on your composition assignments was different from high school. Looking back, how was your learning different because you weren't getting grades?
    9. Of all the writing you did last quarter, which type of writing do you see yourself doing the most in your college career, given your choice of major? Or which writing strategy do you see yourself utilizing the most in your college career?
III. Closing questions

    10. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your first quarter experience? This could be about your cohort course, linked courses, or anything else.
    11. One of our hypotheses is that learning you do outside of your classes with members of the cohort is just as important as in-class learning. Does this fit your experience?
        a. Would you add or change anything about this hypothesis?
        b. Do you think the cohort course enabled important out-of-class conversations?

Notes

1. Following Smagorinsky, we attempt to provide a detailed discussion of the relationship between our theoretical framework, code development and application, and interpretation of results. (Return to text.)

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