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## Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions

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**Abstract:** Previous transfer researchers within writing studies have made tremendous gains in understanding how social contexts and curricula influence writing behaviors. In this article, we argue that individual dispositions, such as motivation, value, and self-efficacy, need to occupy a more central focus in writing transfer research. After describing shifts from focusing on the educational context to the individual in composition research broadly, we examine previous writing transfer research, tracing a growing need in better understanding student dispositions. In the second half of the article, we identify five qualities of student dispositions and describe four specific dispositions—value, self-efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation—that influence writing transfer. The article concludes by emphasizing the role of the individual and by articulating new avenues of research for better understanding student dispositions in writing transfer.

A growing body of research in writing studies has focused on understanding students' struggles to transfer writing knowledge from high school to college, from course to course, and from university to workplace settings. Composition as a field has made tremendous gains in addressing the problem of transfer through activity-based curricular models and in examining students' knowledge. However, less attention has been paid to individual, internal qualities that may impact transfer; these qualities, which we call dispositions, include what the *Framework for Success for Post-Secondary Writing Instruction* calls "habits of mind," such as persistence, self-efficacy and metacognition. As noted educational psychologist David Perkins and others have described, dispositions are not knowledge, skills, or abilities—they are qualities that determine how learners use and adapt their knowledge.

Independently, both authors of this article began dissertations on transfer of learning using exploratory, grounded, and mixed methods approaches to our data collection and analysis. We intended to build upon the rich transfer work of David Russell, David Smit, Anne Beaufort, and Elizabeth Wardle, and to examine curricular interventions for transfer, although our data lead us in a much different direction. Despite the differences in our geographic locations, the educational levels of our participants, and our research questions, we discovered surprisingly similar findings concerning the importance of individual learner dispositions. Our findings suggested that student dispositions were critical to success in transfer of learning—an emphasis that we had not seen widely addressed in the literature. While we agree that the emphasis on contexts and curriculum are essential for understanding writing transfer, we suggest that dispositions play an equally essential role.

In this article, we argue that writing researchers, writing faculty, and writing program administrators (WPAs) should more explicitly consider the role of learners' dispositions because this may allow us to more fully understand and address writing transfer. After briefly describing the ways that individuals and contexts interact in the broader composition literature, we discuss previous literature that examines writing transfer. Through this work, we trace a growing emphasis—and need—to better understand student dispositions. In the second half of the article, we articulate a theory of student

dispositions that identifies five key qualities of dispositions. Using data from our two studies and work from education and psychology, we then describe four specific dispositions—value, self-efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation—that influence writing transfer. We conclude by suggesting future avenues of research concerning dispositions and writing transfer.

## **Composition’s Turns Toward Integrating the Educational Context and the Individual**

Over the past decade, the gaze of writing transfer researchers has understandably drifted towards pedagogical interventions and classroom contexts; however, we argue that researchers need to embrace a more nuanced perspective in which both the role of the instructional context and the role of the individual and his/her dispositions receive equal consideration. We situate this move toward a more integrated approach within a long history of similar moves made inside composition studies.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Scott Consigny sought to rectify the divide between Lloyd Bitzer’s privileging of context and Richard Vatz’s privileging of the individual by arguing that both the individual and the context were, and still are, essential to understanding the rhetorical situation. Likewise, over the past twenty years, composition researchers have shifted from understanding literacy development as something that takes place primarily within the educational context of the classroom, to something impacted by the individual’s experiences outside the classroom.

In the early 1990s, Marilyn Sternglass made a clear case for a “whole person” approach to studying literate development that includes understanding individual student histories and how non-academic settings impact academic life (236). Taking up this call in his 2008 article, Kevin Roozen presents an ethnographic study of one basic writer and demonstrates how this writer’s literate activity and identity in non-school areas (comedy, poetry, etc.) profoundly shape the writer’s educational activities.

Composition’s understanding of genre, as Bawarshi and Reiff discuss in *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy*, has evolved from a view of genres as simple textual categories to one that see genres as complex social actions that include cultural knowledge (4), intention (4), and motivation (75). In this way, genre theory brings together textual features of production, contexts of production, tools for production, and—implicitly—individual dispositions that mitigate that production.

We note these examples to show that, as composition has sought to understand fundamentals like rhetorical situations, literacy development, and genre theory, it has done so by, first, gravitating toward context. Only later does it self-correct to include the impact of the individual learner. In the same way, within composition’s research on transfer we neither advocate abandonment of context nor a 180-degree turn toward individual dispositions. Rather, we acknowledge both are essential to understanding transfer.

## **Transfer of Learning: Seminal Studies**

The history of the development of knowledge transfer theory is analogous to the historical shifts in composition theory described above. On the one hand, most definitions of knowledge transfer involve three elements: something learned in the past, something applied in the future, and something that enables what was learned in the past to directly affect or influence what is done in the future (Haskell; Perkins and Salomon; Royer, Mestre and Dufresne). On the other hand, writing transfer theorists have not always considered the learner or what the learner brings with him/her to the transfer problem. In some definitions, the learner is someone to whom or through whom transfer happens rather than being the agent of transfer.

Compositionists who have studied knowledge transfer have reflected this theoretical bent by drawing upon activity theory, and while it accounts for some individual aspects, it largely privileges actions and contexts. Russell's "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction" is frequently cited to describe the limitations of first-year composition (FYC) in facilitating knowledge transfer. Using a "general ball" metaphor, Russell explains why "General Writing Skills Instruction" (GWSI) courses fail to teach students to generalize. He equates a GWSI course to a course in general ball handling, where students learn how to hold the ball, bounce the ball, throw the ball, etc., but do not learn those skills inside of contexts where they would actually use them (baseball, football, basketball etc.). Russell argues that students can't transfer "general ball" to the disciplines and suggests that we encourage more writing in the disciplines (WID) and writing across the curriculum (WAC), and use an activity theory approach.

Russell's work is based on the research of Terttu Tuomi-Grohn and Yrjo Engestrom, who describe activity theory as that which emphasizes organizations and movement through activity systems:

The conceptualization of transfer based on socio-cultural views take into account the changing social situations and individual's multidirectional movement from one organization to another, from home to school or from workplace to school and back. Based on activity theory, this conceptualization expands the basis of transfer from the actions of individuals to collective organizations. It's not a matter of individual moves between school and workplace but of the efforts of school and workplace to create together new practices. (34)

As they argue, activity systems are structured to include a number of features: rules, division of labor, community, subjects, objects, instruments, and outcomes. It is through the relationship of each aspect of this larger activity system that successful boundary crossing (transfer) can occur. Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom articulate that transfer in this model is primarily driven by the interaction and resolution of conflict between different activity systems, such as school and work. While activity theory makes space for the individual, its emphasis is on the system of activity and the organization.

Writing researchers have built upon Russell's activity theory approach to focus primarily on instructional contexts and curricula. In *The End of Composition Studies*, Smit argues that most research has not allowed us to understand how transfer occurs and "the only principle we have is that transfer can be taught if the similarities of the knowledge and skill needed in different contexts are pointed out" (132). Like Russell, Smit critiques FYC for being a place where writing is taught as a set of isolated skills and divorced from future writing contexts, his primary concern on how educators can either make the contexts of their classrooms similar enough for students to generalize from one classroom to another or how to make similarities more transparent. While he acknowledges that transfer in large part "depends on the learners' background and experience," he dismisses these factors because he says teachers cannot control them (119). Smit argues that first-year composition students often do not see how previous learning is relevant to the future, but he does not explore *why* this may be the case. So, although Smit does an admirable job describing challenges for transfer in the context of curriculum and classrooms, he fails to address—or even acknowledge—dispositional aspects of transfer.

In her ethnographic case study of one student, Beaufort follows Tim as he struggles in moving from FYC to his coursework in dual majors and later into the workplace. Beaufort grounds her research in a context-based framework, discourse community theory, which has features in common with activity theory but is more specific to literate practice. Beaufort finds that Tim had trouble transferring writing knowledge because of the competing values in Tim's different discourse communities (FYC and History) and his lack of awareness about the differences between those communities (66-68). While

Beaufort’s study focuses on Tim’s perceptions of his discourse communities, she does not focus on the dispositional aspects Tim has that may be causing those perceptions (such as locus of control, motivation, etc.). Beaufort also does not discuss anything about Tim as a person outside of the educational setting. Like Smit, Beaufort’s arguments are based on curricular interventions on the part of faculty rather than on individual student characteristics. In her concluding sections, Beaufort critiques the context in which first-year writing is taught and argues that many teachers of writing consider themselves “generalists” who are mostly concerned with providing students with basic skills. Drawing on Russell’s ball analogy, she challenges the idea that teaching students basic writing skills will automatically enable the students to transfer their knowledge to new settings.

Like Smit and Beaufort, Wardle’s “Understanding ‘Transfer’ from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study” can be seen both as a product of activity theory as well as the beginning of a new genealogy that leads to the current scholarship on “Writing About Writing,” a curricular concept that stems from Douglas Downs and Wardle’s groundbreaking 2007 article. Wardle also addresses the limitations of trying to understand the role of the individual in the problem of transfer. Unlike Smit, she argues that researchers would miss crucial information if they only focused on the individual without understanding the learning context. Additionally, Wardle argues that by focusing on the individual, “we may be tempted to assign some ‘deficiency’ to students or their previous training though in fact the students may fulfill the objectives of their next writing activities satisfactorily without using specific previously-learned writing-related skills (such as revision)” (69). Despite her concerns, we interpret Wardle’s context-rich findings as having much to do with dispositional aspects of learning. For example, Wardle found that students generally did not transfer knowledge from their first-year writing courses, “not because they are unable to or because they did not learn anything in FYC. Rather, students did not *perceive a need* to adopt or adapt most of the writing behaviors they used in FYC for other courses” (76). Wardle explains that while the students felt they were capable of completing more difficult assignments, they were “unwilling to put forth the effort required” to reflect on their past learning enough to use what they had learned to solve these more difficult writing problems (74). Wardle argues that this problem, ultimately, is in the hands of those instructors who do not create the kinds of conditions that will motivate students to put forth effort in transferring. With this, Wardle departs from the conclusions drawn by Russell, Smit, and Beaufort. Instead of arguing that the context of FYC itself fails to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, Wardle suggests that the FYC context fails to provide students with the motivation to transfer their knowledge—a key dispositional quality. However, her emphasis is still on the context of FYC, and she is largely locating the sources of her participants’ motivation outside of themselves.

## Writing Transfer and Student Dispositions

It was within this framework that we initially formulated our dissertation research questions. We began our own studies [\[1\]](#) [\[#note1\]](#) by asking questions about how classroom contexts in high school and college had affected our participants’ ability to transfer knowledge as they moved through educational activity systems. Dana was studying whether certain approaches to teaching writing could foster transfer more successfully than others (such as rhetorical approaches vs. literary ones), while Jennifer was trying to understand how a seemingly transfer-inhibiting curriculum (the formulaic Jane Schaffer method) was apparently facilitating successful knowledge transfer. What we both initially missed in formulating our questions was right in front of us—the impact of students’ dispositions. It was not until we began collecting and analyzing our data and examining work from outside the field that we realized the importance of dispositions in writing transfer.

In his 2012 piece, “Challenges in Assessing the Development of Writing Ability: Theories, Constructs and Methods,” David Slomp seemingly describes our initial approach when he explains that “failure to consider the role that intrapersonal factors play in the transfer process can cloud our ability to

assess underlying barriers to transfer” (84). He argues that activity-based theories of transfer do not clearly account for individual factors because they privilege the social interactions, institutional contexts, and participation in activities. To address his critique of the limitations in current writing transfer research, Slomp suggests that transfer researchers draw upon Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela Morris’s bioecological model of human development, which we next describe.

## Defining Dispositions

Although student dispositions have not been widely addressed in writing transfer research, substantial work on dispositions and their impact on learning and transfer has been conducted in the fields of education and psychology. Once we delved into this literature in our own work, it became obvious that this was the crucial piece of the transfer puzzle we had been missing. In this section, we begin by identifying five key features that define dispositions and their relationship to transfer; we follow with specific examples of dispositions supported by data from our two studies.

### **1. Dispositions are a critical part of a larger system that includes the person, the context, the process through which learning happens, and time.**

Slomp argues that a bioecological model of transfer assessment, based on the work of Bronfenbrenner and Morris, allows us to balance individual and contextual understandings of transfer and to seek new means of assessment. Slomp writes, “framing their work through the lens of this theory, researchers will be able to examine not only how a student’s writing ability is developing, but also...the array of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional factors that either support or inhibit that development” (86). Building upon his suggestion, we use Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s model to articulate the relationship of individual dispositions to contexts and processes.

The Bioecological Model of Human Development, inspired by living ecological systems, has four parts: process, person, time, and context. *Process* is an interaction between a *person* and his/her *context* over *time*—it is this interaction that produces human development—or in the case of writing studies, writerly development. Person, context, and time substantially impact processes; Bronfenbrenner and Morris argue that these areas interact to encourage or discourage development (795). Of particular importance to understanding dispositions, the “person” aspects of the bioecological model include: dispositions (personal characteristics such as motivation and persistence), resources (knowledge, skill, ability), and demand (influences from a context that encourage/discourage a person’s reaction) (795-796; 810).

### **2. Dispositions are not intellectual traits like knowledge, skills, or aptitude, but rather determine how those intellectual traits are used or applied.**

Perkins et al argue that most views of learning and transfer focus on the intellectual traits with which individuals are equipped—their knowledge, skills, and aptitudes—rather than what dispositional features individuals may use to access, adapt, and employ intellectual traits (270). They also argue that while researchers often try to explain behavior in terms of skills, knowledge, or aptitude, dispositions can greatly help explain student behaviors concerning transfer. Bronfenbrenner and Morris likewise split dispositions from resources (which include knowledge and skills) as described above, seeing the two as clearly distinct.

### **3. Dispositions determine students’ sensitivity toward and willingness to engage in transfer.**

Bronfenbrenner and Morris argue that while most research treats dispositions or “cognitive and socioemotional characteristics of the person as dependent variables; that is as measures of developmental outcomes,” their model instead treats them as “precursors and producers of later development” (810). Bronfenbrenner and Morris argue that dispositional qualities are so important that they don’t just interact with the development, but rather they determine and/or prevent later development, in that they begin, sustain or otherwise prevent the start of processes (795; 810). This point is critical to understanding the role of student dispositions in writing transfer. While activity theorists Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom view the “subject” as having an equal role in the activity system (and do not appear to address that subject’s dispositions at length), Bronfenbrenner and Morris and Perkins et al. see dispositions not just as contributing pieces in development but also as features that *allow* or *prevent* successful development from taking place.

Numerous transfer researchers articulate the importance of dispositions as key factors in preventing and allowing successful transfer to take place. Perkins et al. argue that dispositions are features that determine how sensitive students are to be motivated and inclined to transfer knowledge to new learning situations. Anne McKeough, Judy Lee Lupart, and Anthony Marini note, “Even if a learner has acquired all the resources necessary for a particular transfer task, if he or she cannot easily access those resources, *does not recognize* the relevance of prior learning to the task at hand ... or *has no desire to take up recognized transfer opportunities*, then transfer will not occur” (2; emphasis added). This is why Perkins and Salomon call “mindful abstraction,” or the willingness to engage in transfer-focused thinking, as both crucial and precarious. Likewise, Velda McCune and Noel Entwistle, describing a particular generative “desire to learn” disposition, argue that dispositions are associated with particular ways of thinking, ways students approach material, and their willingness to engage with the subject matter (305).

### **4. Dispositions can positively or negatively impact the learning environment; they can be generative or disruptive.**

Bronfenbrenner and Morris demonstrate that two kinds of dispositions exist: developmentally generative (such as curiosity and goal pursuit), allowing for positive human development to take place; and developmentally disruptive (such as impulsiveness and distractibility), allowing for a negative impact on the development of the individual (810).

### **5. Dispositions are dynamic and may be context-specific or broadly generalized.**

Perkins et al. argue that dispositions are not static; learners develop particular dispositions as they move through activity systems. Research has shown that some dispositions may be context-specific (e.g., valuing learning in one context but not another) or broadly generalized (underlying value systems, such that “learning is good”) (Hofer, Driscoll).

These five features describe and define dispositions in very broad terms. However, it is critical to understand that many different types of dispositions exist and that certain dispositions may be more or less prevalent within an individual learner. In our own studies of writing transfer, we found four such specific dispositions (value, self-efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation) that either enabled or inhibited our participants from successfully transferring their knowledge. All of the four dispositions we discuss below fall under the umbrella of psychological theories of motivation.

## What Do I Value? Expectancy-Value Theory of Motivation

The expectancy-value theory of motivation (Wigfield and Eccles; Eccles) links students' motivation, performance, persistence, and choice-making to the *value* students place upon a particular task or learning situation in educational environments. Expectancy-value theory aligns with work of transfer researchers Salomon and Perkins, who argue that learners must be *willing* to engage in mindful abstraction and put forth the mental effort to generalize from past learning to new learning situations. If students don't value what they are learning or don't see how what they are learning will be useful to them in the future, they will not engage in mindful abstraction. In 2007, composition researchers Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick conducted focus groups with upper-division students concerning their perceptions of FYC. They found that the "primary obstacle to ... transfer is not that students are unable to recognize situations outside FYC in which those skills can be used, but that students fail to look for such situations because they believe that skills learned in FYC in particular have no value in any other setting" (139).

In Dana's study, the issue of value played a key role in successful transfer. Julie, a sophomore in animal science, placed a very low value on her rhetorically focused FYC course, which created problems with transfer and a disconnection between divergent genres at the university. Julie reported never having to write in her high school classes and being largely inexperienced with college writing. She expressed negative views concerning the transferability of most of her FYC course content because she saw it as completely disconnected from her career goals in animal science. She says:

I tried my best in that class; I turned in every assignment; I came. But, I just didn't feel like it was useful to me. ... That ethos, pathos, logos—I know I'm never going to use that again. For example, there's people over in Africa—you know they're starving but you know it had nothing to do with you. You're not worried about it ... it's not on your mind. It's just like [FYC], it doesn't affect you, so why be worried about it?

The low value that Julie placed on her FYC course essentially blocked her from engaging in the kind of reflection or "mindful abstraction" that is necessary for transfer to occur. In her interviews and subsequent science writing the semester after FYC, Julie struggled and yet reported no efforts to engage in mindful abstraction, to seek external help, or to apply the seemingly useful rhetorical content of FYC to her writing. Julie, therefore, demonstrated developmentally disruptive dispositions concerning transfer--characteristics that prevented her from science writing success.

Conversely, Carl, a student studying computer information technology and biometrics with a forensics science minor, demonstrated generative dispositions and was able to engage in mindful abstraction using material from FYC in his two majors. Not only did Carl value writing and view it as critically important to his career, he also described and demonstrated through writing how the conciseness, argument, and outlining skills he learned in FYC directly applied to his speech communications and forensics science courses:

*Dana:* Were you able to take the information from your English class here last semester and transfer it into other classes? In other classes which you have to write?

*Carl:* The conciseness helped. Also, I was really fortunate to have the instructor I had, because he was not the easiest grader in the world ... every two lines or whatever, he'd say "So what who cares?" And that really, really helps the [COM] outlines. In [Forensics] if you have a sentence that is like 3/4 of a line that's weird. And it sets it off, looks bad .

... So I think it is really important to be able to say what you have to say in the least amount of space.

While Carl reported that he still struggled in adapting to widely divergent genres at the university, he actively sought out ways to connect his knowledge and engage in mindful abstraction and sought help through the university’s writing center. Data from both of our studies revealed that the value students placed on tasks directly impacted their motivation to transfer; without value, students generally will not engage in mindful abstraction and therefore fail to see situations in which transfer of knowledge could occur. The data revealed that “value” for students was almost entirely based on student beliefs about future writing contexts. Furthermore, value seemed to have the potential to be, in Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s terms, either generative or disruptive.

## Am I Capable? Self-Efficacy Theory

According to Albert Bandura, self-efficacy theory explains the ways in which “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce performances influence events that affect their lives” (434). If someone believes he is capable of running a marathon, he is more likely to do the things required to complete a marathon (like maintaining a training schedule) than someone who believes that, no matter what he does, he won’t be able to complete a marathon. With regards to learners, self-efficacy explains the relationship between students’ beliefs about their capabilities and the likelihood they will take the steps needed to achieve their goals. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely than students with low self-efficacy to self-regulate their own learning (Bandura), to work hard, to be persistent when faced with obstacles, and to feel less anxious about the work they need to do (Zimmerman). Students with low self-efficacy may perceive work to be harder than it actually is, which can cause negative emotions such as stress and depression (Pajares).

In studies of writing and self-efficacy, Patricia McCarthy, Scott Meier, and Regina Rinderer found that students who held more positive beliefs about their own abilities produced better writing. If the students who had low self-efficacy held those beliefs because of their past learning experiences, then “one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individual’s self-efficacy expectation about their writing ability” (466). Self-efficacy theory suggests that, in order for students to do the work that successful transfer requires, they first have to hold developmentally generative beliefs about their ability to do that work and to accomplish their goals. A learner’s self-efficacy becomes especially important when faced with a task that at first seems overwhelming or unfamiliar.

For example, in Jennifer’s study, the students who had positive self-efficacy were those who persisted through writing in unfamiliar genres. Rebecca, a history major, initially panicked when she was asked to write an essay in which she had to evaluate the arguments of two historians who were attacking each other’s interpretation of a text. In an email to a former high school teacher, she wrote: “HELP ME. I really am struggling with this for some reason. I feel like I’m just summarizing their points rather than analyzing their arguments. What kinds of things should a person consider when ‘evaluating an argument’?” While the amount of anxiety Rebecca exhibited might suggest she had low self-efficacy, the fact that she reached out for guidance underscored her belief that she would be able to write in this genre—she just needed more information. Like the runner who trains for a marathon, Rebecca did what she needed to achieve her goals. Once she understood the purpose of an argument evaluation, and learned about different ways authors make their arguments (e.g., by establishing credibility), she was able to adapt what she knew about essay writing (e.g., establishing her own argument, analyzing her evidence) to complete her assignment.



## Was This My Fault or Yours? Attribution Theory

Attribution theory (Weiner) suggests that people's actions and beliefs are affected by the ways in which they attribute cause to events that impact them. These attributions are often referred to in terms of a person's locus of control. When an individual believes that her ability or efforts are the cause of her success or failure, she is considered to have a high internal locus of control. On the other hand, when an individual believes that the cause of her success or failure lies outside of her control, she is considered to have a high external locus of control.

Studies of high and low academic achievers have shed light on the impact of the location of a learner's locus of control, as well as on the relationship between the learner's self-concept and her locus of control. While both high and low achievers think effort is important, low achievers are more likely to place contingencies on that effort (i.e., effort will produce the desired outcome if certain external factors are present, like luck, teacher help, or an easy task). Likewise, if they are not successful, low achievers are more likely to blame external causes that are outside of their control (Shell).

In Jennifer's study, Kiera, a psychology major, found that college required her to be more independent and to self-motivate, which, as she explained, "is not as easy as you might think." While she initially relished "not having someone looking over your shoulder, no teachers checking in, no constant grades being forced in your face via school," she also acknowledged that she lost "track of things very quickly." While Kiera was honest about her issues with motivation, she also placed some of the blame, or attributed the causes of her failure, on her college professors because she didn't always know what her grades were. In high school, she had relied on the fact that her teachers were required to update grades every two weeks, but in college that did not happen. Kiera felt she needed someone to help keep her accountable for completing her work; she did not have enough self-regulation to do it herself. As a writer, Kiera was one of the more capable participants, yet her self-regulatory and motivational challenges prevented her from having the same kinds of academic successes the others had.

Likewise, Brianna, a pre-pharmacy major in Dana's study, demonstrates a high internal locus of control. Brianna, who was accustomed to getting all A's in high school, did poorly on her first homework assignment. Rather than blame her professor, however, she recognizes that she will have to work harder to achieve her goals:

My first college paper ever, it was like a thirteen out of twenty something. I was like oh man! Because in high school I had always gotten an A on it. ... But after that I really took that class seriously. I was like "O.K. I am going to have to really try on what I am writing. I'll have to pay attention in that class." He set the standard early. It was like the second week of class we got our first papers back. I knew I was going to have to work my butt off in that class to get an A.

In writing lab reports in her pharmacy courses the following semester, Brianna again discussed her struggle to write in an unfamiliar genre—and her success when she is able to work hard to achieve good grades. In both cases, Brianna and Kiera demonstrate ways in which attribution can be developmentally generative and assist students in being successful.

## Am I Doing OK? Self-Regulation

Self-regulation, according to Barry Zimmerman, is not an inherent trait that learners either have or don't have; rather, it is a process learners go through when they choose how they will adapt to new

learning situations. The ability to set reasonable goals, to choose to utilize strategies to achieve those goals, to self-evaluate progress, to manage the physical and social settings so that they serve to support and not distract from those goals, to practice effective time management, to reflect on the success of choices made or strategies used, to understand how performance leads to results, and to be able to make changes to any of these preceding actions to improve future performance—all of this falls under the umbrella of self-regulation. Zimmerman acknowledges, “[i]t is hardly surprising that many students have not learned to self-regulate their academic studying very well” (64). For students to do this would mean they would have to be self-aware, self-motivated, and have control over their own behaviors. If a student is lacking in one area, self-regulation will be harder to achieve. As Zimmerman describes, “novices ... attempt to self-regulate their learning reactively. That is, they fail to set specific goals or to self-monitor systematically, and as a result, they tend to rely on comparisons with the performance of others to judge their learning effectiveness” (69). That is, students who do not set attainable goals or have the self-reflective capacity to monitor their progress and then the self-control to change their behaviors, if necessary, will see the results of this work as somewhat disconnected from their own actions. They will compare the outcome of their performance with others to ascertain how well they did on a specific task. If they find they are underperforming, they are more likely to blame their own lack of ability rather than to be able to examine the regulatory processes they did or did not engage in. In a sense, the opposite of strong regulation is learned helplessness. Self-regulation is linked to self-efficacy theory because individuals with high self-efficacy tend to be good at setting reasonable and achievable goals for themselves. An efficacious learner already has the predispositions, including motivation, to engage in self-regulation.

Kayla, a freshman in Jennifer’s study who planned to major in nursing, had the ability to self-regulate; this greatly impacted her ability to successfully navigate college literacy practices and transfer learning from high school to college. Since she was able to regulate her own behavior, she employed successful strategies, like drafting ahead of time or changing approaches that were not working. Notably, Kayla made a point of going to her professors’ office hours to get feedback on her early drafts:

I started really going to office hours. Cause office hours helped a lot because they don’t ... the teacher doesn’t say, like, “This is what I look for in papers.” The way you find out about what your teachers wants in college—you really need to go to their office hours ... once you go to office hours enough, they won’t remember your name necessarily, but they’ll remember your face.

While the act of going to office hours may seem inconsequential, it shows that Kayla could deliberately make the choice to leave her dorm room and cross campus to talk with her professor. She chose to act in a way that would help her achieve her goals—again, an example of a generative disposition.

What these four dispositional theories and our participants show is that dispositions matter--generative dispositions, like a student’s willingness to self-regulate or to positively value writing, will assist in their ability to transfer knowledge. Likewise, students’ belief in their own ability to achieve their desired outcomes and that they have some control over those outcomes is more likely to cause them to have dispositions which will allow them to transfer knowledge to new contexts. On the other hand, negative dispositions, like Julie’s lack of value or the lack of value reported by Bergmann and Zepernick’s participants, will substantially interfere with successful transfer. Now that we have presented a detailed examination of what dispositions are and how specific dispositions impact knowledge transfer, we present a brief re-examination of the previous literature using dispositions as a framework.

## Applying a Dispositional Lens to Previous Work

A re-examination of previous studies of transfer within composition, including the work of Wardle and Beaufort, shows that in many situations where students failed to transfer individual dispositions played a role. For example, in Wardle's study, students demonstrated challenges with expectancy-value theory when Wardle reports that the amount of effort the student gave to writing tasks was synonymous with the value they placed on the task, including the value of a good grade (73-74). Wardle also broadly discusses the lack of motivation to learn in courses, although she does not investigate the underlying dispositions that may cause such motivational issues (74). And while Wardle is absolutely correct in saying that the larger activity system of school did not challenge students in ways that required them to transfer learning from FYC, dispositions are also clearly at work.

Likewise, Beaufort largely blames inadequate instruction for the lack of progress Tim had in history writing in his three years as a history major. Beaufort emphasizes three problematic areas: the lack of feedback on his history writing, the lack of a scaling/sequencing difficulty in earlier and later courses, and a lack of clarity concerning the purpose and genre of writing tasks (103). In her conclusion of the history chapter, however, Beaufort describes dispositional features (labeled "negative transfer") that impacted Tim's writing progress. One feature is attribution theory, where Tim blames his failure on the instructor's limitations in understanding Tim's essay, rather than Tim's own knowledge of history (104). Similarly, in her chapter on engineering, in interview segments Tim describes metacognitive awareness (114), self regulation (114, 129), and self efficacy (114, 116). How much these dispositional aspects impact Tim and his learning in history and engineering are unclear from Beaufort's text, but they are contributing to Tim's ability to transfer, as revealed through his interview segments. In both of the cases above, an expanded analysis using a dispositional lens may have led to additional insight into these students' struggles to transfer learning effectively.

## Future Inquiry into the Nature of Dispositions

It has become clear to us that individual dispositions are not just something that may impact a learning environment; rather, they are a critical foundation upon which learning is built and potentially transferred. We hope that the research on knowledge transfer within composition studies follows the historical trajectory of the development of other crucial composition theories and embraces an integrated understanding of the individual, individual dispositions, and his/her relationship to larger contexts. We would like to see others in the field move to substantiate the critical nature of individual student dispositions in the transfer process. This is especially urgent since most research on dispositions in education has been conducted outside the field and such work does not necessarily take the complexities of learning to write into consideration.

We see three overarching areas for research on dispositions that we believe it would benefit composition researchers to address. First, it is clear that composition requires a deeper understanding of student dispositions: what they are, how they function, and how they change. Within this area, we see a number of questions for further inquiry, including:

- How and where are dispositions formed?
- What is the relationship among individual dispositions (such as self-efficacy, metacognition, value, etc.)?
- How can we better measure dispositions and changes in dispositions over time?

- Are there certain “key” or “critical” dispositions for learning to write and transfer that can be generalized beyond individual students?
- How do dispositions impact all areas of learning to write?
- What generative dispositions facilitate writing transfer?
- What disruptive dispositions inhibit writing transfer?

Second, we also need a better understanding of the relationship between dispositions and larger activity systems that support/inhibit transfer. Specifically, we need to learn:

- How can teachers accurately understand--and adapt to--student dispositions in classrooms?
- What is the role of curricular interventions in shifting dispositions?
- Can disruptive dispositions be shifted within a single writing course? If so, how?
- Can we teach students in a way that encourages transfer-oriented, generative dispositions?
- How are dispositions shaped by the activity system that a learner inhabits?

Finally, we could benefit by following the lead of theorists like Phil Hodkinson, Gert Biesta, and David James who argue in “Understanding Learning Cultures” that current theories of learning are all “partially inadequate as a means of understanding ... learning ... in its full complexity” (416). They argue that when researchers focus on one theory of learning (e.g., a focus on social interactions at the expense of attention to individual differences, or a focus on the site of learning at the expense of attention to social or cultural influences), that the effect is similar to looking at one location through maps of different scales. While it might seem that the different scales are simply different views of the same thing, they argue that “the risk is that ... the scale of investigation results in a different and partial version of what learning is” (418). Therefore, as a field we might ask:

- How might the field create a map that simultaneously focuses on multiple theories of transfer?
- How can individual researchers bring together theories of transfer that fully account for individual dispositions in contexts?

Answers to these and other related questions can help the field continue to best serve our student writers, understand challenges in teaching writing, and encourage transfer from our courses to a wide range of contexts. Writing transfer research likewise needs to seek answers to these questions so that we can better understand what individuals bring with them, how they move through activity systems, how dispositions impact individual learning, and how we might engage with them in our classrooms and beyond.

## Notes

1. Dana’s dissertation was a mixed-methods study of eight sections of FYC in which she sought to understand transfer during and after a single-semester, four- credit FYC class. She collected pre- and post- surveys from 135 first-year writers, conducted follow-up interviews with fifteen writers the semester after their FYC course, engaged in class observations of all sections, and collected student writing from the interviewees. Jennifer’s study examined curricular impacts on the transfer of literacy learning from high school to college. She also employed a mixed-

methods approach that included a survey of participants at the end of their high school careers (N=52), email surveys of participants (N=22) as they entered college and engaged in literacy tasks throughout their first year, and in-person interviews (N=10) of participants in the summer after their first year of college. ([Return to text.](#) [\[#note1-ref\]](#))

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