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Elements of Successful Writing Assignment Design in Literature Courses

Sean Patterson

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Dr. Pace

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Introduction

Rhetoric and composition studies, a growing concentration within English studies, researches the theories and practices of teaching writing. A primary interest in the field is: how can students apply the writing skills they learn in the college classroom to other academic and non-academic contexts? This application involves a specific type of writing transfer, the act by which students recruit skills and knowledge used previously in order to effectively address a new situation. Scholars have defined transfer in a variety of ways since the early twentieth century, but all have reached consensus on an important point: successful transfer demands a wide array of cognitive skills which students develop through writing assignments. Three elements of assignment design are especially critical in helping students practice and refine these cognitive skills: a problem-solving structure, task sequence, and audience awareness.

The field of rhetoric and composition provides a starting point for further study into college writing. Specifically, the field emphasizes the importance of context when composing or addressing a rhetorical situation. This study focuses on the context of literature courses. In their study on the transfer of writing skills from first-year writing to other rhetorical contexts, *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane

Robertson, and Kara Taczak define transfer as the development of writing knowledge and practices that students can "draw upon, use, and repurpose for new writing tasks in new settings" (Yancey et al. 2). This process is not automatic, since students must actively explore and abstract potential connections between past and present learning situations. Whether students see these connections depends on well-designed assignments that allow them to practice useful, context-based skills.

Understanding the role of context in a current writing assignment and connecting it to previous experience is significant, because students must draw upon familiar skills and repurpose them in new contexts. In his essay "The Material Contexts of Assignment Design" Thomas Polk highlights the need for further research into assignment design by focusing on how writing tasks are essentially connected to skills and knowledge learned previously. He writes that earlier studies "focus on the *product* of design and not the *production* of design" (Polk 88). This is important because the products that result from writing assignments, such as essays and theses, impact future institutional procedures and curricula. These products influence how writing is taught, but often fail to include a representative sample of student writers and focus on literature classes in particular. A greater analysis is therefore needed on the process of responding to assignments. Polk follows Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak by suggesting that in the writing process, students learn material within the course context which they can later repurpose for enhanced learning outside the literature classroom.

Well-designed assignments enable students to write with greater breadth, authenticity, and impact. In their essay "Teaching for Transfer" Perkins & Salomon distinguish the process of transfer from ordinary learning. They assert that transfer "assumes learning within a certain

context and asks about impact beyond that context" (Perkins & Salomon 3). In other words,

transfer is a context-based extension of learning, and their way of thinking influences how I

approach my own research, because assignments are the method by which transfer is enabled.

This study identifies a specific context, literature classes, as an initial step in recommending

features of assignment design that best facilitate transfer. Well-designed assignments invite

students to repurpose skills and knowledge for use in different contexts and disciplines. In short,

Polk and Perkins & Salomon establish that assignments can be produced in a way that allows

students to write within one context and then draw on similar skills to serve a different context

and audience.

  Many college writers, if deliberately guided by their writing instructors and assignments,

can distinguish between different disciplinary conventions in their field of study, which can lead

to an understanding of the broader notion of context. In their essay, "Disciplinarity and Transfer:

Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write," Bergmann & Zepernick point out how students

generally accept "disciplinary standards, conventions, and expectations" when composing in a

specific discipline (Bergmann & Zepernick 129). Recent work on writing assignments in

literature courses, for example, show that cross-disciplinary transfer of rhetorical skills is

possible when instructors teach students "where and how to see conventions and practices at

work in a particular piece of discourse" (Bergmann & Zepernick 142). However, these studies do

not consider how students perceive individual assignments within the discipline. Certain

elements of assignment design can promote learning in the discipline of literature and beyond.

For these reasons, studying writing assignments in literature classrooms from a student

perspective is much needed. Well-designed assignments, including literature assignments,

encourage disciplinary mastery as well as foundational writing skills. Thus, awareness of purpose and audience increases the likelihood that students will transfer those skills from one class to another.

Indeed, rhetoric and composition studies have studied the best practices for assignment design that can help lead students to transfer of these writing skills. For example, in his book *Writing Assignments Across the Curriculum*, Dan Melzer points out that a well-designed assignment can reveal the goals and values of instructors as well as their academic disciplines (Melzer 3). He focuses on the rhetorical features of assignments, such as genre, purpose, and audience. Yet, recent scholarship has not addressed how strong writing assignments in literature classrooms can help students transfer these skills when writing for other classes.

In this paper, I argue that successful writing assignments in literature courses can best promote transfer of writing skills when they include three common elements: a problem-solving structure, task sequence, and audience awareness. To make this argument, I draw from previous scholarship and a survey of John Carroll University students to show how assignment design plays a crucial role in promoting writing transfer. This study analyzes elements of successful assignment design in literature courses and recommends which components of writing assignments most effectively promote transfer to new contexts. In doing so, this study is significant because it demonstrates that effective assignments stress how the writer and audience, as well as the specific task and future contexts, are interconnected. To show this interconnectedness, my study culminates in three recommendations. In order to best design assignments to help facilitate transfer, instructors should create task sequences, present assignments as problems, and specify the audience students are addressing. In short, this study

seeks to fill that gap by considering literature assignments and integrating feedback from English majors at John Carroll.

Literature Review

Most of the recent research on assignment design and the transfer of writing skills addresses how well-designed assignments can help students draw on past learning situations when they approach new writing tasks. Transferring writing competency from one context to another is more intellectually complex than simply applying the same skill at a new place in a new time. Much of the scholarship on literature assignments prioritizes context, while recent research on transfer tends to show that repurposing skills requires intentional practice and cognitive activity. Scholarship that focuses on elements of well-designed literature assignments is informed by previous research in rhetoric and composition studies but often lacks a student perspective.

In recent years, the transfer of writing knowledge from one course to another has been studied extensively in the field of rhetoric and composition, and much of the scholarship dates to the twentieth century. However, more recent reports have emerged that offer more insight as well as an opening for student voices. *The Elon Statement of Writing Transfer*, an influential report from a 2013 conference called Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer, aims to "provide a framework for *continued* inquiry and theory-building" (*Elon Statement* 347). This framework is helpful for producing studies that are more student-centered and up-to-date. According to the Elon Statement, when students draw on previous knowledge and strategies, they must transform or repurpose that prior knowledge" (*Elon Statement* 352). This

transformation is a first step toward transfer, and often occurs when completing a writing task. The extent to which students actually repurpose these skills, the *Elon Statement* suggests, is best measured by gathering their own perspective on assignments. Certain features of assignment design, for example, allow for a continuous, gradually more refined application of skills and knowledge that enable students to transfer writing. These include rhetorically-based concepts like genre, purpose, and audience which have frequently been used to construct curricula and classes (*Elon Statement* 353). *The Elon Statement*, therefore, attempts to show that successful transfer is contingent upon adapting skills used in familiar contexts to new contexts. Yet, further research is needed, however, on how assignments themselves promote recognition of context and application of skills.

While work such as *The Elon Statement* provides a general overview to the importance of writing transfer from one context to another. In her essay, "First the Bad News, Then the Good News: Where Writing Research Has Taken Us and Where We Need to Take it Now," Wendy Bishop focuses on the importance of understanding context when it comes to shifting writing from one context to another. Although this essay was written in the twentieth century, her argument influences current thinking about assignment design and the importance of context. For example, she stresses that more research is needed on what she calls "context-based insights" into "general classroom experiences" (Bishop 3). Here, she means that a greater understanding of students' learning experiences is needed to complement research on writing curricula. She also established that classroom experiences have been overlooked. So, while Bishop's essay does not address transfer and assignment design specifically, she recognizes the importance of context shifting when students are moving from one writing situation to another.

This focus on a specific type of transfer, shifting from one context to another, appears in Gerald Calais' review of Ropbert Haskell's taxonomies of learning transfer. In his essay, "Haskell's Taxonomies Of Transfer Of Learning: Implications For Classroom Instruction," Gerald Calais draws from Robert Haskell's taxonomies of learning transfer. The first three are gradations in specialized knowledge and intentional application of skills especially relevant to literature courses. Calais identifies Level One of Haskell's taxonomy as "nonspecific transfer," which establishes that current and previous learning are interconnected. Level Two, Calais notes, is "application transfer," which involves applying what one has learned to a concrete situation. Level Three is "context transfer," which refers to applying skills under slightly different situations. Calais's summary of Haskell's taxonomies is significant for my research because in many literature courses, for instance, students might draw on Level Two when they interpret a selection of text based on their previous reading. Level Three is also common and involves similar skills, applied to more dissimilar situations. The reason for the separate classifications is that significant transfer is proportional to the number of similarities or analogical relationships among past, present, future situations (Calais 7). Assignments provide specific tasks that help students make these associations. In short, both Bishop and Calais suggest that identifying learning context is important for establishing the potential for learning transfer. However, context is only a preliminary step in transfer; individual factors also play a role. In short, Calais suggests that it is not only previous learning, but also new contexts that are important. Student perspectives on beneficial writing assignments seek to fill this gap in the scholarship.

One area of transfer that focuses on student understanding of their own selves as writers and as writers who shift from one context to another appears in Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer

Wells's 2012 article "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions." Driscoll and Wells build on previous research into social context and writing curricula to argue that students offer important insights of their own into assignment design, as is documented in scholarship. Driscoll and Wells focus on the role of student dispositions, or attitudes toward learning and literature, in effective transfer. They describe four specific dispositions—value, self efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation—that influence writing transfer. They also note that "fundamentals like rhetorical situations, literacy development, and genre theory" are all predicated upon context (Driscoll and Wells 2). Context is particularly relevant in literature courses, which situate reading and writing in a variety of time periods and genres. While the broader topic of assignment design is generalizable to other disciplines, literature courses prioritize individual and contextual factors, which instructors should consider when designing assignments. In short, Dricoll and Wells build upon the work of Calais by suggesting that student dispositions are important when applying learning to slightly different situations. By revealing how they view past and current learning, students offer valuable insights into the types of assignments that most effectively assist in learning. The Elon statement on writing says that "Individual dispositions and individual identity play key roles in transfer" which affirms Driscoll and Wells's findings and supports the rationale for surveying students as part of this project on assignment design (*Elon Statement* 352).

A more recent study on transfer shows how students can specifically take their learning about writing from one context and use it in another writing situation. In *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing,* Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak address the personal and curricular factors that enable students to repurpose

knowledge for new writing tasks. They propose new insights into how students make use of prior learning, a relevant area of inquiry in the present study which analyzes the experience of English undergraduates. Students entering college, they found, "see writing principally as a vehicle for authorial expression, not as a vehicle for dialogue or an opportunity to make knowledge" (Yancey et al. 111). While self-expression is a factor in developing writing voice, entering into a conversation or rhetorical situation is of greater concern in literature courses. Whether students enter this dialogue or knowledge-making opportunity, these researchers note, depends on well-designed assignments. This study is important because it reinforces that a clear audience and purpose are important for approaching writing tasks, something my study will take into account.

Yancey, et al, also address the importance, among other issues, of well-designed assignments. In their 2014 study, they explore the transfer of knowledge and writing skills. In recent years, academic argumentative writing, a mainstay of composition classes, has been seen as one among many varieties of writing (Yancey et al. 1). Questioning conventional approaches to teaching and writing can be constructive. A well-designed literature assignment assists in this transfer of learning. Integrating previous scholarly work with student perspectives shows that effective learning depends on well-designed assignments.

One place where well-designed writing assignments can lead to transfer of writing knowledge is the literature classroom. However, recent scholarship on writing assignments has focused relatively little on literature courses in particular. These studies are often outdated and limited. For example, in "Motivating Writing Differently in a Literary Studies Classroom," James Reither describes the dichotomy between faculty discourse and student discourse. In his

view of the writing scene, students are uninformed outsiders and instructors make all the important choices about writing such as feedback and grading (Reither 49). This classroom dynamic limits inquiry and inhibits authentic learning. However, Reither says that writing will be motivated differently if students' texts take over at least some of the responsibility for organizing and presenting course material (Reither 52). Many literature classrooms, Riether notes, often suppress genuine student learning, suggesting that a change in assignment design is needed. Reither's article is from *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, a compilation of essays from 1995. A more recent evaluation of the issues raised in this research, such as the student-based research in my study, will ultimately help instructors design writing assignments that lead to the kind of learning transfer discussed here.

To many students, academic writing remains inaccessible due to highly specialized language and an unclear purpose in assignment design. Many students understand the form an essay must take, but fewer can grasp the process involved in writing to create knowledge and enter into a larger conversation. The struggle involved in this process is necessary for learning. Further support can be found in Alan Jackson's "Cognition and Culture: Addressing the Needs of Student-Writers." Furthermore, Jackson observes that composition addresses professors' rather than students' desire for change, and that the "intellectual questions of student-writers are overlooked" (Jackson 228). Thus, in order to better understand what types of academic discourse students value the most, it helps to capture their opinions on their own writing in literature courses.

Other research on assignment design in recent years has related academic contexts to so-called "real world" contexts in order to understand how students view their own writing. For

example, in her 2019 article "A Conceptual Framework for Authentic Writing Assignments: Academic and Everyday Meet," Katalin Wargo focuses on how students acquire knowledge and skills in both everyday writing and academic writing. She says that "the notion of real-world is often erroneously pitted against learning in academic contexts" (Wargo 539). Assignments distinguish academic writing as academic, hence the need to study assignments first within academic contexts, through a student survey, and then in relation to other contexts. Literature courses offer significant insights into the question of transfer because many skills, such as literacy, are skills that students utilize beyond the context of the classroom. Similarly, Kristen H. Perry, in her 2012 article "What is Literacy?—a critical overview of sociocultural perspectives," defines literacy as "what people do with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it" (Perry 54). Reading and writing are crucial to the skills of literature courses as well as the overall discipline. Literacy is a skill that students are frequently asked to demonstrate in responding to assignments, and an example of how academic and professional contexts can intersect when skills and knowledge are transferred.

Another work that addresses well-designed assignments is Arlene Wilner's essay "Fostering Critical Literacy: The Art of Assignment Design." Wilner analyzes what constitutes a successful assignment. While she insists that there is no strict formula for crafting an effective assignment, she proposes a model of ill-structured problems (Wilner 24). According to this framework, questions are grounded in uncertainty, "dependent on the kinds of thought processes that real-world practitioners engage in," and evoke a complex response (Wilner 24). This model increases the quality and authenticity of the writing students produce. A successfully-designed assignment imparts skills to students that are not directly teachable. Students are most engaged

when they understand the demands of the genre, criteria for evaluation, and possibility of criticizing a persuasive text. Wilner, like Driscoll and Wells, establishes that student perspectives are crucial in successful achievement and successful transfer of skills.

Scholars have conducted studies into the process of composing, which is relevant in literature courses.Students can recognize the "problem-posing qualities of assignment design" (Wilner 26). This in turn can help them transfer their problem-solving skills such as analysis, interpretation, and argumentation into other tasks. Additionally, this would prepare students to enter "classic and ongoing conversations" and participate in public discourse. Yet several scholars point out that learning is not always easily transferable. When teachers craft assignments, they model the types of questions they think are important for students to ask of the text (Wilner 35).

Additionally, the "National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment" (NILOA) shows that assignments serve the important purpose of signifying to students what instructors value and what they expect from students (Hutchings et al. 7*)*. Well-designed assignments elicit an original response, even if students must synthesize new information to inform their point of view. In literature courses students enter a conversation, so to speak, of previous scholarship that might be unfamiliar, so that they can articulate a meaningful response. A problem-solving framework can motivate students to write critical and sophisticated "answers" using higher-order processes applicable to other courses. Wilner claims that "ill-structured [problems] require evaluation of a number of approaches, careful consideration of evidence, imagination of counterarguments, and the integration of information, concepts, and contexts" (Wilner 24). These skills are characteristic of undergraduate literature courses. Students draw on these skills when

approaching the "problem" presented in the assignment instructions. Yancey, Robertson, and

Taczak state that "transfer seeks to "help students develop writing knowledge and practices that

they can…repurpose for writing tasks in new settings" (Yancey et al. 2). The research suggests

that writing practices common in literature courses have a constructive purpose beyond the

classroom.

     Literature courses require a distinctive organized thought process based on context and

audience. In his article "Writing Speaks to Situations Through Recognizable Forms" from the

book *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies,* Charles Bazerman

highlights how completing an assignment involves anticipating context and form. His view

aligns with Wilner's notion of ill-structured problems when he says that in writing there are few

"here-and-now clues about what the situation is, who our audiences are, and how we want to

respond" (*NWWK* 35). To some degree, students play a role in constructing context. Successful

assignments, Wilner and Bazerman suggest, enable students to solve a problem and envision an

audience. A well-designed assignment acknowledges that context is not so much a physical

setting as a means to enter into a conversation. This view fulfills Bishop's call for "context-based

insights" into "general classroom experiences" and is further established by previously-overlook

student perspectives on the content and form of common literature assignments (Bishop 3).

     On the surface, reusing established skills might seem obvious, but assignments do not

always allow students to recruit the depth and breadth of learning needed to achieve intellectual

growth and expand understanding. As *The Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* concluded, even

while we are bringing existing knowledge and experience to bear on the new situation, we must

learn anew as part of the process of understanding, adaptation, and enculturation" (Elon

Statement 352). Learning anew occurs gradually, through each assignment. Yancey et al. recognized writing's potential to generate knowledge (Yancey et al. 111). A present concern in the field is how students can develop a similar awareness of their writing purpose, which is always closely related to audience. This literature review has shown the prominent role of transfer and student attitudes toward writing. For this reason, a survey was fitting to include in this research project. Together, the literature review and survey address the previously-overlooked context of literature classes and include the voices of students.

Methodology

To learn more about how students respond to writing assignments in literature courses, and to highlight the voices of students in assignment design research, I conducted a survey of English majors and minors at John Carroll University. The overall purpose of the survey is to examine how students respond to literature assignments, because their perception of audience and purpose aids in transferring their learning to other contexts. The survey questions reflect Bishop's call for context-based instruction, Yancey's view of purposeful writing, and Wilner's emphasis on student dispositions. These concepts are all related and relevant to teaching practice, although more research is needed that includes new insights. Recent scholarship, discussed above, lacks conclusive recommendations for how to best design literature assignments that lead to learning transfer. My survey, and the results that follow, address this gap and also integrate the voice of students in a new and genuine way. In surveys and studies on college courses, students frequently show that they take ownership of their learning, and are not just passive recipients of a curriculum (Bergmann & Zepernick 28). Within the curriculum, individual

assignments ask students to apply skills and knowledge—from the familiar context of the

literature classroom—to a new context (*Elon Statement* 352). The survey also assesses students'

self-knowledge about their writing practices, something Yancey and her researchers argue is

integral for deeper learning (Bergmann & Zepernick 105). Thus, my study aims to capture

students' preferences and dispositions toward various literature writing assignments and how

they relate to their transfer of writing skills from the literature course to other writing contexts.

I invited John Carroll English majors and minors to participate in an online questionnaire

about assignment design. Participants from three concentrations in the John Carroll University

English major (professional writing, creative writing, literature) were recruited via email to

complete a voluntary, anonymous survey. The survey consisted of multiple-choice and free

response questions in which students revealed what they saw as the most useful elements of

assignment design. See Appendix A for the complete list of questions. Of the thirteen

respondents to the survey, eight were English majors (concentrations: seven literature and one

professional writing). Five were English minors (concentrations: 1 literature, 3 professional

writing, 1 creative writing). Eleven of the thirteen respondents had taken one or more literature

courses, so they would have practiced a variety of skill-based and text-based assignments. All

answers were anonymous. Since much of the research on assignment design focuses on FYC, I

decided to gauge how many students had taken the standard first-year class. One had taken FYC

at a different institution; one had taken HP-101 (first-year writing for students in John Carroll's

honors program); 4 "tested out" of FYC; 7 completed the standard class. This question was

intended to account for students' different experiences, but no matter what class they enrolled in,

they completed similar writing assignments in their first year of college. The scholarship shows

that students have very different first-year writing experiences, which can impart skills, emphasize strengths, and present assignments in different ways. In any case, when students draw on previous knowledge and strategies, they must transform or repurpose that prior knowledge" (*Elon Statement* 352). The method of this survey therefore accommodates all students while challenging them to assess their own experiences in light of recent research on assignments. A survey is the most direct and beneficial means of gathering data that can be used to pose recommendations for assignments that promote transfer.

Discussion of Survey Results

This survey reinforced several concepts presented in the literature review scholarship. Specifically, the survey revealed that the writing assignments students responded to in these literature courses allowed them to take ownership in learning course material. Students had strong opinions on many issues, reinforcing Bergmann & Zepernick's view that taking ownership in learning is important. The survey questions gauged whether students in literature courses learned writing skills that are similar to writing tasks common in other courses, such as textual analysis, close reading, and writing for a specific audience. These are skills they can reuse and repurpose in other settings.

Examining the survey results revealed a few key patterns. First, when considering past writing assignments in literature courses students demonstrated their awareness of audience, whether it was stated directly or implied. Of the twelve responses to the question "In your literature writing assignments, is the intended audience typically specified in the assignment instructions?" five students said often, two said very often, and five said almost never. Some

students might have a better grasp on the assumed audience, due to their experience with

academic writing. Still, there is a greater need to specify the audience intentionally so students

can recruit higher-order skills. Awareness of speaker, subject, and audience is integral to

academic writing yet is frequently unspecified or assumed to be the professor. Students

approach writing based on how they perceive the professor will respond, an attitude that values

present achievement over future proficiency in writing effectively. The survey suggests that

students complete literature assignments with "personal engagement and critical distance"

(Wilner 24). Student writers must consider the audience of the assignment, so that they can

engage readers but also respond critically to the work under consideration. Tailoring an argument

to specific audiences is related to context transfer, because students often draw on similar skills

even when the writing task is not identical. If the audience is not specified in assignments,

transfer will not take place as easily.

A second pattern that emerged was that students reported a strong awareness of the

rhetorical modes: inform, argue, persuade, entertain. This is promising for potential transfer,

since the Elon Statement claims that "Successful writing transfer occurs when a writer can

transform rhetorical knowledge and rhetorical awareness into performance" (Elon Statement

352). Assignment design determines how effectively students can perform these four essential

functions. Furthermore, literature assignments instill a recognition of disciplinary conventions, a

skill that will benefit students in other courses. As Bergmann and Zepernick establish, students

can perceive transferrable practices at work in particular pieces of discourse (Bergmann &

Zepernick 142). Assignments invite students to take the next step, by performing a writing task

according to these practices. When analyzing a text, for instance, students can envision the

impact of the text on different audiences, and then craft a response that is more-open minded. Or, when reading closely, students might determine whether a passage can fulfill multiple rhetorical modes. Then, students practice new ways of solving rhetorical and real-world problems.

How students respond to structured or open-ended prompts was another noteworthy pattern from the survey. Student respondents were split on whether they preferred structured or open-ended prompts, and provided strong and varied reasons. Four respondents favored a structured prompt, and six favored an open-ended prompt. Interestingly, one student who preferred structured prompts said that a response to an open-ended question "might not be what a professor is looking for" while another student said they preferred open-ended questions because they allow "liberty to write what I want and not just what the professor wants to hear." Another student preferred *structured* questions because they tell "exactly what my professor is looking for in order to obtain full credit." Students share a concern for adhering to the professor's expectations, which is understandable but also indicative of a greater emphasis on the "answer" than the process of arriving there. It has been documented that "students' meta-awareness often plays a key role in transfer," and this can be seen in the different rationales given in the survey (*Elon Statement* 353).

The third major pattern that emerged from my study stems from the question, "Which literature writing assignments do you find most helpful in learning course material?" led to a wide variety of responses. On the surface, answers appeared to vary, with students noting that they found a wide range of writing assignments helpful in learning course material, from close reading prompts to literary analysis to personal interpretation and reflection. A closer look at these responses, however, suggests that the assignments students find most beneficial to their

learning share a common feature: a short, in-depth response informed by a particular text. This finding is significant within the study because it suggests that literature courses would benefit from more assignments that demand a thoughtful interpretation that responds to and is supported by a text. This pattern also supports the rationale for focusing on literature classes. By recognizing the conventions and practices at work in a particular literary discourse, such as a novel, students can respond effectively in a variety ways (Bergmann & Zepernick 142). By promoting "personal engagement and critical distance" with a text, literature courses are valuable for learning across contexts (Wilner 24). The transfer of knowledge and skills like close reading and textual analysis depends on assignments. How these elements are presented and designed are crucial for learning course material and applying it to other academic and professional contexts.

In short, students offer abundant and strong reasons for perceiving how different types of literature assignments facilitate their own learning. They also specify the degree to which structured prompts help or hinder their awareness of the audience. Therefore, the recommendations that follow will take into consideration the two main patterns that emerged from the survey.

Recommendations

The literature review and survey have established that transfer depends on how writers perceive connections between writing contexts. In order to foster the intellectual skills needed to repurpose skills like close-reading and textual analysis, instructors can present assignments as problems to be solved; much growth and learning takes place in the intellectual endeavor that leads to an answer. Through assignments instructors convey the interconnectedness of learning,

which in turn helps students believe that the writing they do is meaningful and beneficial to future academic tasks. As such, based on the results from the survey and on recent scholarship in assignment design and transfer, I suggest three recommendations to help instructors create literature writing assignments that invite students to articulate stronger, more informed responses within the discipline and then transfer the skills they develop to other contexts.

Recommendation 1: Present assignments as problems to be solved

By presenting assignments as problems to be solved, students can focus less on the final output and more on the writing process, where the deepest learning takes place. Drawing on Wilner's notion of ill-structured problems, instructors can create assignments that mirror the types of thought that people rely on in the workplace. In a literature course these skills might include careful reading, collaborating with others, and textual analysis. What are some specific assignments? A student might present the main ideas of a reading and then facilitate a class discussion that further develops those ideas. Involving more students in the process increases student engagement. Asking questions forces students to think spontaneously, a skill that is required in professional settings. Drawing on higher-order skills to solve problems enables deeper learning, as students adhere to "disciplinary standards, conventions, and expectations" even as their writing process lends itself to transfer (Bergmann & Zepernick 129). This recommendation would also respond to trends in college writing, the source of most research on transfer and assignment design.

Colleges have seen a growing popularity of integrative capstone experiences, and such, "they face the challenge of creating truly crosscutting assignments" that "call on students to pull

together their learning across multiple contexts and over time" (Hutchings et al. 15). Integrative

assignments can be structured as problems because in solving them, students apply disciplinary

skills, as well as the breadth of knowledge that results from real-world experience. Such an

assignment puts into practice Wilner's notion of ill-structured problems, in which students'

thought processes mirror the types of thought people use in the workplace. The result is that

while students write within the particular context of the literature classroom, they draw on prior

learning and prepare themselves for future work. Without a framework for encountering and

solving a problem, students might not automatically synthesize the knowledge and skills needed

for authentic learning. Assignments, therefore, should be structured as problems in order to

provide the best chance for students to showcase disciplinary knowledge and then transfer this

knowledge to other courses.

Recommendation 2: Sequence assignments using smaller tasks leading to the final product.

Drawing on *The Elon Statement on Writing Transfer*, as well as student feedback,

sequencing assignments could potentially benefit students in and out of the classroom. How does

a framework for c*ontinued* inquiry translate into a concrete assignment? One way is by designing

a large task such as a research paper, but creating several smaller tasks that anticipate the final

paper and prepare students to complete it. For example, instructors could begin by asking

students to write reflectively about a topic that interests them. Then, they could generate a list of

questions, independently or in groups, that further explore the topic. Creating search terms for a

research database could help further student inquiry. Next students can articulate a research

question, which could be a problem to be solved. This is one example of a framework for

continued inquiry (*Elon Statement* 347). This type of consistent learning allows students to use

higher-order thinking skills that they will draw upon in other professional and academic settings

Recommendation 3: Specify the audience to which students should write

      This recommendation allows instructors to teach students disciplinary conventions while

also imparting the importance of rhetorical skills. As the Elon statement states, audience is

included in writing curricula but often left unmentioned in individual assignments. Nevertheless,

students who write to a specific audience write more focused responses in literature classes. In

the survey, the majority of students responded that in literature courses, they write to the

professor or instructor. If students had the opportunity to write to a variety of audiences, students

would develop transferable skills while constantly learning anew (*Elon Statement* 352).

Assignments designed with the audience in mind can also empower student writers to develop a

mindset proper to transfer. The research shows that four skills instrumental in the writing process

also facilitate transfer: value, self efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation (Driscoll and Wells 2).

To that end, literature classes using writing assignments that draw from these recommendations

can foster the rhetorical awareness needed to master these skills and problem-solving

opportunities to apply them to other challenges, academically and professionally.

Conclusion

      This project proposes recommendations based on a synthesis of previous research, as

well as feedback from John Carroll University English majors and minors. Specifically, this

study seeks to fill gaps in the previous scholarship in two ways: first, by offering more up-to-date

research on literature assignments by showing that applying recent recommendations on writing assignments in general to the literature classroom leads students to a better understanding not only of course material but also how their writing knowledge in that class can transfer to writing knowledge in new contexts; second, by considering the viewpoint of students, a voice that past scholars have not addressed in research about writing assignments in the literature classroom. The results, therefore, show that three key elements of successful assignment design are crucial when creating writing assignments in the literature classroom: designing writing assignments that allow students to address problem-posing situations; sequencing assignments that begin with smaller assignments and culminate in a larger, more complex one; and specifying a clear audience for students. Studying assignments from this new perspective has promising potential for instructional design, writing pedagogy, and efforts to maximize the depth and breadth of student learning.

Appendix A: List of Survey Questions

Below are the survey questions I sent to all English majors and minors at the John Carroll University Department of English.

I understand the information above and consent to participate in this survey.

What year are you?

If you are an English major, what is your track?

If you are an English minor, what is your track?

Have you taken a literature course?

What was your first-year writing experience?

How did your first-year writing experience help you transfer writing skills to non-English classes?

My writing assignments are most often: (informative, argumentative, persuasive, entertaining)

Describe the features of your favorite writing assignments for literature courses

Describe the features of your least favorite writing assignments for literature courses

Which literature writing assignments do you find most helpful in learning course material?

Which literature writing assignments do you find most helpful in improving writing skills and knowledge?

For literature writing assignments, do you prefer responding to a structured or open-ended prompt? Why?

In your literature writing assignments, is the intended audience typically specified in the assignment instructions?

If your literature assignments specify an audience, who is that audience (most often)?

How often have you used close-reading skills from literature writing assignments in other academic and non-academic writing contexts (i.e. other courses)?

How often have you used textual analysis skills from literature writing assignments in other academic writing contexts? (i.e. other courses)?

How often have you used writing skills from your literature writing assignments in other academic writing contexts?   (i.e. other courses?)

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