

## Understanding the Transfer of Writing Skills through the Writing Center: An Autoethnographic Account

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the role of the writing center in facilitating writing in interdisciplinary contexts and the transfer of writing skills across academic disciplines. Drawing on my autoethnographic account of a university writing center consultant (writing tutor) at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and the psychological theories of learning transfer, I examine how the writing center functions as an academic space of a “contact zone” where writing skills are negotiated and transferred. A central question I address in this paper is: How does the writing center contribute to transferring writing skills across disciplines? This question revolves around the nature of interaction between consultants and student writers at the center involving the navigation through differences in disciplinary writing conventions, language, cultural backgrounds, academic mentoring, personal reading and writing experiences, and varying levels of exposure to academic writing practices. These encounters can result in transformative learning experiences for both tutors and student writers. I argue that the interdisciplinary nature of writing center consultations fosters the transfer of writing skills by creating opportunities for dialogue and negotiation between the consultants and the students of diverse disciplinary communities.*

**Keywords:** *University Writing Center, writing conventions, contact zone, transfer of writing skills*

### University Writing Center and Writing Pedagogy

A University Writing Center, institutionally practiced across American universities, is a collaborative academic space designed to assist students from all disciplines in helping to improve their writing skills. Primarily, it serves as an academic support center where student writers receive guidance on various aspects of their writing. The consultants at these centers are trained in academic writing conventions and equipped to guide students through the writing process, help them develop their writing skills, deepen their understanding of writing conventions, and build confidence as writers. The center often emphasizes process over product, which, according to Donald Murray, is “the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, and to communicate what we learn about our world” (4). Tutors adopt this process-based writing pedagogy to encourage and facilitate student writers to engage in brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing and foster a deeper understanding of writing as an ongoing process. Through dialogue about writing and its rhetorical contexts, the Writing Center promotes the transfer of writing skills across various academic disciplines and enables students to apply what they learn from the center to their own writing contexts and needs.

Conceptualizing the University Writing Center as a space for the transfer of writing skills also draws from the idea of the center as a “contact zone.” In this context, student writers as well as consultants from diverse academic backgrounds interact with writing center tutors, creating a contact zone space that, according to Mary Louise Pratt, is a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly

asymmetrical relations of power” (607). As a contact zone, the writing center facilitates the transfer of writing-related skills and knowledge from tutors of one discipline to students from other disciplines. In fact, as a part of situated learning, “it is absolutely vital for writing centers to draw from other fields to develop new ideas” (Devet 120). In this sense, the teaching and learning process in the writing center becomes an eclectic and integrative endeavor. In such a contact zone, “a student writer is not [asked] to leave one discourse in order to enter another, but to take things that are usually kept apart and bring them together, to negotiate the gaps and conflicts between several competing discourses” (Harris 35). Although the topic of knowledge transfer in writing centers has been discussed by several scholars of the discipline, the specifics of what is transferred have not been fully explored. So, my goal, in this paper is to investigate how writing centers help students transfer writing-related knowledge beyond their individual learning experiences to their various academic disciplines.

### **Theoretical Grounding of Learning Transfer and University Writing Center**

The concept of learning transfer originates from the discipline of educational psychology, with significant contributions from Edward Thorndike and Robert S. Woodworth, starting in 1901. This field explores how the mind functions during the transfer of learning, which occurs when individuals apply ideas, strategies, or skills learned in one context to a new situation. Thorndike and Woodworth explored how learning in one area influences performance in related areas, emphasizing that “improvement in one mental function could influence to the one related to the next” (553). Thorndike further contextualized this theory within curriculum design, recommending that tasks selected for learning should reflect real-world situations to facilitate practical learning transfer.

Understanding how learning transfer takes place in a writing center requires distinguishing between what transfer is and what it is not. According to Ellis, transfer refers to “[t]he experience or performance on one task influences performance on some subsequent tasks” (3). He takes an example of mathematics and claims that if one is proficient in algebra, they can do calculus as well. The underlying principle here is that when the mind recognizes the new situation but is identical to what is done or encountered already, then it can perform the new as well. In that situation, the mind draws on the principles of the previous one. For instance, the one who can type in a typewriter can perform the similar task in a computer keyboard as well because both of them have similar identical operative mechanisms. And these mechanisms themselves invite the operation of the mind to act upon in an expected way.

Learning transfer can be conceptualized in contrast to the principle of knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer, rooted in business disciplines, involves the exchange of information between individuals or groups without the cognitive application of prior knowledge to new situations. For example, employees of one company may share assembly manuals with those of others, but this process does not involve applying previously acquired skills to new tasks. In contrast, learning transfer requires the mind to actively engage with and apply prior knowledge in new contexts, preventing what Robert E. Haskell refers to as “functional fixedness” (24).

Theories of transfer developed by educational psychologists such as Haskell in his *Transfer of Learning: Cognition, Instruction, and Reasoning* suggests that transfer occurs under four primary conditions: context, application, near, and far (29-30). These conditions are particularly relevant for understanding transfer in the writing center. First, transfer requires a *context*, such as reading, writing, or tutoring, which serves as the rhetorical situation in which learning writing skills takes place. Second, transfer involves *application* in which prior learning is brought to new situations by establishing connections between them.

Third, transfer occurs when the learning context of one situation closely resembles another (*near* transfer). Fourth, transfer can happen when the mind draws analogical connections between seemingly unrelated situations (*far* transfer).

In the context of writing centers, the transferability of writing-related knowledge and skills can be observed in various forms. Drawing on my experience as a writing consultant at UTEP, I observed that learning transfer begins with the initial interaction between the writing consultant and the student writer, starting with the completion of an Initial Survey. This survey helps build rapport between the writing consultant and student writer by gathering information such as the student's classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Master's, Doctoral), subject code, course number, and specific writing concerns. The completion of this survey allows the consultant to gain a preliminary understanding of the student's needs for writing skills, facilitating a tailored approach to the session and enabling the transfer of writing-related skills across contexts. This context can be visualized with the help of the following figure of the Initial Survey Form enacted at UTEP:

\* What **pre-writing** concern is the student seeking help with?

Brainstorming    Outlining    Organization/Layout    Narrowing Topic

Does not apply

\* What **grammatical and mechanical** concerns is the student seeking help with?

Please select all that apply)

Paragraphs    Sentence Structure

Parallel Structure    Subject/Verb Agreement

Word Choice    Verb Tense

Articles and Prepositions    Spelling

Punctuation    Does not apply

\* What are the **research format and citation styles** the student is seeking help with?

(Select all that apply)

APA    MLA

Chicago Style    Using Sources

Citing Sources    Avoiding Plagiarism

Other Format    Does not apply

\* What **development concerns** is the student is seeking help with? (Select all that apply)

Responding to the Assignment    Thesis Statement

Development of Ideas    Topic Sentence

Transition/Flow    Continuing to work on prior draft

Figure 1: Initial Survey Form of the University Writing Center at UTEP  
(Source: University Writing Center at The University of Texas at El Paso, USA)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the UTEP University Writing Center anticipates the types of assistance that student writers may need, categorizing them into four main areas: pre-writing activities, grammatical and mechanical concerns, research format and citation styles, and developmental concerns. This survey framework, which writing consultants come across in every session with each student, helps the consultants develop a ‘mental framework’ for identifying common struggles in the writing process and prepares them to facilitate the transfer of writing-related knowledge and skills.

For instance, the first category, pre-writing activities, encourages writing center consultants to assist students in developing the foundational skills of writing. At this stage, students gain insights into key components of process-based writing, such as brainstorming, outlining, organization, layout, and narrowing topics. Even if students are already familiar with these skills, they benefit from refining their understanding and applying them to their specific writing tasks. Consultants guide students through various brainstorming techniques, including freewriting, mapping, listing, the pentad method, and journalistic questioning, equipping them with practical tools to enhance their writing across disciplines.

The second category addresses grammatical and mechanical issues where consultants help students improve skills such as paragraphing, sentence structure, parallelism, subject-verb agreement, word choice, verb tense, articles and prepositions, spelling, and punctuation. In writing-center pedagogy, these concerns are often referred to as Lower Order Concerns (LOCs). As Donald A. McAndrew and Thomas J. Reigstad explain, LOCs involve improvement with “surface appearance, correctness, and standard rules of written English” (56). Since they deal with surface-level issues, LOCs are typically given lower priority in writing center consultations. Conversely, Higher Order Concerns (HOCs), which McAndrew and Reigstad define as issues related to “the meaning and communication of the piece, such as thesis and focus, development, structure and organization, and voice” (42), are prioritized. HOCs are more central to the transfer of writing skills because they involve deeper aspects of writing that impact communication and understanding. LOCs, on the other hand, can often be addressed with the help of AI writing tools as well and they could be Grammarly, Microsoft Copilot, Google Bard, or ChatGPT.

The third category of the Initial Survey Form includes concerns related to citation styles, such as MLA, APA, and Chicago Style, as well as citing sources and avoiding plagiarism. These aspects of writing also fall under LOCs, as they deal with technicalities that can be corrected without direct guidance from writing instructors. The fourth category, development concerns, covers HOCs that include thesis statements, topic sentences, idea development, transitions, and the flow of ideas. Here, consultants also support students in overcoming challenges related to completing assignments or revising drafts.

Together, these four categories—comprising both HOCs and LOCs—represent strategic tools for facilitating the transfer of writing skills. Through tutorial dialogues addressing these potential challenges, students become familiar with addressing immediate concerns (*near* transfer) and can apply this knowledge to future writing tasks (*far* transfer) across various contexts.

According to psychological theories, the mind tends to rely on similar strategies to navigate new situations. Haskell refers to this as the mind’s recognition of “near similarity” (30). Bonnie Devet argues that “in near similarities, the mind converts knowledge from one situation to another that is roughly similar” (122). In the context of the writing center, consultants help students recognize and apply pre-writing strategies, such as brainstorming tools, to new rhetorical situations. This transfer of discipline-specific conventions of academic writing is a process that is less likely to be facilitated by instructors from other

disciplines, making the writing center and consultants essential for fostering this skill across various writing contexts.

### **Transferring the Knowledge of Discourse Community**

One of the primary responsibilities of writing center tutors, especially in fostering learning transfer, is to help freshmen “invent the university.” This concept, as defined by Bartholomae, involves teaching students how to “learn to speak [the discourse community's] language, to speak as [they] do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of [the] community” (4). According to him, to become a member of an academic discourse community, students must appropriate its conventions. The writing center plays a crucial role in this process by transferring the fundamentals of academic writing in the university by helping students understand writing as a form of communication between the writer and their audience which constitute their discourse community. A freshman undergoes through navigation of various expectations of the discourse community, including tone, diction, organization, genre conventions (e.g., argumentative, narrative, descriptive), paragraphing, thesis statements, and overall rhetorical situations. These are skills that must be learned, internalized, and appropriated to succeed in academic writing which the writing center facilitates.

Bonnie Devet highlights the importance of training writing center tutors to enhance their awareness, competence, and effectiveness of tutoring so that their impact on student learning extends beyond the immediate session. This involves developing both declarative and procedural knowledge. According to Robert E. Haskell, declarative knowledge is “knowledge of or about something” (101). In a writing center, this might involve teaching concepts like subject-verb agreement, claims, reasons, warrants, or evidence. However, impactful learning transfer occurs when tutors engage with procedural knowledge, which Haskell defines as knowledge of “how to do something” (101). Procedural knowledge is what enables students to apply the concepts learned in the writing center independently to their broader academic work which makes the transfer of writing skills truly effective. Devet illustrates this with an example of how teaching subject-verb agreement can shift from a declarative to a procedural approach, ensuring students understand not just the rule but how to apply it in their writing.

After explaining how the error confuses readers, consultants can show student writers different ways the problem arises: dropping the “s” on a verb in certain dialects, long sentences that cause writers to forget the noun count and so forth. Thus, consultants provide ‘schémas’ (what transfer labels as declarative knowledge) or larger pictures before they launch into “how-to” (procedural) ways to fix the error. By using declarative to procedural transfer, consultants provide students with a larger perspective, preventing the consultant and students from getting bogged down in micro concerns. (126)

In a writing center, as discussed above, students often seek help with various aspects of writing, including word choice, articles and prepositions, punctuation, sentence structure, verb tense, and spelling. Through addressing these mechanical and grammatical issues, students gain generalized knowledge that can be adapted to different writing contexts.

### **Tutors as Audience and Learning Transfer**

Student writers in a Writing Center space get an opportunity to better understand the rhetorical concept of audience in academic writing. When tutors at the Center read the students’ work aloud, it helps the writers visualize and recognize the role of the audience in any writing situation. This interaction allows students to develop a mental abstraction about the importance of considering the audience, which they can apply to other writing contexts. Before visiting the writing center, students may view their writing as a private endeavor. Also, it is quite common for student writers to encounter several challenges including “the

difficulty in finding a patient and meticulous reader to identify issues aligning with academic conventions is the major one” (Pandey 11). However, while engaging with writing center tutors, student writers get an opportunity to introduce their works into the real world, and the potential feedback, ideas, and skills gained from these sessions provide valuable support that they can use as major takeaways for the revision as well as for the future writing tasks.

The writing center’s affordances of tutors as audience aligns with Chaim Perelman’s concept of two types of audience which is pertinent to understanding the way it can turn into the form of transfer in the writing center. For him, the audience is of two broad categories: the particular audience and the universal audience (Perelman 14). Accordingly, particular audiences are the immediate audience the student writers have in their mind while writing and they could be their instructors in the case of writing assignments. Though the audience element operates in a complex way in every piece of the rhetorical situation, Perelman addresses the importance of considering the role of the audience as “[i]t would be pointless for the speaker develop argumentation without being concerned with the reactions of the sole interlocutor, who necessarily moves from the role of the passive listener to that of active participant” (15).

While the particular audience consists of a specific person or members of a specific discourse community, the universal audience is broader, encompassing anyone who may engage with the text. Perelman notes that the universal audience “may be all of humanity, or at least all those who are ‘competent’ and can have reasoning skill” (14). In this context, writing center tutors can serve as the universal audience, providing feedback from an external perspective that student writers may not have initially considered. From a transfer theory perspective, the particular audience functions as the *near* proximity, while the tutors represent the *far*. By engaging with these dual dynamics, student writers can become more critical and informed about their writing. This interaction can also be analyzed through the lens of audience theory, a fundamental aspect of composition theory.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford conceptualize audience in two ways: as either real people who respond to a text or as constructed figures shaped by the writer. They refer to these as the addressed audience and the invoked audience. The addressed audience consists of the “actual or intended readers of a text” who “exist outside the text” (167). These are real individuals with specific values, needs, and expectations that the writer must anticipate and respond to within their writing. Writing center consultants play a crucial role in helping here for student writers to identify their actual audiences by considering the context in which the students’ work will be submitted.

On the other hand, Ede and Lunsford describe invoked audiences as the constructed figures created by the writer’s language and rhetorical choices. The audience that emerges through tone, diction, and the complexity of ideas can either align with the intended audience or create a disconnect if not carefully considered. Student writers need to recognize that their rhetorical choices automatically shape the audience within their text. Writing center consultants guide students through this process to ensure the values and positions constructed in their writing appropriately match those of the real audience writers intend to reach (166). Thus, the writing center becomes a key space for fostering awareness of these complex dynamics of audience anticipation and construction in a composition process.

### **Learning Transfer of Commonplaces and Genre Awareness**

The Initial Survey at the UTEP Writing Center, as shown in Figure 1, suggests that many students seek assistance with grammatical and mechanical concerns in their writing. This is particularly relevant for universities like UTEP or Tribhuvan University, Nepal, where a significant number of students in the classroom come from non-native English backgrounds and often face challenges in these areas. Common concerns they bring include prepositions,

punctuation, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and spelling. Despite this, the prevailing philosophy in writing centers, as reflected in the discourse community, emphasizes “the idea that a writing center can . . . [never] be some sort of skills center, a fix-it shop” (North 435). This notion encourages writing tutors not to simply proofread students’ papers but to engage them in the writing process in a more meaningful way. As Hawthorne explains,

we keep reminding ourselves that it is possible to work on proofreading issues without proofreading for the student. Students can be taught to proof-read for themselves, just as they’re taught to develop their own ideas and support their own theses. It’s frustrating work, hardly as rewarding as deep discussions about ideas, but sometimes exactly what the student needs. (6)

This approach underscores the importance of fostering student independence and deeper engagement with the writing process, rather than merely addressing surface-level errors.

However, such established discourse also fails when an overwhelming number of student writers visiting the writing center seek assistance with better choice of words, better sentence structure, correct prepositions, and several others. In the course of the recurrent encounter with these issues in working with the consultants of the writing center, students’ ways of better expression in the language choices are most likely to take the form of learning transfer. Such ‘better ways of expression’ themselves serve as tools of learning transfer in the writing center because those are the recurrent issues that each student especially from the non-native English background comes across in most of the writing situation. The importance of these concerns is also validated by their quality of enhancing readability and credibility in the writing piece.

Students also frequently visit the writing center to learn about outlining and organizing their papers. As indicated in the Initial Survey Form of the UTEP Writing Center, these skills fall under pre-writing activities. However, since writing is a recursive process, it is natural for students to revisit earlier stages, such as organization, even after completing a draft. Students often seek guidance on how to reorganize their drafts to improve clarity and coherence. One key takeaway for students is the understanding that strategies for organizing and outlining differ across various writing contexts. Ellen C. Carillo critiques the common transfer-as-application model, which assumes that knowledge remains static. According to her, the role of context is important to learn and prior knowledge of the writing tutors needs to be adapted or repurposed in different writing situations. Rather than assuming that a strategy learned in a first-year writing course can be directly applied to a later history course, the writing students need to recognize that writing contexts vary, and strategies must be adjusted accordingly (46-47).

Composition studies emphasize the critical role of genre awareness in writing, recognizing that genre helps students identify and navigate different rhetorical situations. Writing center consultants can assist students in recognizing how genres function across disciplines. Carolyn Miller, in her seminal essay “Genre as Social Action,” redefines genre as “typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations” (159). She moves beyond the traditional understanding of genre as merely text-types or formal features, positioning genres as dynamic social actions performed by both readers and writers. Bonnie Devet’s concept of orienting writing center consultants around metagenres offers a fascinating perspective on how genre awareness facilitates the transfer of learning. According to her “directors can orient consultants to the four metagenres that seemingly underlie most writings: ‘problem solving’ (food science and engineering are examples.), ‘research from sources’ (history, English, religious studies), ‘empirical inquiry’ (political science, the natural sciences), and performance’ (art and design, communication)” (135). Through genre awareness, writing center consultants can help students understand the specific demands of different genres, such

as the empirical focus required in a lab report or the critical reading necessary for an annotated bibliography. By teaching genre awareness, consultants help to foster learning transfer, enabling students to recognize that writing in different genres involves distinct activities and approaches, all of which are historically and socially situated.

In the writing center, consultants guide students to understand genres as typical responses to recurring rhetorical situations, such as classroom assignments, projects, or research tasks. Rather than focusing solely on the formal features of genres, which do not fully define them, consultants help students connect their writing to its underlying social action or purpose. In this way, students' awareness of genre becomes a catalyst for them to have effective writing. Nowacek argues that teaching genre awareness equips students to connect knowledge across different contexts: "genres associated with one context—because they are experienced as a constellation of tacit and conscious associations—can cue an individual to make connections to knowledge domains, ways of knowing, identities, and goals associated with another, previously unrelated context" (28).

Apart from genre awareness, effective tutorial sessions in the writing center help students develop generalizing skills related to academic writing conventions. Building on the arguments of Driscoll and Harcourt, Bonnie Devet argues that:

when students struggle with presenting an argument, avoiding fallacies, and developing a concession, consultants generalize from this practical, procedural work to address argument in various disciplines. Abstracting from their experience and 'building transferable knowledge' . . . , consultants have moved from procedural to declarative knowledge. (p. 126)

Devet's arguments also offer valuable insights of transfer through her notion of abstraction that the writing center consultants can utilize while tutoring in the writing center sessions.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the University Writing Center, as explored through the lens of learning transfer, shows writing center as a dynamic and transformative academic space. By functioning as a "contact zone," it enables meaningful exchanges between diverse academic perspectives and helps to facilitate the transfer of writing skills across disciplines. Using tailored consultations, genre awareness, and process-oriented pedagogy, writing center consultants play a crucial role in helping students navigate the complexities of academic writing across the diverse disciplinary contexts. This process not only enhances students' abilities to apply writing skills to those contexts but also deepens their understanding of disciplinary conventions. Ultimately, the writing center's approach to fostering learning transfer underscores its vital role in bridging gaps between different areas of academic inquiry, supporting students in becoming more versatile and effective writers. The effectiveness of learning transfer in a writing center is influenced by various factors, including students' motivation, consultants' awareness of transfer theory, and the frequency and purpose of visits. My autoethnographic account informs that that regular engagement with the writing center enhances students' ability to adapt and apply writing skills across different writing contexts. By helping students grasp broader concepts such as genre, discourse community, rhetorical situations, and audience purpose, consultants' facilitation can turn to be a meaningful learning transfer in the writing center services. This adaptability ensures that the writing skills and ideas gained in the writing center, when effectively applied to diverse writing situations, can help student writers enhance their writerly skills and potentials.



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