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Encouraging Learning Transfer Through Writing Prompts

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ENCOURAGING LEARNING TRANSFER THROUGH WRITING PROMPTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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May 2018

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        This study seeks to explore how students use and understand writing prompts, as well as how their understanding might help or hinder the successful transfer of previously gained knowledge into new writing contexts. First-year composition seeks to impart a broad-reaching set of skills to their students, and so students enrolled in a first-year composition course were selected in order to determine the skills that participants had gained in their high school experiences, how they utilized these skills in their first year of collegiate English instruction, and how they responded to a new writing context using these skills and the ones they gained in first-year composition. The study examines the lived writing usage of students in this important space of writerly development and contrasts it with the skills that they reported as having gained, as well as how they utilized these skills in a new writing context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

This study explored how students responded to writing prompts and how these responses may affect student learning. Specifically, this research sought to investigate how writing prompts may change the way a student approaches an assignment, thus affecting the breadth and depth of the learning available to the student during their work. This work may also be affected by the type of instruction and learning the student has gained during their high school writing experiences, which contributes to their bank of prior knowledge upon which to draw information and can be transferred into new learning contexts. This study aims to reveal how first-year composition (FYC) students interpret the writing prompts they are given, as well as how knowledge they have gained during their high school and freshman years is used to respond to college essays. Most universities, if not all, require students to enroll in these courses during their first year, as this period is considered important to the development of college writing. The first-year writing curriculum is designed to provide foundational instruction that students will continue to use and develop throughout their collegiate careers. As such, the ways in which students begin to use this foundational knowledge to respond to writing assignments seems a rich area to explore and understand.

In this chapter, I will explain how I came to this topic for study, the research purpose and questions that I posed, as well as the research problem. I will also provide a brief overview of the methodology used to answer the research questions, and how this study contributes knowledge to the field. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an overview of the entire study.

How I Began

During my final year of studying for my bachelor's degree, I worked in my college's writing center. As a consultant, I engaged with pedagogical practices with various students, but I was also exposed to a side of learning that was previously unknown to me. Most of my assumptions about writing and writing instruction came from my own experiences as a student, but working in the writing center gave me a fresh and varied perspective, as students with experiences that differed from my own provided new insights and a deeper understanding of how students gain and use knowledge. In addition, I was exposed to concepts of research and study design, which provided a foundation upon which I could build and eventually design this study.

In the writing center, I worked with many students, all of whom faced different personal struggles with their writing. Despite their differing challenges, however, there was a strand of commonality that ran through many of my appointments: students seemed to struggle to understand and connect with the essay prompts provided to them by their professors; they often expressed concerns about their ability to interpret what the professor was asking of them. Students found it difficult to associate what they knew with what they were being asked to provide in their writing assignments. I recall one appointment in particular, with a student I will call Amanda[1]. Amanda came to the center with a prompt for an essay that the professor termed a "research piece." Amanda, like many students, was finding it difficult to begin her paper, and came to the center looking for help with, in her words, "brainstorming" and "getting started."

Within only a few moments of talking with Amanda, it was clear that she wasn't truly there to "brainstorm" with me. Amanda anxiously pulled out the prompt and confessed that she had never written anything like this before. She was at a complete loss for how to even begin the

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[1] All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

assignment, much less write a strong response to it. Looking over the prompt, it seemed rather straight-forward to me – Amanda was supposed to choose a topic, preferably a "hot-button issue" that she was personally invested in, pick a side, and convince her reader of her position using sound research practices and well-vetted sources.

As a writing consultant, I was dumbfounded. Was it possible that Amanda was encountering the persuasive essay for the first time, as a college freshman? Perhaps she'd written persuasive essays before, but hadn't had to use research? How could a student at the college level be unfamiliar with using research and/or convincing an audience to take her side? My own high school writing experiences had included *some* interaction with the genres of persuasion and research writing, so the idea that she had never written these pieces seemed strange to me.

Considering my confusion with her concerns, tentatively, I asked, "Have you written persuasively before?" She looked confused, so I continued, "I mean, have you written a persuasive essay before? This is a persuasive essay, but you need to do research to back up your arguments. You can't just take a side and argue it; you need sources to support the side you pick."

There was a moment of silence as Amanda processed this. Finally, she said, "That's *it?*"

Research Problem

Although Amanda was certainly not the only student to approach the writing center with these issues, this experience illustrated them in a way that few other sessions did. The fact is, students often do not realize what or how much they know, and when pressed to try and use this knowledge in new contexts, they sometimes falter and become anxious (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Driscoll & Powell, 2016). This is compounded by the requirements and strain of the college experience, in which looming deadlines and grades can further exacerbate the problem. I have

worked with many, many students who, when pushed to the limits of what they thought they

knew about writing, found themselves panicking about assignments and final projects.

It is the commonality of this problem was what drew me to this study. As a developing

teacher-scholar, I wanted to understand how writing prompts functioned for students, and I

wanted to understand how they may use writing prompts to help them adapt their prior

knowledge. Findings from this study can provide insights to writing instructors, writing centers,

and others who may have students facing similar issues.

Research Questions

As I reviewed the literature, I came across a study that explored the concepts of "high-

road" and "low-road" transfer, in which student confidence and prior knowledge came together

to provide insights into the ways in which students approach new writing contexts and tasks

(Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Using this framework, I developed the following questions in order to

explore and respond to the questions that Amanda, as well as many others, brought to their

tutoring sessions.

1. How do FYC students from diverse backgrounds interpret writing prompts using their
   prior knowledge?
   a. Does a student's understanding of their previous writing experiences change
      the way they approach writing prompts?
2. How can writing prompts encourage high-road or load-road transfer?
3. How does a student's written response compare to their understanding of a given
   prompt?

Overview of the Methodology

In an attempt to answer these questions, qualitative research was selected as an appropriate method of inquiry, as the students themselves likely have the best insights into how they use prior knowledge in new writing tasks. To this end, two data sources were selected: interview and writing samples. This allowed me to approach this knowledge from the perspective of both the student's beliefs about their practices and the lived practices of the student in question. The student was asked to not only read and speak about the prompt but was also given ten minutes in which to respond to the prompt in whatever way they saw fit.

Two writing prompts were designed for the purposes of this study. The first, a "vague" prompt, simply asks students to write about a topic that they have encountered in their college course. Although they are permitted and encouraged to use outside sources, they are asked to respond to the prompt using their own words. The second prompt is more specific, and utilizes so-called "academic" jargon, such as "analyze," and specifically asks students to use outside scholarly sources in order to make their argument. This jargon may have an effect on how the student interpret the given assignment (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Each participant was given one of these prompts during the interview period. Although the wording of these prompts is different, these assignments are essentially the same when regarded in the context of college coursework, which provided valuable insights into how students read writing assignments in general. The prompts were designed to be regarded as "high-stakes" assignments, in that they should be regarded as a "real" assignment, though they were also assured that there was no right or wrong response to either prompt. This information was given to students in an attempt to a) imply a writing context for participants, and b) encourage participants to write freely, without fear of repercussions or consequences.

The interviews themselves consisted of questions regarding their initial reactions to the given prompt, and then, after they were given time to respond to it, they were asked additional questions about the experience and the knowledge they used to respond, as well as where they gained this knowledge. The rest of the interview was devoted to questions about their high school writing experiences, as well as their experiences and feelings regarding writing in general.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned previously, I was most interested in conducting this study as a part of my own development as a teacher-scholar. Much of my graduate work has consisted of exploring the unique and varied experiences of students and learners, as well as the complexity of writing development and how the field addresses this complexity (Bean, 2011; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Wardle, 2009; Kaufer & Young, 1993; MacDonald 1994). The wealth of knowledge available is staggering, but considering the ubiquity of the college essay in college students' educational experiences, it is important to investigate the nature and usefulness of the writing prompt itself, as this seems to be yet another tool in the college writer's arsenal.

This study has not only provided insights into how I might better construct prompts for my own students, but my hope is that this research can do the same for others in the field by providing new insights into how students use prompts, which may also change the way instructors design these assignments, as well as how the design of these assignments may contribute to long-term learning and transfer. As composition instructors, we can talk about what it means to write and write well, but in the end, we must rely on our students' ability to actively engage and use our writing assignments as the space in which they *do* writing. It is my hope that this study provides a deeper understanding of how we can provide a robust and effective tool as students begin and continue to develop as collegiate writers. Ultimately, this project is an attempt

to demystify how the writing prompt functions, both as an assignment to be constructed and an assignment to be answered.

Study Overview

The following chapters in this study cover a lot of ground, not only in terms of the framing for the study, but also in terms of the study design and the analysis of the data. This chapter provided a brief introduction into the reasons for the study, its significance to the body of knowledge in the fields of composition and TESOL, and an overview of the methodology of the study. In Chapter 2, I explore and demonstrate the literature upon which this study was built, as well as where this study's contributions will fit in the current literature. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the study design, including participant selection, the data sources, method of analysis, and considerations of ethics and limitations. Chapter 4 is an in-depth review of the participants' interviews and writing samples, as well as overarching themes across interviews. The study concludes with Chapter 5, in which conclusions are drawn from the data reviewed in Chapter 4, which is contextualized using relevant literature. In addition, there is an overview of the entire study, and the implications of the research and suggestions for follow-up studies. Finally, this study includes several appendices, including any and all supporting documentation, the given writing prompts, and IRB approvals.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study investigates the structure of writing prompts and their effects on student learning. The purpose of this study is to examine the feelings and perspectives of students who are in their first year of collegiate writing. Enrollment in a first-year composition (FYC) is a common requirement of freshman writers, as the first year of college instruction is considered an important time in a student's writing development.

In this chapter, current and foundational literature surrounding FYC courses, student writing, and learning development are reviewed. The chapter begins by briefly discussing the experience that led to this study. Next, assumptions regarding theory and practice that are commonly held in the course design and objectives of FYC classrooms, as well as assumptions about the type of student expected to enroll in these courses, are explored. Afterwards, the field's current and foundational research regarding writing skill development and learning transfer is explored. Throughout the chapter, these concepts and issues are framed in a way that demonstrates the need for this study. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the aforementioned topics.

What Do Students Know?

As discussed in in Chapter 1, this project was prompted by my own experiences as a writing tutor in my undergraduate writing center. In my experience as a tutor, students often struggle to articulate what they know, unless explicitly prompted, and I believe that research in this area could be useful to instructors' understanding of how students learn. In addition, this

study serves as an attempt to demystify some of the assumptions and questions surrounding how students learn to write, especially in their FYC classrooms.

First-Year Composition Courses

In the United States, the first-year composition course is a mainstay of many curricula at the university level, and it is tasked with instructing students in common writing practices that can carry them through their college careers (CWPA, 2014; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle 2009). The FYC course seems ubiquitous; a survey of over 1600 college-level institutions found that, between 1973 and 1998, not only have more curricula adopted some form of the FYC writing requirement, but more institutions are favoring two or more years of writing study as opposed to one (Moghatader, Cotch, & Hague, 2001).

Although these theories provide the baseline for the important work of FYC, these theories are also rife with criticism when put into practice. Sometimes the stated goal of the FYC course is framed as one of "generalizability," in that students who successfully complete the FYC course are expected to be able to take what they have learned in the class and apply these newly gained skills in their selected major/discipline (MacDonald, 1994). As of 2014, the Council of Writing Program Administrators indicates that these skills are: rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, composition processes, and knowledge of conventions (CWPA, 2014). The desired outcomes of FYC focus on "types of results" or outcomes, rather than "precise levels of achievement," and are designed to provide a foundation upon which these skills can "diversify along disciplinary, professional, and civic lines" where "expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge" within new writing contexts (CWPA, 2014, p. 1).

While these skills are important to the development of strong, thoughtful writers, the efficacy with which students transfer this knowledge into their field is debatable. Wardle (2009)

points out that one of the most common critiques against the generally accepted role of FYC is that its inherent assumption that students will be able to *effectively* and *appropriately* utilize the genre knowledge they gain during FYC if/when they confront new writing contexts across the majority of, if not all, disciplines. It is widely understood that "the activity system of FYC is radically different from other activity systems in its use of writing as the object of primary attention rather than as a tool" for writing in other disciplines (Wardle, 2009, p. 766).

This "generalizability" also seems to permeate the *way* we teach composition to young, developing writers. In FYC courses, the space where students are perhaps most often expected to demonstrate their accrued knowledge is within an essay, for which a writing prompt is most often the starting point. These assignments are sometimes characterized as being geared towards "no content in particular" (Kaufner & Young, 1993, p. 77). In contrast, upper-level courses, whose curricula are more often directed and specific, especially in comparison with the "one size fits all" curriculum often associated with FYC, are based in a defined content that helps drive the course's structure (Kaufner & Young, 1993). In addition to attempting to answer myriad needs and struggles held by a diverse body of student writers, the FYC course is often criticized for trying to teach these general skills in a general manner. These "no content in particular" courses are used as a way to teach students various writing skills, but the method through which these skills are taught is also approached in a generalized way, as it is assumed that "pretty much the *same* skills of writing will develop no matter what content is chosen" (Kaufner & Young, 1993, p. 79). Throughout FYC and its associated writing contexts, regardless of their relative broadness or specificity, writing assignments are given to provide a space in which student learning can be assessed.

Other scholars have also noted this phenomenon, noting the seeming ubiquity of the research essay assignment that often appears in FYC courses (Bean, 2011). This genre is also sometimes referred to as a "mutt-genre," (Wardle, 2009), which has "different meanings to different scholars across the curriculum" (Bean, 2011, 228). This genre, according to Bean (2011), is "pseudo-academic" in that the skills it imparts to students do not necessarily reflect the skills we intend for them to learn by completing the assignment. Bean (2011) claims:

> The process of moving from outside to disciplinary insider or from novice to expert is neither simple nor linear. What we need is a description of this process that differs from the prevailing perception that students learn to write the research paper in first-year composition. (228)

In this way, the research paper is often mischaracterized as the "key" to opening the door to deepened genre knowledge, which students will then be able to carry on with them as they progress throughout the writing assignments they encounter within their chosen fields. Bean (2011) characterizes this type of composition instruction as "the traditional method," in which a professor advises their students that a "term paper" will be due during finals week. There is generally some sort of negotiation regarding the topic of the term paper, but the student is required to clear their chosen topic with the professor in advance. The students move forward, sometimes with very little further interaction with their instructor regarding the project in progress. After the paper has been turned in, "some teachers mark the papers copiously; others make only cryptic end comments" (Bean, 2011, p. 90).

In my experiences as a student and as a tutor, Bean seems to be correct in his assertion about how these assignments are often handled, as most of the "instruction" given to students comes in the form of feedback after they have written their response to an assignment. Writing

instruction is rather unique, in that students must attempt to write in order for instructors to fully

understand where they are in their development. Scholars have also spoken to this issue, citing

the inconsistencies between pedagogy, sometimes defined as "a method of teaching based on

[theories]" and practice (Taggart, Hessler, & Schick, 2014, p. 1). There is an understanding in

composition studies that the theories do not always speak to practice as much as we may like

them to, and that the merging of theory with practice is often a challenge in the classroom

(Taggart, Hessler, & Schick, 2014). Scholars have written much about theory, and how,

confoundingly, we know very little about its efficacy in classrooms (Tate, Taggart, Schick, &

Hessler, 2014; Bean, 2011). This may be especially true of composition studies, where students'

practice is often found to be more vexing than our theories suggest they might be (Bean, 2011).

Although some scholars have discussed the need for "alternative approaches" to writing

assignments, this discussion is largely limited to examples of what an alternative assignment

might look like, or as tips and tricks for formulating writing prompts that may encourage critical

thinking (Bean, 2011; Smith & Swain, 2011). This leaves room for the writing prompt to be

explored in a more rigorous, data-based way.

Perhaps one reason for the confusion between theory and practice comes from the sheer

breadth of content that is meant to be delivered via FYC courses. These courses not only attempt

to arm students with all the tools needed students for future writing assignments, but also face

the daunting task of demonstrating the complex nature of writing development to students.

In *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015)*,* scholars consider and

explore "threshold concepts" that speak to the complexity of writing. One particularly salient

example that speaks to the momentous task faced by FYC courses is the concept that writing is

an activity that is *always* social, which also speaks to theories of rhetoric that often frame writing

instruction (a framing that featured heavily in my own undergraduate instruction). One contributor says that "writers are always connected with other people," and so the social element of writing ever be removed from the process (Roozen, 2015, p. 17). Due to the nature of writing, each piece of writing is created by the author, who brings with them a troop of people into their writing process. Even when a writer pens a document alone, the author can never escape the presence of, at the very least, the intended audience for their text. We learn to write from others, and we go on to use this skill to acquire and demonstrate meaning, either for ourselves or other people. No matter the reason for our writing, our work is always produced for a reader, and the needs of said reader must be taken into account and addressed in order to be successful. However, this often does not reflect the ways in which writing assignments are given, nor in how students respond to them, as Bean (2011) points out with his example of "copious" or "cryptic" comment on papers that "many students never pick up [from] the teacher's office" (p. 90).

Although theory speaks often about the rhetorical nature of the writing process, much of the design of FYC seems based in the idea that writing skills can be developed in a vacuum that limits the highly contextual nature of writing, which can then be transferred into other, more specifically contextualized writing environments. Most of the assumptions of the role of FYC appear to be born of the idea that genre knowledge can be transferred seamlessly into other genres, but more recent research postulates that genre knowledge is tightly bound to its context (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). The concept that a student may be able to simply "move" their knowledge from one writing context to another does not always bear out so easily in practice (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Students may struggle to recognize the writing strategies that allow them to flourish in a genre, or may find it difficult to recognize the rhetorical structures in one genre that mimic the rhetorical structures of another,

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leading to confusion and frustration when writing in a new context. Disciplines do not use the same "universal discourse," and so presenting FYC as a method of preparing *all* students for *all* disciplines is inherently shortsighted and likely impossible (Russell, 1995). The FYC course is tasked with teaching "academic" writing, which "begs the question: *which* academic writing[?]" (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 556). The method by which we attempt to meet these objectives is also necessarily going to be conflated with the *how* of getting students to write – essay assignments and prompts – thereby making the prompt an interesting place to explore the relationship between the objective of FYC and how we attempt to reach it.

In response to these criticisms, some scholarship has suggested a reimagining of the objectives of FYC. Downs and Wardle (2007) put forth the idea of posturing the FYC course, not as a magic bullet for college writing skills, but as an introduction to college writing studies. The FYC course is akin to preparation for standardized testing, in which the "content-versus-form misconception" is built into the very objectives of the course (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 555). The FYC should be replaced, say Downs and Wardle (2007), with a course that encourages students to consider "how to understand and think about writing in school and society" (p. 558), focusing on broad rhetorical strategies, rather than specific writing assignments that invite specific methods of success. Rather than focusing on so-called "academic writing," such a course would focus more fully on how reading and writing are related, how writing works, how people use writing, and how to solve problems using writing. This course could serve as a "gateway" into college writing, rather than attempting the impossible task of making *all* students strong college-level writers in their first one-to-two years of university instruction (Downs & Wardle, 2007).

In addition to considerations about the assumptions inherent in the FYC curriculum, it is also important to interrogate assumptions about *who* takes the FYC course. The "writing across disciplines" nature of the FYC course seems to imply, from its inception, that writers enrolled in these courses already possess some level of writing skill, sometimes referred to as "nonacademic" writing skills, which are gleaned during their high school educational experience (MacDonald, 1994). Of course, as teachers, we know that this idealization of the freshman college student is not always the student who enters our classroom.

Students at the college level do not all present with the same level of skill in English, written or otherwise, perhaps due to their access to effective education in the United States, or in the case of international writers, students whose educational experiences prior to college took place in their home countries within different educational contexts, which can feature different priorities and goals for instruction and/or may occur in a different language. Students who speak more than one language are sometimes referred to as being "plurilingual." Plurilingual students "may not possess a full mastery of [English]," but can move in and among their known languages in their day-to-day life, including in the classroom (Lin, 2013, p. 522). These students may struggle with applying the rules of English as "native speakers" would and may sometimes find themselves overwhelmed and underserved in the "traditional" FYC course. Even the concept of the "native speaker" is rife with assumptions about the presumed skill level of students who have been brought up in the educational context of the United States. By extension, assumptions about the skills of "non-native" users of English are implied as being inherently "less" than their "native" user peers (Paikeday, 1985; Faez, 2001; Lin, 2013). Conversely, this hierarchy of assumed language prowess also implies that "native" speakers possess a certain

level of skill that will allow them to flourish in the FYC classroom, which can disregard the

actual level of preparation that students have gained by the time they reach college.

Some universities, such as Western Pennsylvania Learning Institution (WPLI)[2], respond

to the unique needs and experiences of plurilingual students by offering preliminary admittance

to a sort of "test-run" of sorts; these students can enroll in courses that help to improve their

written and oral communication skills in English, as well as acclimate them to the rigors of

academic culture of learning institutions in the United States (WPLI, 2017). In addition, after

these students have successfully completed this "test-run," they are often invited to enroll as full

students in the university, wherein they can take a version of the FYC course that is specifically

designed and geared towards students who speak more than one language. The WPLI course

catalogue lists two FYC courses in its roster – "FYC" and "FYC – multilingual[3]" (WPLI, 2017).

The mere existence of a course aimed specifically at plurilingual students implies that the

"standard" or "default" FYC course has been designed without taking their learning needs into

account, which only furthers the gap between the "ideal" of FYC vs. the practice. Not only does

the design of FYC imply a universality to college writing that cannot exist, but it also implies a

universal FYC student. Courses that have been specifically designed and differentiated for

plurilingual students only further demonstrate that this assumed universality fails to reach

students whose educational experiences diverge from the "norms" assumed of students who have

received the majority of their education in the United States. Our conceptions of the FYC course

seem to enforce the idea that these courses are meant to mold *all* freshman writers into

accomplished authors who can demonstrate writing skills that will be applicable to all areas of

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[2] All names are changed to protect anonymity.
[3] WPLI uses "multilingual" to describe non-native English-speaking students, and so this term is preserved here due to this course description. However, I prefer to use the term "plurilingual," as described in Lin 2013.

study beyond their freshman year, but our current ideas surrounding the FYC course cannot teach students to write across all disciplines, nor can these courses hope to reach *all* students effectively, given the diversity of the students in question.

Using Prior Knowledge

Although there *is* diversity in freshman writers and their prior experiences, my experiences in writing centers have taught me that many students, despite their diversity, face very similar struggles in their writing. My writing center student, Amanda, was one in a long line of students struggling to apply previously gained knowledge to a new writing assignment, but these students *were* often able to draw connections if they were asked to do so. Research also seems to mirror the experiences I had with these students: "Students are often not conscious of how they use prior resources, except when explicitly prompted" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 316). In addition, students cannot always "automatically" transfer their knowledge to new tasks on their own: "skills mastered in one situation (freshman composition), [do] not … automatically transfer to new contexts with differing problems and language and differing knowledge" (McCarthy, 1987, p. 261).

The ways in which students use prior knowledge to navigate new contexts is an important factor in their development as writers (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2011), students at the First-Year Composition (FYC) level are expected to have developed a foundation of critical skills upon which to build their knowledge and continue on at the collegiate level. The parameters of these critical skills are helpful to students in a variety of disciplines and intend to speak to "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical" (CWPA, 2011, p. 5). These skills, which include things such as curiosity, creativity, responsibility, persistence, flexibility, etc., are "essential for success in

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college writing," and "can be [fostered] … through writing, reading, and critical analysis experiences" (CWPA, 2011, p. 5). In writing, various skills and experiences can contribute to the development of these critical skills and mindsets; the practice of writing is thought to improve students' skills in ways that go far beyond the act of writing itself (CWPA, 2011).

Among the skills that students should learn via writing is metacognition, which is defined as "an ability to reflect on one's own cognitive processes – as well as the related ability to seek connections between contexts and to abstract and draw from prior skills and knowledge" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 315), which allows students to "transfer" this knowledge into new contexts (Gorzelsky et al., 2016). This deep reflection and ability to apply prior knowledge within new a new context is believed to be integral to the process of growing knowledge and is therefore deeply important to a students' overall development (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Wardle, 2012; Devet, 2015; Estrem, 2015; Grozelsky et al., 2016). The importance of this process cannot be overstated according to some scholars; Devet (2015) claims that the "[transfer] may be one of the most important subjects composition studies has explored since process itself" (p. 120). Exploring this phenomenon could prove invaluable, as a deeper understanding of how students *learn* may change the ways in which we *teach*, which may be especially helpful in composition studies, where scholars such as Bean (2011) have often commented on students' uncanny ability to repeatedly and successfully *practice* writing skills, yet fail to use them effectively when writing.

Transfer is not simply "learning." Students who are able to transfer prior knowledge into a new context are active users of their knowledge. Take, for example, Devet's (2015) example of students who can successfully "fill out endless exercises on punctuation," but often fail to apply the grammar rules demonstrated by these exercises in their own writing (p. 121). In these

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situations, students experience "functional fixedness," wherein a student struggles to find similarities between their prior knowledge and a new task (Haskell, 2001, p. 22). When these similarities among familiar and unfamiliar contexts are found, students should be able to bridge the gap between what they have learned and what they are learning. Understanding this gap may help to support students in a frontload fashion, in that instructors can formulate assignments that illustrate these gaps for students, thereby helping to facilitate transfer from the outset.

Of course, the kind of "gap" that a student must bridge when facing a new task can vary in severity. Haskell (2001) uses the terms "near" and "far" to describe the degree to which two tasks are related. A task that is "near" is fairly similar to tasks that have been encountered previously, while a task that is "far" may only feature small or fringe similarities, or may appear to be wholly unrelated to previous tasks with which a student is familiar (Haskell 2001). Take, for example, the punctuation exercises mentioned earlier: a student who encounters a sentence structure with which they are unfamiliar might find that the task is too "far" from the exercises that they have successfully completed, resulting in their inability to apply the grammar rules that they have successfully practiced previously.

Closing the Gap

In 2011, researchers Reiff and Bawarshi set out to explore the process through which students perform transfer (or close the gap, so to speak) between old and new tasks. They looked specifically at, not only how their participants tended to use prior knowledge, but also the willingness of participants to try new things when presented with an unfamiliar task. In order to explore this, they provided students with a writing task, and then asked students to report on A) what they thought the task was asking of them, and B) what previous tasks they were reminded of and would draw on in order to complete the presented task. Throughout the study, students

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were asked to write several inquiry-driven short papers, culminating in a final, "more complex major paper" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 325). In the context of FYC, this "prior" knowledge is gained in the education students receive in their high school (or equivalent) learning experiences, which is often learned via "a grade or text score – indicating to students how well they write and contributing to their sense of themselves as writers" (Yancey, 2017). These academic accomplishments provide students with evaluative measures of how well they perform in new writing contexts but do little to fully explain exactly what the student has accomplished outside of the marks they have received. While a student may receive a passing grade, they may not be fully aware of exactly *how* they were successful.

In analyzing the data provided by students, researchers found that the use of "academic trigger words" such as "essay" or "analyze," seemed to cause student to draw more on previous experiences within an academic context (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). It was this finding that led me to structure my prompts in this study in the way that I did, as I believe this particular part of the data may help us better understand how students transfer knowledge among various contexts.

Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) determined which students were more likely to "repurpose" prior knowledge, and referred to them as "boundary crossers," while students who "were more likely to draw on whole genres … regardless of task" were termed "boundary guarders" (p. 312). They also found that the level of confidence expressed by the student was often an early indicator of the type of transfer that they would engage in when presented with a new writing task.

Boundary guarders, according to the study, were more likely to engage in what researchers referred to as "low-road transfer," which "reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines" in situations where the similarities between old and new tasks are easily

drawn (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p. 25). These students, according to Reiff and Bawarshi (2011), were more confident in their ability to respond to new writing tasks, and referred to previous genre experience rather than writing strategies, i.e. "this is a research essay" vs. "I need to use good sources to support my argument." In this context, "genre" was used to differentiate among types of writing, i.e., persuasive, research, etc.

Boundary crossers, on the other hand, were more likely to engage in "high-road transfer," wherein the student performed a "deliberate, mindful extraction of skill or knowledge" in order to apply it within the new context (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p. 25). These students also often expressed a lack of confidence with regard to the writing task, but consistently relied more on writing strategies than genre knowledge in order to connect the writing task with their prior knowledge (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011).

Interestingly, research also showed a difference in *how* these students described their understanding of a new writing context. Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) found that boundary crossers who tend towards high-road transfer used "not talk" to describe the new writing context, while boundary guarders consistently used less "not talk." When using "not talk," students describe their knowledge of a new task by explaining what it is not (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). This was especially evident near the end of the study, at which point students were provided with the prompt for the final paper. The study reported that most participants experienced a loss of confidence and struggled to define the key tasks when faced with the final assignment (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Students described this final assignment as being "broad" and said that they were "not quite sure" about the intended learning outcomes (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 326).

Even at the conclusion of the study, however, some students still felt confident in their ability to respond to the prompt, and this confidence reflected in low-road transfer. For example,

one participant reported that, when faced with the final assignment in the study, he "[formatted] it in pretty much a five paragraph form" because he was familiar with the format, even as he admitted that the assignment was "all new to [him]" and that he "didn't know what to expect" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 326). The student essentially admitted that he was at a loss as to how to respond to the assignment but used a format with which he was familiar in an attempt to respond anyway. The assignment vexed the student, and though he did produce a response, this kind of response is probably not what teachers hope for when they present an assignment to their students. As this research shows that students *will* provide a response, even if they are unsure, it seems important to look at how the prompt itself may help or hinder students in their writing.

Ultimately, more and more students exhibited incidences of "not talk" and high-road transfer when faced with their final writing task, and the required knowledge became more and more focused on writing strategies rather than genre knowledge. In this way, students began to demonstrate a reflective awareness of their prior writing experience in a way that was more fine-tuned. A student who simply states "this is a research essay" is not reflecting in the same way as a student who states, "I have to use sound research that supports my position in order to posit myself as an expert on this topic." The latter demonstrates knowledge of *why* and *how* a particular genre functions, while the former simply demonstrates an awareness of the genre itself. In formulating this project, I did so with the belief that the structure of the initial essay prompt may encourage students to think about writing strategies or genre, depending on the structure of the prompt itself, and that exploring this part of the writing process may help to explain how students use them.

Finally, Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) claim that students who engage in high-road transfer exhibit the same three traits. First of all, they tend to express a lack of confidence in their ability

to respond to a particular prompt. Second, these students draw more on their knowledge of writing strategies than they do their knowledge of whole genres. Third, these students use a lot of "not" talk to connect a new writing task with their prior knowledge. Students who exhibit all three traits are considered boundary crossers and are more likely to demonstrate deep learning transfer in their writing (Reiff & Bawarshi 2011).

Though previous studies have explored the actual process of transfer that occurs while writing, few/none have interrogated this issue with regard to the prompt itself and how prompts may encourage the uptake of prior knowledge or inhibit it. As mentioned previously, the FYC classroom faces a mighty task, and engages with numerous types of students, who present with various levels of skill and understanding in English. By attempting to learn more about transfer, perhaps we can also learn more about how students use these documents when attempting to respond to an assignment.

Writing Prompts

In my own experiences in writing center sessions, student responses to essay prompts can vary wildly. Some students do not perceive themselves as being strong writers and seem to work themselves into a defeated mood before the writing process even begins (Driscoll & Powell, 2016). Others encounter terms or concepts in a prompt that they have never seen before or encounter a *version* of a previously encountered term or concept that is new to them. Still others agonize about how to navigate various portions of the writing process, ranging anywhere from selecting a topic to drafting a conclusion. No matter what problem a student has presented with, we have always made headway by discussing what they know about writing. Sometimes students just need a bit of prodding to get themselves writing a strong, well-developed paper (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). As instructors and writing tutors are not always available to deeply explore

these prompts with students, it seems pertinent to understand how students use these prompts when beginning an assignment, as these prompts seem to act as an additional tool as students consider how they will respond to a given assignment.

There is some research that delves the ways in which assignments are often formatted for students (Melzer, 2014). In a survey of 787 writing assignments, Melzer found that the majority of given assignments are informative, lending more credence to Bean's (2011) assertion that many assignments certainly fall into the "all about" type of research papers that often appear in FYC courses (p. 226). Melzer (2014) also found that many assignments are given to students with the intent that they write for their professor, rather than for a broader audience, which also encourages students to forgo audience analysis and highly contextualized writing. How students understand and use these assignments to guide their work, as well as how these might contribute to learning transfer, is largely unstudied.

Writing prompts and students' responses to them are a rich area to explore in research. As the literature suggests, asking students to actively think and discuss their writing habits, their previous writing experiences, and their prior knowledge of genres can be a productive area of inquiry.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined conceptual ideals of the role of FYC, some criticisms of these ideals, and some of the problematic implications inherent in the "role" of FYC, including those imposed on plurilingual students. The chapter also considered the role of learning transfer and metacognition in writing skill development, and provided a brief explanation regarding the selection of writing prompts for investigation in this study, as well as how writing prompts have been investigated in previous research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this study, the structure of a writing prompt and how it may affect student learning is investigated. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of students with regard to writing prompts, not to provide quantifiable information regarding student performance or the efficacy of various kinds of writing prompts.

In this chapter, the rationale behind the study design will be explored, as well as details regarding how the study was administered. The chapter begins by explaining the rationale for selecting a qualitative research method, and I explain my own relationship to the research. Next, the study's context and the selection process for participants will be described. Following that discussion, details regarding the sources of data, including how the data was collected and analyzed, as well as the challenges, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study, are provided. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of the aforementioned topics.

Research Questions

Using the theoretical framework of "high-road" and "low-road" transfer as framed by Perkins and Salomon (1989), it may be possible to craft writing prompts with the explicit intent of encouraging boundary crossing behavior. In order to explore this possibility, the following research questions were considered:

1. How do FYC students from diverse backgrounds interpret writing prompts using their prior knowledge?

   a. Does a student's understanding of their previous writing experiences change the way they approach writing prompts?

2. How can writing prompts encourage high-road or load-road transfer?

3. How does a student's written response compare to their understanding of a given prompt?

By asking students to engage with a new writing task and encouraging them to call on their prior knowledge, as well as asking them to discuss their own feelings and experiences as writers, it may be possible to draw some conclusions about what kinds of writing assignments may be more or less likely to encourage high-road transfer.

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative design, which allows researchers to "[understand] the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2012, p. 4). Qualitative research allows participants to describe their experiences in their own terms, which can be coded and analyzed for relevant themes, thereby providing insights into a particular issue or experience. Qualitative research focuses on "small" things in a deeper way, rather than looking at a larger issue in a broad way, as with quantitative research (Lichtman, 2006). Due to the breadth and depth of data that can be gleaned from qualitative research, this method was selected because it seemed more likely to provide insights into the writing habits and experiences of first-year composition students.

Although qualitative research is often not particularly generalizable, the findings of this research may provide some groundwork upon which more quantitative work could be explored.

Researcher Positionality

My own relationship with this research is born out of a) my interest in teaching writing and writing skill development, and b) my experiences as a writing center consultant at two

different universities. The former is due to my development as a teacher-scholar and my desire to provide the most supportive guidance I can to my current and future students.

Due to the peer-to-peer nature of writing center appointments, students seem comfortable confessing deep confusion during sessions. One byproduct of this is that students often approach the writing center when they need help with "brainstorming" or "figuring out an assignment." This interaction is a fairly common one; students often come to the writing center with a writing assignment and express confusion about how to interpret it. Sometimes, students receive an assignment and feel that they are being asked to respond to a prompt unlike any they have encountered before. As mentioned earlier, it was one of these common experiences with a particular student that led me to this project.

Context of Study

This study was conducted at a university in western Pennsylvania, USA. For the purposes of this study, the university will be referred to as "Western Pennsylvania Learning Institution," or WPLI.
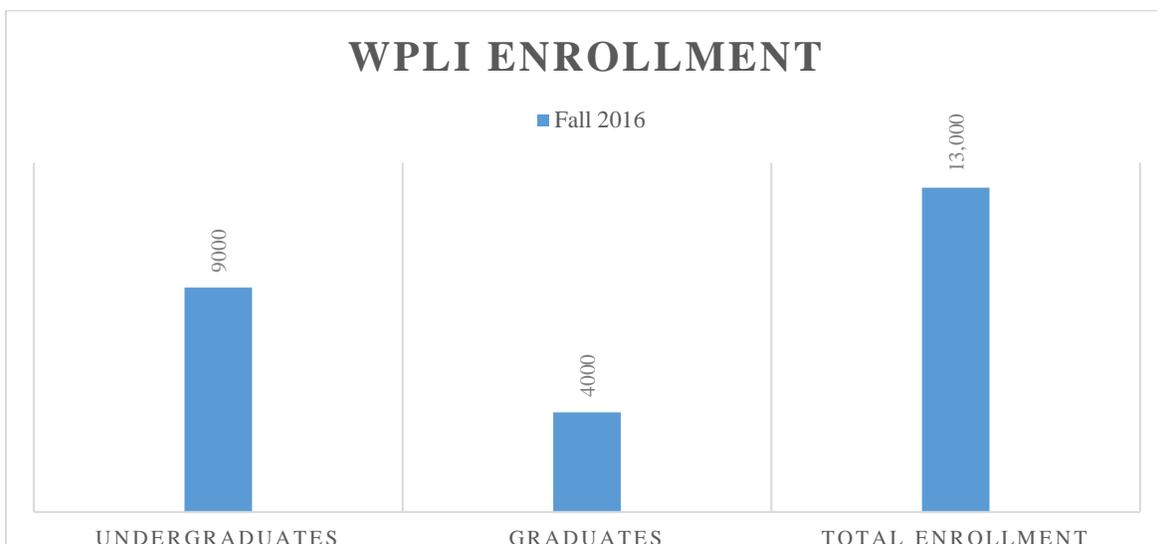
Figure 1. WPLI enrollment.

WPLI (2017) reported roughly 13,000 students enrolled in fall of 2016; of these, roughly 9,000 were enrolled as undergraduates (Figure 1). During their undergraduate studies, the university requires that students complete two composition courses as part of their general studies, though additional related courses may be offered on a compulsory or elective basis depending on the requirements for the program in which a student is enrolled. These initial required composition courses are considered 101 and 202 level courses, to be completed during the student's freshman and sophomore years respectively. The university also offers a 100-level course on "basic" writing, which may or may not be required depending on students' placement test scores.

The 101 course is described as a "first-year writing course" (FYC) in which students "use a variety of resources" to complete writing tasks in multiple genres (WPLI, 2017). The university's stated learning outcomes for the course include observation, critical reading, analysis, and reflection. The course involves various stages of the writing process, ranging from early drafting practices to revision and final draft submission. Courses such as these are common among university curricula.

The 101 course required by the WPLI curriculum provides students with a foundation upon which to begin to build their college writing skills. Such courses provide an important step in the development of writing skills, as the goal of such courses is to "[teach] ways of writing (genre and genre knowledge) that [students] can then transfer to the writing they do in other courses across the university" (Wardle, 2009, p. 765).

Participants

This study focused on a population of six participants from three FYC English courses at WPLI, though I was only able to meet with five participants within the data collection period

(see the "Challenges" section below). The first-year composition course is often structured in such a way that it assumes the existence of a "universal" prior education that "more than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated" does not exist (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 552), and often use "all about" informative writing assignments as the final paper assignment (Bean, 2011, p. 226). I admit that I also approached this study with similar assumptions, which were quickly and readily disproven as I talked with students, both in the writing center and within the interviews conducted for this project.

WPLI offers two FYC courses – one for "native" English speakers, and one for multilingual[4] English speakers. This designation is a problematic one, especially considering the varied skill levels presented by FYC students, regardless of their mother tongue (Paikeday, 1985; Faez, 2011; Lin, 2013). That being said, this study focused on three FYC course classrooms that are geared towards "native"[5] English speakers, as it was not possible to speak with a class geared towards "non-native" writers (see below in the "Challenges" section). However, the participant pool did include one non-native English writer, a so-called "bridge" student, who is enrolled at WPLI in "mainstream" classes *and* classes provided by an internal body at WPLI, which are specially designed to provide additional support to international students as they acclimate to academia in the American context.

Participants were selected on a volunteer basis during their FYC coursework. There were no restrictions on student participation based on gender. Participants were required a) to be aged

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[4] WPLI uses "multilingual" to describe non-native English-speaking students, and so this term is preserved here due to this course description. However, I prefer to use the term "plurilingual," as described in Lin 2013.

[5] The terms "native" and "non-native" have been criticized for their lack of specificity with regard to describing the experiences of English speakers whose first language is not English (Paikeday, 1985). However, these terms will occasionally be used in this document to differentiate between the participants in this study.

18 or older, b) to be enrolled in a FYC class, and c) to possess the required English reading skills to interpret the given writing prompts.

Data Sources

The study consisted of qualitative interviews with participants, as well as writing samples produced by participants during the study. The interview portion focused on the participants' prior knowledge and perception of their own skills, while the writing sample demonstrated how participants approach and respond to a writing prompt in practice. The interview method was selected due to the desire to learn about participants' experiences developing their writing skills and habits. Interviews allow participants to speak for themselves, as they "appear to know a lot about what is going on" (Bertaux, 1981, p. 39).

Interviews

Interview data was collected around the end of participants' FYC coursework. At this point, it can be assumed that students will have already developed a foundation of knowledge from previous writing instruction, but they will be unlikely to have fully developed their college level writing skills and may struggle to put their knowledge into words. The interview portion consisted of roughly 40 minutes of data concerning 1) the participant's initial responses to a given writing prompt, and 2) the participant's previous writing experiences.

Writing Samples

As reliance on the participants' abilities to describe their prior knowledge and writing habits may yield unreliable results, writing samples were also selected as an additional source of data. These samples provided valuable further insights into the participants' writing habits, without having to rely solely on self-reporting and the ability to express the knowledge that students already possess. The writing sample was requested near the beginning of the interview,

and the participant was free to provide any sort of writing sample based on their comfort with the given prompt, their writing habits, and their prior knowledge. This meant that participants could write with a pen and paper or on their laptop, and that their "writing" sample could range from a list of sources to be used, to an outline, to the beginnings of a draft.

Data Collection Procedures

As mentioned above, data was collected during the course of the participants' FYC work. After IRB approval was obtained, I spoke to students in three FYC courses in order to encourage participation in the study. After participants gave informed consent, contact was made via email to confirm inclusion in the study and to schedule our interviews. Afterwards, we met to conduct the interview at the agreed upon time to gather the desired data.

The first scheduled interview was randomly assigned a writing prompt, and each interview scheduled after the first alternated between the prompts in order to keep the sampling random. Each participant was interviewed and asked to provide a writing sample in response to one of the two prompts during the course of the interview.

There were two prompts that used to elicit the writing sample data, and these prompts were intended to be distributed evenly among participants, resulting in three respondents for each prompt, though the inclusion of only five participants meant that one prompt was received by only two participants, while the other was received the intended three participants (see "Challenges" section below). Participants were asked to respond to their assigned prompt as it was given during the interview. The participant was not offered any additional clarifying information by the interviewer. This means that participants had to rely on their own knowledge and writing habits in order to provide the requested writing sample.

The prompts were designed to fit the instruction in their FYC course in order to ensure that the participants possessed the relevant knowledge required to respond to the prompt. In addition, connecting the prompts to their coursework helped to minimize any undue burden or strain to their normal workload due to their participation in the study.

Specific Prompt	*Vague Prompt*
Analyze a topic relating to your current coursework. Include no fewer than three (3) scholarly sources to support your arguments/assertions. The assignment should be written in a tone that is appropriate for an academic paper.	Write about a topic relating to your current coursework. You can include others' views on the topic, but the majority of the response should be given in your own words.

Figure 2. Writing prompts.

Each prompt was designed to elicit a certain kind of response from participants (Figure 2). The first prompt, the "vague" prompt, uses no "academic language" (such as "analyze"), and provided the student more agency with regard to their topic, approach, etc. In addition, the "vagueness" of this prompt might also cause a student to feel less confident about their ability to respond to the prompt, which, as Reiff and Bawarshi (2009) found, may encourage boundary crossing behavior.

The second prompt, called the "specific" prompt, gave the student a more defined structure upon which to craft a response. This latter prompt gave the student less agency to choose their own topic, approach, etc., but might have implicitly provided more guidance regarding how to approach the prompt, given the specificity with which it was designed.

Near the beginning of the interview, participants were given one of the two writing prompts. They were given time to study and read the prompt, and then were asked a few questions to gauge their "gut" reactions to the given prompt. After these initial questions, the participant was given 10 minutes to respond to the prompt in whatever way they saw fit.

Although I was still in the room with them, I did not engage with them in any way during this writing period, except to tell them when to start and when the designated time had elapsed. I opted not to leave the room while the student engaged with the prompt but instructed the student to pretend that I was not present. In order to further emphasize my relative removal from the response portion of the interview, I turned away from the student and spent the writing period reading a book that I brought with me to interviews.

To encourage a genuine writing sample, participants were advised to regard the prompt as if it were a graded assignment for their course. This advice was given with the intent of encouraging students to consider the context in which they were being asked to write, which was expected to have an effect on the tone and/or language that participants chose to use in their sample. The process through which participants worked on the prompt was self-motivated; I did not *ask* them to outline, brainstorm, etc., nor suggest to participants the "best" way to approach the prompt, though I did advise them that any approach was appropriate, as there was no "right" method to respond.

After the 10-minute writing period had concluded, the participant was asked some follow-up questions regarding the tools and knowledge they used to respond to the prompt, as well as where they learned these things. Finally, the last 20-40 minutes (depending on the durations of participant responses throughout the interview) were spent using a traditional interview format (i.e., no writing). This portion of the interview focused on participants' past educational experiences regarding writing, their personal writing habits, their level of comfort when writing, and their accumulated knowledge of genre and general writing practices.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the raw data and draw conclusions from them, interview data was transcribed and analyzed. Then, both sets of data were given descriptive codes for common themes, phrases, and writing practices/responses, to draw out emergent themes salient to the research questions (Saldaña, 2009). Most especially, themes that spoke to high school and FYC experiences and learning, writing strategies, and participants' perceptions of themselves as writers and users of English were made a focus. After coding the data, it was analyzed for themes that spoke to conclusions about knowledge transfer, FYC students' prior knowledge, and the effects of differing styles of writing prompts on these developing writers.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first challenge had to do with the timing of the interviews. Due to the selected population, the *when* of collecting data was a major concern; investigating FYC students meant these students had to be given enough time to gain the knowledge that was being investigated. The window for data collection was dictated by the students' learning in their FYC courses, which also meant that the perfect time for these interviews was near finals. In order to encourage participation during this stressful time, gift cards were offered to participants to compensate them for their time.

Additionally, the allotted time within the interviews also presented certain limitations with regard to the samples that participants were able to provide, as they were only given 10 minutes to respond. The structure of the study did not allow time for revision, multiple drafts, etc. This means that the written samples provided for this study cannot be regarded as "typical" writing assignments, as the participants were not given the time and space to regard the prompts as such.

Another limitation was the representation of plurilingual and/or non-native English users. Given instructional schedules and the willingness (or lack thereof) of this population to participate, only one such writer was included in this study. Further studies in this area should endeavor to better include and represent the unique struggles and experiences of this demographic population.

This study relied on participants' own perceptions and descriptions of their writing habits and skills, with only limited access to their practiced writing process and skills. As a result, interpretations were based on a combination of these, relying most heavily on the participants' perceptions. In continuing research in this area, this aspect of practiced writing should be more fully explored through allowance of a fully developed response.

Related to this point, another consideration is the perception of accuracy present in self-reported data. Participants may not have been completely accurate when responding to interview questions because a) they might have perceived a desire to receive certain answers and report accordingly, or b) they might have perceived that their own writing habits and/or perceptions of the prompts were not "good enough," and adjusted their responses in an attempt to improve their standing with me.

In addition, participants in interviews sometimes may not feel comfortable enough to provide complete and honest reports. In this study, care was taken to ensure that participants would feel comfortable speaking freely, but it is impossible to address all concerns in this area. Participants in the study may have felt uncomfortable due to my position as a fellow student, or due to students being asked to report on a prompt that is so closely tied to their coursework, or simply because they did not perceive me as being trustworthy. All of these factors must be considered when reviewing the entirety of the study.

However, as this process presented an additional commitment made by both my participants and myself, my participants expressed feeling tired, stressed, or burned out prior to beginning the recording. These discussions were a boon, as talking about these feelings seemed to help participants feel more comfortable. Considering I was a stranger to these students, I believe these conversations helped them relate to me more as a fellow student, rather than as a researcher. This small talk about final projects helped participants to be more comfortable with me, which likely helped to encourage the accuracy and honesty of their self-reporting.

Research Validity and Ethical Considerations

As the experiences and feelings of the participants drive the results of this study, it is likely to be considered valid. Creswell states that qualitative research is "socially constructed" and that it is "what participants perceive it to be" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). As a qualitative researcher, my participants and I worked together (via data collection) to assess the validity of my designed study in order to answer the posed research questions. Further, qualitative data is not necessarily concerned with producing a "closed narrative," as the data encourages "a more open narrative with holes and questions and an admission of situatedness and partiality" (Creswell, 2017, p. 247). Finally, this research must be understood as merely a "scratching of the surface" with regard to what is to be known about writing prompts, learning transfer, and the ways in which students use each.

In addition to relying on the relationship established between myself and my participants, this study also relied on multiple sources of data to ensure its credibility. In qualitative research, multiple sources of data can be used to ensure that the analysis is undertaken with a critical eye that leads to credible conclusions (Creswell, 2017). This study takes advantage of this idea by collecting both spoken and written data samples.

It is important in any research setting to be mindful of the ethical and moral implications of one's work. This study has a few important areas to consider. First and foremost, researchers are responsible for maintaining the anonymity of their participants, and I am no exception. My adherence to protecting participant identity not only provides them protection if they had volunteered any information that may be damaging to their education, but it also helped to ensure that they felt comfortable speaking freely during the interview process. The participants' comfort level determined the breadth and accuracy of their self-reporting and was therefore essential to the quality of the collected data.

In an effort to protect participant information, pseudonyms were selected by participants prior to beginning the recording during interviews, and have been used to protect participant identity, as well as obfuscate the university where the study took place (i.e., WPLI). The legal name of each participant is known only to myself, and the recorded and transcribed interview data, as well as the final version of this document, uses only the selected pseudonyms. The sole copy and record of participants' legal names is encrypted, password protected, and saved on my personal computer, where it will remain for up to three years before being destroyed.

In order to comply with university standards and policies concerning research, approval with the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Rights Subjects was sought prior to data collection and was sought again when it became clear that the participant selection process needed to be amended. Participants were given an informed consent form that detailed the study, as well as any conceivable risks they might incur through their participation. In addition, any students who consented to participation prior to the amendment to the selection process were contacted after receiving approval for the new process. They were informed of the changes and asked to sign the amended consent form. These consent forms allowed me to share

transcriptions of interviews and the collected written samples in the final document. Participants were advised that they had the right to decline to answer any and all questions during the interview, as well as decline to provide a writing sample; none of the participants declined to respond to any portion of the interview. In addition, the rights of participants were verbally reviewed prior to collecting data. Finally, participants were informed that they are entitled to a copy of the "soft publication" of this document if they would like, and that they would be contacted as the document neared its final stages in order to offer this "soft" copy version. This allows participants to understand how their information and participation was used for the purposes of this study.

Due to the timing of the interviews, it was imperative to be mindful of the burden placed upon participants. This study was designed so that participation would not, in any way, deeply interfere with participants' ability to complete their normal level of coursework. The time required to complete the interview, as well as fair compensation for this time, was of deep concern, and I emphasized my desire to minimize any undue burden for these students when soliciting participants and during the scheduling process.

Finally, this study should provide some kind of value to participants, as they have sacrificed their time and privacy to speak with me about their writing experiences and knowledge. As a result, it was important to ensure that these sacrifices will benefit them in the long-term. I took care to ask questions that were relevant to the information being sought. I endeavored to provide accurate and fair analysis of the data, to ensure that it provided insights that can be used to help students in the future. I am grateful to my participants for sharing their time and experiences with me, and I hope that this is reflected in this final document.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed how the study was conducted, as well as the impetus for choosing qualitative research in the form of interviews and writing samples. I also described my positionality in relation to the study, the context in which the study was conducted, and the participants who provided data. Details surrounding the sources of data, the method of analysis, and the protection of the data were also discussed. I also explored the challenges I faced during data collection. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of the study were given.

CHAPTER FOUR

REVIEW OF THE DATA

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the data that was collected from the study participants.

The chapter begins by describing the general demographics of the study group. Then, the data is

reviewed so as to provide insights that speak to the proposed research questions, especially with

regard to boundary crossing, boundary guarding, and "near" and "far" transfer. Finally, the

chapter will conclude with a review of what has been discussed.

General Demographics

Table 1

Participant Overview

Name	Age	Major	American?	Considers Self a Fluent English Speaker?
Marie	19	Theater	Yes	Yes
Tracy	18	Nutrition	Yes	Yes
Pip	20	Undecided/Finance	No	Yes
Will	19	Media Marketing	Yes	Yes
Jim	18	Criminology	Yes	Yes

Note: Though all the participants characterized themselves as fluent speakers, the majority of them considered themselves fluent but with caveats. This will be explored in further detail below.

As Table 1 shows, all of the participants in this study were aged between 18 and 20, and

all but one had *officially* declared their major with their respective departments. Interestingly, all

five participants described themselves as fluent English speakers, though three of the "native"

English speakers quantified their fluency in negative ways, indicating that they were somehow

lacking in their language proficiency, perhaps due to their feelings regarding their dialects and

how closely these align with perceptions of "good" English. The sole non-native

English/plurilingual speaker described himself as being "proud" of his multiple languages and therefore did not directly answer this particular question, though he did indicate an overall need to improve his skills in English during the course of the interview. At the time of data collection, all the participants were in the final stretch of their first-year composition course, between the end of April and the beginning of May 2017.

As a reminder, the two given prompts were designated as being either "vague" or "specific." Both prompts are included below for reference.

Specific Prompt	*Vague Prompt*
Analyze a topic relating to your current coursework. Include no fewer than three (3) scholarly sources to support your arguments/assertions. The assignment should be written in a tone that is appropriate for an academic paper.	Write about a topic relating to your current coursework. You can include others' views on the topic, but the majority of the response should be given in your own words.

Figure 3. Writing prompts.

Throughout the interview process, each participant expressed concerns about their language proficiency, their abilities as a writer, and provided writing samples that offered additional insights into their writing habits and knowledge.

Boundary Negotiation, High- and Low-Road Transfer

In Chapter 2, we explored of how scholars have characterized students' ability to transfer knowledge into new contexts (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Perkins & Salomon, 1988). To review, boundary crossers are more likely to "repurpose" prior knowledge in new contexts, resulting in "high-road transfer" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, p. 312). On the other hand, boundary guarders are more likely to engage in "low-road transfer," or an "automatic triggering of well-practiced routines" (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p. 25). These tendencies also correlated with low and high levels of confidence, respectively. Participants in Reiff and Bawarshi's study also described their

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understanding of new writing contexts using "not talk," in that they quantified their understanding of an assignment by clarifying what it was *not.*

The participants in this study provided several different examples of boundary crossing and guarding. There was a lack of confidence in various areas across the group, but the ability of each student to perform high- or low-road transfer was more varied.

Boundary Guarding, Low-Road Transfer

Marie was given the "specific" prompt, while Tracy worked with the "vague" prompt. Despite this, both explicitly connected their prompt with previous reflective writing experiences, and their writing samples reflected this understanding.

Throughout this past academic school year, I have written may different types of papers. These range from interview articles to research papers. No matter what the type of writing it was they all had a similar topic, food. In this I will be writing about my three favorite writing assignments of the year, the food memoir, the interview article, and the radical revision.

Our food memoir is what we started the year off on. We each chose a food that was our favorite or we have a strong connection to. I chose my mother's home made Ham-Pot-Pie. In this food memoir I researched what the food was based off the internet. I found that the ingredients can change. They don't have to be Ham dumplings and potatoes. It can be made out of Turkey and celery or even Beef and carrots. Basically, it is another name for any sort of stew that you would make.

In our interview article, we took that food and interviewed anyone who would be related to the food. I of course interviewed my mother over the phone. I recorded her and quoted her throughout my academic paper.

Finally, with my radical revision I took the interview article and turned it into a new genre. I chose to do a video.

Figure 4. Marie's writing sample.

Topic Related to My Coursework

offers many majors and course to possibly choose from. I decided on the major of nutrition, being that this is my major the courses that I take are generally science heavy and of course nutrition related courses. My second semester consist of English 101, Chem 102, Foods and Nutrition 150 and 151, along with women's wellness. Although they may seem to be different the topics within them are linked together.

When it comes to my English 101 class, we develop writing skills that will help us not only with our academic careers, but our future profession. The skills we learn in that class can be utilized in almost any class. We learn to analyze a writing and to be able to talk about it and describe what it was about. In my other coursework we have to analyze our books, such as for my nutrition classes we learn about the different food and types of cooking method and we will have to discus them or do assignment on them. Having the skill to analize writings helps to insure that we are focusing on the importance of the writing and finding the valuble infora

Figure 5. Tracy's writing sample, with identifying information omitted.

Both Marie and Tracy misread the intent of the prompt, which was essentially the type of "all about" research writing that Bean (2011) describes as being common in FYC courses. In Tracy's case, she actually provided several examples of topics that she could have used if she had interpreted the prompt as it was intended (food and nutrition, women's wellness, chemistry, etc.). However, her understanding of the prompt did not allow her to draw this conclusion, resulting in the reflective nature of her response. Marie also struggled specifically with how to integrate scholarly sources into her response, as this did not seem to match the "reflective" assignment that she perceived. However, this mismatch of information did not signal to her that she had misunderstood the prompt as it was written.

Interestingly, both Marie and Tracy explained that their high school writing preparation had left them underprepared for college writing. This seems to be reflected in their use of the 'I' voice, despite the proposed context as being that of a classroom assignment, which was given with the intent of asking participants to regard the prompts as "high-stakes" assignments. For

both Tracy and Marie, they drew on previous writing experiences, and opted to frame their responses based on the experience that was closest to their interpretation of the prompt, which most reflected an end of the year/course reflective writing piece. Tracy also described the language required by the prompt as being "proper formatting," but did not offer any clarifications regarding what she believed this to mean.

Tracy and Marie both described their interpretation of the prompt in terms of being "similar to" previous writing experiences, though neither truly engaged in "not-talk" with regard to the prompt itself. In Tracy's case, she explicitly marked the prompt as being similar but "not exactly the same" as previous assignments that she had completed in the past. Marie noted that the prompt was different in that it did not provide a "specific thing [to look at]."

Both participants explained that their interpretation of the prompts was "similar" to previous assignments, and Tracy explained that she had an idea of how to respond to the prompt because she had already learned how to "develop [her] thoughts and put those into writing," which she learned in her 101 course. However, neither participants' descriptions of the prompts or their understanding of how a response should look indicated any understanding of broader rhetorical strategies.

Based on my understanding of low-road transfer and boundary guarders, as well as both these participants' written samples, Tracy and Marie appear to have engaged in low-road transfer and boundary guarding. Neither of them explicitly used "not-talk" to describe the task posed by the prompts, nor did they mention rhetorical strategies or the differences in and among genres. In addition, many of the concerns they mentioned with regard to their writing had to do with specific, mechanical issues, such as using grammar properly, or organizing their work in a linear way.

Reflective Boundary Guarding with Low-Road Transfer

Similar to Tracy and Marie, Will (who was given the "vague" prompt) also initially regarded the prompt as a reflective assignment, and as such, drew on previous writing experiences that were similar to his interpretation of the given prompt. Although he began to outline for the response based on this understanding, he eventually understood the prompt and produced a first sentence that demonstrated this understanding. Will explained that he tends to read assignments repeatedly and doing so helped him to eventually understand what the prompt was asking of him. Though his sample is relegated to the outline he provided with this initial misunderstanding, his first sentence reflected a fuller understanding of the prompt's task.

> Will: The first time reading it, I didn't realize that you wanted me to talk about one topic of my courses, so one I read it again, I was like, "oh, I gotta rephrase it," because I was gonna write about all my courses, so re-reading it helped me.

And:

> Will: A lot of times when I get [an assignment], I'll read it, and I'll keep reading it until something clicks because, for some reason, when I first read something, it just – when I first read [the prompt], I was like, "what the heck is this talking about?" […] I read up there, and then I read it again, and then finally after I read it a couple more times, it finally clicked.

Figure 6. Will's writing sample.

Will outlined under the assumption that the prompt was asking him to write reflectively, though his brief beginning to the prompt itself was more in-line with the question being asked. After he realized what the prompt was asking, he switched tactics, and chose computer science as his topic, which he described as being "like a puzzle." Due to the time constraints of the interview, Will was only able to outline and then write one sentence in response to the prompt, but the sentence sounded promising: "Everyone loves a challenge, whether it's a puzzle or a magic trick." However, the bulk of his writing response encompassed his initial misreading of the prompt.

The choices that Will made with regard to his opening sentence were due to his high school writing instruction, which emphasized an "hourglass" organizational method, in which the first few sentences of an assignment may not even touch on the topic (in Will's case, computer science).

> Will: My senior year of high school – my senior and junior year actually – both those teachers worked with the hourglass essay type. So they always told me to start very broad and then work your way in, and then end broad as well. So, I dunno, it was sorta pounded in my head and it made sense to me. Everything I did, I started off broad, every introduction sentence was broad and catchy.

Despite the transfer of this instruction, many of the writing strategies Will used were broad, with little-to-no demonstration of rhetorical knowledge. In addition, he demonstrated an awareness of different genres (i.e., "I'm not good at research papers, but I'm good at poetry"), but could not articulate the differences between them, nor why he does not perform as well on research papers. His understanding of his performance in these areas was heavily tied to his grades, rather than any clarifying feedback provided by his instructors. He also described the given writing task without using "not-talk." Although Will eventually interpreted the task correctly, and although his beginning sentence *does* demonstrate an understanding of the prompt, the ways in which he described his writing knowledge and his understanding of genre did not imply boundary crossing behavior, though he did demonstrate more introspection and reflection than Tracy or Marie.

Boundary Crossing, Some High-Road Transfer

Pip was the only international participant in the study, as well as the only non-native/plurilingual English speaker. This presented an interesting complication, as he seemed to

struggle to understand the vague prompt. Although this was a common theme for the majority of the participants in this study, Pip's misunderstanding seemed to be more of a mechanical language issue than it was a misinterpretation. We talked over the prompt together prior to beginning the interview process, though this consisted of my reading the prompt to him out loud before asking him any questions about it. Once I had read the prompt to him, he came to a conclusion that was slightly different from both Marie and Tracy, in that he recognized that he needed to write about a topic relating to his coursework but seemed to frame this response in terms of reflection on an individual assignment.

> Pip: [I have] to write that topic that is relating to my coursework. I am taking English
> 101, so I have to write something relating to essays. Um, we are still writing our memoirs
> in English 101. So, I have done 5000 words. […] We are still writing this memoir, and
> we have to publish a book – it is for us and for our instructor.

After we discussed the memoir, Pip continued to discuss the given prompt as if it was *about* the memoir assignment, though I attempted to clarify this several times. However, his conclusion of using the memoir as the contextualization of his response made complete sense as the only writing assignment in English that he had completed thus far *was* a memoir. As such, it seemed that his framing for what a "writing assignment" is consisted of this developing knowledge.

Despite this, Pip chose to write about academic essays, which was a surprise given the ways in which he indicated his understanding of the prompt. Pip's writing sample (below) was handwritten, though he later stated that he usually writes on the computer. This option was made available to him, but he chose not to use it.

> How did I start to write an academic essay?
> I had I different Idea about writing or how to write an academic essay's. In the begning, I just talke care about how many words I vill write, and to make a full vords inside it. But now, I develope my writing and take care about the Ideas and my opinions more than just count the word and the sentences, the essay needs a great Ideas to build it. You have to have a good Structure in order to get a nice building.

Figure 7. Pip's writing sample.

Like other participants, Pip also seemed to frame his response to the prompt as writing reflection, though his response was more of a reflection of what he had learned about writing and his own process than it was the type of "general reflection" that Tracy and Marie offered. His perception of writing is couched in language of construction, in that his thoughts, words, etc., become "a nice building." It was interesting that this understanding led him to misunderstand the prompt, but also encouraged him to actively reflect on his writing development, as well as the rhetorical tools he had learned and how he uses them.

Pip's response showed evidence of high-road transfer and boundary crossing, which is evident in many of his responses. For example, he utilized a lot of "not-talk," stating that memoirs are a genre in which the author must share "what somebody *doesn't* know," and are comprised of "stories relating to [the author], *not* general ideas" (emphasis mine). In addition, despite his knowledge of English writing being largely relegated to experiences with the memoir,

his choice to write about academic essays indicated that he recognized that the given prompt was *not* a memoir, despite his framing of the prompt using that genre. He also spoke to broad rhetorical strategies (i.e., "you have to have a good structure mortar to get a nice building"), indicating his understanding of how one organizes their writing in order to adequately respond within a given genre.

Although Pip also seemed to misinterpret the prompt, he was also the only participant to explicitly display a measure of knowledge with regard to the *differences* between various genres, despite this knowledge being limited to his exposure to memoirs. His sample also demonstrated a high level of reflection, in that he followed the trajectory of his writing development from what he thought he knew about writing to what writing a memoir had taught him.

When asked what he already knew about writing that helped him respond to the prompt, Pip again explained that all his knowledge about writing in English had come from his English 101 course that semester.

Indeterminate Boundary Negotiation, Low-Road Transfer

Jim was given the specific prompt, and he was the only participant to properly grasp the nature and goal of the assignment on his first attempt. After reading the prompt, he described the assignment as a "research paper" and to write about cyber bullying, which he felt was related to his major, criminology.

In today's society, bullying has been put into the spotlight. The public is now aware that bullying in schools is still a problem in today's society not only verbally, but through technology also. After extensive research, people have found that when children leave school they are not as safe as they think they are. Children can be emotionally attacked by other through social media at any point in time. This is a very big issue because not only is cyber bullying damaging the children emotionally and mentally, but their parents could not have a clue that these things are going on.

There has been bullying in society for generations. But before technology, bullying was done in person. Now, children can bully others through social media and text message. One article explains "About one out of every four teens has experienced cyberbullying, and about one out of every six teens has done it to others" (Cyberbullying Facts). This means that all over the United States, thousands of children are experiencing some sort of cyberbullying.

http://cyberbullying.org/facts

not enough time to cite

Figure 8. Jim's writing sample.

Jim demonstrated some genre knowledge of research papers, as he explained that he needed to support his claims with scholarly sources, though he described as being anything that comes from ".edu or .gov" websites. He also explained that he seeks out articles that have a named author attached to them, as he felt that these sources are more credible.

Although he correctly interpreted the prompt, he also explicitly marked the genre as being that of a research paper, which means that this is a boundary that Jim has, essentially, already encountered and crossed. In fact, he described research papers as being "easy for [him]" due to his previous exposure to the genre. He also noted that, although the phrase "academic paper" was new to him, he assumed that his response should include citations and use the appropriate academic tone, which is similar to the behavior of boundary guarders in earlier

studies (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). He also used no "not-talk" to describe the boundaries of the genre.

> Jim: [The assignment is] similar in ways that I need more than three scholarly sources. A lot of my professors wants a lot of sources. A lot of them do topics related to my coursework, they aren't always random.

Interestingly, despite his emphasis on genre knowledge, Jim had a difficult time articulating the difference between a persuasive paper and a research paper, though he did acknowledge them as separate genres. He said that they are similar in that a strong writer of each genre will know how to use sources and establish themselves as a credible author. The genres are different in how these sources are used, however:

> Jim: For persuasive, you definitely have to pick a source that goes along with your idea and supports your argument, [but] for research I just kinda pick sources that go along with the topic.

Jim did not acknowledge or differentiate between the kinds of credibility that should be established for each genre, though he certainly seemed to describe them as being different. He also did not clarify whether he evaluates sources in the same way for these genres, which implies that there may be a difference in how he determines which sources should be used in each genre.

Jim is a unique case in this study, as without further examination of his skills (i.e., providing a prompt that provides a *new* writing context), it is hard to determine whether he is a boundary guarder or a boundary crosser. However, given that he was unable to articulate the differences between research papers and persuasive papers, it also seems that Jim is not regarding these genres in a deep way, relying on surface mechanics rather than rhetorical strategies to define them. In this study, he exhibited low-road transfer behavior, this could be due

to his prior knowledge – he did not have to engage in high-road transfer because the task did not provide a space in which to do so. This is not a reflection of Jim so much as it is his previous writing experiences in high school, which have more than adequately prepared him to respond to tasks such as these, which is in direct contrast to Tracy and Marie, who described their high school writing education as being lacking.

Ultimately, while Jim's response is indicative of low-road transfer, it is difficult to make a determination regarding Jim's overall tendency towards boundary crossing or boundary guarding with any level of certainty due to the need for more data.

General Writing Knowledge

Many of the participants in this study framed their writing knowledge, both previous and developing, in terms of helpful tips and tricks that helped them to complete assignments. Marie discussed the importance and foundational nature of the thesis, as well as using this same concept to frame each paragraph in her writing, a tip she learned in English 100. Tracy explained that she learned about the five-paragraph essay structure in English 101, and seemed to adapt this structure to new writing contexts. Will learned about an "hourglass" writing structure in high school, as well as the importance of forming a strong thesis, which he emphasized as being important to his writing practices. This instruction was evident in his response, as he "started broad" and intended to become more and more specific, though the time constraints of the interview prevented him from providing a sample that fully evidenced this knowledge. He also reported that, like Marie, he adapts broader essay writing strategies (i.e., a strong thesis, organization) for each paragraph, regarding each one as a "mini essay." Jim recognized the structure of the prompt as being similar to prompts he received in high school, and used what he learned through that instruction to complete his response for this study. This instruction focused

on topic sentences and effective use of sources, a skill he reported as having improved in English 101, where continued exposure to these skills helped him to further develop as a college writer.

These writing strategies were often recounted in the context of "making writing easier," rather than as broad tools that the participants could transfer effectively across contexts, in that these tools were not explored in explicit rhetorical knowledge; rather, these tools were framed as general tips that made writing an essay, regardless of genre, an easier task. Participants discussed these tips as things that would help them address specific struggles that students often face in their writing, such as providing an adequate amount of content, developing ideas, overcoming writer's block, and organization, issues that many of the participant responses touched on in one way or another.

While the other participants framed their previous knowledge around these general tips, Pip's understanding of his English 101 course focused more explicitly on genre. His understanding of the memoir genre seemed to impart specific rhetorical knowledge, as his response emphasized his development in writing. In the introductory paragraph of his writing sample, he mused on his "different idea" about writing when entering his FYC course and explained that his primary concern was simply providing enough content to his instructors, while his memoir instruction taught him to "develope [his] writing and take care about the ideas and opinions" [sic]. His understanding of the memoir genre also helped him to think explicitly about the needs of his audience while writing, and this knowledge also helped him to keep to his task without adding any additional or unneeded information. His exposure to and understanding of memoirs implied that, if given similar instruction in other genres, Pip might draw similar conclusions, relying on the rhetorical structure of a particular genre to guide him in his response.

Interestingly, Will also spoke about genre, but did so in negative terms, as he did not recount strategies that he had learned from various genres, but instead explained that he struggled with the genre of research papers. He indicated that he struggled with this genre due to his use of citations, but he did not indicate any particular rhetorical knowledge that the negative feedback he had received in these areas might imply, such as the effective establishment of his ethos. He also reported that he performs well in other genres but did not explain any rhetorical knowledge that may indicate why this is so.

Based on participant responses, it is unclear to what extent each of them has been given explicit rhetorical knowledge and tools during their studies. Tracy and Marie, however, both seemed to imply that their instruction in high school had not been explicit in this regard, as they each asserted that these early writing experiences did not adequately prepare them for college writing. Both of them stated that their high school instruction often involved reading, with brief responses that encouraged the inclusion of their own opinions. Considering both Tracy and Marie misinterpreted their prompt and wrote reflective pieces, a genre which also encourages the use of personal opinions, it may be that neither Tracy nor Marie were given broader rhetorical knowledge in their high school instruction. However, it seems that each of them encountered some of this important foundational knowledge in their college classes, as they each spoke to the importance of writing for a particular audience, as well as the use of the rhetorical triangle. Despite this, neither of them implied that they had fully incorporated this knowledge into their skillset, as the comments regarding audience and ethos, logos, and pathos, were given in generalized terms, i.e., "I learned about this," rather than "I used this to complete a writing task."

Emphasis on Topic

With the exception of Pip, each participant focused heavily on their discomfort with the lack of specific topic given by their prompt. In Pip's case, he marked the topic as being something that he pays special attention to when given an assignment, as he reported that these are the most important pieces of information on an assignment. He explained that the title on a given prompt is synonymous with "topic" for him, as "when you give a title to write about […] this is the title, so you have to write something relating to this." However, he did not express any discomfort with the lack of title or topic in the prompt he was given.

However, the other participants all described the prompt (whether "vague" or "specific") as being too broad, too vague. The participants also seemed to indicate some level of anxiety or uncertainty in writing situations in which the given topic is not specific. In fact, these participants framed a lack of specificity in their writing assignments to be an additional hurdle to overcome in their work. When a specific topic is not given, these participants described this as being task to complete *prior* to beginning to draft a response, which they found universally frustrating. Marie specifically spoke to this point, stating that she usually receives more direction with regard to topic in her classes.

Marie: We always have something to draw from, but this is kind of open.

Stephanie: Too much freedom or too little?

Marie: Um… I think too much.

Marie expressed a lot of discomfort with the broadness of the prompt and spoke about this at length. Tracy also described the prompt as being "too broad" with regard to the topic, and stated that the time constraints of the interview structure made this issue even more frustrating, though she did note that having more time may not have helped her very much, as "there's just so many

ways you can go with [the prompt] that trying to focus on just one [way] was too hard." For Jim, he prefers to be given a topic over having to choose one, and he explained that the topic is the most important piece of any writing assignment for him.

Spoken Language Fluency and Student Confidence

One particularly interesting theme were the ways in which the participants quantified their language fluency. All the participants except Tracy explained that their spoken language proficiency was good, but that it could be improved. This included Pip, whose relative language spoken proficiency was lower than the other participants', but also included Marie, Will, and Jim, who had been exposed to English for most, if not all, of their lives. All the participants, including Tracy, described their writing skills as something that needed to be improved.

Tracy seemed confused or put-off by the question regarding her language proficiency.

Stephanie: Do you consider yourself to be a fluent English speaker?

Tracy: Yes.

Stephanie: Okay. You're smiling very big and laughing.

Tracy: It's just funny. I don't know, I just speak English.

She also reported that she speaks "a little Spanish, but nothing major."

Pip did not quantify his language proficiency in negative terms, though he did acknowledge that he needed to practice English in order to improve further. He did not seem bothered by his progress, and in fact was proud that he speaks multiple languages, stating "I like to be bilingual, by the way." However, he also said that he "like to be a native English speaker," which I took to mean that he used the speech of "native" English speakers to be the benchmark by which be measures his success; this standard of measurement is a common one, as both students and teachers often use the "native" voice as a method of comparison to measure

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progress in English language learning (Holliday, 2006). Pip's comments were never focused in any lacking aspects of his language, only his progress and what he could learn next; he was extremely proud of his status as a plurilingual English speaker.

The other three participants all quantified their language proficiency in ways that were lacking or negative. Marie hesitated when she was asked about her language proficiency, and said "I speak English," but that she did not consider her English to be "proper."

> Marie: Um… I don't speak in the right tense sometimes. I say the word "things" a lot
> when I'm trying to explain, like "stuff", and when I read that in a paper, I know that's not
> how we speak.

Marie seemed to describe her feelings about her own English fluency as being somehow lacking, but ultimately clarified her overall English proficiency with a simple, "I speak English."

Will provided a rather in-depth qualification of his language proficiency. With regard to his status as an English user, he also seemed to qualify his language proficiency in negative or lacking terms, though he has used English all his life. His reasoning for this was that he "[says] different words." He explained that he sometimes purposely pronounces certain words differently from his peers, as he places the emphasis on certain words in the "wrong" place. He has also inherited some of his father's idiolect, as his father is from a small town in western Pennsylvania, where some of the words are used or pronounced differently. He seemed conscious of this rural dialectic background, and he oscillated between pride and sheepish apology for this linguistic heritage.

Despite these linguistic differences, Will was clear that these differences were active choices for him, but quantified his language fluency in such a way that these choices took away

from his perception of his ability to speak fluently. Interestingly, he seemed to connect this

perception to how non-native English speakers might learn from his language.

Stephanie: So you think that playing with language makes you less fluent?

Will: In a sense, yeah. I mean, I guess it would be more diverse, harder for other people

who are coming into this country who are unaware of the language. It would make it

harder for them to learn. Like, they say English is the hardest language to learn, and with

the many ways of people saying different words – like [example omitted for anonymity]

– like I can see how it would be hard for them to understand.

Stephanie: Okay. So you think – I don't wanna use this in the wrong way – but you think

that using language differently actually takes away from *your* fluency?

Will: Sorta kinda.

Stephanie: What does being fluent mean to you?

Will: Um, being 100% knowledgeable of a certain topic or thing, so English in this case.

I guess… I dunno, maybe I'm changing my answer to yes. I think I am fluent enough that

I can change words into my own understanding, maybe help explain to other people. So

maybe I do change my answer.

As with Marie, there seemed to be an implication that Will felt his language was somehow

lacking because he was not "100% knowledgeable" and therefore had more to learn. Although he

ultimately changed his final answer to this question, he still seemed unsure or uncomfortable

with considering himself fluent.

Jim also seemed uncomfortable or hesitant with his status as a language user, though he

was not as harsh about this as Will was with his language.

Stephanie: Do you consider yourself to be a fluent English speaker?

Jim: …. Yes [laughs]

Stephanie: Okay, so you're laughing. Can you say more about that?

Jim: Um, I dunno. I would like to say that my English is good. I don't really know of much other languages besides a couple sentences.

Stephanie: Okay, so this is the most comfortable language for you, so you must be fluent?

Jim: Mmhm.

Although he did not negatively qualify his fluency in the same way others had, he did seem uncomfortable or uncertain about it, though this appeared to be based on his perception that he still has a lot to learn.

In the data of this study, there does seem to be a connection between the relationship a writer has with their spoken language proficiency or confidence and how they approach writing contexts. This relationship to language may have an affect on transfer, but this study did not provide adequate time or space in which to fully explore or understand the nature of this relationship, nor how it may help or hinder learning transfer in other contexts.

Written Language Proficiency and Student Confidence

Each of the participants in this study discussed their writing proficiency as something that could be further improved, though none of them explicitly quantified their writing development in negative terms (as many of them did with spoken language). Many of the participants also based their perception of their skill with written language based on the feedback of others. Marie mentioned that her mother says that she is "not [a] terrible" writer when it comes to content, while Jim reported that he often provides feedback to his peers in classes, which he took to mean that he was "above average." Will stated that he *had* considered himself a good writer until he

got a poor grade on a research paper in high school, but that he "[could] be" a good writer, especially if he sought more help with his writing.

Interestingly, if the participants *did* define their written language proficiency as being lacking in some way, they often attributed it to previous instruction and exposure to writing. Both Marie and Tracy attributed their struggles to previous instruction. It seems that many of the participants in this study expressed their discomfort with their writing proficiency in ways that place the brunt of developing this knowledge on their instructors. In some ways, this may be a fair placement of "blame," as many of the participants did not recount explicit rhetorical knowledge that they gained in their high school writing experiences, and many of the participants explained that they *had* gained some explicit rhetorical instruction in the FYC courses, though the extent to which each participant had integrated these skills into their writing habits varied greatly.

However, given the ways in which many of the participants described their discomfort with the broadness of the prompts and their repeated references to the importance explicit topics, as well as an overall lack of explicit discussion of rhetorical strategies, it would seem that these students are generally uncomfortable with being given complete power over their writing in their classes. As Marie put it, there was "too much freedom" in being able to select and write on her own topic. Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments, either expressing explicit dislike of having so much freedom, or if given a choice, explained that they prefer more control to be in the hands of their instructor than themselves. In general, these students expressed an overall desire to have their instructors give them more guidance in their writing.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, a general overview of the prompts and the intended reading of them was provided, as well as some general demographic information about the participants. Then, the participants' interview data and written samples were analyzed, paying special attention to reported high school and college writing experiences, as well as how these experiences may have influenced the impressions of the participants' writing development.

In Chapter 5, the data provided by these participants will be further explored and interpreted within the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In addition, suggestions will be provided as to what this data may regarding the development of students' writing skills, as well as how to best encourage this development within a writing prompt.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this final chapter, the participant responses are re-contextualized with literature to explore what the responses in this study may mean with regard to writing development in FYC instruction. Future areas of study are also explored. The chapter concludes with a summary of the aforementioned information, as well as a broad summary of the entire study.

Writing Prompts

As mentioned in Chapter 2, many of the prompts that are used in FYC courses are informational pieces with an "all about" slant, in that students are encouraged to provide information about a given topic, perhaps with little-to-know context regarding a particular audience (Bean, 2011; Melzer, 2014). The extent to which these kinds of prompts encourage transfer of writing/rhetorical knowledge seems to be limited, as when given a similarly de-contextualized prompt, the participants in this study struggled to transfer knowledge that they gained in their FYC courses.

Bean (2011) speaks at length regarding rhetorical knowledge and how it is learned in FYC, as he states that the "role" or "purpose" of a given task can be extremely useful to students who are just beginning to understand the interplay between the needs of an audience and the constraints of an assignment (p. 99). This issue is also reflected in the interviews of this study, as Pip described the need for understanding what his audience "does not know" when writing. Jim also spoke to this to some extent, describing his concerns with a reader's perception of his work, though he did not explicitly connect this to rhetorical knowledge of audience analysis, and instead talked about whether "the reader [will] be interested in the topic."

In this study, the implied audience was not defined for participants, and none of the participants asked questions about who this audience may be, regardless of their previous classroom instruction regarding this issue. Some of the participants explicitly mentioned audience and its importance in their interviews (Jim and Tracy), but did not connect this knowledge to their writing practice in their interview or written sample. Bean (2011) points out that effective writing assignments should "help students visualize the audience's stance toward the writer's subject" (p. 99). This provides important context to the student, which helps to encourage writers to think about their audience and how it will affect their writing, which may then provide a space in which deep, high-road transfer can occur.

Bean (2011) also suggests that providing an explicit genre to students helps to contextualize a written task, providing deepened understanding of issues such as document design, organization, and tone (p. 100). This genre knowledge "helps students transfer earlier genre knowledge from earlier writing tasks" to make thoughtful, meaningful decisions about their work (p. 100). In this study, the genre and context were not explicitly defined, and though some participants correctly interpreted the prompt as being a research assignment, the majority of them struggled to make this connection without an explicit labelling of the genre in question, and it appeared that none of the participants attempted to write with a specific audience in mind.

Given the interviews in this study, as well as what the literature explains regarding effective writing prompts, it is clear that students facing implicit contextual information in writing assignments may struggle to draw thoughtful conclusions regarding their task. Without this reflection and metacognition, students are unlikely to engage in boundary crossing and high-road transfer.

In FYC, the combination of developing rhetorical and genre knowledge makes the importance of defining these rhetorical and genre boundaries paramount. As FYC is tasked with encouraging the successful development of this knowledge, it is important to provide ample information for students so that its development is encouraged (CWPA, 2014). This means making explicit note of audience, writing context, genre, and how the students are evaluated on their attempt to write effectively will be evaluated (Bean, 2011).

Bean (2011) provides a wealth of information as to how to format prompts that may facilitate transfer, and this study confirms many of his assertions on this topic, as the lack of context, audience designation, and explicit genre made it difficult for participants to engage in high-road transfer and boundary crossing. In addition, participants often expressed discomfort when they were refused clarification during the interview period. This reflects a deep need to ensure that these types of clarifications are built into the structure of assignments, so as to better facilitate the space where students may engage in boundary crossing and high-road transfer. By frontloading these kinds of clarifications within an assignment, students can start the important work of transferring previous knowledge into a new context sooner.

General Writing Knowledge

Many of the participants in this study framed their writing knowledge, both previous and developing, in terms of helpful tips and tricks that helped them to complete assignments. Many of these tricks were concerned with helping the students to begin or continue writing, i.e., Will's instruction regarding the structure of the first sentence, or Marie's learning regarding the concept that each paragraph is a "mini essay."

These writing strategies were often recounted in the context of "making writing easier," rather than as broad tools that the participants could transfer effectively across contexts, in that

these tools were not explored as explicit rhetorical knowledge; rather, these tools were framed as general tips that made writing an essay, regardless of genre, an easier task. Participants discussed these tips as things that would help them address particular struggles that students often face in their writing, such as providing an adequate amount of content, developing ideas, overcoming writer's block, and organization, issues that many of the participant responses touched on in one way or another. Many of these same tips and tricks that participants recounted are explored by Bean (2011), but his framing is set within the context of making the *functions* of these tips and tricks explicit with regard to genre and rhetorical strategies.

Based on participant responses, it is unclear to what extent each of them has been provided or used explicit rhetorical knowledge and tools during their studies. Tracy and Marie, however, both seemed to imply that their instruction in high school had not been explicit in this regard, as they each asserted that these early writing experiences did not adequately prepare them for college writing. Both of them stated that their high school instruction often involved reading, with brief responses that often encouraged the inclusion of their own opinions. Considering both Tracy and Marie engaged in boundary guarding and low-road transfer when writing their reflective responses (Reiff & Buwarshi, 2011), it may be that neither Tracy nor Marie were given broader rhetorical knowledge in their high school instruction. However, it seems that each of them has been given some of this important foundational knowledge in their college classes, as both of them spoke to the importance of writing for a particular audience, as well as the use of the rhetorical triangle. Despite this, neither of them implied that they had fully incorporated this knowledge into their skillset, as the comments regarding audience and ethos, logos, and pathos, were given in generalized terms, i.e., "I learned about this," rather than "I used this to complete a writing task." A student who is able to reflect on and explain *why* and *how* a genre works is more

likely to effectively use that genre when writing (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Neither Tracy nor Marie demonstrated this knowledge in their interviews or their writing samples.

Given the various ways in which each participant described and recounted some rhetorical instruction in their English 101 course, as well as the varying experience with these concepts in high school, it would seem that explicit instruction in rhetorical knowledge and usage, as well as the rhetorical conventions of various genres, may be a helpful foundational tool that can help students develop in their writing. However, at the time that these interviews were conducted, it appears that none of the participants had fully incorporated this knowledge into their skillset, as none provided a broad explanation of how these tools function in their writing. As such, it is unclear as to the point at which this transfer may occur, though FYC certainly encourages it to do so (CWPA, 2014).

Focus on Topic

With the exception of Pip, each participant focused heavily on their discomfort with the topic given by their prompt. The other participants all described the prompt (whether "vague" or "specific") as being too broad, too vague. The participants also seemed to indicate some level of anxiety or uncertainty in situations where a topic is not specific, contexts in which the boundaries of the assignment/writing context/audience are not explicitly defined. In fact, these participants framed a lack of specificity in their writing assignments as an additional hurdle to overcome in their work. When a specific topic is not given, these participants implied that they felt as if they have to complete an additional task, and this brings frustration because they cannot begin to respond to the assignment until this important piece has been clarified.

Bean (2011) echoes the concerns of these participants with instructions for instructors that address this issues with a method he calls "RAFT." This mnemonic proposes that writing

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tasks should be developed such that the **R**ole, **A**udience, **F**ormat/genre, and **T**ask are clearly defined, and the task itself should be posed as an "intriguing problem" to solve (p. 98). This also speaks to many of the issues with having "too much freedom" that participants expressed, as framing a prompt in this way provides concrete ideas regarding rhetorical context and the boundaries that it implies. Providing this "guidance," even in brief or with fewer specifications, can allow students freedom within their writing. Assignments may also be formulated to explicitly ask students to define these issues themselves, thereby providing a more open-ended assignment *without* giving students no guidance as to how to progress (p. 98).

For students in FYC, a broad topic (i.e., a prompt structured without the aforementioned guidance) may become a source of anxiety or fear due to their still-developing foundational knowledge, as well as the relative breadth or depth of said knowledge; this was certainly the case among the participants of this study. However, more open-ended assignments can encourage one of the aforementioned stated goals of FYC, critical thinking (CWPA, 2014). As students at the FYC level are still expected to be developing this important skill, the concept of having to ask one's *own* question(s) *and* answer them can seem insurmountable and frightening, especially if a student's previous writing experiences have focused primarily on writing about one's personal opinions. This is further compounded because students are also often tasked with learning rhetorical knowledge during the same FYC course (CWPA, 2014).

Given the ways in which participants in this study framed their rhetorical knowledge, it seems apparent that asking students to develop their own specific topic may be "too much" (as Marie put it) to ask of them during this critical time in writing development. However, using the RAFT strategy that Bean (2011) suggests can allow for more freedom, while still providing support so that students can begin to use the explicit rhetorical knowledge and be encouraged to

engage in critical thinking. By reverse-engineering writing prompts to encourage this kind of learning, and by scaffolding classroom practice to facilitate and deepen this learning, students can begin to make meaningful, thoughtful decisions about their writing with regard to audience, purpose, and genre.

As students move from FYC and deeper into their majors, they should become more comfortable with applying this rhetorical knowledge, as well as asking and answering their own questions without an explicit RAFT prompt. In FYC, the balance of specificity-to-freedom must be carefully weighed, and in cases in which a topic is unspecified, specificity should be given to the genre, audience, and task. Bean (2011) characterized this practice as "modulating difficulty levels," wherein assignments gradually more freedom to students as they progress in their development (p. 232).

Student Confidence and Language Fluency

As mentioned previously, all the participants except Tracy explained that their spoken language proficiency was good, but that it could (and should) be improved. This included Pip, whose relative language spoken proficiency was lower than the other participants', but also included Marie, Will, and Jim, who had been exposed to English for most, if not all, of their lives. All the participants, including Tracy, described their writing skills as something that needed to be improved.

Considering the "needs improvement" nature of the participants' responses regarding language proficiency, as well as the widespread discomfort regarding the vagueness of the writing prompt and topic among most of the participants, it would seem that there is a connection between a participant's confidence in writing and their perceived level of language skill, especially given how "academic" writing often conceptualizes "appropriate" tone and language

within writing assignments (Temple, n.d.). These stylistic considerations often discourage the use of "non-standard" dialects, such as those used by Will, Jim, Marie, and Pip. This discouragement is often internalized and can cause issues of confidence for speakers, especially considering the ways in which these non-standard dialects are often considered indicative of "carelessness" or "laziness" on the part of the speaker (Siegel, 2012, p. 41).

This discomfort with language proficiency seemed to be a universal experience, as this was echoed in one way or another among all participants, regardless of the amount of previous exposure to the English language. Since all the participants except Tracy quantified their spoken language proficiency as something that needed to be improved, and all five participants said the same of their writing skills, it may be that, at this point in their writing development, students do not consider themselves proficient enough in their language to write and interpret confidently.

As most of the participants spoke at length about the vagueness of either prompt, as well as how each participant expressed the need for improvement in their writing, one way to address this connection between perceived language/writing proficiency and writing prompts is for instructors to help students to become "fluent" in the language of a given assignment, regardless of how vague or specific it may be, and regardless of the language proficiency that each student brings to an assignment. This may mean taking the time to make the implicit rhetorical boundaries of a particular genre explicit (as Bean (2011) has previously suggested), or to analyze the prompt as a class prior to sending students to begin working on the assignment. In this study, the participants often attempted to clarify the prompt they were given prior to the 10-minute response period, but since declining to offer these clarifications was a deliberate choice in the methodology, no clarifications were offered. This led to confusion and misinterpretation among most of the participants. If these questions had been clarified for each participant, or if both

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prompts had been more specific, then each participant may have written a response that was closer to what Jim produced.

In future research, this kind of explicit clarification may be useful in determining what questions students most need answers to before beginning a writing assignment. Bean (2011) offers many suggestions on things that may be useful to clarify, but perhaps a quantitative study in what students most often ask could provide guidance into what to frontload in a prompt, to alleviate some of these common areas of confusion or discomfort.

Suggestions for Writing Prompt Design

As part of the contextualization of this study's data, it is important to offer pedagogical implications for the data that participants provided. As such, this section offers some tips for the design of essay prompts. These suggestions are made with the knowledge and suggestions offered by previous research (Bean, 2011; CWPA, 2014; Melzer, 2014), which are further contextualized by the interview data of this study.

Suggestions for Designing Writing Prompts in FYC

- *Scaffold writing development:* Consider structuring the progression of the overall course so that prompts provide RAFT information early on, but increasingly ask students to provide this information themselves as the class/major coursework goes on. This can help to provide a low-stakes space to explore rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking early on, while providing the foundational knowledge upon which students can utilize to exert more control over their writing later.

- *Help students become "fluent" in the language of their writing assignments:* As students are still developing their rhetorical knowledge base, and especially because students in FYC courses come from a wide range of educational experiences, language proficiencies, and

previous writing assignments, take care to fully and explicitly describe exactly what and why a writing prompt is requesting of students before asking them to respond. This is especially important as different instructors may conceptualize various genres using different terms. In order to minimize any confusion that may come as a result of assuming that universal referents to genres are being used in all classrooms, care should be taken to clearly and fully define these terms for students.

- *Provide support for developing skills:* Students who are still developing their rhetorical knowledge skills are apt to confuse or completely disregard the importance of process when given an assignment. This can lead to ignoring the importance of revision, a rushed or incomplete understanding of rhetorical moves and strategies, etc. Make the importance of this growth part of assignment design, providing ample deadlines at different steps in the writing process (i.e., topic development, outlining, requiring multiple drafts). Students may be more likely to engage in transfer and boundary crossing if the structure of the assignment itself provides ample space in which transfer may take place.

- *Make rhetorical knowledge instruction explicit:* Many of the students in this study could not conceptualize or articulate some of the rhetorical skills they had learned. In FYC, as these important skills are being developed, it may be helpful to students to have these strategies and their functions made explicit, as students may be more able to then transfer this knowledge into new contexts. By making the expectations and strategies of a particular genre explicit, students may be more able to make more conscious moves into new genres.

- *Attempt to find a balance between low- and high-road transfer:* Provide contexts in which students are asked to either work a little harder on their own (assignments with more freedom) or are provided more frontloaded support (extremely specific and defined

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assignments). By varying assignments in this way, the space through which students may accomplish transfer is varied, resulting in high- and low-road transfer, depending on how "near" or "far" a given task is designed to be (Haskell, 2001).

Suggestions for Future Study

This study investigated how writing prompts may affect learning transfer. However, the breadth and depth of this topic far outreaches the investigation in this project. As such, other avenues of research are implicated by the limitations of this study.

First, given the lack of non-native English using and/or plurilingual representation in this study, additional research should be given to this particular demographic, especially with regard to how language proficiency may affect how these students read and interpret prompts. This study's data did not provide enough information to make any claims regarding the habits and understanding of these students as a demographic. More data is needed to deepen understanding of this topic with reference to students who may approach assignments with an additional barrier between themselves and the language of an assignment. In addition, future research should also engage with language and language barriers as another space in which learning transfer can be further complicated and/or negotiated in differing ways. Due to the lack of non-native/plurilingual participants and due to the focus on writing prompts as the vehicle that initiated transfer, this aspect of the data was unexpected and largely unstudied. Further research in this area may yield more information regarding this particular aspect of learning transfer and language.

Secondly, there were several areas in this study in which the data might have benefited greatly from giving participants more time to respond to the prompt. A follow-up study could utilize a similar design and methodology and could even use the same or similar writing prompts,

but could ask participants to write full responses, perhaps with multiple drafts and revision. A follow-up that allows participants to continue to work with a prompt like the ones used in this study could provide evidence of how students use more open-ended prompts when given more support and feedback as they work. Conversely, a follow-up study could also investigate how students respond to hyper-specific prompts (i.e., prompts that provide the RAFT context) in short periods of time, to determine to what extent transfer occurs and at what point(s) in the writing process it might appear.

Finally, a review of to what extent high school education tends to offer explicit rhetorical knowledge may be useful, as the participants in this study demonstrated a wide range of high school writing experiences. These divergent experiences also seemed to help or hinder participants with regard to transfer, as students who had "lacking" high school writing instruction engaged in boundary guarding and low-road transfer (Tracy and Marie), while the other participants' previous writing experiences were varied, and these variances seemed to reflect the extent to which transfer was accomplished (Will, Jim, and Pip). The less these students recounted explicit rhetorical knowledge, the less they seemed to engage in transfer and boundary crossing.

Chapter Summary

This final chapter provided a contextualized discussion of how this study's data fits into current and foundational research regarding writing development, FYC, and learning transfer. In addition, suggestions for how to implement the findings of this study into pedagogical practice. Further avenues of study, including ways in which to more fully include plurilingual speakers, as well as other ways to approach and study writing prompts with students were explored.

Conclusion

This study began with the goal of answering the following questions:

1. How do FYC students from diverse backgrounds interpret writing prompts using their prior knowledge?

   a. Does a student's understanding of their previous writing experiences change the way they approach writing prompts?

2. How can writing prompts encourage high-road or load-road transfer?

3. How does a student's written response compare to their understanding of a given prompt?

In order to answer these questions, a broad review of the current and foundational literature was conducted. Using the knowledge provided by this review, qualitative research was selected as an appropriate method of inquiry, and interview data and writing samples were collected.

The data in this study has offered insights into possible answers to these questions. Students' prior educational experiences absolutely contribute to or inhibit the goals of writing in FYC, and their understanding of previous experiences (i.e., Tracy and Marie's feelings that high school English instruction left them underprepared for collegiate writing) can affect how students approach new writing contexts, which may influence their confidence, their perceptions regarding their ability to improve, and their willingness or ability to try new things when writing. Writing prompts that do not adequately address rhetorical boundaries, in combination with previous writing experiences, may deeply hinder students' ability to engage in high-road transfer. Students, when presented with a prompt, deeply utilize their understanding of a writing assignment when they begin to write, and this understanding can cause issues when the interpretation of a prompt is incorrect or unclear. In summary, it would seem that the writing

prompt itself may not have much power over students' ability to transfer knowledge into new contexts, especially considering the ways in which participants in this study faced similar struggles, regardless of the prompt they were given. That being said, adequate writing support (i.e., classroom discussion, writing centers, etc.), language confidence and how language is regarded in the classroom (i.e., non-standard dialects), the timing and pacing of assignments (i.e., drafts and revision), and what students bring to an assignment (i.e., prior knowledge, linguistic resources or differences) can all have an effect on what students are capable of when placed into a new writing context.

Although this study does not answer all questions regarding writing prompts and how they may affect learning transfer, it does offer some insights into how this process is affected, what may encourage transfer, and how classroom assignments can be designed to better encourage this process. It also demonstrates an interplay between students' perceptions of themselves as speakers and writers, and their willingness or ability to engage learning transfer. Further research in these areas will continue to deepen knowledge regarding the knowledge that students bring with them from their high school educational experiences, the ability and efficacy of FYC to impart explicit rhetorical knowledge, and how writing prompts may aid in these important processes and writing development.

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Appendix A

Presentation Given to Invite Participation in the Study

This presentation is to be given to one first-year composition classroom, with permission granted

by the instructor to meet and speak to the students. The instructor will be asked to leave the

room, and will not be permitted to re-enter until after all prospective participants have signed and

returned the informed consent form.

> Hello. My name is Stephanie and I am a graduate student in the MA of TESOL program. I
>
> am currently working on my thesis, which concerns students like you, and how you work
>
> with writing assignments. I would like to ask 4-6 students to participate in my study, which
>
> will consist of one, one-hour long interview where we'll discuss your previous writing
>
> experiences and I'll ask you to spend a little bit of time responding to a writing prompt.
>
> Your participation is completely voluntary and will in no way effect your course grade.
>
> Your information and participation will be kept totally confidential, and will be known
>
> only to those who decide to participate and myself. If you participate and complete the
>
> interview, you will be given a $10 gift card to Amazon.com for your time. I am passing
>
> around informed consent forms, which detail your rights as a participant in the study. If
>
> you would like to participate, please sign one of these forms and add your school email
>
> address to the top of the form. I will contact you via email in the next few days in order to
>
> schedule an interview time that works with both our schedules.

After the informed consent forms have been distributed and collected, I will place them in a

sealed envelope and inform the instructor that I have concluded my presentation.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

IUP Indiana University of Pennsylvania
www.iup.edu

Department of English   **P** 724-357-2261
Humanities and Social Sciences Building, Room 506A   **F** 724-357-2265
981 Grant Street
Indiana, PA 15705
www.iup.edu/english

You are invited to participate in a research study on student perceptions of writing prompts. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are currently enrolled in a Composition 101 course at our university.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Composition 101 students respond to writing assignments. You will be asked to talk about your previous writing experiences and your general feelings about writing. In addition, you will be asked to read and respond to a writing prompt. This will take place during a 60-minute interview period, which will be recorded with your permission. At the conclusion of this interview, you will submit a writing sample in response to a given prompt. After the interview, the researcher will transcribe and analyze the data.

Your contribution to this research will help to shed light on our understanding of writing prompts and how they function. The desired outcome for this study is to help instructors design assignment prompts that help students to accomplish learning objectives more effectively.

Your participation in this study is *completely voluntary*. If you decide to participate, all information provided by you will be *completely confidential* and will be used only for the purposes of this study. Whether or not you participate, your course grade will be unaffected, as this study has no affiliation to your instructor or coursework beyond that used to design the writing prompts. To ensure confidentiality, you will create a pseudonym that will be used in any and all published data. In addition, the data will be stored on a password-protected computer and will be accessed only by myself. In addition, if you have any questions or concerns about this study and your participation in it, you are free to contact the researcher at any time via email at TGMW@iup.edu. Finally, you are entitled to soft copies of any publications that come about as a result of this research.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement on the next page and add your email address at the top. You will be given a copy of the consent form. If you decide not to participate, simply leave the form blank.

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).

Candidate for MA TESOL

Thesis Chair:

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM: Email Address: _____

I have read and understand the information on the form, and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

_____   _____
   Date   Participant's Signature

                                                  _____
                                                                Participant's Printed Name

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study. I have also answered any questions that have been raised and have witnessed the above signature.

_____   _____
   Date   Researcher's Signature

Appendix C

Email Sent to Participants to Schedule Interviews

This email is to be sent to participants who sign the informed consent form following the classroom presentation and invitation to participate in the study.

      Hello [name],

Thank you for agreeing to participating in this study! Your help is greatly appreciated and

I look forward to speaking with you about your writing experiences.

I would like to set up an in-person interview for [date, time], [date, time], or [date, time].

Please let me know if any of these times will work for you.

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Stephanie Hilliard

Appendix D

Writing Sample Protocols

Vague Prompt –

Instructions: Please read over the following prompt. For the purposes of this study, you are asked to regard this prompt as a "real" assignment. After you have been given a moment to acquaint yourself with the prompt, you will be asked a few questions about it.

Write about a topic relating to your current coursework. You can include others' views on the topic, but the majority of the response should be given in your own words.

Specific Prompt –

Instructions: Please read over the following prompt. For the purposes of this study, you are asked to regard this prompt as a "real" assignment. After you have been given a moment to acquaint yourself with the prompt, you will be asked a few questions about it.

"Analyze a topic relating to your coursework. Include no fewer than three (3) scholarly sources to support your arguments/assertions. The assignment should be written in a tone that is appropriate for an academic paper."

Appendix E

Interview Protocol – Written Response

Instructions: Now that you have been given some time to read the given prompt, I would like to ask a few questions to get your first, "gut" impressions about it. Afterwards, you will be given 20 minutes to respond to the given prompt in whatever way you see fit.

1. In your own words, what is this prompt asking you to do?

    a. What should a response to this prompt look like? Describe structure, language you might use, length, etc.

2. Have you ever written a paper like this before?

    a. If so, please describe your previous experience.

   b. How is this assignment similar? Different?

3. Please describe how you would begin to write a response to this prompt.

   a. Brainstorming practices, etc.

4. Do you feel prepared to respond to a prompt like this?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol – Prior Knowledge

Instructions: We will begin this interview with a series of questions about your previous writing experiences, your general writing habits, and your feelings about writing in general. Please feel free to respond as briefly or extensively as you wish. Your responses will be recorded and transcribed following this interview, and you are free to ask for copies of this recording and/or transcribed interview.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your major?
3. Do you consider yourself to be a fluent English speaker?
4. What do you enjoy about writing?
5. What do you dislike about writing?
6. Are there any particular kinds of writing that you like/dislike more than others?

     a. What are they?

     b. Why do you like/dislike them?

7. When you are given a writing assignment in a class, how do you read it?

     a. What stands out to you first?

     b. In your opinion, what is the most important piece of information on a writing assignment?

8. Do you consult with your instructors on writing assignments to help you figure out the specifics of the assignment?

9. Do you consider yourself to be a good writer? Why or why not?

10. When you are writing an assignment for a class, do you consult with anyone else?

     a. If so, whom? (Peer reviews, Writing Center, etc.?)

     b. Regarding what? (Grammar, tone, "does this make sense?", etc.?)

11. Please tell me about your most favorite writing assignment that you have completed.

12. Please tell me about your most challenging writing assignment that you have completed.