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Writing about Writing and the Multimajor Professional Writing Course

This article connects the pedagogy of the multimajor professional writing (MMPW) course with two important contemporary discussions in composition studies: the pedagogy called writing about writing (WAW) and the conversation about the transferability of rhetorical knowledge from school to work. We argue that the capaciousness of the WAW approach accommodates the best of genre-based and client-based pedagogies for the MMPW course and provides a framework for expanding the course beyond skill-based outcomes to include preparing students to be learning transformers. The article includes two iterations of what a writing about writing–professional writing (WAW-PW) course can look like.

Introduction

This article is motivated by what we believe is a fairly common experience in the broad universe that is composition studies, that of teaching what Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle have dubbed the introductory “multi-major professional communication course” (114). We imagine that for many, the experience may go something like this:

You are a newly hired comp/rhet specialist or an assistant/associate professor moving between colleges, and you have joined a Department of English (or Writing/
Rhetoric) where you have been asked to teach a section of a course currently called Business Writing. Your chair has made it clear how excited he is to have someone who “actually knows something about business writing” to teach a course that is, he admits, frequently staffed by adjuncts or faculty with marginal knowledge of or interest in professional communication. As you read through the sample syllabi your chair has shared with you, you recognize the shape of the courses your colleagues are teaching—the assignments they are giving (e.g., memos, letters, proposals, reports) and the titles of the textbooks they are using. While your area of expertise is not professional or technical writing, you know enough to know that just teaching business genres divorced from context is not an approach grounded in the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the field. As you think more about your dilemma—how to design a course in professional writing for an audience of multimajor undergraduate students whose only exposure to workplace literacy will be your class—you begin to feel frustrated: How, you wonder, have others worked through this problem? What books or textbooks have they used, what assignments have they created? What can you teach here and now that might help your students in the future, when they’re actually out there in the workforce, writing each day?

In this article, we seek to connect this pedagogical dilemma, a dilemma that is neither new nor likely to go away anytime soon, with two important contemporary discussions in composition studies: the conversation about the pedagogy called writing about writing (WAW) and the conversation about the transferability of rhetorical knowledge from school to work. In the process, we hope to reinvigorate conversations in the field about the teaching of multimajor professional writing (MMPW) courses that are populated by thousands of undergraduates each year at both four-year and two-year institutions.

This shift in emphasis accommodates our increasing awareness that what students take with them across the academic-workplace boundary is less a set of explicitly transferable skills and more a generalized rhetorical capacity that enables them to successfully adapt to new rhetorical situations.

First, with regard to WAW, we see in this approach a viable solution to the problem articulated in the scenario above, a solution that we know, anecdotally, is already in use in practice, if not in name. We see in WAW an opportunity to, borrowing the language of Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (“Teaching”), teach students in MMPW courses not just how to write professionally but also “about” (553) writing in professional contexts. This shift in emphasis accommodates our increasing awareness that what students take with them across the academic-workplace boundary is less a set of explicitly transferable skills and more a generalized rhetorical capacity that enables them to successfully adapt to new rhetorical situations. In light of this, we propose a reorientation of the
pedagogy for the MMPW course—from that of teaching professional writing as a baggy set of genres and rhetorical skills to teaching professional writing as an area of inquiry and a problem-solving activity. We propose transporting into the context of professional settings the questions that motivate Downs and Wardle’s Introduction to Writing Studies course: How does writing work in professional settings? How do people use writing in professional settings? What are problems related to writing and reading in professional settings, and how can they be solved? (558). We propose that those engaged in the work of teaching and theorizing MMPW courses consider what we have come to call WAW-PW (writing about writing—professional writing) as a rich pedagogical practice uniquely suited to the MMPW classroom.

Second, with regard to learning transfer, one of the rationales for Downs and Wardle’s proposal for a WAW approach was that of the “open” (556) question of transfer (see also Downs “Teaching”). The openness, or uncertainty, of what transfers from explicit writing instruction to new rhetorical situations is also a salient issue for professional writing pedagogy. This issue has recently been taken up by Doug Brent, who, across two articles (“Transfer”; “Crossing”), refocuses the conversation about writing transfer—and transfer as it relates to professional writing, in particular—away from the “classical” (“Crossing” 588) notion of skill transfer and to the concept of learning transformation (see Smart and Brown). Learning transformation is the ability to adapt wide-ranging and flexible general knowledge, including habits of rhetorical thinking (“Transfer” 407), to meet the particular challenges of a new writing context (“Crossing” 565). While Brent is still unable, at the close of his study on co-op students writing in new workplace situations (“Crossing”), to make specific prescriptions for a professional writing pedagogy that explicitly promotes transfer and learning transformation, he is hopeful that teaching students how to analyze genres and audiences and use genre knowledge to interpret sociocultural information (590) will help students develop rhetorical knowledge that is transformable in new writing situations. In this article, we pick up where Brent leaves off by recognizing that these elements of a rhetorical education also happen to be common to a WAW approach to teaching writing. We see in WAW-PW a viable answer to Brent’s call to develop professional writing pedagogies with an explicit regard for preparing students to become learning transformers of rhetorical knowledge. In this article we take up this call in the context of the MMPW course. We argue, in sum, that WAW-PW is a coherent and viable approach to teaching generalizable rhetorical knowledge that can be transformed across contexts, and workplace contexts, in particular.
Before we continue, we feel that we should pause to articulate the reasons why the argument we make in this article is pertinent and timely for the field of mainstream composition. While a review of the issues of the last fifteen years of *College Composition and Communication* (1997–2013) turned up no articles that directly discuss the pedagogy of MMPW, five articles (Beason; Johnson; Pennell; Rhodes; Simmons and Grabill) and several book reviews do address literacy research or practices at the borderlands of academia and industry (more generally understood as the workplace). This inclusion reflects one of the reasons why addressing issues of professional writing pedagogy in *CCC* is a timely concern: teaching college students to be literate beyond the boundaries of the university is an issue of concern for composition, in general, and has been since the nineteenth century (Connors). After all, the workplace is just one among many of the sites of literacy and writing (e.g., civic sites, community sites, personal sites) that students can expect to encounter both during and after their academic experience.

In addition, our rationale for locating our proposal for a WAW-PW pedagogy within the *mainstream composition* community reflects our understanding of what constitutes professional writing. For the purpose of the conversation about the course reflected in the scenario that opens this essay, what we refer to as the MMPW course, we understand “professional writing” in terms of the literacy practices of professionals-who-write in any of the diverse professional contexts of business, industry, government, and the nonprofit sector. These literacy practices are related to, but are overall less extensive and specialized than, the literacy practices of writing professionals, such as trained technical communicators, content strategy specialists, or any of the other specializations available to students enrolled in major and minor programs in professional and technical writing. The literacy practices of professionals-who-write are, generally speaking, the purview of the introductory, multimajor professional writing (MMPW) course.

Finally, our arguments are motivated by the practical concern that the MMPW course is often taught by instructors with graduate training in composition or extensive experience teaching first-year writing (FYW), like the one in the imagined scenario above, who are likely to approach teaching the MMPW course from a theoretical and experiential background in mainstream composition. Locating our proposal for WAW-PW within the *CCC* community communicates, without a doubt, that the pedagogy of the MMPW course is the legitimate disciplinary concern of composition instructors and researchers.
without specialized training or industry experience in professional or technical communication.

With these rationales in mind, in what follows we begin by reviewing existent pedagogies that have been devised to prepare students to become effective learning transformers in MMPW courses and that function as antecedents for WAW-PW. Next, we briefly summarize the central tenets of and rationale for WAW as articulated by Downs (“Writing-about-Writing”). Finally, we share two iterations of WAW-PW, Read’s course from Midwestern University and Michaud’s from Eastern College, highlighting rationales for these courses, assignment sequences, and student reflections/voices.

Antecedent Approaches for Teaching for Learning Transformation in MMPW

If we are to build an argument for reconfiguring the pedagogy of the MMPW course under the banner of WAW, we should first look to the existing pedagogies for MMPW that have been developed with an aim toward preparing students to become effective learning transformers. What pedagogical methods have we devised to teach students to cope successfully with what we know to be the reality of what they will face when they graduate, that is, frequent new, rapidly changing, and often disorienting workplace writing tasks? This is a question that a review of the professional writing pedagogy literature about the MMPW course shows has spawned several answers, although not always with an expressed concern for learning transformation.

Approaches that provide precedence for WAW-PW can be roughly sorted into two categories: genre-based and client-based approaches. While these two approaches are certainly not mutually exclusive, they do differ in how they situate students in relationship to the workplace: as researchers investigating a field site (genre-based) or as proto-professionals responsible for a project with real stakes (client-based). Additionally, as the discussion below illustrates, each of these approaches implicitly or explicitly claims a different value for transfer. While WAW-PW is more closely aligned with the genre-based approach, it does incorporate some elements of the client-based model, thus integrating the two most well-known antecedent approaches to the teaching of MMPW courses.

Genre-Based Approaches

Genre study and genre analysis have already been established as elements of MMPW courses shaped by a concern for the transferability of metacognition in
the form of rhetorical awareness (Freedman and Adam; Freedman, Adam, and Smart; Kain and Wardle; Spinuzzi “Pseudotransactionality”). The literature has not been certain, however, about the extent to which knowledge about genre and the analytical practices associated with genre analysis transfer between classroom and workplace settings. As Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam discovered in their study of novices learning to write new genres in classroom and professional settings, the purposes and processes for learning new genres in each setting are different. In addition, as Chris Anson and L. Lee Forsberg discovered in their study of internship students learning to write in new workplace settings, confusing the process of learning a new genre in a classroom setting and in the workplace can lead to problems. Whereas genre learning in the workplace is strictly instrumental (learning a new genre to accomplish a workplace task), they and their student research-participants discovered that classroom genre learning is in part about demonstrating genre knowledge for learning’s sake.

It can also be problematic for students to learn to mimic workplace models of genres. As Brent (“Transfer”) and others (Beaufort Writing) have pointed out, it is seldom enough for a workplace writer to simply find a single model of a genre and assume that it is a conventional and viable response to a writing situation. Without the sociocultural knowledge to determine the success of a given sample of a genre, a writer new to a writing situation does not have adequate knowledge to respond successfully. This finding raises the question of how a student might go about learning the necessary sociocultural knowledge to become a savvy social actor/writer. And therein lies the challenge of the genre-based approach.

Kain and Wardle and Clay Spinuzzi (“Pseudotransactionality”) have proposed approaches to teaching professional writing that attempt to meet this challenge. These approaches are shaped by a concern for teaching students methods for learning the sociocultural knowledge necessary to become savvy social actors. Both Kain and Wardle and Spinuzzi combine a genre studies approach with activity theory in order to articulate a pedagogy that is attentive to the sociocultural elements of genre learning. Kain and Wardle draw on activity theory to help students study professional genres of writing and the role they play in facilitating workplace activity. They seek to “help students transfer not
the ability to remember and write the conventions of specific genres but, rather, the ability to assess contexts and identify related genres, evaluate the ways that genres mediate those contexts and determine the role of generic conventions in that mediation” (135).

After studying students’ work and course reflections, Kain and Wardle acknowledge that while not all of the students were able to produce detailed and thorough genre analyses, most produced analyses that were more sophisticated and nuanced than those produced by prior students who were not exposed to a pedagogy focused explicitly on genre and activity theory. Kain and Wardle’s approach has established that teaching students theoretical structures and analytical practices for approaching new writing situations is one way for students to go about learning the sociocultural knowledge that writers new to a situation lack.

Like Kain and Wardle, Spinuzzi mobilizes notions of genre and activity theory to revise a traditional professional writing curriculum based on teaching the features of common workplace genres. His approach aims to address the problem of “pseudotransactionality” (295)—writing that is produced to meet teacher expectations rather than to perform a function for the audience addressed. Similarly to Kain and Wardle, Spinuzzi also encouraged students to enter real workplace activity networks as contexts for rhetorically analyzing and producing workplace documents. Spinuzzi’s concern was for students to develop an awareness of how sociocultural knowledge shapes workplace genres and to develop strategies for obtaining this knowledge as newcomers to a workplace activity network. Spinuzzi emphasizes that it is not important which context or activity network students choose to research; what matters is that students analyze the sociocultural actions within that activity network and come to a recognition of how those actions influence the genres that are used within the network (303).

Kain and Wardle and Spinuzzi are proposing similar pedagogies: they aim to send students outside the classroom to investigate and analyze real writing situations, armed with analytical structures and practices packed with the power to make visible the sociocultural knowledge that would otherwise remain occluded to anyone but a seasoned insider. In other words, what they are proposing is that students engage in a form of writing activity and genre research, or as it has now been termed by Russell, WAGR (see also Artemeva). It is important to maintain, however, that it is not the particulars of the analytical framework that matter for transfer—teaching a form of WAGR is no magic
bullet for promoting metacognition and transfer. What is important is that the practices that are motivated by a WAGR-informed pedagogy are an example of what Beaufort (College) refers to as mental schemas. Mental schemas are what allow a writer to adapt to a new rhetorical situation, and, importantly, mental schemas have more to do with learning to learn than with learning to write. In other words, it is important to recognize that it is not the teaching of any particular rhetorical structure or practice that matters for transfer; it is that students engage in the process of learning transformation.

As both Wardle and Brent suggest, however, the metacognition of rhetorical knowledge is not automatic. One way to achieve metacognition, or at least to promote the process of achieving metacognition, is to engage students in structured reflection, a mode of thinking and writing that Brent characterizes as “pure” metacognition (“Transfer” 413). Structured reflection has long been part of many FYW courses but is less common in MMPW courses, perhaps because of the traditionally instrumental focus of such courses and the implicit assumption that what is transferable is genre and style knowledge about conventional workplace documents (the exception has been in MMPW courses with service-learning components; see Dubinsky; McEachern). Structured reflection, however, is an important component of a WAW-PW approach, particularly when it affords students an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned about learning to write.

**Client-Based Approaches**

An alternative approach to preparing students in MMPW courses to be learning transformers of rhetorical knowledge is to set up students in client relationships with a community business or organization. These relationships might be motivated by the civic learning initiatives of a service-learning course (Henson and Sutliff; Huckin; Sapp and Crabtree), the expressly professionalizing learning initiatives of courses that incorporate a client project (Blakeslee; Cox, Ortmeier-Hooper, and Tirabassi; Cooke and Williams), or a course that supports an internship or co-op experience (Anson and Forsberg; Blakeslee; Brent “Crossing”). It is important to foreground that this approach is not distinct from the WAGR-informed genre approaches because students are introduced to and write “authentic” workplace genres with the goal of exceeding pseudo-transactionality. In addition, both client-based and genre-based approaches offer a transitional space—whether literal or analytical—between classroom and workplace writing. The primary difference between the approaches, how-
ever, is the positioning of the workplace context. Whereas the genre-based approach positions the workplace as a site of research—the major text of the course—a client-based approach situates students as protoprofessionals within that workplace.

How students are positioned in relation to the workplace (and vice versa) has implicit ramifications for what kind of knowledge will be generalizable for learning transformation in the future. If the workplace or sociocultural context for writing is a “text” that students are being trained to “read,” then a greater amount of course time will be invested in teaching and scaffolding the habits of mind and practices of a writing researcher. In this case, the aim for transfer is that the disposition of “the writing researcher” will be generalizable into a mental schema for learning to read new writing situations. On the other hand, if students are positioned within a real high-stakes writing situation, there is more incentive and pressure to spend course time on learning project-specific genre knowledge, writing practices, and ways of adapting to the professional standards of the client (Taylor). As a consequence, in a client-project course, there may be less time and incentive to invest in scaffolding and reflecting on how the particular learning from the client project might be generalizable to other workplace situations. In other words, a client-based pedagogy motivates students to invest in acquiring the dispositions of a practitioner rather than a researcher. Hope for transfer in this case is placed in diminishing the gap between the classroom and the workplace to, at least in theory, zero. In essence, students engaged in a client project are getting a jump on what might be their first “real” workplace writing experience.

Engaging students in workplace writing activities with real stakes has shown promise for setting up students with rhetorical knowledge that they can transform over both the nearer and longer terms. Engaging students in workplace writing activities with real stakes has shown promise for setting up students with rhetorical knowledge that they can transform over both the nearer and longer terms. In a study of two cases of classroom-workplace collaborations, Blakeslee points to a number of advantages to the client-based approach for creating “transitional experiences that bridge classroom and workplace contexts” (170). She concludes that by gaining exposure to workplace writing from the relative safety of the classroom, students begin to establish a history of interaction with a workplace activity system and an understanding of writing as praxis (176). Blakeslee adds that students participating in classroom-workplace collaborations also seem to
develop a “heightened sensitivity to audience” (181), a type of rhetorical knowledge Brent (“Transfer”) identifies as transformable. Blakeslee’s findings also resonate with what Gregory A. Wickliff found in a study to assess the longer-term value of client-based projects in an introductory technical communication course. Wickliff found that over the long term, what students reported valuing about group client-based projects were the transformable skills of social negotiation and research, in particular, “interviewing specialists, reading critically, conducting survey research, and directly observing problems” (188).

It is important to reiterate that we are not trying to imply that the genre-based or client-based approaches are mutually exclusive or that they have not been or could not be successfully integrated in the same professional writing course. Quite the contrary, in fact. While it is useful to tease apart the differences between these approaches in order to uncover their explicit and implicit assumptions about teaching for learning transformation, a WAW-PW approach promotes a writing curriculum that both enculturates students into the habits of mind and practices of a writing researcher (in order to facilitate the development of generalizable mental schemas) and situates students within real-world workplace settings in order to close the gap between the classroom and workplace.

**What Do WAW Approaches to Professional Writing Look Like?**

In a recent reconsideration of their 2007 *CCC* article “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions,” Downs and Wardle (“Reflecting”) attempt to clarify their earlier arguments about teaching writing studies content in first-year writing classes. They assert that what they were arguing for was, essentially, “a pretty general set of outcomes and practices, not a specific curriculum or a specific subset of knowledge.” While we appreciate the open-ended and generative nature of this conception of WAW, we also find Down's’s (“Teaching”) seven rationales for WAW to be a useful framework for thinking about the organization and design of WAW-PW courses:

1. Rendering writing “study-able” to help demystify it for students;
2. Emphasizing transfer, including teaching metacognition and knowledge of the nature of writing that spans disciplines and activities;
3. Challenging conceptions of writing as a universal, fundamental, basic skill of transcription of language to print;
4. Teaching conceptions and functions of academic inquiry;
5. Apprenticing (temporarily) students to a community of practice of which writing teachers themselves are members;

6. Introducing and teaching “authentic,” rather than “simulated” or “mutt” genres of writing;

7. Building students’ experience in reading scholarly writing. (Downs, “Teaching” 21)

One of the great affordances of these seven rationales is how loosely they are linked to the curriculum of FYW, even though the major articulation of the approach in Wardle and Downs’s textbook (Writing) is aimed primarily at FYW courses. This capaciousness enables the transport of these rationales beyond the FYW curricular context. In this sense, it is possible to construe the MMPW course as another pedagogical context and student population for which a WAW approach can have value.

Of course, not all of Downs’s rationales have equal value for WAW-PW. For example, the rationales that are focused on teaching academic inquiry and building students’ experience in reading scholarly writing are relevant but not central to professional writing. While the approach that we argue for in this article does suggest that course readings are primarily composed of scholarly texts that model an inquiry-based approach to learning about writing in professional and workplace contexts, the ability to read a scholarly text is not a core outcome of WAW-PW. In addition, it is not a core outcome to frame students as contributors to a scholarly field of inquiry by empowering them as contributors to the academic discourse in writing studies (see DeJoy for a review of this position). More will be said presently about what our curricular emphases in WAW-PW look like and how they are operationalized in our own courses. For the moment, however, it is important to emphasize that the implementation of the rationales for a WAW approach in the context of the MMPW course does not challenge or change what fundamentally constitutes a WAW approach.

It is also important to reiterate that Downs’s rationale for emphasizing transfer is a key rationale that motivates our articulation of WAW-PW. Downs is very clear in his summary of the seven rationales that a WAW approach does not aim to teach students “‘how to write’ generally... we’re teaching students how to learn to write” (21; emphasis added), a statement that resonates with Brent’s (“Transfer”) efforts to reorient our thinking about transfer and writing courses around the concept of learning transformation.

In the sections that follow, we describe two approaches to teaching WAW-PW in MMPW courses. The differences in our approaches are, perhaps, less
matters of substance or intention than of the choice of the controlling analytical
framework or idea. Read’s course is organized around the notion of workplace
writing as both a research activity and as a researched activity. Read’s course
teaches workplace writing as a professional practice that is analytical and that
produces new knowledge of both scholarly and professional interest. Michaud’s
course adopts the notion of the “knowledge society” as a context for writers and
writing. Michaud’s course prompts students to investigate the myriad contexts
in which writing takes place in knowledge organizations and the ways in which writ-
ing helps knowledge workers get work done. Each of these courses exemplifies
the extent to which we believe WAW to be a capacious framework for MMPW
courses. At the same time, readers will notice similarities between the courses—
for example, assigning disciplinary texts, a research project, and opportunities for reflection. These trends, we feel, are
an indication of the robustness of the WAW framework.

**Approach 1: Teaching Workplace Writing as a Research(ed) Activity**

Read’s multimajor professional writing course acknowledges that what it
means to be a workplace writer or a professional writer is a moving target with
which students will have to keep up over the various phases of their careers. In
response to this fact, the course aims to broaden the idea of research activity
beyond an academic to a professional practice and, most importantly, to situate
research activity as a practice that is essential to lifelong learning in workplace
contexts. Becoming a researcher of writing in workplace contexts, however, has
less to do with learning disciplinary research methodologies or analytical tools,
although students do learn and practice a selection of these. It has more to do
with learning to think theoretically about writing and with learning to identify with being a
knowledge producer about writing in response to a personal, or professional—what Spilka
terms “practitioner research” (217)—exigency.

Read’s approach to teaching professional writing as a research activity is
both implicitly and explicitly shaped by Downs’s seven rationales (“Teaching”
21) for a WAW approach to teaching writing. In particular, as this article argues,
the value placed on preparing students to be learning transformers of rhetorical knowledge is the primary motivator behind the course. However, three of Downs's rationales, in particular, are central to Read's formulation of WAW-PW:

1. Challenging conceptions of [professional] writing as a universal, fundamental, basic skill of transcription of language to print.

2. Introducing and teaching “authentic” rather than “simulated” or “mutt” genres of writing, or what Spinuzzi (“Pseudotransactionality”) terms pseudotransactionality.

3. Rendering writing “study-able” to help demystify it for students. (21)

Taken seriously, these rationales are incredibly hard to satisfy. The rationales challenge both the expectations and assumptions of students coming into an MMPW course for the first time and the conventional curriculum and objectives of the MMPW course. The first and third rationales challenge students’ generally positivistic epistemology for and mechanistic conception of workplace rhetoric. The second rationale challenges the course to generate realistic rhetorical situations for students to respond to with their nascent workplace rhetorical practices. In other words, these rationales challenge students to adopt a rhetorical epistemology for workplace writing, and they challenge the course to close the temporal, geographic, and rhetorical distances between school and the workplace. Certainly, one course cannot claim to achieve both of these ends perfectly; however, an impulse to shape a course around these ends is at the heart of Read’s conception of WAW-PW.

**Course Institutional Context and Objectives**

Read’s course is a 300-level undergraduate course called Writing in Workplace Contexts. The course is a required core course for the Writing, Rhetoric & Discourse (WRD) major and minor and also serves as an upper-level writing requirement for the colleges of computing and business. The multimajor population of students presents familiar challenges to writing instructors in terms of the skill level, interest level, and overall investment of the students.

The course objectives are designed to accommodate the dual, and not always compatible, curricular goals of the course: on the one hand to introduce students to conventional genres and styles of professional writing, and on the other hand to enculturate students into rhetorical habits of mind and practices for encountering new workplace writing situations. The course objectives are divided into two categories:
1. Strategies for encountering new workplace writing situations

2. Conventional professional writing practices and forms

The structure of the course interleaves these two categories of objectives as much as possible, with the quarter-long research project as the main organizational structure. The research project prompts students to investigate workplace writing at a field site of their choice. Most students choose a current workplace or a workplace of a friend or family member, although a few students opt to build their professional networks and locate a field site within their intended postgraduate career field. Via the production of a series of conventional professional writing genres (including a proposal memo, a business request letter, and an informal and a formal report), students propose a field site, set up their study with site participants, and gather, analyze, and finally report on data. Students read writing studies texts that present models for empirical research in workplace writing, that introduce new concepts about workplace writing, and that introduce analytical tools and concepts for studying workplace writing, such as genre analysis. At the end of the course, a reflection letter prompts students to demonstrate that they understand the difference between their learning about the strategies for encountering new workplace writing situations and their learning about the genre and style conventions of workplace writing.

It is important to acknowledge that students’ field sites function, quite intentionally, as the major text of the course. Students learn to “read” these “texts” using the tools of qualitative research and analytical constructs from writing studies. The value of this point is made material for students at the end of the course in Anson and Forsberg’s article about transitioning from school to workplace writing: "A writer [in a new and unfamiliar professional culture] is in many ways ‘illiterate’ until he or she begins to understand these [epistemological, social, and organizational] characteristics and their manifestations in written texts” (201). Students also find that in order to read the sociocultural characteristics of their field sites, they have necessarily learned a substantial amount of domain knowledge about the organization, profession, or industry in which it is situated. Studying writing, it turns out, is simply one way into becoming an insider of an organization or profession.

At the level of practice, in Read’s course, students learn basic methods of doing field research, such as interviewing, field observation, and document collection and analysis. Students learn the fundamentals of the qualitative re-
search interview, an important professional skill that has applications beyond gathering research data. Students also do genre research at their field sites. They identify a genre that is key to their participants’ work and do an in-depth genre analysis in order to make an argument for how this genre functions for the participants, the participants’ organizations, or the industry at large. In addition, students take a more systemic view of genre by adopting Spinuzzi’s analytical tool of the genre ecology model (“Modeling”) for visualizing the ecology of genres that mediate their participants’ work.

By the end of the course, students are able to argue for an overall takeaway from their research about what they have learned about workplace writing. These arguments are site-specific instantiations of how the writing of research participants is constitutive of the organizations for which they work (or its mission), or of how the writing that the participants do is surprisingly rhetorical in a particular way. A prototypical example is a recent formal report of a student studying the work of an accountant in the tax audit department of a corporate soybean grower. While the student correctly assumed that her participant’s work was highly quantitative, she was surprised to discover that the tax audit memos that her participant writes are actually high-stakes arguments to management about the best way for the company to approach its tax situation.

Student Work and Discussion
In Read’s course, students learn a few of the theoretically motivated analytical tools for studying writing; however, they don’t just apply the tools—they also critique and develop these tools. An example of how Read’s course positions students as critical users of the analytical tools of writing research is the course module on modeling the ecologies of genres that mediate the work of students’ field-site participants.

Students are given access to an online tool, GEMviz (see Figure 1), for producing genre ecology models (GEMs). GEMviz is the product of design work by students and researchers at the University of Washington’s Department of Human-Centered Design and Engineering and is still in its early release phases. As such, the tool has many usability limitations that students soon discover. As a response to the limitations of the tool, students often find ways to modify or annotate the model produced in GEMviz (see Figure 2), or they abandon the tool altogether and turn to alternative tools, such as Microsoft PowerPoint (see Figure 3) or MS Visio. By choosing a new tool for visualizing the ecology of genres that mediates their participants’ work, students are able to produce more
Figure 1. A student’s genre ecology model of her participant’s work at a mental health services clinic using the GEMviz modeling tool (tool user interface in upper right corner of image).

Figure 2. A student’s genre ecology model of her participant’s work at a community college. The GEMviz model is annotated to include additional contextual information in the form of four different “spheres” of genres.
contextually sensitive GEMs and to render more complex relationships between genres. This process of learning a theory-motivated researcher’s analytical tool (the GEM), applying it to field data using a technology-in-development by researchers, and then critiquing and adapting the tool or abandoning it for a better tool empowers students as knowledge producers and foregrounds how knowledge production is a highly dynamic, recursive, and rhetorical process in both academic and professional environments.

Another outcome for students of the genre research component of Read’s course is the transformation that many students make from viewing workplace genres as static sets of stylistic features to understanding them as always-changing responses to complex rhetorical situations at their field sites. Along with this transformation comes the realization that no genre is simple.
or mundane, that no genre functions in isolation, and that all genres have a history and a specific value to an organization. This knowledge is given depth and contingency by exposure to the history of how conventional workplace genres have developed with social and technological changes in industry and society (e.g., Yates; Richardson). Students are also introduced to the theoretical notion of genre as social action and introduced to a systematic process of genre analysis in order to make arguments about how a key genre functions at their field sites.

A prototypical example of this transformation is a student who studied the work of a corporate executive secretary. While the student initially found little to say about her participant’s primary task of maintaining the company president’s calendar, after further research and creating a genre ecology map (Figure 3), she recognized that the work activity of keeping the president’s calendar current, comprehensive, and accurate was an immensely complex job that was central to the seamless functioning of the company. This was not only in the sense of keeping the president on schedule but also for managing the president’s budget and accounting for his expenses and time. In addition, this student discovered that the calendar is the locus of some social tension in the office. The introduction of social media into the communication practices of the PR staff had changed who needs to have access to the president’s calendar (and the president) and why. This student was able to observe how the effects of small changes in technology and in communication practices can be traced to the dynamic features and functions of the genres that mediate the work of her participant and the organization.

While what these students have accomplished with modeling genre ecologies or doing genre analyses of field-site documents is impressive, it is important to remember that it isn’t the analytical or technological tools that are likely to have value for preparing students to be learning transformers of rhetorical knowledge. Instead, teaching students the habits of mind and practices of a writing researcher is a vehicle, or framework, for the high-level rhetorical generalizations (Brent, “Transfer” 411) and dispositions that we hope will transfer from school to workplace settings. Read’s approach to WAW-PW proposes that if students learn how to do genre analysis as a practice of writing research, they will be able to recall the general practices, if not the particular theoretical framework, of genre analysis in a future workplace writing situation. What is important is that students recall that a savvy workplace writer will engage in an inquiry-driven process of research and reflection prior to
committing to the stakes of a new workplace writing situation. For students to achieve this level of metacognition, however, requires a balance of teaching the practices and conventions of workplace writing and research with opportunities for structured reflection that can transform this new knowledge into transferable generalizations.

The goal of structured reflection is to raise learning to a more conscious level that enables the learner to generalize learning and free it from the particular context and circumstances in which it was initially learned. One way to stimulate structured reflection is to prompt students to imagine their learning either into a future context (forward reaching) or to apply it backward to experiences and learning in their pasts (backward reaching) (Brent, “Transfer” 413). A common assignment genre for prompting forward- and backward-reaching reflection is the reflection letter to the instructor that argues for how the student’s course work demonstrates the outcomes or objectives of the course.

In Read’s course, the final assignment is a reflection letter that prompts students to narrate their experience with learning the difference between the two categories of course objectives (strategies for reading new writing situations and conventional styles and forms of workplace writing) in their own experience in the course. Additionally, students are prompted to think into the future and to imagine how their learning in the course might be recalled in future workplace contexts. Students are prepared for this reflective activity with a lecture on what writing studies scholars know about the transfer of knowledge about writing and are introduced to the concept of metacognition. In class, students do a genre analysis of successful reflection letters from previous classes in order to differentiate the genre’s conventional features—which can be learned and appropriated—from the clichés that obscure a demonstration of the learning that has been meaningful within a student’s unique experience (in particular, at his or her field site). Importantly, students are encouraged to write specifically, rather than comprehensively, about their experiences in the course.

Despite the best intentions of the reflection letter assignment, however, it remains difficult to know what to look for when assessing (even informally) whether students are actually moving toward achieving metacognition about the course’s objectives. As discerning instructors know well, good students can expertly reiterate the discourse of the course, even translating the discourse into their own words and creatively extending the course concepts. But do these abilities demonstrate a move toward metacognition? This is a question that this article can only leave open. However, in Read’s experience, more likely...
traces of metacognition come in the form of comments about the students’ learning processes—in particular, comments that make connections between the nature of learning to write in a new workplace writing situation and the nature of learning in general.

For example, here is an excerpt from a student’s reflective letter that demonstrates backward-reaching reflection:

Having come to college later in life, there are certain skills that I had to develop to be successful in the workplace. . . . Success in the work environment meant reading deeply into the context. . . . When we began studying Linda Driskill’s Rhetorical Situation Model [sic] I could see how powerful it was because I had used a more primitive form of it already. Translating intuition into formal knowledge is one of the most potent forms of learning.

This next excerpt from a student’s reflection letter demonstrates a forward-reaching reflection. The student generalizes the skills of reading a new writing situation as the skills of how to “get work done” more generally:

From this class I can look at a document, decipher the style of writing, the tone, what I need to do, how I need to do it, as well as other factors. These are the skills of how to get work done. I can take these skills not only to my work life but also to the rest of college and to other jobs as well.

Certainly, both of these statements point explicitly toward “generalization” of the course material. However, more importantly, the students’ statements comment explicitly on learning about learning. It is Read’s opinion that the greatest hope for evidence of learning transformation in student reflection letters is demonstrated by comments about new learning about the process of learning itself.

**Approach 2: Writing in a Knowledge Society**

As writing has come to occupy a place of growing significance in virtually all spheres of public life, scholars in writing studies have explored the myriad ways in which writing functions in knowledge-intensive societies and organizations and in the lives of knowledge workers (see Starke-Meyerring et al.). Deborah Brandt has been one of our foremost chroniclers of this process of social transformation, arguing that writing is “at the heart of the knowledge society” (166). In Michaud’s WAW-PW course, Brandt’s work serves as an important point of departure, providing students with two organizing purposes:
1. To investigate the role that writing plays in the lives of knowledge workers and organizations

2. To consider the implications of their inquiry for themselves in their current and future capacity as knowledge workers

With these purposes in mind, Michaud attempts to address several of Downs's rationales for WAW, working both “to challenge conceptions of writing as a universal, fundamental, basic skill of transcription of language to print” and to “render writing ‘study-able’ [in order] to help demystify it for students.” At its most ambitious, Michaud’s course attempts to “emphasize transfer,” teaching “metacognition and knowledge of the nature of writing that spans disciplines and activities” (Downs, “Teaching” 21).

In his attempt to meet these rationales, Michaud organizes the declarative knowledge he seeks to teach in his WAW-PW course into two categories: knowledge about knowledge work and organizations, and knowledge about the role of writing within such contexts and within the lives of knowledge workers. Each of these areas emphasizes different types of outcomes. On the one hand, Michaud wants students to grasp the significance of lifelong learning to knowledge work and to see writing development as part of lifelong learning. On the other hand, he wants students to learn about the ways in which the contexts for workplace and academic writing differ and about the ways in which writing mediates activity in contemporary workplaces.

To accomplish these objectives, Michaud organizes his WAW-PW course around four instructional units. In the first, students read, write, and reflect on the work of Brandt and others to acquire broad knowledge of the concepts of knowledge societies or organizations. In the second unit, students read Anne Beaufort’s book-length case study on professional writing, *Writing in the Real World*, to learn about the role of writing in the work of a single knowledge organization and to lay the groundwork for their own future investigations. Here, they acquire beginner’s knowledge of concepts important to the study of writing (e.g., genre as social action, discourse community, etc.) and begin to learn about methods for investigating professional writing (e.g., interviews, artifact analysis, etc.). In a third unit, students take to the field, identifying a
knowledge worker to interview and a field site to investigate. Students trace
their participant’s professional journey and inquire into the role played by writing
in this journey. They investigate such questions as how knowledge workers
develop (and redevelop) discursive expertise; how institutions and organizations
constrain, enable, or otherwise shape discursive production; and how
genres of writing mediate knowledge work. Here, students get the opportunity
to see and study, in “the real world,” what they have been reading and learning
about in prior units and to share this knowledge with their professor and peers.
In a fourth and final unit, students read scholarly work in writing studies that
reports on the transitions individuals make between academic and workplace
writing contexts (e.g., Anson and Forsberg; Brent, “Crossing”) and attempt to
anticipate and articulate the implications of their newfound learning for their
own professional journeys.

Throughout Michaud’s WAW-PW course, students engage in frequent
informal writing to try on new concepts and ideas and to reflect on their learning.
One informal writing assignment asks students to draw on the concept of “boundary crossing” to think about the ways in which they already have
experience moving, as writers, from one discursive context to another. Another assignment asks students to reflect on their participation in a discourse
community and to consider how that community’s values and norms shaped
discursive decision making. A third assignment asks students to conduct a
mini-genre analysis on a familiar text of their choosing. In this way, Michaud
uses reflection as an important tool to help students learn course concepts by
accessing prior experience and knowledge.

Once students’ field research is underway, in the third unit, Michaud asks
them to learn the conventions of and to try on generic genres of professional
writing such as the proposal, memo, business letter, and report, using these
genres to document their research processes and disseminate their findings. In
this way, static professional genres come to serve “authentic” rather than “simu-
lated” purposes, allowing Michaud to address another of Downs’s rationales
for WAW. These generic genres are contrasted with the highly context-specific
genres students are learning about via their fieldwork. Students are glad for the
opportunity to learn the genres that they expected to learn in the course, and
Michaud is glad for the opportunity to show that in professional settings, while
such genres as the memo or the report do frequently exist, virtually everything
about them is determined by the local settings in which they function.

Michaud notes that almost across the board, the content of the WAW-PW
course he teaches is new to students. Most are unacquainted with the notion of a knowledge society (for this reason, Michaud chooses not to complicate the meaning of this term), and few have any sense of what professional writing is, that it might be different from academic writing, or that, as one student put it, professional writing even really “counts” as writing. Michaud notes that organizing a WAW-PW course around the framework of “investigating writing in knowledge organizations” creates significant “buy-in” from students, many of whom arrive expecting simply to learn the conventions of generic professional genres. Michaud has found that with the WAW-PW approach, students quickly come to see that far more is actually at stake in a professional writing course than they first thought. Importantly, students come to see the course as deeply in sync with their own often highly instrumental goals and aspirations.

**Course Institutional Context and Objectives**

While most of the students who enroll in Michaud’s professional writing courses hail from his institution’s School of Management, students arrive from other departments as well (e.g., computer science, health education). With a recent revision to his college’s rhetoric and writing (RAW) minor, Michaud’s professional writing courses now also contain a small number of RAW students.

As suggested above, in Michaud’s course, students attempt to operationalize the declarative knowledge they are acquiring about knowledge organizations and the role of writing within them by participating in a multistage field research project that culminates in the production of two formal reports. In the first, students share a profile of their research participant and his or her professional journey, an articulation of the role of discourse community in their participant’s work, and a list of workplace genres their participant writes on the job. The heaviest intellectual lifting in this first report comes in the second section, where, with a nod to Beaufort, students construct a map to articulate the relationship between various discourse communities in their participant’s workplace. Figure 4 is an example of one such discourse community map. As the student discovered through her research, in order to understand the nature of her participant’s workplace writing, she had to learn about the various other communities with which members of her participant’s discourse community came into contact.

In the second research report, students return to the list of genres they provided in their first report and choose one on which to focus in greater detail—to investigate how that genre works alone and in concert with others...
to mediate a task or activity in their participant’s workplace. In their written analysis, drawing on a framework articulated by Anthony Paré and Graham Smart, students analyze the “regularities” in textual features, social roles, composing processes, and reading practices of their target genre and then make an argument about the genre’s significance in their participant’s workplace. In each of the two reports, students write concluding sections in which they reflect on the significance of their analysis for writing researchers and on the implications of their analysis for students making the transition from academic to professional writing.

Student Work and Discussion
In Deborah Brandt’s study of the role of writing in the professional lives of knowledge workers, she tells the story of Pam Collins, a “registered nurse turned clinical research coordinator turned regional relations and development director” (190). It’s a story that serves as a kind of metaphor for Michaud’s WAW-PW course and, thus, a story to which he and his students return frequently during the term. Having started her career as a nurse, writing “care plans and keeping charts,” Collins later transitioned to a public health department where, Brandt reports, “her writing switched to narrative summaries of home health visits.”
Later, when she joined a health maintenance organization (HMO), Collins “began writing performance evaluations.” Still later, when she became a clinical research coordinator, she found herself in a position that required her to “answer inquiries, recruit and schedule patients, register and store medications, schedule data collection, and complete case report forms.” Finally, in the position she inhabited at the time when Brandt interviewed her, Collins was in charge of regional relations and development for an HMO, writing “contracts, scheduling information, and preparing demographic projection reports, educational materials for rural clinics, and promotional materials that connected HMO specialists with rural doctors and patients” (190–91). Her ability to “nurture,” Brandt writes, memorably, “had been eclipsed by her ability to communicate and document” (191). “As a result of all of these changes,” Brandt concludes, “[Collins] was involved in constant shifts in the kinds of writing she was required to do. For many people writing now, this is what the knowledge economy, and the intensifying role of literacy within it, can feel like from the inside” (191).

Learning the stories of knowledge workers like Pam Collins and then seeing firsthand what the day-to-day work of such individuals is like via their field research projects help students develop the habits of mind or dispositions toward learning that Brent (“Crossing”) describes as being significant to “learning transformation.” Summarizing Graham Smart and Nicole Brown, who studied the processes student interns experienced as they transitioned from academic to workplace writing, Brent explains that the interns were often able “to learn new skills relatively easily” because they were “armed with wide-ranging and flexible general knowledge that they [could] transform to meet the challenges” of composing in new environments (565).

What does such “flexible general knowledge” look or sound like, coming from the mouths (or pens, or keyboards) of students? Each semester Michaud experiments with different ways of prompting students to reflect on their learning—to “transform” their knowledge into something they might be able to draw on or operationalize in some future writing situation. In some instances, he asks them to look back, to think about what they have learned that term, and to connect this learning explicitly with course outcomes. In other instances, he asks students to look forward, to imagine how what they are learning might be useful to them in the future.

In one recent assignment, Michaud asked students to write a short letter to a fellow student who was nearing graduation, to share what they could about the professional and writerly transition he or she was about to make. A
number of different themes emerged. For some students, the realization that in knowledge societies, career trajectories can be circuitous and unpredictable, like that of Pam Collins, was a source of significant discovery and worth sharing. As one student put it, “After looking at my participant’s workplace profile I learned that holding just one position upon graduation is rare.” For other students, the realization that new learning will be required in order to succeed in knowledge organizations was important:

Just because you have a degree in a subject does not mean you stop learning. You have the tools now that you need to continue learning, not simply the tools to do a job. If you make a conscious effort to keep learning, your presence in the workplace will be demanded and needed, and your potential as a part of the knowledge economy will be utilized to your advantage as well as to that of your chosen discourse community.

This same student was also able to connect this need for new learning, in general, with the need for new learning about writing, in particular:

When you graduate and enter the workforce, you are likely to have to relearn many ideas you currently know about writing. Know that this transition process is normal, and you are not the only worker who will struggle to re-situate themselves in an environment that operates very differently from college term papers and professor critiques. In the same way that high school and college were big turning points for your writing career, so, too, will entering the workforce and adjusting to the types of writing that will be done on the job.

For some students, it’s the realization that academic and professional writing might be different that resonated with them. As one student put it:

Writing post-college is something you will never feel you are entirely prepared for and that is because you will not ever be. When you encounter a new environment it will be a discourse community all of its own. This means that it will have its own values, goals, and methods. Be open to adaptability and flexibility because without the two of these you will never fully blend into the community.

For many students, the simple realization that there would be writing after college and that there would likely be a good deal of it was a powerful take-away, as one student explained:

[T]he amount of writing my participant did surprised me. I knew that [he] wrote a lot, but I had no idea that he wrote as much as he did and wrote for as long as he did. I thought he wrote for a few hours but definitely not 5 to 6 hours [a day].
Finally, some students learned of the power of writing in knowledge organizations and in the lives of individuals living in knowledge societies, and this discovery proved significant:

My participant mentioned that her written observations can qualify or disqualify a child in regards to getting therapeutic services. I found this interesting, that my participant’s power as a speech therapist has the potential to completely alter the course of a child’s education and life.

Michaud has highlighted these reflections to underscore the general habits of mind or dispositions that some students develop via a WAW-PW course—that knowledge work requires flexibility and adaptability, that writing is a significant part of knowledge work, that professional writing and academic writing are different in important ways, and that when it comes to writing (among other things), new learning will likely be necessitated after graduation. That some students come to see and understand the considerable power of writing in shaping the lives of people living in knowledge societies is an additional and highly desirable outcome. Michaud believes that developing these forms of knowledge will help students acclimate to future workplace settings and aid them in navigating their own inevitably circuitous and unexpected professional journeys.

**Conclusion**

At the outset of this article, we sketched an imagined scenario of a composition specialist confronting the challenge of teaching an MMPW course. We imagined the frustration such an individual might feel when faced with the highly modal or case-based pedagogy suggested by many of today’s professional writing textbooks. We acknowledged that writing specialists in many quarters have already begun the work of inventing engaging instructional strategies to meet the specific needs of the MMPW classroom, including genre- and client-based pedagogies. Finally, we proposed that writing about writing, with its emphasis on teaching “about” writing, is a pedagogy that is well suited to the exigency of the MMPW course. We see in this proposal less a departure from existent thinking about MMPW pedagogy than an extension and consolidation of what has come before: WAW-PW, we believe, offers a unifying and capacious framework for thinking about the teaching of MMPW courses.
As our course descriptions make clear, WAW-PW shares WAW’s concern for teaching in ways that promote learning transfer or transformation. In his recent article exploring the role of transfer among undergraduate students moving from the classroom to the workplace, Brent (“Crossing”) asks what, if anything, “we can legitimately expect a rhetorical education to do for students when they cross the boundary from our classroom into the classrooms of other disciplines or the much larger boundary between school and workplace” (590). With the disclaimer that the results of his analysis, based on case studies, don’t settle this question definitively, Brent suggests that a rhetorical education that teaches students how to extract genre features from models, analyze an audience, and use genre knowledge to interpret information (590) should go a long way toward helping students in their various boundary crossings. We see in Brent’s three transformable instructional strategies parallels to our vision of WAW-PW. Our courses teach generalized rhetorical strategies for meeting new and complex writing situations and attempt to instill in students a flexible and adaptable writerly subjectivity that sees each new writing task as an opportunity for new learning. Far from an instrumental course in business writing, WAW-PW envisions the MMPW classroom as another site within a liberal arts curriculum for enculturating students into the habits of lifelong learning.

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Consent to reproduce student work presented in approach 1 was gathered via consent forms approved by the DePaul University Institutional Review Board. Consent to reproduce student work presented in approach 2 was gathered directly from students.

Works Cited


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