Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

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Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Bleakney, Julia | Moore, Jessie L. | Rosinski, Paula
Title: Writing Beyond the University / Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski
Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2022] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022945867 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-08-5 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-09-2 | DOI https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa5
Subjects: LCSH: English language – Rhetoric – Study and teaching | Business writing
Classification: LCC PE1404.W75 2022 | DDC 808.066

CHAPTER 10

"WHAT ONE LEARNS IN COLLEGE ONLY MAKES SENSE WHEN PRACTICING IT AT WORK"

How Early-Career Alumni Evaluate Writing Success

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> What one learns in college only makes sense when practicing it at work. What we learn in college remains theory, but once you start to write such emails and documents at work, you start to figure it out. —Kioko

We begin with this short quote from Kioko, a recent alumna from Strathmore University in Kenya, because it highlights concepts important to the Alumni Writing Transfer Project. First, Kioko acknowledges a gap between theories about writing learned in school and their practice in workplace contexts. Second, rather than dismiss the knowledge gained from school experience, Kioko perceives value in that prior writing knowledge and seeks to draw on it when learning to write at work. Finally, learning to write for Kioko is not a process of wholesale application from college to work. Kioko has to "figure it out."

Learning how writers draw on their prior writing knowledge to figure out how to write at work, to learn the organization or company and how it handles communication, as Hyland (2016) puts

it, is one of the major goals of our project. In this chapter, we share preliminary results from the Alumni Writing Transfer Project, an international, multi-institutional study of how early-career alumni adapt prior writing knowledge. For this chapter specifically, we narrow our focus to explore how early-career alumni define writing success and its impact on writing transfer.

In the mid-2000s, the field of writing studies saw an explosion of empirical research investigating writing transfer, how writers engage prior writing knowledge when writing in new rhetorical situations. Because of the importance of first-year writing to writing studies, much of this scholarship focused on the critical transitions from high school to first-year writing (Reiff and Bawarshi 2011) or from first-year writing to writing in the major (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014; Baird and Dilger 2017). The transition from school to work received little attention from first-wave writing transfer scholars.

Early scholarship examining the transition of writers from school to work emphasized the difference in the purposes and goals for writing between school and workplace contexts (Anson and Forsberg 1990; Dias et al. 1999). As a result, Brent (2011) argues that a "glass-half-empty" orientation dominates, with scholars being deeply skeptical of writing transfer between academic contexts and those beyond the university. However, even though the school-to-work transition was understudied by first-wave transfer scholars, this empirical work deepened our understanding of "transfer." The complex metaphors for transfer emerging can 1) help scholars of writing beyond the university better understand what happens to writers within this transition and 2) help faculty and administrators design experiences that better support writers as they transition from school to work.

First-wave writing transfer scholarship found that transfer as wholesale movement or application of writing knowledge from one context to another is seldom possible. Scholars leaned heavily on Perkins and Salomon's (1989) concepts of near and far transfer. Near transfer involves transfer between similar contexts while far

transfer occurs between contexts different from one another. Far transfer requires what Perkins and Salomon call high-road transfer, which is the mindful abstraction or transformation of prior knowledge. Recognizing that learning to write is often a form of far transfer, first-wave transfer scholars began to employ metaphors suggesting that prior writing knowledge changes in the process of transfer: "transformation" (Brent 2011), "repurposing" (Roozen 2009), "remix" (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014), and "recontextualization" (Nowacek 2011). Drawing on the work of DePalma and Ringer (2013), we use the metaphor of adaptation to describe how prior writing knowledge changes as writers learn to write in new contexts. For writing beyond the university, such metaphors for transfer offer a "glass-half-full" orientation (Brent 2011), where scholars and others that have a stake in the school-to-work transitions should ask "not whether but how it happens" (Donahue 2016).

Writing transfer scholars seldom ask why writers adapt prior writing knowledge. That is, what are the goals for such adaptive work? This might be because most writing transfer scholarship focuses on transfer in school, where success is being able to demonstrate learning or to take up the writing expected in future contexts. Within workplace contexts, what constitutes success in regards to writing is difficult for newcomers to determine. Nowacek (2011) argues that typically someone with authority determines successful transfer. In school contexts, a teacher primarily determines what counts as success and how prior knowledge needs to adapt; however, learning what constitutes writing success is more difficult in workplace settings, where writing competency is often assumed and little support is given for learning to write, or where supervisors are not educators and may not be the best models for writing. Workplace writers also must learn to adapt to technological revolutions and ongoing change, a pressure that may be increasing with social factors like gig economies (Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus 2020) and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the difficulties defining success, workplace environments offer very rich contexts to investigate how writers adapt prior writing knowledge.

Like Kioko, most alumni in our study, regardless of geography, expressed perceptions of difference between writing for school and work and described episodes of disorientation when learning workplace expectations. Academic and professional contexts may indeed differ, and the Alumni Writing Transfer Project seeks to illuminate possibilities for bridging this gap, fostering confidence that writing transfer, though difficult, is possible. This chapter contributes to a framework that faculty and program administrators can use to support students' school-to-work transitions.

Research Methods

To learn more about writing transfer as adaptation, four researchers designed an interview-driven case study, using twelve early-career university graduates, from police officers and social media content editors to major gift managers and software engineers, for two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A: Study Participants in the chapter's online resources for a full list of participants). Four researchers, representing institutions in the United States (2), Kenya, and the Czech Republic sent questionnaires to potential participants from their institutions, with one sending a large-scale survey to 13,000 potential alumni respondents and the others sending to a small, purposive sample of alumni (see Appendix B: Institutional Context). Questions included work history, workplace writing history, and willingness to participate in interviews (see Appendix C: Interview Questions). Alumni were selected for interviews based on questionnaire responses. Questions from the first interview focused on exploring participants' writing lives at work, in-depth. For the second interview, alumni shared and reflected on two writing exemplars, texts written for work: one that was significant to them in some way and another piece that posed a challenge. In this way, we invited interviewees to be "self-reflective" (Bandura 2001, in Blythe 2016) and recall some moments of pride and challenges related to their early workplace writing. Figure 10.1 shows the interview process.

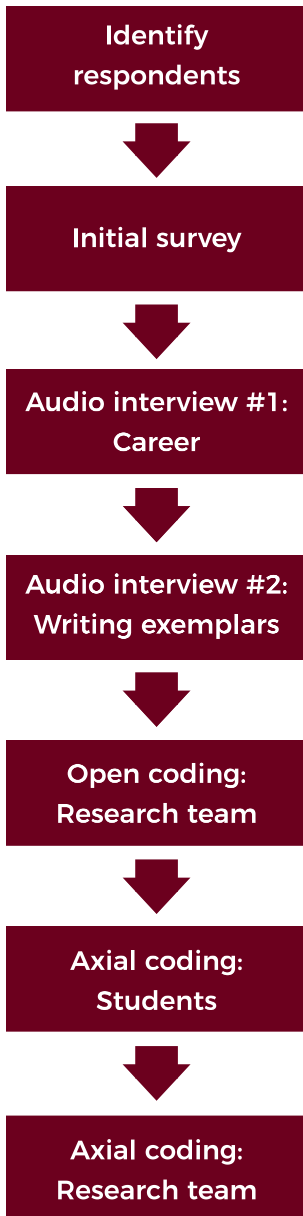

Figure 10.1. Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data Analysis

Researchers transcribed and shared all interviews. Each researcher read all transcripts and wrote memos to share about distinctive features, which formed the basis of a series of conversations about prospective codes. These were refined through a trial coding of a transcript not included as study data. Peer review by other researchers was used in the refinement of the coding scheme.

All transcripts were coded twice, once by a researcher and once by a doctoral student, in hopes that different perspectives on the data could lead to a richer analysis. Coding consisted of assigning a code to a portion of the text, with portions divided by thought. Coders noted both the assigned code and the relevant quotes from the text. Then, coders extracted the coded quotations into documents separated by variable and by code. For example, if a quotation from a transcript referred to putting a lesson from school to use, that quotation was copied into a document for metaphor (the variable) under the heading "put it to use" (the code). One researcher surveyed all variable documents and generated a tentative list of themes. A second round of open coding further identified themes and a tentative set of relationships. Axial coding was used to assign relevant quotations to themes. In this process, researchers read the transcripts and identified segments

where content closely matched that defined in the theme. Where researchers differed, full-group discussion was used to resolve differences. The approach also allowed us to respect our different cultural orientations, as there are no calibration procedures to achieve a uniform perception and arrive at a 100% concordance (see Appendix D: Codebook).

Results

Coding revealed that heuristics were one of the most prevalent ways alumni evaluated the success of workplace writing tasks. Below, we share examples of those heuristics and how alumni came to value them. Furthermore, alumni recognized the need to adapt heuristics to be successful because of perceived differences between writing for school and work. Depending on context, alumni turned to the Internet and coworkers or supervisors to support that adaptive work, and their approaches to these supports fostered difficulties in adaptation.

While most alumni were able to adapt heuristics for workplace writing, we learned alumni often lacked heuristics to deal with two differences between school and work: 1) writing as a tool for advocacy and 2) collaborative writing. Below, we share how alumni struggled to evaluate writing within these workplace writing subcontexts.

Using Heuristics for Evaluation

Alumni in our study told us one way they evaluate writing success is through heuristics, which we defined in our codebook as "rules of thumb" for writing. Here are some examples and the wide range of contexts alumni pull from.

- "You follow this format: As a ____ (dash) you need to do X so that I follow X." (Mbugua, information technology and software development entrepreneur in Kenya)
- "As a journalist, that's what you want to say, lead with the most important detail that the people gave." (Ross, newspaper reporter in the United States)

- "I worked in the writing center for three years. Outlining was always something that I tried to help the students do because a lot of people don't outline and don't think it's super important, but I think it's so important to have an idea and some type of roadmap of what you want to say before you start writing." (Rachel, external communication for a nonprofit in the United States)
- "Fundraising has gone less from sort of like 'Here's what we need. Can you help us?' to 'Here's who you're helping. Here's their story. Doesn't it intrigue you to want to help people like this.' So, you have to make it personal and matter to them. And you do that by telling those individual stories." (Kate, MFA in creative writing who is a major gifts manager for a nonprofit in the United States)

Alumni recognized the need to adapt heuristics to be successful because of perceived differences between writing for school and work and changes in context. For example, between our first and second interview, Kate attended a webinar on marketing in the pandemic. Her original plan for fundraising was to draw upon her "here's who you're helping" heuristic by connecting the isolation felt at the beginning of the pandemic with the intense isolation felt by cancer patients: "Isolation is nothing new for them. Now you know what it feels like. So how do you say that without sounding snotty? 'Now you understand. Finally.'" Before moving forward with this social media marketing campaign, she attended a webinar on fundraising during a crisis, which had a powerful impact on her heuristics: "So then I started thinking about it not in terms of 'Now you know what it feels like to be a cancer patient' but more 'We're all in this together. Together, we can get through this.'" Her next Facebook post thus begins: "It's been a week. Together we will get through this, but imagine if you had to face this week knowing exposure to the virus could be catastrophic to your health, or mean you couldn't receive lifesaving cancer treatment," and the fundraising campaign hashtag #NoOneWalksAlone was born.

The support Kate receives is a reminder that contexts matter in "affording transformative reuse of knowledge" (Donahue 2016, 112), and environments that support adaptation make such transformation more straightforward. While some workplaces have established mentoring schemes to support their novices, many early-career alumni report a lack of support. For example, Nyambane, who works at a firm dealing with IT-related consultations in Kenya, noted that his use of the Internet to solve writing problems was one quality that made him a successful workplace writer: "Many different people have different ideas about how to do something. For example, if you Google how to write an internship offer, many sources will give different opinions. What I normally do is to pick what is suitable for a given situation. There is so much knowledge on the Internet. You just need to narrow down what is specific to your situation." Pavel, a coder for a global IT company in the Czech Republic, had difficulty finding a writing project challenging to him, but shared what he would do to resolve an issue: "I don't remember that I had any problem with any text. If there is any problem, I just use the Internet, so it's a problem that lasts a minute."

Still, other alumni wrote in workplace contexts where supervisors were seen as writing authorities, and finding ways to adapt heuristics, especially to multiple supervisors, was difficult. For example, Kioko, a financial accountant at a firm dealing with IT-related consultancy services, noted the following about her multiple supervisors: "There are some who were very mad at me because I used the word 'Hi' on an email. There are others who do not care about that and what is important is the message." Jackie's experience reflects Kioko's as she tries to figure out the multiple demands on her police reports: "It's tricky. Every supervisor does it differently, and it depends who's in charge that night. How do they like their reports and their citations written? It's difficult." The consequences are that writing choices come to be seen as idiosyncratic rather than responding to a recurring situation organizing action.

Two Differences Between School and Work: Advocacy and Collaboration

While studies of school writing highlight the value of learning to write for future application, our participants highlighted the ways writing became meaningful through advocacy. We were struck by how alumni challenged heuristics learned in school when they began to see writing as a way of advocating.

Jackie, for example, has an ethic of care that transforms police report writing into advocacy on behalf of victims. She became a campus police officer as a result of a male police officer who didn't take vandalism to her car seriously. "When I was in grad school, my car kept getting vandalized. And we reported it to the city officer. He spent five minutes with us and was like, 'Well, we can't really do anything,' and that was that. It just felt incomplete. And it felt like I wasted his time basically reporting it." In describing how she might report on a college student suicide attempt, she said, "I care about my students, and I want them to know that they're not just a report to me. Every situation is important." As a result, Jackie writes longer, more detailed reports that are more time-consuming to write, and has pushed back against her supervisors, whose feedback encourages her to write more concisely.

For Ross, an assignment from his editor to investigate long lines at the DMV turned into a series of advocacy articles in which he also pushed back against heuristics for writing that are common practice in journalism, which are learned in school and reinforced in internships and on-the-job training. When an assignment required him to visit a DMV, he was struck by what he saw: "I've been in long DMV lines before, and I still have never seen anything quite like this. What's wrong?" His first newspaper article on the DMV received a lot of attention, resulting in a series of fifty subsequent stories that investigated managerial incompetence and new programs. When Ross comes to see his writing as advocacy, he pushes back against heuristics common to newspaper reporting, especially regarding introductions: "My editor told me, if you're going to do an anecdotal lead, if you're going to tell someone's story, it should not be

the very top of the story. You got to make it two grafs. But, I kind of ignored that, and I made it four grafs." In this way, ignoring the advice from his editor and drafting four paragraphs, which Ross felt better represent the conditions at the DMV, advocated for those impacted.

Finally, alumni seemed disoriented by the ways in which "acts of composing are shared and interactive" (Beaufort 2007, 280) in workplace settings. Lack of heuristics regarding collaborative writing seemed to inadequately equip alumni to negotiate issues of ownership and co-creation. For some, writing as advocacy encouraged alumni to reach out for collaboration, like Hana, who is an HR specialist for a global company, working on a document for on-boarding: "I sat down with my boss, and we were thinking what kind of information should be included in the very first email you receive if you join the company." Other alumni found themselves in collaborative situations that proved difficult. For example, Faye, who is leveraging a BA in film studies as social media content editor for a large zoo, described the zookeepers and scientists she works with: "They're very passionate about all the communication. Everybody cares very deeply about their work, and the keepers care very deeply about every single animal that they work with. . . . Really, it's less about how to make everybody happy and more about how to not make anybody mad." For Faye, heuristics for writing to her primary audience, in this case patrons of the zoo, were inadequate for the multiple secondary audiences that would need to approve her work before it began to circulate.

Phoebe, who works on internal and promotional communication for a nonprofit, shared that she needed to adapt attitudes toward the writing process in response to co-creation: "When the working environment is so collaborative, I think that I've had to learn to not take it personally. If someone prefers a different way or redrafts, I need to let it go and not take it as a personal attack if they don't like how I've drafted something." At the same time, she had to learn when to entrench herself and fight for rhetorical choices: "I feel like I've learned when to push back. Kind of pick your battles. I think

that was a little bit challenging because in undergrad I did a lot of group projects, but not a lot of group writing. What happened, frankly, is we would do the project together, and I would do a lot of the writing pieces, or we divided sections. It wasn't like we were editing on top of each other's sections like you do in the workplace."

Implications for Teaching

Learn how students turn writing instruction into heuristics and provide practice in adapting to multiple audiences.

We found that our alumni rely on heuristics or rules of thumb to negotiate writing in the workplace, in contrast to the "flexible rhetorical knowledge that can be traced to much more general features of academic writing" (Brent 2012, 586) found in other studies of school-to-work transitions. Static heuristics learned in college do not acknowledge the dynamic nature of workplace writing, where alumni encounter different audiences with a variety of expectations about demands for writing. At key moments across the curriculum, faculty should seek 1) to learn more about how writing instruction becomes such rules of thumb for students and 2) to provide opportunities for students to practice adapting them for new writing tasks and multiple audiences. For instance, becoming a better writer is often conceptualized as learning to write to specialists in specialized ways; however, what if students were asked, after writing a chemistry lab report for example, to write about findings to a grantmaker or other lay audience? In this way, students will have experience that prepares them to adapt approaches to writing according to context.

Provide guided opportunities to write collaboratively and to attend to the social dimensions of the writing process.

Alumni in our study indicated that peer-peer, employee-supervisor, and writer-audience relationships and negotiations impacted their engagement with prior writing knowledge. Faculty should provide students opportunities to practice different roles in collaborative writing. In addition, scaffolded group assignments could discourage

the common practice of dividing longer projects into smaller pieces where each learner independently contributes a part that is simply concatenated at the end. Alumni indicated that in the workplace, sometimes an entire text is co-created, with multiple writers sharing work and responsibility for the whole text. More important, our alumni expressed difficulties negotiating the social dimensions of the writing process—the give-and-take that occurs with multiple, immediate audiences in the process of drafting. To do so, faculty can direct reflective activities toward the success and failure of the discussion and other forms of writing, like feedback and email, that structure negotiation during collaboration.

Help students experience writing as advocacy and learn how to advocate for changes to writing systems.

In school, students often find writing meaningful because of "personal connection" and "potential for current or future relevance" (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 2016, 331). For many of our alumni, writing became meaningful because of its ability to advocate for an idea or for people. In using writing to advocate, some alumni came to realize that writing needed to evolve in order for it to meet their advocacy goals but had difficulty "selling" (Nowacek 2011) those changes to those in positions of authority. Faculty can help students experience writing as advocacy through assignment design and by working together to design concentrations or programs that emphasize advocacy, such as Missouri State's undergraduate certificate in advocacy writing. More important, here, too, faculty can design experiences to help students attend to the social dimensions of advocacy writing so the students can learn how to advocate for change to writing systems.

Implications for Administrators

Fully fund and robustly support high-impact practices that connect students and faculty with industry professionals.

Because alumni report that writing demands are context-driven, teaching should focus on exposing learners to the demands for

writing in different contexts. Students then learn that expectations for writing in the workplace are not homogenous, a useful lesson given the societal trend of frequent job changes. Many institutions promote high-impact practices, like practical, project-based learning with clients, internships, service learning, and visiting instructors/alumni, that connect students and faculty to professionals in industry. However, these high-impact practices often need more funding and support. For example, faculty often have so many duties that they simply can't establish robust relationships with industry professionals, and some internship supervisors supervise so many interns that true mentoring and reflection seldom take place. Additionally, professional development can help connect faculty with industry, such as Susan Conrad's Civil Engineering Writing Project, but faculty need support or time away from primary duties to devote time and energy to a series of professional development engagements across time, rather than one-and-done events.

Create opportunities for faculty and other stakeholders to shift the objectives for writing transfer from accommodation to transformation.

The adaptive work of alumni like Ross and Jackie, who actively pushed back against expectations for writing from authority figures in their workplace contexts, made us question some of the assumptions we were making about writing transfer. Many faculty hold the assumption that the goal for writing transfer is that of accommodation. That is, our approach to writing instruction is either to teach students the expectations for the writing of future contexts or to teach students how to figure out the expectations for writing, with the goal of helping students effectively take up the writing expected of those contexts. Jackie and Ross remind us that writing doesn't always respond effectively to the demands of a situation, and sometimes writing systems need to change. We thus challenge administrators, especially those in positions to shape conversations about writing across campus, to create opportunities to shift the objectives for writing transfer from accommodation to transformation. To return to Kioko whose epigraph opens this

chapter, alumni need to "figure things out" not just to fit in but to transform.

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