

Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners
for Lifewide Writing

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and Paula Rosinski*

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CHAPTER 5

WRITING ACROSS PROFESSIONS (WAP)

Fostering the Transfer of Writing Knowledge and Practices in Work-Integrated Learning

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In this chapter, we offer writing across professions (WAP) as a curricular model that faculty and administrators in higher education (HE) can utilize to facilitate students' transfer of writing knowledge and practices in the context of work-integrated learning (WIL). A central goal of writing transfer scholarship is cultivating high-impact pedagogies that seek to foster students' reuse and reshaping of writing knowledge and practices as they traverse writing contexts, genres, and media (DePalma and Ringer 2011; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014). A primary objective of WIL research is designing pedagogical frameworks that blend workplace practices with academic learning in HE settings in order to equip undergraduates across the disciplines for their transition from university contexts to workplace environments. WAP connects these closely aligned and burgeoning bodies of research with the aim of preparing students who are engaged in WIL experiences for the writing that they will do in their careers. In drawing together the insights from these bodies of research, WAP foregrounds the centrality of writing

in WIL contexts and prioritizes the transfer of students' writing knowledge and practices as a key learning outcome of WIL.

Among scholars of writing transfer and writing pedagogy, it has long been recognized that the transfer of writing knowledge and practices to the exigencies of writing outside of the university constitute a significant pressure point for professional success as students attempt to navigate the demands of the workplace. For example, scholarship on internships, a type of WIL experience, notes the high degree to which students as well as industry partners and university supervisors emphasize the importance of writing transfer for employability and professional performance (Anson and Forsberg 1990; Brent 2012). Recent studies also highlight the lack of awareness and vocabulary needed to recognize, theorize, and adapt to the ways in which writing undergirds internship work, both as an epistemic and a professional activity, among some students, industry partners, and university supervisors (Eady et al. 2021; DePalma et al. 2022). To help students, professional partners, and supervisors in WIL experiences promote the recursive transfer of writing knowledge and practices across academic and professional contexts, our WAP framework capitalizes on the strengths of writing transfer scholarship, such as the Elon Statement on Writing Transfer (Elon University Center for Engaged Learning 2015) and on the innovation of WIL design for work-based learning (Dean et al. 2018). Drawing on an international, multi-institutional study of transfer in the context of WIL, our WAP framework provides empirically-based principles that faculty and HE professionals can employ to foster students' reuse and reshaping of writing knowledge and practices in WIL.

WIL and Writing Transfer

Preparing students for the workplace is a central responsibility and primary focus of administrative strategic plans in an ever-increasing range of HE contexts (figure 5.1). Universities worldwide are thus building WIL objectives into strategic plans at their institutions. These objectives incorporate overarching values of the institution

and specific goals for the progression and attainment of WIL objectives. While the workplace readiness movement in tertiary education has taken several shapes, WIL is increasingly recognized as a generative framework and innovative curricular approach for preparing students for the demands of their professional lives. The term WIL accommodates a wide range of workplace learning activities, including cooperative education, internships, service learning, practicums, immersion, and placements. Dean et al. (2018) have created a classification system to simplify and explicitly define the categories of WIL opportunities in HE contexts. Figure 5.1 is the visual representation of the elements that need to be taken into account when classifying activities.

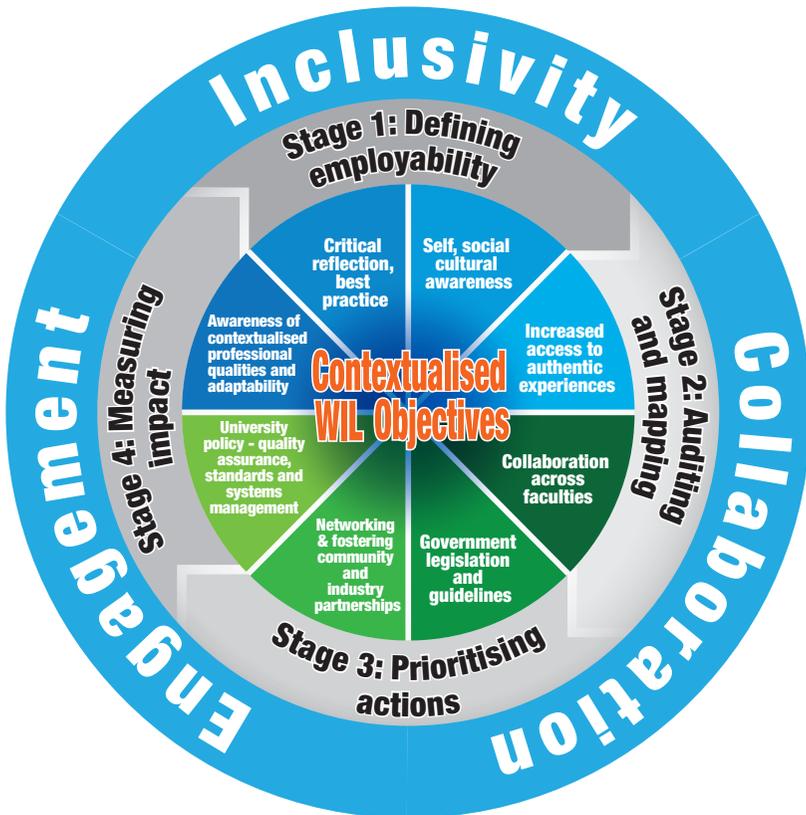


Figure 5.1

Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) conceptual framework of employability assists in understanding the value of WIL activities in the context of HE settings. In their model, WIL offers students opportunities to access and develop essential components of employability, including career development learning (CDL), work and life experience, subject area knowledge and skills, generic skills, and emotional intelligence. They also suggest that WIL provides a range of opportunities for students to reflect on and evaluate their employability skills, a process that enhances their self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence as they move into professional spaces.

Left implicit in their model of employability and notably absent in WIL, however, is a focus on writing transfer. Writing transfer involves writers' "application, remixing or integration of previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions" when encountering new or unfamiliar writing situations (Elon University Center for Engaged Learning 2015). Given the centrality of writing to a range of professions (e.g., law, computer science, museum curation, engineering, medicine, nursing) (cf. Schrijver and Leijten 2019) and the need for undergraduates to be highly capable communicators in order to thrive in their careers, the cultivation of students' writing knowledge and practices across professions should be a key focus of WIL (Moore and Morton 2017). Thus, it is imperative that university faculty and HE administrators make it our priority to (a) prepare students for writing demands in the workplace, (b) involve industry and workplace practitioners in providing students with access to workplace writing, and (c) help support and scaffold workplace-relevant writing and reflection. In taking up this work, it is necessary for faculty and administrators to make the roles of writing in professional contexts more visible to students (Goldsmith and Willey 2018; Goldsmith, Willey, and Boud 2019) and to more seamlessly integrate a focus on writing into WIL by intentionally embedding opportunities for students to transfer their writing knowledge and practices across professional and academic contexts. WAP is a response to these exigent needs.

WAP is an empirically-informed curricular model that faculty and HE administrators can utilize to foster writing transfer in WIL contexts. It enables faculty to prepare students who are engaged in WIL experiences for the writing that they will do in the context of WIL and in their professional lives beyond HE by (1) introducing rhetorical genre theory and analysis; (2) teaching discourse community theory and analysis; (3) offering engaged feedback on students' writing; and (4) inviting critical reflection on prior and concurrent writing knowledge and practices. WAP is designed to prepare undergraduates for the diverse rhetorical demands that they will be required to navigate within and beyond the university.

To ensure that the WAP framework connects to employers' priorities, university standards, and students' prior knowledge about writing, we collected written as well as interview data from all stakeholders. This included WIL practitioners outside of universities in workplaces and schools, teaching faculty who support students in their WIL endeavors, and students participating in WIL experiences. For this chapter, our discussion is focused on data from WIL practitioners.

Methodology: Data Collection and Institutional Contexts

Data for this chapter were extracted from a larger data set that was collected from five institutions in four countries. Specifically, we selected sixty-minute interviews with professionals (n=12 in the US, n=5 in Germany) who supervised students in their WIL experiences, namely professional WIL or internships. The professionals who participated in our IRB-approved study were recruited through email. The professionals in the United States are located in a medium-sized southwestern city and work in a wide range of jobs: non-profit directors, marketing and communication directors, educators, entrepreneurs, publishing professionals, business professionals, a veteran's support program director, a public policy director for a think tank, the vice president of strategic initiatives at a bank, and a community activist. In Germany, the supervisors are employed

as teachers in public secondary education with at least three years of teaching experience, and they oversee student interns and recent graduates in their first practical year as teachers.

After transcribing the interviews, we read through the transcriptions to identify emerging themes. In order to ensure high reliability, two researchers read the transcripts independently before meeting to discuss their coding and the themes they identified. The analysis of our data revealed several central themes across national and institutional contexts. We share those themes below.

Findings

For the professionals in our study, writing is a vital dimension of their work that mediates a vast range of their workplace activities and has significant bearing on their ability to meet the demands of their professional roles. The professionals we interviewed are required to write in a variety of genres in their workplace contexts, and a high percentage of their time at work is spent writing. However, very few professionals in this study indicated their formal education in university or high school settings prepared them for the writing they do as professionals. Thus, in order to learn to write for their professional contexts, they engaged in three forms of self-initiated learning: modeling texts of colleagues in their workplaces, seeking feedback on their writing from colleagues, and studying the communication practices of stakeholders in their professional environments.

Learning to Write for Professional Contexts

James, a managing editor at an academic press, described learning to write on the job as “baptism by fire.” He explained, “There was no real training on what was expected and how I communicated. I just picked that up organically over time.” Linda, a director, writer, and editor for a religious press, communicated similarly that she was never taught to write for her professional sphere in the context of her formal academic training. When asked how she learned to write for her professional context, she candidly responded, “How I learned? I don’t know.”

Similarly, in the German-language data set, none of the interviewed school practitioners ($n = 5$) who mentored the students in their teaching internship had learned how to write for their profession during their teaching degree programs. Mostly these “professionals-who-write” (Read and Michaud 2015, 430) learned by observation, by taking initiative to reach out to colleagues, or by searching for models and resources to familiarize themselves with genres relevant for their workplaces. Maria, an experienced teacher of German, English, and Latin in German secondary education, clearly articulated the contrast between writing practices in her degree program and the workplace writing that characterizes her teaching profession: “At university, it was rather writing academic texts, something that is no longer present in my everyday life.”

Three Self-Initiated Learning Strategies: Writers in the Workplace

Although three of our study participants identified high school or university coursework as contributing to their preparation as writers in their professional settings, the majority of the professionals we interviewed learned to write through self-initiated learning strategies in their workplace contexts. This observation holds across our US and German contexts.

Modeling

One common form of self-initiated learning discussed by several professionals was modeling the writing of colleagues in their workplace contexts and in their wider professional fields. Elizabeth, a nonprofit organization director, for instance, conveyed that she “just basically learned off of examples” left by a former director of the nonprofit. Elizabeth explains, the former director was a “really, really good writer, and so I just kind of followed her lead in a lot of areas like her membership stuff, her grant applications.” Similarly, Sina, a school teacher for German and mathematics in German primary education, reached out to a wide range of colleagues, even across schools, in an effort to learn to formulate her observations and assessment of students’ behavior and performances. Sina explained

that for heterogeneous student groups, including children with special needs, she used “models from state regulations” and “inquired at other schools whether they had done something similar before that [she] could use as an orientation.”

Seeking Feedback

Seeking out and providing feedback on the writing of other professionals in their particular fields of expertise was another important form of self-initiated learning utilized by several professionals. Angela, a public policy director for a think tank, for example, attributes feedback from seasoned professionals in her field as crucial to her formation as a writer in her professional context. She explains that during her early years as a staff member working for a state house representative, she had submitted a piece of writing that was given back to her with “the whole thing . . . redlined.” For Angela, this experience and others like it gave her crucial insight into how to write in her professional field. Edward, a business owner, nonprofit organization founder, and former bank executive, conveyed how important giving feedback to other bankers was for his growth as a writer in his profession. “Editing,” he remarks, “helped me become a better writer.” In his role as a bank executive, Edward would regularly read and provide feedback on the writing of other analysts. Reflecting on this critical dimension of his work, he reflected, “I learned much from editing and reading other people’s work.”

Feedback and teamwork were likewise valued highly among three of the five participants in the German data set. Bärbel, a German language teacher, explained how she seeks feedback from not only one, but various colleagues for her writing: “Sometimes, I realize even while I am writing, ‘The children are going to have problems with that if I don’t put it differently!’ And it helps enormously if a second or even a third person takes a look at it. And that is really how we do it.” Interestingly, Maria in the German data set pointed out that a kind of digital divide hampered feedback and collaboration among teaching colleagues for writing tasks: “We have a cloud, and I can upload it there. Usually, there is no real exchange

about it. . . . What you can see is that the youngsters who are more interested in technology are ready to contribute, while the older generation prefers using things they have at home in their folder.” However, the importance of forging relationships between writing mentors and mentees proved to be an invaluable facet of learning to write in professional contexts for many participants in our study.

Studying Communication Practices

A third self-initiated learning strategy that multiple professionals discussed in relation to their learning as writers was studying communication practices of stakeholders in their professional environments. Mark, a vice president of strategic initiatives at a bank, discussed how attending to the communication practices of clients and external advisory groups gave him insight about how to write in his professional role. He explains, “I’ve always gone to the source. . . . There’s a lot of insights that we’ve learned through meeting with advisory groups and doing calls and asking questions about what’s important to them. That allows you to create that content that can evoke an emotion that is positive, that makes people want to become a part of who you are.” In the German data set, Karla emphasized how parents as stakeholders in her school communication have become a valuable source of insight about the comprehensibility of her writing, specifically during the period when schools remained closed due to the pandemic: “This was really intense and I think that a lot of our written communication has to be improved. Mostly, the feedback came from parents, whom we had never worked with so closely before.” Through the intentional study of the communication practices of stakeholders in their professional contexts—whether they were colleagues, clients, constituents, or advisors—professionals in our study found opportunities to internalize discourses that would strengthen their ability to write in their workplace contexts.

All the professionals featured in this selection from our data set had gone through the tribulations of learning workplace writing knowledge and practices without prior academic preparation. One can assume that they will also expect student interns to take the initiative for acquiring writing knowledge in their WIL opportunities.

Crucially, for students to make the most of the connections and insights about workplace writing offered to them in professional settings, writing needs to be made visible as a relevant workplace practice before students go out on their WIL placements. Increasing the visibility of writing is a key dimension of what the WAP framework will contribute.

Writing Across Professions (WAP): A Curricular Framework for Integrating Writing Transfer and WIL

WAP is a curricular model created to help faculty better prepare students for the writing that they will do within the context of WIL. Important to this model is the fact it centers on encouraging successful transfer between and among writing contexts. In accordance with the existing literature on writing transfer, our data show that writing is not a generalizable practice that can be learned and mastered in one context (e.g., high school, a first-year writing course) and then simply carried forward across writing contexts. Instead, writing is context-specific and learning to write for different contexts requires that writers both use and adapt what they have learned about writing in prior contexts in order to navigate new and unfamiliar writing situations (DePalma and Ringer 2011). Our employer data also show that the adaptation process tends to be arduous and haphazard in the absence of specific preparation in university contexts. Faculty teaching WIL thus need to emphasize that the transfer of writing knowledge and practices across contexts and genres is not simply a matter of following a universal set of rules that can be applied in any situation. Rather, transfer of writing is informed by the student's ability to analyze the genres and discourse communities that mediate a given writing task, seek and receive engaged feedback on their writing, and then critically reflect on what prior knowledge and practices may be used or reshaped to suit that writing task. In order to prevent lengthy periods of unsystematic trial and error, faculty teaching in WIL contexts need to debunk the myth of transience (i.e., the idea that writing can be learned once and for all and then statically imported to address any writing

situation). Instead, faculty teaching WIL should communicate that learning to write is a lifelong process and that all writers always have more to learn (see Rose 2015).

Our findings reveal that such a conception of writing would have served the professionals in our study well by setting up more realistic expectations concerning what learning to write in professional contexts entails. Similarly, foregrounding a conception of writing that is grounded in transfer research will serve students who are engaging in a range of WIL experiences around the globe.

There are several approaches that could be taken in an effort to create a sustainable WAP model across HE contexts. Ideally, universities would benefit by creating WAP directors who are equipped to facilitate the training for faculty teaching WIL courses centered on how best to integrate writing transfer theories, pedagogies, and practices in students' WIL experiences across disciplines. A central priority for WAP directors would be creating partnerships, fostering collaboration, and maintaining regular communication with employers and WIL faculty in order that they might be responsive to the dynamic and changing writing demands across professions. WAP directors would function much like writing across the curriculum (WAC) directors in that they would develop frameworks, pedagogical strategies, and training workshops that would equip faculty in their particular university settings to integrate writing in productive and meaningful ways in courses across disciplines. For example, training in theories, pedagogies, and practices in the transfer of writing to the workplace could be offered to faculty to introduce them to ways of embedding the WAP framework systematically in their existing courses. Such workshops could be customized for different programs based on their specific writing needs in the workplace (e.g., for accounting students who need to write audit reports or business students who are required to write marketing plans). The end result of such workshops would be to equip faculty with the pedagogical training needed to prepare students for the writing demands of WIL experiences and their future workplace environments.

The position of WAP director would likely be situated differently depending on the university context. For example, at some institutions a WAP director could be housed in a center for engaged learning, an institute for writing in the disciplines, a center for career and professional development, an academy for teaching and learning, or a center for WIL excellence. It could also be possible for a WAP director to work within the context of an already established writing program or WAC program, perhaps as an assistant WPA or an assistant WAC director. The placement of a WAP director will be based on the structures, resources, and needs of particular institutions. What will be consistent across institutional contexts, however, is the kinds of writing knowledge and practices that WAP directors will foster through the workshops that they facilitate with faculty who teach students engaged in WIL experiences of various kinds. The facets of WAP that directors will address in training faculty include rhetorical genre theory and genre analysis, discourse community theory and analysis, engaged writing feedback, and critical reflection on writing knowledge and practices.

Rhetorical Genre Theory and Genre Analysis

A central dimension of WAP training entails preparing faculty to introduce students to rhetorical genre theory and genre analysis. A self-initiated strategy that several professionals in our study employed was modeling the writing of colleagues in their workplace contexts and in their wider professional fields. These professionals would have benefited from learning rhetorical genre theory and methods of genre analysis that grow from this theoretical framework. The same holds for students in WIL contexts who are being prepared for the writing demands of their professions. Rhetorical genre theory understands genres as forms of social action (Miller 1984) and forms of cultural knowledge (Bawarshi and Reiff 2010). These ways of conceptualizing genre make it evident that genres of writing are responsive to social situations, human motives, and exigent needs. Thus, professionals who write must consider the interplay between these factors and the textual conventions of a written artifact in order to produce writing that is appropriate for their workplace settings.

Teaching WIL students rhetorical genre theory and methods of genre analysis could therefore help better prepare them to learn how to use their knowledge of genres and practices of genre analysis to write for their particular professional contexts.

Discourse Community Theory and Analysis

Another vital component of WAP training involves preparing faculty to teach the concept of discourse community and methods of discourse community analysis. A self-initiated strategy that several professionals in our study used was studying communication practices of stakeholders in their professional environments. Discourse community theory and methods of discourse community analysis would have certainly been valuable to the professionals in our study, and we are confident that teaching the concept of discourse community and approaches to analyzing them could be highly productive for students in WIL experiences. The notion of discourse community is defined by writing transfer scholars as a social group whose members communicate at least in part through written texts and whose written texts shape and are shaped by the goals, values, and social norms of the community (Beaufort 1997). Teaching students to analyze their professional environments through the framework of discourse community theory could thus be immensely helpful in preparing students to understand the dynamics and expectations of writing in WIL.

Offer Engaged Writing Feedback to Writers in WIL

The next dimension of WAP training is to acquaint faculty with scholarship on responding to student writing. Even though a majority of professionals are required to write extensively and regularly to meet the demands of their workplace environments, very few view themselves as writers and many lack awareness about the important ways that writing mediates the work they do. One way to change the perceptions of future professionals with regard to their professional identities and the roles of writing in workplace contexts is to prepare faculty to provide students in WIL experiences with substantive and engaged feedback on their writing. Engaging with

students as writers throughout the course of their WIL experiences can help students begin to envision themselves as “professionals-who-write” (Read and Michaud 2015, 430), professional writers, or even writers who craft texts in order to achieve the aims of a professional community.

Invite Critical Reflection on Writing Knowledge and Practices

A final aspect of WAP training would entail equipping WIL faculty to facilitate student reflection on their learning about and practices of writing in various contexts. In our study, professionals made many interesting connections among various sites of learning in order to adapt to the writing demands of their professions. While the links they forged displayed both their resourcefulness and creativity as learners, these professionals could have benefited from structured and systematic critical reflection on the ways their prior writing knowledge and experience might be reused and reshaped to meet the rhetorical exigencies of writing in their professional contexts. Writing transfer research emphasizes the important role that critical reflection plays in helping writers transfer their prior and concurrent writing knowledge and practices across contexts, genres, and media. Students who are engaged in WIL experiences could benefit significantly if given structured opportunities to critically reflect on the ways their prior and concurrent writing knowledge and practice might be used and reshaped for the writing they are doing in the context of WIL and for the writing they will do in their future professions (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014). A method of reflection that is particularly well suited to facilitating the transfer of writing knowledge across contexts is the 360° reflection (Taczak and Robertson 2016). The 360° reflections invite students to reflect in substantive ways on their writing knowledge, practices, and experiences before, during, and after the WIL experience, so that we may gather in-depth information about how, if at all, students’ theories of writing, writing practices, attitudes about writing, expectations as writers, and writing knowledge were affected during the course of the WIL experience.

In sharing the dimensions of our WAP framework here, our hope is that HE professionals and faculty teaching in WIL will be better prepared to equip undergraduates for the diverse rhetorical demands they will be required to navigate in WIL and throughout their professional lives.

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