

Changing Conceptions of Writing: An Interview with Elizabeth Wardle

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Elizabeth Wardle, currently Roger and Joyce Howe Distinguished Professor of Written Communication and director of the Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence (HCWE) at Miami University, has dedicated her career to creating and facilitating several kinds of writing programs, including first-year composition (FYC) and writing across the curriculum (WAC). Her research in these areas has produced invaluable scholarship and resources for writing program administrators across the country, including the *Writing about Writing* textbook (co-authored with Douglas Downs) and the edited collection *Naming What We Know* (co-edited with Linda Adler-Kassner). In celebration of the 40th anniversary of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and in recognition of this journal's influence on our field, I asked Wardle to discuss her 2007 *WPA* article "Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study," placing that work in conversation with her other research in the field.

"Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study" is among the first articles in writing studies to explicitly investigate writing transfer, as well as one of the first multi-year longitudinal studies on the subject. In this article, Wardle discussed transfer from FYC, reporting on preliminary results of a longitudinal study she conducted with students during their four years of college. She advocated context and activity in generalization of knowledge, particularly "the importance of the purpose, expectations, and support for writing tasks in encouraging generalization" (82). She argued that meta-awareness is important in knowledge transfer but that such knowledge "must be gained in discipline-specific classrooms" and that FYC can "help students think about writing in the university, the varied conventions of different disciplines, and their own writing strategies in light of various assignments and expectations" (82). Wardle also noted the importance of assignments beyond FYC and encour-

aged program directors to “develop collaborative research projects with faculty from across their universities” in order to “better understand what goals they do and do not share for assignments and outcomes and to closely examine how students interpret assignments from various courses” (82–83).

In our interview, Wardle covered a range of topics related to the transfer study in her 2007 article, including the future of transfer research, how her transfer research has impacted her further WAC research, and how faculty conceptions of writing influence writing instruction. One of the major themes that emerged in our discussion is how to actively change faculty conceptions of writing, which can lead to faculty feeling “ownership for needing to teach writing themselves,” and which, in turn, helps improve students’ writing instruction in their disciplinary contexts. In what follows, I share some of Wardle’s responses related to her article and WPA work that has been taken up in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* over the years.

Mandy Olejnik: Your WPA article “Understanding ‘Transfer’ from FYC: Preliminary Results of Longitudinal Study” is considered one of the foundational pieces on writing transfer. I’m wondering how this project got started and how it relates to your earlier writing about writing research.

Elizabeth Wardle: My PhD is in professional communication, and I became interested in transfer because professional communication scholars had been conducting transfer research on school to work in a way composition scholars had not been during that time. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the goals of first-year composition and whether those goals were being achieved, which led me to writing about writing (WaW) as a way to consider whether studying about writing in a FYC course could better achieve the goals of FYC. This is what then led to the transfer question. I taught a WaW section of FYC when I started my first job, and I was interested in whether or not the WaW approach in that class was useful for students and their learning. I was interested in following up with the students, and because they were willing to meet with me, that led to my first transfer study and the publication of this *WPA* article. Seven of the students met with me every year until they graduated. I still have giant boxes of data in my closet that I never published further on.

MO: How do you see your 2007 piece impacting the transfer conversation? This article has been cited 272 times on Google Scholar and, as I already said, is considered foundational in transfer studies. What can you say about this influence?

EW: Even prior to my transfer study, there were a number of excellent longitudinal studies that had been done both in and out of writing studies. But I don't think people were framing them as writing transfer studies. Maybe the fact that I and others borrowed the theoretical framework around transfer from educational psychology helped us see these longitudinal studies differently and build on them to conduct explicit transfer research. I don't know about cause and effect, but when I was doing that first transfer study, I don't think there was a lot of work being done directly related to transfer in composition. But something happened during that time frame where people were becoming interested in writing transfer and started conducting direct studies of transfer.

MO: One major point that many people take away from this article is that meta-awareness is what encourages transfer. Is that an accurate take-away, in your view?

EW: In that article, I was examining what first-year composition can do. That's a very specific question. My answer to that very specific question was that it seems like helping students learn rhetorical analysis and meta-awareness is helpful when they go into their disciplinary classes. I did not say that reflection is all you need in order to facilitate transfer. One of the biggest points in the article was that the activity systems, the institutions, and the context in which we're operating have a big impact on whether students can learn as we want them to, and whether we can teach as we know we should be teaching. The burden for encouraging generalization (or transfer) related to writing rests all across the university in disciplinary classes.

MO: How did the work you started in this article on transfer in FYC influence further research questions you've explored over the years that have come to impact the way we talk about writing in our field and beyond?

EW: The hypothesis I am working from now is: if faculty change their conceptions of writing, they will change their practices related to writing. I wonder what happens if you try to change faculty's conceptions of writing and then help them feel ownership for needing to teach writing themselves, whatever their discipline may be? In a WAC setting, we don't necessarily have to do "tips or tricks" workshops. We can help faculty as they have specific questions, but they already know on a big-picture scale what they want to change about their writing practices. In our Faculty Fellows program at Miami, faculty members' ideas

about what writing is, what it means, and what they know about it has shifted. And they know what to do in their own classrooms once they start thinking about writing differently. This approach to WAC is, I think, nothing but a modified version of the WaW approach to first-year writing: help people understand the theory about how writing works and then they'll be able to figure things out for themselves.

MO: From our conversation, I feel like a theme in your research and administration is working to design different programs and models to make specific changes over time across the university. Would you agree with that?

EW: Yes. I want to think about administration as making change in programs, departments, and universities—long-term, sustained, meaningful change that's driven by the expertise of the people doing the work. The responsibility of the person directing a WAC program, for example, is to help people find the framework, theory, and research they need in order to do what they already implicitly know how to do in their disciplines. I spent a lot of time in my career wondering what we are going to do about this problematic instructional site that is first-year composition. I thought up the best answer I could think up. Doug Downs and I wrote a textbook about it. We've tried it. We've studied it. People are using it. But at the end of the day, first-year composition is still just one class at one place at the beginning of a student's educational experience. And we already know that that will never be enough, no matter how well-designed and taught it may be. We need to work with faculty from across all the years and all the disciplines as well, so they can continue the work with student writers. And that's why I study WAC now. It seems like an exciting place to help facilitate broader changes around writing.

MO: I'd like to ask you about rapport with students in transfer studies, as you addressed that both in this article and in your later transfer research. On page 71 you wrote that your positioning as a teacher-researcher was a strength in that you "knew the students well" and "had a relationship and rapport before the study began," but you also noted that the weakness of your study was that "the students might feel they needed to please me in their interviews and focus groups." What would you say about that now?

EW: Now, I would say that rapport is not a weakness. I don't think you can actually study what students are learning and how they're drawing on their prior knowledge to engage with challenging writing situations

unless you're doing things in collaboration with them. Now I would see working with students as a strength, even a necessity. However, I also think we have ethical dilemmas that we need to really think about before conducting close transfer research. If we're going to operate as co-researchers with our undergraduate students in a transfer study, the students really need to be free to walk away from the study at any time, and we as researchers should not feel pressured for them to remain. In my later transfer studies where I co-conducted research with my student Nicolette, I could walk away (as could she). I already had tenure. If she didn't want to continue the research with me anymore, that was fine. But there are very high-stakes moments where you have to publish for tenure or you have to get your dissertation done. Those might be cases where it is not a good idea to do research with undergraduate students in this way.

MO: What do you see as the future of transfer research?

EW: I think so much of “transfer” returns to the learning question. How do people engage in meaningful learning by drawing on what they already know, learning new things, and growing? The questions I'm interested in now are much bigger than what has historically been considered “transfer.” I find it hard to imagine setting up another study to look at only transfer at this point in my career. Even the transfer studies I did with Nicolette are veering toward other things—learning, identity, disposition, how people solve hard rhetorical problems. But in terms of the future of transfer studies explicitly, aside from my own personal angst, I think [my doctoral student] Cynthia Johnson's current dissertation research is revealing that maybe we've gone as far as we can go in transfer studies with the lens of cognitive psychology; maybe we need to go back to rhetoric and approach transfer from that lens. That's the recovery and methodological framing work that Cynthia is doing, and I think that's probably where the future of transfer studies is—or at least part of it.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Wardle's 2007 *WPA* article contributed to an important and evolving conversation about writing transfer, learning, and program design to better foster transfer and learning in writing. Transfer studies remains a dedicated area of research in the field of composition and rhetoric, with numerous longitudinal studies continuing to unfold and a second transfer research seminar occurring at Elon University in 2019. For Wardle, her work on transfer helped her explore research questions that have grown

throughout her career to center on student and faculty conceptions of writing, which are calls and aims taken up in *WPA* over its 40-year history as well as in the future.

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