

Towards Improving Language Literacy and Transfer of Writing Knowledge in the University of Oregon English Department

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Abstract

What happens when an English student can graduate without taking any more writing classes than a math major? This study uses Transfer Theory as described by Perkins & Solomon, along with Vygotskian Activity Theory, as articulated by David Russel, to describe and analyze the transfer of writing knowledge in the University of Oregon English Department through semi-structured and coded interviews with undergraduate and graduate writing tutors of various training. In these interviews, tutors discuss their own educational experiences and their work. Based on the responses, I found that there is little meta discussion of writing or genre happening in English classes in the department, and that the classes where it is happening are disproportionately under-represented in the degree program requirements. I also found that writing tutors within the department were able to detect communication issues in assignments and were hampered in their abilities to help students by the lack of background writing knowledge present in classes. While this data is specific to the University of Oregon English program at the time of writing, it may serve other institutions as a case study, as many of the issues that arise here are commonly discussed across the field of Composition. After reporting my findings and analysis, I offer suggestions for improving student writing outcomes at the University of Oregon from a student perspective. These suggestions include a ground up approach to explain the reasoning behind writing structures and conventions, and/or using tutors with such specific training to fill the gaps left in classroom instruction.

1. Introduction

“Literary education should lead not merely to the admiration of great literature, but to some possession of its power of utterance.”

-Northrop Frye (*The Well-Tempered Critic*)

1.2. Exigency

This project began as an observation: a sentiment of dissatisfaction I felt myself and have heard expressed by fellow students—in classes and out—centered around the writing happening within the

English classes at the University of Oregon. There seemed to be a disconnect between what instructors and the department intended for students to learn and be doing, and what was happening in the activity system of the classroom: specifically centered around the amount of writing instructions they were receiving, the kind of writing they were being asked to do, and the kind of feedback they were getting on that writing. I wondered if there was anything to this, as it is natural—I feel—to complain even in the best of circumstances.

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At the same time that I noticed this, I had recently taken Advanced Composition, a class covering the very existence of a field studying the writing process I had never heard of before. I wrote a lot in my English classes, but why had we not discussed writing as a discipline?

I majored in English to study literature, writing, communication, and critical thinking. I feel that all these things are integral, if not definitional, to the study of language. I believe that mastery of language is the same as mastery of one's own mind. We are influenced by language every day, and only through a deep understanding of language can we both navigate and wield the medium ethically and intentionally. We think in language (Burton), and the humanities have long been based on the classical idea of empowering the individual to think critically and live according to their own judgment. In the age of information, I can imagine no greater tool of liberation and leadership. Not everyone sees it that way, however.

Since its 2015 high, enrollment in English programs across the country has plummeted by 44% (Fischer). More recently, the National Endowment of the Humanities faced massive cuts from the federal government (NHA). This can be attributed to a number of factors, but one that is most observable in conversation is that English and the humanities are seen as luxury, accessory degrees that people get for fun if they do not have to worry about money or worldly success (Wulf). They are seen as intellectual hobby degrees. As an English major myself, I disagree.

The University of Oregon's English website tells us "What [we] can do with a degree in English" and claims that "The most sought-after competencies [include] critical thinking, written and spoken communication, research skills, digital literacy, ethical judgment, and creative thinking—all areas in which an English degree

offers excellent preparation" ("English"). If this is true, why is the number of English majors declining? Is this statement false, or is the issue elsewhere? Is the marketing of the degree a shortcoming, or is it in the contents of the major and outcomes of its graduates?

Through my analysis, I reveal ways students consciously and unconsciously learn writing conventions and structures, and I discuss limitations within current practices. To do this, I will present two main pedagogical theories: Transfer Theory (Solomon and Perkins) and Activity Theory (Russell). I will then apply them to information gained from interviews with the graduate and undergraduate student writing tutors—the ideal vessels for examining transfer between instructors and students—using composition studies terminology and techniques to examine current teaching practices and priorities within the English department at the University of Oregon. After analyzing this information, I will discuss practical steps that I believe can be taken within existing frameworks that could improve writing and literacy outcomes at little cost and low operational impact.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction and Context

Composition Studies is the doing and the teaching and the study of the writing process. In the following sections, I will provide the metacognitive background from Composition Studies that I will be borrowing as lenses for my analysis, including key terms, frameworks, and existing sentimental and conversational trends that will be transferable onto my data.

The field of Composition Studies, in practice, is focused on teaching writing: the methods, techniques, and philosophies around educating and producing new writers or students

who can write well and with confidence. This broader topic is further contextualized in a few different focus areas: pre-college education, composition programs at universities—such as writing centers and tutoring programs, and first-year composition classes in universities (Babcock; Moore 2012; North 1987; Nystrand et al.; Rude). Because my research focuses on writing knowledge transfer from instructors to students within the English department, using the student writing tutors as a catalyst for viewing the process, the articles I will be reviewing and referencing in this research focus on composition classes and tutoring programs in universities.

In analyzing my findings, I use common terms within composition studies and education generally, those being genre and transfer, along with the lens of Activity Theory as described by David Russell. I use Pedagogy to refer to teaching practices more generally, and I use genre as defined in Genre Theory to discuss that application of writing education by students across situations and modes of writing, as well as the different demands for writing placed upon said students across situational contexts. My two main lenses for analysis include Transfer Theory to discuss the impact or results of pedagogy, assuming that successful transfer in teaching and then broad application and ownership of material by the student is the desired outcome of successful pedagogy, and Activity Theory as a framework to understand the effects of the educational environment on what students do and how they write. Each concept builds upon one another to offer a more complete picture of cause and effect in an educational environment where students are intended to practice what they are being taught and teach it themselves.

2.2. Genre and Its Study

Genre as a word has many definitions, but the one most useful to us here is “a particular style or category of works of art; especially a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose” (OED). The key words here being style and purpose. Style and purpose relate to how writing studies defines genre by referring to the rhetorical situation of a piece of writing.

Lisa Lucas Hurst of Southwest Minnesota State University describes a piece of writing’s rhetorical situation as conditions that affect the form and or content of said writing, such as “Who is the speaker? What is the occasion? Who is the intended audience? What is the intended purpose? What is the subject? What is the tone?” All these things are considerations when deciding how to present information or questions and when establishing norms within academic and professional fields that face similar, consistent conditions, establishing a genre or style and purpose for the writing they produce.

This use of the term genre brings us into a larger framework of theoretical study known as genre theory. Amy Devitt explains genre theory in her 1996 review essay of three new books on the topic. Devitt acknowledges that “the study of genres has been around since Aristotle, if not before, in the traditional taxonomies of types of oratory and of types of literary works,” but that “what is new about this renewed turn towards genre is the study of genre as action rather than form, as a text-type that *does* something rather than *is* something” (604-605). This definition gives us language to describe the different ways of writing found in academic settings and elsewhere. For example, an essay is a broad form, but an argumentative essay is a different genre than a review essay like this one written by Devitt, a point she makes in her introduction.

More clearly, an argumentative essay is a different genre from a lab report or research manuscript in a STEM field, a journalistic article, or a product pitch. Each of these genres seek a different effect, a different outcome, and seek to accomplish it in different ways, parameters, and conventions, though all written. Each has its own rhetorical situation. Having knowledge of the rhetorical situation and purpose of a genre is inherent in what Dinitz and Harrington call disciplinary expertise when discussing the benefits of tutors embedded in a classroom, which I will discuss later in my “Tutoring Writing in Universities” section. The writing tutors I interviewed in this study offer help with English, Writing, and Honors College classes, or explicitly First-Year Composition (FYC) classes, for which they have disciplinary expertise, but none reported any explicit genre training for their tutoring roles. If we do not know the situational aspects and structures of a genre, how can we write in it effectively, much less teach it? The only writing tutoring available for classes not listed is a generalized drop-in service run by the university, independent from the English department and their composition program. I cannot speak to their disciplinary expertise or genre knowledge of tutors outside the department, nor could any English or Composition faculty I have spoken to.

2.3. Transfer

It may be impossible for any one instructor or student to know the ins and outs of every genre, but can we help bridge the gap between knowledge and practice in the ones being taught already? Transfer, as it is used to talk about writing, retains much of its general meaning in education theory and can be described as “taking something someone has learned and using it in a similar or different context” (Babcock).

As I will explain, this concept of learning and applying can be used to articulate the transfer of knowledge across disparate disciplines and concepts. It is easy to see the overlap in context and knowledge between the different disciplines that contribute to the study of English. Language is complex, and English—being one of the most common, adapted, mutated, and long-lasting languages in the world—is all the more so. Linguistics, Philosophy and Rhetoric, Literature, and Writing and Composition are all fields of English that contribute to its study. Because of this, each has something to offer the other, and each draws from each other’s concepts, findings, and frameworks. Each can contribute to our literacy of the English language. Being a knowledgeable writer is not only important for writing but also increases our understanding of the language in its use and function, which is then usable in any context involving it. Therefore, while much of my literature review discusses topics of transfer around First-Year Composition (FYC) classes and around the act of writing in classes generally, the same principles can be applied to English literature classes and beyond.

2.3.1. Near and Far Transfer

Scholars have developed terms for talking about transfer in different forms. Perkins and Solomon state that “*near transfer* occurs when knowledge or skill gets used in situations very like the initial context of learning,” whereas “*far transfer* occurs when people make connections to contexts that intuitively seem vastly different from the context of learning.” While they acknowledge that “the near-far contrast is very fuzzy,” it provides a good foundation for a scale or spectrum of the application of the concept (2).

Perkins and Solomon name different educational practices under the lens of effective transfer. They name “the Bo Peep theory of

transfer” as one that “assumes that knowledge and skill a person has learned anywhere will ‘come home’ to wherever it is needed. Just leave it alone. No problem” (4). “The Lost Sheep theory of transfer” is one that says “in effect, rich far-reaching transfer is a lost cause. One cannot expect to secure very much of it” (5). They go on to describe instances that dispute this idea. Third, and most important, they describe the “Good Shepherd’ theory of transfer, that says the desired transfer can occur, but only if we are good shepherds and help it along” (6). Assuming that the goal of education is the successful transfer of knowledge and skill from instructor to student and that it is the instructor’s role to facilitate that transfer, the “Good Shepherd” theory is what I will be assuming is the desired practice in writing pedagogy.

2.3.2. Hugging the Low-road and Bridging the High-road

Other important terms established by Perkins and Solomon are low-road and high-road transfer. They describe low-road transfer as “based on a skill, mastered to near automaticity by continuous and repeated practice” and something that “happens automatically” when “applied to a new situation that is very similar to the situations in which it has been practiced in the past” (6). High-road transfer is described as something that “is not easy and does not happen on its own; it requires the mindful abstraction of principle, the effortful search in one’s memory, the selection of the appropriate principle and, finally, its application to a new instance” (7).

For example, if someone had spent four years studying brick laying in a professional program and came out only knowing how to build straight walls, even if those walls were very well built, I would question the methods of that program. If that brick layer never learned the

fundamental principles behind why the methods he employed worked or did not work, and cannot apply them to any other structure—like a curve, or arch, or patio—then his best prospect is likely getting a job in that same brick laying program to teach the same methods to future brick layers. That, I assume, is not a preferred outcome in the humanities. Successful and intentional transfer of fundamental principles and the ‘why’ behind them is a necessary and crucial part of method-focused English and writing education. In other words, Perkins and Solomon’s good shepherd approach.

In practice and in accordance with their proposed good shepherd approach to facilitating transfer, Perkins and Solomon describe two techniques within the framework of low-road and high-road transfer: “*bridging* for high-road transfer and *hugging* for low-road transfer” (7). Bridging is when an instructor helps connect the lesson to other, different contexts, whereas hugging is when an instructor makes the lesson conditions as similar to the application conditions as possible. For example, the military broadly uses a low-road hugging approach to transfer where the emphasis is generally on an automatic, drilled response, and so much of the training is focused on replicating the real-world conditions where the trainee will be expected to apply the knowledge and action they are drilling. The use of this example in a paper on writing knowledge is an example of a high-road, bridging application.

Perkins and Solomon go on to discuss methods of facilitating transfer with allegorical examples and advocate a kind of connected curriculum. While I will not be delving into the veracity of their proposed methods, and there are other theories available on the subject (Beach, Haijian), I find their framework the easiest to use for practical analysis, and I will be using their terms for talking about transfer as they define

them, following the example of many of the other scholars I will be citing.

Perkins' and Solomon's essay on transfer and the terms therein have been referenced and used across the discipline of composition. Jessie Moore cites them in her essay, "Mapping the Questions: The state of Writing Related Transfer Research" where the conversation around transfer of writing knowledge is closely linked with writing education and the environment in which it survives: higher-education bureaucracy, particularly FYC classes at universities, where instructors are expected to teach college writing to all students of all majors, disciplines, and backgrounds as if all college level writing is of the same genre with the same rhetorical situation and purpose. FYC is the primary source of tutees for writing tutors in the University of Oregon English department and is the foundation of writing education and philosophy at the institution, making up the overwhelming majority of explicitly labelled Writing (WR) classes taught. Therefore, to look at the writing instruction within the department, considering the potential lack of it in other classes, FYC must be acknowledged as foundational to other English classes and the writing pedagogy of the department. We can use transfer to help us connect what happens in FYC classes to English classes and instruction as a whole by abstracting the principles we observe in action, and applying them across contexts, engaging in relatively far, high-road transfer ourselves. To examine the teaching of specific tasks in a singular context, the same rhetorical situation or purpose, we can use near, low-road transfer.

2.4. Transfer in College Composition

A large component of First-Year Composition (FYC) classes is supposedly to prepare all

incoming students to write at a basic college level in all their other classes. The results are not always what people would hope for or easily visible, and so research has been done on the transfer that happens or does not happen from FYC classes to others (Moore, Jessie; Wardle and Downs). In the article "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies'" Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs discuss the misunderstandings writing instructors face from nonspecialists that assume "FYC can do what (they) have always assumed it can: teach, in one or two early courses, 'college writing' as a basic, fundamental skill that will apply in other college courses and in business and public spheres after college" (553). Rather than working within the framework of FYC as a catch-all for an entire discipline and field of study (Composition), Wardle and Downs suggest that:

When we continue to pursue the goal of teaching students 'how to write in college'...—despite the fact that our own scholarship extensively calls this possibility into question—we silently support the misconception that writing is not a real subject, that writing courses do not require expert instructors, and that rhetoric and composition are not genuine research areas or intellectual pursuits. We are, thus, complicit in reinforcing outsiders' views of writing studies as a trivial, skill-teaching nondiscipline. (553)

I think Wardle and Downs are both right and wrong here. I think that the humanities are skill-teaching, but also most certainly disciplines. Skill-teaching should not be considered derogatory; it is the depth of the skills and their applications that are being misunderstood. There are so many types of writing that rely on fundamental language skills, and disciplinarity is a requirement to even begin to grasp a holistic

understanding beyond that, so much so that the study of the English language is, in fact, multidisciplinary. Literary Studies, Composition Studies, Linguistics, and even Journalism is an entire degree program dedicated to a single umbrella genre of writing and language use, not to mention the genre differences across S.T.E.M fields and social sciences. The idea that a skill level capable of bridging those disciplinary gaps or offering a significant foundation to begin building that bridge can be taught in one or two classes is understandably difficult to swallow. Wardle and Downs perceive writing to be worthy of an entire subject in itself, and thus something that cannot adequately be taught to a proficient degree in the limited standard framework of FYC classes. They reject the idea that ‘writing’ can be a skill taught entirely in one or two classes by a single instructor, arguing that the lack of results from FYC programs comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of writing that underlies the structure imposed on writing instructors by non-specialists.

To combat this misunderstanding and the problem of FYC courses being seen as insufficient in their current form, Wardle and Downs argue that the expectation of holistic transfer from a generalized writing course to all other majors, all other potential genres a student may have to write in, is unreasonable. Writing instructors do not know “what genres and tasks will help students in the myriad writing situations they will later find themselves..., if writing essays on biology in an English course helps students write lab reports in biology courses,” or “whether choosing genre A over genre B will be of service to students who must write genre B or genre C later on” (Wardle and Downs 557). If structure and organization are genre specific, are we serving students in a generalized writing course by teaching them the structure specific to the argumentative essay

genre over more transferable principles like logic or clarity of language?

The idea of college writing as a universal genre is pervasive and demonstrates a lack of metacognition about writing that Ellen C. Carillo offers potential solutions for in her essay “Creating Mindful Readers in First-Year Composition Courses.” In it, she discusses the idea of using metacognitive reading methods in composition classes to help prepare students for future college classes and facilitate transfer. She references a set of questions from the textbook *Reading Rhetorically* (2014) by John C. Bean that align closely with the conditions referenced by Hurst that describe the aspects of the rhetorical situations considered in academic genres. Carillo suggests using these questions as a guide for reading material in writing classes to help students see the rhetorical aspects of writing in practice and identify them. This is an interesting proposition that suggests a practice much like the close reading commonly taught in the University of Oregon English department, but for technical and rhetorical devices that can be transferred across genres rather than just focusing on cultural themes or critical theory, and that are primarily applicable in literary analysis and significantly less so in technical, journalistic, or academic writing outside the humanities. Some aspects of writing are surely more easily transferable than others.

2.5. Tutoring Writing in Universities

This problem of expected scope and limited time and resources in teaching writing has given rise to writing centers and tutoring. Stephen M. North is one of the foundational writers and researchers in tutoring writing and constructing what he calls the writing center. He refers to his experience tutoring and teaching tutors in his 1982 “Training

Tutors to talk about Writing,” describing “tutoring in writing” as “simply, intervention in the composing process” (434). North outlines that a tutoring program must put the emphasis on the writer, or tutee, and that tutor actions must meet them where they are and empower them to do the work themselves, facilitating independent implementation of principles and ideas, and thus facilitating transfer of writing knowledge and skills. He describes how what tutees want out of the tutor and what they need is often idiosyncratic and that “a good tutor has to bring the two—the location and the intention—closer together” (435). In this, North talks about how tutoring or teaching in a way that empowers the tutee or student is more difficult than simple correction.

In two later essays, “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) and “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” (1994), North expresses frustration with the misconceptions around what a writing center is and what it offers from those not involved in its operation and later offers clarification and a calmer reflection on the outcomes of the first essay.

In “The Idea of a Writing Center,” North describes the misconceptions he has faced as a program administrator, the general idea that students should be sent in to have their papers cleaned up, from students that expect a tutor to fix their paper for them, or from other administrators that think writing centers deal only in correcting fundamental concepts and grammar rather than true supplemental education and transfer of skills. Here, he claims that “the non-English faculty, the students, the administrators—they may not understand what a writing center does, but they have no investment in their ignorance and can often be educated. But in English departments this second layer of ignorance, this false sense of knowing, makes it doubly hard to get a message through” (433). He disputes the idea that writing

centers are for remedial issues or for problem students and posits that other professors and administrators at his own university have a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of their writing center, despite its existing almost unchanged in its goals for over a decade.

Most aspects of writing in the professional world face multiple sets of eyes, including those of editors who are paid explicitly to verify the quality of writing being produced before it is used, regardless of the skill of the writer in question. Why is it, then, that a student writer must be a one-person publishing house? Writer, developmental editor, line editor, copy editor, beta-reader, and publisher? Sure, academic writing, particularly assignments for evaluation, must be the student’s work alone, but a tutor, assuming they are properly supplied and trained, can offer the opportunity for instruction personalized to both ability and genre and help the student fill those gaps from which no writer of any skill is immune.

As much as writing centers have been ceded institutional responsibility for writing instruction, they were never designed to shoulder it alone. Heather N. Hill, in her 2016 “Tutoring for Transfer: The Benefits of Teaching Writing Center Tutors about Transfer Theory,” contextualizes her research in the discussion around transfer in college composition and recognizes a gap in the research around transfer through writing centers and tutors in favor of research on classroom pedagogy. She claims that “through an analysis of 30 hours of recorded tutoring sessions, [her] research shows that after only a one-hour class on transfer theory, tutors engaged their students in transfer discussions considerably more than their peers who had not had that transfer education,” and argues that “tutors would also benefit from learning to effectively use key concepts that help lead to the transfer of writing-related knowledge—genre, discourse community, rhetorical situation,

etc.” (78). Hill admits that “research conducted over the past few decades shows transfer to be a complex process,” but that:

Scholars have shown that some pedagogical techniques help to facilitate transfer better than others. These include...: having a high level of initial learning; being able to see the similarities between learning situations; understanding key concepts about writing—abstract principles that transcend individual writing situations; being able to use metacognitive reflection; and promoting certain dispositions towards learning, such as active learning and motivation. (79-80)

This may seem obvious in hindsight, but teaching core concepts with the intent for them to be applied to a variety of situations is rare in my experience. In the training class I took to become a writing tutor, much of the course content was focused on revisiting core concepts around the essay format and genre requirements so that they could be easily explained or taught to other college students who may know how to write an essay but are not sure of the why behind the methods. The fact that the tutor curriculum sees a review of the basics and reasoning behind them as necessary for understanding, and the continual need to address the idea of transfer in current educational research, speaks to a significant discrepancy in curriculum from that research and is an example in favor of high-road, bridging transfer-focused teaching.

Also describing the benefits of small, unburdensome changes with large impact, Laura K. Miller describes the effect a single embedded writing tutor had in a “junior-level engineering course” in her 2020 essay “Can We Change Their Minds? Investigating an Embedded Tutor’s Influence on Students’ Mindsets and Writing” (110). Miller’s study revolves around the

metacognitive idea of a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. She cites Carol Dweck in describing that “students who believe their abilities and intelligence are ‘fixed’ are more likely to avoid taking risks and expending effort in challenging situations” and that “in contrast, students who believe their abilities are malleable tend to work harder and overcome failure...[and] perform better academically” (104). She asks the question: “Can tutors change students’ mindsets?” (104). The answer, according to her research, is yes. In other words, if tutors can help encourage a growth mindset, they can help facilitate transfer focused teaching.

Speaking to the effectiveness of a writing tutor in a non-writing class, Miller cites a variety of studies to show the effectiveness of embedded tutors on writing outcomes, one being “The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials” by Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington. Dinitz and Harrington define “disciplinary expertise as the ways of knowing and doing that lead to particular ways of writing in a discipline,” the disciplines in their study being History and Political Science (74). If this definition sounds familiar, it is. “The particular ways of writing in a discipline” is directly related to how we would define academic writing genres. Dinitz and Harrington state that “expertise can refer to content knowledge, genre knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, or any combination of these” (74). They also acknowledge that pitting the idea of generalist (tutors with only basic writing expertise) and specialist tutors (tutors with specific genre knowledge) against each other is unproductive, and rather than focus on “*whether* expertise is valuable,” they “focus closely and objectively on *how* expertise affects what happens in (writing tutoring) sessions” (74).

In the study design, Dinitz and Harrington had faculty members rate individual tutors’

expertise in a subject and followed patterns across differently ranked tutors in their sessions. They also use the terms global and local issues, which is a variation of commonly used distinctions used by writing tutors to identify large, structural, paper defining issues, or smaller, focused issues on a syntactical level. The University of Oregon writing tutoring program uses the terms “High Orders of Concern” (HOCs) and “Low Orders of Concern” (LOCs) for the same distinctions. HOCs here meaning structural, organization of information and ideas level writing concerns, and LOCs meaning syntactical, clarity of language, and grammar level writing concerns.

Generalized, Dinitz and Harrington found that writing tutors without disciplinary expertise or genre knowledge of those disciplines and genres their tutees were writing in “focused on local rather than global issues,” “accepted the (tutees) statements and assessments” with “little pushback,” linearly moved through the paper without “going back to topics to reconsider them,” “retreated from” moments when “the tutor could have asked more questions” around HOCs, and “didn’t generalize from the particulars to provide lessons or strategies for the writer” (81). In contrast, tutors determined to have a higher level of genre knowledge or disciplinary expertise “focused on global issues,” “considered [tutees’ input] in light of their own analysis” rather than accepting it at face value, “pushed back when they judged [tutees’] ideas to be limited and/or limiting,” “pushed [tutees] to go further by asking questions to extend discussion,” “had recursive, not linear structures” focusing on “larger goals throughout the session,” and “drew general lessons from the session” (85-86). In other words, the confidence granted to tutors with knowledge of the genre in which their tutees were writing enabled them to provide more detailed and structural input focused on HOCs present therein.

This kind of feedback tends to be less corrective and easier to transfer to tutees for later application on their own.

Dinitz and Harrington found that while the methods used by tutors with higher genre knowledge took a more directive role in the sessions (73). Collaborative instruction and feedback that relies on guiding the tutee to apply concepts specific to their own work and genre is the kind of instruction that leads most to transferable writing skills, but doing so effectively requires tutors to have explicit knowledge of genre conventions within the tutee’s discipline and be able to help the tutee apply those conventions on their own. Teaching applications of writing conventions is possible through repetition, but the short and limited nature of a tutoring session requires knowledge of—and ability to teach—the fundamental principles that lead to the creation of those conventions in the first place in order to transfer the knowledge and enable tutees to apply the conventions on their own. This is a lot to put solely on student tutors and writing centers and is surely a monumental task for a single writing class to accomplish. Facilitating this kind of transfer appears to require prolonged instruction across contexts, something that would surely require cross-program, cross-classroom collaboration.

2.6. Activity Theory

While creating high-road, bridging transfer in accordance with Perkins and Solomon’s good shepherd theory in writing and English classes can be difficult, low-road, hugging transfer still happens through unconscious repetition. Metacognition about writing is necessary to enable students and tutees to think critically about and apply genre conventions intentionally and independently, but repetition and conformity can be their own teacher. In their previously cited

articles, Jessie Moore and Carillo reference David Russell in his “Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis” and his “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction.” Moore summarizes Russell’s argument from the first article as when:

Students become more involved in a professional activity system, they begin to explore the system and its tools, including its genres, both learning more about the system and eventually reconceptualizing it in concert with other activity system members. Internships and other field experiences can facilitate this transition from school-based activity to professional activity system, but Russell cautions that the movement is not anxiety-free or unproblematic. Students must reconfigure their identities as they straddle activity systems, including the activity systems beyond their disciplinary activity systems. (Moore 3)

This framework can be summarized as “student see, student do,” though it runs deeper than imitation. In his 1997 “Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis” David Russell begins by stating that “The relation between writing in formal schooling and writing in other social practices is a central problem in writing research, whether it is research on critical writing pedagogy, on writing in nonacademic settings, or on the cognition of individual writers in variable social contexts” (504-505). Russell cites “Vygotskian activity theory” as a lens to look at “North American genre research and finally illustrate how the theory can clarify certain problems of analyzing how students change as writers, drawing on examples of research on writing in the disciplines in higher education” (508).

Basically, a university is a system, and classes are environments within that system that students inhabit. In these environments, students

are required to act along social and productive expectations that—consciously or not—are defined by their interactions with their instructors and each other in a way that reinforces certain actions and behaviors through explicit and implicit incentives and disincentives. In cases where the classroom environment reinforces habits incongruent with expectations outside the university system, students struggle to adapt after they leave.

This barrier to bridging transfer is like the ruts in the road of actions over time in systems like universities, and in our case, English and Composition classrooms. And while transfer of different kinds and levels happens through both conscious and unconscious instruction, Activity Theory offers a concrete way to examine the habits of and decisions made by students in their writing outside of explicit instruction. Through repetition and feedback, often unconsciously given, students adapt their writing consciously or unconsciously to the system they find themselves in. If left unacknowledged, this can result in a writer who can only write in one way, in one genre, in one discipline, and struggles to transfer to any other, while maybe not even understanding why.

Both far, high-road transfer and near, low-road transfer can be encouraged by an activity system. By applying the concept of a social activity system to a classroom or department, we can examine the actions taken therein and explain how those physical or social actions are facilitating different kinds of transfer. This lens of Activity Theory allows us to look beyond stated objectives and see the actual activity that is taking place within these social environments. Once a system’s activity and its results have been identified, it can be diagnosed and improved with the goal of successful transfer in mind. Therefore, I will be using both frameworks in my analysis.

2.7. Active Limitations and The Why

In a conference presentation, “The Fraud of Composition Pedagogy: What I learned from Writing a Handbook,” Rebecca Moore Howard describes the difficulties she faced as an educator and author attempting to encompass her knowledge of writing in a useful way. She approached the project as a service, stating that “I am not inclined to regard my students’ desire for correctly edited texts as a matter of false consciousness that my critical pedagogy must correct.” After addressing the common critique of language prescription lobbied at attempts to define and explain writing structures and conventions, she explains that she sees her job “as helping [her students] gain the editing skills they want—while at the same time helping them to understand what is being surrendered in the bargain.”

Unfortunately, in her pursuit of describing her students writing in a way that would inform them of its function instead of restricting them with seemingly arbitrary rules, she realized that she “knew far less about grammar—and about students’ writing—than [she] had thought... [she] didn’t know what [she] was talking about, neither did the handbooks, and neither did the students. The complexity of [the] students’ writing far exceeded handbooks’ and teachers’ attempts to categorize, label, and instruct” (5).

This is likely the result of pedagogy that, in an attempt to avoid language prescription, shies away from the study of terms and definitions that are necessary to describe the writing they talk about, attempt to teach, and are being produced by their students anyway. Implementing transfer-focused pedagogy in writing tutoring has a positive outcome across academic writing genres, and tutors equipped with disciplinary expertise—

knowledge of their genre—can discuss writing therein with more depth and confidence (Dinitz, Hill). Bar the prescriptive excuse, the fact is that detailed, fundamental knowledge of writing and its conventions derived from observation is beneficial. But, much to the frustration of some practitioners and students, discussion of such conventions is commonly neglected or misunderstood.

These essays and research, while informative, remain limited in scope, a common and often accurate critique of Composition Studies, but they collectively establish a disciplinary lens through which to examine and contextualize the further evidence presented by myself later in this paper. It is through the connection of these limited scope studies to my own that I hope to contribute to a larger vision.

Each instructor has their pedagogy, defined by their actions, intent, goals, and results in the classroom and out. All these things have an impact on students. In my study and analysis, I have applied the idea that effective transfer of skills, the ability of students to apply what they have learned about writing in any context, genre, or rhetorical situation they find themselves in, is the goal of successful writing pedagogy in the university system in order to properly prepare students to better flourish beyond it. I base this assumption both on what existing and past writing scholars and administrators have claimed their goals are and what they see to be effective, as well as my own experiences as a tutor, editor, and student. This is no easy task, and based on the falling numbers of English majors, the devaluation of the humanities broadly, the prevailing questions and the almost pleading prodding of existing research I have so far discussed, and the testimony of some existing tutors soon to come, many current systems are falling short. But there is concrete evidence that metacognitive practices

around genre and learning in conjunction with receiving individualized tutoring, even in small but intentional doses, can have a significant impact on improving writing ability across disciplines.

3. Methods

I decided that the student writing tutors would be a great vessel to try to measure effective transfer and activity happening in and around English classes, as they serve as a bridge between instructors and students while being students themselves. As experienced English majors—junior and senior undergraduate students and graduate students—they not only have a breadth of experience with the department, genres, and subject matter involved with the major, but also serve as intermediaries, consistently bridging the communication gaps between instructors and students.

Because of this, I started broadly in the planning stages, and through guidance and experience, my methods narrowed, were refined, and evolved through the course of study. I decided to engage in semi-structured interviews to try and capture the nuance and sentiment that I knew existed. This was the one thing that did not change, and coded semi-formal interviews remain my primary data source. Tertiary to this, I draw on my own experience as an undergraduate English major and my experience as a writing tutor in the same tutoring program as the other undergraduates I interviewed. To conduct this study, I applied to the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board and was approved for exemption on educational grounds.

3.1. Source Material

To understand the different stages of writing knowledge transfer happening in the English

department, I interviewed undergraduate writing tutors in training, working undergraduate writing tutors, and graduate student writing tutors, all working within the department. The undergraduate tutors are all junior or senior English majors filtered through G.P.A. requirements of 3.5 or higher, performance in a training class, and a willingness to work for credit. They offer tutoring for all but the highest division undergraduate English, writing, and Honors College classes. This group is further broken up into students in the tutoring training program and students who went on to work as tutors. All undergraduates interviewed fulfill the criteria stated above. The graduate tutors, though they make up far less of my data pool, have been accepted by their various English degree programs, which are inherently competitive, and they are prior English undergraduate students. The result of this is that I had a filtered pool of English students to interview that could not be said to be problems or uninvested in their education. They are among the best performing students in their programs and regularly put in the effort required to excel in their classes while expressing a desire to help other students do the same. The disconnect between instructors and students, in my experience, is often shifted onto students, and sometimes rightfully so. It is difficult for instructors to gauge the effectiveness of their pedagogy when faced with students who simply do not care about the class or material. This also informed who I chose to interview and why.

As one of the undergraduate writing tutors myself, I cannot avoid my own participation in this program, and I believe that ignoring myself, the reporter and analyzer, as a source of knowledge on this, based on my own experiences, would not only be dishonest but would significantly hinder the scope and depth of the project. Therefore, I will be including my own experiences and

knowledge as data to draw from in my analysis. However, before analysis comes data, and how it is gathered. Here I will cover the gathering.

3.2. Interviews

I conducted four interviews with undergraduate students in tutor training, two of whom continued to intern as tutors and were interviewed again the following term. Each undergraduate interview averaged 15–30 minutes, depending on the length of answers. I conducted two additional interviews with graduate tutors, one lasting 15–20 minutes and another over 45 minutes, also based on length of the answers. Interviewees were provided with a digital consent form in a query email for them to reference. Upon appointment and before the interview, they were provided a physical version of the same document to review and sign. Interviews were audio recorded with no names attached to the files or recordings in any way.

I developed three sets of questions for the three types of tutors I would be interviewing: undergraduate tutors in training, working undergraduate tutors, and graduate tutors. The questions were written in a sequential list with prompts for expansion attached to each and presented to program administrators for approval. I asked questions centered around the tutors' own educational experiences in English and writing classes, their experience and practice with writing, and their experiences and findings in tutoring other students. While I did have a set list of questions that I stuck to, I elected to conduct semi-structured interviews to allow prompting for expansion on certain points or topics brought up by the interviewee or to refocus their attention on the topic of a specific question on the list. The first question and last question were more open-ended and provided a space for the tutors to express themselves, first about their experience in their

tutoring program, and then about anything they thought may be related. The undergraduate tutor in-training list contained nine questions, the undergraduate tutor list contained ten questions, and the graduate tutor list contained twelve questions.

Each set of questions was based around similar themes: the tutor's experiences in their tutoring program, their experience in university English and writing classes, the feedback they had gotten from those classes, and their own writing habits and processes (see Appendix A, B, and C for each list of questions). My coding scheme was developed after my questions, and it was based on answers from the completed interviews and in accordance with themes included in my literature review.

3.3. Coding

I coded the interviews by timestamp, and I developed three themes of focus that I then used as umbrella codes: pedagogy, transfer, and activity. Each umbrella code had at least two sub-codes attached to it. Considering that I built the coding scheme from the interviews, starting with informational sub-codes before categorizing them according to the three major themes instead of first determining a scheme and then questions based on that scheme, some umbrella codes have significantly more sub-codes than others, and as multiple sub-codes can describe a single piece of information, umbrella codes often overlap.

Pedagogy related codes (13 sub-codes; see Appendix A) encompass instruction, curriculum, and assessment, and marked themes of student expectations, type of instruction, and how the student felt about it, types of writing feedback, and instances of learning—writing related or otherwise—mentioned by interviewees. For example, something that would be coded under

Pedagogy: expectations: “This class... I think it’s not what I expected it to be. I assumed we would be working a lot more in class on our personal writing and improving that, and then also learning—I don’t know.”

Transfer related codes (4 sub-codes; see Appendix A) mark mentions of a knowledge source like a book, class, or instructor, and instances of genre identification and writing across genres. For example, something that would be coded as Transfer: cross-genre: “I tend to do a lot of timed essays [in English classes], and those tend, by nature, to be a little bit less formal. ...if I’m writing something more formal and long-term, it’s going to be for my [non-English] classes.”

Activity related codes (2 sub-codes; see Appendix A) marked instances where the interviewee talked about their own writing or action related to their writing process, as well as mentions of conformity to perceived systems and expectations. For example, something that would be coded as Activity: “I think my very critical, honest analysis of my education here is that about 95% of my classes, I’m not learning how to be a great writer. I’m not being challenged or learning anything particularly new, but I’m being drilled in certain expected skills.”

Each code was designed to be neutral, descriptive, or adaptable to positive or negative sentiment expressed by each tutor and was intended to cast a wide net to avoid biasing the data from the tutors’ answers. The broad categories of the codes also served the open-ended questions intentionally asked to allow tutors space to speak freely about their experiences. You can see a table of my codes in my Results section.

3.4. Limitations

The information gathering methods and instruments of this study were limited in part by

logistical constraints such as time and in part by administrator concerns around observational tutoring sessions and skewed sentiment from tutee surveys. The scope of the study is limited to interviews with writing tutors within the English Department umbrella due to limitations on time and the logistics of integrating and gaining permission from the university-wide Tutoring and Academic Engagement Center, which also employs writing tutors.

While the questions in each of the three categories of interviews follow similar themes, they vary in wording, formatting, and number. This is primarily because I wanted to tailor my questions to gather information pertinent to the different situations of the interviewees regarding their tutoring experience. Not having a foregone conclusion about what I wanted from them; I tried to cast a wide net.

3.5. Application

My results have been tailored to present topics I have deemed most useful, relevant, and actionable to instructors and administrators. My findings follow the three main themes set up by my umbrella codes of pedagogy: teaching practice, transfer: high-road bridging transfer as the measure of successful pedagogy, and activity: what level of transfer is actively being learned and practiced.

4. Results

4.1. Overview

I will begin with a table. It is important to note that the number of sub-codes for each umbrella code is far from uniform. The length of responses from each interviewee also varied individually across interview categories and question lists. Individual quotes or topics in interviews could also be assigned multiple sub-codes, and thus, there is an

overlap of umbrella codes in the responses. This is to be expected, as the topics are inherently intertwined with and relevant to the subject in multiple ways. For example, a tutor could be describing a pedagogical practice of their professors and how that has influenced their own writing, which would be an overlap of the Pedagogy and Activity umbrella codes. The following table shows the number of sub-codes per umbrella code that showed up in each type of interview I conducted. The percentages listed under Total sub-codes show the percentage of total codes per category across interview types, whereas the other percentages under the interview categories show what percentage of code types appeared in each individual interview type.

Table 1.

<i>Umbrella Code</i>	<i>Demonstrative Quote</i>	<i>Total sub-codes</i>	<i>Undergrad Tutors in Training</i>	<i>Undergrad Tutors</i>	<i>Graduate Tutors</i>
Pedagogy (13 sub-codes)	"...every professor has different expectations, which can be really frustrating... My favorite kind of professors are the ones that give really specific feedback."	323 (~67%)	168 (~67%)	56 (~64%)	99 (~71%)
Transfer (4 sub-codes)	"I tend to use formal language even when it's not an essay, so I sort of stay in one mode. I might be a little bad at code switching."	75 (~16%)	34 (~13%)	17 (~19%)	24 (~17%)
Activity (2 sub-codes)	"...I saw my role in the session as being: 'how can I get this student to satisfy this professor's comment while not having to embark on the work of rewriting this?'"	82 (~17%)	50 (~20%)	15 (~17%)	17 (~12%)

While all interview questions and answers remained on and around the topic of writing knowledge and transfer, the focus and framing for each group I interviewed differed. This happened more in the answers given by each group than the questions I asked them, offering three unique perspectives: the in-training undergraduate tutors' answers which focused more on the student perspective, informed by new and or renewed concepts; the practicing undergraduate tutors—each previously interviewed in training—that focused primarily on the application of their

writing experience and what they were learning about their tutees; and the graduate tutors that talked about their experiences both in adapting to their own tutoring pedagogies and how their approaches have been informed by their writing and tutoring experiences over time.

Because of this difference, each category of interviewee will be organized differently in an attempt to keep data relevant and representative of interviewees' responses. In this format, while the sample sizes are limited, we are granted insight into the gradient of writing knowledge transfer present in the dynamic between English faculty instructors and students of various experience and writing skill levels. Much of the report below is intended to summarize data relevant to the focus of this paper: writing knowledge transfer from instructor to student in classes and tutoring sessions. Sentiments about pedagogical practices I have included were expressed by at least two of the interviewees in their category and may be supplemented by quotes. It is important to note that there are exceptions to each claim, and much tangential affection for programs and instructors that did not make it into this thesis.

4.2. Undergraduate Tutors in Training

The in-training tutors offered a unique blend of perspectives as they were both well performing junior or senior English students being taught in English classes and were tutors in training who were learning to teach other students. Each volunteered to take the tutoring training course and met the English major G.P.A requirements necessary to do so, showing a track record of successful writing within the demands of the English department. These students, by every metric available to them, are good writers. They are intimately familiar with class requirements

and instructor expectations, making them important windows into the workings of classrooms and pedagogies within the English department from a student perspective. Each participant is numbered and thus referred to as Student 1–4. The majority of responses from this group described their expectations of their tutor training and what they found to be productive within it, as well as insights into their own writing process and past instruction they received on writing.

4.2.1. Tutor Training

For the undergraduate tutors I interviewed and myself, the term-long tutoring training focused primarily on how to interact with tutees on an interpersonal level while meeting their needs and wants. We also reviewed fundamental essay structures such as topic sentences, introductions and conclusions, and paragraph transitions while workshopping each other's essays with the goal of revision. These structures—things like theses and communication of ideas—were made the primary focus and are referred to as Higher Orders of Concern (HOCs), while syntax errors and stylistic genre choices were deprioritized and referred to as Lower Orders of Concern (LOCs). Trainees also participated in classroom visits to assist students in planning their final projects in several different English classes. I asked each student about their expectations and experience in the training.

Three of the four would-be tutors expected a different kind of curriculum or content in the tutor training than we received. I had similar expectations to the three. When asked how they were finding the training so far, Students 1, 2, and 4 expressed that they had been expecting more focus on the technical aspects of writing, such as grammar and style, as well as focusing on improving their own writing or editing skills. Each expressed some level of frustration with the lack

of this within the training. Student 2 expressed that they felt the training was “a lot more opinion-based,” and that they felt “there [was] definitely a sense of how each individual person thinks a good paper should look” and how it offered more of a “chance to explore [that] rather than holding us to stricter standards.” While Student 3 did not express a disappointment of expectations, they did express an anxiety over feeling that their writing skills were not “where they needed to be” to tutor other students in a “more professional” context, demonstrating some expectation of the importance of knowledge transfer and the understanding required to accomplish it.

The students also praised aspects of the training they liked or felt were necessary. Both the classroom visit and the small classroom sections where we practiced giving feedback on each other's essays were mentioned as practical experiences more in-line with trainee expectations. They also appreciated the small class size, aspects of the empathetic tutoring principles we covered, as well as the review of essay form and structures that some students mentioned had not been covered or reviewed in their classes since high school. Two students mentioned that this review of basics, in combination with peer review, caused them to re-examine steps in their own existing writing process.

4.2.2. Practice and Instruction

Each tutor in training was asked about their own writing practices before and during training, with a focus on academic context. When talking about it, each student expressed knowledge that they were writing in a style and genre and were able to name them, but they did not discuss the specific parts of their writing that made it so. For example, when asked what form, style, or structure they found themselves writing in most often, each gave

a clear answer: the formal essay. Students 1, 2, and 3 each expressed that they primarily wrote short (2 to 3 page double-spaced) essays in formal language for their English classes.

Student 2 expressed that they had faced tougher grading and more focus on formal language in their social science classes, as well as longer paper requirements, than they did in their English classes. Student 4 expressed that they had their own less traditional style, and that they compensated for this on assignments by paying extra attention to the rubric or other instructions given to them, demonstrating an expectation that deviating from a formal style could put them out of favor with instructors. The students also listed more specific sub-categories of essays, such as close reading analysis, argumentative and timed essays, and research manuscripts. None identified these things explicitly as genres or as having specific genre conventions not present in other kinds of writing unprompted.

They did express some stylistic distinctions, without naming them as such, within the essay genre, referring to timed and shorter essays as requiring less formal language and being less “academic.” They tended to equate formal language with sounding more academic, and they expected it to be more or less required based on the kind of assignment, class, instructor, and department they were writing for. They expressed having gained this knowledge through experience rather than direct instruction. They did not say what they did specifically in their writing to make it more or less formal or academic, despite most expressing that doing so was a regular and conscious decision.

Most of the writing instruction students talked about receiving in college was structural or organizational feedback, focusing on the organization of ideas in their writing rather than the syntax. What style instruction they did discuss

was from their high-school classes, yet they stated that they were still getting feedback on their style choices from professors to varying degrees. Student 1 expressed that they had gotten “helpful” feedback recently on their lack of vocabulary. Student 2 said that they have had some English professors who are “a little bit more picky about grammar,” but only if the mistake is “really insane,” in contrast to their experience in other departments with harsher grammar criteria. Student 3 mentioned cumbersome vocabulary and excessive sentences or extra clauses as examples of stylistic, LOC feedback they had received from instructors. Student 4 liked that the English professors at the University of Oregon were “not particularly strict about style,” but also said that they tailor their writing to the instructor, that “sometimes it takes essay one to figure out how they grade and what they want from you,” and that while they can usually get by the first essay with a good grade, the third and fourth are stronger as they adapt to the feedback they get from an instructor each time they take a new class. Student 4 points out that this is a positive for them, despite its frustrating nature, as it forces them to practice “different skills.”

All students expressed some level of frustration at a lack of feedback or overly general feedback from their instructors. Each student expressed a desire for more specific, actionable feedback on their writing itself. Student 1 described a first-year composition class where they got comments on “specific grammar things” without much explanation, but a lot of them were on ideas in the argumentative essays they were writing that the instructor disagreed with and that they were asked to make a “different argument.” Student 1 also mentioned getting consistent feedback over time that they were too “wordy” and that they were using run-on sentences, but when pressed, Student 1 admitted that they were not

sure of the definition of a run-on sentence and that, despite receiving this kind of feedback from multiple sources, they had not been given a technical explanation of what a run-on sentence was. Student 3 expressed receiving similar feedback, demonstrating that while students are not receiving explicit classroom instruction on stylistic choices, they are being evaluated on them. Student 4 expressed affection for a specific instructor due to the detail and particularity of their feedback in contrast to other experiences.

Students 1 and 3 in particular expressed that they had positive experiences with the level of detailed, personal feedback they received from their fellow students and other tutors on their writing during their tutoring training, echoing the feedback Miller reports getting in her embedded tutor study.

4.2.3. Undergraduate Knowledge Sources

The tutors in training received most of their stylistic and organizational knowledge about the essay genre from high-school classes and, being reminded of it in training, some found it helpful in improving their essay writing. In college, they rely primarily on written rubrics for organizational direction and feel they must often adapt their writing styles and arguments to the particular whims and unspoken preferences of each instructor, more so across disciplines, relying on corrective feedback to improve their writing rather than explicit up-front instruction: an example of low-road transfer. Most expressed a desire for more specific feedback and instruction on their writing and found that they got that from their peer-tutoring experiences: an example of higher-road transfer.

Based on the experience articulated here by successful English students through an activity theory lens, they have adapted to an instructional environment of fill-in-the-blank, repeating, drill-

based assignments in a single genre with implied requirements for style and syntax—which students have little to no formal instruction on—depending on the unarticulated preferences of their instructor. In order to conform to this environment within the English department, they have learned to read their instructors through lecture and the subtext of written rubrics in order to meet those unspoken requirements, finding the argument or goal that the instructor intends for them to make or reach, and matching the content of their assignments to something they feel the instructor will agree with as opposed to expressing their own thoughts or opinions. In other words, the practice of writing in their English classes had been approached with a near, low-road application of transfer that often relied on unspecific, corrective feedback rather than explicit up-front instruction.

While the tutor training did not match student expectations entirely, some tutors mentioned that the review of basic concepts of the essay and in-depth conversational feedback on their writing raised their confidence levels about said writing. It also led to more metacognitive discussion of their writing process, the principles behind basic essay structures and concepts, and how they communicated their ideas on the page. This metacognitive approach to format and structure was intended to teach students to teach students, and to enable the transfer of those ideas. This review of basic structural concepts—though specific to a single familiar genre—in combination with peer-to-peer back-and-forth feedback sessions, seemed to lead students to think critically about the instruction or lack thereof they had received themselves.

4.3. Working Undergraduate Tutors

Now that I have covered the four tutors in training, I will cover the responses of the two working undergraduate tutors to see how they have adapted to their role and if the themes from their training show up in their work. I interviewed these two undergraduate tutors previously during their training, but they will be renamed for this section as Tutor 1 and Tutor 2. These tutors offer valuable reflections on their experience, training, and expectations as they begin to apply them to actual tutoring sessions with other students.

4.3.1. Students Tutoring Students

Undergraduate writing tutors in the English department work as unpaid interns for credit and offer tutoring for all undergraduate English classes. Both undergraduate tutors expressed enjoying their work, and Tutor 1 commented on how they have a much better understanding of the average student's writing ability after tutoring, something they had not fully grasped as a successful English major before working with tutees. Each tutor found most of their tutees to be positively engaged by the experience, though Tutor 1 mentioned having a mixed bag, and that the unengaged tutees were "always a guy."

At the time of the interview, each tutor had seen mostly students from lower division English courses and required first-year composition courses. They reported that most of the writing issues they saw were of a Higher Order of Concern (HOCs: structural or content issues), though it should be noted that this is what they were instructed to prioritize. Each was able to identify key recurring issues with student writing generally, as well as with specific assignments in classes where visiting a tutor was encouraged or required as part of the class curriculum. This mainly involved identifying disconnects in

student-instructor communication in lecture and written instructions. Tutor 2 identified a habit of student writers to focus more strongly on singular aspects of their paper while neglecting others, the focus varying based on affinity for and perceived competency in different areas. Tutor 2 identified that this was a habit they also had, and because of this work, they were able to more clearly recognize and improve their own writing habits.

In addressing tutees, each tutor reported finding interpersonal communication that broke down the hierarchical barrier between them, and that emphasized their peer relationship, resulting in a more engaging and informative session. Techniques they discussed included reflecting on their own writing struggles and barriers, as well as relating their own experiences with communication disconnects between themselves and the tutees' instructors. They also found themselves sharing tips for interpreting what the instructor wanted from the tutee that was not explicitly stated in instructions, reacting to what the tutors recognized as an unconscious evaluation system from instructors, often related to genre conventions and their foci. This dynamic highlights the unique advantages tutors can offer from an intermediary position in the teaching process, but also the low-road, near transfer happening within the class activity system where the tutors had learned what was expected of them from repetition and corrective feedback within the classroom environment rather than proactively through explanation and reasoning. Tutor 2 also found that introducing ideas like audience awareness helped frame issues with papers for students. This indicates either a lack of instruction or a breakdown of communication regarding concepts and requirements in the classroom that the tutor was able to compensate for.

4.3.2. Tutor Reflections and Foundations

This second set of interviews with trainees-now-tutors gave me a chance to delve into more detail on themes of student experience that showed up in the first round of interviews with trainees, such as their past instruction on and experience with Lower Orders of Concern (LOCs; non-structural/content issues) that some trainees had reported getting instructor feedback on.

Tutor 1 had taken three or four writing classes at the University of Oregon that they could think of: a First-Year Composition (FYC) class, a lower-division grammar course, and the tutoring training class. Tutor 2, having tested out of first-year composition, had taken no college-level writing classes besides the tutoring class, which alone fulfilled their English major writing requirements of a single non-FYC writing class. Each referenced their advanced placement English courses in high school as being their primary draw for writing knowledge based in the essay genre. Each tutor found that their experience interpreting instructions for classes was their most drawn on source for helping students. Tutor 1 mentioned how in English classes, “you write the same essay over and over and over and over again,” but that each time you have to make a different point or argument based on rubrics and your instructor, and that this taught them good critical analysis skills that allowed them to identify the nuances present in instructions and rubrics more easily than a student in another major. This may be the case, but this tutor likely learned these critical thinking skills more from learning to adapt and interpret the implicit evaluation system they found themselves in rather than explicit instruction on assignments, which, according to their experience, amounts to a repetitive, drill-based writing education.

When asked if they felt comfortable addressing LOCs, Tutor 1 answered that yes, they did, referencing a lower-division grammar course titled *Craft of the Sentence*, crediting it with their knowledge of how semi-colons work. When pressed for specifics, they admitted that they retained very little from the class. Tutor 2 admitted to seeing quite a few LOC issues in student papers, but they were keeping their focus on HOCs so as not to overwhelm students. Tutor 2 recalled an instance where a tutee brought in a large quote that they were concerned about, and how they had to go over it in steps together, expressing that LOCs are often a concern of tutees and that they, as a tutor, try and engage them when prompted. This desire from students to focus on LOCs builds on the fact that tutors in training reported getting feedback from instructors on LOCs, particularly in non-English class writing assignments, while not receiving much, if any, explicit instruction on the topic at the university.

4.3.3. Undergraduate Tutors in Practice

In adapting to the work of tutoring, each tutor prioritized Higher Orders of Concern with students according to their own confidence and program directives, but acknowledged that they and their tutees had Lower Order Concerns. Each tutor had to engage those concerns at their own level due to a lack of explicit instruction on the topic. Each tutor also found that a significant portion of their work, if not a majority, lay in helping students to interpret instructions and feedback relating to assignments. They often identified trends and recurring pitfalls in both student writing generally and in specific assignment instructions they saw more than once.

If students in FYC classes are not receiving instruction on LOCs, but on the structure and organization of ideas in the essay genre, a genre

primarily used in the Humanities, how are they being prepared for 'college writing' in other genres in other disciplines or professions (Wardle and Downs)? LOCs are framed as lesser areas of concern but are the most universally applicable principles of writing. Communicating clearly with the most accurate wording and on a sentence level is a skill that is universally applicable across all genres of writing and rhetorical situations. Communicating clearly is not only rhetorically important but can be taught regardless of class content and is valued in the workplace. If students learn how to organize an essay and not how to clearly communicate detailed information in sentences, they may not only have to learn a new genre in their chosen major, but they will also not have a good understanding of sentence-level communication to transfer to it. If we think in language (Burton), is its clarity not important? In the close reading and textual analysis taught in the English department, why do we not emphasize learning the basic functions and forms of that text? This lack of LOC instruction seems to be another fundamental disconnect between students and instructors in English and writing classes that tutors find themselves compensating for, despite often being similarly underprepared.

While I cannot conclusively determine which tutees were simply not paying attention in their classes, the tutees' experiences of confusion and lack of direction in their writing are representative of the consistent pedagogical patterns successful English student writers and tutors in training had adapted to and since compensated for. In combining the experiences of tutors and tutees, we see a pattern of unconscious feedback systems that encourage and reward conformity to implicit requirements and expectations from instructors in the face of missing, explicit, metacognitive, and transfer-focused writing instruction. Students who do not

learn to adapt or pander based on written or social feedback, or are not already proficient enough to do so, struggle the most and are better able to bridge that gap with the help of a peer tutor.

I myself have found that tailoring the topic of my papers to the interests of my instructors seems to result in more generous grades; though vague, remote feedback that does not go into detail on function, structure, or language makes it hard to tell. If an instructor mentions form or syntax in their lectures, I feel emboldened to include that kind of analysis more in my papers; if they do not, I do not. A lack of explicit instruction or common knowledge about the function of writing conventions and the whys behind writing decisions leaves the student in a position where they feel they have to guess at preferences, unable to argue or understand the verdict that is being handed down. Rubrics and syllabi have been sold as an objective contract that should eliminate the possibility of feeling-based grading, but so long as those documents do not include explicit technical and stylistic requirements, and students lack the fundamental, functional knowledge of writing structures, terms, and conventions to dispute that their ideas didn't "flow," how objective can it be? In a qualitative discipline required to give quantitative grades, ignorance of the function and purpose behind conventions in any party leaves us directionless and mute under an undefinable hierarchy of right and wrong that is made up to begin with.

4.4. Graduate Tutors

The two graduate student writing tutors who agreed to sit down with me, Grad. Tutor 1 and Grad. Tutor 2, had relatively different backgrounds. Each came from different undergraduate programs at different institutions. Therefore, these interviews are more general,

covering a much broader range of topics. Because of this, I will separate this section by specific tutor reflections and then combine shared information. The first graduate tutor had prior experience as a writing tutor at another university, and the second did a lot of creative writing course work as an undergraduate. Each offers different insight into the tutoring process and trends in student writing based on those different backgrounds and the instruction and training they received there. It should be noted that the graduate tutors work in a separate tutoring program than the undergraduate tutors—though still within the English Department—and deal exclusively and directly with First-Year Composition (FYC) courses.

4.4.1. The Past Tutor

Grad. Tutor 1 found their experience as a tutor at the University of Oregon to be very different from their past experiences, where pedagogy was more focused on teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). They described the new Writing 100s curriculum at Oregon as focused on identity and literacy and found that they had to “re-curate” their teaching style and philosophy. They also found that the writing center they were now based out of was not well-known or utilized as much as they thought it could be. They also recalled being able to specialize as a tutor in different genres within their past university-wide program that received many kinds of writing, as opposed to a general first-year college writing focus.

Grad. Tutor 1 described their own undergraduate first-year composition experience as being different: an intensive semester course where the student writes five different papers and must show them, along with four drafts of each, in a final portfolio. They also reflected on their class experience of learning to tailor each paper to the preferences of individual instructors. They compare this to graduate school, where they now

struggle to find their own voice in their writing, demonstrating the struggle of transferring outside a previous activity system where they tailored their writing style to instructor preferences rather than their own. Grad tutor 1 also expressed how tutoring students in writing has helped them improve their own writing through metacognitive reflection.

4.4.2. The Creative Writer

Grad. Tutor 2 had not tutored before, but they had a lot of experience in creative writing workshops. They reflect on how that experience was very detail oriented and critique focused, and how their work as a tutor has to be oriented differently to meet the needs of First-Year Composition courses and beginning writers, even when some student writers come wanting “honest critique” of their work. Grad Tutor 2 expressed that it is difficult to ignore many smaller textual level problems (LOCs), but the few times they brought them up to a student, the student was grateful for it. They admit, however, that like the undergraduate program, focusing on LOCs is discouraged, again showing a disconnect between program guidelines and student desires.

4.4.3. Their Tutees

When asked about common student writing problems, each tutor had a similar answer: structure. Each graduate tutor expressed that students know what they want to write about, but struggle to put it into words. The graduate tutors also referenced systematic forms and guides from past instructors and courses that they still use themselves when advising students and in their own writing. Grad. Tutor 2 poignantly referenced the writing adage of “know the rules before you break them” as a practice that helped give them the confidence to make writing decisions. Each

also referenced their high school classes and instructors as primary sources of these rules and guides on the essay genre. Grad. Tutor 1 reflected that one of the primary issues they saw in student writing that such guides help with is a lack of personal voice, explicitly giving students a space for their own thoughts. Grad. Tutor 1 reported feeling that students are “made to feel that the humanities and English and writing is something that is inaccessible, not for them...going back [to] how being well-read means that you’re smarter than other people.”

Each graduate tutor also expressed that making an effort to relate to their tutees and emphasizing a peer dynamic helped students to open up and be more receptive to feedback. Grad. Tutor 2 found that just engaging tutees’ work directly by reading it out loud to them led to the tutee initiating corrections and changes in the session, facilitating transfer and application of past concepts.

If students in FYC classes feel like Grad. Tutor 1 reports, that English and writing are inaccessible and their desire to fix what they see as fundamental issues is dismissed or just unacknowledged by tutoring programs and classes as Lower Orders of Concern without articulating the principles behind that focus explicitly, is it any wonder that student use of Large Language Models is becoming more common? If students are not told the rules to the game of writing that they feel they are being judged on, why should they play? A lack of metacognitive instruction and explicit explanations of the whys behind writing instruction and structures is unlikely to encourage a student who struggles to navigate and adapt to implicit expectations and foci to learn anything, much less something as complex and inaccessible as writing.

4.4.4. Graduate Tutors in Summary

Each graduate tutor brought a different set of expectations and practices from their undergraduate backgrounds, determined by the kind of writing they did in different environments and genres, with different modes of receiving feedback, and influenced by the activity system they were engaged in. Here, they deal with similar issues that undergraduate tutors experienced regarding the implicit demands of assignments and communication breakdown between students and instructors. The graduate tutors find themselves filling in those instruction gaps and meeting students’ needs and wants that are not being met in classrooms in regard to writing. They are encouraging students to apply what they have been taught and helping them do so, facilitating transfer of writing knowledge and ideas in personalized ways, even if it is only in regard to the essay genre that is the staple of college writing in FYC classes. As tutors, they fill much the same role as undergraduate tutors and deal with similar levels of student writing, showing a consistent problem set related to lower division student writing and writing instruction.

5. Discussion

The primary engagement of the high-performing undergraduate English students whom I interviewed with their writing in English classes appears to be through interpreting rubrics and generalized corrective feedback that clues them into the preferences of individual instructors, more than initial, intentional, explicit technical or functional instruction. These students found that their ability to interpret and conform to instructor preferences was a primary knowledge source to draw upon when tutoring other undergraduate students in English classes. The other source of knowledge they primarily draw on is the

structures and basics of essay writing that were reviewed—some for the first time since high school—in their tutoring training course. These basics helped many tutees with their HOC (Higher Order of Concern) writing problems.

Graduate student tutors found similarly that structural guides and forms, some of which they retained from high school, helped First-Year Composition students to better express themselves and insert themselves into their writing despite feelings of exclusion or inadequacy in the medium, giving the tutees explicit room for their own voice and rules to use for their own means.

Both kinds of tutors found that emphasizing their peer-like role with tutees assisted them in engaging with tutees over their writing and prompting questions, serving as an interpreter for instructors' spoken and written directions. Both kinds of tutors also found that Lower Orders of Concern (LOCs) were present in student writing and were a source of anxiety and questions from students, but the tutors were guided by their programs and training to focus instead on structural, Higher Orders of Concern (HOCs). Most tutors also found that revisiting basic principles of writing in the essay genre and communicating them to others helped them with their own.

5.1. Limitations

While the demographic I interviewed—the writing tutors in the University of Oregon English Department—are the most likely group to have anywhere near a holistic understanding of the transfer process I seek to understand, I conducted only eight interviews with six subjects. While this number of interviews and subjects is average to high for a Composition Studies project, and my concentration on a small subject group was

intentional due to their unique position, the fact remains that it is a concentrated group with similar experiences and perspectives, which can only be so varied.

As a student myself, my view into the inner workings and politics of the department, as well as the reasons behind their decisions, is very limited. I do not have access to the reasons that certain classes have been prioritized and required, nor the budget and time constraints or other considerations that faculty and the department must at all times consider. Because of this, I cannot take these things into account in my analysis, nor in any recommendations I make. I argue that this is a good thing. A lack of immersion in the logistics and politics involved in such decisions allows me to take a fish-out-of-water perspective and focus on the principles and activity I see at play in my research and the impact I see it having on students. I may make statements, observations, and recommendations based on said principles and my data, but any true action or change must be taken up by those with a much more complete picture than myself.

5.2. Implications

This project began as an observation of a disconnect between what instructors and the department intended for students to learn and be doing, and what was happening in the activity system of the classroom. Students complain about schoolwork, so what? Based on my experiences and the experiences articulated by the tutors I interviewed, writing the same close reading essay that includes mostly formal elements, though likely without the language to talk about text at a sentence level, or analyzing an academic article or two in conversation over and over, pandering to the parts of texts and the type of analysis the instructor personally likes, is formulaic. Students

complain because they receive a prompt and spit out the same formulaic language and argument that they think will get them the grade they want. In this way, are they not currently being taught to write like slightly better Large Language Models? They are being taught to write, yes, but the same genres with the same conventions without being taught the history or reasoning behind them over and over. They are good at that thing, yes, but is that enough?

Allow me to refer back to my brick layer analogy from my review of transfer theory in my literature review. Without explicit instruction on fundamental principles and the whys behind genre conventions and structures and bridging the gaps between them—while writing in the same genre form about similar topics over and over, while conforming to the unspoken stylistic preferences of their given instructor, while imitating genre and stylistic conventions without explicit instructions on those conventions—what activity system can English students at the University of Oregon be expected to transfer to besides the teaching of the same?

Assuming they do not go beyond the base requirements of their current degree program, what should English majors at the University of Oregon have to offer besides their knowledge gained through the near, low-road transfer of writing the same essay over and over? In a degree program that requires only one additional writing class beyond the FYC classes required by every other major, where English majors are only required to take one writing class more than a math major, what “mindful abstraction of principle” is being taught to English students beyond how to be literary academics focused on cultural themes or critical theory writing in short argumentative essays (Perkins & Solomon)? If the English degree program exists solely to prepare English students to do literary analysis in an

academic setting with cultural lenses, I think this current state is fine. But that is not how the degree is marketed as of the 2024–2025 academic year (“English”), and I believe the current department could do more to encourage new humanities students who are interested in careers besides teaching literary analysis.

If English is a multidisciplinary topic, what is the role of an English major? In my view, the English major should be the place where those disciplines of Literature, Linguistics, Composition, Philosophy, and Rhetoric converge, where we not only study the use of written language by others, but are expert wielders as well. I would say that the major has literary study fairly locked down. But if the English major is more than a professional program to train culture-focused literary academics, I feel that its members should be required to at least produce what they study. Why should anyone outside of academia hire an English major over a Journalism and Communication major? Can we really say that Journalism does not teach critical thinking? I believe that a deeper expertise in the language and its use across contexts should be the answer.

The good news is that there are already existing classes and programs that are actively tackling these concerns. Tutoring programs in the English department with tutors who undergo prerequired and ongoing training, though lacking resources and popularity, are working to help students with their writing concerns. There are, albeit generalized, genre-focused writing classes like Business and Technical writing being taught: classes that can be clearly placed on a resume. Craft of the Sentence (ENG 209) and Art of the Sentence (ENG 420) are helping students with their Lower Order Concerns and providing a grammar education that many are increasingly missing. The Writing, Public Speaking, and Critical Reasoning (WSCR) minor seeks to provide students with a

basic foundational understanding of how language works in the world through combining theory and philosophy (mindful abstraction of principle) with individual application of those things (transfer). The Creative Writing minor has a similar dynamic where the technique is examined, yes, but then put into practice in different ways and forms, focusing on specific applications of specific genres and modes of what is studied in combination with peer workshops. But these classes and minor programs, while implicit in the department's language about what an English degree offers, are explicitly absent from the English major requirements and advertising.

What can we take from these observations and how? Beyond looking at the models of other English encompassed programs, I would point to suggestions from other scholars in my literature review for consideration. Metacognitive reading (Carillo) could be put into practice in literature classes more broadly in conjunction with the less-clear-to-me-still practice of close reading. Peer or instructor feedback of truly completed drafts, integration of tutors into classrooms (Miller), and a general promotion of visiting tutors could also provide a buffer for instructors with time demands too great to give the personalized feedback that undergraduate tutors found so helpful in their training class. There is much already happening within the English department on a weekly basis that I think works to help students with their writing that is not reflected in the major's focus, despite the currently required classes revolving around and grading based on said writing.

Why are English majors not required to write in any genre beyond short argumentative essays, doing close reading analysis in formal academic language? I believe that a metacognitive approach towards reading and writing in literature classes, along with meta-discussion of genre and

communication, with reprioritization towards already existing writing-focused classes and programs in the English major requirements, could have a significant and beneficial impact on successful high-road transfer.

I am just one undergraduate English major who saw a gap in my education and sought to fill it—in part through performing this study—but I have done my best to give voices to my peers and examine as many sides of this issue as I am capable, given my position and logistical constraints. I remain adamant that in an age where language is constantly manipulated by algorithms and produced by machines, if the English major is to thrive, standards must go up, not down. To compete in a society increasingly steeped in language and rhetoric, I believe explicit and thorough instruction on technique and conscious language competency is paramount to remain relevant and serve students and society at large. Based on what I have communicated here, in coordination with existing literature, investing into English department tutoring programs and expanding their use across disciplines would raise the competency of both successful and struggling students by providing further learning opportunities to both. Through open and meta discussion around the writing that we do and the writing that we study, we can increase our understanding of it and our ability to produce it. Through ongoing training and practice, this would improve transfer of literacy and writing skills in English classes and, if increased in scope, the university as a whole.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Codes

Umbrella Codes	Sub-codes
Pedagogy	➤ Expectations ➤ Learning: Writing ➤ Learning: General ➤ Instruction: Explicit ➤ Instruction: Implicit ➤ Instruction: Helpful ➤ Instruction: Unhelpful ➤ Instruction: Relevance ➤ Instruction: Discrepancy ➤ LOCs (Low Orders of Concern) ➤ HOCs (High Orders of Concern) ➤ Feedback: Personal ➤ Feedback: Impersonal
Transfer	➤ Reading ➤ Knowledge Source ➤ Genre: Identified ➤ Genre: Cross
Activity	➤ Act of Writing ➤ Conformity

Appendix B: Table 1

Umbrella Code	Demonstrative Quote	Total sub-codes	Undergrad Tutors in Training	Undergrad Tutors	Graduate Tutors
Pedagogy (13 sub-codes)	"...every professor has different expectations, which can be really frustrating... My favorite kind of professors are the ones that give really specific feedback."	323 (~67%)	168 (~67%)	56 (~64%)	99 (~71%)
Transfer (4 sub-codes)	"I tend to use formal language even when it's not an essay, so I sort of stay in one mode. I might be a little bad at code switching."	75 (~16%)	34 (~13%)	17 (~19%)	24 (~17%)
Activity (2 sub-codes)	"...I saw my role in the session as being: 'how can I get this student to satisfy this professor's comment while not having to embark on the work of rewriting this?'"	82 (~17%)	50 (~20%)	15 (~17%)	17 (~12%)

Appendix C: Questions for Tutors in Training

- How are you finding training so far?
- What form, style, and structure do you find yourself writing in most of your classes?

- How do you think that has affected the style of your writing?
 - What kind of feedback have you gotten in those classes?
- Do you feel that prior University of Oregon coursework has prepared you to speak about what good writing is or teach others skills to improve their own writing?
 - How so/why? (Readings? Repetition? Instruction?)
 - Can you walk me through your writing process before you started tutoring training?
 - Why did you do it that way?
 - Do you feel like you've changed your writing process since starting tutor training?
 - How has your process changed? Why?
 - How do you think it may change more by the time you're finished with tutoring training?
 - Is there anything you see yourself applying?
 - How so?
 - Is there anything else that has been covered in writing tutor training that is new to you?
 - Is there anything else you'd like to share or add?

Appendix D: Questions for Working Undergraduate Tutors

- How have you found your experience working as a tutor?
- How, if at all, has your experience tutoring students affected your own writing?
 - How so or why not?
- What kind of classes do tutees come from most?
 - Why do you think that is?
- What are the most common things that you explain to tutees about writing?
 - Why do you think that is?
 - Were these things present in your own writing at some point?
- Is there a method of explaining common problems you find to be most effective?
 - Why do you think that is/what led you to that conclusion?
 - Was this something you were taught or figured out through experience?
- Is there anything that is commonly difficult to explain?
- How many writing classes have you taken here and/or outside the University of Oregon?

- a. How has that affected your confidence in talking to other students about their writing?
- 8. Do students more commonly ask about “High Orders of Concern” (HOC) or “Low Orders of Concern” (LOC)?
 - a. What kind of each category shows up most?
- 9. Do you feel comfortable addressing “Low Orders of Concern?”
 - a. Why or why not?
- 10. Do you have any final thoughts on your experience?

Appendix E: Questions for Graduate Tutors

- 1. How have you found your experience working as a tutor?
- 2. Do you have any experience working as a tutor before you came to U.O.?
- 3. How many writing classes have you taken here and/or outside the University of Oregon?
 - a. How has that affected your confidence in talking to other students about their writing?
- 4. How, if at all, has your experience tutoring students affected your own writing?
 - a. How so or why not?
- 5. What kind of classes do tutees come from most?
 - a. Why do you think that is?

- 6. What are the most common things that you explain to tutees about writing?
 - a. Why do you think that is?
 - b. Were these things present in your own writing at some point?
- 7. Is there a method of explaining common problems you find to be most effective?
 - a. Why do you think that is/what led you to that conclusion?
 - b. Was this something you were taught or figured out through experience?
- 8. Is there anything that is commonly difficult to explain?
- 9. Do students more commonly ask about “High Orders of Concern” (HOC) or “Low Orders of Concern” (LOC)?
 - a. What kind of each category shows up most?
- 10. Do you feel comfortable addressing “Low Orders of Concern?”
 - a. Why or why not? (Press for specifics)
- 11. Do you feel that prior undergraduate coursework has prepared you to speak about what good writing is or teach others skills to improve their own writing?
 - a. How so/why? (Readings? Repetition? Instruction?)
 - b. Have graduate classes been different?
- 12. Do you have any final thoughts on your experience?