Nowacek, Rebecca S. *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

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Researchers and teachers within the field of Writing Studies have become increasingly interested in the issue of "transfer"–how writing knowledge and abilities learned in one context are abstracted and applied within new writing contexts. Based on a shared interest in understanding the complex cognitive and social processes by which student writers "recontextualize" knowledge, researchers over the past two decades have conducted numerous studies examining the transfer of writing strategies across multiple contexts: from high school to first-year composition (FYC) courses, from FYC courses to courses in Writing in the Disciplines (WID), and from WID courses to writing in the workplace.[1] Positioned among these various research sites for studying transfer, Rebecca Nowacek's *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act* makes a valuable contribution to transfer scholarship and pedagogy by introducing a new site for transfer research: an interdisciplinary learning community (LC).

The interdisciplinary LC–which fulfills a first-year general education requirement for honors students, who enroll in linked courses across three disciplines (history, literature, and religious studies)–is positioned somewhere between FYC and WID courses. As a result, it offers a unique site for studying transfer and for revealing the tensions between applications of general writing knowledge and discipline-specific writing strategies. Nowacek's study insightfully explores how students resolve these tensions within their roles as "agents of integration," rhetorical actors who mediate among various and competing discourses and assignments, institutional and disciplinary structures, their own identities and subject positions, and most importantly, their prior

genre knowledge, which plays an integral role in cueing students' writing performances in new situations.

The book's focus on genre as "a social and rhetorical resource that helps individuals both to generate . . . and to interpret" (19) meaning is reflected not just in the study's findings but in the genre of the research study itself and its overall design. For instance, the book follows a fairly conventional structure for reporting on empirical research, with an introduction and theoretical overview of the concept of transfer (Chapter 1), a description of the design of the study and initial case studies of students (Chapter 2), the reported results of data collected from instructors (Chapter 3), the discussion of the results and analysis of how students transfer writing-related and genre knowledge (Chapter 4), and the implications of the research for FYC and Writing Centers, along with directions for future research (Chapter 5).

However, while the structure is typical, the research study and its findings are far from typical. The study makes a distinctive contribution to transfer research by focusing on students' experiences of making connections across contexts while they are simultaneously enrolled in connected or linked courses–courses that, while reflecting different disciplines, are team-taught and focused on the same historical period (the medieval, early-modern, and Enlightenment periods of Western civilization). The LC is designed to cultivate connection-making, an emphasis that culminates in a collaborative oral exam that asks students to synthesize their knowledge of literature, history, and religious studies. One of the central questions the book poses, then, is: "What can be learned about transfer of writing-related knowledge by examining a context not bound by the institutional limitations of first-year composition?" (9). To answer this question, Nowacek draws on rich data gathered from the eighteen student participants and the three instructors of the interdisciplinary seminar and employs multiple methods, including class observations, surveys of students, interviews with students and teachers, focus groups, and analysis of student papers and notebooks. Utilizing classroom-

based ethnographic methods (including attending, audiotaping, and transcribing twenty-five classes over the course of a semester), Nowacek is able to provide a thick description of students' learning experiences and the connections they made across the three disciplinary contexts as well as to provide valuable insights into best practices for "teaching for transfer" and how instructors might facilitate (or inhibit) students' transfer of knowledge.

Nowacek begins the study by establishing a framework for understanding transfer as recontextualization, which effectively situates her research among recent transfer studies. Recent studies have challenged traditional understandings of "learning transfer" (based on the foundational work of educational psychologists David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon) as primarily a linear, cognitive process in which knowledge is abstracted from one situation and directly applied to new situations. This focus on the direct application of learning has shifted, in recent research, to an interest in the "adaptation" or "transformation" of learning, which involves re-situating, extending, and reinventing writing knowledge and practices.[2] Nowacek situates her work within these current approaches, embracing a more dynamic understanding of transfer as recontextualization, which acknowledges the ways in which students not only adapt previous knowledge to new situations but–as "agents of integration"–also reshape, reuse, and repurpose writing knowledge.

The question then becomes, "What are the capacities that students develop in order to become agents of integration?" (8). While a number of research studies on transfer have highlighted the ways in which rhetorical awareness informs students' abilities to recontextualize knowledge,[3] Nowacek's study breaks new ground as it redefines the act of transfer itself as a rhetorical act. Not only do students, as agents of integration, draw on their rhetorical awareness to gain access to new writing situations, they must also enact rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences (instructors) of the effectiveness of these connections. One of the key distinctions made in the book is the distinction between

"seeing" connections and "selling" connections and the integrative learning that must take place as "individuals actively work to *perceive* as well as *to convey effectively to others* connections between previously distinct contexts" (38). The case studies vividly illustrate this interplay between "seeing" and "selling," making visible the rhetorical strategies (e.g., making connections explicit, explaining concepts) that student writers employ as they negotiate different disciplinary and epistemological contexts, with varying degrees of success.

The case studies also highlight the powerful role of the instructor, who has "the institutional authority to decide which connections count" (68) –another finding that significantly extends current transfer research. While previous transfer studies have indicated that students often compartmentalize knowledge, failing to see connections among their various courses and writing assignments, Nowacek's study complicates the issue of transfer by illustrating how instructors are similarly locked into disciplinary domains that may prevent them from recognizing an act of transfer or judging it as successful. For example, one of the case studies highlights a student's transfer of a proposition argued in history to her literature analysis paper. While the student demonstrated the ability to repurpose knowledge for use in other contexts, the instructor failed to recognize the act of transfer or to deem it as successful, concerned instead that the student should demonstrate the "ways of knowing" within literature by supporting the broad historical claim with textual evidence and analysis. This is a compelling insight since, while transfer studies typically focus on students' failure to transfer knowledge across disciplinary domains, Nowacek turns our attention to the failure of instructors to recognize key moments of transfer, due to their own epistemological and disciplinary locations. In this sense, teachers, not just students, are called upon to be "agents of integration" who can "see" the connections students are making and who can fulfill the role of audiences who are receptive to the creative recontextualization of knowledge. Further extending the metaphor of students as "agents of integration," Nowacek calls on

instructors to assume the role of "handlers" and provides concrete advice for how instructors might facilitate transfer, whether through ungraded assignments that allow for creative connection-making, or by assigning more pliable genres, such as reaction papers, that leave room for students to maneuver and to creatively recontextualize their knowledge.

Central to this concept of transfer as recontextualization is the role of genre. The integral role that genre plays in rhetorical acts of transfer emerges as another one of the key findings of the study. Nowacek claims that "spoken and written genres offer exigencies and constraints for students trying to make connections and teachers trying to facilitate connections" (18). Genre knowledge can motivate connections, as in the case of a student who successfully recontextualized his previous genre knowledge (of research papers and analysis essays) to create a hybrid genre that synthesized the rhetorical goals of research and analysis to effectively respond to an assignment. On the other hand, genre knowledge can limit effective transfer, as in the case of a student who drew on her knowledge of personal diaries to respond to a history assignment that conceptualized the diary as more of a detailed log. In this case the student's genre knowledge cued acts of transfer that were counterproductive to the objectives of the assignment. Nowacek's findings effectively reveal the tensions that instructors often experience as they work to facilitate students' transfer of writing-related knowledge across disciplinary boundaries: the tension between making explicit the rhetorical domain of disciplinary genres while also assigning genres that are pliable enough to enable interdisciplinary connections.

Given these tensions, one of the more surprising findings of the study is that transfer is not guaranteed even in linked courses within a learning community where instructors have the ability to consult with one another as they plan the course and assignments and where they spend time attending each other's classes. Students' abilities to make connections are hampered by instructors' contrary advice about writing, their differing definitions of the same term (such as "thesis"), or their

presentation of rhetorical rules that emphasize formal conventions over larger rhetorical purposes. However, despite these challenges, within the "shared pedagogical space" of an LC, the potential and possibilities for transfer are apparent, which is why Nowacek concludes by proposing an interdisciplinary LC model of FYC. Given the focus of the study on the interdisciplinary LC context, this concluding emphasis on FYC was a bit surprising, although some readers will no doubt appreciate the connections to FYC. Perhaps more surprising is that the success of the LC model for FYC seems to rest on an activity–metacognitive awareness–that is earlier dismissed as a factor that might be central to transfer. Nowacek's study, for example, reveals that students may transfer knowledge without conscious awareness of the connections they are making. Nonetheless, her LC model of FYC rests on a significant criterion: providing "structured opportunities for students to reflect on the similarities and differences between the types of writing-related knowledge valued in each discipline" (130). As a result, Nowacek recommends a series of scaffolded, meta-reflective requirements that could be integrated into FYC courses. These requirements would ask student to reflect on their antecedent genre knowledge as they connect that knowledge to new assignments or to explore the similarities and differences among the assignments they are working on within the learning community.

While the potential for incorporating FYC into an interdisciplinary LC raises a number of challenges and opportunities, one of the more promising implications of Nowacek's research is the potential for writing centers to serve as a site for facilitating transfer. Little research has been done on the ways in which writing centers are uniquely positioned institutionally to help students transfer writing-related knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. But Nowacek challenges the "underappreciated contribution of writing centers to the undergraduate curriculum" by re-imagining the role of tutors as "handlers" who can engage writers in a process of transfer-as-reconstruction (137). At the same time, as tutors are trained to

help students integrate disciplinary knowledge and work on "cultivating a metacognitive awareness of disciplinary genres" (139), they, too, become "agents of integration" as they further develop their own understanding of genres and disciplinary ways of knowing. It is within this framework of understanding students as "agents" who "see" and "sell" connections across contexts, while understanding tutors and instructors as simultaneously "agents," "handlers," and "audiences" who have the potential to limit or enable transfer, that Nowacek's book makes its most valuable contribution: complicating and clarifying our understanding of the complex, dynamic interactions that inform the rhetorical act of transfer.

Notes

[1]See, for example, Beaufort (1999, 2007); Bergmann and Zepernick (2007); Brent (2012); Carroll (2002); Dias et al. (1999); Dias and Paré (2000); McCarthy (1987); Nelms and Dively (2007); Reiff and Bawarshi (2011); Smit (2004); Sternglass (1997); Walvoord and McCarthy (1990); Wardle (2007).

[2]Many writing teachers and researchers who study knowledge transfer draw on work by educational theorists D.N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon (1988, 1999), who distinguish between reflexive and reflective cognitive acts and between two types of transfer: "low road" and "high road" transfer. Recently, researchers have redefined the cognitive model of direct "learning transfer" as knowledge "transformation" (Smart and Brown 2002) or as "adaptive transfer" (DePalma and Ringer 2011).

[3]See, for example, the following studies, which foreground the role of rhetorical awareness in transfer: Beaufort (2007); Bergmann and Zepernick (2007); Brent (2012); Fishman and Reiff (2008); Wardle (2007).

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