FIRST YEAR WRITING STUDENT ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS: THE POTENTIAL FOR WRITING-RELATED TRANSFER

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The concept of transfer is important in First-Year Writing (FYW). Further research is needed on how students' existing beliefs about their FYW courses affect the likelihood of transferring their learning. My paper addresses this by gauging student beliefs both before and after taking a FYW course. I look at surveys and the three reflection assignments of eight FYW students. From the data, I argue student engagement is important to promote transfer and that reflection assignments may not be a good method of judging student learning. I conclude that FYW courses should focus more on ensuring students understand the purpose of reflection assignments.

> "This course has truly been beneficial to my overall writing abilities. The knowledge I have gained will follow me and will be beneficial for my time here at [Oakland University] and will only be enhanced upon going into the professional world." – Skylar

January 7, 2020, was a cold Michigan day. It was a Tuesday, and eight first-year students were trying to find the room where their general education writing course, a class Oakland University called Composition II, was scheduled to meet. For them, it was the beginning of their second semester at Oakland University, and this was a required general education course. But for the instructor and their Teaching Apprentice, this was something more: another opportunity to help students learn more about writing, how to find scholarly sources, and most importantly, how to transfer this knowledge they would gain into future educational and professional contexts.

Teaching for transfer has been *the* topic in composition and rhetoric for the past few decades. Scholars like Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Roberton, and Kara Taczak, Elizabeth Wardle, and Dana Driscoll have considered questions such as: How should first-year writing (FYW) courses be taught so that the students can transfer what they learn, instead of merely forgetting things they believe are useless to them everywhere except that particular classroom? What skills or knowledge should we be trying to help these students transfer in the first place?

This paper looks at the reflection papers of eight Composition II students to answer the above two questions. The study had two major findings: first, fostering student engagement is of the utmost importance, and having students select communities they are a part of helps give them a reason to find writing valuable and engaging. Second, studying student reflections is an often-used method

for judging student learning and transfer, but reflections are not doing what prior research suggests that they do. In this paper, I will look at the history of research on the concept of *transfer* and why it is important. Then I will present the methods used for this study and the results those methods yielded for each finding.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON TRANSFER

> "What general knowledge can we teach students about academic genres that will help them write in later courses? And how can we ensure that students will transfer that general knowledge—at all and in helpful ways?" (Wardle 769)

What has arguably become the most important aspect of First-Year Writing (FYW) is the concept of *transfer*, what Dana Lynn Driscoll describes as the idea that knowledge gained in one area can be applied "from one context, such as first-year composition, to a new context, such as disciplinary writing" (1). However, Elizabeth Wardle notes, transfer does not happen easily, and it's not readily apparent why it does or does not occur (770). Other things that affect whether transfer occurs or not include *expectancy-value theory*, created by Norman Feather in 1969 and further explored by Driscoll. Expectancy-value theory says that the amount of work students put into a course or project is related to what sort of value they see it having (Driscoll 4).

Many authors offer suggestions for how transfer can be facilitated, agreeing that instructors ought to treat their FYW students as *knowledge-makers* who participate in the creation of knowledge instead of merely mimicking professionals (Vallis; Locklear; Purdy & Walker; Guichelaar; Driscoll; Wardle). Amy Locklear claims that students creating knowledge is central, as student engagement and agency ought to be the foundation for FYW courses (63).

According to Gabrielle Stanley, all students who sign up for their FYW courses will have already decided how they feel about writing days, weeks, or even months before stepping in or logging on to the classroom (90). Whether transfer succeeds will depend a lot on the students, creating a variable that professional writing instructors have yet to solve (Wardle 770). Writing instructors will need to work with students who are only present for a passing grade (Driscoll 4), students who will fail, and defensive writers who are opposed to feedback (Monthie 74).

There are many ideas on how FYW should be structured to best prepare students for transfer. Something is lacking, however: a focus on the actual students that come into these classrooms. What beliefs do they hold that will help or hinder them? How does taking a Composition course change these beliefs, if it changes them at all? These are questions this study hopes to answer.

METHODS

> "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." (Cameron qtd. in Chowdhury 1135)

SITE OF STUDY

This study took place at Oakland University, a public research university in Southeast Michigan founded in 1957 that averages 20,000 attending students per year, mostly

undergraduates. Oakland University requires all students to take a Composition II course, a general education first-year writing course. Participants for this study were selected from two Composition II courses taught by the same faculty member in the Winter 2020 semester. At 5 pm on March 11, 2020, the university shut down all in-person activities on campus due to the events of COVID-19. Neither of these Composition II courses was online when the semester began, but they were both fully online after March 11th.

At Oakland University, Composition courses have four non-negotiable learning outcomes: rhetoric, research, reflection, and revision. The course involved three major projects that each included a reflection, peer review, and online assignments. The third major assignment, which involved a Pecha Kucha presentation, was canceled because the course became fully online after March 11th. For the complete course syllabus, see *Appendix A*.

DATA COLLECTION

Reflections were gathered instead of student papers in order to see the participants' metacognitive practices. According to Heather Lindenman, Martin Camper, Lindsay Jacoby, and Jessica Enoch, reflections are a way to see how students respond to feedback from their peers, but more importantly, from their instructor (592). The two Composition II courses required two meetings with their instructor, once for the Annotated Bibliography and again for the Research Paper.

Three questionnaires, one at the beginning of the semester and two at the end, were posted on Qualtrics, a popular online survey tool. These questionnaires were emailed to all students in both classes. The first two questionnaires had no participants, but two students answered the third and final survey. The questions for the third survey covered what students expected, what they think they learned, and their feelings towards specific assignments.

PARTICIPANTS

This study was approved by the IRB. The consent forms allowed access to the participants' three reflections. The three reflections were the Annotated Bibliography Reflection (ABR), the Research Paper Reflection (RPR), and the Final Reflection (FR). Eight students agreed to participate, resulting in the collection of 24 reflection papers. Gender-neutral pseudonyms and pronouns were used to avoid bias in the coding.

QUALITATIVE CODING

Qualitative coding was used to analyze the data. This is because qualitative coding methods are well suited to investigating student attitudes and beliefs about first-year writing courses. According to Muhammad Faisol Chowdhury, the strengths of Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), which include "generat[ing] rich, detailed, and valid process data that usually leave the study participants' perspectives intact with contextual consideration," are superior to quantitative methods with this type of research (1138).

POSITIONALITY

In one of the classes examined in this study, I was a Teaching Apprentice, a class offered by Oakland University for undergraduates in the

Professional and Digital Writing program. I took this class and did this research to reach my goal of completing a Ph.D. in Writing Studies so I can teach composition courses. My part in this particular Composition II classroom was to help students during in-class work time, to create a method for effective peer review, to create forum assignments that involved rhetorically analyzing memes, and sometimes to lead presentations on particular topics.

MAJOR FINDING #1: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH COMPOSITION II MATERIALS

VALUE & ENGAGEMENT

> "Through three different types of revision I learned the value of getting other opinions on my work and striving to improve in areas I know I'm weak." – Parker

This study coded 17 words used in the 24 reflections (see table 1). The words *learn, future, benefit,* and *help* were coded due to their correlation with transfer. Emotional words like *difficult, struggle, hard, enjoy, stress, happy*, and *fun* were coded because of the importance of the role of emotions in transfer, as researched by Driscoll and Roger Powell (2). The words *challenge, strength,* and *weakness* were coded because of how often they were mentioned.

Out of the seventeen words coded for this study, *engagement* and *value* were eleventh and twelfth on the list, with *engagement* mentioned 13 times and *value* only 12. According to Locklear, for writing pedagogy to be effective for students, "*engagement* and *student agency* must become central" (63). Without engagement, students will not learn. This is why *value* and *engagement* were coded for this study.

Table 1: The Words Students Use

#	Main Categories	Times Mentioned
1	Learn	150
2	Help	92
3	Strength	32
4	Difficult	32
5	Weakness	31
6	Future	31
7	Benefit	27
8	Challenge	25
9	Struggle	24
10	Hard	20
11	Engage	13
12	Value	12
13	Expect	8
14	Enjoy	7
15	Happy	6
16	Stress	5
17	Fun	3

For this course, students chose a topic that they would be working with for the entire semester. The topic had to involve a community the student was a part of, either geographically or culturally. Then students had to find a problem within that community that they were going to address with both primary and secondary research. Because of this, students mentioned *engagement* or *value* primarily in the context of their chosen community (see table 2). The next most common usage of

these words was students saying something of value they got out of the course, with some saying what they learned about writing was valuable and others mentioning the one-on-one instructor conferences.

Table 2: How the Words Value & Engagement Were Used by Students

Value & Engagement Categories	Times Mentioned
Being engaged with their chosen community	8
Getting value out of something in the course	7
Engagement or value in the project or sources	4
Engaging in critical thinking	1

In the context of expectancy-value theory, if knowledge is valuable for its own sake, rather than a means to a career, then Driscoll says students will work to truly learn, remember, and apply everything they learn in their classes (5). From here, two points are important: how the instructor fosters engagement and what responsibility the students bear.

FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT

Instructors have an uphill battle, as they must work with the preconceived beliefs students developed back in high school (Stanley 90). Part of these beliefs is whether they view writing to be *valuable*. If students come to see it as valuable, then they are more likely to transfer that knowledge to other areas. A primary component here is students who see themselves as *knowledge-makers* (Driscoll; Locklear; Purdy & Walker; Vallis; Guichelaar) instead of merely imitating the arguments of more academic people. Helping students understand that they are part of the conversation, not merely standing on the outside looking in and mimicking professionals (Locklear 74), will help with engaging students as they work to create knowledge through their writing and researching. A student who sees themselves as a knowledge-maker may see the class as having intrinsic value, increasing their engagement and transfer.

For the two Composition courses that the participants were pulled from, the instructor fostered engagement effectively by having students choose a community they are a part of and having them address a problem in that community through secondary and primary research. This not only engages the students as knowledge-makers but gives them an important stake in their research: it *matters* because it's a community they are a part of; it *matters* because they are going to find a gap in the research and fill it with their own research.

In their reflections, students showed that they valued this community-based approach. Billie, who chose the Catholic community they belong to, said that "we did learn something about each specific [community] and that there is always something you can do to try to help." Alex, who is a trans-racial adoptee and chose that community for their topic, was engaged throughout the semester due to their investment in their community, saying that they "learned so much in my community and even feel like my project helped give adoptees a voice through that questionnaire." Parker wrote about college students' mental health and found the primary research to be invaluable, stating, "I was able to conduct an interview with a mental health professional in the area, which strengthened my community engagements and connected them

to the campus." Frankie, writing about college student athletes in particular, found that telling their fellow students about their topic was important, saying, "informing others of communities that you are part of is enlightening." This sentiment is reminiscent of Katelyn Guichelaar, who said that "professional academic writers write for their peers, arguing that what they have to say is relevant, new, and interesting" (13). In the same way, these first-year writers were encouraged by their instructor to do the same.

Of course, the instructor is only half of the puzzle here. The other half is the student: what beliefs about the course they had going in, as well as how well they picked out their chosen community. It's on the student to carefully pick a community, to ensure they don't have to spend a semester investigating and learning about a community that they have little to no interest in. This could negatively affect student engagement.

STUDENT BELIEFS ABOUT VALUE IN FYW

The word *expect* was mentioned only a total of eight times, with three students not using it at all in their reflections. This gives us a narrow window into what students were expecting from this course. Five of these mentions concerned expectations from the syllabus or the instructor. One of the remaining mentions was Denver saying how moving 100% online after the COVID-19 lockdown was more difficult than they expected. Robin said how doing research takes much more time to do than they expected, and Parker said that before "this class, I hadn't been asked to do a synthesis paper, and I wasn't sure what to expect."

In the last questionnaire, which Robin and Parker responded to, a few questions pertained to expectations. They were asked how what they learned in the course compared to what they expected they would learn, and both participants said that the class was about half things they expected and half things they did not expect.

Parker's expectations came from their high school English course and their Comp I course. Robin's expectations came from reading Oakland University's course description for Comp II, and they ended up listing more expectations for the course. What's interesting here is that both Parker and Robin claimed the class was half things they did expect and half things they did not, despite Robin having more expectations. This could indicate that Robin learned more from the course than Parker. If this is the case, that means that student expectations of FYW courses play a role in how much they will end up retaining and potentially transferring.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HELPED

> "The conferencing was also helpful because not only did [Comp II Instructor] review my paper, Emily did as well. This would give you two valued opinions on the paper." – Alex

Help was mentioned in the RPR instructions, which start by explaining that reflections have been shown to help students become better writers. Because of the use in the instructions, it might be the case that the ninety-two uses of *help* were encouraged by the prompt.

However, it is more likely that these uses were not influenced by the prompt, seeing as none of the answers reflect the way in which *help* was used in the prompt.

Students saying something was *helpful* for a project, or *beneficial* for a project, was the number one use of those two words (see table 3). Skylar said that "drafting, peer review, and instructor conferencing" benefited their ability to write their Annotated Bibliography. Most of the *help* categories were students saying that they received help from somewhere, such as the instructor, during peer review, the writing center, or in another way, such as the library or a friend. Two students, Skylar and Parker, were outliers in mentioning how they were able to provide help to their fellow students through peer review.

Table 3: How Students Used the Word "Help"

Use of the Word "HELP"	**Times Mentioned**
Beneficial/helpful for a project	27
Help was received from the instructor	21
Help was received from peer review	11
Help was received in some other way	10
Help was received from the Writing Center	3
Providing help to others	3

Monthie argues that some writers who feel defensive when it comes to peer feedback are not necessarily wrong to feel that way (74). However, none of the students in their reflections mention feeling defensive. Skylar admitted in their FR that they "had a bad taste in my mouth about the idea of having to peer review" due to being a new and nontraditional student. Skylar was timid about giving critical feedback but said that they "made progress in being able to communicate effectively and provide others with good, helpful feedback" while acknowledging that there is still work to be done in improving their feedback during peer review. Jesse said that the "peer review session was more helpful than I thought it would be," being of the opinion that their peers were not skilled or knowledgeable enough to give good constructive criticism. Jesse's opinion did not appear to change in their mentions of peer review.

All of the other participants only said positive things about peer review. Perhaps the lack of defensiveness in the participants is due to this being a Composition course, instead of a creative writing course like Monthie explored where the subject matter can be much more personal. It is also possible that the instructor helped to foster a positive peer review environment, teaching students how to participate instead of assuming they already know and are well-versed in the activity.

DIFFICULTY, STRESS, STRUGGLE, & HARDSHIPS

> "I caught up eventually, but it took a lot of mental strength to get myself back on track and focus." – Robin

The RPR instructions specifically state, "What parts of your writing in this research assignment did you *struggle* with? And how will you address these struggles in the future?" In addition to *struggle*, students also used negative emotions words like *stress*, *hard*, and *difficult*.

When students mentioned having difficulty with an assignment, they often talked about how they *struggled*. They also would talk about an assignment being *hard* or *difficult* (see table 4).

Table 4: Negative Emotion Words Used by Students

Negative Emotion Words	Times Mentioned
Difficult	32
Struggle	24
Hard	20
Stress	5

What students found to be most difficult was secondary research, in terms of finding articles, understanding articles, and using them successfully in their papers (see table 5). Choosing their topic, or deciding how to conduct primary research on it, was the second most difficult. What's interesting here is that moving 100 percent online tied for second place on the struggle scale, with these new, second-semester students having never taken an online course before.

The next two most interesting aspects of this table are personal life difficulties and growing from difficulties. Frankie mentioned personal struggles twice. Robin spoke of the personal difficulty of having classes move fully online while they "didn't have a laptop or internet at home either, so it was particularly difficult."

The negative emotions expressed by the students are important because negative emotions negatively affect the likelihood of transfer occurring, whereas positive emotions positively impact transfer (Driscoll & Powell 2). However, the negative traits Driscoll and Powel mention–boredom, hate, fear, frustration, anxiety, and confusion (5)–were not present in the reflections in this study, with the exception of five mentions of confusion. All mentions of *confusion* were students explaining that they had been confused, but that they were able to overcome this. However, Driscoll used interviews with her participants and was able to ask specific questions about participant emotions in a way that reading reflections cannot, especially since the prompt did not ask students to talk about their emotions.

Table 5: Things Students Said They Struggled or Had Difficulty With

Student Struggles/Difficulties	Times Mentioned
Secondary Research	16
Paper Topic	11
Moving 100% Online	11
General/Mechanical Writing	6
Primary Research	5
Other	5
Summary & Analysis	4
Synthesis	4
Personal Life Difficulties	3
Something was not Difficult	3
Annotated Bibliography	2
Research Paper	2
Grew from Difficulties	1
Generic Mention of Difficulty	1
Writing in General	1

Related to emotions is the idea of *resilience*, which Tara Moore and Suzanne Shaffer discuss, finding that resilience in students tends to shrink instead of grow. The fairly frequent use of negative words in the reflections is an indication that the resilience of these students was challenged. All the students ended their reflections on good notes, focusing on the positives over the negatives. However, the

students used negative words more often than positive words. This means that the ability of the participants to transfer what they learned in this course was more negatively than positively affected.

FRANKIE: LANDING ON YOUR FEET

> "This research paper helped me realize that I'm not as bad of a writer as I thought I was and it honestly made me enjoy writing a little more." – Frankie

One of the participants was Frankie, whose journey is of particular interest. During the first few weeks of the course, when students were gathering scholarly sources, Frankie failed to follow the guidelines set forth by the instructor. The students were required to have five scholarly, peer-reviewed articles that were less than ten years old, and they could not all be from the same discipline. Frankie tried to use a dissertation and articles older than ten years.

During the one-on-one instructor conference in week 5, Frankie only brought three articles to the conference with poorly written summaries. I made notations on their summaries while the instructor had an honest talk with them, explaining plainly that they would fail the class if they didn't immediately start taking it seriously and getting to work. The instructor laid out what they needed to do to have the Annotated Bibliography finished, with the due date five days away. Both the instructor and I recommended an appointment at the writing center.

In their Annotated Bibliography reflection, Frankie acknowledged that they came into the instructor conference "short-handed," saying that they knew they "had dug myself in a deep whole [*sic*]," but also adding, "I was ready to take on the challenge." They claimed in their reflection to have worked for hours both at home and in the Oakland University library to fix their bibliography assignment.

What helped Frankie recover was the visit to the writing center, which the instructor and I recommended. They described the brutally honest conference with the instructor as having helped "me grow and learn from my past mistakes and I believe it made me work even harder on this project." Frankie said that the writing center consultants assisted them with their citations, format, summaries, and rhetoric, ending by claiming that "I plan on going there from now on if I have any questions or concerns with my writings." In fact, the phrase *writing center* appears in the 24 reflections exactly seven times. For six of them, it was Frankie writing it.

Frankie is an example of a student whose methods for writing failed them in their class, which in turn forced them to develop new methods to succeed (Yancey et al. 101). And not only did Frankie recover and stick with the course, 74 percent of all the positive emotion words coded were written in Frankie's reflections. Frankie wrote variations of *enjoy* six times, *fun* two times, and *happy* three times (see table 6). Frankie wrote that they *enjoyed* both the Annotated Bibliography process, while describing the Research Paper process as *fun*.

Table 6: Words Used by Frankie

Frankie's Words	Times Mentioned
Help	18
Learn	16
Challenge	6
Enjoy	6
Hard	5
Struggle	4
Happy	3
Stress	3
Fun	2
Weakness	2
Future	1
Difficult	1

Frankie also enjoyed learning some things about themselves, both as a person and as a writer: Frankie said that they learned they were not a bad writer, which helped them enjoy writing. In addition, recovering their stride after the first instructor conference had Frankie write that "one thing I really enjoyed about this process was learning that I can do anything I set my mind to." And despite choosing what the instructor and I thought might not be too viable a topic, Frankie reported that they "learned that writing can be enjoyable if you're passionate about learning more about the subject" and added that the topic made them happy. This information shows things Frankie learned that will likely be transferred: their newfound confidence as a writer, knowing passion helps with writing, and that they can do anything if they set their mind to it.

The final words in Frankie's last reflection speak volumes about what they learned:

> I am very thankful for how understanding professors have been during this time and would like to say thank you to [my Comp II Instructor] specifically for being very active in communication, setting up google meets and responding to emails fast so that I can thrive. If anything, the switch to online helped me realize how much the professors really care about you and your future and that means a lot to me.

Frankie managed to come out of their first five weeks a better, more confident writer who found a special kind of value in the course. Frankie never used the words *value* or *engagement*, but their use of words showing positive emotions appear to indicate value. Frankie wasn't sure if they would be able to do a good job on the research paper, but after putting in all the effort they felt *happy* with their finished product. Students who have positive emotions about writing increase the likelihood of transfer, whereas negative emotions do not (Driscoll & Powell 2). From this perspective, Frankie was the student most likely to transfer what was taught in that Composition II course.

MAJOR FINDING #2: STUDENT REFLECTIONS AS INDICATION FOR TRANSFER

METACOGNITION

> "In class, I don't really think that we spent a great deal of time actually learning concepts. Instead, I think that we did a lot of writing and peer work in class." – Jesse

Something that bears mentioning alongside *engagement* and *value*, as discussed earlier in this paper, is the concept of metacognition and its role in the transfer of learning. The

issue isn't that students are simply unable to make connections between what they learn in their FYW courses and how that knowledge can be of use elsewhere, Driscoll says, but they fail to *consciously look for* these situations (3).

What can help us figure out how or even whether students are making these connections is their use of the word *learn* in their reflections. The word *learn* was found to occur in two ways: first, students would say they learned something and then accompany that with examples, descriptions, or definitions as evidence that learning took place. Providing examples to show learning was an instruction mentioned in all prompts. Second, students would say they learned something while providing no evidence to show that the concept was learned.

Table 7: Specific or Generic uses of "learn" by student

Category	Specific	Generic
Secondary Research	12	20
Primary Resaerch - HOW	6	2
Primary Research – DATA	0	6
Writing	9	24
Rhetoric	2	10
Peer Review	2	2
Communication	2	1
Motivation/Passion	2	0
Communities	2	4
Critical Thinking	1	2
Multimodality	2	5
Moving Online	2	5

The number of generic mentions of learning dwarf the specific examples of learning (see table 7), with forty-one uses of the word *learn* being accompanied by specific examples and eighty-four generic mentions of the word *learn* that are not accompanied by examples. This could partly be due to students struggling with how to show evidence that they learned something. If students struggled to show they learned something in their reflections, where the primary purpose of the assignment is to show what they learned and provide some evidence showing that they did indeed learn it, does that mean students did not learn those concepts? Perhaps, as Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak mention, the problem is that students lack the vocabulary to express what they have learned and to internalize it (101). This lack of vocabulary could explain why many of the words students used seem to be mostly, if not entirely, a reflection on the instructions more than what was actually learned.

Many students mentioned how they learned about the technical parts of writing papers, such as APA citations, reading APA papers, writing up an annotated bibliography, and IMRAD structure, which is a commonly used method of structuring research—Introduction Methods, Research, and then Analysis and Discussion. According to Wardle, one of the issues with transfer is the idea between the general or "mechanical" skills (766), what Locklear calls the "skills-practice-product approach" (65), and rhetorical writing knowledge; the former is easier to teach but its transferability is often low because it's domain-specific. A counterpoint to this is that APA is a style of academic writing; while they aren't really transferring *writing skills,* they are transferring style knowledge.

FORWARD-REACHING KNOWLEDGE OF FUTURE WRITING CONTEXTS

> "In the future, I will be able to get better at connecting sources through hard work and help from those around me." —Robin

Students used the word *future* a total of thirty-one times (see table 8). Students used it in the context of what they thought would be useful to them in the future—essentially, this is the most important category when talking about transfer. Here, students are showing what they believe they can use elsewhere. The number one thing the participants believed was transferrable is technical writing, or what Wardle calls general or "mechanical skills" (766). This means that students understand the importance of academic genres and that they will be asked to read and write papers that are in APA style and sometimes use the IMRAD structure. The fact that mechanical skills were mentioned the most as being useful for future contexts reveals what these students thought was important about the class. Could this be the result of their own internalized beliefs, or did the class structure contribute to it? Plenty of in-class time was spent learning how APA worked and helping students cite their sources in APA correctly, to the point where missing or mixed up volume and issue numbers were marked on their Annotated Bibliography drafts. While the focus of the conferences for both major assignments was content, plenty of emphasis was also placed on formatting correctness.

Table 8: How Students Used the Word "Future"

Categories of Future Use	**Times Mentioned**
Writing – Technical/Mechanical	9
Secondary Research	4
Moving 100% Online	4
Primary Research	3
"Future Research Suggestions"	2
Writing – Synthesis	2
Writing – Peer Review	2
Multimodality	1
Career Usefulness	1

Four students readily acknowledged the importance they placed on correctness in their reflections, with Parker writing that "I'm sure this will be crucial to my future writing because APA is the more commonly used formatting in college and at Oakland University." Alex anticipated it would be useful in their psychology courses, and Billie acknowledged that APA is the style of the social sciences and will come up often while attending college. Jesse wrote that APA will be useful in other classes and potentially "even a career."

Driscoll argues that in order to facilitate transfer, students must be able to "recognize situations where previous knowledge can be useful in order to successfully transfer knowledge" (4). If students cannot think about what kind of future writing contexts await them, they will not be able to sort through the instruction they receive and know what they will need to transfer to be successful in school and their careers. The fact that these eight participants all used the word *future* indicates that they are all, to a degree, aware that the

purpose of the course is to give them knowledge they will need to use in later situations.

One student, Jesse, claimed that what they learned in this course in regard to primary research, specifically conducting interviews, would be helpful in their future career in business, a specific future-reaching comment. This kind of thinking is important for transfer, since how to do primary research is not a mere mechanical skill. What would make this better for transfer is if Jesse could imagine where else at university this interviewing experience would be useful.

THE INFLUENCE OF INSTRUCTIONS ON STUDENT REFLECTIONS

> "With the pecha kucha [sic] we learned that just putting words on a slide doesn't engage the viewers, and a lot of the time they don't catch the big picture." – Billie

Of the seventeen coded words, six were mentioned in the instructions (see table 9). What was written in the instructions had a clear influence on the words students chose to use in their reflections (see table 10). A good example would be that, in the generic mentions of *learn*, students said six times that they learned about "writing, rhetoric, and research" with no evidence provided. That particular phrase is mentioned exactly like that in both the ABR and FR instructions, and Parker, Robin, and Frankie each used the phrase written in exactly that way. In another reflection, Denver, Alex, and Robin used the same words but sometimes mixed them up, avoiding the copy/pasted feeling from the former three participants. This could indicate that these three students were conscious of the fact that they were merely repeating exactly what the instructions said and were working to make it slightly less obvious that their response was copy-pasted.

Table 9: Words Present in the Reflection Instructions

Words in the Instructions	**ABR**	**RPR**	**FR**
Learn	1	1	9
Strength	1	1	1
Weakness	1	0	1
Future	0	1	2
Help	0	1	0
Struggle	0	2	0

Table 10: Words in the Instructions that Students Used

Words Used by Students	**ABR**	**RPR**	**FR**
Learn	41	30	79
Strength	8	10	14
Weakness	10	7	14
Future	3	8	20
Help	27	28	37
Struggle	6	14	4

The fact that some of the coded words were mentioned in the instructions means that some words have more weight than others. Some of the coded words never appeared in the prompt (see table 11). The RPR instructions asked students to reflect on what they struggled with, but the students went the extra mile and talked about stress, challenges, difficulties, and what they found to be hard.

Table 11:Words Students Used that Were Not in the Instructions

Words not in the Instructions	Times Mentioned
Difficult	32
Benefit	27
Challenge	25
Hard	20
Engage	13
Value	12
Expect	8
Enjoy	4
Happy	5
Stress	5
Fun	3

CONCLUSION

> "All in all, the structure and demands of this class taught me writing skills that I hope to bring to and build on in future courses." – Parker

This study found rich, detailed information on what students think, believe, and feel about the Composition II course and the value they find in the knowledge taught there. The students learned many things that they will, as Driscoll and Daewoo Jin say, put in a box under the bed and forget about (1). However, each student appeared to learn some lessons that affected them deeply, which they will carry into their future. All of the students learned many things and pointed out some specific things they believe will be useful to them in future contexts.

What's most difficult about transfer is that all students are unique individuals, with different learning styles, methods, values, beliefs, and life directions. This study had two major findings: first, fostering student engagement is of the utmost importance, and having students select communities they are a part of helps give them a *reason* to find writing valuable and engaging. Second, studying student reflections is an often-used method for judging student learning and transfer, but reflections may not be doing what research is thinking that they do.

The purpose of reflections is that they engage students in metacognition, which helps students understand what they've learned, which leads to transfer. However, students in this study were reflecting on the instructions, not their learning process. They do not value reflections in the ways that instructors are trying to encourage them to. People learn *selectively*; for example, in this Composition II course, the instructor spent a lot of in-class time at the beginning of the semester emphasizing the importance of gap statements in research papers, but three students never mentioned it in their reflections as part of their process or as something they learned.

These reflection instructions were not created by this instructor from scratch. They are part of a general template that most, if not all, instructors are using for their reflections at Oakland University. If these reflections are not doing what we think they are doing, then what are our papers on student metacognition and learning really about? What is the research based on student reflections really telling us? Perhaps more students are in class for a passing grade than we think, and reflections are simply the ultimate only-for-a-grade assignments.

It's time to start re-thinking how to teach students to reflect on what they've learned and why that's important—because putting that information in the instructions for the reflections isn't working either. While instructors

and colleges can do more to help students be aware of what they are learning so the possibility of transfer increases, a lot of this weight falls on the shoulders of these students, and they do not know it. As the old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." But that doesn't mean that has to be the way it ends – we can always work on ways to encourage students to understand the importance of reflecting on their work.

A presentation on what learning is, how it happens, how students can reflect on their learning processes, and the benefit of this could be helpful in assisting students to see the importance of their reflection assignments. Future research could look specifically at reflections, utilizing surveys or interviews to find what students think reflection assignments are for and why they are required to do them.

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APPENDIX A

Oakland University
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Writing and Rhetoric WRT 1060
Composition II (4 credits)

COURSE (CATALOG) DESCRIPTION

Methods of research and writing including the use of rhetorical strategies and synthesis of scholarly sources to create academic arguments. Emphasizes processes of writing and revision with a focus on information literacy, critical thinking, and effective communication in diverse rhetorical contexts.

GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES

- The writing knowledge foundation area prepares students to demonstrate:
- knowledge of the elements, writing processes and organizing strategies for creating analytical and expository prose
- effective rhetorical strategies appropriate to the topic, audience, context and purpose

UNIVERSITY LEARNING OUTCOMES (ULOS)

- effective communication
- critical thinking
- information literacy

SPECIFIC COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

The student will:

- make connections with the broader community through activities related to civic and community engagement on and/or off campus
- demonstrate familiarity with basic rhetorical, ethical, and methodological conventions of academic disciplines (such as humanities, sciences, social sciences) to prepare them for further study in their chosen discipline
- demonstrate the ability to locate and analyze scholarly sources critically and synthesize them to produce various academic genres which include print, visual, digital, or oral elements

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In addition to reinforcing the outcomes from WRT 1050, WRT 1060 will instill in students a basic understanding of:

- primary research methods (quantitative and qualitative) appropriate for academic scholarship
- secondary research strategies for locating and evaluating sources both through library databases and through external online databases appropriate for academic scholarship
- ethical considerations in academic scholarship, including responsibility to human subjects, non-biased use of language, fair and accurate use of sources, appropriate documentation, and larger rhetorical purposes of civic engagement
- stylistic conventions for integrating secondary and primary research to arrive at new knowledge in academic disciplines, including familiarity with APA format