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While the transfer of knowledge across contexts and disciplines is a perennial concern in composition studies—sometimes due to its widespread service discipline frame—and compositionists have been using methodologies like longitudinal studies to understand how transfer operates, Rebecca S. Nowacek aims to introduce a closer examination to supplement existing disciplinary analyses. Her synchronous approach, a close reading of data gathered from an interdisciplinary humanities sequence, provides a stimulating inquiry into the ways that genre plays a role in the transfer of knowledge for both teachers and students. Nowacek argues that “transfer is best understood as an act of recontextualization,” a premise from which she builds her framework to develop the “concept of agents of integration—a concept that foregrounds the rhetorical dimensions of transfer” (8, emphasis in the original). Writing program administrators, interdisciplinary practitioners, and even experienced first-year writing instructors will find this book stimulating as it explains what she calls an interdisciplinary learning community (LC) model that replaces the traditional first-year writing course in favor of a paradigm where writing instruction resides “within a learning community taught by non-FYC instructors” (129).

The benefit—and challenge—of her study, however, is that it operates outside the first-year writing paradigm, and she admits, “this classroom is not typical of most undergraduate classrooms” (6). Observing a team-taught multidisciplinary arrangement titled Interdisciplinary Humanities Seminar offered to first-year honors students, Nowacek collected data from eighteen students enrolled in the second of the three-semester sequence. Interdisc II—comprised of literature, history, and religious studies courses—was team taught by professors Olivia, Roger, and Thomas, respectively, who participated in interviews and a focus group and attended each others’ classes regularly. In addition, Nowacek attended, audiotaped, and transcribed every class session, used surveys to collect demographic information, collected student papers, and interviewed ten students at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. In such an intimate research setting with the students and their work, this study is a needed complement to longitudinal studies that sacrifice proximity for longevity, for it allowed Nowacek to provide insight to the ways in which students used transfer of knowledge among courses. The challenge to this methodology, as valuable as it is, is that it will not be easily replicated at other sites because of institutional constraints.

The theoretical framework and its implications are developed in the first three chapters of the book, in which she unpacks the notion of agents
of integration and extensively reviews her findings. Nowacek grounds her work in the discipline by arguing that composition is void of transfer theory that describes how connections are made rhetorically between comparable contexts. More specifically, she argues that metacognitive awareness of writing and rhetorical strategies “may assist in the process of transfer but is not necessary for transfer” (17, emphasis in the original). From there she suggests that research on genre can be combined with research on transfer to explain how the identification of similarities and conventions can be used to facilitate the recontextualization of knowledge, relying on the warrant that genres frame rhetorical situations and thus sites of overlap among differing discursive spaces. Nowacek gracefully pursues the similarities between theories of transfer and theories of genre to synthesize her notion of recontextualization, though she is careful to articulate a distinction between the two. Consequently, theories of genre, “which assume that individuals find themselves in fundamentally similar situations and draw on socially constructed and constitutive genres in order to minimize the sense of difference in these different situations,” is a particularly potent mode of understanding transfer, “commonly understood as the negotiation of very different social and intellectual contexts” (20). For Nowacek, genre is a pedagogical foundation from which to build a generative sense of agency (agents of integration, not nodes of integration) and not just a simple closed system of rearticulating knowledge through generic conventions. Thus, she is able to argue successfully that transfer framed as recontextualization is a two-pronged concept; is not just an act of mere application but also an act of reconstruction—a highly rhetorical act.

Nowacek is careful not to valorize genre to the extent of dogma to oversimplify her findings. She challenges compositionists, and even instructors in other disciplines, to recognize their role in the process of transfer, as instructors possess the responsibility to decide whether or not to recognize acts of transfer. Instructors must foster a reflexive awareness of genre to reveal to students that they aren’t static conventions, lest students experience negative transfer, or, an incorrect application of prior learning. By downshifting the idea of agents of integration into a detailed and complicated discussion of genre, she makes an important finding that careful qualitative researchers won’t immediately cast off—the need to develop a framework of transfer that will recognize transfer in all students and not simply its representations in the most invested or the most talented students. In the case of Kelly, a student who was admittedly an honors student only at the request of her family and less worried about her academic work than her social interests, her static understanding of genre prevented her from reframing it to fit the objective of the instructor and the assignment. Kelly was prompted to write a medieval diary for a history course, and the assignment asked her to

“assume a specific medieval identity in terms of gender, age, social position, and occupation and write a diary entry for a single day.” The entry
“should focus on material details like what you do and where you do it, including physical surroundings, tools, who else is present, etc.” Roger, the history professor, explained that this assignment was meant to focus students’ attention on the lived, material reality that undergirded the “big ideas” students were studying in their religious studies classes. (47)

Instead, inspired by a character from *The Canterbury Tales*, Kelly developed a psychological, personal portrait of a nun instead of focusing on describing material details. This one example illustrates Nowacek’s caution of limited understandings of genre and the way they may influence students’ success in transferring knowledge. Readers will likely find the case studies most useful for developing prompts that challenge students to rethink genre and its rhetorical potential for aiding in the transfer of knowledge. As a doctoral student teaching at a large state university and learning to make my own connections among disparate bodies of knowledge, I appreciated the challenge to think of genre not just as the exigence of transfer, but also as a means of shaking loose assumptions students may possess by stressing the importance of selling transfer as a rhetorical act. In this way I feel I have another weapon in my teaching arsenal for articulating the need for writing instruction to students as well as colleagues in other disciplines.

Building conclusions from student interviews, Nowacek’s results sustain her call for “helping students see the rhetorical domain of disciplines” by instructing students to recontextualize genre knowledge and “sell” their writing to new audiences (128). The series of case studies in her project develop the *agents of integration* metaphor and argue against the perception that students are unable to make transfer without a highly structured curriculum, which also serves to demonstrate that institutional setting has major effect on perceptions of transfer in both students and instructors. Regardless of Nowacek’s idealist setting, which is likely impossible for the majority of readers to emulate, the fourth and fifth chapters provide ideas for revising FYC courses to reduce the obstacles of integration. I especially appreciate her frame of recognizing the rhetorical domains of disciplines, which she argues pose a roadblock to integration. Also helpful for instructors and writing program administrators, the investigation offers lines of argument and support for the benefits of genre theory both as a tool in first-year writing courses and as a mode of research in assessment. The framework of students as agents appears to be the most directly applicable concept to traditional composition courses.

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