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# Inviting Students to Determine for Themselves What It Means to Write Across the Disciplines

BRIAN HENDRICKSON AND GENEVIEVE GARCIA DE MUELLER

## Introduction

Situated in the literature on threshold concepts and transfer of prior knowledge in WAC/WID and composition studies, with particular emphasis on the scholarship of writing across difference, our article explores the possibility of re-envisioning the role of the composition classroom within the broader literacy ecology of colleges and universities largely comprised of students from socioeconomically and ethnolinguistically underrepresented communities. We recount the pilot of a composition course prompting students to examine their own prior and other literacy values and practices, then transfer that growing meta-awareness to the critical acquisition of academic discourse. Our analysis of students' self-assessment memos reveals that students apply certain threshold concepts to acquire critical agency as academic writers, and in a manner consistent with Guerra's concept of transcultural repositioning. We further consider the role collective rubric development plays as a critical incident facilitating transcultural repositioning.

## Course Rationale

Although it could be said that composition courses are designed to prepare students "to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines"—the description for our writing program's second-year, intermediate composition course—scholars in composition studies, and writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines (WAC/WID) more particularly, have questioned the capacity of composition courses to do just that.<sup>1</sup> Whereas J. Paul Johnson and Ethan Kruse find that the first-year composition (FYC) classroom can help students transfer general argumentative skills to upper-division writing tasks, Natasha Artemeva and David R. Russell separately argue that the traditional FYC classroom cannot adequately simulate writing and learning contexts within particular academic disciplines. To better prepare students, scholars such as Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick, Amy Devitt, and Elizabeth Wardle ("Understanding") recommend a shift in composition pedagogy from teaching generalizable skill sets or particular genre conventions to sets of metacognitive strategies.

How specific those strategies are to particular disciplinary contexts is a matter of debate. Anne Beaufort argues that students develop general types of writing knowledge, but only over time and in particular disciplinary contexts. Likewise, Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki suggest that students develop as writers in accordance with the idiosyncrasies of particular disciplines, but in generalizable developmental phases leading to metadisciplinary awareness. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle also contend that learning to write involves the acquisition and application of a cross-disciplinary set of threshold concepts, and Kathleen Blake Yancey, Lianne Robertson, and Kara Taczak observe that FYC courses foregrounding reflection and explicit instruction in threshold concepts from composition studies support students' transfer of writing knowledge and practices more effectively than those grounded in expressivism or cultural studies. Although they don't set out to study the role prior knowledge plays in transfer, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak find that the role it does play is equally if not more important, as Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi have previously demonstrated.

This recognition of the value of students' prior literacies aligns well with scholarship in WAC/WID that Juan C. Guerra refers to as "writing across difference," or work that urges WAC/WID scholars and practitioners to "acknowledge the value inherent in the full repertoire of linguistic, cultural, and semiotic resources students use in all their communities of belonging"; "encourage them to call on these as they best see fit"; and institute campus-wide initiatives like the "Writing Across Communities initiative that attempts to integrate the individual college classroom, the campus and our students' other communities of belonging" (x-xii). "Writing Across Communities" is the term Michelle Hall Kells coined for her grassroots approach to creating a WAC/WID initiative that operates as "a mechanism for transdisciplinary dialogue to demystify the ways we make and use knowledge across communities of practice" (94). Kells elaborates, "It is a process that must directly involve students themselves. Moreover, it is a process that should include consideration of the range of rhetorical resources influencing students' lives in and beyond the academy" (90).

*Writing across difference* seemed to us a particularly relevant and necessary concept for re-envisioning the function of our writing program's second-year, intermediate composition course within the larger literacy ecology of our flagship, land-grant, Hispanic-serving institution. We were concerned that our writing program had not adequately addressed how this course would help our particular student population, largely comprised of students from socioeconomically and ethnolinguistically underrepresented communities, "improve their writing skills to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines." The lack of any explicit attention in the course description to where our students were coming from, where they were going, and what literacies they were bringing with them, raised concerns for us similar to

those expressed in Donna LeCourt's critique that WAC/WID has "forgotten the concern for alternative literacies and voices Other to the academy" (390). Drawing upon LeCourt's vision for a critical "third stage" in WAC/WID, Victor Villanueva suggests addressing the field's assimilationist tendencies through an antiracist critical pedagogy developed in partnership with scholars in other disciplines.

Twelve years after Villanueva, and seventeen after LeCourt, Mya Poe continues to call attention to "WAC's limited engagement with race," which Chris M. Anson contends is partly due to its focus on faculty development, and partly to a habit in composition studies writ large of treating "students as a generalized construct, not as individuals who bring specific histories, experiences, and 'vernacular literacies' to their learning" (23). For these reasons, and out of recognition of the local demographic context of our institution, we wanted our own course pilot to be more responsive to individual students' racial and linguistic identities. Our state consistently ranks at or near bottom in terms of overall youth well-being and chances at success (*2014 Kids Count* 21; "State Report Cards"). According to the US Census Bureau, 19.5% of the state's population lives below the poverty level. A minority-majority state, 47.3% of the population are Hispanic or Latino, 10.4% are American Indian or Alaska Native (39.4% are white alone), and 36% speak a language other than English at home. During the semester in which we piloted our course, our university's official enrollment report stated that 84% of the student body claimed original residence in state, so it is no surprise that the demographics of the undergraduate student body of 21,008 closely reflected those of the state as a whole: 43% Hispanic and 6.4% American Indian (38.3% white).<sup>2</sup> That the average undergraduate student age was 23.7 years old further suggests a large nontraditional undergraduate student population.

If one reason for designing our course pilot was to better attend to where our students came from and what they brought with them, the other was to better attend to where they were going. It's difficult, though, to define what it means "to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines" without the assistance of a WAC/WID program capable of more systematically documenting the ways that faculty assign writing across the disciplines. At the time of our study, the university benefited from a strong grassroots network of students, faculty, and administrators advocating for a WAC/WID program with an emphasis on writing across difference, but it operated largely outside official channels, including reporting lines and budgets. The university's college for undergraduate student success did partner with the English department's core writing program to offer linked courses, or learning communities (see Nowaceck; Wardle, "Can"; Zawacki and Williams), but those offerings didn't extend beyond the first year. And though several academic units required writing-intensive courses in their majors in response to the requirements of their own disciplinary accrediting bodies, the university offered no formal oversight or support in

the form of a mandate for writing-intensive upper-division courses (see Townsend). The writing program therefore offered no upper-division courses in writing in the disciplines beyond those particular to its professional writing degree concentration.

It did, however, offer two second-year writing courses as part of the university's core curriculum. Our course pilot took place in a section of one of them, English 202: Expository Writing, with the following full description: "an intermediate writing course designed for students who have passed 101 and 102, and who wish to improve their writing skills to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines." 202 was one of four options students could choose from to fulfill the second-year, university-wide core writing and speaking requirement, the others being professional and technical writing (201), public speaking, and reasoning and critical thinking. Though several colleges within the university, including business and engineering, required 201, only the college of fine arts required 202.

202 was billed to prospective instructors, mostly graduate students in the English department, as focusing "on one content subject, selected by the instructor, for the length of the semester." Despite the breadth of possible themes implied here, the course titles rarely reflected disciplinary interests beyond literary or cultural studies, even though at the time of our study, more than two-thirds of our university's undergraduate students had declared majors outside the college of arts and sciences, in which humanities-related disciplines were housed. As Carol Severino and Mary Trachel point out, generalist versus discipline-specific notions of academic writing are often shaped by the disciplinary or institutional context in which a course or initiative takes shape, and within the context of our English department, 202 seemed to operate under the assumption that humanities-related notions of academic writing were generalizable across the disciplines. What's more, a student planning to pursue a major complementary to the focus of a particular section would not likely know to look for the section-specific description on the writing program's website; only the general course description was included on the registration site, further suggesting that the course should be beneficial to the student regardless of its focus or their choice of major.

But was that what we were saying, and if so, were we really offering a course that could fulfill that promise? Beneath the surface of this question were other questions central to WAC/WID: "What does it mean to learn to write and teach writing within and across particular disciplines?"; "What role should core writing courses play in preparing students for the writing challenges they will face in their upper-division coursework?"; and "How can writing programs and WAC/WID initiatives best account for a particular student body's learning goals and learning incomes?"

## Course Design

Our pilot course section, “Reading and Writing Our Communities,” sought to productively engage with questions of disciplinarity, transfer, and identity—and in ways that honored the WAC/WID language in the course description—by prompting students to examine how their own prior and other literacy values and practices shape and are shaped by the communities to which they already belonged, then encouraging them to transfer their growing meta-awareness of that dynamic to the critical acquisition of academic discourse, i.e., the task of answering for themselves what it means “to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines.”

In distinguishing between the kinds of literacy outcomes programs/courses privilege, Thomas Deans identifies “writing about the community” courses as emphasizing “personal reflection, social analysis, and/or cultural critique . . . [and] tend[ing] to advance academic and critical literacy goals” (18). With a writing-about-the-community pedagogy in mind, our course description read as follows: “In this course, students will develop their own academic writing identities by considering how language, power, and identity influence how we read (are shaped by) and write (shape) our communities.” Similarly, our outcomes emphasize academic and critical literacy goals met through personal reflection and cultural critique:

By actively, collaboratively, and critically engaging with course readings, community-based research, and the writing process itself, students in this course will:

- Gain a greater understanding of the complexity of issues related to language, power, and identity within their own communities;
- Explore the strategies of community writing centers and other community literacy initiatives for acting as responsible agents of change;
- Reflect on their own academic literacy practices by:
  - Analyzing and evaluating the moves made by academic writers in relevant selected readings and further scholarly research;
  - Collectively developing assessment criteria derived from that analysis and evaluation;
  - Applying criteria in peer and self assessment and in composing drafts of major writing assignments;
  - Assembling a portfolio including revised drafts of major writing assignments and an outcomes-based self-assessment memo.

Our sequence of assignments moved from a focus on the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, professional, religious, and/or other communities to which students already belonged to the academic community to which they wished to gain entry. In each assignment,

we asked students to analyze how various aspects of literacy shape and are shaped by specific communities, then apply that same analytical framework to consider how they were working in the course to acquire academic literacies. For each assignment prompt, we provided students with a rhetorical situation. Their audience was always their peers, and their context an undergraduate academic journal; as an example, we provided our own institution's publication featuring the best essays written by students in courses across the curriculum.

For the first assignment, students were asked to choose as their subject "an artifact—textual, audio, image-based, or a combination thereof—that exemplifies a particular valuable, idiosyncratic, or even undesirable literacy practice in [their] own community." In this assignment, as with the latter two, students were required to collect analyzable data from the community in question in the form of field notes, interviews, recorded images, and other texts. The purpose of the first assignment was "to demonstrate that [the] artifact is an interestingly representative example of a particular literacy practice in [their] own community." This assignment aimed to give students the opportunity to develop an understanding of literacy as shaping and shaped by a community's attempts at self-representation and to prepare students for the next two assignments, which asked them to analyze "a literacy education practice in [their] own community" and the "values and beliefs about what 'good' academic writing is (and isn't)," respectively.

Our assignment prompts allowed students a wide berth to explore what literacy means to them and their own communities. Whereas for the first assignment some students looked at textual and digital literacy practices, such as Facebook and Twitter usage among their friends, others described local street art and billboard advertisements as literacy practices reflecting the values, discursive conventions, and power dynamics within the local community. One student even analyzed how her brother's Grateful Dead shirt functioned as a literacy practice signaling his status within the touring community.

Whereas the first assignment emphasized text collection as the primary research method, the second assignment asked students to conduct actual observations and interviews. We and our students were surprised to discover that most of them were often already involved in some kind of literacy education practice beyond the university, prompting assignments about crisis center training, online home brewing forums, tour guide services, youth ministries, and even rugby practice, where a student analyzed how the rules of the game shaped how he coached and the values players were expected to learn.

If the first two assignments were intended to be more analytical than critical, the third assignment invited students to apply what they had learned throughout the semester in a more evaluative fashion. One student made an argument for greater

awareness of the instructional needs of second-language writers, and another for those of students with disabilities, with a special focus on mental illness. Yet another evaluated digital literacy practices like Twitter as tools for teaching and learning that challenge traditional notions of “good” academic writing.

For each assignment, students relied on readings in composition studies and related disciplines to formulate research questions and protocols that analyzed how language and literacy practices determined membership in particular communities and how community members determined their language and literacy practices. Keeping in mind the work of Thaiss and Zawacki on differences and overlaps between academic and alternative discourses, we chose readings that modeled a range of moves that academic and nonacademic writers make, including breaks with writing conventions, whereas readings often interrogated the relationship between language, power, identity, and status in a particular community. In that respect, our course design borrowed from Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s “Writing about Writing” (WAW) pedagogy, which urges compositionists to act “as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced, thereby changing their understandings about writing and thus changing the ways they write” (553). As Nancy Benson et al. note regarding their WAC/WID-influenced “Guide to Writing in the Majors” course revision, WAW doesn’t just teach students to write like writing studies majors; it provides them with tools for learning about writing in other disciplines. In our own course pilot, WAW also provided tools for students to study nonacademic literacies, comparing them with the conventions found in course readings, and with the writing they were doing in their other coursework. In many respects, we used WAW in the same way that Joanna Wolfe, Barrie Olson, and Laura Wilder use what they term “Comparative Genre Analysis”: with the hope that what transfers is not so much proficiency in conforming to particular writing conventions but awareness of how those conventions shape communities, and vice versa (45).

To encourage students to exercise agency in the acquisition of academic discourse, we integrated collective rubric development into our pilot course via Asao B. Inoue’s community-based assessment pedagogy. Inoue provides a systematic account of collective rubric development as shifting the culminating emphasis from instructor evaluation to peer and self-assessment. The basic concept behind community-based assessment pedagogy is that students collectively develop rubrics that describe holistically what a proficient/adequate (not excellent) paragraph—and eventually position paper—should look like. The rubric evolves over time from a list of traits to categories of traits, and the language of the rubric evolves in complexity and explicitness as students apply it in peer assessment and collectively revise it during class discussion. Inoue stresses the difference between critique and assessment, coaching students to focus on potential, and focusing class time on discussing strategies for assessing peers



and interpreting peer assessment, and he makes reflection on assessment an integral component of the process as well. To maintain the emphasis on peer assessment and not instructor evaluation, Inoue does not grade students on their assignments. Instead, he negotiates their grades with them during one-on-one end-of-semester portfolio conferences.

In our application of community-based assessment pedagogy, we asked students to summarize and reflect on course readings in which the authors examine literacy artifacts, then draw inferences regarding how the community “reads” and “writes” the artifact, i.e., shapes and is shaped by the literacy practices associated with the artifact, and class discussion consisted of comparing and contrasting a range of popular and academic readings and analyzing how and why different readings with similar purposes were written in different ways for different audiences. These exercises paved the way for students to work in teams on what Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson call primary trait analysis, in which lists of traits evolve into categories of traits that eventually form the dimensions of a rubric (67). In our version of primary trait analysis, students identified key traits from the readings that they considered relevant to the assignment’s genre and rhetorical situation, then grouped those traits into rubric categories. In performing this exercise, students were instructed not to employ superlatives but to use qualitative language to describe traits that perform the function expected of a document given its genre and rhetorical situation. Each team then posted their rubric drafts to a discussion forum on our online course site, then assessed other teams’ rubrics, noting what traits and categories they would like to see included in the final rubric to be used collectively by the class. Based on commonalities across rubrics as well as students’ assessment of rubrics, the teams’ rubric drafts were compiled into a single course rubric to be refined during class discussion before and after the peer assessment process, in which students used the rubric to describe in memo format what they saw in at least two of their peers’ first drafts. We then evaluated as a class the effectiveness of the rubric as a resource and guide for peer assessment, and we revised it accordingly before students used it again to write self-assessment memos addressed to the instructor as accompaniments to their revised second drafts. We repeated this process through the following two sequences, during which we adapted the previous rubric based on new and increasingly longer and more complex readings and writing assignments.

Some of the benefits of giving students greater agency over rubric creation and revision are apparent in the evolution of the rubric itself. The first combined rubric draft evidenced the complicated nature of accounting for seven different teams’ interpretations of the genre and rhetorical situation, and the students objected to it as too wordy, impersonal, abstract, and stuffy. Take for example this trait from the rubric’s “Introduction” section: “Establishes the document’s rhetorical situation as described

in the assignment guidelines, introducing the document's topic and purpose and the relevance between them and the document's audience." After being led through a class activity in which teams revised the rubric, then advocated for their revisions to the rest of the class, students decided on the following language: "Introduces your paper's subject, a literacy artifact, as well as your paper's purpose, and the relevance between your paper's literacy artifact, purpose, and audience."

Although the style in which the rubric was written grew simpler over time, its descriptions of genre conventions and the requisite rhetorical awareness grew in complexity. The first assignment's rubric ended up with four categories of traits: introduction, body, conclusion, and style. In the final version of its "Introduction" section, another trait read: "Explains terms and methods of analysis by referring to sources so that a general audience of your academic peers could understand." By the final draft of the third assignment's rubric, the students had decided to give that trait its own category labeled "Terms, Methods, and Literature Review" and revised it as follows: "Explains terms, methods, and scholarly context of research by referring to sources so that a general audience of your academic peers can identify what/whose conversation you're entering and what you plan to contribute to it." The changes in the second example evidence students' growing awareness of the rhetorically situated purpose of genre conventions specific to academic writing. By negotiating the terms of the rubrics that served to concretize these conventions, students gain a sense of academic discourse as evolving, malleable, and questionable.

This approach aligns with one of our underlying assumptions in designing "Reading and Writing Our Communities": that instructors cannot coach students in the critical acquisition of academic discourse while presenting them with unquestionable guidelines and rubrics, then grading them on how well or poorly their writing conforms. Our students did not therefore receive evaluations of their writing. Borrowing one of Kathleen Blake Yancey's reflective writing practices, instructor feedback took the form of a response memo that reinforced students' insights in their self-assessment memos and directed their attention to other aspects of their writing that they might not have considered in their self-assessments. Though students did receive occasional prescriptive feedback when struggling with more foundational problems, most feedback took the form of a request that the student explore in her next memo how she was attending to a particular problem. Often that request was more prescriptive of the memo itself than of the assignment to which it referred, pressing students to further develop their reflections, explaining in greater detail how and why they made particular choices. So although students did not receive evaluations of their writing, they did receive feedback that directed them in revising their drafts for inclusion in their final portfolios. The goal in withholding evaluation and directing prescriptive feedback only at the students' self-assessments and not at the

primary writing assignments was to highlight the course's emphasis on developing students' awareness of how they made their choices and not necessarily the choices themselves, thereby carving out a space for students to critically reflect on their acquisition of academic discourse. This emphasis on assessing students' reflective writing also aligns with the first of what Susan H. McLeod and Eric Miraglia identify as WAC/WID's "two different but complementary pedagogical approaches . . . 'writing to learn' and 'writing to communicate,'" which they claim is a key feature of WAC/WID's success as a pedagogical change agent (5).

Because our writing program required a more thorough record than afforded by Inoue's approach to deferring grades until the end of the semester, we adapted Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's contract model to fit programmatic constraints. We assigned full credit for all assignments submitted on time and meeting minimum requirements. If students met these two conditions on all assignments leading up to the final portfolio, they earned an 85% in the course, or a solid B. The remaining 15% was determined by the extent to which students demonstrated in their portfolio self-assessment memos critical engagement with their own writing in terms of the course outcomes, and we collectively developed as a class the final portfolio rubric that distinguished qualitatively between an excellent (15%), proficient (10%), sufficient (5%), and unacceptable (0%) portfolio memo.

### **Coding Portfolio Self-Assessment Memos**

In coding students' portfolio self-assessment memos, we hoped to identify if, when, and how students articulated any threshold concepts that may have aided them in their learning. In their portfolio self-assessment memos, students were asked to first provide a brief, general assessment of their experience in the course, explaining how if at all the course influenced their own writing; their understanding of writing and/or literacy in general; and their understanding of academic writing and/or literacy in particular. For the remaining majority of each memo, students were asked to describe decisions they made while writing and/or revising each assignment, citing as evidence specific pages in drafts whenever possible, and explaining how and why they made those decisions in terms of whatever aspects of the course they deemed relevant.

Data analysis took place over eighteen hours and ten meetings, during which the two of us coded fourteen students' end-of-semester self-assessment memos. We approached our data analysis inductively, a process described by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman as one in which the researcher "identifies the salient, grounded categories of meaning" that "then become buckets or baskets into which segments of text are placed" (159). Throughout the process, we refined all categories and subcategories with an eye for internal convergence and external divergence,

ensuring that in adding, revising, and dividing categories all remained “internally consistent but distinct from one another” (Marshall and Rossman 159).

At the first level of coding, we identified any passages in students’ self-assessment memos where they explicitly discussed any element of the course that played a role in their learning. At the second level, we placed those passages into three major categories that emerged during rereading. The first major category was comprised of potential threshold concepts. Then we had to create a second major category just for references to rubrics, and a third for references to both concepts and rubrics. Although we were initially looking only for threshold concepts, the prevalence of rubric references led us to also pay attention in our analysis to the role that rubrics played in student learning.

At the third level of coding, we further divided the major categories, creating five concepts categories of academic research, academic writing, literacy, rhetorical situation, and reflection. These category labels were fairly superficial in that they didn’t describe how students used each respective concept. But the level-three rubrics categories did go into greater detail regarding how students found rubrics useful: for defining terms, developing ideas, focusing inquiry, integrating sources, structuring an assignment, reflecting in general, and revising in general. We also came up with a level-three rubric utility category of collective development that we had to refine further in our level-four coding to identify how students described the utility of collective rubric development: as clarifying concepts, cultivating individual agency, and/or establishing collective investment and accountability.

Level-four coding likewise consisted of identifying five further subcategories through which we differentiated students’ references to concepts categories. The subcategories noted instances wherein students discuss the utility of a particular major concept as *self-empowerment* as an end in and of itself; *hermeneutic*, or a process of inquiry and/or interpretation; *sociocultural*, or a way of understanding the socially constituted nature of language, identity, and agency, but without a demonstrated recognition of how that understanding gains the student access and/or agency; *access*, or a means of gaining access via greater agency, but without a demonstrated recognition of how that access and/or agency operates within a sociocultural understanding of the concept; and *transcultural*, or the need and/or ability to apply a sociocultural understanding to transition between discourse communities, i.e. the *access* and *sociocultural* subcategories combined.

In all cases, we strived to construct what Michael Quinn Patton calls “indigenous typologies,” or categories and subcategories that evidence an explicit relationship between a concept or rubric reference and a claim about how it contributed to a student’s learning (457). At times, however, we did have to discern implicit references to the rubric from the way a student might describe a class conversation that influenced

her writing, which we knew was a conversation that emerged during and necessarily in relation to the collective development of a rubric. In other, murkier cases, a student might demonstrate an understanding of literacy as sociocultural in the way she explains decisions she made while writing, but without explicitly describing the concept, in which case we would discuss at length whether the student makes any reference elsewhere in the memo that demonstrates the influence of a course concept on that decision, or if the student's language and reasoning adequately reflects the way a concept was discussed and applied in the course.

Once we had refined all of our coding, we tabulated the number of students who referenced a concept/subcategory pairing as well as the number of instances of references within each concept/subcategory pairing, making sure to document the student's identifying number in each case so that we could maintain correspondence between our tabulations and other tables containing students' passages. We also tabulated the number of instances a concept/subcategory pairing was mentioned in conjunction with the rubric; the number of students who referenced each category of rubric utility, and the number of instances of those references; and the number of students who referenced a rubric utility category in conjunction with a concept/subcategory pairing. These tabulations provided us a clearer picture of which concept/subcategory pairings and rubric utility categories were referenced most frequently and by the most students, separately and together.

Of all the concept/subcategory pairings, students in "Reading and Writing Our Communities" most often demonstrated an understanding and application of the category of literacy, and within it the subcategories of literacy as hermeneutic, socio-cultural, and transcultural, in that order. These pairings align with Beaufort's writing process and discourse community knowledge categories, as well as Adler-Kassner and Wardle's threshold concepts of writing as a continuous learning process, as a social and rhetorical activity, and as enactment and creation of identities and ideologies. In terms of categories and subcategories of rubric utility, students most often referred to the category of collective rubric development, and within it the subcategories of collective rubric development as clarifying concepts, establishing a sense of collective investment and accountability, and cultivating individual agency, in that order. Furthermore, of all the concept category/subcategory pairings, students most frequently referenced the rubric in relation to their understanding and application of literacy as sociocultural.

## Students' Theories of Writing Knowledge

Identifying these concept category/subcategory pairings allowed us to further analyze the relationships students articulated between them, so that the pairings existed no longer as isolated coding categories but as what Yancey, Robertson, and Tacsak

describe as the theories of writing knowledge students develop through reflective practice. One major trend we noticed in students' theories was an appreciation for the dialectical nature of literacy and learning. Take for instance Student Nine's explanation of collective rubric development as hermeneutic; in her case, this development involved an interpretation of and inquiry into not only an area of scholarship with which she was previously unfamiliar but also her own extant understanding of literacy as sociocultural, and in that respect the process of collective rubric development serves for Student Nine as one of "self-discovery":

For major writing assignment one, I chose the petroglyphs as my literacy artifact, and I explained the conflict of the local Native Americans and suburban population fighting for the petroglyph land to illustrate the power struggle that may arise when different groups understand varying forms of literacy. At first, the prompt for this writing assignment was confusing because I didn't understand the connection between literacy, a community, and language. However . . . the discussions held in class were very open-ended, and this allowed my peers and I to ask questions to sort out our thoughts. . . . By listening to the in-class discussions, I became aware of other concerns that had arisen and thought more critically about the major writing assignment. Before the class discussions, I received the prompt and was confused because the wording of the rubric was lengthy. However, during class we discussed how to change the rubric in groups, and thinking about how I wanted to change the rubric was a form of self-discovery. For instance, when thinking about standards for the assignment, I discovered more about my own understanding of the topic, and what I needed to learn more about, and this helped me focus my attention on certain aspects to better my understanding.

Student Nine explores the ways in which collective rubric development helped her further develop the knowledge she already possessed about her topic, and in a way that helped her rethink how she was writing about it, which in turn helped her learn that much more about her topic.

The dialectical relationship Student Nine describes between collective rubric development, conceptual knowledge acquisition, and the writing process involves a movement from confusion to greater clarity, and in a manner increasing individual agency while simultaneously emphasizing the sociocultural nature of literacy. That movement appears to play an important role in students' accounts of how a sociocultural understanding of literacy enables them to transculturally reposition as academic writers. Although the theory of transcultural repositioning had informed our course design from the start, we didn't explicitly recognize it as an outcome or look for evidence of it in students' self-assessment memos, but in coding students' self-assessment

memos, we recognized that the more striking examples conformed to Guerra's definition of the term. Guerra derives the term from Min-Zhan Lu's description of learning in basic writing as repositioning, or boundary crossing catalyzed by an encounter with conflict. For Guerra, transcultural repositioning describes how all students, but especially the socioeconomically and ethnolinguistically underrepresented, overcome cultural and linguistic obstacles by transferring their prior and other literacies to the critical acquisition of new literacies.

Lu's original emphasis on the function of conflict in repositioning aligns with our own findings, as we discovered that students described their own critical acquisition of academic discourse less in terms of an explicit transfer of prior and other rhetorical knowledge and practices and more as a gradual movement from an encounter with conflict through collective rubric development to an insight into the dialectical nature of literacy understood as sociocultural; and in that respect, the notion of transcultural repositioning provided us a framework through which to examine students' individual accounts of this more longitudinal, collective process. For example, Student Seven connects her emergent understanding of literacy as sociocultural with her ability to transculturally reposition:

Overall this class was personally challenging and rewarding. I learned about what it means to be literate, as well as the power that being extensively literate holds, and pushed [sic] me to improve my own writing.

Regarding literacy and academic writing, my understanding has changed in a profound way. I now understand that literacy is based on community discourse and that the discourse of a community affects the community discourse, somewhat like evolution. This realization has changed my views on my own writing as well; my writing affects those who read it, and my writing is affected by what I read. As time goes on, I see that my writing has the power to change the discourse of its subject, and that this power comes from credibility.

Again, Student Seven acknowledges that the class was "personally challenging," and without first developing an appreciation for discourse communities as sites of contention and flux, she admits that she wouldn't see her own writing as carrying any consequence. Her understanding and application of literacy as sociocultural allows her to claim ethos and agency in the discourse communities to which she wishes to belong. Although Student Seven doesn't mention collective rubric development in the above passage, she does mention elsewhere that the "group assignments"—i.e., collective rubric development—helped her and her group members better understand course concepts in general, suggesting that the activity likely did play an important role in her development of an understanding of literacy as sociocultural. The following passage

from Student Five more explicitly connects collective rubric development with trans-cultural repositioning:

I chose to analyze written communication in the workplace as a means of exploring what is defined within this certain community as “good” writing. Focusing on this form of writing allowed me to consider how determinations of “good” or “bad” writing are made and how there is a more complex dynamic that prohibits a universal definition of “good” writing.

The overall activities of constructing and revising rubrics for this class seemed to be most applicable to thinking about this assignment because it made me realize that determining what qualifies as “good” writing can differ depending on the class and teacher. Working together to compose rubrics seemed to counteract this disparity and allowed us to be able to more critically engage in the writing process.

Student Five describes how collective rubric development enabled her to better appreciate academic writing as sociocultural and to exercise agency within the academic discourse community of the classroom, and she suggests that this academic literacy knowledge and practice contributed to her evolving understanding of workplace literacy knowledge and practice. Again, her description of this relationship is more dialectical than linear, offering a glimpse into how prior and other literacies, academic literacy, threshold concepts such as the sociocultural nature of literacy, and collective rubric development are synthesized for her into an understanding and performance of academic writing as neither immutable nor inaccessible. Interestingly, this knowledge and practice again appears to arise out of an encounter with conflict, in the case of Student Five, due to the ability to “counteract [the] disparity” she observes between what different teachers value as “good” writing across the disciplines.

## Discussion

At the time of our study, both the writing program and university in question were undergoing significant changes, but as we write this, those changes have yet to lead to a new course description or set of outcomes for the second-year “Expository Writing” course, or an administratively supported campus-wide WAC/WID initiative. We originally set out to develop an approach that our writing program might use to better align the composition classroom with the demands of writing across the disciplines, and in a manner that empowered our students to take agency in determining what that means. However, our research offers implications of relevance beyond the successful revision of a single course at one particular institution, and beyond the composition classroom in general, for scholars and practitioners interested in exploring the possibilities of a writing across difference approach to WAC/WID.



Our analysis of students' self-assessment memos adds dimension to the definition of transcultural repositioning that we inherited from WAC/WID scholars Guerra and Kells in that we were able to observe students applying their understanding of literacy as sociocultural to the task of accessing critical agency as academic writers, suggesting that for our students, a sociocultural concept of literacy operated as a threshold concept in transcultural repositioning. This finding led us to reflect on how explicitly foregrounding the concept of literacy as sociocultural in the composition classroom might help us reframe that work as the facilitation of transcultural repositioning. It's possible that doing so might be more beneficial to certain student populations, and further research might observe the effects of explicitly foregrounding the concept of literacy as sociocultural across multiple course sections and with a larger sample population of students who self-identify as belonging to a socioeconomically and ethnolinguistically underrepresented community. Alternatively, researchers might provide a more longitudinal description of how the concept of literacy as sociocultural operates as a threshold concept facilitating transcultural repositioning throughout students' upper-division coursework.

Our research suggests that transcultural repositioning may be a valuable guiding principle for curriculum design at the course and programmatic level, and we hope that our efforts will encourage others to afford this concept the extensive scholarly attention it deserves. At the same time, not all students' self-assessment memos evidenced transcultural repositioning. More often, they evidenced students' emergent and preliminary recognition of literacy as sociocultural, or the related recognition of literacy as hermeneutic, i.e., an ongoing process of inquiry and interpretation. That an understanding of literacy as sociocultural was a necessary but not sufficient attribute of transcultural repositioning suggests that the latter may be a difficult though nevertheless rewarding outcome to aim for, if not an objective that every student should be expected to achieve.

As indicated by Lu's definition of repositioning, transcultural repositioning did not occur for our students without conflict, but the occurrence of conflict appears to indicate an intersection at which students' prior and other literacies, academic literacies, and the conceptual knowledge students gained from the course all collided, interacted, and were synthesized in a manner consistent with Yancey, Robertson, and Tacsak's description of the critical incident model of prior knowledge use, in which "students encounter an obstacle that helps them retheorize writing in general and their own agency as writers in particular" (5). The indeterminacy and deliberation involved in collective rubric development presented obstacles that ultimately appeared to help our students retheorize academic literacy and claim agency in the process of determining for themselves what it means "to meet the demands of academic writing across the disciplines." In other words, what we imagined would function as a simple

form of empowerment also seemed to play an important role in students' acquisition of conceptual knowledge of writing and literacy.

Further research might look more explicitly at how collective rubric development functions as a critical incident in students' attempts at transcultural repositioning. But we might also consider the utility of collective rubric development in curriculum design at the course and programmatic level. What if, for instance, we had more explicitly invited our students into the collective activity of revising our course description and outcomes in accordance with students' actual learning outcomes (and incomes)? To do so would be to place Inoue's community-based assessment pedagogy into conversation with Bob Broad's organic assessment protocol, so that actual courses take the place of focus groups in the collective process of curriculum design. Resituated within the context of WAC/WID, such an approach harkens back to Kells's insistence on "a reconceptualization of WAC through a deliberative process that engages diversity and the discursive possibilities of representation" (90). In that respect, our pilot course design also adds dimension to what such a reconceptualization of WAC/WID might look like.

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## Notes

1. We have withheld identifying information in accordance with our research protocol, using pseudonyms where appropriate.
2. We use these racial/ethnic labels to remain consistent with the sources of our demographic data.

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