

## Interdisciplinary Themes and Metacognition in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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“I believe I have become a stronger and better writer this semester... I can connect this class to other things, especially when it comes to persuasion. As a future music educator, there is no doubt in my mind that I will have to convince someone about the benefits of music classes.”<sup>1</sup> – Calli, first-year writing student

Calli enrolled in the mandatory composition class during her second semester on campus. Like many students, Calli was not exactly thrilled about class, but by the end of the semester, she was able to reflect on what and how she learned. Early in her reflection she explains that “At the beginning of the semester, I was a good writer, but not very strong . . . . I also dreaded writing papers, because every time I try to write, my brain fills up with so many thoughts that it is hard to keep track and organize everything.” In this excerpt, readers see an apprehensive student. The epigraph shows more confidence, illustrating Calli’s ability to recognize rhetorical situations that require persuasion. Despite the fact that the majority of the students enrolled in this section were music majors like Calli, this writing course was not about music. Instead, it focused on argumentation and persuasion through the lens of food studies, and as Calli notes this focus did

not hinder but rather helped her succeed because “being [in] a food based class made it easier and more enjoyable to research and write.” A number of questions arise from Calli’s experiences: What made her feel more confident? How did the interdisciplinary nature of the class content improve her writing knowledge? How can writing instructors help students like Calli connect writing tasks to and in diverse rhetorical situations?

In many ways, the answers to these questions drive the pedagogical decisions I made for and in this course, including course content and organization. One question among many in contemporary composition scholarship is how courses should use content beyond that of writing studies. This content may be literature, contemporary journalism and non-fiction, or scholarly works from other disciplines. Often, courses are built around themes. Thematic courses are neither uncommon in contemporary FYC programs nor have they been historically absent. In 1982 Philip Snyder wrote, “The ‘theme course,’ a staple in composition teaching a decade ago, has fallen on hard times. Where are we to find, in the eighties, a theme that will be close to our students’ experience, yet distanced enough and sufficiently complex to offer these writers the possibility of genuine investigation, rather than yet another opportunity for personal reverie or the airing of common knowledge?” (315). Thirty years later, many programs using themes seek the same objective Snyder sought, namely “genuine investigation,” where students write for real audiences outside the classroom, look to solve problems that affect them or their communities, and create new knowledge.

Themes are often quite broad, and contemporary research and textbooks suggest food, health, family, war, monsters, and work as possibilities alongside race, gender, and sexuality.

Disciplinary lenses such as history, music, drama, science and technology, and writing studies also offer the classroom focus. Learning communities embed writing courses into their course sequences as well, pairing writing faculty with those in other disciplines. The topics, students they attract, and genres produced may differ, but the potential motivations for designing courses around themes and disciplines are consistent: students can maintain their focus on one topic, student interest in the theme may increase investment in “genuine investigation,” and instructors have the ability to focus student attention on rhetorical moves in a variety of disciplines and genres that engage the theme. Lipson et al argue the use of a theme helps students transfer information from one task to another because they learn how to connect different tasks (253). Using themes, however, is not uncontested. Maxine Hairston’s landmark essay “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing” asserts FYC courses about topics like race and gender are seen as “vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops designed to build students’ confidence and competence as writers” (180). Richard Fulkerson maintains instructors in these theme-driven courses suffer from “content envy,” or the desire to teach something other than writing, particularly if these instructors are literature or cultural studies scholars who would prefer to teach their own interests (663). In “The Companies We Keep *Or* The Companies We Would Like to Try to Keep: Strategies and Tactics in Challenging Times,” Linda Adler-Kassner recognizes the ubiquity of these classes and declares a “no vampires policy,” arguing “writing classes, especially first year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing” (132). This observation, coming from her 2012 keynote address at the annual Writing Program Administration Conference, speaks to what she

sees as a need to defend and define the discipline. Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle extend these concerns in their research advocating Writing about Writing, noting the “mutt genres” (Wardle, “Mutt”) that typically make up the FYC classroom and the unlikelihood that students and teachers separate the writing process from the content of the course when the content is not writing studies (“Re-imagining”). While these scholars criticize themes for different reasons, each suggests that a non-writing studies focus is inappropriate for the composition classroom.

Though the interest in thematically-organized courses from programs and publishing companies is evident, the research on thematic classrooms is both thin and varied, reaching back to the 1970s (and in some cases, even earlier) and investigating not just FYC but high school, interdisciplinary learning communities, professional and technical communication, English for Academic Purposes, and advanced composition courses.<sup>2</sup> Diana Shank’s 2014 dissertation examining the role of teaching a composition course focused on race reminds readers that while much discussion has happened about whether themed courses should be taught, few pedagogical studies have occurred that explore what happens *when* focused topics are taught in the composition classroom.

This article looks to add to Shank’s pedagogical research. Despite Adler-Kassner’s entreaty to banish vampires, I look to the possibility that interdisciplinary, thematic courses can build student confidence in the writing process. I argue a first-year writing course that combines close attention to rhetorical skills, readings about an interdisciplinary field, and a carefully scaffolded assignment sequence enhances the potential transfer of rhetorical skills through

student attention to boundary practices, the ability to analyze multiple rhetorical situations and discourse communities, and the opportunity to engage in sustained research and writing.<sup>3</sup> To explore the potential of the themed writing classroom, I explain the methods used to collect student data and the context of the first-year writing course at a mid-size public university, the curricular design of the reading and writing assignments in a course focused on food studies, and draw some initial conclusions about thematic first-year writing classes and their relationship to transfer and rhetorical awareness.

## Data Collection and Methods

Student work was collected under an approved IRB protocol. Because these students were enrolled in my class as I collected research, a fellow faculty member visited my classroom, explained the protocol, and distributed consent forms. She collected the consent forms and held them until after final grades were due. In the protocol, students were asked for permission to have their final research essays and their reflection essays analyzed under the promise of anonymity. To pass the course, students must complete both of these assignments, and there was no additional burden placed on those who chose to participate in the study. Of the 19 students enrolled in the course 12 chose to participate in the study.

This essay uses data collected from the reflection essay, which is designed to help students participate in metacognitive practices and think about the potential for transfer outside of the classroom. The reflection assignment asked students to answer two questions:

- 1) How has the use of a theme in class (food) and the focus on one specific topic for all of your writing assignments affected your writing during the semester?
- 2) How will you use your writing knowledge after you leave the ENG 105 classroom?

After collection, the reflection essays were anonymized, and I used qualitative, grounded coding. I found four prevalent responses: increased confidence in writing skills, reflective practices that indicate potential transfer, positive attention to sustained research on a single question, and the importance of a focused theme in developing confidence.

## **Putting ENG 105: Critical Reading, Writing, and Thinking in Context**

ENG 105: Critical Reading, Writing, and Thinking is the required first-year composition course at a regional public university serving approximately 9,500 students. The course is intended to be “Instruction and practice in close reading, research, and critical thinking as applied to academic writing, with emphasis on analysis, synthesis, and argument.” The four-hour course was developed in 2008 and replaced a two-semester, six-hour sequence in which expository writing was the focus for the first semester and academic argument that of the second. The Department of English and Philosophy offers approximately 80 sections each year with a course cap of 22 in a variety of formats: some sections meet 4 times weekly for fifty minutes a session, a smaller number of sections meet twice weekly for 100 minutes a session, and a still

smaller group of classes only once a week, online, or in a hybrid format. Students are generally in their first-year of college, though some local high school students enroll in online sections and other students may delay enrolling until their sophomore or junior years.

The emphasis on reading, writing, and critical thinking in both the course title and description indicates students will perform a number of tasks, and while there is not a standard syllabus or reader, those teaching in the program are asked to follow common objectives. The course objectives state successful students will possess

- A) Knowledge of rhetorical elements and methods;
- B) Competence in examining complex ideas and situations and in developing cohesive, well-researched written and oral arguments for relevant audiences;
- C) Capability to integrate the work of multiple authors into students' own analytic and persuasive writing with appropriate documentation and style;
- D) Knowledge of methods for research, including where and how to obtain the most effective, relevant, and credible sources; and
- E) Understanding of the revision process.

Students produce at least 25 pages of revised work, conference individually at least three times during the semester with their instructor, and complete assignments in the genres of analysis, synthesis, and argument, however broadly the instructor chooses to define these writing tasks. Instructors can, and most do, supplement these genres with other writing assignments of their choice. Students, thus, may encounter a variety of schedules, readings, and assignments. The course's staffing, activities, objectives, and purposes mirror those of many other universities.

Within the objectives, persuasive writing and a general understanding of the rhetorical situation are explicitly noted, making it easy to organize courses around argument and persuasion, what Fulkerson defines as a subset of procedural rhetoric<sup>4</sup> or a thematic course with additional instruction in rhetorical concepts.

## ***Food Studies and Transfer***

To encourage transfer, improve student learning outcomes, and attend to major rhetorical concepts, I created a course that focused on rhetoric in food studies within the framework just discussed. In doing so, I worked to both engage students' interests and include foundational writing instruction. Responding to Adler-Kessner's "no vampires" proclamation, Friedman argues that "To banish vampires is ... to limit students' choices—and thus, to reduce the possibility of engagement" (81). Friedman notes students may not be interested in the intricacies of writing studies research, and in a required class like FYC providing students with choices might encourage more engagement from and success for students. This need for student interest is present in the scholarship, as Snyder sought topics that would keep students engaged in meaningful reading and writing, and Beaufort suggests "the theme needs to be broad enough to enable a broad range of related intellectual inquiries and needs to be developmentally appropriate. By the latter, I mean the subject should be relevant to the life experience and interests of a given age-range of students." Food studies is something that generally interests and speaks to student experiences. Everyone has to eat. Food is "relevant" to students and



appropriate for any “age-range of students,” whether dual-credit high school students, traditional-aged college students, or older adults. Because our university enrolls a diverse student population, this theme is appropriate for anyone who enters the classroom. Moreover, the role of food in many of the most popular programs on campus (agriculture, education, social work, and health and human services professions broadly conceived) means students can investigate the topic and connect it to other coursework.

This course explicitly addresses writing and rhetorical instruction through the lens of, hopefully, an inherently interesting interdisciplinary theme like food studies. Transfer and self-efficacy research demonstrates that student interest alongside direct instruction in writing encourages stronger writing skills, on both a sentence or local level and in knowledge of genres and rhetorical situations. Pajares and Johnson discuss a course for education majors where the instructor included explicit instruction on assigned genres, what Pajares and Johnson call “writing tasks,” rather than on “writing skills” (grammar, usage, organization). In an end-of-the-semester survey, students showed more confidence in their ability to successfully write those genres than they did at the beginning of the semester. Their confidence in their skills, however, did not increase. When Pajares and Johnson analyzed pre- and post-tests that applied both genre and skills knowledge they found that despite students’ appraisals, student writing skills also increased (Pajares and Johnson 323). Though not a FYC course, the students were explicitly taught writing. Through this instruction, they increased their knowledge of the genres – as their post-test shows they should have. They also increased their writing skills, but not their confidence. Thus, instructor focus influences student confidence and knowledge attainment. In

light of thematic composition classrooms, we can infer that if students are interested in the topic (this was a course created for education majors who should have had high levels of interest), then instructors must target instruction and feedback specifically on writing, whether it is writing tasks or skills, to foster explicit knowledge development and encourage transfer.

## ***Course Reading Assignments: Writing Studies and Food Studies***

One criticism leveled against theme-based classes is that they are too “content focused.” Instructors and students become too interested in talking about the *content* of the readings rather than how writers approach their subjects. Heiman asserts instructors who teach thematic writing courses may “overlook writing instruction (or pay it only surface attention) and focus on the content of what students will be writing about....Part of the problem in our instruction—of giving writing short shrift—may result from privileging our course’s theme” (130). These arguments are logical. As Pajares and Johnson’s work shows, if students are not explicitly being taught *writing* in a *writing class* it is difficult for students to recognize they are learning to write. That lack of metacognition makes transfer, an already dicey proposition, even less likely.

Importantly, thematic courses should include basic rhetorical skills. It is teaching basic writing knowledge alongside the theme that may counter critics’ assertions that these courses are too focused on content. To prevent the privileging of content over writing, the course readings integrated the basic rhetorical concepts Beaufort recommends for all writing classrooms: “discourse community, genre, rhetorical situation, [and] writing process knowledge.” By connecting foundational writing studies concepts to the theme, students begin to see the many

ways writing is used. Their interest improves their ability to learn about how writing is used. They should, as Pajares and Johnson's research shows, increase their knowledge and confidence in both the content *and* the ability to write about that content with the dual focus on writing and food studies.

The interdisciplinary nature of food studies allows students to examine different discourse communities and how writers navigate diverse rhetorical situations. For instance, students might read personal essays like Lily Wong's "Eating the Hyphen," popular nonfiction by Michael Pollan or Eric Schlosser, philosophical texts like Peter Singer's "Equality for Animals?," photojournalism in *National Geographic*, and scholarly research like Margaret Mead's "The Changing Significance of Food." When instruction focuses on the texts' rhetorical attributes, students are asked to identify discourse communities, audiences, and how authors attend to readers' needs. When thematic courses include thorough rhetorical instruction, students learn to address the needs of specific contexts and situations. The students may be initially interested in the content itself, but when the instruction is focused on the content's rhetorical purpose, much like a class on procedural argument would be, the students' focus turns to writing.

To supplement food studies readings, the students read Losh et al's *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing* and excerpts of writing studies research like John Swales' chapter on discourse communities from *Genre Analysis*, Christina Haas and Linda Flower's work on rhetorical reading, a chapter from Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff's *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, and works on revision by Anne Lamott and Susan Sontag. These texts provide students with the vocabulary to rhetorically

analyze documents: to address organization, the rhetorical situation, and genre. In the vein of rhetorical genre scholars, we examine the social actions the texts enacted. As students read food studies scholarship, daily discussions focus specifically on rhetorical practices. Rather than asking questions like “what do you think of GMO foods?” or “How does food work in our culture?” questions like “Who is this author’s audience? How do we know that? What are some of the rhetorical moves this author is using?” bring students’ attention to the practice of writing. It allows them to analyze various discourses and genres, and they begin to use language about writing.

Interdisciplinary courses serve as an ideal space for students and teachers alike to examine genres and integrate rhetorical language into daily discussions. These genres mark the boundary practices and objects of different disciplines. Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner explain boundaries between disciplines or communities of practice mark where non-community members have a difficult time understanding different practices. Thus, students in introductory courses may find themselves confused and at the boundaries while graduate students have become community members. Though boundaries can prevent participation, when teachers and students acknowledge boundaries exist, they can reflect on the creation of boundaries (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 19). Along with boundary practices are boundary objects. Star and Griesemer theorize boundary objects arguing they “are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites . . . . They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make

them recognizable” (393). In the case of this interdisciplinary FYC course, the different genres constitute the boundary objects among the disciplines engaging in food studies. Moreover, the commonality of boundary objects serves a rhetorical-based classroom well, for students can analyze multiple examples of a genre, the academic article, for instance, to look for similarities and differences. If they understand how to ask questions *about* the genres, when they move into other courses, they can engage in a rhetorical analysis of those texts. Writing instruction does not stop in the FYC classroom, instead, it can give students the tools to engage with writing instruction across the curriculum.

This analysis and reflection on the composition of boundary objects rather than their contents is important, for Wardle discusses the difficulties FYC students have in composing specific boundary objects when she analyzes a biology-based learning community composition course. She reports that despite the efforts of the writing faculty member to learn *how* biological arguments worked because students were not actually *performing* biological research, they could not write biological arguments (“Mutt” 780-781). Instead of having students replicate other disciplines’ texts, composition faculty should facilitate reflection about boundary practices and objects. To encourage reflection, “[e]ducators aiming to develop knowledgeable practitioners might organize learning programmes in which students engage with a range of practices from the landscape” (Kubiak et al. 81). To engage with this “range of practices” “FYC teachers and students alike must become educated about the genres of various disciplines, collect as many examples of them as possible, explicitly abstract the textual characteristics of those various genres, and reflect on how those genres are used to mediate work in different classrooms

(Wardle, “Mutt” 782). The wide variety of genres that food writing takes up provides students the opportunity to see how writing works, whether it is investigative journalism, sociology and psychology, philosophy, biology and chemistry, or policy on the local, state, and federal level. This diversity helps students explore “boundary practices,” and FYC instructors become what Kubiak et al. call “brokers” (81), or individuals who help students move between and among communities of practice, when they ask students to analyze a variety of genres or “a range of practices from the landscape” of a particular topic.

Thematic FYC courses are particularly well suited to investigating boundaries because their analyses of the “range of practices” help students begin to understand not only the different communities but also the boundaries that separate those communities. For instance, “Real Men Do Not Read Labels: The Effects of Masculinity and Involvement on College Students’ Food Decisions” was published in the *Journal of American College Health* and co-written by agricultural business, marketing, and sociology faculty. These faculty not only participate in different communities of practice, but they likely use the data differently in their individual research. Moreover, the study’s implications suggest other readers include campus nutritionists and food service managers who can use the study to determine how to encourage healthier eating on their campuses. This article is a boundary object among a number of disciplines and helps students examine the social actions the document encourages in different communities of practice. If students are able to determine various boundaries between disciplines, it may be easier for them to read scholarship in the future and to understand how different disciplines speak to one another. Through the interdisciplinary nature of food studies, students have already

practiced navigating boundaries among diverse disciplines, recognizing how they contribute and speak to one another. Attention to the different rhetorical aspects of the article shows students different ways that discourse communities speak about topics, who their intended audiences might be, and how to approach similar readings assignments in the future.

## ***Course Writing Assignment Sequence: Building and Writing a Rhetorical***

### ***Awareness***

Just as important as the reading in the course is the writing assignment sequence. While each instructor must include assignments that fall into the general genres of synthesis, analysis, and argument, the sequence designed for this class includes more specific, named genres to help students begin to understand the context in which they're writing, the discourse community, and the genre's requirements. The sequence consists of five scaffolded, formal assignments: a project proposal and audience analysis, a preliminary I-search essay, an advertisement and rhetorical analysis of that advertisement, a policy proposal or recommendation report, and a final reflection.

This assignment sequence's carefully named assignments and attention to specific genres speak directly to current scholarship about writing prompts and transfer. Contemporary composition research argues students who complete FYC often struggle with transfer (Wardle, "Mutt" and "Understanding"). Transfer of most skills, writing included, from one context to another is complex. Perkins and Salomon suggest that this complexity arises from "knowledge and skill [that] may be too 'local' to allow" transfer (25). One way that composition knowledge

becomes “too local” is through the assignments included in FYC. Many do not delineate diverse discourse communities. Instead, students are simply told that they participate in “academic writing.” Research from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s Genre Project (Bunner et al.) shows FYC classes “include broad genre types, not specific genres-e.g. ‘analysis,’ not ‘literary analysis,’ ‘scene analysis,’ ‘film analysis,’ content analysis’ (exception: rhetorical analysis),” and “Genres are removed from disciplinary context and rhetorical situation.” This vague nomenclature is not only the fault of individual instructors, for the textbooks researchers analyzed participate in the same naming conventions, confusing and displacing academic and professional genres (Bunner et al. under “FYC Results”). These generalized assignments cause students to have a difficult time understanding how different disciplines and discourse communities analyze, use, and communicate information.

The lack of specificity in the genres makes transfer more difficult. When students do not necessarily learn how professionals write, or they do not understand how to analyze genres for their textual clues, the generalized writing content makes it difficult for students to understand or relate to new writing situations. Nowacek describes the power of genre recognition: genres “provide both the shape and the means of reshaping the discursive spaces within which acts of transfer occur. Genre is not the only cue for transfer, but it is a powerful and underappreciated cue. By recognizing the power of genres—and helping students to do the same—instructors can help facilitate mindful transfer” (17). If students are taught about genres and their greater role in discourse, students may find it easier to transfer that knowledge between contexts. One way faculty can create or change the way students learn is to “Continually make connections among



concepts, principles, and theories, as well as connections among lecture, lab and recitation, or among major sections of the course to help students who believe knowledge is a set of isolated pieces” (Ambrose and Lovett 13). In a thematic classroom, students focus on the same topic, but they see it presented, or see the “connections,” in different ways.

Beginning with the project proposal, each student formulates a problem that concerns food and identifies an appropriate audience. For the rest of the assignments, students develop and narrow (or expand in a few cases) that problem, research and evaluate sources, and further refine their audience, so by the end of the 16-week semester, they have been actively engaging one topic for 12-13 weeks. This scaffolded approach increases student “self-motivation” by “combining a long-range goal that sets the course of one’s endeavors with a series of attainable subgoals to guide and sustain one’s efforts along the route” (Bandura 217). In the assignment sequence, subgoals are specifically tied to writing skills such as identifying an audience, rhetorically analyzing and evaluating sources, and building knowledge about both the proposal subject and the writing process. This design follows Heiman’s recommendation that instructors should “bypass any temptation to reduce writing to ‘following the rules,’ [and] as teachers of writing we should construct assignments that invite students to learn the content *through* both the process and product of writing” (131).

The preliminary I-search paper asks students to reflect on their connection to the topic they have proposed and begin conducting formal research for their topic.<sup>5</sup> While many students have a personal connection to their topic, some merely have an interest and want to learn more.

Thus, it is important for students to begin researching their topic so they may explore the discourse communities, determine the genres used in those communities, and begin to understand the arguments. This assignment asks students to synthesize their research and begin forming their opinions. The story they tell may reflect how their opinion is changing or the complexity of the topic. I-search essays are commonly used at the culmination of research. However, because this essay is the most generically fuzzy of the assignments, I position it earlier in the semester as students are learning about genres. To emphasize reflection and genre awareness, students are asked to discuss the rhetorical moves their research is making and the differences in the genres they have found. Thus, students begin to reflect on the research for their chosen topic, identify main points, and investigate the rhetorical aspects of the writing they read. These important skills are necessary to successfully complete the other assignments.

In the advertisement assignment, each student creates a public service announcement in a self-selected medium. Students are required to seek out their audience, show them the PSA and get feedback, and complete a rhetorical analysis and revision report. In the analysis, students examine the choices they made when they designed the advertisement, including medium, location, and their textual and/or visual rhetoric; report and analyze the audience's reaction; and suggest revisions based on the feedback. Throughout the assignment, students reflect on their choices and their effects. This active reflection may enable students to perform “backward-reaching high road transfer” in new contexts. <sup>6</sup> This kind of transfer allows students to encounter new situations, reflect on past experiences, and use abstract information to help them solve their

future writing problems (Perkins and Salomon, “Teaching” 26). Students will likely find themselves needing to persuade someone, as the student in the epigraph realizes, but it may be in a situation so different that the context classifies it more as high road rather than low road transfer. The rhetorical analysis asks students to clearly articulate why they made the decisions they did and how they hoped that rhetoric would affect their audiences.

In the final assignment students address their selected audience, explain the problem and propose solutions in a recommendation report or policy proposal. They support their own arguments, synthesizing the research they have completed during the semester. Students may not write about food again, but the metacognitive work of the course and specific writing instruction initiate thought processes that encourage knowledge transfer and in many cases serve as boundary objects where students can imagine different users and readers.

## ***Reflections on the Curriculum Development and Student Reactions***

This curriculum was developed in two stages: first, the assignment sequence and, second, the theme. I have assigned this sequence (project proposal to recommendation report) with minor revisions for a number of semesters. The impetus for the assignment sequence was to allow students to develop expertise in one topic carried through diverse genres rather than four or five disparate topics, which is common in high school English classes and many first-year writing programs, including our own. No one else in the department teaches such a tightly linked assignment sequence. Calli recognized this goal in her reflection when she writes “Focusing on one topic this whole semester has helped me write each of these papers because it is so much

easier learning and talking about one topic rather than researching and writing about a new topic each time” and that the sequence helped her develop credibility when she addressed her audience. Developing student expertise is supported by much of the writing for transfer scholarship that advocates allowing students to build on their knowledge of writing through research and focused assignments. For instance, Nowacek’s investigation of three linked interdisciplinary humanities courses found that students’ engagement with the same time period, authors, and ideas helped students make connections between the courses and recontextualize information. Developing an expertise, in other words, can help students see relationships between ideas over diverse intellectual contexts and improve motivation and transfer.

I first used the sequence in a non-thematic procedural rhetoric class. When it did not accompany a theme, the assignment sequence showed weaknesses in areas of reflection, understanding how the boundary objects and practices were working among diverse disciplines, and peer engagement. The first three semesters, students were immersed in discussions of rhetoric and argumentation, but readings and discussion did not explicitly discuss genre, literacy, and discourse communities. The absence of these topics, which also encourage metacognitive practices that lead to backward-reaching, high road transfer, prevented students from clearly creating boundary practices. Students did not necessarily see how genres worked or differed, nor did they explicitly reflect on or recontextualize information from their other classes when considering different texts. Their projects seemed to exist in the vacuum that is the FYC classroom. The move to a thematic classroom helped students see the relationship between work discussed in class and other instances of food writing or similar genres because they had a

vocabulary with which to describe their experiences. For instance, we could create boundary practices that linked our readings of sociological texts to their experiences and readings in their introductory sociology courses.

According to student reflections, I met my initial goals to engage student interest, confidence, and motivation through the change to a thematic course with a unified assignment sequence. Most students discussed how reading and writing about one topic helped them become stronger writers. Many focused specifically on their ability to better explain and organize information. Carolyn, for instance, reflected on the differences between her high school writing and that at the end of the semester. In preparation for her reflection, she had reread her first assignment, “cringed,” and realized her earlier writing had been “cheesy writing with ... lack of substance.” Carolyn’s comments privilege a new sophistication, and while her assessment seems negative, it also shows an ability to reflect on older work to see her growth in providing her writing with more “substance.”

Other students, like Calli, Ben, Braden, and Sarah were more positive in their assessments and also focused on improved analysis. Calli straightforwardly proclaimed that because she wrote on one topic for the semester “I believe I have become a stronger and better writer this semester,” and “I know how to organize my thoughts and sound intelligent.” To show he had “grown as a writer,” Ben used an example from a political science class he was also enrolled in that semester. Ben was required to write an essay that explained divided government and predict whether or not Congress would pass more, fewer, or the same number of laws under a divided government. He writes: “I use my writing strategies and writing brainstorming

planning that I learned in class to take my idea and branch ideas off and build upon them to thoroughly explain my answer. In the end I feel like I had a good thesis and body paragraph that fully explained my opinion” (Ben). Braden saw himself as a “much more advanced” writer than he “could have ever imagined,” and that “having a class theme truly benefited me more than I realized, which helped contribute to my success as a writer.” Braden describes some of those successes:

It is amazing to see how much I have advanced in my writing compared to just five months ago! Within these last five months I have learned how to organize my writing, provide exquisite detail when and where appropriate, clearly state and address a thesis in an introduction, establish my credibility as the author throughout a piece of writing, address research properly in my writing, and simply advance my writing in ways I did not know before.

Sarah echoes these sentiments explaining that “Focusing on one main topic throughout the semester and completing multiple assignments related to our final project helped considerably in making our writing more sophisticated and organized so that we may use these skills in situations to come.” All of these students focused on how their writing had improved. In some cases, their explanations were more generic – they became “stronger” and “better” writers. But in others they recognized what had changed during the past sixteen weeks. Their writing had become more organized, they were able to establish credibility, and they could provide more details. Writing and reading about one topic over the course of the semester and with an attention

to the writing process and rhetorical concerns allowed them to develop this mastery in ways that might not happen in a non-thematic classroom.

The students also addressed their ability to transfer the knowledge and skills they learned in class to other writing situations. The students first acknowledge that their writing will be “more mature and solid” in the future (Carolyn). They look back to how their writing has matured, and look to carry that maturity into other writing situations. Sarah directly addresses the theme, explaining

Through writing about food articles from our “Food Matters” text, applying rhetorical concepts from our “Understanding Rhetoric” text, and the various writing projects directed towards our final Project Proposal, I have improved as a writer and developed valuable communication skills that will help me in future classes and professional situations.

She recognizes that she has improved through the application of the theme and rhetorical knowledge and looks to apply this information in the future noting “In fact, I can tell my writing has improved from the beginning of the semester because I applied skills learned in English 105 and my previous English class to write my responses for World Civ. 201” (Sarah). Much like Ben, Sarah tries to show that she is applying the skills learned in class to other situations.

Though we cannot know if she did so effectively, the confidence she takes with her to these other situations improves her chances at meeting expectations in other writing situations because she knows that she has developed skills to apply to diverse situations. This confidence can also be called self-efficacy, or the “*beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of*

*action required to produce given attainments*” (3, emphasis Bandura’s). Because “People’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true” (Bandura 2), self-efficacy often determines classroom behavior and success. If students have high levels of self-efficacy about how to analyze a rhetorical situation and determine the correct approach, as these students seem to have developed, they are more likely to persevere in diverse writing tasks. In other words, their ability to transfer the knowledge they have from one situation to another might be greater because they believe they have the knowledge to sufficiently analyze the situation and apply their skills.

In their reflections, these students identified how their writing improved – organization and explication in particular – but also recognized skills they could use in other situations, indicating their attention to transfer. Using both a theme and an assignment sequence that asks for sustained focus can improve student transfer. Wilhoit addresses one reason the potential for transfer may increase because of theme: the thematic classroom enables students to return continuously to the same ideas about a subject but from different fields. This cross-disciplinary reading encourages students to “summarize, analyze, and critique arguments (informal logic), foreground the reasoning which led them to their current position or allows them to maintain it (metacognition), and continually reappraise that position and redefine the points of contention (problem finding)” (Wilhoit 129). Each of these characteristics serve to make students “stronger” writers but also provide them with the metacognitive skills needed to reflect on rhetorical situations and apply the appropriate rhetorical skills. Thematic readings and writing assignments



paired with purposeful discussions of rhetoric, critical thinking, and reflective practices encourage both high and low road transfer as students encounter new writing situations.

If, as Wilhoit argues, the thematic classroom supports broader skill building in critical thinking, it is appropriate students would feel more confident. When these critical thinking skills are paired with genre-based discussions about how writing works, reflective activities that ask students to think about how they approach writing, and clearly defined assignments in specific genres, students can understand the role writing will play in their other courses and professions. Ultimately, the integration of an interdisciplinary theme, critical thinking, and key writing studies concepts allows students to find more success in writing specific genres rather than “an essay,” “report,” or some other mutt genre. This attention may also encourage high road transfer because throughout the drafting process, students continually analyze and reflect on the content *of* the course in their writing *for* the course. When students encounter different contexts and situations, their ability to reach back and reflect on the texts’ social actions may make that transition easier. In helping students to bridge contexts, the assignments work to create those boundary objects between students’ first-year writing and their disciplinary courses.

## Limitations and Looking to the Future

At the same time we seek to create boundary objects and practices, first-year composition instructors integrating interdisciplinary themes in their classrooms must consider the various disciplines’ epistemological concerns. Wilner, for instance, presents a case study of an assignment created for a co-taught, interdisciplinary English and history course. This case study

outlines the concerns of the two faculty, which demonstrated that the type of thinking expected from the first-year students was quite different. The history professor believed students could distill the evolution of democratic governance into three or four pages specifically because of their “novice” experiences, but the English professor argued that the task was too big for that length of paper and asked students to draw too narrow of a conclusion. In asking students to think and write in a disciplinary manner, Wilner concludes “it is easy for experts to overlook the long and messy processes by which they came to understand what it means to ‘do’ their field, and to expect students to imitate only the end result of [sic] a long period of study without undergoing the thought processes that inform practice in that discipline” (Wilner under “What’s the Problem?”). The disagreement between the two faculty members is grounded specifically in how each expects students to approach writing prompts, what evidence is valid, and how students use evidence to draw and support conclusions. Similarly, Nowacek found that when students tried to use information from their history course in a religious studies course, the types of evidence, claims, and assumptions each professor accepted differed. Wilner and Nowacek both show that even if the topics, or themes, are the same, the intellectual work students are expected to do with the information can differ widely. First-year composition cannot and will not be a panacea for writing instruction in the disciplines. Faculty must be prepared to teach their students how to write for their specific disciplines, especially as students move into upper-level courses in their majors and minors. Preparing students through a thematic course that increases metacognition of rhetorical knowledge may increase students’ chances for success and their ability to transfer skills from one situation to another.

This course design also calls for further, more structured research. A number of questions are at play: what role does the integration of literacy and genre readings play in students' reactions to writing? Do faculty members who do not have a scaffolded assignment sequence experience similar outcomes? Do students who take thematic courses about their intended majors find the thematic course to be conducive transfer? In other words, do these observations extend beyond the walls of my classroom, or do I have on rose-colored glasses about my students' achievements? Many of these questions, especially those about transfer, can only be answered through longitudinal research projects.

Questions of transfer, content, and assignments will not disappear anytime soon from composition scholarship. As faculty and universities continue to navigate and negotiate what, exactly, they would like their first-year writing courses to accomplish, considering how to improve students' metacognitive practices through interdisciplinary themed classes that increase student engagement with the theme may be one way to consider these goals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All student comments were collected under an institutionally approved IRB application. All students' names are pseudonyms, and their writing is reported verbatim.

<sup>2</sup> A special thanks to Sara Cooper for her insightful feedback on this, at times, expansive project.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the research on thematic courses stems from interdisciplinary programs at elite schools. For instance, in "Thinking Like a Program," Joe Harris describes Duke University's interdisciplinary writing program that hires post-doctoral instructors from a variety of fields. Though he does not address "thematic" courses in particular, we are led to believe that the instructors create theme-based courses. Arlene Wilner, in "The Challenges of Assignment Design in Discipline-Based Freshman Writing Classes," briefly describes Cornell University's use of first-year writing courses taught by instructors from a variety of disciplines but notes that little emphasis is put on the "*teaching* of writing" either in the classroom or in pedagogical training for instructors (Wilner's emphasis). See also Johnson "A Unifying Theme for the Year"; Devine "Introducing Thematic Reading in Freshman Composition"; Scheffler "Composition with Content: An Interdisciplinary Approach"; Moon "First-Year Writing in First-Year Seminars: Writing across the Curriculum from the Start"; and Heiman "'Odd Topics' and Open Minds: Implementing Critical Thinking in Interdisciplinary, Thematic Writing Courses."

<sup>4</sup> In this article, I understand transfer as students being able to understand how "knowledge and skills are *transformed* across contexts" (Wardle, "Understanding" 69). In this conception, students do not just transfer skills from one setting to another, but rather, they can analyze the situation and understand what needs to change, or transform, to best address it.

<sup>5</sup> Fulkerson explains that procedural rhetoric “shares an axiological commitment to judging writing by suitability to the context (‘situation and audience’), including concern for classical issues of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos*. Its theory of the writing process says that writing is a complex extended set of (teachable) activities in which a wide variety of invention procedures may be valuable, and an equal variety of drafting and revision activities . . . . In contemporary composition practice, I see rhetorical philosophies taking three different emphases: composition as argumentation, genre-based composition, and composition as introduction to an academic discourse community” (671).

<sup>6</sup> The I-search paper is a less formal research paper that draws specifically on the writer’s interest in the subject. It most often begins with a story about either the writer’s interest or their research project, and it explains the process they used to find information.

<sup>7</sup> Perkins and Salomon outline two types of transfer, low road and high road. In low road transfer, the circumstances are extremely similar to one another, ‘low road transfer trades on the extensive overlap *at the level of the superficial stimulus* among many situations where we might apply a skill or a piece of knowledge” (“Teaching” 25). Perkins and Salomon use the examples of driving a car and driving a truck or reading bar graphs in different situations to demonstrate low road transfer. The skills needed look and feel so similar, that the transfer of those skills happens fairly routinely. High road transfer, however, is more difficult because “high road transfer depends on deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application in another” (“Teaching” 25). In other words, the learners do not automatically recognize the same skill is needed in two different situations.

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