

Episode 164: Kara Taczak

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Kara Taczak talks about writing across context, research on transfer, teaching transfer in different institutional context, and e-portfolios.

Kara Taczak is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Central Florida, the co-editor of Composition Studies, and incoming co-editor of College Composition and Communication. Her award-winning research centers on composition theory and pedagogy, specifically focusing on teaching for transfer and reflection. Her work has appeared in numerous edited collections as well as in CCC, Writing Spaces, International Journal of Work Integrated Learning, the WAC Journal, Composition Forum, teaching English in a two-year college, and across the disciplines. Her upcoming work will appear in CCC and Writing and Pedagogy.

Kara, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: In 2014, you published Writing Across Contexts with Kathi Yancey and Liane Robertson, where you all write about reflective practice and transferring composition and how "we can help students develop writing knowledge and practices that they can draw upon, use and repurpose for new writing tasks and new settings." Do you remember the moment when you decided to collaborate and work on this book together? When and where did this start and what was that process like?

KT: Well, first, thank you so much for having me, Shane. Very excited to be here. It's kind of crazy that you're starting with this question, because it's been a decade. Where does the time go? Does not feel like it's been 10 years already, but it's exciting that we're hitting this milestone moment. I feel like TFT is still being talked about and used in really fruitful ways, so I think that's exciting. So thinking back on the moment that it came to be and when the book came into fruition is really kind of exciting for me. And ironically, I've already thought about this, because Kathi, Liane and I just wrote a teaching for transfer encyclopedia entry, and I was thinking back to the moment that it kind of all came together. It didn't actually start with the book, because Liane and I were at Florida State University and Kathi was our dissertation head, and we were trying to think of dissertation topics, as one does when you're in grad school. For me, and I've written about this with Kathi, I went to the Writing Across Borders Conference, the WRAB Conference, and it was only my second conference and it was in California.

I remember I had never been to Southern California before and everybody told me it was going to be beautiful, warm, sunny, and I got there and it was fucking freezing, rainy. And I was like, "Well, everybody lied to me." That was the first thing I remember. But the second thing that happened was I went and saw Kathi present. And Kathi presented with a grad student of hers, Emily Dowd, and they presented on transfer. They had got a CS grant and they just were doing a small study on transfer. And I sat in the crowd and I was like, "This is interesting." That was my exact thought. "Well, this is such an interesting idea. Transfer."

I walked out, and I remember exactly where I was on that campus, UC Santa Barbara campus. I sat down on a bench and I had a notebook of New York, because New York is one of my favorite cities. And I started making a list of possible dissertation topics. Now mind you, this is February of my first year in grad school, so super early, but I'm a little type A. I wrote "transfer." Right above that I had a post-it from Kathi that said, "Trust the process." And below "transfer" I wrote "reflection," because Kathi of course is

one of the leading theorists in reflection in the writing classroom. And so just put those two thoughts down and kind of went about my business.

And then Liane had done a master's thesis on transfer in the workplace. Liane and I used to have coffee at a Starbucks on Monroe Street, and we started to think about what would it look like if students could make use of writing knowledge past the first year classroom. We just started having conversations, and those conversations led to talking with Kathi and turning those conversations into dissertation topics. Kathi got excited about our dissertation topics and one thing led to another. At first, Kathi thought our dissertation topics were just going to lead to a single chapter, and she would tell you this, because she was originally going to write a book about transfer.

And the more research that Liane and I got into and the more our findings came to be, Kathi was like, "We're finding bigger things. We're going to have to be co-authors." And Liane and I were like, "Yes, please." Who's going to turn down Kathi Yancey when she's like, "Would you please co-author a book with us?" And we did. Liane and I's first year out of grad school, we started writing that book, *Writing Across Contexts*, and it was really fun and exciting to write. Writing with Kathi is very easy and we write very well together, I think.

We had a very clear picture of what we wanted to put in the book, which is we needed a history of transfer, because no one had done that before, and we really wanted to focus on specific findings that had come from both our dissertations. Prior knowledge was a huge thing for us, and we put that in. And of course, reflection was another big thing for us. That's how the book kind of came to be. It really did start for me from a conference in cold and dreary California, to coffee conversations with Liane, to Kathi inviting us to do this with her. So in some ways it was very organic, and other ways it just kind of followed that process that Kathi always told us to trust. And then from the book has led to so many other wonderful things, including three phases of research.

SW: 10 years later, Kara, here we are in 2024. What's most appealing or interesting to you now about the transfer question?

KT: I think the interesting thing is we are still learning a lot about transfer. I think that's the first thing. I think there's still so much that we can do. For one, there's still research coming out on it from lots of really exciting places. Two, I think there's things that we can still test within the transfer curriculum. Liane and I talk about this all the time and we talk about it with our colleague Matt Davis, who was a year behind us. His dissertation wasn't necessarily on transfer, but since then he has become a part of our transfer group and done a lot of work in multi-modality and transfer. We are constantly thinking about, in what ways do we evolve our transfer research? And I think in 2024, it means a couple different things.

One, I think very obvious answer, and people ask us all the time, is what does it look like in terms of anti-racist practices? What does that mean for the curriculum and what does that mean for the transfer question, as you asked? And how do we make and adapt, I guess, the curriculum to help fit that? I think the other thing we have to think about is the changing learning habits of students. We know since COVID has happened that students do not respond to learning in the same ways. We know that their learning habits and motivation to learn has changed, in part because of COVID, in part because of other things. And I think that means we have to think about the ways that we teach and the ways that we bring the curriculum to them. I think it also suggests what students will take out of the classroom. How we taught 10 years ago, since the book is now 10 years old, is not the same as we are going to teach nowadays.

The third thing I would say, and I've really been thinking about this a lot, is students are in a different place in terms of wellbeing. I think it's this different generation really focuses a lot on their wellbeing. They think about it in ways that other generations have not. And so that's something that I don't think we

ever thought or accounted for in the transfer question, in the teaching for transfer curriculum. So what would that look like to account for it now or should we account for it now? I think we should, and I think we should build it into the reflective framework.

I think it ties in really nicely to the reflective framework, but I think there's always going to be ways to challenge the transfer question. And I think if we are good educators, we always want to challenge the transfer question, because we want our students to learn knowledge and practices that they're going to use in other contexts. So if we're going to be good at our jobs, we have to constantly challenge the transfer question. What does it mean for students to take up that knowledge and use it in current contexts and future contexts and make it adaptable and useful?

SW: Kara, has there been a thread in transfer research over the last 10 years that has been challenging and/or inspiring to your own understanding of transfer, something that has informed your current pedagogy and research on transfer? You've taught in several different institutional contexts now as well. How has your own understanding and how has the curriculum changed now that you're no longer a graduate student at Florida State?

KT: That's a great question. Right out of the gate I had to change, because I moved from an R1 flagship school to a private elite school. Slightly similar, but not really, student demographic. And I went from a 16-week semester to a 10-week quarter, and I went to an independent writing program from an English department. So those are some different changes, not necessarily huge changes, but big. I would say the 10-week quarter was probably one of the biggest, so trying to adapt to a 10-week quarter. And then of course you have to account for an independent writing program has really specific goals and objectives, and I was now teaching a rhetoric class and a research class, where I was not teaching a rhetoric class at Florida State. And so I had to adapt the teaching for transfer curriculum for that.

And then I started teaching so many different... For me, I'm the kind of teacher who likes to teach lots of different types of classes. I don't like to teach the same class over and over again. So while at DU, I taught so many different types of classes. I worked a lot with honor students. I worked with internationalization. I developed classes for e-portfolios, writing minor. I taught within our upper level writing classes, our ASM, our first year seminar. In all of those classes, I took up the transfer question, because I do believe... And I also taught within our embedded college, and I taught ironically, and I mean ironically because this is not my content area, environmental management and policy. But I think one of my areas of expertise is curriculum and development, and I'm really good at designing curriculum.

I think it's because I do think about transfer and I think about it from a reflective standpoint. And for me, the question that you asked is, what is it that I want students to value and what is it do I want them to take forward? Very early on in my career, and when I went to DU, I had a conversation with someone, and I'm not going to say whether it was from DU or where it was, but early on, right after I graduated, I had a conversation with someone and I was talking to them about transfer, and they said to me, "Well, I don't care if they take anything from my class. I'm just teaching and I'll teach for the amount of time that I have them in my class and then I'm done with them."

In that moment, I thought, well, isn't that just sad? Why would we just teach them for that moment or that experience? That's not my philosophy. It's probably because how I started. My master's is in education. I came up during a time when No Child Left Behind was happening, highly qualified teacher, and I learned alongside some pretty burnout teachers. They taught me a lot about education and they taught me a lot about how to think about classroom practices. And I think because of those experiences, I've always thought about students in terms of moving knowledge forward. So it makes sense that transfer became my area of research because I learned alongside people who were really questioning why they were even

having to go back to school. So they were trying to question what they should take out of that experience, as students themselves, I mean.

So for me, the transfer question always comes back to what do I believe students need? And I think you have to look at students themselves, and I think you have to look at the moment in time, and then I think you have to look at the content. And then of course you create objectives based on that. I think the challenge becomes... Well, there's a lot of challenges. Transfer is not easy. One of the things that the last phase of research found is that... We call it readiness to learn, and students don't necessarily enter our classes ready to learn. So if you think about that in terms of any of our classes, students are not necessarily prepared, or if they're prepared, they're not prepared for the type of content and expectations that come with the college class. So in terms of readiness, they have to be willing to engage with the writing concepts and understand what it means to transition into college.

SW: Kara, you've taught in so many different classes and so many different students. You made a comment about how students' needs change alongside the curriculum depending on the classes we teach. It seems to me that foundational to your approach to teaching, regardless of the class, is transfer. Can you talk about how you negotiate this teaching philosophy or pedagogical value with the changing needs of your students and the changing classroom environments in which you teach?

KT: I think it goes back to, because my second area is reflection, I always try and place the agency back on the students and look to them for what they need. I mean, I was trained by Kathi, and so this of course is coming directly from her. And then what we learned from our transfer research is you do need to ask the students what do they come into the classroom understanding. And my good colleague Jesse Moore says this, so many educators do not ask students what they come into the classroom knowing and understanding. And so then if we don't ask students this, how do we know what they know? How do we know what students know if we don't ask them? I don't know.

So I think if we start with students' prior knowledge and experiences, and then we put that agency back on them and we ask them to engage with the material of the class, whether it's writing, or I've taught classes on Batman, feminism and romance and environmental policy, if we ask them for their own goals and expectations, then we can start to figure out what it is that they need. I understand that sometimes my way of teaching is not necessarily the same as others, but I can revise... I mean, I tend to revise, not that I can. I just tend to revise my syllabus as I go so I can hear what the students are telling me they need.

SW: In your article "The Importance of Transfer in Your First Year Writing Course," you write, "When we think of transfer, we hope it's successful or effective at moving writing practices forward." Then you share two less positive types of transfer: negative transfer and resistance transfer. Do you mind talking about these two less positive types and how teachers can acknowledge and address them in the writing classroom?

KT: I think the thing that's important to remember is that transfer is difficult and that it doesn't just readily happen. The thing that I always remind faculty, especially when I'm working with them, because I have worked with faculty a lot, is, one, you have to tell students that what you're teaching them, the goal is to transfer. You have to acknowledge that we are teaching for transfer, because students don't always... They have a lot going on. So we want to help them and so tell them that we are trying to give them something that they can use for their future or use in something that they're currently doing, because it could be concurrent transfer. But there can be less positive types of transfer. The first one I talk about is negative transfer, which is just when the knowledge or practice is used negatively impacting their ability to perform in a new context, which is pulling directly from Ed Psych, Perkins and Salomon.

My example that I used in that article was the five paragraph essay. We know that in high school, students are taught the five paragraph essay because it works for that context. And when they come to college, they write a five paragraph essay and then it doesn't work, and then that's negative transfer, because they get a "bad grade", whatever that bad grade is, and they get really upset about it. And so the negative transfer is the five paragraph essay worked for the context of high school, but coming to college it didn't work, and they're really upset because they don't understand why the five paragraph essay didn't move forward successfully.

And so how do you combat negative transfer? I think as an educator and not just a writing educator, you have to understand that we need to talk about genres with students. So what kind of genre are you asking of your students? I'm pretty sure I talked about it from a philosophy professor, because this was an example a student gave me before a philosophy professor asked a student to write a reflective letter. Well, a reflective letter is not a five paragraph essay. And so if we want our students to write a reflective letter, well, let's talk a little bit or at least define what the genre of a reflective letter is and let them know that there are certain genre conventions of a reflective letter that you are looking for. If we unpack the rhetorical situation for students a little bit, we help set them up for more success and they start to understand that what happened in their prior experiences isn't necessarily the same set of expectations that is expected for this current writing moment.

The second type that I talked about was resistant transfer. This is coming from our research, the teaching for transfer research. I said that resistance transfer is when a writer's past experiences with writing encourage resistance to new learning, which often result in a roadblock. And I connected the roadblock to general types of resistance, from fear of failure to anger. And I found the resistance transfer to be... I found this can happen a lot when students are just unsure of what expectations are. And so a way to help students with that is to think about the writing assignment itself. And so what are you asking of students and what are the expectations?

I think it goes back to what I said earlier, in terms of starting with prior experiences. So then the students enter the current assignment already understanding what their prior is, so that if there is a roadblock, students have thought about it a little bit. I think this is a good example of why reflection is so important.

SW: Kara, you've done a lot of work with portfolios and e-portfolios. Do you mind talking about the benefits and values of e-portfolios in first year writing? What do you think are some of the affordances of using e-portfolios in writing classes?

KT: The really cool thing about e-portfolios is it kind of forces students to pause both internally and externally because it's got that built in reflection. Kathi always says, or she defines it as collect, select, reflect. And so when portfolios are part of the reflective classroom, you're asking students to reflect on multiple levels. So when they collect the artifacts, when they're thinking about what artifacts to include, that's a really specific type of reflection. So you're having students think about their work rhetorically. So it's not just what type of work best showcases me, but what kind of work fulfills these expectations, and then can I also talk about them? Can I create an argument about why these pieces should be in the portfolio and why they fulfill the objectives?

And then all portfolios have some sort of reflective intro or a letter or some reflection and presentation, like Kathi talks about. For me, it's the theory of writing that they do as part of the teaching for transfer. And that component allows students to really dig into what have they learned and can they make sense of that learning? That is where they start to become reflective practitioners. And we know from research in transfer that students can and carry that knowledge forward better when they are reflective practitioners, because reflective practitioners develop a repertoire, and I've argued this elsewhere, but they develop that

repertoire of knowledge, past knowledge, current knowledge, future knowledge, and the repertoire is this thing that they can pull from.

It's like they can bring it out and use it again. The portfolio is that opportunity for students to really create that repertoire, because then it makes it real, right? They literally see it in front of them. They can manipulate it. They can revise it. It shows them how they evolved as a learner in different spaces. And so it's really this great opportunity to show them in many different ways themselves as learners, as writers, as reflective practitioners, and to show them what they're capable of and to show them where they can possibly go with it.

SW: Thanks, Kara, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.