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Tutors for Transfer? Reconsidering the Role of Transfer in Writing Tutor Education

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Abstract Writing center professionals' (WCPs) efforts to integrate transfer of learning theory into writing tutor education have exceeded empirical research on the effects of such curricula. Building on research in this area (Cardinal, 2018; Hill, 2016), we designed and implemented a semester-long, transfer-focused training curriculum for experienced undergraduate writing tutors that sought to build on tutors' prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy. We tracked these tutors' understanding of, attitudes toward, and uses of transfer and transfer talk in writing center sessions over the course of a semester.

Through analysis of training meeting transcripts and a post-training survey, we found that tutors developed a basic understanding of transfer and demonstrated positive attitudes toward transfer and transfer talk; however, they responded negatively to *examples* of explicit transfer talk in the curriculum and proposed modifications constrained by the social context of tutoring (Carrillo, 2020). We characterize these modifications as instances of tutors contextualizing transfer talk in light of their prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy. We encourage WCPs who are designing or researching transfer-focused tutor education to conduct additional empirical research and to prioritize tutors' perceptions and experiences in order to develop more dynamic conceptions of transfer in writing center studies (Carrillo, 2020).

Keywords tutor education, transfer talk, transfer of learning, prior knowledge, writing center pedagogy, contextualized transfer talk

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Writing center professionals (WCPs) are understandably enthusiastic about transfer of learning. Given assertions that “[writing] centers already teach for transfer every day” and that “transfer studies and writing centers are made for each other” (Devet, 2015, pp. 120, 138), transfer seems not only integral to but inevitable in writing center work. The conviction that writing centers are “key sites” in facilitating transfer (Hill, 2016, p. 78) has prompted research in two areas: (1) exploring how tutors transfer

their writing center knowledge and experience to contexts beyond the writing center (Driscoll, 2015; Driscoll & Harcourt, 2012; Weaver, 2018); and (2) revising tutor education curricula to prepare tutors to facilitate students' transfer of writing knowledge in writing center sessions (Bowen & Davis, 2020; Cardinal, 2018; Devet & Driscoll, 2020; Hahn & Stahr, 2018; Hill, 2020). Less common are empirical studies of the effects of transfer-focused tutor training interventions (for an exception, see Hill, 2016). As interest and experimentation in the second

area grows, we believe that empirical studies of transfer-focused training curricula are essential in determining not simply which “training techniques are successful and how they can be improved” (Devet, 2015, p. 142) but, more fundamentally, what transfer actually looks like in the context of writing center work, particularly from the perspective of peer tutors.

In this article, we report findings from a non-credit-bearing, transfer-focused writing tutor education curriculum consisting of six biweekly meetings during a 15-week semester with a group of five experienced undergraduate writing consultants at our university writing center. Our curriculum functioned as part of an IRB-approved study that sought to address this question: What effect does a transfer-focused training curriculum have on undergraduate writing tutors’ understanding of transfer, their attitudes toward the usefulness of “transfer talk,”¹ and their application of transfer talk in tutoring sessions? Our curriculum, described below, was extensively informed by Heather Hill’s (2016) experimental study on how transfer-focused training helped tutors “facilitate the transfer of writing-related knowledge” in writing center sessions (p. 77). We also drew on Jody Cardinal’s (2018) attention to tutors’ prior knowledge and identification of “pedagogical methods” that tutors found “most helpful in understanding and applying the concept of transfer” (p. 2). We sought to build on these and related publications then available by designing a more extensive curriculum in terms of length, content coverage, and tutor engagement with transfer. Rather than focusing exclusively on helping tutors learn how to tutor for transfer, we sought to help tutors integrate the concept of transfer with their prior knowledge of and training in writing center pedagogy (defined below). And when introducing transfer-related concepts, we sought to create ample opportunities for tutors to collaborate on generating, implementing, and reflecting on their efforts to incorporate transfer talk into their writing center sessions. In this sense, our curriculum anticipated Carillo’s (2020) recommendation that transfer-focused education and research account for tutors’ prior knowledge and their perceptions of transfer.

We began this project hoping to see the presumed benefits of transfer manifested in our meetings with tutors and in their meetings with writers. However, two aspects of our experience—attempting to empirically study transfer of learning, and listening carefully to our tutors’ mixed responses to transfer talk—have prompted us to reconsider claims about transfer as an inevitable good for writing centers and assumptions that transfer aligns seamlessly with writing center pedagogy. As summarized by Neal Lerner (2014), writing center pedagogy is, at heart, a “conversation about student writing” in a peer-to-peer environment where the tutor adopts a “facilitative role” to support individualized learning, encourage practice, and avoid grade-based evaluation—all geared toward the long-term goal of promoting students’ development as writers (pp. 303–304). Writing center pedagogy underscores the social context of peer tutoring, including the need for interaction and feedback from readers throughout the writing process (pp. 306–307). Teaching, theorizing, challenging, and researching this pedagogy has been a perennial focus among WCPs, as evidenced by a robust library of resources, handbooks, and research. Writing center pedagogy is central to our writing center’s initial and ongoing training,² but certain aspects of that pedagogy are prioritized by our tutors in ways that affected our participating tutors’ reception of transfer in significant ways. Although scaffolding receives more sustained attention in our initial and ongoing training than Melissa lanetta and Lauren Fitzgerald’s (2016) relatively brief summary of Kenneth Bruffee and social constructivism, it is the authors’ description of tutoring as “a friendly conversation” in a context where “people are comfortable with one another, when there’s an environment of trust established” (p. 17) that resonates strongly with our writing tutors, who are exclusively undergraduate students and who encounter this within their first week of tutoring. We were aware that peerness strongly animates our writing center’s culture, but we did not anticipate how central it would be in our participating tutors’ reception and modification of transfer talk.

Consequently, we wonder about the relationship between transfer of learning and

writing center pedagogy in recently proposed transfer-focused tutor education, and how the two are integrated effectively, particularly for new tutors with little or no prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy. Hill (2020) describes her one-credit course as using genre theory, writing-about-writing, and teaching-for-transfer approaches to help tutors first “come to a more accurate and complex understanding of writing” and, second, “evaluate and give useful feedback on writing.” Hill’s syllabus indicates that writing studies readings are paired with readings from Ben Rafoth’s *A Tutor’s Guide*, but the course description prioritizes transfer content. Similarly, Bowen and Davis (2020) propose that “TFT-focused” tutor education “can be productively taught through writing center pedagogy” by fostering tutors’ “high-road³ transfer of writing, tutoring knowledge, and practices” in ways that are suited to “diverse writers, texts, and circumstances of tutorials.” While the authors’ curricular description strikes us as a thoughtful, plausible articulation of integrating transfer and writing center pedagogy, it seems to foreground the former in ways that displace the latter. We worry that doing so displaces the needs and experiences of those at the center of our work: namely, tutors. At a time when publications like *Talk about Writing* and *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* have, respectively, empirically studied and synthesized best practices in writing center tutoring, it seems crucial that such work remain centered in transfer-focused tutor education, especially for undergraduate peer tutors. Doing so will more likely ensure that tutor education remains grounded in the context of peer tutoring and centered on the needs and experiences of tutors.

Part of our interest in designing an experimental transfer-focused tutor education curriculum was to address the lack of empirical research on the effects of such curricula. Citing Dana Driscoll (2015), Hill (2020) claims that “a transfer-focused course [is] an effective way to prepare tutors for the writing center” because doing so improves tutors’ “writing, interpersonal communication skills, and metacognitive skills.” Bowen and Davis (2020), also citing Driscoll (2015), imply that high-road transfer is a means for fostering tutor “learning” that,

more than training, equips them to better facilitate learning in writing center sessions. But Driscoll’s (2015) article includes little empirical evidence that the “transfer-focused pedagogy” she integrated into her peer tutoring course prepared students to tutor independently in her campus writing center.⁴ Given our initial struggle to identify empirically the impact of transfer-focused training in our tutors’ writing sessions, we are not surprised by the field’s lack of empirical evidence in this area. Indeed, we agree with Rebecca Nowacek, Bridget Bodee, Julia E. Douglas, Will Fitzsimmons, Katherine A. Hausladen, Megan Knowles, and Molly Nugent’s (2019) conclusion that “transfer is both more common and more complex than research currently recognizes” (p. 18). Studying transfer empirically compelled us to reexamine our understanding of transfer and its role in writing tutor education. This was most apparent as we sought to listen carefully and critically to our tutors—during the semester-long curriculum and through subsequent analysis of training meeting transcripts—to identify their understanding of transfer, their perceptions of its relevance to tutoring, and their efforts to incorporate it into their sessions with writers. As we learned to listen to our tutors, we developed a new perspective on transfer’s relevance to writing center work. Paraphrasing Nowacek and colleagues (2019), we saw commonalities between transfer theory and writing center pedagogy, as well as complexities when integrating both in tutor education. We also saw the need for WCPs to develop “more complex and multidimensional conceptions of transfer and context into studies of transfer” (Carillo, 2020, p. 47).

We aim to foreground tutor contributions to the field’s understanding of transfer’s role in writing center work by sharing five tutors’ understanding of and attitude toward transfer and transfer talk (for definitions, see Table 1) as they participated in our semester-long, transfer-focused tutor education. After reviewing relevant transfer-focused training curricula and summarizing our own, we review our methods and report our findings: tutors developed a basic understanding of transfer as application, and they responded positively to the relevance of transfer and transfer talk

in writing consultations; however, they responded negatively to *examples* of explicit transfer talk presented in the curriculum and suggested modifications intended to preserve peeriness in sessions. We characterize these modifications as instances of tutors contextualizing transfer talk in light of their prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy, which included their awareness of the social context of peer tutoring. Our study underscores the importance of designing empirical research on transfer in writing center studies that foregrounds tutors' perceptions and experiences. Listening carefully to tutors can help WCPs develop broader understandings of transfer and transfer talk that can, in turn, benefit transfer-focused tutor education.

Transfer-Focused Training Curricula

When designing our curriculum in 2018, we consulted then-current curricula, which focused on developing training that would help tutors learn to tutor for transfer (Hill, 2016; Cardinal, 2018). Hill (2016) taught a one-hour training meeting on transfer to three tutors and then compared these tutors' session transcripts with transcripts of three tutors who did not participate in the training meeting. After coding the transcripts for transfer talk, Hill (2016) concluded that, while the transcripts from transfer-trained tutors provided more evidence of explicit transfer talk, both groups of tutors missed opportunities to engage in discussions about writing concepts that would promote transfer. Drawing on content from Hill (2016) and Devet (2015), Cardinal (2018) delivered two 90-minute professional development meetings on transfer and transfer talk, then surveyed tutors to determine their preferred methods of instruction and their perceived impact of the training on their tutoring. Survey data indicated that the "preferred [training] activity" was analysis of sample dialogue involving transfer talk, and that tutors reported "at least some implementation of transfer talk" in their sessions (p. 5). However, Cardinal also learned that, in some cases, tutors' prior knowledge of tutoring interfered with

their understanding of transfer theory, including their ability to conceptualize "transfer talk as distinct from a generalized notion of good tutoring" (p. 6). Both Hill (2016) and Cardinal (2018) acknowledged research limitations and provided direction for future transfer curricula research. Hill encouraged WCPs to implement more robust training curricula and has since published a semester-long transfer-focused training curriculum, discussed above (Hill, 2020). Cardinal (2018) recommended designing transfer-focused training to draw explicitly on tutors' prior tutoring knowledge (p. 8).

Our curriculum focused on facilitating tutors' ability to tutor for transfer while understanding their perceptions of, experience with, and response to the content of the curriculum. Drawing extensively on Hill's (2016) experimental study and Cardinal's (2018) training activities, we designed a transfer-focused training curriculum that emphasized transfer, transfer talk, and key concepts identified in writing center publications as helping facilitate transfer (Cardinal, 2018; Devet, 2015; Hahn and Starr, 2018). These and other transfer-related studies (Bromley et al., 2016; Farrell & Tighe-Mooney, 2015; McCarthy, 1987; Perkins & Salomon, 1988; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Roozen, 2010) were consulted but, due to limited time and room, not addressed explicitly in the curriculum. Key concepts were familiar to tutors based on their initial and ongoing training (see note 2).

Our curriculum sought to build on Hill's and Cardinal's in several ways. We explicitly addressed tutors' prior tutoring knowledge in order to minimize the challenges that Cardinal's tutors experienced. We lengthened the curriculum, both in number of meetings (6) and in duration (15 weeks). We incorporated teaching methods determined by Cardinal's tutors as more effective. These changes were meant to provide a more extended and interactive experience for tutors to learn, discuss, apply, and reflect on their efforts to engage students in transfer talk. Additionally, these adjustments allowed tutors to regularly process and assess transfer through ongoing discussion in training meetings, reflection on tutoring sessions between training meetings, and participation in an exit survey and discourse-based interview

at the conclusion of the training. These opportunities provided multiple data points from which to synthesize tutors' understanding, attitudes, and application of transfer and transfer talk over the course of a 15-week semester.

Prior to the first meeting, tutors read a chapter on transfer from Robert Haskell's (2001) *Transfer of Learning*, which they discussed during the first meeting. In the second meeting, tutors were introduced to Hill's (2016) definitions and examples of transfer talk. In subsequent meetings, tutors reflected on and shared how the previous meeting's topic and activities had informed their efforts

to incorporate transfer talk into their tutoring. They were then introduced to and discussed a new key concept in relation to transfer talk, worked in pairs to revise an actual tutoring transcript to include explicit transfer talk based on the given concept, shared their revisions with the group, and discussed how to incorporate similar instances of transfer talk into their tutoring. Between each meeting, all tutors were asked to audio-record one of their tutoring sessions; these sessions were transcribed toward the end of the curriculum. For an overview of our transfer-focused curriculum's key concepts, learning objectives, and definitions, see Table 1.

Table 1. Transfer-focused Training Curriculum

Meeting	Key Concepts	Learning Objectives	Definitions
1	Transfer	<p>Tutors will recall their own moments of transfer by reflecting on previous learning experiences.</p> <p>After discussing textual examples of transfer success or failure, tutors will explain the processes that helped or hindered transfer.</p> <p>After receiving a basic definition of transfer, tutors will generate their own examples of transfer successes or failures.</p>	<p>Transfer: "previous learning [can influence] current and future learning" and "past or current learning [can be] applied or adapted to similar or novel situations" (Haskell, 2001, p. 23)</p>
2	Transfer Talk	<p>By reflecting on their reading, tutors will identify concepts that help students engage in transfer.</p> <p>Tutors will discuss and explain the importance of explicit transfer talk.</p> <p>By looking at sample tutorial dialogues, tutors will identify how good tutoring practices and transfer talk work together.</p>	<p>Transfer talk "occurs when tutors discuss the relationship between writers' prior knowledge and current task, or between their current learning and future writing, thus helping writers adapt learning about writing to new contexts" (Cardinal, 2018, p. 3)</p> <p>Explicit transfer talk: "When tutors were consciously asking students to engage in transfer talk. . . . tutors explicitly asked students to reflect on their previous or future writing experience and relate it to their current writing situation" (Hill, 2016, p. 85)</p> <p>Implicit transfer talk: "When tutors engaged students in transfer talk without specifically meaning to. . . . the tutor would mention things that students would have previously learned about, but did not necessarily ask the students to talk explicitly about that previous learning" (Hill, 2016, p. 85)</p>

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3	Prior Knowledge and Transfer Talk	<p>Tutors will reflect on their understanding of transfer talk concepts by drawing on their prior tutoring knowledge from <i>The Oxford Guide</i> or elsewhere.</p> <p>Tutors will define initial learning and prior knowledge. They will identify how these terms can invite students to engage in transfer and create examples of these terms in tutorials. Tutors will set goals for ways to explicitly incorporate these principles into their own tutorials.</p>	<p>Prior knowledge: What a student has learned from previous experiences, near and far similarities (Devet, 2015, p. 124)</p> <p>“A crucial first step in scaffolding a writing tutoring session is figuring out where the writer is in terms of a particular skill set or knowledge base” (lanetta & Fitzgerald, 2016, p. 66)</p>
4	Genre, Rhetorical Situation, and Transfer Talk	<p>Tutors will reflect on their understanding of transfer talk concepts by drawing on their prior tutoring knowledge from <i>The Oxford Guide</i> or elsewhere.</p> <p>Tutors will define genre and rhetorical situation. We will discuss and identify how these terms can invite students to engage in transfer. Tutors will create examples of what these terms might look like in a tutorial. Tutors will set goals for ways to explicitly incorporate these principles into their own tutorials.</p>	<p>Genre: “Typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller, 1984, p. 159)</p> <p>Rhetorical situation: “Moments that invite us to communicate with others in a way that’s appropriate or fitting for the moment” (Jackson, 2018, p. 67). The rhetorical situation also involves the writer, their audience, their purpose, and their exigence (or what they’re responding to/what’s caused them to write/what makes their response timely) (Jackson, 2018, pp. 67–75)</p>
5	Metacognition and Transfer Talk	<p>Tutors will reflect on how transfer talk has thus influenced their tutorials. Tutors will set goals for explicitly incorporating transfer talk into tutorials.</p> <p>Tutors will define metacognition. We will discuss and identify how metacognition can invite students to engage in transfer. Tutors will create examples of what metacognition might look like in a tutorial.</p>	<p>Metacognition helps writers develop awareness of what they do and what they want to change as writers; this helps them control their writing process by “develop[ing] flexibility in approaching any writing task” (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008, p. 13). Tutors can help writers “learn metacognitive control” (p. 19) by “intervening in [writers’] writing processes, providing specific strategies, or helping them to refine the strategies they already use” (p. 14)</p>
6	Assessment of Training Curriculum	<p>Tutors will define transfer and transfer talk and reflect on their own experiences with the transfer training and how they have incorporated the training into their tutorials.</p>	<p>Complete training exit survey</p>

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Methods

Participants and Setting

Five experienced undergraduate writing tutors consented to participate in our IRB-approved study. Experienced meant they had completed at least two semesters of

tutoring in the writing center. One had worked for two semesters, two had worked for four semesters, and two had worked for five semesters. Four presented as female, one as male. All were Caucasian. One was a junior; four were seniors. Three colleges (humanities, life sciences, social sciences) were represented.⁵

The university's writing center is a campus-wide program that employs approximately 60 undergraduate writing tutors and approximately 12 undergraduate research consultants. A partnership between the writing center and library instruction, the writing center constitutes an "integrated" service model, where students can receive writing or research help, or both (Stock and Julian, in press). The writing center serves student writers across campus and records approximately 15,000 visits per academic year.

The university enrolls approximately 30,000 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students. According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, the university is a doctoral university with high research activity.

This study was designed by Shannon, a former writing tutor in the university's writing center, as part of her master's thesis under the supervision of David, who was her thesis committee chair and who, at the time, directed the writing center. Shannon was the writing center's graduate student administrator during the semester (spring 2019) when this curriculum was piloted. The training meetings were held in person in the writing center. Shannon led five of the six training meetings. David attended five of six training meetings and led one meeting in Shannon's absence.

Data Collection

Data consist of two sources: transcripts of audio recordings of six 50-minute training meetings; and a 12-question, post-training tutor survey, which consisted of demographic, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions to measure the tutors' perceptions of the value of the training curriculum and its impact on their tutoring. All 5 tutors who participated in the training completed the survey. Three tutors attended all 6 training meetings, and two tutors attended 5 training meetings. Additional data collected but not reported in this article include the following: 18 audio recordings of writing center sessions (approximately 30 minutes each); five discourse-based interviews (one per tutor, approximately 30 minutes each); and survey responses (post-tutorial and end-of-semester) from students whose sessions were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Initially, we began analyzing tutors' session transcripts for evidence of transfer talk in order to assess the impact of the curriculum on tutors' practices. Because transfer talk as conveyed in the curriculum was not evident in the transcripts, we examined training meeting transcripts, as these were more directly indicative of tutors' developing understanding of transfer and their attitudes toward transfer talk as they participated in the curriculum.

First-round coding

Using a qualitative data analysis software program (MAXQDA), we descriptively and collaboratively coded the training meeting transcripts, focusing on all three aspects of our initial research question: tutor understanding, value (defined as relevant or applicable in tutoring sessions), and application of both transfer and transfer talk. Descriptive coding seemed appropriate, given its "primary goal" of clarifying and conveying, for us and for our readers, what we saw and heard in the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 88); collaborative coding was vital for coordinating our interpretations not only to ensure agreement (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 34–35) but also to highlight contrasting interpretations, which generated important, and often challenging, conversations that clarified our understanding and refined our codes. Both methods required us to check our assumptions about transfer, resist the tendency to dismiss data that initially struck us as irrelevant, and listen closely to our data and each other. After coding the first transcript, we met to compare, discuss, and modify coded data and revise our codebook. We repeated this time-intensive process for all six training meetings, writing separate analytic memos throughout. After this first round of coding, we noted consistent agreement in our coding of tutors' understanding of and attitude toward transfer, but less agreement in our coding of value and application.

Second-round coding

Sensing the need to refine our analysis, we focused on tutors' understanding of and attitude toward transfer and transfer talk. We prepared a clean set of training transcripts, solidified revisions to our codebook (see Appendix A),

and recoded the transcripts in MAXQDA, following the same process, except remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions: we coded independently, then met via Zoom to compare and discuss our codes, making minor adjustments to our codes and clarifications to our codebook. To assess agreement, we used the software to calculate a simple interrater reliability (co-occurrence of codes), which indicated 80–100% agreement.

To ensure accuracy and representativeness of all five tutors' understanding and attitudes toward transfer and transfer talk, we individually reviewed and summarized all coded data, noting comments that were reinforced or repeated by three or more tutors, and that were reiterated in subsequent training meetings. We then compared and integrated our summaries into a synthesized account of tutors' understanding of and attitudes toward transfer and transfer talk, as well as their modifications to examples of explicit transfer talk.

Tutors' Responses to Transfer and Transfer Talk

The results of our study suggest that tutors generally understand and value transfer, but they engage in transfer talk in ways WCPs may not anticipate or recognize. Specifically, we observed the following: Based on analysis of training meeting transcripts and a review of survey data, we report that (1) tutors developed a basic understanding of transfer as application and of transfer talk in facilitating the application of prior knowledge to current and future writing tasks; (2) tutors demonstrated positive attitudes toward transfer and explicit transfer talk but negative attitudes toward the examples of explicit transfer talk, which they perceived as undermining their roles as peers; and (3) tutors proposed modified examples of transfer talk that reflected tutors' concerns for maintaining peeriness in sessions.

1. Understanding

After the first training meeting and in subsequent meetings, all five tutors used language that reflected a general and consistent

understanding of transfer, one resembling Haskell's definition introduced in the first training meeting. In five of the six training meetings, all tutors described transfer as a means for helping writers (a) apply prior knowledge about writing to the current writing task and (b) recognize how writing strategies discussed in the session could be applied to future writing tasks. Tutors frequently used the words "apply" and "adapt" when talking about transfer. For instance, when discussing the five-paragraph essay genre, one tutor described helping a writer understand how "You can apply the basic principles of, like, the five-paragraph essay to a longer essay, but to make it effective, you need to adapt that strategy so that it fits within the requirements of the longer essay." This basic understanding likely led tutors to describe transfer in an instrumental way, as indicated in survey responses, where three tutors described "using" transfer or trying to "turn it into concrete tutoring practices" in sessions.

But comments in the final training meeting and in survey responses indicate that tutors also understood and valued transfer more broadly as a means for facilitating metacognitive awareness about their tutoring, including rethinking their routine tutoring approaches and being more intentional when using specific tutoring strategies. This was particularly true for the three tutors with four or more semesters of tutoring experience, as the following comment indicates:

[This] new way of, like, framing [tutoring] . . . helped me challenge my own assumptions and my own, like, go-to strategies . . . and, like, assess whether or not they were helpful or whether or not I should change and do something different, 'cause I've been working at this job for a while and so I think it helped me get a little bit, like, unstuck from my normal tutoring pattern and continue learning and growing as a tutor.

When tutors were introduced to the general concept of transfer talk in the second training meeting, their understanding of it reflected their understanding of transfer, namely as a means for helping writers apply and adapt

prior knowledge to current and future tasks. When introduced to implicit and explicit transfer talk via Hill's (2016) coding scheme,⁶ tutors recognized the limitations of implicit transfer talk and the benefits of explicit transfer talk. Tutors perceived that explicit transfer talk helped writers actively engage in writing center sessions and, with tutors' assistance, apply prior knowledge to current and future writing tasks. Though they initially struggled to identify or describe clear examples of transfer talk, by the fifth and sixth meetings tutors projected a new understanding of transfer talk informed by their prior knowledge of and experience with writing center pedagogy.

2. Attitude

In transcripts and survey data, tutors demonstrated positive attitudes toward transfer and transfer talk, seeing both as relevant to writing center work. At the first and final training meetings, tutors characterized transfer as facilitating the writing center's long-term goal: to help students develop more confidence and independence as writers. During the final training meeting, four of five tutors described the transfer training as helping them refocus and revitalize their tutoring approaches to accomplish that goal more effectively. The following comment is representative:

I think [transfer] really is essential to truly effective tutoring, like, regardless of whether or not we talk about transfer. I guess when we talk about, like, tutoring and the way that we're ideally supposed to be teaching them things that they can then take and do on their own, that's kind of what transfer is, and so if we're really doing our jobs correctly and helping them with more than just what's right in front of us at that moment, then transfer is an essential part of that.

Overall, tutors perceived transfer talk as an effective means for accomplishing that ultimate goal. In the final meeting, tutors described explicit transfer talk as beneficial because it made sessions more discussion-based and application-oriented, thus helping writers

have deeper learning experiences that would extend beyond the session. However, all tutors demonstrated negative attitudes toward Hill's (2016) *examples* of explicit transfer talk. A frequent target was the example, "Tell me what you know about verbs." Tutors described this and similar "tell-me-what-you-know" examples variously as vague, broad, fishing, uncomfortable, or condescending. When prompted to explain their resistance, tutors described such questions as likely to confuse or alienate writers and disrupt a peer relationship necessary for collaboration. Tutor discomfort was consistently evident in transcripts of subsequent training meetings, and one survey response identified "some explicit transfer-based questions" as "still rather awkward to ask."

3. Modified Transfer Talk

Across tutors' modified examples of explicit transfer talk, we noted a tendency to replace open-ended questions with more specific questions, tailored to the perceived needs of the writer and the constraints of the session. This contextualizing strategy was repeated when modifying Hill's (2016) "tell-me-what-you-know" questions: rather than asking a writer what they know about verbs, tutors suggested asking what writers had learned in their class about verbs. Rather than asking what they know about genre, tutors preferred asking students what they'd learned in class about how to write a specific assignment. A variation of this strategy included gauging the writer's prior knowledge indirectly as it emerged in the session. A few tutors endorsed another's suggestion to use the writer's paper to assess prior knowledge. For instance, rather than asking a writer what they know about transitions, this tutor suggested highlighting an instance when a writer used a transition in their paper effectively, then asking how they might apply that elsewhere in the paper. These context-specific modifications reflected tutors' primary concern about minimizing awkwardness or condescension in order to maintain a positive peer-to-peer relationship and prioritize writers' expressed needs.

In a similarly contextualizing move, rather than aiming to help writers access and adapt general prior knowledge about writing for

unspecified future tasks, tutors proposed helping writers make explicit connections among more immediate, familiar, or accessible contexts for writers. For instance, given their familiarity with the university's first-year writing assignments, tutors described efforts to prompt first-year writers to recognize similarities in prior assignments (e.g., "Remember how you did something similar with the opinion-editorial assignment?") or anticipate opportunities to apply what they were learning in the writing center session to future assignments in the course (e.g., "Oh, this will help you when you write your final [research] paper."). Additionally, these and other modified examples were accompanied by tutors' preferences, which they confirmed in the final training meeting, to avoid engaging writers in extended discussions about writing that moved beyond the constraints of the immediate assignment. Again, this preference was motivated by tutors' primary concern for maintaining peerness by prioritizing writers' immediate needs.

Discussion and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, our struggle to empirically verify the complex phenomenon of transfer and transfer talk prompted us to listen more carefully and critically to what the data (really, our tutors) were saying about topics we thought we understood. As we learned to see transfer and transfer talk differently, we realized that Nowacek, Bodee, Douglas, Fitzsimmons, Hausladen, Knowles, and Nugent's (2019) conclusion about writers also applies to tutors: both "engage in transfer talk more often than some research would lead us to expect, but not always in the ways we had anticipated." We further agree with Rebecca Nowacek's (2011) observation that "transfer is not the all-or-nothingness" implied by discrete categories such as positive/negative or near/far (pp. 40–41) and with Carillo's (2020) assertion about the importance of drawing on more dynamic conceptions of transfer and a multi-dimensional view of context in writing center research. Hence, our first recommendation is for WCPs to be open to rethinking what they

know about transfer or what counts as useful transfer talk by finding ways to listen carefully and critically to their tutors' perceptions, experiences, and reflections.

For instance, when applying Nowacek's (2011) "transfer-as-application" versus "transfer-as-recontextualization" distinction to our findings, one might conclude that, despite having participated in six 50-minute training meetings, tutors developed only a rudimentary understanding of transfer, one that characterizes moments when tutors help writers "articulate and apply" their existing prior knowledge (p. 137). Nowacek argues that "application" is generally accurate but incomplete and instead favors a "recontextualization," or reconstruction, approach, which prompts new ways of understanding old and new contexts and of "seeing possibilities where none existed before" (p. 25). But this distinction may prevent WCPs from seeing and valuing transfer as writing tutors do, which—without a "multidimensional conception of context" in writing center sessions—can be overlooked (Carillo, 2020, p. 58). As Carillo (2020) indicates, considering such dimensions as the social and temporal (time) contexts of tutoring are essential to understanding how transfer informs tutors' work with writers (pp. 59–60). Like all of our tutors, these five tutors participated in this transfer-focused training to learn applicable tutoring strategies that would increase their ability to collaborate with writers (social context) in a 30-minute session (temporal context). Indeed, these tutors' positive attitudes toward transfer likely stemmed from a "basic" understanding of transfer, which allowed them to see transfer as compatible with their short-term goal of helping address students' immediate needs and the writing center's long-term goal of helping students develop as writers. Accounting for the constraints of context can help WCPs better understand tutors' reception and application of transfer, which in turn may cause them to reevaluate the appropriateness of a given approach to transfer in writing centers.

Similarly, one could see tutors' contextualized transfer talk examples, and their tendency to focus on the immediate context, as a limited or limiting approach to facilitating transfer of learning. This interpretation aligns

with Nowacek, Bodee, Douglas, Fitzsimmons, Hausladen, Knowles, and Nugent's (2019) distinction between transfer talk⁷ in transcript data that "was most often focused on the immediate task of the assignment" and transfer talk that "reach[ed] back further than the immediate course context," and the authors' subsequent privileging of the latter. Hill (2016) also privileges transfer talk that moves beyond the immediate assignment to more general discussions of writing. In transcript analysis, Hill (2016) describes tutors' decisions to return "to the text in front of them" (p. 90) or to focus "on the project at hand" (p. 94) as "missed opportunit[ies]" for more extended discussions that would help students "make connections" between prior and current learning situations and more likely promote transfer of learning (p. 93). In contrast, we interpret our tutors' modifications as conscious choices to contextualize transfer talk in light of their prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy as reflected in their tutoring experience. As mentioned above, tutors' motivation for modifying transfer talk was to preserve the peer-to-peer relationship with writers. This concern reflects tutors' efforts to adapt transfer talk in light of prior knowledge and experience with the social context of peer tutoring, which Carillo (2020) describes as "foreground[ing] the role of collaboration in transfer" and "how students and tutors develop knowledge together, one of the very foundations of peer tutoring" (p. 60). By contextualizing transfer talk to suit the social context of tutoring, tutors were reconciling the ongoing tension between addressing the writing center's long-term goal of helping students improve as writers and the tutors' short-term goal of helping writers improve their writing. Rather than labeling such modifications as missed opportunities or as implicit transfer talk, we characterize them as tutors' intentional efforts to access writers' *immediate* prior knowledge or writing experience, help writers apply that knowledge to the task at hand, and then help writers see opportunities for application to specific future writing tasks. Again, accounting for the constraints of context can help WCPs recognize the complexities involved in tutors "transforming prior knowledge" in light of transfer and transfer

talk, which can lead to more dynamic conceptions of both (Carillo, 2020, p. 52, emphasis in original).

These observations inform our second recommendation for WCPs, which is to prepare to help tutors navigate the commonalities and complexities of integrating transfer of learning with their prior knowledge of writing center pedagogy. Our study corroborates Cardinal's (2018) findings that tutors' prior knowledge gleaned from initial training affects how they respond to transfer-focused curriculum in continuing training. We recommend that WCPs prepare to facilitate explicit discussions among tutors about the commonalities between transfer and writing center pedagogy along with the complexities of integrating them in the social context of tutoring. For writing centers that employ undergraduate tutors or that operate within a strong culture of peerness and collaboration, our study suggests that a transfer-focused curriculum, especially when introduced in continuing education, has the potential to foreground the longstanding tension between peerness and authority inherent in peer tutors' roles. WCPs can help new and experienced tutors draw on transfer and transfer talk to navigate this tension and reexamine their own roles and goals as tutors. To avoid prescribing what transfer or transfer talk should look like, WCPs should create ample opportunities for tutors to discuss, collaborate, and reflect on their efforts to integrate transfer and writing center pedagogy. Acknowledging Cardinal's (2018) recommendation to "explicitly model" transfer talk in tutor education (p. 9), we nonetheless recommend that WCPs focus on facilitating tutors' discovery of transfer in their own sessions (Carillo, 2020) without using a coding scheme or prepared transcripts, as we did. Our experience suggests that examining how tutors make "tutoring for transfer" their own is vital to advancing the field's understanding of transfer's role in writing center work and in tutor education.

In addition to facilitating explicit discussions, WCPs should consider how to frame transfer in relation to writing center pedagogy in ways that will resonate with and expand tutors' prior knowledge and perceptions. Given the finding that our tutors understood

and valued transfer as a means for facilitating metacognitive awareness about their tutoring, we now see a new role for transfer in writing tutor education: as a valuable theoretical lens for framing the ultimate goal of writing center pedagogy, which is to facilitate students' long-term development as writers. Our study suggests that this kind of framing may be especially beneficial for experienced tutors, who are more prone to tutoring routines that may short-change this long-term goal. Drawing from Ianetta and Fitzgerald's (2016) discussion about the inevitable role of theory in writing center work, we suggest that transfer as a theoretical framework can help tutors name and "know why [they're] doing what [they're] doing and where [they] expect to get by doing it," as well as evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of their tutoring practices (p. 28). WCPs can create opportunities in transfer-focused curricula for tutors to identify, discuss, and assess whether their efforts to facilitate transfer are successful in meeting writers' needs, tutors' goals, and the writing center's purposes. Based on our tutors' understanding of and attitude toward transfer, we see transfer of learning as particularly well suited to help tutors consistently recall the connection between the "how" (facilitating individualized, context-specific, collaborative writing assistance) and the "why" (promoting long-term learning and writing development) of their daily work with writers.

As noted earlier, empirical research was instrumental in prompting us to reconsider our understanding of transfer by focusing our attention on our tutors' perceptions and experiences, which led us to unexpected perspectives on the role of transfer in writing center work. We see empirical research as essential in responding to Carillo's (2020) invitation for writing center studies "to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to understanding and studying transfer" (p. 45). WCPs who design or study transfer-focused tutor education may need to be prepared to encounter conceptions of transfer or transfer talk that differ from their understanding, as we did. But pursuing rigorous research and drawing extensively from tutors' perceptions and experiences will likely lead to conceptions of

transfer that are more expansive than WCPs could imagine alone and are more attuned to the heart of writing center work. Maintaining a tutor-centered approach to transfer-focused writing tutor education will also confirm the wisdom in Kenneth Bruffee's observation that it is "peer tutors [who should] teach us how to train them" (quoted in Trimbur, 1987, p. 21).

Notes

1. Though we cite Cardinal's (2018) and Hill's (2016) descriptions of transfer talk, we acknowledge Rebecca Nowacek's (2013) origination of the term.

2. Our initial training is a low-enrollment, credit-bearing academic internship taught by the writing center coordinator and taken during new tutors' (interns') first semester of employment. Interns read, write about, and discuss theories and practices of peer tutoring in a practicum environment. Primary texts include *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*; *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Tutors*; *A Tutor's Guide*; research articles by Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson in *Writing Center Journal*; *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*; and additional resources. Our ongoing training consists of weekly, non-credit-bearing, paid training meetings for new and returning writing tutors on a variety of writing and tutoring topics. During the experimental curriculum, our training was certified by CRLA and has since received SWCA-CARE certification.

3. As defined by Salomon and Perkins, high-road transfer indicates "the explicit conscious formulation of abstraction in one situation that allows making a connection to another" (quoted in Bowen and Davis).

4. Aside from referring to quantitative data that suggests students enrolled in the peer tutoring course were applying specific transfer techniques in course assignments, only one student's interview data is used to support the claim that the course prepared students to work as writing tutors. Further, that student reported needing to "heavily supplement her knowledge of tutoring beyond [the peer tutoring course]" when she began tutoring independently (p. 165).

5. In terms of recruiting participants, the transfer-focused training curriculum was one of several options for returning tutors' semester-long ongoing education project. Of approximately 40 returning tutors surveyed, six designated this option as their first or second preference. All six were invited to participate; after the third meeting, one tutor withdrew from the study due to a scheduling

conflict. The five remaining tutors participated in the duration of the study.

6. This raises a limitation of the models of transfer talk used in this study: they may have been coding categories rather than actual tutorial dialogue (pp. 86–87). Some phrases in Hill's (2016) coding chart differ from quoted session dialogue (pp. 90–91). We relied exclusively on Hill's coding scheme because we intended our curriculum to function as part of a broader, though loosely conceived, replication study of writing center transfer research.

7. Facing a similar challenge in applying a specific definition of transfer talk to writing tutor session transcripts, Nowacek, Bodee, Douglas, Fitzsimmons, Hausladen, Knowles, and Nugent came to a revised definition of transfer talk as "the talk through which individuals make visible their prior learning (in this case, about writing) or try to access the prior learning of someone else."

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Appendix A

Transfer-Focused Writing Center Curriculum Codebook

Code	Subcode	Examples
<p>Transfer: any phrase, clause, or conversational turn in which tutors demonstrate their understanding of transfer, generally understood as how "previous learning [can influence] current and future learning" and "past or current learning [can be] applied or adapted to similar or novel situations" (Haskell, 2001, p. 23). Tutor understanding may reflect comprehension or application of transfer as defined by Haskell to writing center tutoring.</p>		<p>"Application, just in general, of prior experience or knowledge."</p> <p>"It refers back to like things they already know that they can apply to new situations."</p> <p>"I like the word adapt because it implies growth. . . . You can apply the basic principles of like the five-paragraph essay to a longer essay, but to make it effective, you need to adapt that strategy so that it fits within the requirements of the longer essay."</p>

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Code	Subcode	Examples
<p>Transfer Talk: any phrase, clause, or conversational turn that demonstrates understanding of, engagement with, application of, or reflection on transfer talk, defined by Hill (2016) as “moments when tutors [engage] students in talking about their previous knowledge or in talking about how their current learning connect[s] to future tasks” (p. 85) or by Cardinal as talk that “occurs when tutors discuss the relationship between writers’ prior knowledge and current task, or between their current learning and future writing, thus helping writers adapt learning about writing to new contexts” (Cardinal, 2018, p. 3). Distinguish explicit from implicit transfer talk.</p>	<p>Explicit Transfer Talk: instances when tutors demonstrate understanding of, engagement with, or reflection on the meaning of this term as defined by Hill (2016): “When tutors were consciously asking students to engage in transfer talk . . . tutors explicitly asked students to reflect on their previous or future writing experience and relate it to their current writing situation” (p. 85).</p>	<p>“We get to the end of the tutorial and . . . I [ask] ‘What did we talk about in this tutorial that you can use in the rest of your paper that we haven’t gotten to?’ or ‘What could we use from this tutorial that you can use in your future papers that would be helpful for you?’”</p> <p>“I just see the explicit [as] more of like a discussion where . . . they feel comfortable telling you what they know.”</p>
	<p>Implicit Transfer Talk: instances when tutors demonstrate understanding of, engagement with, or reflection on the meaning of this term as defined by Hill (2016): “When tutors engaged students in transfer talk without specifically meaning to . . . the tutor would mention things that students would have previously learned about, but did not necessarily ask the students to talk explicitly about that previous learning” (p. 85).</p>	<p>“You’re kind of expecting the writer the student to actively stop you and say, like, ‘Wait, I don’t know about . . . argument essays’ or ‘I don’t know what subject-verb disagreement is.’”</p> <p>“You mention something in passing, it’s not like you’re stopping and asking them, like, to tell you information.”</p> <p>“You get information, but it doesn’t necessarily prompt them to be actively engaged or actively involved.”</p>

Code	Subcode	Examples
	<p>Modified Transfer Talk: instances of tutors changing, modifying, or adapting transfer talk as defined by Hill (2016) to better align with their perceptions or practices as writing tutors, or to better meet students' needs.</p>	<p>"I think you can still ask what they know, like 'Are you comfortable with this kind of writing?' . . . where you can still get the same information but preserve what you want to."</p> <p>"Find[ing] the balance between making sure that you are kind of extracting that information without being condescending in that way, without trying to push them into something that like that can be hard to maintain that relationship that you're looking for and add to those things."</p> <p>"Limiting [prior knowledge questions] to, like, what they've experienced in the classroom kind of helps them know what you're looking for."</p> <p>"You . . . need to gauge with the student. For example, like telling someone who's an English major something like 'Tell me what you've been taught about verbs' is not, like, super appropriate."</p>

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Code	Subcode	Examples
<p>Attitude: any clause, phrase, or conversational turn that indicates a tutor’s response, reaction to, or judgment about the value of transfer or transfer talk in relation to tutoring writers.</p>	<p>Positive attitude: instances of a tutor using language that suggests the importance, relevance, or usefulness of transfer or transfer talk in tutoring writers.</p>	<p>“I mean, I think it’s kind of essential. Like the whole point is like, you know . . . we’re not just helping them improve this piece of writing, we’re helping them become better writers. I mean, implied within that is they’re learning things that they can transfer to other, you know, writing assignments and such.”</p> <p>“I think it really is essential to truly effective tutoring, like, regardless of whether or not we talk about transfer. . . . I guess when we talk about, like, tutoring in the way that we’re ideally supposed to be teaching them things that they can then take and do on their own, that’s kind of what transfer is, and so if we’re really doing our jobs correctly and helping them with more than just what’s right in front of us at that moment, then transfer is an essential part of that.”</p> <p>“This new way of, like, framing it . . . helped me challenge my own assumptions and my own, like, go-to strategies . . . and, like, assess whether or not they were helpful or whether or not I should change and do something different. . . . I think it helped me get a little bit, like, unstuck from my normal tutoring pattern and continue learning and growing as a tutor.”</p> <p>“It helped me be more intentional for my choices.”</p>

Code	Subcode	Examples
	<p>Negative attitude: instances of a tutor using language that characterizes transfer talk as incompatible, irrelevant, or counterproductive in tutoring writers.</p>	<p>“I feel like, when I get asked those [explicit transfer talk] questions, it feels like the teacher’s looking for a specific answer. And so if I don’t know it, I’m a little uncomfortable.”</p> <p>“[Explicit transfer talk questions] takes away the peer-to-peer relationship.”</p> <p>“Some of these questions can feel kind of condescending, basically [they] can throw off the relationship between the tutor and . . . the writer.”</p> <p>“If I’m trying to ask them . . . about past knowledge, it feels like I’m just poking around in the dark, like I don’t really know what’s there. And so I don’t know [what] we’re going to find. And I, like, that’s why it’s hard for me.”</p>