Feedback to the Future:

Providing Writing Feedback to Foster Students' Transfer of Knowledge

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The Problem

Instructors spend time providing feedback on students' writing but don't always see students applying that feedback later.

Students don't always apply or adapt writing knowledge they learned in one situation to other situations in which that knowledge could be relevant (Beaufort, 2007).

Transfer Theory

- "Transfer goes beyond ordinary learning in that the skill or knowledge in question has to travel to a new context…across…gaps that might in principle block it." (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p. 22)

Situation One

Knowledge learned in situation one

Knowledge learned in situation two

Situation Two

Situation Three

Knowledge learned in situation three
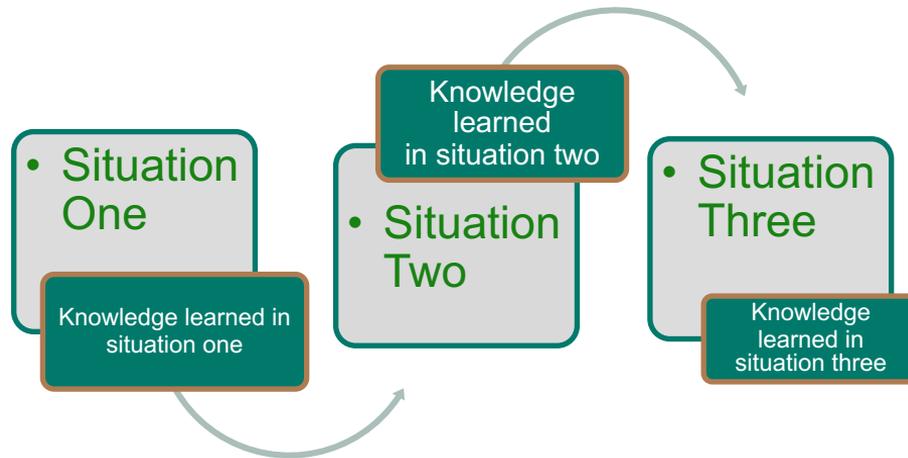
Transfer often needs to be cued, primed, and guided

- The initial knowledge should be well learned

- Learners should be able to abstract concepts from one situation for use in another

- The learner should see that a given situation calls for the specific knowledge or skill

- The learner should reflect on their own learning/mental processes

(Hill, 2016, p. 80)

How can our written feedback to student writers support transferable learning and cue students to apply that learning going forward?

Transfer-oriented feedback would

- **Invite writers' to tap their prior knowledge** for use in the current situation

- **Support the learning** you want to take place
  - Provide generalizable explanations

- **Cue writers to transfer** that learning forward
  - Provide a specific cue
  - Name one or more situations in which the knowledge is applicable or adaptable
  - Ask students to predict other situations in which they could apply or adapt knowledge

Supporting transfer:

Invite writers to transfer prior knowledge *in*

"A memo should provide a statement of the main takeaway at the beginning, up top. Don't save it for the end! In an academic research paper, this main takeaway would be called a thesis statement, right? In a memo this key takeaway is often an action item or a recommendation. Put it up here, at the end of your short intro—this goes for any memo you write."

Supporting transfer:
Provide a generalizable explanation

In the lit review section, consider launching your paragraphs with a statement of the point your sources let you make, rather than making the source(s) the topic of the paragraph. (You've actually already done this on page 4, first para. Works well.) Two benefits: 1) you stay in better control of the "story" you're telling in the lit view, and 2) your readers can more easily follow that story or argument. Try this strategy out in this paragraph and throughout.

Provide a specific cue to transfer forward

"Yes, your author's credentials and publication record certainly build her ethos; good. "Ethos" also refers to an author's credibility *as it arises from the speech itself.* So ethos doesn't necessarily depend on anything the author has done before; it depends on what the author is doing *in the speech* (or piece of writing). What does your author do *in the article* that helps build her credibility with the audience? Are there elements of her argumentation or language use that do this? In your next draft, include this "in the speech" dimension of ethos in your analysis."

Supporting transfer:

Identify a new situation for future use

"A memo should provide a statement of the main takeaway at the beginning, up top. Don't save it for the end! In an academic paper, this main takeaway would be called a thesis statement, right? In a memo, this key takeaway is often the action item or main recommendation. Put it up here, at the end of your short intro— this goes for any memo you write, as well as many reports.

Ask writers to identify situations for future use

"A memo should provide a statement of the main takeaway at the beginning, up top. Don't save it for the end! In an academic paper, this would be called a thesis statement, right? In a memo, this key takeaway is often the action item or main recommendation. Put it up here, at the end of your short intro—this goes for any memo you write. Can you think of other kinds of business writing that call for the main point to be located at the beginning?

Fewer, fuller comments

- Prioritized feedback focused on your specific learning objectives

- Invite students to apply or adapt that feedback in future writing tasks.

Thank you!

You can find additional resources on writing feedback from Writing Across the Curriculum:

- Tips for Commenting on Student Writing:
https://wac.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Approaches-to-Commenting.pdf

- Giving Effective Feedback:
https://wac.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Handout-Giving-Effective-Feedback.pdf

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