

The Elon Research Seminar

Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer

**June 12-17, 2011,
and
June 17-22, 2012 (tentative)**

“As recently as 2004 Smit was able to conclude [in *The End of Composition Studies*], ‘As far as I know, there are no research studies that concentrate directly on the nature of transfer in writing.’ “

Elizabeth Wardle, “ ‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write Genres of the University?” CCC, June 2009

From first-year composition through advanced professional and technical communication, writing curricula are constructed under a foundational premise that writing can be taught. Arguments over the ability to teach writing have coursed through the veins, often under the skin, of the disciplines related to writing studies for decades. Usually, the discipline, and especially those directly involved with the teaching-learning of writing, moves forward choosing to leave foundational questions alone and assume the truth of primary premises. The premise that writing can be taught, but more specifically our understanding of what we mean by “taught” and “learned,” have remained unquestioned, undisturbed, under the skin.

One of the chief assumptions about the teaching and learning of writing is the assumption that when we speak of teaching and learning, we are speaking about knowledge (of all sorts) that can be “transferred” across critical transitions. First-year composition is often a required course for all students with the assumption that what is learned there will transfer to other coursework and throughout students’ educational careers. Senior capstone courses often integrate writing instruction that is intended to transfer to post-graduation writing in new workplaces or graduate or professional programs.

Arguably, all of modern education is based on the broader assumption that what one learns here can transfer over there – across critical transitions. But what do we really know about transfer, in general, and writing transfer, in particular? Is “transfer,” and all of the assumptions that tag along with it, the best term to use to understand, enhance, and found education (broadly) and writing education (specifically)?

Elon University is pleased to announce the 2011-2013 Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer, a two-year research seminar that will facilitate multi-institutional research on exploring these questions within the context of critical

transitions. We invite interested scholars from across the disciplines to submit applications to join a cohort of researchers collaborating on the study of writing transfer at critical transitions - to explore these under-the-skin foundational arguments about writing education.

Critical Transitions and Writing Transfer Questions

We anticipate facilitating research cohorts focused on writing transfer at one or more of the following critical transitions:

- high school-to-college
- two-year college to four-year college
- writing in general education to writing in the major
- college to new workplaces, graduate, or professional programs
- curricular to co-curricular or extra-curricular
- informal-to-formal

Research questions might include:

- What writing strategies and practices do students transfer across these critical transitions?
- What attitudes, strategies, or forms of knowledge enable effective writing in a new setting?
- What is the importance to successful transfer of knowing the history and nature of the community or context?
- How do students respond to writing tasks in new environments – what are the intermediate steps involved in transfer?
- What kinds of features/support facilitate effective writing in new contexts?

To examine these questions, cohort members might engage with the following methods:

- participant-observer or other type of ethnography
- case studies of a group of writers over time
- interview techniques, such as discourse-based interview (Odell et al, 1983)
- evaluation and/or analysis of student work (including, potentially, student e-portfolios)

Research Cohorts and Seminar Logistics

The Elon Research Seminar will support multi-institutional research addressing and surrounding this theme over a two year period, with two one-week summer meetings on the Elon University campus, as well as a third culminating meeting of a yet determined form.

- **June 12-17, 2011:** Working with multi-institutional teams focused on the same critical transition, participants will meet on Elon's campus to develop and plan research projects

to be conducted throughout the following year at the participants' own institutions.

- **June 17-22, 2012** (*tentative dates*): Participants will meet to share their initial results, and to plan a more sharply focused research agenda for the research cohort for year two. These research cohorts will afford inter-institutional collaborations that enable larger scale studies and explorations of the impact of different institutional contexts.
- **Summer 2013**: Participants will reconvene to share their year two results, to plan continuations of their work, and/or to host a conference on writing transfer.

Participants will be active producers of significant, concrete outcomes. Outcomes of the Elon Research Seminar could include white papers, an edited volume, conference panels, individual publications, and/or a website gallery of cohort projects – as well as local initiatives on participants' home campuses.

Seminar Leaders

The 2011-2013 Elon Research Seminar will be led by Chris Anson, Randy Bass, and Jessie Moore.

- **Chris Anson** is University Distinguished Professor, Professor of English, and Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in language, composition, and literacy and works with faculty in nine colleges to reform undergraduate education in the areas of writing and speaking. Chris has published 15 books and over 90 journal articles and book chapters and has received or participated as a co-principal investigator in over \$1 million in grants.
- **Randy Bass** is Executive Director of the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning Initiatives, and Associate Professor of English at Georgetown University. He is the editor and author of numerous publications and has directed or collaborated on multiple education and technology projects, including the Visible Knowledge Project and the American Studies Crossroads Project. Randy is president-elect of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.
- **Jessie Moore** is Associate Professor of English at Elon University, where she coordinates both the first-year writing program and an undergraduate degree program in Professional Writing & Rhetoric. Jessie co-coordinates an annual faculty writing residency for the Elon University Center for Advancement of Teaching and Learning and facilitated faculty participation in a grant-funded, multi-section research project on digital literacies in first-year writing.

How to Apply

To apply, submit a completed application and abbreviated curriculum vita by November 8, 2010. The application, available online at <http://www.elon.edu/writingtransfer>, asks for the following information:

- Which critical transition(s) are you most interested in examining, and why?
- How does this work fit with your existing work? Does it have a larger institutional context at your campus?
- What methods do you have experience using and/or would you anticipate applying to study your selected critical transition(s)?
- What are the demographics/background/institutional context for your work?
- What kinds of expertise do you bring to the study of writing transfer across critical transitions?

More than one person per institution may apply, and teams that cross disciplines or institutional areas of responsibility are encouraged. Although Elon Research Seminar projects will be multi-institutional, applicants do not need to form these teams before they apply; ERS leaders will create these teams based on applicants' information.

A review committee, including the seminar leaders, will review applications, make selections, and notify all applicants by *December 3*. Questions about the application and selection process should be directed to Dr. Jessie Moore at writingtransfer@elon.edu.

Participant expenses

Expenses related to the seminar, including lodging and meals during the seminar's 2011-2013 summer meetings, will be paid by Elon University. Each participant will be granted \$1000 (\$500/year for summer 2011 and 2012) to support travel to the seminar's June meetings at Elon University. Other participant expenses, including additional travel and any research costs, will be paid by the participants and/or their home institutions.

To learn more, please visit: www.elon.edu/writingtransfer