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## **Locating the Terms of Engagement: Shared Language Development in Secondary to Postsecondary Writing Transitions**

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This article explores shared language development in secondary to postsecondary transitions. Based on survey findings of secondary students, the authors advocate using a shared language corpus to access and collect student and instructor language about writing to smooth secondary to postsecondary transitions and transitions beyond the FYC classroom.

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### **A Story**

*In the spring of 2012, the authors, two university-level writing professors, and a secondary language arts teacher met to discuss possible ways to frame a collaborative project to examine student readiness for writing in settings beyond high school—college, professional, and social. As the meeting progressed, Christina (a former secondary school teacher) and Karen, the high school teacher, fell into a comfortable conversation about teaching writing at the secondary level. They shared stories about items such as curriculum development, motivating students to write, parental involvement, curricular challenges, and the ever-looming testing standards that predominate most conversations about secondary education today. Through this conversation, Mark sat silent. Overwhelmed by the acronyms*

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*and specialized language of secondary English instruction, he did not know how to join in the conversation. Ultimately, he realized he was an outsider to this world since he did not speak the others' language. There was a gap between their world of writing instruction and his that he could not cross. He was unable to travel in their world of writing and participate meaningfully in it.*

### **Language to Connect Locations**

This early meeting to establish a secondary-university partnership drew our attention to the centrality of language as a connector between locations of writing. In particular, language is the vehicle through which members of different communities travel and come to know one another and their understandings of writing. What was most revealing for us as “writing experts” in this encounter was that one of us, despite his extensive writing knowledge, was unable to access our partner’s language of writing instruction.

After this meeting, we developed a research and teaching partnership with Karen, the high school teacher, in order to identify and examine barriers to student movement between secondary and postsecondary writing locations. Our own experiences of negotiating the language of transitions, including uncomfortable experiences such as the one recounted in the anecdote above, encouraged us to consider how we could come to know high school students’ world of writing and develop an appreciation for the ways they used language to describe their relationship to writing and the roles or purposes it served in their lives.

Accordingly, to develop this appreciation, we surveyed Karen’s students to capture a local, working corpus of the language they used to articulate their world of writing. Armed with this language, we recognized we would not have to rely on assumptions about what we thought the students knew and valued about writing. Instead, we would be in a position to engage intentionally and directly with the rich and complex world of writing they made visible to us as well as to develop tailored curricular practices to foster effective strategies for students preparing for the secondary to postsecondary transition.

As scholars and teachers of writing interested in the transition between secondary and postsecondary writing, our survey of Karen’s students revealed an opportunity to investigate the impact of language as a potential barrier to transitioning between locations of writing. In particular, our view is that two obstacles in the secondary to postsecondary transition are secondary students’ lack of familiarity with the language college teachers use to discuss writing and college teachers’ lack of familiarity (like Mark’s) with the language secondary

school teachers and students use to discuss writing. Though the vocabulary or phrasing to discuss writing may be similar between these two locations of writing, we theorize that the meaning that such terms carry varies between locations of writing, thus creating tensions for students about what they thought they knew about writing and what they now need to learn about it in college, a point that researchers on transfer, like Reiff and Bawarshi and also Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey, have made as well. This article suggests that a heightened awareness of the language of writing as a potential boundary in transitions between locations of writing offers a rich and nuanced way to understand and address transitions in the FYC classroom and beyond.

With our colleagues, we assert that secondary students have knowledge about writing, but what they lack is vocabulary for articulating their knowledge and instincts in a language that is known to us. Granted, we give them language to talk about writing—*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, *audience*, and so forth—but the students' command over that language is emerging, and thus they struggle to communicate with us in our language. Therefore, a challenge we (Saidy, Hannah, and Sura) have as writing instructors is meeting students where they are and asking them to tell us in their own words where they are. It is from that point that a shared language about the value and aims of effective writing can develop and ultimately shape teacher and student engagement about writing.

In this article, we begin by locating our interest in shared language development in transition and transfer scholarship by focusing on three strands or themes that are directly or indirectly rooted in the language of writing instruction. Then we briefly describe our partnership and the survey we administered. Drawing on our survey findings, we then assert that some secondary school writers have extensive writing vocabularies, knowledge, and experiences prior to attending college, although many students still struggle in the transition between secondary and postsecondary writing. In response, we advocate for the use of a shared language corpus, which is a pedagogical mechanism for accessing and collecting student and instructor language about writing to breed familiarity about the knowledge, language, and practices of writing that circulate in and between locations of writing.

### **Transitions and Transfer: Language and Movement across Boundaries**

In “Mapping the Elusive Boundary between High School and College Writing” Deborah Appleman and Douglas E. Green state, “We assume that between high school writing and college writing exists a boundary that is real, if un-

definable, and it is across that boundary that our students must travel” (191). Here, we have a clear recognition of students as movers, as individuals who travel across boundaries. Thinking of students as movers requires not just an acknowledgment of the positional work students do in moving—moving from one location to the other—but also the intellectual work this moving requires. Negotiating the competing languages of writing instruction is a dimension of the intellectual work secondary students perform in their transitional movement.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of students as movers is integral to work examining secondary to postsecondary writing transitions and to the more recent transfer scholarship

in rhetoric and composition. Specifically, the scholarship on transitions and transfer have an affinity to one another because of their shared interest in how students navigate the boundaries, or thresholds, between writing situations and locations. Transition and transfer scholarship both value the fact that “[w]riting knowledge and know-how do not simply move from one context to another; they adapt, transform, orient, are reimagined and newly applied; they change the context and in the process are changed by the process” (Boone et al.). We are interested in understanding how the language of writing instruction adapts, transforms, orients, and is reimagined by students as they move between locations of writing. A number of scholars have addressed this dynamic movement, which has informed our early thinking about this topic. In examining this work, we consider the role of language in this dynamic movement between locations and see these conversations falling into three particular strands: fostering connections between secondary and postsecondary locations of writing; talking to students when fostering connections; and expanding writing capacity.

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### ***Fostering Connections between Secondary and Postsecondary Locations of Writing***

Much important work has examined the difficulties associated with the secondary to postsecondary transition in areas such as the institutional and material conditions of the transition (Dombek and Herndon); cognitive, textual, and social dimensions of the boundary (Beck); comparisons of teacher expectations and secondary standards (Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese); writing forms and genres (Brannon et al; Smith; Wiley); and teacher preparation (Thompson). In addition, some scholars (Shaughnessy; Yancey and Morrison; Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey) have examined the vocabulary or language of composition,

and we want to consider ways secondary students' expression of that language, or understanding of that language, impacts the transition.

In "Bridging Gaps: Analyzing Our Students' Metaphors for Composing," Lad Tobin discusses student metaphor as a means of building on student language and offers a useful beginning point for understanding the challenges of fostering connections due to the mismatch of language use between secondary and postsecondary settings. At the heart of Tobin's analysis is a concern with "a disturbing failure of communication about composing," which he saw as arising partly from disparate language use between teachers and students. In particular, Tobin understood that "composing processes and accompanying attitudes [about writing] are abstract, idiosyncratic, and largely unconscious," and thereby were to a large extent untranslatable between individuals (446). Further compounding this lack of translatability was the fact that teachers generally made students play on their turf rather than the students' own (456). That is, teachers spoke from their own location and broadcast their language of writing to students for consumption. As one way to work through this failure of communication, Tobin argued for shared language development via metaphor usage due to the shared access that metaphors offered. As Tobin explains, "for it is in our common realms of experience, in the dislocation from the writing scene and from the jargon of academic research, that we can free writers to talk candidly about writing" (446). Tobin's recognition of common experience is important for our argument in two ways. First, he acknowledges the need for a leveling move between teachers and students in order to align them through a common frame, a frame through which to witness and assess another's view of writing. Second, and more importantly, through such leveling, Tobin creates a space for students to use their own technical vocabulary and expertise to describe their writing processes (446). They have an opportunity to bring in language from their prior writing location and play on their own turf, which Tobin notes is a key factor in negotiating a shared language for connecting writers (451). Ultimately, it is through such connections that teachers and students are able to begin contextualizing competing understandings of what it means to write, which is an essential building block for cultivating a shared or merged location of writing.

To enable the contextualization process and the ability to make connections, some scholars have argued for a need to develop more familiarity between secondary and university writing. For example, in "Improving Writing for College: The Conditions to Do It Well," Jay Simmons reported on a study that was

designed around the assumption that a familiarity between high school and college writing instruction would improve students' writing abilities (76). To achieve such familiarity, Simmons and his colleagues developed four assignments—personal essay, research-based “sense of place” essay, cultural critique, and persuasive essay—that secondary and FYC students would write and share with individuals at different grade levels (76). Through the study, the researchers found that unlike their college counterparts, high school writers did not improve their writing ability, which Simmons attributed to the conditions of high school teaching—large class sizes, large teaching loads, limited instructional time (78–79)—and ultimately concluded that high school writing classes are futile and a waste (77). Though we disagree with Simmons's characterization of the utility of secondary writing instruction, we see value in the study's attempt to foster a connection between high school and college writing instruction in order

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to understand more clearly the tensions students feel in the transitional phase. Specifically, Simmons's primary focus on the mastery of traditional forms as a boundary in the transition is noteworthy; however, we see an opportunity to extend his analysis with a more complex understanding of the boundary between secondary and postsecondary writing by seeing that boundary as dynamic and layered and exploring the role of language in the movement across the boundary. A pathway to discovering the quality and nature of the different layers of the boundary is talking with students about their transition experience.

### ***Talking to Students When Fostering Connections***

Although talking to students seems like an easy option for helping FYC instructors learn about the challenges students face in traveling between locations of writing, Anne Beaufort, in “*College Writing and Beyond: Five Years Later*,” argues this is not as easy as it seems. “Students don't know how to decode our language,” she writes, “so they are less than fully equipped to understand the particular framework for a writing class and the instructor's biases.” Beaufort's acknowledgment of students as decoders is important as it draws attention to the intellectual dimension of student travel between locations of writing. More specifically, she casts students as translators, as decipherers of language that is teacher-centric. What the translation process entails is different between

individual students and even between classes of students from year to year. The task for FYC instructors is to talk to students and discover what practices or knowledge best positions them to engage in their translation work.

An early study that examined how the language of writing potentially affects the secondary to postsecondary writing transition is D. R. Ransdell and Gregory R. Glau's "Articulation and Student Voices: Eliminating the Perception That 'High School English Doesn't Teach You Nothing.'" In it, the authors report on survey findings of first-year college students who were asked to comment on the amount of writing they did in high school as well as offer advice to

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their high school teachers about adapting their teaching to better prepare students for college writing. Most revealing in the study were the student comments offering advice for their teachers. Specifically, these students were translating back to their old location of writing based on their new experiences with writing and its attendant descriptive language in college. Though Ransdell and Glau do not frame their discussion in this way, we see the student examples as providing glimpses of some of the layers of the boundary between secondary and postsecondary writing. For example, the authors found that college students had a desire for high school teachers to emphasize writing as communicating (18). That is, writing is not simply something one does to complete an assignment or even solve a problem in everyday life. Writing is a primary means of communicating that shows up in many different forms, not just in the five-paragraph essay. In their comments, students also put language to some of the different layers of the boundary between secondary and postsecondary writing such as institutional practices and even explicit, personal feelings about prior writing training and the purposes of writing. Granted, the description of the layers here is general, but the students identified points of disconnect in their writing transition that they had to overcome and attempted to make visible their frustrations that stem from the tensions they feel in the transition. To help college students work through these tensions, Ransdell and Glau argue that college writing teachers need to learn more about student preparation, and to do that, they argue that student voices need to be part of any discussion where high school and college writing instructors discuss pedagogy (21). We agree fully with this claim and add that the focus of how to integrate student voices needs to be examined more closely than just simply inviting them to participate in the conversation. Specifically, we do not just want to create room for students to

offer suggestions. We want to create space for them to comment on the challenges of understanding and negotiating the language of writing on separate and oftentimes conflicting levels—the language they bring with them from secondary school and the language they are newly introduced to in college. In creating such space, we position ourselves to hear our students differently and be attuned to the challenges they face as developing writers.

An example of such a space is the dual enrollment classroom, as recommended by Christine Denecker in “Transitioning Writers across the Composition Threshold.” In a study of secondary to postsecondary writing transitions, Denecker investigates dual enrollment classrooms in which students experience high school and college expectations at the same time. The very nature of dual enrollment makes visible not only the tensions and inconsistencies between secondary and postsecondary writing instruction but also the variability and complexity of the boundary between secondary and postsecondary writing. In light of these factors, Denecker argues that the voices of students should also be included in conversations between high school teachers and college instructors regarding dual enrollment courses not only to gain insight about the struggles students face in the transition, but also because the writing the students produce can serve as indicators of how well composition instructors speak the same language (45). Although Denecker is arguing that the inclusion of student voices provides an opportunity for composition instructors to speak the same language, we argue that the inclusion of student voices also offers an opportunity for composition instructors and their students to develop shared language for learning in the FYC classroom.

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### ***Writing Capacity***

Writers encounter situations where they are unfamiliar with what is deemed as appropriate or even what is necessary to perform well in such situations. This very tension is what lies at the heart of transfer research that examines how students draw on their past experiences to work well in their present circumstance. We define this process of drawing on the past to perform well in the present as expanding capacity or realizing capacity, and we are interested in how the language of writing instruction activates one to realize this capacity or perhaps even fails to trigger that capacity in new contexts. To guide our



thinking about capacity, we draw from Reiff and Bawarshi's examination of students' use of prior genre knowledge to develop their writing capacity in FYC. Reiff and Bawarshi identify prior genre knowledge as an example of incomes or "discursive resources" that students bring with them to FYC courses. Of note in their work, Reiff and Bawarshi also identify "languages, englishes, and discourses" (313) as other examples of discursive resources, and we are curious about identifying the mismatch that develops between students' past language of writing instruction and the language their college writing instructor employs. More specifically, drawing on Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney's acknowledgment that "something different" is being asked of

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students in FYC, we are interested in understanding how language manifests that which is different or mismatched and generates tension for students in moments of transition or transfer.

Rather than focus exclusively on what prior knowledge students do have, some scholars have examined the students' lack of prior knowledge and its impact on writing capacity. For example, Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey identify students' absent prior knowledge and suggest that to foster transfer "teachers may want to ask their students about their absent prior knowledge and invite them to participate in creating a knowledge filling that absence." We draw a parallel between the absence of prior knowledge and students who are unfamiliar with or do not understand what is either expressed or implied in the language of college writing instruction. In essence, such students have absent prior knowledge with the new language and thus are lost in the college location of writing.

Beyond prior knowledge, transfer scholars have explored the role of student dispositions and their impact on students' writing capacity and development (Driscoll and Wells). Specifically, Elizabeth Wardle's "Creative Repurposing for Expansive Learning" offers a useful discussion of dispositions that informs our thinking about the potential impact of secondary students' language of writing instruction on activating writing capacity. Drawing on her analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Wardle comments on the challenges of realizing the aims of the transfer of writing knowledge due to the answer-getting disposition that she generally sees students inhabit as

their principal problem-solving approach. In her discussion, Wardle pairs the answer-getting disposition with a more generative problem-exploring disposition that she argues will help writing scholars realize the aims of the transfer of writing knowledge through their teaching. To cultivate the problem-exploring disposition, Wardle suggests writing scholars ought to consider “the larger fields in which [students] acquired [their] dispositions.” She writes, “individual dispositions are never simply individual; they are products of and contributors to the dispositions of educational, familial, and religious fields.” We see an opportunity to examine students’ descriptions of their high school writing experiences as an example of a field where they acquired their problem-solving dispositions. Specifically, secondary students’ language of writing instruction can offer us glimpses into the factors that contributed to how they understand writing as a tool for addressing problems in school as well as their daily lives.

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To expand on the work that examines fostering connections, talking to students when fostering connections, and writing capacity, we use an example from our secondary-university partnership to demonstrate the potential for bridging the boundary between secondary and postsecondary writing if college teachers develop a shared language of writing instruction with students.

### **Inquiry to Bridge Language and Locations**

We developed a partnership with Karen, a local high school teacher, and cultivated a relationship with her and her students over twenty-two weeks during weekly classroom visits. Early in the partnership, we became keenly aware of the language Karen and her students used to talk about writing. It was not necessarily language we used in our own writing classrooms. As such, we realized that we needed a baseline of sorts for working with Karen and her students if we hoped to bridge our locations of writing. That is, if we did not already speak the same language of writing, we needed to at least have an awareness of what that language was. Accordingly, part of our intellectual work in the partnership was finding a way to develop such awareness and communicate with the students via some form of shared language.

To obtain the baseline understanding, we designed a survey (see Figure 1) that Karen administered during the spring semester in her classes. We opted

to survey Karen's outgoing classes, even though the work of the partnership would primarily be done with her classes the following fall. Since we saw this survey as an exercise in exposing ourselves to the language of writing in Karen's classes, we believed her outgoing students would give us a clearer picture of the language of writing that students would gain in an entire year in Karen's class, specifically, and in their school more broadly. Per our institution's requirements, we obtained parental consent and student assent for the surveys, and students only participated if both consent and assent were obtained. A total of 112 of Karen's ninth-grade students participated in the survey. Over the course of the school year, the students had been exposed to a writing-rich curriculum, which consisted of exposure to many genres of writing in Karen's class and writing across the disciplines school-wide.

The students in Karen's classes were representative of the larger school population, which is 94% Latino. The site is a magnet school with an application process, yet admission is not overly competitive, and students come from a large number of feeder schools over a wide geographical area. Karen

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told us that she could not assume that her students shared a general learning base or commonality of learning experiences prior to high school. This inability to make assumptions was further complicated by the fact that Karen's classes included students from varying learning levels: regular, special

education inclusion, and honors. We were drawn to this school because of its geographic and socioeconomic diversity and because many of the students at this secondary school aspired to be students at our university, which gave us a unique opportunity to learn much about this particular location of writing that was relevant to our own location.

We designed the survey to help us access the diverse writing experiences to which Karen's students had been exposed, the types of writing they commonly practice, and their relating perceptions about the importance of that writing currently as well as in their future education and careers. Therefore, students were asked to respond to three specific questions: 1) What types of writing are you required to do in school? 2) What types of writing do you do outside of school? (This question provided boxes to check with a space to fill in other types.) 3) Describe a situation in which you had to use writing to solve a problem.

1. What types of writing are you required to do in school? (This could be for any class.)

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2. What types of writing do you do outside of the classroom? (check all that apply)

- Texting                       Journaling  
 Email                               Creative Writing (poems, stories, etc.)  
 Blogging                       Writing at Work

List any other types of writing here: \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Describe a situation in which you had to use writing to solve a problem.

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*Answer the next 2 questions by circling a number 1-5. Then write a sentence or two explaining your ranking.*

4. I believe writing will be important in my future career.

Strongly disagree   1                      2                      3                      4                      5   strongly agree

Explanation:

5. I believe I am prepared to do the types of writing I will need in my future.

Strongly disagree   1                      2                      3                      4                      5   strongly agree

Explanation:

6. Gender \_\_\_\_\_                      7. Age \_\_\_\_\_                      8. Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

9. What are your plans once you finish high school?

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Figure 1: Student Survey

Overall, the language students used in the survey to describe their writing was particularly interesting to us for two reasons: 1) The students seemed to be engaged and thoughtful writers who had specific language for describing the writing they did and how they used that writing. Although many of Karen's students may one day be considered "underprepared" for college, we saw evidence that they had developed a practice and language of writing, and that practice and language could teach us something; 2) While we could recognize much of what the students were describing, we were not actually sure about some of the language they used to describe their writing. That is, the students primarily were doing the types of writing assignments we had seen before. However, they were talking about that writing in ways that were unfamiliar, and at times disorienting, to us. Our task then as part of our intellectual work was to determine what the language revealed about the students' prior writing history and training in other locations of writing as well as their readiness to participate as writers in college. Ultimately, the survey data led us to see that the potential boundary posed by language in the transition is not singular. That boundary has multiple layers, and to understand the potential impact of the boundary, it was vital to understand the dimensions of the layers we identified: genre, institutional, disciplinary, and personal/familial.

### **The Layers of Language about Writing**

The list in Figure 2 represents all of the ways students described the types of writing they reported doing in school with no note of the overlap in responses. In order to accurately represent the language students used to describe their own writing types, similar terms were maintained on the list. The survey results revealed that Karen's students expressed the language of writing in a complex and layered way. As we examined the students' descriptions, we considered how the language of writing implicated the tensions they experienced with writing in their lives.

#### ***Genre Layer***

The first way that Karen's students came to describe one of the boundaries in the transition may be called the *genre layer*. In this layer, students described writing that fit into specific genres required of them in their secondary school location. As might be expected, since these students were all enrolled in the same English class, there was quite a bit of overlap in responses. In the first question, which asked respondents to list in their own words types of writing

Essay	Punctuation	Explanation articles
Persuasive	Different types of essays	Worksheets
Reading	Personal Statements	5 paragraph essays
Journals	Paragraphs	Informative essays
Reading Journals	Briefing	Comments
Power Point Presentation	Persuasive writing	Convincing
Notes	Summaries	Thank You letters
Bellwork	Lab Reports	Topics about life and how things work
Tests	Letters	Information story
Problem/Solution	Our reaction to something	Essays for Spanish
Math Problems	Writing story	Learning targets
Experiments	Book Reports	Summaries of what we learned
SAP's	Stories	Formal/informative
Excel	Presentations	Labs
Texting	Theatrical play	Classwork
5 Starts	Test Answers	Quick Writes
Timed Tests	Biology	Wrap ups
Geometry	Write with detail	Numbers
Word Documents	MI and CM	Instructions
Criterion	Write my steps for math	Movie summaries
Cornell Notes	CATE class notes	Thinking
Journal Entries	Reading comprehension	Brainstorm
Plays	Analysis	Data Charts
Website	Projects	
Poems	Homework	
Stories	Scripts	
Supporting details, Commentary, and Concluding Sentences	Research Paragraphs	
	Health class notes	

Figure 2: Types of Writing Required in School

they are required to do in school, many students responded with genre-based answers. For example, a large number of students reported some variation of problem/solution writing, which directly reflected the last major writing assignment the students had just completed. Furthermore, the classroom teacher had informed us that she required reading logs throughout the school year, which accounted for the large number of students who reported doing writing with some variation of reading log: *reading log*, *reading journals*, *reading comprehension*.<sup>2</sup> Another prominent genre listed by students was journaling of some sort. The students reported the following types: *journals*, *reading journals*,

and *journal entries*. In the writing students did outside of school, they reported items like *business letters* and *résumés*.

The students' responses gave us a general idea of the genres they had been exposed to in Karen's classes. In some instances, the language was straight-

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forward, such as *tests* and *punctuation*, and a college writing teacher likely would not need an explanation when a student reports focusing on punctuation as part of high school writing. Language like this carries its meaning clearly between locations of writing. However, there were some instances in the students' descriptions of genre where a college writing instructor might require some translation assistance, such as understanding how a

student distinguishes between *analysis* and *briefings*. As a specific example of a translation need that arose from one of our meetings with Karen, Mark was confused after reading through the surveys because a large number of the students wrote about doing *bellwork*. Mark may have been able to conduct a brief Web search for the meaning of *bellwork*, but even that likely would not have satisfied his question about what bellwork was in this particular context and for these particular students.

Ultimately, the relevance of the misunderstanding between students' language and teacher comprehension about genre is the way it reveals the need for college writing instructors to find new pathways for discussing genre with incoming students and broaden their understanding of what genre implies in the writing classroom. In the student responses, it was clear that they generally used genres and described them in a static way, as being tied to a specific purpose or function. However, we could not ascertain whether students understood the concept of genres. Therefore, in an FYC class, an instructor may not want to assume a basic knowledge of the term *genre*. Rather, it would be generative for transitioning students, and likely their instructor, to discuss definitions for this term and the types of writing genres students have experienced as an early step to bridging language boundaries.

### ***Institutional Layer***

The students employed specific language to describe classroom or school-wide writing practices, which we are calling the *institutional layer*. For example, a small number of participants described *supporting details*, *commentary*, and

*concluding sentences* as a writing type.<sup>3</sup> This specific language was used by the teacher to help students distinguish between evidence and analysis in their paragraphs. Additionally, language such as *5 Starts* and *SAPs* (summary analysis paragraphs) are often teacher-, class-, or school-specific ways of describing writing types required for a particular teacher or class. Furthermore, a large number of students reported doing *bellwork*, a catch-all term used to describe short writing assignments that teachers use to begin class or that students should be doing when the bell rings, hence the name *bellwork*. As we worked with Karen's classes, we learned that the *SAPs* and the language used to discuss parts of a paragraph were part of language adopted school-wide, or institutionally, to discuss writing.

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Beyond classroom uses of writing at the institutional level, we also noted the institutional focus of particular responses to the question that asked students to describe how they used writing to solve a problem. For example, one student notes his or her use of writing to solve a problem:

When my friend had gotten in a fight the security told me to write statements about what had happened to help them out.

This statement shows that writing works in a particular way in this school setting to document and resolve situations. Likewise, a number of respondents reported writing letters of apology to teachers or substitute teachers for unacceptable behavior. The following are two examples:

When I disrespected a teacher by calling her a rude name, I had to write an apology letter for it to be okay.

When I had to write an apology letter to a substitute teacher because of the way our class acted.

While the classroom teacher who conducted the surveys noted that there is no specific school policy regarding using writing in problem situations, a fair number of survey respondents reported using writing in this way. This form of writing was local to the institution and emerged as a common practice for resolving problems or disputes. The value in recognizing the institutional dimension of the secondary school to college writing language boundary was how it challenged our assumptions about what we thought *schooled* writing was. That is, we recognized a potential danger is assuming that writing done



in secondary school settings is primarily literature-based, formulaic five-paragraph essays. Instead, we came to realize there are many examples of hidden, nontraditional forms of writing that circulate within institutional environments that are tremendously useful for introducing writing as an applied art to first-year students.<sup>4</sup> These nontraditional, location-based forms of writing represent opportunities for drawing on students' applied, institutional writing experiences as a way to discuss writing as it is structured—that is, genre—and how such structure is adaptable to address local needs.

### *Disciplinary Layer*

In the survey results, we noticed 78 different terms that could be related to genre, but they suggested something more than a particular form of writing.

**What is noteworthy about this sense of performance is students' awareness that writing is tied to action and is created for something more than a teacher's consumption and understanding.**

Instead, we read the terms as being sensitive to places or locations in school but outside of the English classroom, and we are referring to such terms as representing the *disciplinary layer*. In this layer, respondents reported writing for math, geometry, biology, health, and Spanish classes. Initially, we were surprised by the prevalence of such language in the results, and what stood out for us most in this language was how students saw locations inside school yet outside of the English classroom as requiring more than the five-paragraph theme. The inability to see writing as operating beyond this traditional form is a common concern reflected in the literature about secondary to postsecondary transitions, yet these students seemed to be attentive to the rhetorical demands of differing disciplinary locations. Examples of the disciplinary writing language include *briefings*, *lab reports*, *theatrical plays*, *data charts*, *explanation articles*, and *scripts*. Certain responses also indicate that schooled “writing” may occur in electronic and paper-based formats and may also be performed. For example, students reported writing *websites* in addition to *scripts* or *theatrical plays*. What is noteworthy about this sense of performance is students' awareness that writing is tied to action and is created for something more than a teacher's consumption and understanding. The value we see in recognizing the disciplinary layer of the secondary to postsecondary transition is that it makes visible to us the tensions students may feel when negotiating their understanding of writing purpose and writing style for school locations. Anecdotally, we observed in Karen's classes that her students had a limited, binary understanding of

*style*—a writer’s style was either formal or informal. Yet, when we later asked students to comment on style or the differences between writing for English and writing for a math or science course, we noted how their discussion of writing was not tied to either formal or informal style but instead was tied to a sense of purpose or what needed to be accomplished or communicated. Style in such instances operated in the in-between space of formal and informal writing. Pedagogically, we observed an opportunity in FYC courses to draw on students’ prior writing experience in non-English courses as a pathway to articulating the relational nature of style and purpose and to transfer beyond the FYC class to other locations of writing.

**In addition to asking students to record types of writing for school, the survey asked them to list the types of writing they might do outside of school.**

### ***Personal/Familial Layer***

In addition to asking students to record types of writing for school, the survey asked them to list the types of writing they might do outside of school. We found these responses to be centered primarily on personal writing or writing done within family life, which is why we are referring to this as the *personal/familial layer*. When answering this question, students could check boxes for writing types that included *texting, email, blogging, journaling, creative writing, and writing at work*. This question also provided student participants the opportunity to record other types of writing they might do outside of the classroom (Figure 3). The language in the open-ended section reflected expected responses such as *tweeting, Facebook, I.M., and notes/letters*. However, these responses also illustrate writing directed at personal/communal communication, such as *thank-you cards, birthday cards, and status updates*, as well as writing for personal purposes, such as the participant who wrote *what I feel or think so that I can keep it to myself*.

The familial layer was predominantly evident in the responses to writing to solve a problem. In these cases, students often acted as intermediaries for parents. While not directly stated, the responses imply that a language barrier causes the student to fill in for the parent. The following are two examples:

My dad often makes me write letters for him when he’s having some misunderstandings at work.

A problem I used writing to solve is to complain to the landlord that they shouldn’t be doing what there doing.

Tweeting  
 Poems for Contests  
 Journal  
 Poems  
 Quick Write  
 Journaling, problem  
 To inform people  
 Letters  
 Persuasive  
 Typing  
 Facebook  
 I.M  
 Message on Facebook, Google  
 Business  
 Fictional  
 Biography  
 Writing Reports  
 Brainstorming  
 Happy Birthday Cards  
 Thank you Cards  
 Status updates  
 Graffiti

Figure 3: Types of Writing Done Outside of School

The value in recognizing the personal/familial layer as a part of the language boundary was how it drew our attention to the need to conceptualize broadly what constitutes a problem for incoming students. Rather than assume that all students share the same understanding of what a problem is, we ought to explore the breadth and range of problem scenarios with students and honor the types of problems they deem capable of being addressed with writing. That is, rather than have students focus on fictional cases or large, macro-level problems like global warming, which may not be pressing in students' communities, we ought to listen to students' problem descriptions and draw on that language to conceptualize and develop a writing project that casts the problem in an accessible manner. In doing so, we can tie students' everyday, problem-solving practices to their writing in an academic location.

### Implications of Layer Recognition for FYC

We recognized the survey responses as examples of students struggling to articulate what writing is; they were putting language to their prior experiences with writing and commenting on its potential applicability to their future personal, social, and professional lives. In the FYC classroom, the layers of the language boundary in the transition become more complicated as there are students from multiple classrooms in multiple areas. To limit discouragement and frustration from language use, FYC instructors ought to allow for the different layers to emerge rather than covering them up with their own language of writing instruction, which is situated in the unfamiliar, specialized disciplinary language of rhetoric and composition.

In uncovering the layers of the language boundary in the secondary to postsecondary transition, we open space for students to tell us what they know about writing. Having such space is essential as it diminishes the necessity of teachers having to make assumptions about what students know and

understand about writing. In telling us what they know, students put their own language to writing instruction, language that can be used as the building blocks for constructing a shared class language or creole that will be used to work through the tensions resulting from the use of competing languages of writing instruction in the transition.<sup>5</sup> Creating a shared, creole language is an alternative to assuming a basic competency simply because a student has completed high school. Rather, through inviting students to share their writing experiences, college writing teachers enable the whole class to experience and draw from the students' rich writing experiences.

One way we suggest for opening space for this shared language in composition is to begin a class corpus of writing vocabulary. Much like the list in Figure 2, we would invite students to begin by listing the types of writing they have encountered prior to first-year composition. It is likely that the initial list will be far longer than the list in Figure 2. However, the wide variety of vocabulary terms that students list provides the opportunity to create an extensive corpus and gives students the opportunity to see that many terms are synonymous but potentially applied differently. Therefore, the essential practice of the initial corpus activity is not only the listing of writing vocabulary and experiences but also the defining of what those terms mean and the negotiation between students and teachers about which terms are synonymous and which are distinct. As students compile the list, they begin to see their experiences as part of the FYC classroom rather than simply coming to class thinking they have learned everything incorrectly. Furthermore, the creation of the corpus encourages students and instructors to see themselves as experts in the composition classroom. Students are experts on what they already know, and sharing this information helps the instructors expand their knowledge about what it means to write in high school.

The early class corpus enables the instructors to begin composition assignments in a more accessible manner since they will have an understanding of the students' prior writing experiences. For example, if many students report having done a problem/solution type of project in high school, the composition instructor may begin the project differently, make different assumptions about the students' abilities to identify community problems, or encourage

**We recognized the survey responses as examples of students struggling to articulate what writing is; they were putting language to their prior experiences with writing and commenting on its potential applicability to their future personal, social, and professional lives.**

multimedia assignments earlier in the semester. Using the corpus as a way to tune into the language of the secondary to postsecondary writing transition certainly does not erase the language boundary. Rather, it makes the boundary more visible for FYC students and their instructors and ultimately makes language accessible and usable as a tool for writing instruction.

Ultimately, the corpus has a role throughout the composition course. As new language and writing experiences are introduced, the class adds to the corpus. Consequently, the corpus becomes a connection point between the students' prior secondary writing language and their college writing language. The ability to make such connections adds richness to the students' learning and depth to their understanding of changing writing contexts, and it gives them an opportunity to articulate the tensions they experience in and between the different layers of the language boundary. For example, a number of students in our surveys reported using language in their lives to solve problems in the world. Their responses were confident and matter-of-fact. However, often when students try to confront problems at the institutional level when in college, they feel as though they lack the language or expertise to confront the problem. By modifying the corpus in this type of situation, students become aware of the changes to the language of writing in concrete ways that they can apply both in and beyond the composition classroom. This brings us to the final step in the creation of the corpus, which is a revisiting of the corpus at the end of the semester. At this point, the corpus includes the original student language, definitions, and examples along with the shared class language, definitions, and examples. At the end of the course, students work with the corpus and begin to predict how their shared language translates to the writing they will do in their school, community, and workplace lives. The prediction accounts for how language shifts between these three areas, and anticipation or prediction is a key aspect of seeing boundaries between different locations of writing. The ability to anticipate and predict may mean the difference between a successful and unsuccessful transition.

Of course, a class corpus is not the only way to open space for attention to the language of the secondary to postsecondary transition. However, it provides one way for writing teachers to attend to student language in order to *know* rather than *assume* what students bring with them to the FYC classroom. One of the more inviting elements of the corpus is that it must be created anew with each class. This has multiple benefits. First, the creation of a corpus assures that teachers attend to student language each semester, rather than falling back

on our assumptions about what students know. Second, the corpus gives FYC instructors a record of changes in student writing language and experience over time, thereby giving access to knowledge about institutional changes at the secondary level.

## **Conclusion**

The work of language negotiation is never fixed. It is a practice students will use as they transition between locations of writing. Furthermore, it is a practice that will support and forward the articulation of the declarative and procedural knowledge (Wardle and Downs) that constitutes the body of knowledge in the field of rhetoric and composition. As our survey results and corpus discussion illustrate, there is an opportunity in the FYC classroom to create common frames for students and teachers to discuss and understand the language of writing in multiple locations. When a common frame is absent, students and instructors have the potential to feel dissatisfied and frustrated, as they operate under assumptions rather than a situated understanding about writing. Accordingly, it would be beneficial for composition teachers and students to attend to the work of language negotiation in our FYC classes, as it is an essential aspect of the shared intellectual work of the writing classroom. Ultimately, shared language provides an access or connection point for writing development in and beyond the FYC classroom.

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## **Notes**

1. Although, clearly, not all students go directly to college from high school.
2. *Reading comprehension* may refer to the reading log-type assignment or to written test questions that ask the students to report on what they read. Many of the students enrolled in this teacher's English course are also enrolled in a reading remediation course in which reading and writing are closely linked and students document their reading comprehension in written form.
3. This specific language is part of the Schaeffer Method, which is a scripted writing program that gained popularity in schools in the West and Southwest in the 1990s. While this particular method is not always used in its scripted form, many

teachers who once taught Schaeffer still use some of the language of the method although their schools may no longer use the approach.

4. An April 2008 PEW study (Lenhart et al.) found that students do not consider many forms of writing that they actually engage in to be “writing.” We note that through focusing on shared language development in FYC an opportunity exists to help students understand and value all the “hidden” writing they do.

5. Our use of the word *creole* is drawn from Harry Collins, Robert Evans, and Mike Gorman’s article, “Trading Zones and Interactional Expertise,” in which they discuss Peter Galison’s idea of “trading zones” in the social studies of science (657).

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