Agents of Integration:
Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act

Three main claims

• Transfer is not just a cognitive act. It is also a rhetorical act.

• Genre is crucial for transfer—especially the transfer of writing-related knowledge.
  o Students regularly draw on identifiable antecedent genres
  o Writers often mean very different things when they use the same terms
  o The example of Henry: Bricolage

• If writers are agents, instructors can serve as handlers.

The “transfer matrix”
A brief and incomplete bibliography of recent scholarship on transfer


SEQUENCING ASSIGNMENTS:
PROMOTING TRANSFER WITHIN A SINGLE COURSE

When sequencing or deciding on the order of your assignments for the semester, you may want to ask yourself three questions.

• First, want do you want your students to learn and be able to do by the end of the semester (that is, what are your goals)?
• Second, what strengths will your students bring?
• Third, what do you anticipate your students will find difficult in achieving your course goals?

With that knowledge in mind, you can then order your assignments to help your students build the skills and acquire the knowledge to meet your end-of-semester goals. (This is, in essence, what Wiggins and McTighe call “backwards design”). Although there are many approaches to sequencing, here are three of the most common approaches to sequencing assignments throughout the semester.

Repeating the Same Assignment, Varying it by Topic
In this approach, students repeat the same type of assignment, varied by subject matter. For example, if students struggle to engage in sustained “close reading” of texts, you might ask them to compose three two-page close readings throughout the semester, each about a different literary text. This approach to sequencing assumes that students will benefit from multiple opportunities to master a particular genre or skill, or that the genre— the kind of writing assignment—has become familiar, even transparent, to students, and that therefore the genre is one of the best ways for students to learn the content of the course.

Moving from Simpler to More Complex Assignments
In this approach, students begin with simpler, more fundamental genres or ways of thinking, then move to more difficult assignments. Over the course of a semester you might build up to a six-page critical review of several sources by having students complete the following series of assignments: a one-page summary of one source; a two-page summary and critique of a single source; a four-page review of two sources (with revision); a six-page review of four sources (with revision). This approach to sequencing assumes that students will be better equipped to write longer papers or undertake more cognitively challenging tasks if they first have the opportunity to build their skills and their confidence.
Breaking a Complex Assignment into Smaller Parts

In this approach, you choose to make a challenging, complex assignment one of the central activities of your course. You then break that complex assignment into a series of smaller assignments that all contribute to that final project. For example, a research paper might be broken down into the following stages: Topic Area Statement; Library Assignment; Paper Prospectus; First Version of Paper for Peer Review; Peer Review Comments; Second Version of Paper; Peer Review Comments; Conferences, Paper Outlines; Final Version of Paper. This approach to sequencing assumes students’ writing and learning will improve if students have time to concentrate on and master various stages in the process of writing the paper.

These three approaches to sequencing are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the third approach often incorporates elements of the first two.

Although each approach has its benefits and no one sequence is superior, we can generalize and say that assignment sequences—no matter what sequencing approach you take—are most effective when you explain your sequence and the purpose of your sequence to your students. Common sense tells us that students will be better able (and perhaps even more willing) to meet our expectations if they understand not only the requirements for individual papers but the purposes of those assignments as well.

One way to share with students the “big picture” of your assignment sequence is to talk with them when you distribute a new paper assignment about how the new paper relates to the last paper. For example, you might recap the skills or concepts or knowledge that students focused on in their last paper and explain how those skills might be used or those ideas might be complicated in the next paper. You might also explain how working on this paper will help students meet your overall goals for them in the course. You can also make such connections explicit on the assignment sheet itself and when responding to drafts. In this way, your sequence of papers becomes not just one assignment after another, but part of the process of learning to think and write in ways valued in your discipline.

**This is a revision of a handout I initially developed (in collaboration with Brad Hughes) for the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**
Putting It Together:  
Designing Your Own Sequence

(1) As you design your course (Blugold Seminar, bundled course, etc.), what knowledge or skills would you like your students to have acquired (or mastered!) by the end of the semester?

✓

✓

What does that suggest about the type of writing you should assign? Are there particular genres that students should be familiar with? Are there particular “antecedent genres” you think they may be likely to default to?

(2) What strengths will students bring?

(3) What do you anticipate that students will find difficult?
(4) What assignments or activities can you engage them in to help them achieve the goals you articulated in #1?

• What might it look like if students repeat a particular kind of assignment several times?

• What might it look like if students start with simpler assignments and move to more complex ones?

• What might it look like if students write a larger paper in stages?
TEACHING FOR TRANSFER: 
WORKING INDIVIDUALLY AND PROGRAMMATICALLY

A few beginning assumptions:
✓ “Low-road” transfer happens automatically, often unconsciously: students draw on well-developed knowledge and the new context has much in common with prior contexts. “High-road” transfer is a more conscious process of making connections between significantly different contexts, sometimes by repurposing strategies and knowledge. For purposes of this activity, we are focused on how to scaffold high-road transfer—or what I might call acts of “successful integration.”
✓ Instructors can work either as “agents” (making connections for and explaining connections to students) or “handlers” (designing activities that will encourage and support students in the messy process of making those connections for themselves). For purposes of this activity, we are focused on instructors in the capacity as handlers.

Two questions for discussion:

(1) What types of activities might an instructor-as-handler design to help students see and sell connections between previous (or concurrent) coursework and your course?

(2) What types of activities might an instructor-as-handler design to help students see and sell connections between your course and their future courses?