

## CHAPTER 16

# MAPPING THE PRIOR: A BEGINNING TYPOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT ON WRITING

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As studies like those reported in *How People Learn (HPL)* (Bransford, Pellegrino, & Donovan, 2000) make clear, prior knowledge contextualizes learning of all kinds. Sometimes, prior knowledge is a very good fit for the new learning; in such situations, there is a foundation on which the learner can build. Some other times, according to *HPL*, prior knowledge is a misfit: the learner's understanding is at odds with the new learning, and/or the learner's beliefs are in conflict with principles or theories grounding the new learning. Prior knowledge, of course, also shapes the ways that writers develop. We know, for example, something about writing process knowledge and about the ways that students draw on prior writing process knowledge for use in new writing tasks (e.g., Navarre Cleary, 2013), and about how both composing process knowledge and composing practices contribute to new composing processes that seem an assemblage of the old and new (e.g., Cirio, 2016). Likewise, research has demonstrated that school curricula influence composers: the research reported in *Writing Across Contexts* (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014) demonstrates that when provided with a curriculum rich with compositional content, students are more likely to draw upon that content, that writing knowledge, when they take on writing tasks in new rhetorical situations precisely because the content, with a set of key terms available as a framework for new tasks, is *usable* (Yancey et al., 2014). Put as a proposition, prior writing knowledge and practice is most valuable to writers when it seems usable.

A larger review of the research on transfer of writing knowledge and practice, however, as well as of research on composing processes and pedagogies, demonstrates that prior knowledge is more than simply knowledge, and that, as important, it is a much larger and more complex category than has been synthesized in the literature. As a review of the literature documents, the "prior" includes a diverse set of dimensions, including processes, knowledge, dispositions, beliefs, values, and affect, which students, and others, develop as they compose

in writing situations both in and out of school, and which are also shaped by larger cultural forces (Wardle, 2012). Moreover, as some research shows (e.g., Roozen, 2010), the prior influences, sometimes extraordinarily, various choices and decisions—including about majors and even jobs—that students make as they continue developing as writers. This chapter, then, drawing on multiple case studies, begins to detail some of these dimensions of the prior, tracing in particular its influence on students' writing practices. I then conclude by suggesting that engaging students in the work of helping map the prior will assist us in understanding more fully both the prior and its multiple effects.

## **INVISIBLE SCHOOL-BASED CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRIOR TO STUDENTS' COMPOSING PRACTICES**

When writing researchers refer to the prior, what they often mean is prior knowledge, which tends to stand in for a range of constructs, among them processes, dispositions, beliefs, knowledge, and points of departure, which, as *Writing Across Contexts* (Yancey et al., 2014) defines it, refers to an external indicator of quality—for example, a grade or test score—indicating to students how well they write and contributing to their sense of themselves as writers. Much of this research has focused on school contexts, but there is a corresponding line of writing research on the prior developed in non-school contexts—in workplace contexts, for example, as well as in contexts of everyday writing. Here, like Charles Bazerman (this volume), in exploring these dimensions of the prior—past writing processes, knowledge, and beliefs—I draw on multiple contexts and sites of composing simultaneously rather than treating them as separate sites of learning, in large part because, as we will see, writers do just that, repurposing what they learn in multiple sites for new writing tasks, regardless of whether these tasks and the prior processes and knowledge that writers call on are developed in school or out.

The focus on writing process in rhetoric and composition, of course, has a long history. Since the 1970s (and indeed somewhat before that time), faculty in rhetoric and composition have seen helping students develop an elaborated writing process as their primary curricular aim; as Richard Fulkerson (2005) argues, teaching writing as process is the single writing outcome postsecondary writing instructors agree on. It's also one that is responsive to entering students' needs. Considerable research—including that of Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer's and the University of Washington's SOUL study (2009; 2011)—demonstrates that students entering collegiate sites of academic writing bring with them an underdeveloped writing process, and for several reasons, among them the large number of students high school teachers teach, which precludes the critical mass

of assigning and responding to writing that developing writers require; and the pervasive effects of testing, which collectively represents writing as a 45-minute single-draft activity. In the case of most entering college students, the research shows, the major prior school writing practice is a test-motivated, single-draft writing practice.

Even when in such a school environment, however, students may develop composing practices complicated in ways we cannot see, in ways that don't show up in the curriculum; as important, in such cases, what students construct as writing knowledge and what becomes writing practice varies considerably from what we see in curricula and research, as we learn from two students, each of whom illustrates how composing processes are shaped by prior experiences.

I interviewed Nicole, with her permission, as I inquired into how students make use of the prior, whatever it might be. What Nicole's experience shows is how students translate a common experience into a composing commitment informing their composing processes; in Nicole's case, this is a commitment she developed in school, although probably not in the way either the teacher or curriculum intended. More specifically, Nicole's commitment occurred in response to what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) call a critical incident, "a failed effort to address a new task that prompts critical ways of thinking about how to write and about what writing is" (p. 143). Seen from one perspective, Nicole was the kind of student the literature reports, in her case a successful student who completed Advanced Placement English in high school as a single-draft writer, but who also found the format of a five-paragraph essay sufficiently flexible that she called on it for much of her composing in college. In fact, she called her AP class "training for the essay" and claimed that its format had provided (1) a throughline for her as she traveled from college class to college class, and (2) a flexible format that she could expand, adapt, and repurpose as needed.

Seen from another perspective, however, Nicole developed a writing process that now always includes a special feature: her unique contribution, a feature she added after a critical incident in the same AP English class. One of the AP assignments, Nicole had believed, would allow her to draw on material from pop culture as evidence for a claim she was making; her plan was to tap material from a favorite, the *Harry Potter* series. The teacher, however, required Nicole to draw on course material. Disappointed and a bit angry, Nicole didn't draw the same distinction between canonical and pop culture materials that the teacher did; she construed a different distinction, one between school material and Nicole's material. In other words, what the teacher excluded, according to Nicole, was Nicole herself and thus what seemed to Nicole to be the reason to write: to contribute something that is uniquely hers. This episode, which is a kind of critical incident, changed Nicole's process: from that point on, Nicole says, she has been

committed to inserting or incorporating her own interests into *all* academic assignments. She likes, she says, “tak[ing] things that don’t belong” and “sticking them in academic papers.” Nicole’s writing process, then, has been significantly shaped by two prior practices, one expected, one not. First, composing the AP essay has provided Nicole with a consistent and flexible genre-based framework for all her assignments, much as, though more successfully than, the writers studied by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011). Second, at about the same time a critical incident prompts Nicole to design into her writing process her commitment, the consistent feature of incorporating her own interests, even when “they don’t belong,” which in many ways drives her future composing process.

The second student is Marie, who was profiled by Joe Cirio (2014) in his exploration of when and how students negotiate scoring guides. Like Nicole, Marie responds to a school directive about composing, but in an unanticipated way; in Marie’s case, rather than seeing the rubric as an outline of audience expectations, she sees it as a design tool for writing. As Cirio explains, the scoring guide brokers what Marie understands as an exchange: the teacher’s role is to provide the criteria used for grading an assignment, the student’s role, and Marie’s role in particular, to compose a text meeting those criteria. Such a view seems in some ways commonplace: writers often write explicitly to a set of criteria. In Marie’s case, however, assignment criteria aren’t goals to strive for, but rather directions for “build[ing] our papers”:

If we had a project, we would get a rubric with, like—it was, like, the grid. You’d get graded one through five. And if it was five, you had all the details. And, like, it’d be different for, like, presentation, wording, and all the stuff like that. And for my English class last year my teacher would give us, like, this really strict rubric about everything he was looking for, and if we had extra things we knew what kind of extra points we would get and where he would take away points and stuff like that. So, it was really easy to build our papers. (Cirio, 2014, p. 63)

The purpose of a rubric, according to those who advocate for them (see, for example, Turley & Gallagher, 2008), isn’t to provide a blueprint for composing, but Marie’s composing practice has repurposed the rubric for such use, especially because of its role in awarding the grade. With such a set of criteria/directions, Marie can “build” her texts. Thus, when asked what she hopes to see in a rubric, Marie is quite clear about the need for it to be specific: “I think something with details that—so we could get the best grade we could. So, stuff that showed

specific details of what we actually needed to put in the paper and nothing that, like, left us questioning, like, “should I put this in my paper? Should I add this type of reference?” (Cirio, 2014, p. 65). Moreover, Marie understands how very specific teachers’ expectations can be: in describing a “bad rubric,” she identifies vagueness as problematic:

Sometimes teachers are really vague about the things that they want. They’re just, like, “give me five sources.” What kind of sources are they looking for? Or something like that. So, it’s not, like, I don’t want them to put, like, “give me five sources.” But I want to be, like “do you want book sources, newspaper article?” Stuff like that. (Cirio, 2014, p. 65)

Marie’s writing process, then, isn’t merely informed by a rubric: it’s driven by it. Put another way, in an interesting case of *deixis*—when a tool is repurposed to do a completely new task—Marie takes a tool intended to help students understand reader expectations and puts it to two other aims: (1) to define formal features of successful texts, and thus (2) to earn an *A*. Her writing process is oriented not to an assignment, but to the reward of a grade that the scoring guide accompanying it defines. Moreover, Marie’s understanding of writing as an exchange, which oscillates between a belief about writing and a knowledge of it, is in perfect accord with her composing practice, one that isn’t visible. Her prior experience with scoring guides, in other words, defines both her composing process and her understanding of composing.

More generally, what we see in these two writers is that prior writing experiences in school can influence, and even define, students’ understanding of composing and can shape, and even distort, their writing practices. Moreover, without learning from students about their understandings and practices, faculty are less able to help them, precisely because they don’t know that students’ practices may be informed by episodes and desires important to the student but invisible to or deemed insignificant by the instructor; they don’t know which conceptions of writing—the individual student’s and the classroom’s—are in dialogue; and they don’t know when beliefs, some of them shifting into conceptualizations, motivate and direct composing practices.

## THE ROLE OF THE PRIOR IN DIGITALLY MULTIMODAL COMPOSING PROCESSES

Much of what we know about writer development, of course, is predicated on models of writing and writing development that neglect technology, and yet as Jody Shipka (2011) suggests, technology of all kinds, ranging from pen and

paper to wireless tablets, is at the heart of writing and of researching writing processes: “the main challenge facing process researchers today has to do with finding ways to trace the dynamic, emergent, distributed, historical, and technologically mediated dimensions of composing practices” (p. 36). And composers, as the next set of students illustrates, make very different uses of technologically facilitated composing practices: Nicole, whose writing practices were largely word-centric and who didn’t identify a multimodal composing practice as such or draw on prior practice in her formal texts; Adam, who drew on composing knowledge and practice associated with a semi-professional interest in photography in creating a formal multimedia text; and Noreen, who created a multimedia text by drawing on her literacy not so much in writing, but rather in music, which as her major provided her with both knowledge and a set of practices to tap. Across these three accounts, what we see are some of the diverse factors influencing composers’ use, or non-use, of the prior in digital multimodal composing: assignments, curriculum, and conditions of writing.

Nicole, the student whose writing always includes her own interests, was a double major, in Editing, Writing, and Media (EWM) and in Classics. In EWM, she completed the required courses, including the junior-level Writing and Editing in Print and Online (WEPO) course, where she, like all students in WEPO, composed in three spaces—print, screen, and network—and where she created a culminating networked electronic portfolio (Fleckenstein, Davis, & Yancey, 2015). In WEPO, she thus wrote in a fully multimodal way, composing intentionally with layout, color, images, hyperlinks, and so on. Within a year of completing WEPO, Nicole was assigned a two-fold writing task in one of her classes in classics, an assignment with a strong visual component: (1) develop a catalogue of ancient seals based on replicas hosted in a special exhibit at the FSU Art Museum, and (2) analyze either their contributions to our understanding of the ancient world or the contributions of the Englishman responsible for discovering them, Sir Arthur Evans. Nicole reacted ambivalently to the assignment. On the one hand, she understood that the professor was “trying to give us an opportunity to do something more hands-on,” and she thought it was “cool to handle them and look at all the detail.” On the other hand, she believed that she didn’t have sufficient background to do a good job, and she wasn’t particularly invested in the task.

In the composing processes supporting her catalogue, Nicole worked multimodally, not because she understood working multimodally as a means of composing, despite her having taken WEPO, but rather because doing so contributed to a more efficient composing process. At the museum, Nicole made notes and took photos of the seals; taking photos of the seals, she said, saved time, since she would only need to go to the museum once, and they provided a record

she could draw on, “just so that you could use them as a [photographic] reference.” To verify the accuracy of her photo-based descriptions, she also checked “online sources to see the same seals: those sources told you if it was a palm leaf, but [this site was] written in German, so there were pictures that you had to match. I could see them more clearly; reference them more easily.” Still, she didn’t include photos in either the catalogue text, an excerpt of which is included here, or the formal text. When I asked Nicole why she had not included photos in either document (or both), she replied that including them is “maybe more of a digital or Internet kind of thing. In an academic paper, I hadn’t expected it.”

What we learn in this account of Nicole’s is twofold. First, using a composing process clearly attuned to twenty-first century technologies, including use of a camera and the Internet, Nicole saves time and completes the assignment as efficiently as possible, but she doesn’t understand this as writing. In other words, although she employed fully multimodal composing processes for her WEPO texts, Nicole doesn’t draw on that prior practice for the composing in classics since she doesn’t see any similarity between the processes she employed in the two classes, even tacitly. Second, she wasn’t cued to include images in the final texts, and without being cued to include images in the formal writing for the catalogue or the larger project, Nicole didn’t consider incorporating them, even when both documents seemed ideally suited for them and she had the images to use.

A good question is why Nicole doesn’t draw on the prior composing practice and knowledge she developed in WEPO; another is why she relies on a photo-informed composing process, but doesn’t include the images so important to that process in her formal texts. In the interview, Nicole hinted at answers responsive to both questions. She doesn’t understand the use of the camera, for instance, as a part of her composing

K174/CMS VI.93 - Three-sided, elongated, red-brown cornelian. Kenna notes that he agrees with Evans about this being a royal seal.

A - From Kenna: Seated cat, between its ears a *silphium* sign, on one side the leg sign, and on the other the snake. The gate sign is used as a base or exergue.

B - From Kenna: A template in the center of the field, surmounted by a pronged instrument and the *silphium*. At each end of this face there is a panel of three palmettes springing from lunettes. This design shows a remarkable feeling for unity and economy. It has something of the quality of a fine Egyptian cartouche.

C - From Kenna: Trowel, adze, wheel or rayed disk, flanked by a design which is a combination of four C-spirals in pairs, sometimes called bugles, and lunettes.

process, but rather as an independent time-saving activity. And that understanding accords with her own knowledge of genres, which categorizes “Internet” texts and academic texts separately: including photos, she says, “maybe more of a digital or Internet kind of thing. In an academic paper, I hadn’t expected it.” In other words, Nicole seems to have a theory about the kinds of texts that include photos, which is also a theory about the kinds of texts that do *not* include them, a theory or working knowledge that both WEPO and the Classics classes support. WEPO didn’t help Nicole conceptualize writing capaciously: the intent of composing in the three spaces is, in part, to help students see the similarities in composing across those spaces, but Nicole seemed to see them as different, with one set of rules or conventions for print and a different set for the digital. Likewise, there was no cue in the classics assignment that she might include photos, so as she says, it simply didn’t occur to her. More generally, then, what we see here is the dynamic relationship between prior writing knowledge and prior writing practice: what we know about writing from our prior experience, which in Nicole’s case is about where photos do and do not belong in texts, shapes our practices and the texts we create.

## ASSIGNMENTS, OTHER LITERACIES, AND PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

In the cases of Adam and Noreen, we see a different relationship between prior writing knowledge and practice, one based in writing tasks new to them and in knowledge and practice developed in whole or in part outside of English classes or even school itself. Both Adam and Noreen were composing a novel text, a remediation project requiring that they repurpose a print text for another medium, a kind of assignment that is a relatively recent addition to the suite of college writing tasks. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s (1999) *Remediation*, which provides the theoretical foundation for such assignments, was published in 1999, and while some faculty have used remediation assignments for some time (see, for example, the reference to them in Yancey’s “Composition in a New Key” 2004 CCCC Chair’s Address [Yancey, 2004]), they are not yet standard fare in college composition (Beardon, 2016). Moreover, given the nature of the assignment—the same material provides invention for two different texts composed for two different media—the assignment itself may have played a role in their use of the prior. In addition, in composing their remediation projects, both Adam and Noreen tapped prior literacies developed *outside* of the writing classroom to help them respond to these novel writing situations. Their respective assignments also differed somewhat, as did their use of the prior: in Adam’s case, the project allowed him to decide which media he wanted to use, while Noreen’s



assignment asked her to translate a narrative across media, from print to digital or the reverse, so for her both genre and medium were prescribed.

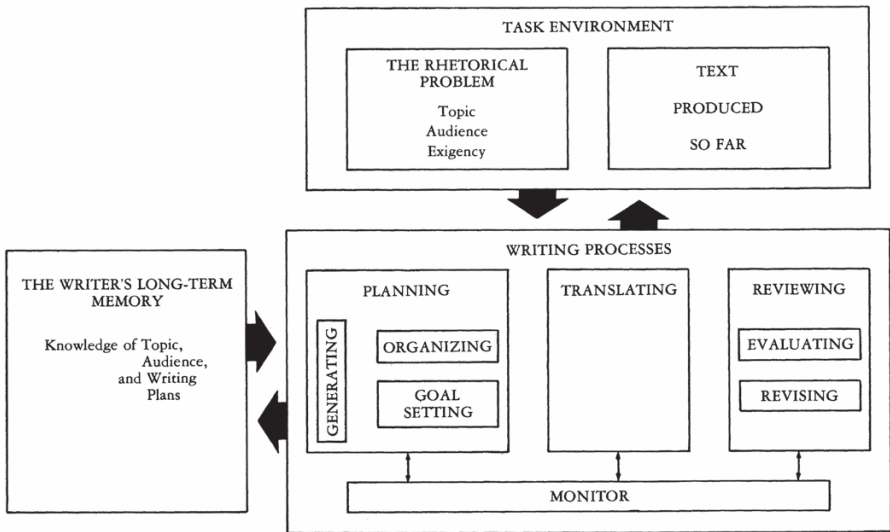


Figure 16.1. Structure of the writing model

As Bret Zawilski (2015) explains in his study of cross-media transfer of writing knowledge and practice, Adam's composing process itself, in the context of this remediation project, diverges considerably from accounts in the literature, at least in its materiality and inclusion of writing technologies. For example, as Charles Bazerman (this volume) suggests, like other models of its time, the Flower and Hayes' account of composing, visualized here, is limited, in this case providing (only) a mental model of composing; more recent accounts of composing (e.g., Pigg, 2014) are much fuller, often highlighting the materiality and technology entailed in current composing practices, as quick description of Adam's composing emphasizes:

[Adam] props a tablet next to his laptop computer, pulling up his original print project—a newsletter defining visual rhetoric and simultaneously exploring the complexity and influences of modern electronic dance music. On the tablet, he navigates to an online magazine, considering how he might frame his text in a similar way. His hands move back and forth between the two devices, browsing through texts and gathering raw materials. While the tablet continues to display model texts, Adam shuffles through windows on the desktop of his computer, opening documents in Word and InDesign

while searching through his personal photography both on his computer and on the digital photography platform Flickr. (Zawilski, 2015, p. 2)

Composing for Adam, as we see here, is neither exclusively putting pen to paper nor exclusively putting fingers to the keyboard or screen: rather, it's a materially rich process involving, in addition to paper, multiple networked devices, multiple software packages, and a collection of his own photography.

Indeed, it was his own photography and his photographic practices that informed Adam's remediation project, which began with his four-page print newsletter defining his key term visual rhetoric and which hosted three articles: one defining visual rhetoric, another addressing the ways the visual represents electronic music, and the last pointing to graffiti. He was happy to write this newsletter on visual rhetoric precisely because it allowed him to draw on his passion for photography and incorporate some of his own photographs into the text. For the remediated text, Adam's overall intent was to remediate the newsletter into an online magazine modeled on one of his favorites, *Game Informer Magazine*. Put another way and as Zawilski (2015) explains, given Adam's prior reading and writing on the Web, the models of networked texts he'd already been exposed to played a large role in how he conceptualized the composition task (pp. 89-80), a point that Doug Brent (2012) makes as well in studying students writing in internships. In his context, Adam drew on two versions of the prior: in the first instance, on the process he had used earlier and on material that he had also used previously; in the second instance, on a network-informed knowledge of community that complicated the assignment for him.

In creating the online magazine, Adam wanted to include images as he had for the print newsletter, but the ones he wanted to use for the remediated text were blurry, so he faced a choice: search online for new ones, or simply draw from his own archive of photographs on Flickr. He decided to use his own photos, a practice that linked to that used for the newsletter, though here his use of the prior was twofold: a practice he had successfully used; and material that he had earlier collected for whatever purpose and archived. In this sense, drawing on his prior practice and material made the task somewhat easier. The online magazine he chose as a genre, however, complicated his task; in this case, the prior was knowledge-based. Adam designed the newsletter so that it would circulate in two communities, the community of the class, of course, but also an online community, and it was this latter community that he thought should take priority since it had a "realness" to it that the classroom community did not. As Zawilski explains, "The community of Medium.com itself served as a second environment, and Adam needed to consider how his text would circulate within

that environment,” especially since “Adam . . . saw a real value to the work he was producing” (2015, p. 126). Moreover, questions around this dual community led to a related complication when it came time for peer review of drafts: while Adam’s peers were also composing texts that would circulate on the Web, theirs were social media texts and thus short-form, so that Adam’s, which was long-form, seemed odd to them.

Whereas many of his classmates were creating short remediations through social media platforms, Adam had to account for their feedback (namely that his text was too long) alongside an awareness that the length was called for by the conventions of the community in which his text was circulating. [According to Adam,] “And it [was] a gamble because, you know, the piece is still on the Internet. So it’s still a part of that community. But I was presenting it and creating it for the purpose of the classroom . . . there was a sacrifice that was made and a decision that had to be made regarding the genre and how I presented it” (Zawilski, 2015, p. 119).

Interestingly, though for different reasons, Adam finds himself in a similar situation as Marie: both of them find their writing more complicated because of an assignment, the specifics accompanying it, and/or their interpretation of it. In Marie’s situation, as described above, her school writing tasks were more complicated because instead of thinking about what each task might require, she approached each one with rubric in hand, using a statement of reader expectations, a scoring guide, as a blueprint for “building” the text. Put another way, a teaching device, the scoring guide, was put to another use, one not appropriate for it, a problem that school unintentionally created when it introduced the rubric. Likewise, in Adam’s case, the assignment, in allowing audiences outside of school, which is a strategy the field applauds, put him in something of a bind: should he play by the school conventions, especially as enforced by his peers, or should he play by the conventions of the discourse community that were part of his prior knowledge but not that of his peers?

Noreen’s remediation project exemplifies another aspect of the prior, in her situation the role of prior knowledge, especially as located in key concepts, and their effect in composing. Like Adam, Noreen was composing a remediation text, hers originating in very specific kind of literacy narrative, as Michael-John DePalma (2015) explains: students were asked to “compose both a written essay and a digital story that explore a critical moment in their literacy development, a turning point in their ethical development, a shift in their sense of identity, or a change in their beliefs” (p. 620). Noreen enacted a story in print that “explored her emotional and psychological growth as an artist through the lens of Berlin’s reconstruction after WWII” (DePalma, 2015, p. 621). A music major, Noreen finds in the digital story assignment, with its images and music, an appropriate opportunity to draw

on her knowledge of music, which informs the planning and arrangement of both print and digital stories. For example, Noreen used concepts in music to help structure “the timing and the emphasis and the flow of the story” (DePalma, 2015, p. 624), a process and structure she understood as organic:

In classical music things tend to happen in pairs. You have a primary thing, and you have a secondary thing. You have an antecedent, and you have a consequent. And so, with the structuring of the essay, I was very aware of that parallel. I’d always have something that goes back, like a counter-part before and after.

She continues:

In music, you present an idea, and it oftentimes recurs later in the composition, and so you go, “Oh, that’s where I heard that before! That’s where that comes from.” So it’s very organic in music, and that’s what I was thinking in this essay, as well. I was trying to make the ideas really organic. (p. 624)

Noreen used other concepts from music to achieve other purposes, for example both to structure and to provide rhythm to the text, including in her digital story “a technique in music composition called ‘time-points’” (DePalma, 2015, p. 625), her intent in doing so to align music and image—the ending of the music marking the fading of the image—for a particular effect on the audience, a process that was so familiar to her that it felt “natural” (p. 626). In describing Noreen’s use of music in her remediation project, DePalma appropriately emphasizes the integration of literacies such projects can invite, in Noreen’s case her written literacy and her musical literacy providing the intersection for her stories. It’s also worth noting, however, that Noreen’s musical literacy is knowledgeable and sophisticated: she is a music major, and it shows—in her vocabulary, in her conception of structure, in her transfer of one set of strategies from music to the essay. The key terms, in fact, may be an important factor contributing to her use of the prior precisely because they are so familiar, and, as the research in *Writing Across Contexts* demonstrates, precisely because they provide a very specific vocabulary useful for describing both tasks and aims. More generally, it’s a good question as to the role that the key terms play in activating prior knowledge.

Fully multimodal writing—moving beyond words only to include connections to photography, to art, to music, to design, and to other modalities—makes a wider set of prior knowledge and practices available to composers. In some cases, like Nicole’s, a writing process may be unintentionally multimodal, and without the text itself benefitting from that process, in part because the

prior acted to constrain rather than open up, in part because no cue signaled her that she might think about the text more capaciously. In other cases, like Adam's, assignments calling for digital multimodality make opportunities to tap the prior of homegrown literacies available even as they complicate the (classroom) writing situation. And still other writers, as we see in Noreen's account, in calling on other literacies, find in them a prior vocabulary useful for conceptualizing and enacting a text incorporating multiple modalities.

## THE ROLE OF (PRIOR) PLACES TO WRITE IN SHAPING COMPOSING

The places where people write, from classrooms and dorm rooms to libraries and coffeehouses, are now also considered an element of composing, and though we don't know as much about writers' current practices as we'd like, especially given the influence of mobile technologies, we would expect that prior practices and knowledge would play a role here as well. Stacy Pigg (2014), for instance, has rendered the ways that connection to place is both weakened and strengthened through mobile technologies. Kim, one of the students whose composing Pigg profiles, explains this process: "Before I had the laptop, I had a desktop, so if I was writing, I had to be at home, I had to be at my desk. And I had to be, you know, in that space, which was a lot different. Using a laptop, I can take it anywhere" (2014, p. 259). For Kim, the coffee shop *Gone Wired*, one of several she frequents, is her composing place four days a week; this schedule gives her both the flexibility awarded by mobile technologies and the stability of a common writing place. Given that it is a public place, part of the task in composing there is managing distractions.

Distractions were not ordinarily a problem for Nicole, who mentioned where she wrote only once, in connection with the classics assignment. She didn't begin drafting the text until the a few days before it was due, so she was anxiously writing to and against the deadline. Accordingly, she used a strategy she had used before: she "spent 12 hours in Strozier [the campus library]" where she used one of the library's computers. And like Kim, critical to Nicole's completing the project was reducing distractions: the library, she said, was helpful in this regard because it could "put me in a work frame of mind." Taken together with Kim's account, what Nicole's episode suggests is twofold: first, that when writers are anxious, they return to composing places that helped them complete other tasks before in the hopes that such success will occur again; and second, that in the age of ubiquitous composing, maintaining distractions is an important component of composing.

Other students, however, are consistently intentional about where they write, and for some of them, as Jacob Craig's (2016) research demonstrates, identify-

ing that physical place is an exercise of the prior, as we see in the case of Lily. An EWM major, Lily claims that finding a hospitable place to write is a crucial part of her composing process; she wants her composing place to offer physical features matching those of the first place she found success as a writer. Her use of this prior, in other words, involves a kind of replication: identifying a specific kind of composing place that iterates places where she composed successfully before.

Lily's first writing place was inside the Boston home where she grew up: a three-seasons porch with comfortable furniture, windows, light, and through the windows, "a scene [with] a lot of trees in the background," a place often filled with the sounds of people she loves, the "hustle and bustle" of the "4-5 people living in it" (Craig, 2016, p. 108). She appreciates both the light and the noise: interestingly, for her, unlike Kim and Nicole, the noise doesn't distract, but rather helps her focus, as she says: "I like working with hustle and bustle around, because I can focus" (Craig, 2016, p. 108). When she enters college, Lily finds a place replicating this first place and calls it her "sanctuary," one that as Craig describes, includes windows, furnishings, and friends, but as Lily explains, she's not sure how aware she was of this reiterative composing practice until her interview with Craig:

I like studying at this house, because it reminds me of where—back home. It's actually like a 2 story house that used to belong to a family. And I have a couple of friends who bought it together. They're friends that I've become good friends with that live here. So, I feel comfortable enough to sit on the couch and work for hours. I think honestly, looking back and reflecting on it. It's interesting how I composed this [current text] and composed back home like with the computer on the arm of the chair and looking out the window because that's exactly what I did here sub-consciously. (Craig, 2016, p. 183)

Place is thus another factor that influences composers, sometimes, as in Nicole's case, on an as-needed basis, and other times as a replicating practice, tacitly or explicitly.

## MAPPING THE PRIOR

As all these accounts make clear and as Bazerman suggests in this volume, "aspects of writing that are less visible, lost in the recesses of minds and feeling" can play a large influence in how writers compose. As this chapter demonstrates,

such invisible aspects influence the ways students like Nicole and Marie, in translating teacher directions, create new composing processes; and the ways fully multimodal assignments invite in students' other prior knowledge and practice, as in the case of Adam and Noreen; and the ways places sponsor composing practices for just-in-time or continuous composing. Likewise, we know about these invisible composing practices and uses of prior knowledge and practice through student accounts, and it is through such accounts that practices and uses of the prior might become more visible, that we might learn more. Toward that end, I here suggest three approaches we might consider as we continue to map composers' uses of prior composing knowledge and practice.

Students' beliefs often influence students' knowledge of composing. Marie, for instance, believes that writing functions as an exchange between teacher and student and that rubrics provide a blueprint for "build[ing] texts." Similarly, Nicole believes that all her writing should include a part of her: that good writing, even academic writing, is personally inclusive. Clearly, there is a relationship between beliefs and knowledge: what we believe sometimes becomes what we know, or stands in for what we know; and beliefs-becoming-knowledge shape what we do. One approach to investigating the relationships of students' beliefs, knowledge, and practices is, of course, located in asking them, a pedagogical approach Jeff Sommers (2011) has outlined. On the first day of class, Sommers shares the beginnings of three sentences—I believe writing . . . ; I believe revising . . . ; and I believe writing courses . . .—and asks students to complete the sentences and to share their responses (2011, p. 103). They do so, and thus begins a semester-long, collective consideration of what students believe about writing, revising, and writing courses. Asking students, perhaps individually or perhaps in focus groups, to engage with questions like these, especially over time, might help us begin to trace the dynamic relationship between beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

A second, more structured approach to exploring students' prior writing knowledge and practice is to frame an inquiry by using a revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy. Sharing with them this revised version, as visualized here, would focus students' thinking about ways they define writing and might identify prior knowledge and practices. What, students would be asked, are facts about writing? How do they know these? How are these different than beliefs, if they are? What are the writing concepts that they know? That they use? What practices do they engage in, and why? What role, if any, does reflection (Yancey, 1998, 2016) play? And what connections across these dimensions do they make, and why? The value of such a taxonomic approach is that it would provide a framework for inquiry such that aspects of the prior are sorted and can then be connected. Put another way, this taxonomy could produce a very specific kind

of map of the prior.

The Knowledge Dimension	Remember	Under-stand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Facts						
Concepts						
Processes						
Procedures						
Principles						
Metacognitive						

Figure 16.2. *The Knowledge Demensioni—major types and subtypes.*

Yet a third approach is to employ the method devised by Erin Workman, which is to ask students on the first day of class to identify their key terms for writing and to map them so that their relationships are made visible. Although Workman’s project is oriented to ways that the Teaching for Transfer curriculum can support students’ transfer of writing knowledge and practice, her approach, or one similar to it, could be used for research purposes. It would be useful to know how students conceptualize writing by reference to key terms, to learn how they structure such terms, to ascertain if some structures are more sustainable and/or productive in terms of use, and to continue to inquire into the role that key terms, as we saw in the case of Noreen, do or do not play in making prior knowledge available for use.

There is, of course, much more to learn about the prior than this chapter has been able to address, but one observation we can make on the basis of the evidence presented here is that the prior, even when it only taps knowledge, practices, and beliefs, is much more complex and sophisticated than is commonly understood. Moreover, given that much of it is invisible, it is impossible—without asking students—to know what they think writing is, or what practices serve best. As evidenced here, however, and with students’ help, we can continue to explore and to map more accurately this important but under-researched area.

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