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"Our door is always open": Aligning Literacy Learning Practices in Writing Programs and Residential Learning Communities

Julia Voss, Santa Clara University

Abstract: Writing studies has considered college students' literacy development as a chronological progression and as influenced by their off-campus connections to various cultural and professional communities. This project considers students' literacy development across disciplines and university activity systems in which they're simultaneously involved to look at the (missed) opportunities for fostering transfer across writing courses and residential learning communities as parallel—but rarely coordinated—high-impact practices. Rather than calling for the development of additional programs, I argue for building/strengthening connections between these existing programs by highlighting shared learning outcomes focused on literacy skills development and learning how to learn.

If I have a question about something, I want to ask it. – Laura

It's not as loud as some dorms might be. But it's still annoying... – Emily

As students filtered sleepily into my 8 am first-year writing course one morning in November 2014, two young women approached me before class. The first wanted to confirm a meeting to discuss the research project she was designing to compare how two university organizations she was part of—her residential learning community (RLC) and an ethnic student organization—used social media to build social ties between members, an idea she had been discussing with me and with her classmates for the past week. The second young woman followed up on an email exchange about a deadline she'd missed as a result of competing in an NCAA tournament. After overhearing my discussion with her classmate, the second student admitted with chagrin that she hadn't even begun thinking about her proposal. Like the two young women in the case study I report on below, both of the students I spoke to that morning lived in RLCs linked to my writing course. But what were their literacy and learning environments like outside my classroom? Like many RLC residents, my Fall 2014 students' experiences outside the classroom varied considerably, based on the extracurricular groups they were affiliated with and the different communities these affiliations placed them in (which I discuss below in terms of activity systems). Because the majority of students' literacy development occurs in hours spent reading, talking, drafting, and revising outside class and across multiple courses and terms, anecdotes like this one call our attention to the activity systems students are part of, indicating how these affiliations affect students' experiences of the writing-intensive courses we teach.

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This essay builds on the observation made by David M. Sheridan—one of the few writing studies scholars to study residence halls as learning spaces—that RLC students' "academic gains are the *result* of increased social connectedness" (forthcoming, emphasis in original) that they experience outside the classroom. Attending to the students' participation in multiple university-based activity systems parallels studies that locate students within different communities of affinity, practice, and origin, looking at how participation in multiple systems creates divergent campus learning environments that affect students' literacy development. Research on college writing development that considers the extracurriculum has often focused on the influence of students' off-campus connections (see Webb-Sunderhaus, 2007; Roozen, 2008, 2009, & 2010; Navarre Cleary, 2013; Williams, 2015) or students' development through a succession of courses (see Smit, 2004; Devitt, 2007; Beaufort, 2007; Wardle, 2009; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Nowacek, 2011; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). Related work on literacy development in academic activity systems has focused on students' development of professional literacies across courses and the tensions involved in writing for on- and off-campus audiences (see Freedman & Adam, 2000a & 2000b; Paré, 2000; Ketter & Hunter, 2003).

This body of work leaves a gap around the curriculum-linked programming colleges provide to scaffold students' classroom learning. In addition to constituting students' everyday environment, university facilities like writing centers, residence halls, student centers, libraries, and other sources of material and intellectual resources are important to consider when tracing students' literacy development across their college careers. I report here on a case study of two young women enrolled in a writing course at a large, public research university during the winter of 2012. In order to look at their experiences of the campus as a learning environment, I follow these young women through the different classroom and residential activity systems they participate in, which are peopled with different types of instructors and peers and characterized by different social dynamics. My activity theory frame calls attention to the learning practices that characterize these different activity systems, highlighting the cultures that define them. In addition to being enrolled in the same first year writing (FYW) course, both women lived in RLCs, interest-based dormitories that grouped students based on academic/professional interests. As these students' different experiences of RLCs suggest, however, the articulation between FYW and RLCs as activity systems varies considerably and can impede the kind of learning students ideally do as they move through their college careers. At universities like the one featured in this study, FYW and RLCs operate simultaneously and impact many of the same students. However, FYW falls under academic affairs and is run by writing studies-trained instructional faculty housed in academic programs, while RLCs typically fall under student affairs and are operated by staff trained in student learning and development. These institutional disconnects work against their communication and coordination, despite FYW and RLCs' similar educational goals.

Writing-intensive courses (including FYW, advanced writing, professional writing, and disciplinary writing courses) fall under the umbrella of what George D. Kuh calls "high-impact practices" (HIPs) that "add value" to the college experience by cultivating students' "intellectual powers and capacities; ethical and civic preparation; personal growth and self-direction," helping them "achiev[e] the level of preparation—in terms of knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities—that will enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy and in turbulent, highly demanding global, societal, and often personal contexts" (2008, p. 12). In particular, the social approach to learning found in many writing courses mirrors the learning environment cultivated in RLCs. Here I highlight the commonalities between writing pedagogies and the socially-situated development RLCs are designed to facilitate, using case studies of students' experience transferring (or not) the literacy habits they learned in FYW to their RLC-based learning to argue for better articulation between these programs. My purpose here is not to argue for the creation of new programs or requirements, but to raise awareness in our field of the complimentary programs currently operating on many of our campuses, recommending ways to amplify what we in writing studies and our colleagues in student affairs are doing by drawing students' attention to our shared goals.

This kind of coordination is especially important as higher education as a whole reevaluates bricks and mortar institutions in an era where virtual learning options like MOOCs and competency-based programs promise the ability to teach students distributed across the globe and where intensive, "practical" educational alternatives like coding academies strip higher education down to hyper-focused technical instruction without attending to other aspects of development. Given the cost of operating a "traditional" university, especially one that engages in HIPs, what can we do to identify, make more visible, and magnify the effects of these programs and to better scaffold students' literacy learning (among other outcomes)? The issue of program coordination I examine here focuses on the shared learning practices of writing courses and RLCs to suggest ways to expand and amplify their impact, focusing on what David R. Russell (1999) calls the "breakdowns and discoordinations" in FYW and RLCs as linked activity systems.

Finding Common Ground: High Impact Practices in Writing Programs and Residential Learning Communities

Writing studies scholarship that uses activity theory to study the multiple systems in which students are enmeshed has tended to focus on connections/tensions between on and off campus activity systems. For example, Russell and Arturo Yañez (2003) describe how undergraduates write within competing activity systems based on their status as university students and future professionals, drawing attention to the potential conflicts created when students transfer conflicting writing expectations across classroom and workplace boundaries. While Russell and Yañez point to tensions between activity systems students encounter on and off campus, in order to look at the relationships between on-campus systems like FYW and RLCs, I draw on Yrjö Engeström's (1987) analysis of the factors shaping learning within activity systems, illustrated and described in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1. Engeström's activity theory components, from *Learning by Expanding* (1987)

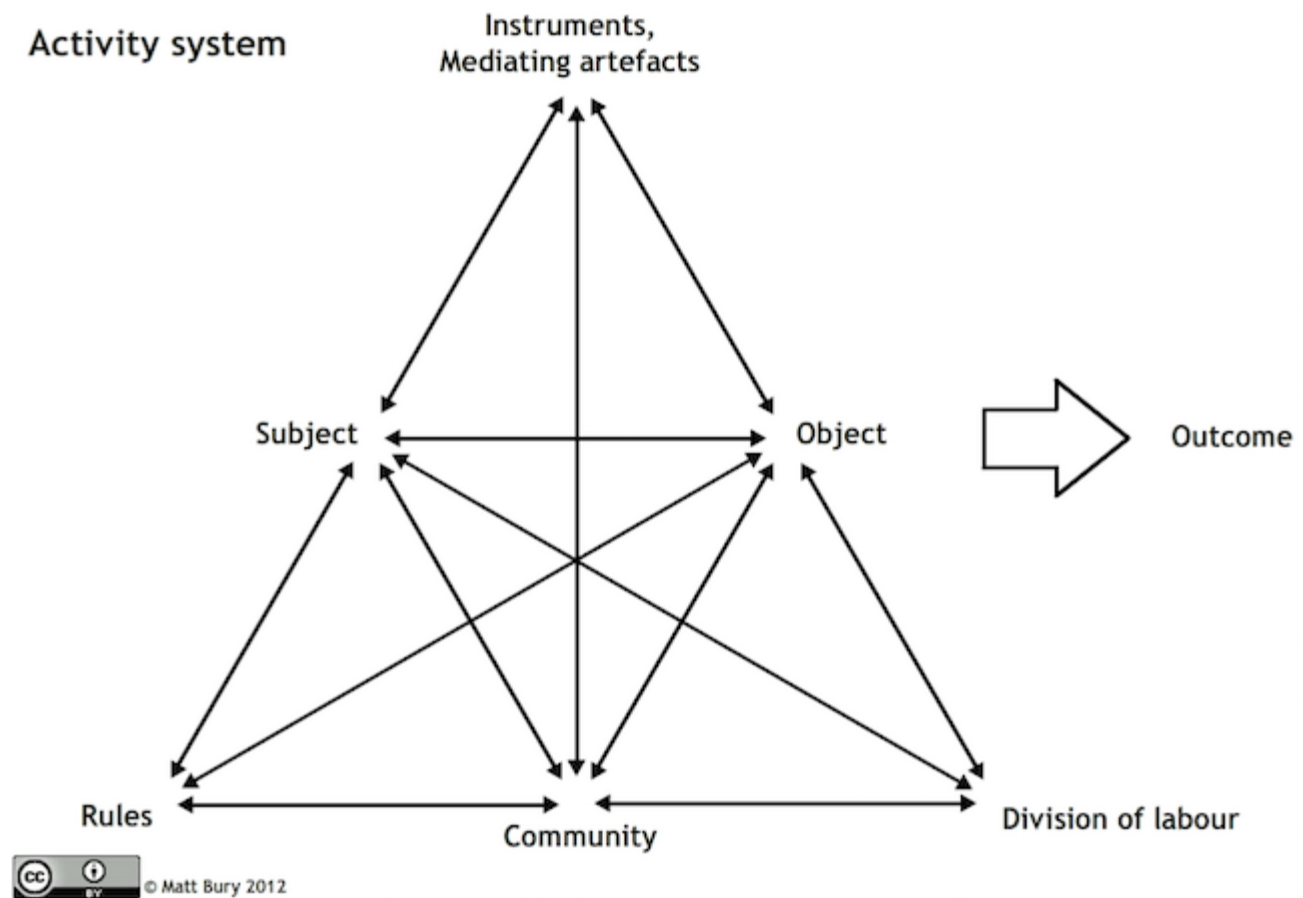
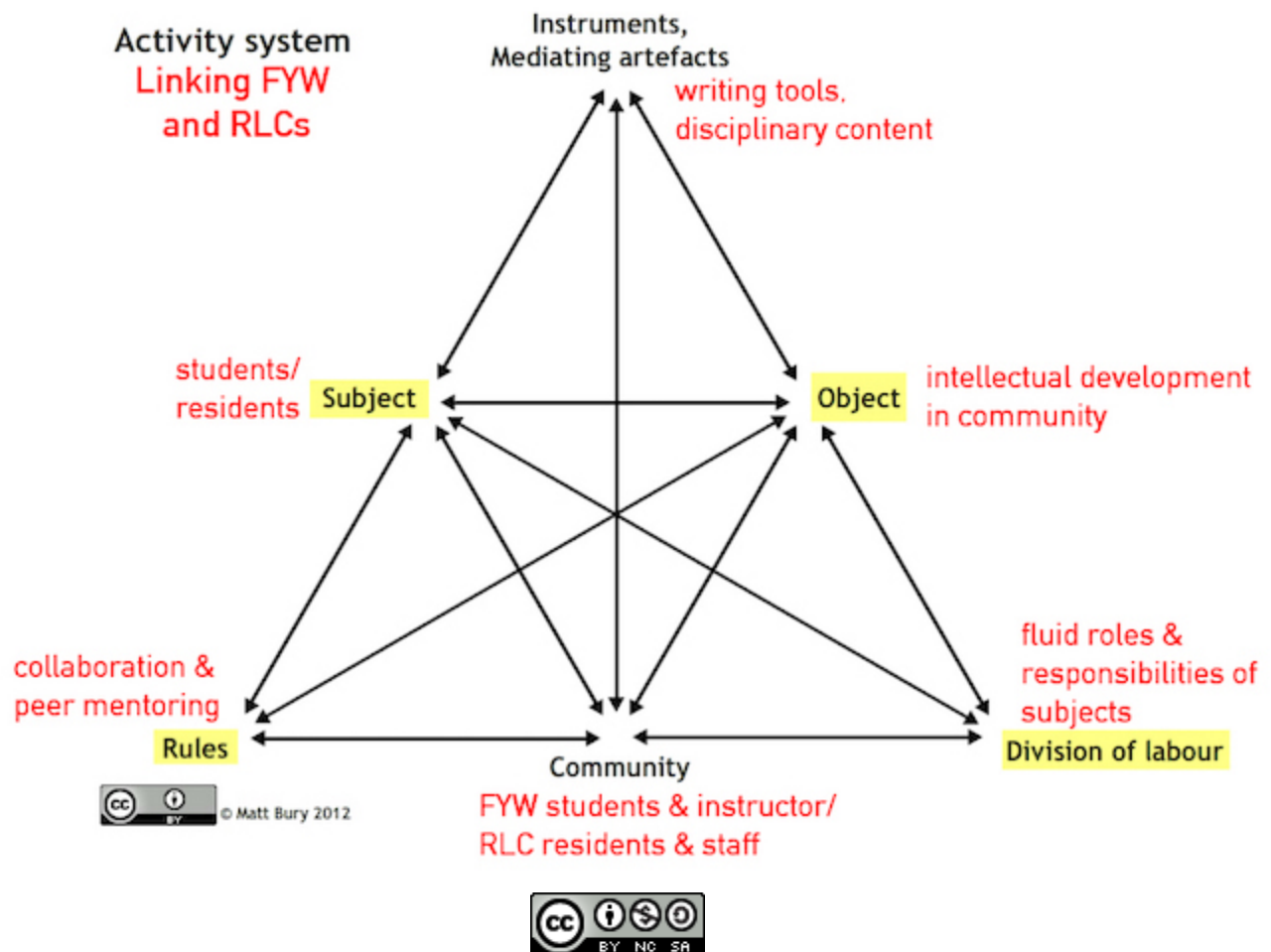


Diagram identifying features of activity systems and relationships between them (image credit: Bury, 2012
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Activity_system.png)

In the case of writing courses and RLCs, while many material instruments are the same (literacy resources and writing tools), the conceptual instruments are different owing to the different disciplinary foci, illustrated in [Figure 2](#). The subjects—in this case, student learners—remain constant across these two systems, serving as the boundary objects that connect the systems. University staff—faculty and student affairs professionals—typically stay in their separate systems, creating the institutional disconnect this special issue seeks to address. While some of the systems' outcomes are shared—learning how to learn and communicate—others are distinct, focused on discipline-specific concepts and skills. The rules that govern the systems—the ways the classrooms and RLCs run and their inhabitants interact—are similar, calling for a flexible division of labor in which participants function as friends, teachers, and learners, depending on the task. Because of the emphasis on learning behaviors in both writing classrooms and RLCs, I focus on their "rules" as learning systems, noting similarities between these different systems and recommending ways they can build on each other. I begin by discussing the collaborative pedagogies that characterize many FYW courses that function as HIPs, compare them to RLCs and then present two case studies that examine transfer of literacy learning practices between these systems.

Figure 2. Engeström's activity theory diagram, specified for writing program/RLC interaction



FYW and RLC mapped out as linked activity systems. The parts of the diagram that are highlighted indicate the activity system aspects the following case studies focus on. (image modified from Bury, 2012 under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

This project focuses on two students enrolled in a first year writing course at Midwest University (MU)^[1], a large, public, research-intensive institution located in a mid-sized U.S. city. The curriculum in this FYW course followed the MU writing program's focus on rhetorical analysis and learning to write for academic and public audiences in print and digital formats. Students completed an eight- to ten-page research paper, moving from close reading of a primary source, to finding and analyzing secondary sources, to drafting a final argumentative essay. The "public writing" components of the curriculum asked students to write about their research topics in social media platforms like blogs, Twitter, and Storify, designed to extend their engagement with the course theme, "Rhetoric and the Social Media Era." The course was fully enrolled with twenty-four students, the majority of whom, like 85% of MU students (Statistical Summary, 2011), were white. The data reported here draws on classroom observations, student surveys, student and instructor interviews, and student-guided dorm visits.

Kristy, the award-winning graduate instructor who taught the course, used a pedagogy that emphasized collaborative learning, asking students to work together on in-class activities related to the research-

supported rhetorical analysis essay and social media writing they did for their individual graded assignments. She guided students toward resolving research, technical, and rhetorical problems themselves, scaffolding in-class problem-solving activities to help students learn how to learn about writing. Kristy placed the students into small, static groups of four for the term, and encouraged them to confer with their group members before asking her questions. To cultivate students' self- and peer-teaching, Kristy also modeled crowdsourcing questions to the class as a whole, positioning students collectively as problem-solvers and sources of information. She deflected students' efforts to identify her as *the* expert, encouraging students to consult each other, do research online, and draw their own conclusions, embodying the kind of student-provided expertise Jentery Sayers (2011) advocates. As Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa S. Ede (1990, 2012), Kenneth A. Bruffee (1999), and others have argued, collaborative activities like these produce better writing products, promote deeper and more critical thinking, and illustrate the social construction of knowledge and communication skills, especially when student engage in them face-to-face in real time (Rogers & Horton, 1992).

When explaining her pedagogy and facilitating small and large group activities, Kristy emphasized the social nature of knowledge-creation and learning, positioning both classmates (in-person human resources) and online content (virtual informants) as valuable sources of information and guidance, characteristics that Laura McGrath (2011) argues increasingly characterize literacy in the twenty-first century. Kristy's writing studies-based pedagogy also embodied the AAC&U's HIP of collaboration, teaching students to "work and solve problems in the company of others" by "sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others" (Kuh, 2008, p. 10). As Kristy explained:

They get to know each other. And not just as humans, but as fellow writers and learners. And they start to know things about each other. So I start to hear things like "Such and such, you remember in the first paper where you did this? You're doing it again. And it seems like the solution that time was blank. And let's think about whether that solution works."

Kristy highlighted both the individual and social learning goals that underpinned her collaborative classroom, echoing Kuh's emphasis on socially scaffolded learning. As an activity system, Kristy used collaborative work and peer mentoring to cultivate writing development, cultivating "rules" for student learning with the potential to resonate with the expectations for socially-scaffolded learning in their RLCs.

John O'Connor defines learning communities as a "purposeful restructuring of [...] students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, [and] between students and their teachers" (2003, p. 3). RLCs^[2] extend these learning objectives from the classroom into students' extracurricular lives, echoing many of the pedagogies Kristy (and other writing teachers) cultivate. At their most basic level, RLCs build on the practical housing function of residence halls to promote intellectual inquiry and bonding between residents by creating conditions that encourage academic conversations and activities (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 5, 17). RLCs at MU are formed around majors,^[3] bringing together students who share intellectual/professional interests and academic experiences. The assessment literature on RLCs as HIPs reports benefits such as higher grades and course completion rates, improved retention, increased learning gains, and more positive perceptions of the college experience.^[4] Work that examines how these benefits come about highlights the ways LCs support learning socially by promoting bonding among students as learners, collaborative learning, and appreciation of peers as academic resources (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 67-70).

For RLC students, living together extends the academic environment into the extracurriculum, so that the residence hall "becomes a twenty-four-hour-a-day setting for intellectual engagement" (Schoem, 2004, p. 132). Alexander Meiklejohn^[5] explains that in a successful RLC

What is needed is that the community find its life centering about a common course of study, a common set of problems, a common human situation. The effect of this is to give to the casual conversation, the easy association of students, an education value which is wholly lost if one's dormitory friends or fraternity house mates [sic] are studying in different fields. If one member of the group is studying physics and another art and another economics, then it follows almost inevitably that neither physics nor art nor economics will be easily talked about. The group must search for matters of common interest outside the field of studies altogether. The studies become private and socially uninteresting. But if the whole group is engaged in the same attempt at learning, then every aspect of the social living becomes steeped in the common purpose. (1932/2001, p. 227-228)

In practical terms, RLCs like the ones at MU facilitate residents forming connections over disciplinary content through enrolling in linked courses, forming study groups, and engaging in everyday discussion of their common college experience in an environment defined by shared values and investment (Schoem, 2004). Practices like group study and discussion of courses and professional opportunities constitute the same kinds of socially-infused learning and information sharing behaviors Kristy's class cultivated, pointing to rules-level links between these FYW and RLC programs. In their research on the deep effects dormitory culture can have on student life, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton also recommend the use of discipline-focused RLCs that mix students of varying ages (like those discussed below) as a way to infuse student culture with an academic—as opposed to purely social—dimension (2013, pps. 235-236).

The RLCs profiled here include both types offered at MU, what the institution calls "learning communities" and "scholars' communities." Learning communities like Agriculture & Environment are defined by students' disciplinary interests and provide residents with extracurricular advising, faculty mentoring, site visits to local businesses, and service learning opportunities ("Agriculture & environment LC," 2015). Anyone majoring in agricultural science, agricultural engineering, or environmental and natural resources can opt to live in the RLC at any point during their college career (P. Heimberger, personal communication, June 29, 2015). Scholars' communities like Health Science include the kinds of extracurricular resources provided by MU LCs, but also require students to demonstrate academic excellence through high GPAs and test scores, enroll in linked disciplinary courses, participate in mandatory extracurricular learning experiences^[6] and community development activities,^[7] and complete a capstone project^[8] (Proposal for a Transcript Designation for the Midwest University Scholars' Program, 2015). The Health Science RLC is open to first- and second-year students, although some residents maintain their affiliation by participating in mentoring programs after they move out ("Health science scholars'-community," 2013).

MU RLCs' extracurricular programming brings together students who share intellectual interests and provides opportunities for them to interact and bond around those interests, so that their intellectual lives "naturally" grow together in the kind of conducive environment Meiklejohn describes. Similar to Kristy's collaborative pedagogy, RLC participants get to know each other "not just as humans, but as fellow writers and learners" because of the classroom experiences and extracurricular programming that structure their college experience. The emphasis on shared interests, collaboration, and peer mentorship creates a natural bridge between FYW programs and RLCs. However, in the absence of formal coordination between them, students don't always recognize the similarity between FYW and RLC objects, rules, and divisions of labor, allowing for the interference of other linked activity systems. [Figure 2](#) shows the FYW and RLCs described as similar activity systems, previewing the features discussed below.

Laura and Emily: Case Studies in the Transfer of Literacy Practices Between HIPs

RLCs and writing courses at MU have a tenuous relationship. Although MU RLCs are structured around disciplinary interest (i.e. not general education courses), Scholars RLCs offer students the opportunity to pre-enroll in designated FYW sections. Kristy's FYW class was a designated pre-enrollment course for Emily's Health Sciences RLC. However, she was the only RLC student who registered for the class. Afterward, the course was opened to general enrollment and, for a variety of reasons (similar schedules, friends enrolling together), about a quarter of the students came from Laura's Agriculture & Environment RLC. So while MU's attempt to offer Kristy's class as a Health Science Scholars RLC-linked course failed, the FYW course became de facto linked to Laura's Agriculture & Environment RLC. As a result, RLCs featured prominently when students discussed their dorms as writing locations (either positively or negatively). Following in the tradition of case study research in writing studies (see Lauer & Asher, 1988; Creswell, 2007), I focus here on Laura and Emily, who represent the two ends of the spectrum of RLC students' experience of the relationship between their writing development in FYW and the dorms, selected to show the potential for congruent, amplifying learning experiences for students embedded in both activity systems, as well as the barriers to this congruence. The material reported below reflects their descriptions of writing in their RLCs during and after their FYW course and the characteristics of their RLCs as learning environments highlighted during subsequent site visits to their dorm rooms.

Laura's Experience: FYW/RLC Congruence that Facilitates Literacy Practice Transfer

Figure 3. Laura, Agriculture & Environment RLC student



Laura was a traditionally aged, white, middle-class freshman, living in the Agriculture & Environment RLC (see [Figure 3](#)). She came from a rural part of the state and majored in food science, hoping to work as a product developer for a food company. A frequent contributor to small and large group discussions in Kristy's class, Laura also relished her dorm's social and academic life. She characterized her RLC as providing a social support network for her intellectual development through informal peer support and advising. The Agriculture & Environment RLC embodied Meiklejohn's ideas: residents' shared interests created a natural environment for discussing coursework, prompting them to form study groups in which residents worked together to understand and communicate disciplinary content. These RLC "rules" for behavior echoed the collaborative, student-led pedagogies that defined Kristy's classroom. Laura emphasized how casual RLC conversations covered not only the general student experience, but also

discipline-specific discussions about courses, assignments, and study habits, facilitated by her floor's open-door policy and its mix of under- and upper-classmen:

Well, it's a really fun environment. It's really loud all the time. There's always laughing and there's always jokes, but then with all these people coming in and out, you learn "Oh, they're in my class too." So you're like, "Oh, OK, well let's study about this." Or "Now I have a question, I'm going to ask you." Or "Oh, you're in that class too?"

Here Laura explains how for RLC neighbors who shared intellectual/professional interests, casual chitchat easily segued into discussion of shared academic experiences. As Nicole Kraemer Munday notes in her research on peer review sessions conducted in residence halls, "Bonding behavior occurs when participants engage in off-topic discourse that appears to divert attention from the peer response session, yet instead of serving as a digression, these conversations reinforce the students' shared experience" (2007, p. 97). Laura reported that connections made in the RLC set up a relationship that offered point-of-need support (answering each other's questions) and promoted more formal collaboration (study groups):

You're sitting there on your computer typing something, and they're like "Oh, what are you typing?" "Oh, I'm in [FYW]." "Oh, I was in that class," and they tell you about their experiences. Because [the RLC] is all different grade levels. So you have juniors, sophomores, and freshmen, and then you have freshmen that have already been in some classes that you're taking this quarter.

The variety of academic experience contained on the floor puts residents in the position of being able to advise one another, sharing knowledge about the subjects they're studying. In addition to general discussions about the nature of individual courses and group study, Laura also described the value of sharing notes with other residents as a way to augment/clarify course content and get exposure to different ways of communicating disciplinary ideas.

RLC residents also provided useful sounding boards for disciplinary writing questions. These benefits extended beyond study groups formed by students enrolled in the same course (described below) to include seeing residents as valuable sources of feedback for individual work. Laura explained RLC residents' process of working together on different discipline-related projects:

We sit right next to each other and sometimes we're working on different stuff. We're not all working on the same thing, but they know what I'm going through. And I can be like "Hey, what's the question for this?" Or "Hey, I have a question about this." And they're just right there. And they might not be working on the same thing, but they can always answer my question.

These comments were in regard to working on assignments for courses like Food Marketing that many residents took, which called for complex problem-solving and proposal development. Based on their shared curricular experience and the fund of disciplinary knowledge distributed among residents, the RLC provided guidance for assignments in progress, allowing residents to reinforce and share their knowledge. Unlike the Scholars' RLCs discussed below, learning communities like Agriculture & Environment didn't include any additional coursework or projects beyond major requirements. As a result, the writing tasks around which residents collaborated included writing assignments from MU's required first- and second-year writing courses, as well as assignments from writing-intensive disciplinary courses like Food Marketing and sciences courses (like the biology course described below) that required lab reports. The student-led approach to problem solving and knowledge-making Kristy encouraged served Laura well when it came to soliciting advice from other residents based on their experienced gained in similar courses and writing tasks.

This kind of peer mentorship and guidance mirrors the group-based pedagogy Kristy advocated. Just as Laura sought out expertise from her FYW classmates, she also turned to RLC residents with questions about her disciplinary classes, explaining that "If I have a question about something, I want to ask it."^[9] Laura stated that in addition to consulting with other food science majors, she also transferred specific collaboration technologies from FYW to her group study with fellow residents. After using videoconferencing software to share screens during peer review in Kristy's class, Laura proposed using the same application to share notes and work in progress with members of her RLC-based biology study group. These information-sharing and -seeking habits created opportunities for Laura to organically transfer the collaborative learning and writing techniques she honed in Kristy's FYW class into her disciplinary RLC. Although students with similar academic interests can meet and collaborate in any residence hall, the disciplinary focus and programming of an RLC like Agriculture & Environment fostered the "social living steeped in a common [intellectual] purpose" that Meiklejohn describes, which echoed the same expectations for collaboration and mentoring that Laura experienced in Kristy's class. As she moved between FYW classroom and RLC, their similar rules reinforced Laura's experience of learning and communicating across her university experience.

Just as in Kristy's FYW class, in the Agriculture & Environment RLC residents bonded around shared academic goals, interacted with each other over time in a common physical space, and shared knowledge about the intellectual content of their courses, interwoven with a casual social interaction. The overlap between the conventions of Kristy's FYW class and the Agriculture & Environment RLC allowed Laura to return the advising favors she received from other residents, introducing a new literacy tool that allowed residents to extend their textual collaboration beyond face-to-face interaction. Laura's experience illustrates the potential writing programs and RLCs have to reinforce and amplify one another's impact, pointing to shared objectives around which writing studies faculty and RLC administrators might build common cause and programming with student affairs personnel.

Emily's Experience: When FYW/RLC Transfer Falters

Figure 4. Emily, Health Science RLC student



Not all students, however, appreciated the kind of undifferentiated social/academic RLC atmosphere Laura described. Laura's classmate Emily (see [Figure 4](#)) also lived in a highly social RLC for students majoring in health science. Although demographically very similar to Laura,^[10] Emily's orientation toward dorm life differed considerably, and she objected to other residents' noisiness:

It's not as loud as some dorms might be. But it's still annoying, because I live on a girls' floor, so there are girls chattering all the time. I don't understand. It's just this certain group of girls. I'm like "I don't know when you get your homework done. You guys are always talking really loud with your door open. Close your door!"

Emily did not appreciate the omnipresent social interaction that Laura describes as central to her RLC as a learning environment. In addition to the self-sponsored advising and study groups that Laura described, Emily's Health Science RLC also used clustered courses, mandatory social events, and academic opportunities to cultivate community among members ("Health science scholars'-academics," 2013; "Health science scholars'-community," 2013). In addition to clustering RLC residents in disciplinary and general education courses—which included writing tasks like the essays in Kristy's FYW class and lab reports for science courses—Scholars' RLCs like Health Science also required students to complete a capstone project where students "select a specific topic or theme that they wish to explore independently and present what they've learned" (Proposal for a Transcript Designation for the Midwest University Scholars' Program, 2015).

Emily's RLC experience was complicated by her credit-intensive medical technology major and her status as a member of MU's Division 1 rifle team.^[11] Because of these commitments, Emily recognized that she wasn't well integrated into the community of her RLC or comfortable with its rules for social/intellectual interaction:

When I'm actually at my dorm, I'll be talking to my friends, and they'll be talking about this person that they're all friends with, that they are only friends with because they live in the dorm, because they've gone to other floors and talk. I barely know half my floor, because I'm never there.

As Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argue when looking at how female college students' experience of life in the dorms shapes their academic, social, and professional development across their college careers, social isolation can have serious academic, as well as emotional, effects. Students who fail to connect with their peers—especially in the discipline-focused environment of an RLC—miss out on valuable information about opportunities like internships, scholarship programs, and interesting classes that travels through the community grapevine, because this information is wrapped up with social interaction which isolated students like Emily do not participate in (pps. 113-114). In addition to the immediate resource of mutual assistance with coursework, Emily's limited social network within her RLC cut her off from the kind of para-academic information that leads to experiences which are intellectually rewarding and—as Armstrong and Hamilton note elsewhere (pps. 180-208)—function as valuable professional currency in the competitive graduate school and job markets where ambitious students like Emily see themselves.

Because of her outside commitments, Emily sometimes went to a study center for student-athletes to work without distraction, a physical separation that further limited her ability to participate in the Health Science RLC community. Emily acknowledged that others living in her dorm consulted one another about disciplinary coursework, like the chemistry course she took while enrolled in Kristy's FYW class, but that she lacked the social connections to seek out other residents herself to discuss either disciplinary or general education coursework. Like Kristy's class and Laura's Agriculture & Environment RLC, the behavioral rules of Emily's Health Science RLC encouraged casual interaction that encompassed both social and academic concerns, using physical co-presence to underpin academically-inflected relationships in which residents taught and mentored each other. Dorms like Emily's where students also take classes together particularly facilitate the development of community because, as Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Tackacs (2014) explain, residents' extended physical proximity leads to their "flexible" use of time and space for mixed academic and social activities, which mitigates against role segregation (separation of different spheres of life) and creates the conditions for Durkheim's classic vision of community. Emily, on the other

hand, separated her classes, athletic responsibilities, and work commitments using time and space. The undifferentiated way other residents used time and space in the Health Science RLC made it difficult for Emily to work alone without distraction on her coursework during her designated evening homework hours in the dorm.

In response, Emily communicated her preference for sustained, solo work with the way she arranged her part of her dorm room. [Figure 5](#) shows the study cubicle Emily constructed using her lofted bed, emphasizing privacy and solitary work rather than socializing or collaboration. Its decorations include notices for sports-related events, a whiteboard calendar recording assignment deadlines, and Emily's post-it note system for tracking work in progress. This forms a stark contrast to the profusion of furniture, electronics, photos, decorations, clothing, and personal items Laura and her roommates kept in their room (shown in [Figure 6](#)).^[12] The décor of Laura's room was typical of residents in both RLCs, designed to showcase personal identity/taste and to invite interaction, which Rebekah Nathan (2006) describes as typical of twenty-first century residence halls. Emily's study cubicle creates the kind of private, self-selected, "idiosyncratic" micro-literacy zone John Scenters-Zapico (2010) describes as favored by individuals whose literacy practices clash with the dominant ones of their culture. Although the behavioral rules of both RLCs favored social interaction that blends leisure and study, Emily carved out a workspace that communicated her preference for working alone.

Figure 5. Emily's study cubicle in her Health Science RLC room



The image on the left shows Emily's whole lofted bed study area. The image on the right shows a detail of Emily's sports-focused decorations and multiple deadline-tracking systems.

Figure 6. Study area in Laura's Agriculture & Environment RLC room



The left and right sides of Laura's room, approximating a panorama. Laura's desk is shown in the foreground of the right side image, with the orange and black backpack in front of it.

Although Emily didn't experience her RLC as a learning resource, she recognized the value of the kind of peer mentoring found in both Kristy's class and her dorm. Describing her experience as a high school honors student and a member of Kristy's FYW class, Emily recalled the benefits of talking to friends about courses and assignments during class, in the hallways, and on the phone:

having people around to do that kind of thing [connecting you with resources and bouncing ideas off each other and clarifying the assignments and stuff to each other] is probably the greatest resource anyone can have, because these people can see things that you can't see, and they can reassure you, and things like that.

Emily didn't resist collaboration categorically, but she didn't see the opportunities for learning behavior transfer that Laura did between her FYW class and RLC. Emily was very aware of her unusual position as a student-athlete, and the effects her commitment to the rifle team had on her integration into the close-knit Health Science RLC: "It's kind of saddening, I guess, because my dorm is a really close dorm. Everybody knows everybody, except for m-, the people who are never there. It's like 'I'm so involved, I can't be here; I'm sorry.'" Her other commitments kept Emily from reaping the linked social and intellectual rewards her RLC was designed to facilitate, despite her awareness of the benefits of these learning behaviors based on her experiences in FYW and elsewhere.

The Health Science and Agriculture & Environment RLCs relied on proximity, shared coursework, and extracurricular programming to cultivate collaborative learning among residents. In Laura's case, the unstated parallels between the social learning rules that defined Kristy's FYW course and the Agriculture & Environment RLC were enough because she spent enough time in the RLC to develop social connections that organically fostered collaborative learning, mentoring, and disciplinary communication work. This allowed Laura to make connections across her FYW and RLC experience and to adapt her FYW collaborative writing experience into her food science coursework. Emily, on the other hand, had too many

commitments to organically integrate into her Health Science RLC by spending most of her extracurricular time there. While in her dorm, she tried to maximize efficiency by working alone, which clashed with the RLC's rules for behavior. The dorm's multifunctional social/study practices struck Emily as distracting and unproductive because she didn't have the requisite ambient contact with other residents to tap into the academic support and advice intertwined with their casual social activities. As Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) have noted, students like Emily with significant outside commitments such as off-campus jobs and varsity sports are more likely to leave LCs than students like Laura who can fully commit their time to the community. Emily explained that she wanted to move off campus as a sophomore, but that the handful of friends she'd made wanted to remain in the Health Science RLC. As a result, Emily planned to stay for sophomore year, but didn't expect her relationship to the community or appreciation of its behavioral rules to change.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Work

Students like Laura who are strongly affiliated with their RLCs are primed to recognize the similar rules that characterize the RLCs and writing courses they circulate through as collaborative, peer-centric learning environments, facilitating transfer. For students like Emily, however, who aren't well integrated into their RLCs, this transfer can falter. Emily understood how peer-based learning environments could, in theory, support general education and disciplinary writing, but without the kinds of formal collaborative structures and explication Kristy provided in FYW, she didn't recognize the FYW/RLC parallels that Laura intuited. Given Emily's scarce time, without having her attention explicitly drawn to the similar rules characterizing both systems, she didn't recognize the benefits of taking time to develop social relationships with other dorm residents that underpinned the assistance and mentoring Laura found in her RLC, and which Emily herself experienced in Kristy's class.

In order to scaffold and promote the kind of "natural" congruence Laura experienced between the rules for social learning found in Kristy's FYW course and the Agriculture & Environment RLC, I argue for closer connections between these programs. Researchers studying RLCs have noted the need for student affairs and academic affairs personnel to work together more closely to create supportive and effective learning environments spanning students' curricular and extracurricular lives (see Schoem, 2004; Rong, 1998). While institutions like MU already connect RLCs to academic programs and disciplinary faculty, these efforts tend to focus on mentoring, lectures, and research/service outings that pair faculty from relevant disciplines with residents in order to engage students with the content of their majors. Connecting RLCs with writing programs would encourage connections on the metacognitive level across the kinds of learning both programs cultivate. Improving the articulation between existing HIPs is valuable because it can boost students' learning across their college careers and increase their satisfaction with their college experiences. Given Ann C. Dean's (2014) argument for the considerable administrative, pedagogical, and emotional labor that HIPs like FYW and RLCs require, intentionally linking these programs cultivates the magnitude of benefit that appeals to institutional funding sources and inspires stakeholder buy-in. Improved programmatic coordination would create opportunities to raise what Jack J. Mino (2014) calls the "unconscious intentionality" some students develop throughout their LC literacy experiences to explicit, deliberate knowledge transfer.

Many writing programs already include such metacognition and transfer in their learning outcomes. But identifying and foregrounding the similar modes of learning found in writing programs and RLCs can scaffold and encourage the kinds of integrative learning—another AAC&U buzzword—that students like Laura are already doing, helping ensure that it happens more broadly and minimizing the missed opportunities Emily's experience highlights. A characteristic of many HIPs (including collaborative learning and learning communities), integrative learning describes the ability to "connect[] skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences" and "apply[] theory to practice in various settings" (AAC&U/Carnegie Foundation, 2004), elevating the peer-based learning found in writing courses and

RLCs to an explicit learning outcome. For motivated but busy students like Emily, highlighting the parallel integrative learning opportunities found in FYW courses and RLCs would help them recognize RLCs as learning environments and encourage them to take advantage of them as such, prompting students to make the effort to participate in what Meiklejohn calls the RLC's "common purpose." Rather than seeing the RLC simply as a residence, emphasizing its status as a learning community that extends the literacy and learning skills students acquire in writing courses (and other general education courses) would signal to students the benefits of participating in RLCs the way they do in their classes, encouraging the kind of deliberate social/intellectual engagement that Laura practiced intuitively.

The disciplinary linkage found in MU RLCs begins to show students these cross-campus learning links. But highlighting RLCs' connections to skills-based general education classes like FYW would connect students like Emily's experience of collaborative writing pedagogy to the opportunities for peer-based literacy development in their RLCs. As Rebecca S. Nowacek (2011) has argued, framing these learning goals in terms of integration calls for intentional transfer. Doing so builds on the research on transfer already undertaken by writing studies faculty looking at students' literate development over the course of college. However, including student affairs-based HIP programs like RLCs within the purview of literacy development and transfer broadens the potential impact of writing studies' work. This lays the groundwork for the kind of "cross-campus" learning environment that Gebauer, Watterson, Malm, Filling-Brown, & Cordes (2013) argue is necessary for scaffolding student learning experiences not just vertically through their college careers, but also horizontally across the different activity systems students encounter in their everyday lives on campus.

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Notes

- [1] In compliance with this study's IRB approval and to protect participants' privacy, Midwest University and the names of the instructor and students used in this study (Kristy, Laura, and Emily) are all pseudonyms. Titles of university websites have also been changed to the pseudonymous "Midwest University" and URLs have been redacted.
- [2] Residential learning communities are a sub-set of learning communities (LCs), many of which don't include a residential component. LCs use a variety of formats including "embedded cohorts" of LC students within non-LC courses, "linked multiple courses" taught by LC faculty who collaborate to create a coherent curriculum, and "coordinated studies" where LC faculty and students spend most of their time within a relatively self-contained and directed program (see Zrull, Rocheleau, Smith, & Bergman, 2012).
- [3] Academic and professional interests are a common basis for establishing learning communities, although they can be organized around many other defining characteristics, such as first-generation college student status, academic achievement, hobbies/extracurricular interests, linguistic/cultural affiliation, et cetera (for an overview of LC types see Laufgraben & Tompkins, 2004).
- [4] See O'Connor (2003) and Love (2012) for reviews of this literature and Taylor's Learning community research and assessment: What we know now (2003) for a more in-depth treatment.
- [5] Meiklejohn, a disciple of John Dewey and architect of the modern RLC, founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1927 to create a two-year, intensive interdisciplinary liberal arts educational environment where students and faculty studied and lived together with an emphasis on participatory pedagogy and vocational discernment (see Meiklejohn, 1932/2001). The Tussman Experimental College at the University of California, Berkeley revived Meiklejohn's residential college concept in the late 1960s, using a curriculum that emphasized current and historical cultural crisis and social issues (see Trow, 1998). Meiklejohn's and Tussman's educational philosophies profoundly influence contemporary RLC design and practice (see Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Schoem, 2004; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004).
- [6] Scholars' RLC learning experiences include activities like career exploration, cultural events, clustered courses, debates, excursions, group discussion & projects, internships, lab visits, presentations & lectures, reflective journaling, service learning, study abroad, and undergraduate research (Proposal for a Transcript Designation for the Midwest University Scholars' Program, 2015).
- [7] Examples of community-building activities include leadership councils, social events, intramural leagues, and mentoring programs (B. Orefice, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

[8] Capstone projects take the forms of independent research projects or presentations; scholarly reflections on disciplinary learning experiences like internships, study abroad trips, undergraduate research, and service learning; or teaching assistantships (Proposal, 2015).

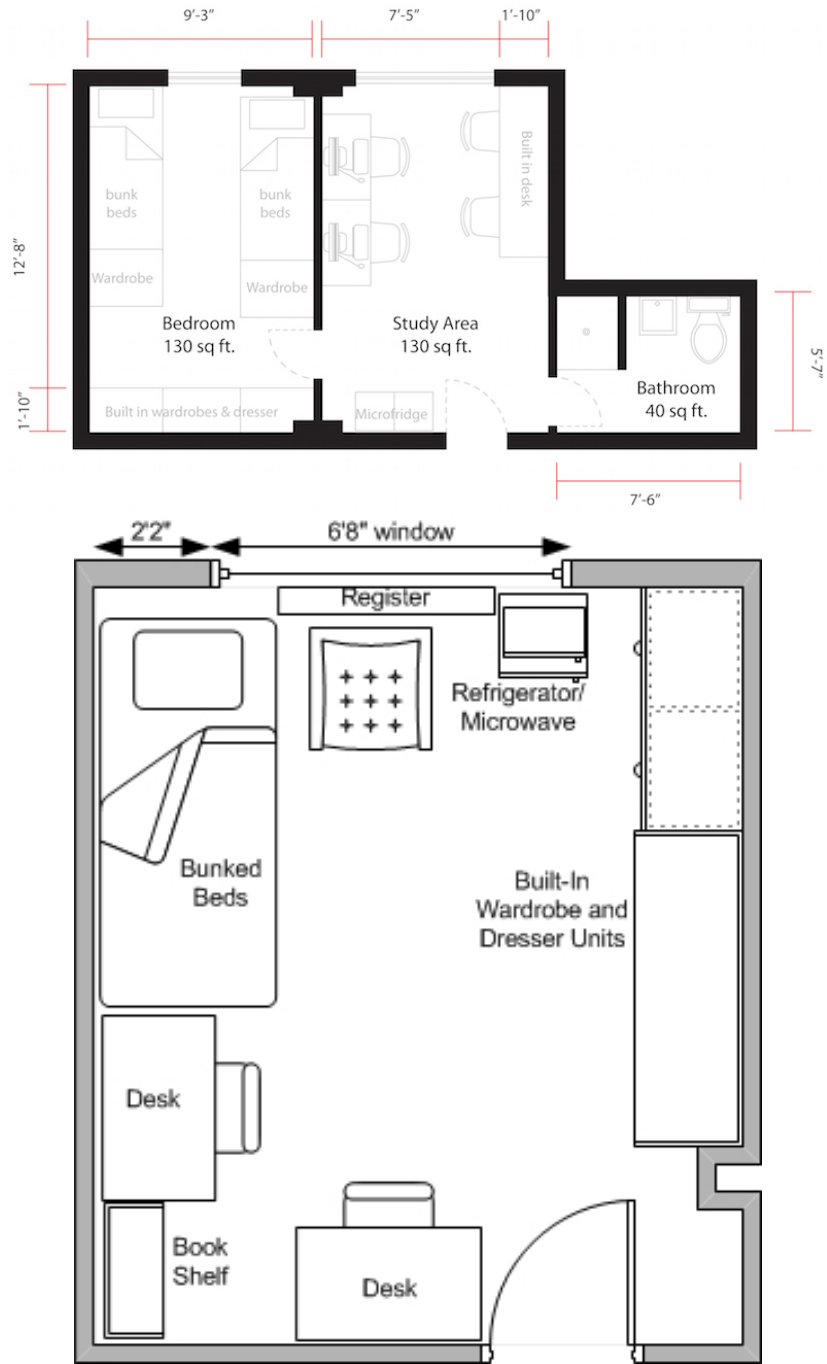
[9] It's important to note that the peer writing mentors Laura sought out in her RLC weren't classmates from FYW (although several were also Agriculture & Environment residents), but other friends made in the dorm. This suggests that Laura was transferring FYW literacy learning behaviors to the RLC context, rather than simply drawing on social contacts made in FYW class in the extracurricular RLC context.

[10] Like Laura, Emily was also white, traditionally aged, and middle-class, although she came from a suburban area in a nearby state.

[11] Beyond the basic medical technology major requirements, Emily was also enrolled in extra pre-med science courses. And in addition to her schoolwork, Emily's rifle team commitments entailed practices and competitions (including travel) and she also taught private shooting lessons on a part-time basis.

[12] MU RLCs are distributed across the university's different styles of dormitory buildings. As shown in Figure 7, Laura's Agriculture & Environment RLC was in a suite-style building, in which 4 residents share a study area, bathroom, and bedroom with 2 sets of bunk beds. Emily's Health Science RLC was in a "traditional" dorm building in which 2-3 residents (2 in Emily's case) share a bedroom that opens onto a corridor containing a bathroom and common room shared by all floor residents. Contrary to the floor plan suggested in Figure 7, Emily and her roommate did not bunk their beds, instead dividing their room into individually-occupied halves.

Figure 7. University-provided floor plans for Agriculture & Environment RLC and Health Science RLC rooms



"Standard" floor plans for the rooms Laura (left) and Emily (right) lived in, including dimensions.

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