

Dealing with Divergence: A *Grassroots* Co-interview on Antecedent Knowledge, Transfer, and Uptake

Madi Kartcheske and Jenn Tullos

Madi Kartcheske and Jennifer (Jenn) Tullos use the genre of a *Grassroots* Co-interview to help them process their developing understandings of writing as they move between different personal, academic, and industry environments. By talking through these concepts together, both Kartcheske and Tullos complicate their notions of uptake and antecedent knowledge as it relates to their writing and writing researcher identities.

Introduction

One of the first things I remember about starting my undergraduate degree was a sense of excitement. I was shedding the caterpillar form of high school, entering the cocoon of college, ready to graduate a self-assured butterfly who would know exactly what she wants to do with the rest of her life. In the four years since I graduated, I've learned that "the rest of my life" won't ever be quite so linear.

My name is Madi Kartcheske, and I'm a second-year Master's student here at Illinois State University. I sat down with Jennifer Tullos, a graduate of the PhD program at ISU who now works as an education manager for Planned Parenthood, to talk about the many things we've noticed about our lives and careers, both within and outside of an academic institution. Before we got into the "meat and potatoes" of our conversation, Jenn took some time to explain a little more about her current professional role:

J: I'm the education manager for the Education Department in Planned Parenthood. The idea of Planned Parenthood is that we have three legs. The

“stool” is the analogy they use. We have the clinic side, which is the thing that most people are familiar with, the advocacy side, where we go out and lobby and do legislative work, and then we have the education side, where we do sex ed. So, I’m on the education side, and I’m in a particular affiliate that spans six states, and I’m the manager for both Washington state and Idaho. I’m usually in the education world, kind of, but it’s so different than the education world that I’m used to, and it’s also particularly different than academia. It’s more similar to a K–12 [Jenn had experience teaching K–12 before returning to graduate school] . . . But even then, it’s very different. I really thought I was going to spend my whole life in academia, which is very different than what I’m doing here.

Managing Career Trajectories

It was that last sentence in Jenn’s introduction that really stood out to me—the idea that we have an assumed trajectory of our life and career, and how we sometimes have to manage and renegotiate those expectations depending on what life throws at us. In the Writing Program at ISU, we tend to think of **trajectory** as it relates to a text—the messy path it will take from the moment it is conceptualized and as it spreads throughout contexts and time. Here, I’m using that same definition and applying it to the literate activity that is all wrapped up in things like career choices and life goals.

I took up that notion of differing expectations as we continued chatting.

M: I think that’s so interesting—so, I got my undergrad at ISU and was pretty involved in the Writing Program, and then I did an international student semester with a program called Up with People, where I was volunteering and doing performing arts. I was hired by them as their education coordinator just before COVID hit, and so I was in this socially aware, academic-minded space. Then, when COVID hit, I had to get a job, just like, as a legal assistant. And so, it has been challenging to be taken from that space of highly theoretical and also highly individualized learning to a family law space, which is a very emotionally charged space where these folks are going through the worst thing they’ve ever been through. And, now, transferring back into academia, I’m trying to figure out how I balance these genres that suddenly feel kind of restrictive. And I’m looking at the differences of power from maybe a more capitalist or bureaucratic center like a law office compared to something that is a different kind of bureaucracy and a different kind of capitalistic structure in academia.

J: Something that you said made me think of something, too. I feel like in this role I have now, it's the first time—what I'm about to say is going to be oversimplified—but it's the first time that I feel like I've ever really collaborated on a thing. Being a classroom teacher, being an academic, like you said, is a very individualized thing. You know, like it's *my* research, *my* dissertation, *my* class that I get to create. So, when I was teaching, especially for ISU because we had so much freedom, I would create everything. Like, especially in the children's literature classes that I taught, I would create the book list and the assessment and the lesson—like, literally everything was mine. And, of course, I collaborated the learning experience with the students, but at the end of the day, I was doing all this stuff, and yes, I'm with professors, and yes, I worked with other grad students and peers, but it was still highly individualized. And now I'm in this space where I supervise five people, and then also I'm a middle manager, so I have a team of five or six senior leaders above me, and so it's like everything we do is collaborative. It changes so many things about the way these genres are producing the way that we communicate.

Classroom Spaces, Organizational Interests, and Power

Jenn and I then got to thinking about how power is negotiated in these different places—both within a classroom and within these business and nonprofit settings—and how that changes the way that we communicate.

J: I mean, even simple things like the way we write E-mails feels very different, and it's funny to me because I was teaching an ENG 101 class—it feels like 1,000 years ago now—and I remember having this student whose task was to E-mail the chair of the English department, and she was freaking out. She was like, “Why is writing an E-mail so hard? This shouldn't be that hard.” And then, you know, we got to have a really cool conversation about power and rhetorical situations and audience on these things, and I always thought that that was just a really interestingly teachable moment. And then here I am, you know, in her position where I feel like a student all over again, and I'm like, “Why is writing this E-mail so hard?” I had to write an E-mail to a senior leader basically pushing back on a decision that they were making that I didn't think was right, and that E-mail took me like two hours to write. I was completely sweating by the time I closed my laptop and, like, ran away. [. . .] I'm also interested in talking about communication styles because I've noticed that changed a lot, but I think that there's something there. I guess it's the “individual versus collaborative” thing, and at the end of the day, power is wrapped up in everything.

M: Yeah, as we've been talking, I've been thinking about the rhetorical situation of a classroom and the power that is inherent there. So, I worked with an organization called Up with People, and they are currently going through a really big shift from, frankly, unethical volunteerism that was well-intentioned, but not well executed, to something that is more explicitly conscious of the powers that are at play in a nonprofit, especially one that is tuition-based, where students pay tuition to have this experience. I think that in a nonprofit those power structures are a little bit easier to see because the literate activity system is almost more visible—you can see the hierarchy, you can see the procedures manuals—all these things become manufactured in a way that making those connections is easier to see, so on some level it's easier to disrupt. Versus, like, a classroom space, for example, I'm interested in the concept of disruption in a classroom space because it's so individualized, and even student learning is so individualized.

J: That's interesting to think about a classroom. So, I've done a lot of thinking about this, you know, and I did everything I could to flatten the classroom as much as possible, to democratize learning, to redistribute power. But let's not get it twisted that at the end of the day, I still very much had the power. I used a lot of self-assessment days on uptake-focused activities and really wanted to put assessment back in the students' hands, but I also still had to give grades. So, it's really complicated when it's like “Oh, yeah, I'm gonna

Flat Classroom Professor

I'd never heard of this concept before our co-interview, but “flat classroom” means something very similar to its imagery. Here Jenn is referring to a style of teaching that attempts to recognize the need for power dynamics in the classroom to be “flattened.” That is, we need to take the excessive end-all-be-all power away from the teacher and give it back to the students to make space for more open and honest dialogue and learning in the classroom.

be super radical,” you know, “Flat Classroom Professor,” and it's like, yes, and I can only do that because of the larger constraints ready to give me power, like my ability to democratize that space is still within this larger system. I think about Audre Lorde and “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (112), and it's just like, how much work are we actually doing? I think it's still worth doing, don't get me wrong. Like, “Oh, we can't actually deconstruct the whole thing so let's just be super heteropatriarchal,” no. I think that we need to be aware of the fact that, like, as queer feminist or anti-racist our pedagogy is, we are still operating within a very restrictive system.

M: It makes me think about stakes and power, as well. Like, in the classroom, yes, it's important to make sure that your ReggieNet announcements go out and that your observations go well, and those kinds of things, but at the end of the day, if a lesson doesn't go well, that's just a collective learning

moment. I'll listen to my students, open a dialogue, and I'll do better. Versus, specifically with some of the stuff that I did at the law office, where it's like, I need to make sure that I'm communicating with this client in a way that's both, "You need to pay your bill," but not being insensitive of their personal and emotional situations. And if that goes poorly, I lose that client, and if that happens too many times, I lose my job.

J: I think you nailed that because you're right: at the end of the day we've all had classes that have gone badly, and it's like, "All right, dust it off, come back tomorrow." Unless you're just a complete shit show of a teacher, you're not going to lose your entire ethos because of one class period, especially if you're the type of teacher who is self-aware enough to come back in again and say, "Oh, y'all, that sucked, I'm sorry." And I think, I don't know, you can be real and honest and authentic with students, so that's just such a rich place for originality and reciprocity, which is so beautiful because you're right. We have these federal grants where you have to report out to the Department of Health or whatever, and it's so serious. These are real people too, on the other end, it's not like this idea of a domain. They're human, and they can understand if we have a bad day or whatever, but at the same time, it's like, we need this grant money to do the important work of getting this education out to really vulnerable and underserved students. And I have to make sure that I'm on my game because I'm not trying to be the one that loses us money. Because that trickles so far down this domino line of third and fourth order effects.

M: That's so interesting, especially when looking at, as we talked about, the power and structure and institution of the classroom as being highly constructed in a way that is implicit or inherent and not something that we necessarily talk about because I think that there are things in a classroom that we take for granted. This is a place where we're re-evaluating what it means to be a good and bad student and what it means to be a good and bad writer, and then translating it into spaces where that's not the norm. We're translating those understandings into spaces where it's not accepted and, in fact, is something that's suppressed.

Positionality and Forgiveness

Jenn and I both have taught 100-level (and beyond) courses here at ISU, so it's important to recognize our positionality as we discuss these concepts. When we talk about "stakes" within and outside of the classroom, as teachers, we're hyperaware of the people that create that classroom space: *both* teachers and students. When Jenn and I talk about "forgiveness" in those spaces and a

willingness to open dialogue about our mistakes, we don't mean to grant a free pass to teachers who are a "complete shit show," as Jenn so frankly put it, and don't take responsibility for their mistakes or challenges in the classroom. The flexibility we reference in the classroom space is BOTH the dialogue that's opened AND the steps that the teacher takes toward improving the classroom environment. It's an active process; it doesn't place blame on the students, and for us, it goes both ways. In our classrooms, we strive to recognize each person in the space as just that—*human*. We are willing to listen to and accommodate the mistakes of our students, just as they are willing to provide feedback and shape the classroom when we make mistakes.

These allowances to be human are emphasized by the Writing Program here at Illinois State, but it's not the reality everywhere—not even within our own departments. When we talk about forgiveness, we don't mean to say that our actions as teachers don't matter in the classroom, or that we're somehow *less* responsible because it's "school" and not the "real world." Quite the opposite, actually. What we're talking about is the safety that we try to build into our classrooms where, when mistakes happen (and they will, no matter how perfectly any of us attempt to plan), we can address them openly and honestly with each other so that we can put in the work to try again. It's something that we highly value, no matter what setting we're in.

J: It makes me think of the way that academia, in particular, especially when we get to those grad classes like 402 and everything else, is so theoretical. And I love that about it, but it's also kind of a thorn in my side, where I feel like, not always, but sometimes there's a failure to acknowledge daily practices of our work. It's "theory," but like, "OK, but why? How does that impact our everyday classrooms or material, living realities within those classrooms?" Don't get me wrong, I'm still very much geared toward theory. As a person, I love it. So, I get into these meetings sometimes, and everything in my world now is praxis. Like, "We need to go, we need to move forward, what is our actual tangible thing?" And so, I've gone in before and was like, "OK, but let's unpack what it even means to do something well or not." Kind of what you're saying, like we're deconstructing good versus bad writing. So, I go in to do that same kind of work, and everyone is like, "OK, that's interesting, but that's also not why we're here." So, I have had to really evaluate when that can be helpful, and when it can be really inefficient to do stuff like that. It's hard because I have to constantly remind myself that I'm not in a graduate classroom right now. Like, this isn't the time to debate theory. Stakes are high; I'm on the line here, and, again, not that they *aren't* on the line in academia, but it's different.

Communication Styles

It wasn't only the stakes shifting in the transition from the academic institution we'd become accustomed to, but also the practical application of communication and language radically shifting in order for us to be successful in these spaces.

J: Something that is privileged and necessary in the industry space, at least the one that I'm in right now, is really clear, concise, direct communication, and everything written. That's very uncomfortable for me, and I think it's partly because of how I was raised. There are so many things involved, but in general, I operate in a very high context way where I jump into a conversation and I assume we're all on the same page already. I don't have to unpack all these ideas necessarily because to do that almost feels condescending. In this conversation right now, we're doing that, where it's like, we go into this with a shared understanding of words like *uptake* and *rhetorical situation*. We're already here, so let's move forward, rather than if we were having this conversation with someone else who maybe didn't have our same training, we wouldn't be able to have this conversation. So, I find that I don't really start to unpack things until I'm writing an article and then have a particular section where I have to define my terms. So, for me, I feel like grad school allowed me to operate in that way, where it's high context and a lot of time kind of indirect and theoretical. And now I'm in this world where it's very low context, like you need to explain everything. You need to be very direct about what you're doing. We all get, like, 90,000 E-mails a day. So, it's like, "No, why are you E-mailing me? It's fine that you E-mail, but you have to tell me why, quickly." There's a kind of luxury of time that academia has, which the industry doesn't. And it necessitates completely different communication styles.

M: I love that phrase: "the luxury of time." I think that, even now, because I was so saturated in nonprofit education, I feel like I need to figure things out *now*. And all of my professors are like, "No, you can take time; you're trying to figure things out," and I can feel the difference between those two situations. In the past, the feeling was "No, this was due last week, and I need to be moving on." I think productivity and time are really intimately tied in that context.

J: I've never been a super balanced person; in both grad school and the PhD program, I could literally write an entire chapter of my dissertation in a weekend. It was basically like, not sleep for an entire weekend, crank out the chapter, and then be like "Woo!" and then not do anything for the

next week. It was very, like, Go, Go, Go, versus Crash. So that's another thing about time, in this job: this is the first nine-to-five job I've had, and I'm just like, wow, I'm mentally and physically in a way, like, I don't have the stamina. This is a skill or a muscle I didn't realize was a thing; I mean, "the luxury of time" is so interesting because in academia, sometimes we have these deadlines, where it's like "Oh, shit." For the most part, those are often self-imposed. It was because I had to graduate with my PhD in four years—besides the fact that, you know, everything comes back to capitalism and we don't get paid and I need a job. So, that's super real, but if we could take that context away (which we know we can't), that deadline doesn't matter to the *institution*. I don't know—I'm just like, "Wait, you mean that I have to get up and work again tomorrow, and then I have to do it the next day, too?" And, you know, I love the job, but in academia it wasn't that way. It's just wild, the kinds of rhythms we get used to with that kind of thing.

M: It's been so flip-floppy for me because I got my undergrad, which is different from grad classes in a lot of ways, but it has the same pressures of doing more classes and having more assignments due more often. Then traveling and working with Up with People—you don't get a break, you're traveling. You live with your students, you teach your students, like—every moment, you're on the job. And then, when I got to the law office, it was weird because I would get tasks done too quickly. Because people were like, this is something that you're supposed to be able to budget your time with; you're supposed to be able to balance the things that you're doing, but I would just treat it like it was a marathon. Until, like, month three, I was physically and mentally exhausted because I was just like, I'm used to the kind of work where you receive a thing, you start the thing, and you work until the thing is done. So, yeah, now being in the throes of Grad culture, where it really is like your deadlines are at the end of the semester so budget your time the way that you want, but you're constantly aware that you don't have anything to do on a Thursday—that's very foreign to me.

J: I felt like I got very used to and good at the rhythm of academia. I was like, OK, I know there's going to be a pop in mid-August, and there's going to be a pop in October, and there's going to be a big push at the beginning of December. And my body actually came to expect and respond to that rhythm; I got good at it and got good at negotiating and expecting it and working around and planning for it. And now my rhythm is much more even, which in some ways, is way healthier, I just want to acknowledge. But in other ways, it becomes a bit monotonous. In academia, I could be much more volatile, which isn't healthy, necessarily, but it's exciting.

Questions of Audience

The literate activity we engage in always exists in conversation with others, and so our thoughts about power and pressure and communication, of course, led us back to that notion of an intended audience.

M: I think about that a lot, specifically about audience and who this is for and what we are doing this for. Because even considering the different audiences that I used to teach and the audiences that I will be teaching next semester, I had access to different people in nonprofit education and different spaces there. And so, when thinking about who my research is for, like, who do I want to talk to? Who do I want to value in these spaces? I feel like a lot of times we talk about making spaces more accessible and wanting to make verbiage more accessible, but then, when it comes down to actually putting it in practice, those sentiments are the first to go out the window. It's like, yeah, it's good that we had that conversation, and now we feel better about ourselves, but I still need you to make these specific rhetorical moves for these specific rhetorical situations.

J: One hundred percent, yeah, I completely agree. I did the same thing. My dissertation, I kind of waxed poetic in the introduction about how I want this to be accessible and I'm going to write it in a way that's, you know, *blah, blah, blah*, and then, you're right, at the end of the day there were moments where I was doing some theoretical heavy lifting; I still fell back into that comfort zone of density. For whom, you know? It does nothing but uphold the structures that are already in place. Again, that's so different from the role I'm in now, where clarity is more important than anything else, because we're working in a huge team, the stakes are higher, we're limited on time and capacity, and so if we're going to get muddled in our language, that wastes time. It's insufficient, and, ultimately, it could damage the end goal, which is to get the information out there. There are memes of academics saying, "to put it simply," and then following with a sentence that makes no sense. I do know people who think that they write clearly, and it's like to you, in your specific cohort of people who are also, like, freakin' geniuses who can sit there and read Judith Butler like it's nothin', baby, this is clear. But to other people, it doesn't make sense.

Some Satisfying Transfer

But, even as we acknowledged this seemingly incompatible shift between our academic genres and our industry genres, Jenn began thinking about the undeniable transferable skills she's noticed within her new position.

J: I don't mean to immediately contradict myself, but when I was writing that E-mail that I referenced at the beginning where I was pushing back on a thing, I did have a moment where I relied on my academic training. I was like, OK, put your thesis statement in the first paragraph. And the E-mail was super long, like, this is not the way that most people in a corporate setting would write an E-mail, so it was still kind of a mix, and I was moving into part of the E-mail where I explain the context for this, aka a lit review paragraph, and I'm going to explain the evidence of how and why what I'm asking for would actually work aka the body of the argument, where you're doing your close reading, and then I have the conclusion which includes the "so what." And, in my mind, this E-mail is a condensed version, in structure, of a dissertation chapter or an academic article. It brought me joy when I thought about it that way, like, "Oh, look at this transference." But also, it made it easier for me to write because I felt like I'm not just having to write this E-mail that's really hard to write, I'm writing this thing that I know how to do, I know how to lay context, I know how to provide evidence, like, "OK, I can do this, take a deep breath, you know, move forward."

Conclusion

There was something comforting about this conversation with Jenn, especially as someone who is in the middle of a career panic. I was glad we didn't have perfect success stories and that she, too, struggled to figure out how to find herself and her identity in a space that was entirely unfamiliar to her.

I think sometimes we're fed this narrative in high school and college that *everything we do* will prepare us perfectly for the world "outside." And, in some ways, it's true. We can't help but learn from our lived experiences and make connections between them. But, in other ways, it's not. Sometimes, we spend a lot of time getting really good at a skill set that will actively work against the skills needed in another context. But, as we walked away from this conversation, I left feeling a bit more grounded. Though I'm not perfectly prepared for every situation I'll find myself in between now and forever, thinking through those conflicts of **antecedent knowledge**, or understandings we gain from past experience, can help to shed some light on how to proceed.

Here, I'd like to suggest a complication for our idea of antecedent knowledge—which, I recognize, will further complicate our ideas of uptake and transfer. (But that's OK, right? We already know writing is complex and messy in the best way possible, so our definitions should be a little joyfully messy, too.)

The ISU Writing Program defines these terms as:

- **Antecedent Knowledge:** all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing;
- **Transfer of Learning:** when you are instinctively drawing from your prior knowledge and acquired skills in order to achieve your present goal;
- **Uptake:** the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don't!).

If we take these definitions at face value, it's tempting to imagine these concepts as linear (Figure 1).

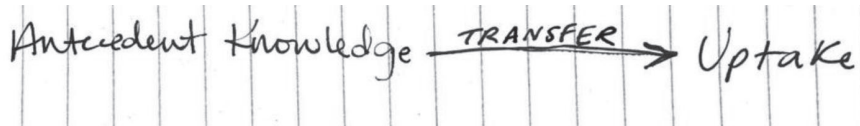


Figure 1: A handwritten illustration of antecedent knowledge flowing into uptake using transfer.

We have the things we already know, which we instinctively apply as we learn something new, which makes each of our uptakes unique or **divergent**.

However, when we look at the article, we've got language *everywhere* contradicting that linear notion. Jenn says, "I don't mean to immediately contradict myself," because we have different contexts where our academic training is either relevant or irrelevant. I say that failures in the classroom are a "collective learning moment," but then I needed to explore some nuance of that perspective once my editor suggested the antecedent knowledge of my readers. Our antecedent knowledge is selectively transferred, depending on its contexts, and sometimes it's reshaped *entirely*. So, perhaps, we should look at a visualization like the one in Figure 2.

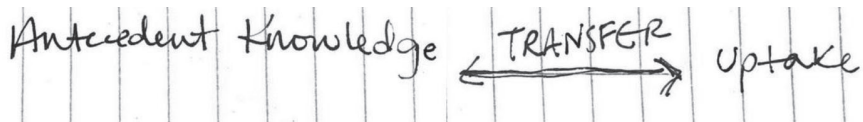


Figure 2: A handwritten illustration of uptake and antecedent knowledge flowing into each other using transfer.

But I still wasn't satisfied with this, either. It's too linear. It doesn't account for the varied contexts in which our antecedent knowledge is changed by our uptake or transfer, or when it camouflages itself or gets ignored. So, I came

up with one final image—a definition that’s good for now, and that might change and adapt as I continue thinking about myself as a writer and writing researcher (Figure 3). (Brace yourself.)

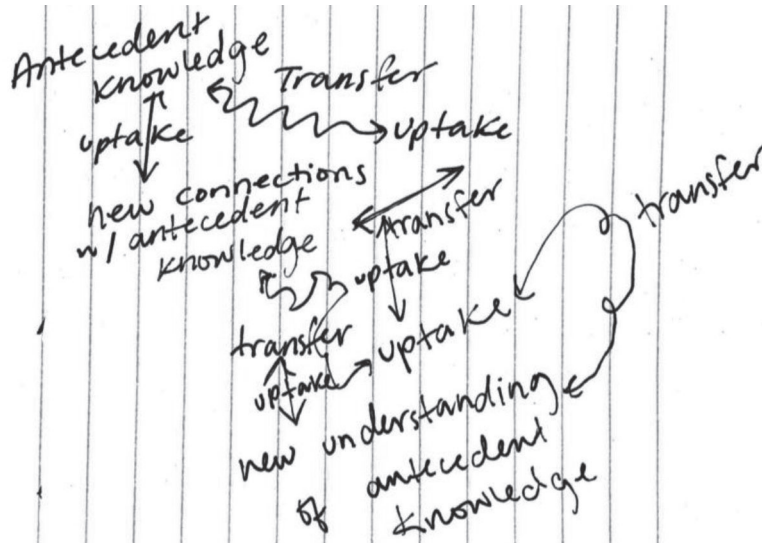


Figure 3: A handwritten illustration of uptake, transfer, and antecedent knowledge being constantly changed by each other in a very messy “flow” chart.

Looking back at this interview, you can see how easy it might be for us to be overwhelmed by the instability of our antecedent knowledge and uptake—much like the above visualization might be overwhelming for you to try to read. How do we know what will be relevant? And when? How can we trust that what we do will matter?

To those questions, I offer: There’s something powerful in looking at the reality of who we are, what we know, and how that shapes the way we move through the world. It all matters; we learn something new (and compare it to something old) with each new space we occupy. One constant I keep returning to, at the center of it all: literate activity. Writing.

Works Cited

- ISU Writing Program. “Key Terms and Concepts.” *Grassroots Writing Research*, Illinois State University, isuwriting.com/key-terms.
- Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 110–114.

Madi Kartcheske is a second-year Master's student at Illinois State University specializing in Rhetoric and Composition. Her research interests are tangled with her personal interests—located somewhere amidst tech theatre, writing, and art.



Jenn Tullos (she/her) has a PhD in English with an emphasis in queer young adult literature from Illinois State University. She has a vast and diverse background in education, including as a K-12 teacher, community college and university instructor, nonprofit education manager, and corporate learning director. Despite her nonlinear career trajectory, everything Jenn has done professionally has always centered education and equity. She is a lifelong learner, writer, and writing researcher, both inside and outside of academia.



Notes