Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies: Looking at Walls and Finding Entryways

"I'm no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls." - Foucault

Surrounded by bustling muggles and the metallic sounds of a train station, Harry Potter searches for Platform 9 ¾ but only sees walls until Mrs. Weasley provides his first magical lesson. Ron's mother guides and supports Harry, instructing him that all you have to do is walk straight at the wall between platforms 9 and 10. ("Best to do it at a run if you're nervous.") This lesson changes how Harry sees not only King's Cross Station but also the world itself. There is now the idea that every wall carries within it the possibility of a secret doorway. And, if you allow yourself to find it, you can go through it. Harry runs toward what seems to be the obstacle of a concrete barrier and comes out the other side in another world: at the Hogwarts Express and at the beginning of a magical journey.

Stories about magic are often about change, transformation, and not accepting the world as it appears. Such stories stretch beyond the pages of books as they can also reflect aspects of meaningful learning experiences. In this proposal, I explore how professional development on threshold concepts in writing studies will allow contingent and graduate teaching faculty to better understand questions of writing transfer between courses, across educational experiences, and among various contexts (Haskell, 2001; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Nelms & Dively, 2007). I explain what threshold concepts are, discuss why they matter to teaching and learning generally, and consider specific threshold concepts from Writing Studies. Knowledge of threshold concepts can transform obstacles in teaching and learning into gateways to meaningful learning.

Threshold Concepts
Threshold concepts are ideas and understandings that are central to mastery of a subject. They are about the nature of a discipline in that they embody key ways of thinking about, understanding, and interpreting a subject or field (Carter, 2007). Because threshold concepts start with disciplinary knowledge, they offer are a more organic approach to anticipating and proactively responding to learning difficulties. They can be an alternative to outcomes and best practices statements (and professional development focused on such topics), offering faculty the opportunity to name what we know as a discipline while making abstract or unclear knowledge and practices more concrete and clear. Being able to clearly state what a field knows and does can facilitate the application of that knowledge in various and productive ways, opening the opportunity to make meaning within and beyond the classroom (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). As a result, threshold concepts can be a catalyst, drawing together a variety of fields into one productive educative framework.

Like Platform 9 ¾ and Harry's experience, some have described threshold concepts as a kind of "portal" that expose new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something. They also have several characteristics in common. As discussed in scholarship (Meyer & Land, 2006; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012; Blaauw-Hara, 2014; Bunnell & Bernstein, 2012), threshold concepts are all

- Transformative – Once understood, the learner views the world/discipline in new way.
- Troublesome – Because of its possibly alien, incoherent, or counterintuitive nature, the learner may experience some cognitive dissonance.
- Irreversible – Once the learner 'sees' it, it cannot be 'unseen'.
- Integrative – The learner can see connections between aspects of the subject that previously

appeared to be unrelated.
- Bounded – They potentially represent a boundary, serving a specific and limited purpose.
- Discursive – Crossing the threshold will incorporate an enhanced and extended use of language.
- Reconstitutive – The learner experiences a shift in learning subjectivity taking place over time and more likely to be recognized by others.
- Liminal – The learner is involved in a messy, back and forth journey that is more complicated than a simple passage in learning from "easy" to "difficult".

In this context, learning involves occupation of a liminal space during the process of mastery of a threshold concept, and progression through a threshold involves various degrees of excursiveness and oscillation between various states rather than crossing from "easy" to "difficult" in a linear fashion. (While the following progression offers a relational view, it should not be seen in a rigidly sequential manner.) The *pre-liminal state* involves a learner encountering some form of troublesome, unfamiliar knowledge, which motivates the learner to inquire into the topic. *Liminality* is the unstable space where the learner may go back and forth between old and emerging understanding of new knowledge. Lastly, the *post-liminal state* is one of mastery and an irreversible transformation that crosses conceptual boundaries and alters the learner's discourse (Brent, 2011; Mezirow, 1997). While some learners may not venture into the in-between state of liminality, remaining in a state of pre-liminarity in which understandings are vague at best, those who enter a liminal space become engaged in a project of mastery that leaves them changed both affectively and cognitively.

Harry took the risk of walking head-on into a wall, which resulted in great reward, but it could have resulted in a painful collision. Similarly, the rewards of introducing and mastering threshold concepts can be great, but such a journey can also involve some risk. The grasping of a threshold concept is never just a cognitive shift; it involves a repositioning and reconstitution of self in relation to the subject. Learners tend to discover that what is not clear and may feel alien at first becomes clear and more comfortable over time (Land, 2015). Such occurrences present a metacognitive issue for learners, a need for self-regulation within the liminal state, and a requirement for the teacher to provide a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1960) along with scaffolding (Georghiades, 2000; Kaplan, Silver, Lavaque-Manty, & Meizlish, 2013). From the viewpoint of curriculum design, attention must be given to the possible discomforts of troublesome knowledge (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012). Creating activities that encourage students to connect new information to former knowledge and introducing deliberate thinking strategies are two ways to support students during these times of cognitive dissonance.

Identification of Threshold Concepts
While initially trying to find a way to Platform 9¾, Harry needed some assistance and direction from Mrs. Weasley. Similarly, there are also several ways to identify threshold concepts within course(s) and disciplines. One way to start is by simply asking, "Which concepts are central to the learning of [your course, major, or discipline]?" or "Where are the points where some of your students seem to get 'stuck'?" (Estrem, 2015; Nelms & Dively, 2007). Along with these questions, one can attempt to tease out what it is that makes a concept troublesome to reveal other aspects of the concept and/or discover new ones: Is it because learners must shift identities in a new way? Is there language that is unfamiliar or confusing? Is it implicit knowledge that needs to be made more explicit?

Inversing the methods above provides another way to recognize threshold concepts. Providing

opportunities for teachers to consider what they, as professionals in their field, know and understand so well that it is transparent to them. Activities like "Novice/Expert Interviews" can help faculty unpack their implicit knowledge and consider how novices struggle with or gain control of that concept by having the interviewee dissect and articulate the intellectual processes that go into the work they do. Finally, Wardle (2015) offers a three-step process that can be helpful for graduate teaching faculty and some contingent faculty's identification of threshold concepts. For example, in a professional development event, the facilitator can ask participants to

1. Summarize a research project you are working on (or have worked on recently) in one to two sentences.
2. Pinpoint one belief, understanding, or assumption you must have to make that research possible.
3. Identify three to four scholars who speak to or about this threshold concept or another, closely related one.

While step 2 of this activity results in the articulation of a possible threshold concept, step 3 works to assure that the threshold concepts identified deals with the nature of a discipline while also providing information to determine if the threshold concept should be revised or tweaked in any way.

Threshold Concept in Writing Studies
Due to the bounded nature of threshold concepts, they usually delineate a specific conceptual space, serving a particular and limited purpose. Therefore, the focus of this professional development series is on how to identify and utilize them in order to enhance student learning and transfer of skills and knowledge, rather than emphasizing a pre-determined set of threshold concepts. That being said, five overarching threshold concepts from Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) text do provide a starting point for consideration of threshold concepts in writing studies: 1. Writing is a social and rhetorical activity, 2. Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms, 3. Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies, 4. All writers have more to learn, and 5. Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity. The authors and editors argue that these five concepts get to the core of writing studies in terms of what we know as a field. These and the other threshold concepts identified within the workshop series hold great use value, allowing us name what we know and start to consider how we can use what we know.

With naming comes power: once you name something, you can objectify and, therefore, study and research it. While historically composition has not always been viewed as a discipline and its teachers have not been treated as professionals or experts, those ideas have been and continue to be considered outdated and incorrect. Rather than seeing writing as an art form that one is either blessed with a gift for, we approach it as a skill with a knowledge base that can be built on and improved. As Wardle and Adler-Kassner (2015) and others assert, writing is an activity, and it is also a subject of study. Additionally, pedagogical approaches like Writing About Writing (Wardle & Downs, 2011) make writing the content of composition courses where students engage in scholarly inquiry into the discipline of writing and encouraging a more realistic conception of writing.

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