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Transforming Writing/Transforming Writers: Threshold Concepts in Undergraduate Academic Writing

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TRANSFORMING WRITING/TRANSFORMING WRITERS: THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC WRITING

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In the context of a seminar focused on threshold concepts and facilitated by Peter Felten through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College, I had the opportunity to identify and explore several threshold concepts in undergraduate academic writing. Working with several colleagues and a student consultant during the Fall-2012 semester, I found that recursive revision that transforms an academic paper into reader-based prose presents a critical juncture for the undergraduate academic writer because it requires conceptual restructuring. This paper identifies three thresholds a student writer crosses in the process and their effect on learning and teaching strategies.

Introduction

Creating learning situations in which students engage with course concepts and practices has been central to my teaching practice for almost forty years. Over the past year, however, working with the articulation of threshold concepts in the field of academic writing has led to a more identifiable and consistent congruence between the learners' integration of key concepts in their process of writing. By this I mean that all students, including non-native speakers, are more able to consistently put core concepts of academic writing into practice in their writing and their evaluation of their writing and that, by so doing, their writing has become more accessible to readers. In their papers they have purposefully entered into academic conversations with readers, using the resources of language to *translate* the paper in their minds to the paper on the page, and then to *transform* the paper on the page into a reader-accessible paper in which they are in dialogue with a reader whose need for structure, definitions and contexts the writer anticipates and fulfills.

To state the outcome more simply, by the end of the semester, students are writing papers with the intention of clearly communicating ideas and evidence to someone else. To do this, they revise recursively, meaning, as Barthes explained, that the revisions reshape their thoughts (1977, from Sommers, 1980), to form a line of argument. In their own words, the students have taken a major step beyond writing in order "to express myself" or "to tell myself what I've learned." Furthermore, they are able to reflect on this writing process that Flower termed "reader based" (1979), pointing to strategies used to "open up the paper" and locating moments in their papers where their writing veers off the mark and "I don't know what to explain or how to explain it."

To learn how to develop early drafts of notes and freewrites into an interim draft that organizes the argument and evidence in a way that makes sense to the writer, and then transform the writer-based draft into reader-friendly academic final draft, the student writer dialogues with a community of potential readers through peer workshops, peer and instructor conferences, help-sessions with reference librarians and reading the texts of experts. In this article, I map critical points in my process of discovering and developing three threshold concepts related to transformational or recursive revision for the two undergraduate academic writing courses I

teach at Bryn Mawr College and the effect of these concepts on student writing and on my teaching.

Background

I have taught writing continuously in my career, as a secondary English teacher, an Adult Basic Education (ABE) and K-12 teacher in a state correctional facility, a facilitator of community poetry workshops for children and adults, and a college instructor of undergraduate and graduate creative and academic writing courses. Re-seeing teaching styles and student learning through the lens of threshold concepts offered the spaciousness of "Beginner Mind" to interrogate and re-imagine approaches to writing as if I were a student teacher. In fact, in the process I have become a student of my own teaching and of my students' learning processes.

As in student teaching, I was observed and questioned, not only by the threshold concept faculty cohort and the seminar leaders, Peter Felten and Alison Cook-Sather, but also by an astute student consultant, Bryn Mawr College junior Xinyi Shen, who became a collaborator in two successive academic writing courses, each spanning a fifteen-week semester. In addition to her experience as a student of mathematics and computer sciences, Xinyi brought her non-native speaker's sensitivities about the structures of thought and language by listening and thinking in fluent English underlaid with fluent Mandarin. Thus, during our weekly meetings, she often asked fundamental questions that helped to strip away my decades of knowledge and assumptions about writing in American English to uncover essential threshold concepts.

Learning Thresholds

Stripping away or getting beneath assumptions and codified knowledge is the primary means by which a teacher comes to comprehend learning thresholds. Simply described, crossing a threshold is a transformative moment of learning; however, this "aha moment" is the culmination of a fluid motion of learning a skill or concept over a prolonged duration, a learning that one understands only after passing through it. The transition into new understanding often erases or makes fuzzy the former way of knowing or doing because the old way loses its context as it morphs into and is integrated into the new way. Although it may result in an experience of accomplishment, typically, moving toward a threshold is a non-linear experience of trial and error, struggle, frustration and confusion, in short, an extended state of betwixt and between. A semester of study in writing offers series (sequential) and constellations (associative) of threshold opportunities for new concepts and their application in practice. A few are thresholds essential to growth in the subject area; others are refinements.

How does a teacher discover or uncover the essential thresholds her students need to pass over? She crossed them years ago, often unaware of how her conceptual knowledge or practice was moving toward a new level or complexity of integration. Now she must work backwards through her own learning toward her students' future learning, but she cannot unlearn what she now knows nor recall with freshness and accuracy the gains and losses of the thresholds she has passed over. This presents a quandary. If you have ever used a chemical stripper to peel forty years of paint down to the grain of an oak door, you have a sense of the radical nature of uncovering critical thresholds of student learning: you must get down to the original grain. But

this analogy also offers a sense of the method: the stripper loosens the bonds of the layers of paint. Although she may not be able to return to her origins as a naïve learner, the teacher must loosen the bonds of the knowledge system she has so assiduously constructed. Thus she, too, is passing across a learning threshold.

Detour: Confidence

Once I realized that I had to loosen, but not *lose,* my attachment to a system of knowledge and processes, I felt confident that I could make some headway. This personal experience of confidence as I set off to learn a new skill set reminded me of the frequency with which students noted that "my confidence improved" in their end of semester self-evaluations. It seems important to address confidence before discussing threshold concepts because confidence is not a threshold concept. Rather it is a self-perception that may be an essential ingredient to students continuing their effort and attention during the period of instability that precedes the crossing of a threshold. The anticipation of learning is cross-cut with hesitation and uncertainty. This suggests that confidence-building activities be included with the concept-specific activities leading to a threshold. Interim moments of self-reflection, however brief, often boost confidence if they prompt the student to consider their progress in terms of what they could not do yesterday (or last week) but can do today.

Context: Two Undergraduate Courses in Academic Writing

I developed threshold concepts for a first-semester, first-year required course in academic writing titled "The Journey: Act and Metaphor," then applied them to a self-selected, non-required second-semester academic writing course, titled "The Writing Workshop" that reiterated and advanced strategies for researching and writing academic papers. Both are 100-level courses in which writing an academic paper is viewed as a recursive process that leads to an analytical paper written in reader-based prose.

The primary course objective for "The Journey" is to use the idea and practice of journeying as a subject of and model for critical thinking and writing by means of readings and discussions on the topic of journeys that suggest subjects, questions and systems of organization corresponding to the practice of writing. The core course objectives of "The Writing Workshop" focus on improving critical thinking and writing. The two most central to threshold concepts are recognizing the features of prose written for an audience and recursive revising with a focus on reshaping ideas, presentation and syntax in order to move from writing to express oneself to writing to communicate with a reader/audience. Both courses emphasize collaborative activities through which the class forms a community of readers and writers who support and encourage each other. Both also emphasize the structure of the Modern Language Association (MLA) style academic argument and include four major papers of 4-7 pages.

The first semester course had eleven students, all first-year students. The second semester workshop had fourteen: five first-year students, four sophomores, four juniors and one senior. Because of the diverse student population at Bryn Mawr, both courses had a mix of students from three general language pools: native, bi-lingual and non-native speakers of American English. The distinction of American English is important for two reasons. First, as ESL writing

instructor Betty Litsinger observed, the argument structure of the MLA-style, American academic paper differs from that of British (also taught in Africa and the sub-continent) as well as from Asian and South American academic essay structures (personal communication, 2011). Secondly, since patterns of thought both shape and are shaped by patterns of language, students need to become aware of the divergence between the thought/language patterns of their native language and those of American English in order to revise at sentence, paragraph and whole paper levels. This divergence also occurs for native speakers of non-normative American English.

Threshold Concepts Essential to Academic Writing

Comprehending the concept and practicing writing and revision as a recursive practice are major tandem hurdles for students of academic writing, as they are for students of all writing that seeks to communicate to readers. The concept of recursion in writing and its application in revision is the threshold (or double threshold) most essential to writing reader-based papers. It was the threshold I had initially planned to explore; however, because six of the eleven first semester students were either non-native or bi-lingual speakers, it seemed necessary to go below the act of language to identify assumptions about language that inhibit the transformation of private thought into public communication.

What impedes writing as communication for many student writers are two assumptions that link inner speech and egocentrism, a relationship observed by both Piaget (1932, from Flower 1979) and Vygotsky (1962, from Flower 1979). A primary resistance to the recursive nature of writing arises from assumptions about the relationship of language to the self.

I am my words.

My words are me.

And their correlatives, framed as possessives, that is, as extensions of the self.

I own my words.

My words own me.

In both sets of assumptions, the self is perceived as inextricably bound to a language all its own. If it is embedded in the self, then language cannot be objectified as a tool. Confounding one's self with one's language often leads to inflexibility in using language as a tool or resource, particularly at the critical juncture in revision of transforming the paper to reader-based prose. For recursive revision to take place, the assumptions must be supplanted.

Each of the threshold concepts that follows simultaneously refutes one of the above assumptions, then asserts a perspective and action that supplants it. Each takes the form of an I-statement to indicate the importance of student agency in recursive revision. Each is followed by a list of sample skill-based actions or awareness that indicate passage across the threshold; these markers are authenticated by statements cited from end-of-semester self-evaluations written by students

in the optional-enrollment second semester Writing Workshop . Second semester students were surveyed because they participated in activities designed specifically to address the threshold concepts developed during the first semester course. All statements are congruent with the skills exhibited in the students' academic papers.

Threshold 1: As a writer, I do not "own" the language I use. Instead, I view language as a flexible resource I can use to articulate the content of my thoughts.

Markers: The markers of passing through Threshold 1 are more likely to be heightened awareness of the purpose of revision rather than active conceptual revision.

1. Expressing frustration with the limitations of lexical revision ["I can't find the right word." "I worked so hard on these words until they said what I mean, but you [the peer reader or instructor) don't understand."]
2. Noticing elements of the paper that might be re-ordered ("My conclusion really should be part of my thesis." "This idea makes more sense if it is connected to *x* in the second paragraph." "I need to say *x* but I don't know where to put it." "This paragraph doesn't even have a topic.").
3. Identifying elements of their peers' writing that are not clear to them as readers.

Threshold 2: As a writer, the language I use does not "own" me. Neither I nor the content of my thoughts is bound to it or by it. Instead, I use language flexibly to articulate and re-articulate the content of my thoughts.

Markers: Markers of passing through Threshold 2 are more likely to be purposeful acts of revision.

1. Reframing paragraph topics as claims that support the thesis ("I have made an effort to improve on relating my arguments to my thesis sentence.")
2. Reordering paragraphs; reordering the sequence of evidence within paragraphs ("When I opened up the 'sense-saturated' words, I found out I had to reorganize the details in the paragraph and explain how they were connected to the claim.")
3. Rewriting complexes of information by explaining relevant connections and distinctions between them, thus reframing bits of information in relation to a concept. In other words, transforming complexes of information into concepts. ("I presented evidence in a way that tied into my paper because I explained the reason why it was relevant." "Assignment #1, which I structured linearly, is clear but not strong. . . . I wrote six drafts for assignment #4 which helped to restructure organization and fix my thesis." "The improvement that I am most proud of is the ability to revise my ideas so that they are concepts rather than incomplete thoughts from my mind.")
4. Offering specific suggestions for conceptual or organizational revision of their peers' writing.

Threshold 3: As a writer, I use the structure of argument (in MLA: thesis, claims, evidence and articulation of its support of claims, conclusion) and structural elements (transitions, definitions,

voice markers, signal phrases) to order and re-order my thoughts so that they are both clearer to me and clearer to my readers.

Markers: The markers of passing through Threshold 3 are more comprehensive, conceptual whole-paper revisions:

1. Referring to an academic paper as a communication, thus assuming a reader who is responding to the paper: a primary definition of communication is exchange of information. Although the writer often does not receive the reader's response, she views the academic paper as the locus of the exchange, the crossroads of communication. ("The person reading my work is not in my head and cannot always understand the process of my thoughts unless I explicitly state them on the paper.")
2. Continuing research for evidence that more clearly supports claims ("My initial evidence were quotes from experts; however, these quotes were not empirical evidence or case studies. . . . Thus each time I went to write I needed to read . . .more sources.")
3. Identifying or wondering what the reader will need in order to follow the argument, thus implying the writer is thinking of the academic paper as an exchange. ("I'm trying to anticipate the potential responses from the readers, but I still find it challenging to be clear but not laborious." "Acknowledging the reader's knowledge gap also forced me to confront and reevaluate the structure of my papers for their effectiveness in explaining concepts or ideas, rather than merely describing my understanding of those ideas.")
4. Including a mental map (Graff & Birkenstein, 2009) or brief overview of their paper's organization and a compelling reason to read the paper ("I included a 'So What?' statement that showed why the topic I was writing about mattered, which shifted my paper into reader-based prose.")
5. Providing a structure that uses transitions, contexts, definitions, voice markers and metacommentary purposed to guide and engage the reader through a line of argument. ("The challenge of formulating great topic sentences lay in my poor ability to use effective transitional writing to link paragraphs.")

Implications for Teaching

Identifying and exploring threshold concepts has had direct implications for my teaching, and I expect that new implications will become clear as I redesign the courses in future years and construct clearer ways to talk with students about these three critical thresholds in academic writing and the skill development necessary to pass over them. In general, the concepts and their effect on writing need to be more overt without becoming directives or strict rubrics. Just as I needed the assistance of a student consultant, faculty cohort and seminar leaders to loosen my attachment to previously codified systems of teaching academic writing, the students need assistance and repeated opportunities to loosen their attachment to former conceptions and misconceptions about academic writing and the enmeshment of writing with self. Rehearsal is way of loosening attachment to old ways, thus becoming more flexible as a writer and as a student of writing. It offers the student writer repeated experiences of language as a fluid medium.

While rehearsal is a staple of skill-learning in any subject (for instance, math drills), it was necessary to reconceptualize its purpose in relation to the three threshold concepts and discuss this relationship when making assignments, framing discussions or giving instructions to workshop groups. Rehearsal took two forms: writing and speaking. Writing rehearsals were built into the syllabus in the form of standard fare, short writing assignments that focused on specific skills necessary to academic writing, for instance, summarizing an expert's stance as part of a counter-claim. Speaking rehearsals, on the other hand, were developed during the course in collaboration with the student consultant, often in response to her observation notes from the previous week. There were two types: large and small group discussions and small group (duos, trios) peer workshops in which each student's writing was critiqued by the other group member(s). The intention to use acts of speech as rehearsal for acts of writing changed the purpose of the speaking activities.

Initially, this pairing seemed counter-intuitive for two reasons. First, acts of speech are communal while acts of writing are solitary; this, however, is a superficial difference. Writing is also communal in that the writer is in conversation with the authors of the sources used to develop ideas and evidence. Discussion focused on sources enables the writer to refine her critical understanding of the sources and to define her own stance in relation to the stances of others. Additionally, the student writer is in conversation with a reader, especially when transforming her paper into reader-based prose. Receiving comments from peer readers assists the writer in moving the paper from a monologue with herself to a conversation with a reader by identifying sections where the peer reader did not understand what the writer meant.

Refining the typical workshop model of critique and rebuttal or agreement to bring it into line with the threshold concepts, we added self-reflection as an endpoint to workshop. Each student was to "capture phrases" she might bring into her paper, make notes on comments that sparked new ideas or subsets of ideas and pointed toward the need for further explanation. The writer was also to pay attention to her feelings and explore anything that provoked strong resistance. In thinking through resistance, a writer might discover that following the peer reader's suggestion would mean major revision. As one student said, "Well, I got what she suggested but I didn't know how to do it. I'd have to change half the paper." For many students, despite the instability it provoked, feeling resistance marked the next step in development. Identifying and closing skill gaps often led to self-motivated learning, more cogent writing and confidence building.

Turning to the second reason that using speech to rehearse writing seemed counter-intuitive, it cannot be resolved. As Sommers explained, Barthes argued that the spoken word is irreversible; it cannot be retracted or erased. Instead, a retraction can only be tacked on to what has already been spoken. Because it is recursive, "writing begins at the point where speech becomes impossible" (Barthes 1932, from Sommers 1980). Linearity in writing leads to repetition and substitution, not to the logical and conceptual construction of an argument. The dissonance between speaking, which is linear, and writing, which is recursive in that it is continuous revision, cannot be resolved. It is this dissonance that writers should seek, Sommers urged, to develop the sense of writing as discovery, as a repeated process of starting fresh, as a process of making meaning (1980). In this way all the stages of writing the academic essay contain the possibility of transforming the self, of beginning again with "I am my words; my words are me."

Often, however, the student resists the transformative moment ("It's really hard, what you're asking us to do. I mean it's hard because I get what you're saying but I don't know how to do it.") At the end of the first semester, I gathered verbal feedback and my student consultant, Xinyi, designed a feedback instrument to collect basic quantitative data. Both sets of feedback reflected student preference for a wide variety of uniformly sustained interactive oral exchanges, in both small and large group. In other words, the students were seeking opportunities to rehearse ideas and writing strategies by speaking with each other. ("We get ideas from each other." "We're working together to understand it." "When she made point x, I saw how I could change my claim.") At the same time, over 50% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with peer workshops focused on rough drafts of their papers. ("The partners aren't always matched well" "She was too critical of my work." "She was not critical enough." "I know she is struggling with English and I don't know how to help her.")

As a result, for the first eight weeks of the second semester, Xinyi and I designed small group activities of one-half hour or less in which students worked on a critical reading or critical writing strategy. Each activity was narrowed to a specific skill. The writing strategy activities addressed skills used in the current paper and were limited to one skill or one paragraph. Only twice were they designed for whole-paper review. They also included individual writing and reflecting components during which students might assess and integrate what had been said. While each was tailored to the lesson at hand, broadly they included:

- Sample critical reading strategies:
- Identifying thesis, claims, metacommentary and other writing strategies in a published article and discussing how they are used to construct an argument.
- Identifying critical stances in published articles and summarizing them individually in their own words or working as a group to construct a summary
- Tracing the line of argument through a published article
- Sample critical writing strategies:
- Constructing a naysayer from an argument in a published article (speaking together, then individually writing their own versions).
- Reviewing each other's bullet outlines and asking questions about connections between the thesis and claims, (speaking together, then individually writing down the connections discussed)
- Discussing and reordering data and explanations of their support of claim and thesis in one body paragraph of a rough draft (reading each other's paragraph, making notes, then sharing and discussing notes, followed by each student making notes to herself on changes she intends to make in the paragraph.

These occurred at least once and usually twice a week in addition to large group discussions. Usually large group discussion was followed with a brief written reflection, often in the form of "notes to myself." End of semester oral feedback indicated that in addition to supporting critical thinking, reading and writing skills, the students felt more confident as a result of the support of their classmates. ("You know you can get help here." "Our class knows how to support each other.") In comparing papers from this class with those from two previous Writing Workshop classes, I see more consistent skill in basic construction of argument, use of counter-claims,

naysayers and transitions, articulation of evidence, and alignment of thesis, claims and conclusion.

The implication is that persistent small group rehearsal activities designed to address specific critical reading and writing skills strengthen both skills and confidence. While I will not track this quantitatively in future classes, I do intend to adapt these small group activities for the first semester academic writing class next year and keep observational notes.

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