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The Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies in the Writing Methods Course

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When Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007) called for first-year composition to be taught as an introduction to writing studies, they argued that students need both procedural and declarative knowledge about writing. Writing instruction at all levels helps students develop procedural knowledge, knowledge about *how* to do something. Students learn how to write thesis statements, how to write in various genres, how to compose a cohesive paragraph, and innumerable other skills. Yet Downs and Wardle observed that declarative knowledge about writing—theoretical, propositional knowledge about what writing *is*—was rarely addressed in composition courses. Although the field of writing studies (their name for rhetoric and composition) has amassed a significant body of declarative knowledge about writing, student writers rarely have direct access to that knowledge.[1] Failing to address declarative knowledge is ultimately limiting, they argue, because "how one plays the game depends on what game one thinks one is playing. When we apply this principle to writing, it is clear that the story we tell ourselves about the nature of writing—our conceptions of what writing is and how it ought to work—will powerfully shape how we go about doing it" (Wardle and Downs 2014, 279). If writing is an epistemic game, writers cannot play it by focusing on only correctness; if writing is a rhetorical game, writers cannot play it by employing a narrow range of forms and strategies.

Writing teacher educators similarly believe that declarative knowledge shapes procedural knowledge: we claim that theories of teaching, writing, and teaching writing shape pedagogical practice, and we offer future teachers access to those theories. Richard Gebhardt (1977) outlined a vision for the writing methods course in which theory and practice were mutually informing; he argued that the *whys* of composition theory should inform the *hows* of pedagogy and that the *hows*

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[1] For Wardle and Downs, the terms *declarative knowledge* and *procedural knowledge* map onto the terms *theory (theoretical knowledge)* and *practice (practical knowledge)*. They argue that first-year composition courses should teach declarative knowledge, which refers to scholarly books and articles from writing studies. In this essay, I am also aligning these pairs of terms: *declarative knowledge* is *theory*, and *procedural knowledge* is *practice*.

of pedagogy should inform the *whys* of theory. Prospective writing teachers should understand "the conceptual underpinnings of composition" and have the opportunity to "test them out in practice" (134). Stephen Wilhoit (2002) also envisions the writing methods course as a place where theory and practice synthesize into praxis: "We value theory and teach it to our students because without it pedagogy lacks context, depth, and ultimate meaning; however, we also value pedagogy because without it theory remains abstract, sterile, and ineffectual. We understand that theory must inform practice, but we also understand that…practice must inform theory" (19–20). In her study of the writing methods course, Christine Tulley (2013) found that instructors remain dedicated to both "theoretical and practical instruction" (43). Surveyed instructors strongly agreed that the course is valuable because it provides "a theoretical background so that undergraduate students have a grounding for the choices they make when they teach writing" (41). The argument that theory should guide practice—an argument in which theory is conceptualized using the physical metaphors of *frameworks* and *underpinnings*—echoes throughout conversations about writing teacher education, and it represents an important point of contact between the disciplines of writing studies and English education (Alsup 2001; Tremmel 2002; NCTE 2016).

Yet questions persist about the theory–practice relationship in the writing methods course. One set of concerns centers on the perceived gap between theory and practice; preservice teachers and their instructors find these types of knowledge difficult to bridge and integrate. Instructors surveyed by Tulley (2013) cited "students have trouble connecting theory and practice" (40) as the most significant challenge of the course. The gap may be intensified when students are not given assignments that require deliberate reflection on the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. Another set of concerns centers on theory itself, with instructors citing "students don't find the material interesting or relevant" and "too much material to cover from rhetoric and composition" as challenges of the course (Tulley 2013, 40). Dan Royer and Roger Gilles (2002) describe how these concerns about theory and practice converge:

> Students want practical advice; we want to supply a conceptual framework and let practice take care of itself in the many different classroom contexts in which our students will eventually find themselves…Students see writing theory as a static body of knowledge they hope to ingest in fifteen weeks; we, having lived through the last thirty-plus years of reform in writing pedagogy, see the history of writing instruction as an evolving process, perhaps gaining in purpose but still very much open-ended (105).

Instructors and preservice teachers bring different attitudes about theory to the course, and it is a challenge not only to introduce students to writing studies as a

discipline for the first and potentially only time—as is the case in many institutional contexts—but also to engage students in its scholarship.

As Royer and Gilles imply, declarative knowledge in the writing methods course regularly takes the form of composition theory. The National Council of Teachers of English (2016) calls for writing teachers to "be well versed in composition theory and research," and Justin Young (2014) argues that "those who teach writing to students who will soon enter college should…be prepared to teach writing through the development and application of knowledge in the field of composition and rhetoric" (24). These recommendations seem to be borne out in practice. Beyond introducing process pedagogy as a theoretical construct, writing methods courses address major movements in composition theory: current-traditional rhetoric, cognitivism, expressivism, and social constructivist or social-epistemic rhetoric. Theorists such as James Moffett, Linda Flower and John Hayes, Sondra Perl, Peter Elbow, James Berlin, Maxine Hairston, Sharon Crowley, and Lester Faigley regularly appear on course reading lists, often alongside Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins (Royer and Gilles 2002; Stygall 2002; Tremmel 2002; Tulley 2013). In writing studies, theory and pedagogy are nearly inextricable, but preservice teachers may struggle with concept development and knowledge transfer across domains.[2] As Christina Saidy (2015) describes and as writing teacher educators understand from experience, theoretical knowledge—even researched, stated commitments to particular concepts and positions—may recede in the face of classroom realities.

In this essay, I examine the potential of another kind of declarative knowledge in the writing methods course: the threshold concepts of writing studies (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). These concepts attempt to capture what the field of writing studies knows about writers and writing, and most do not explicitly address pedagogy. It may seem counterintuitive to shift the theoretical focus of the writing methods course toward *writing* rather than *teaching writing*, and I do not advocate simply exchanging composition theory for threshold concepts. However, the story preservice teachers tell about the nature of writing—how they conceptualize the game of writing itself—can powerfully shape how they will teach writing. It is my argument that the threshold concepts of writing studies uniquely enable preservice teachers to comprehend composition theory, to understand themselves as writers, and to develop theoretically informed pedagogical practices. I begin by outlining how the threshold concepts help preservice teachers and their

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[2] Rhetoric and composition does not have an uncomplicated relationship with pedagogy, and many argue that the field should extricate itself from classrooms, pedagogy, and student subjects. Paul Lynch (2013) argues that the field has already arrived at its post-pedagogical moment, prompted by scholars such as Thomas Kent and Sidney Dobrin. These post-pedagogical claims, however, are not often presented in the writing methods class (Tulley 2013).

instructors fulfill a wide range of goals for the course. Second, using reflections from my own students, I describe how threshold concepts enable preservice teachers to understand their own writing processes and experiences. Finally, and again using student reflections, I describe how threshold concepts help future teachers develop pedagogical practices that are congruent with declarative knowledge about writers and writing.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS OF WRITING STUDIES

When students enter new disciplines and work through the curriculum, some do so with relative ease—they learn to think like members of the discipline and progress well—while others stall at particular concepts or assumptions. Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land (2006) argue that what differentiates these students is their ability to apprehend disciplinary threshold concepts. A threshold concept "can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (3). Meyer and Land (2006) offer *complex number* in mathematics, *signification* in literary and cultural studies, and *opportunity cost* in economics as examples of threshold concepts (4–6). Although threshold concepts are conceptually significant, they are not simply conceptual building blocks or important facts and definitions. Students need to understand a certain facts and concepts to participate in a discipline, but these facts do not "necessarily lead to a qualitatively different view of the subject matter" (6). When learners successfully comprehend threshold concepts, however, the consequence "may be a transformed internal view of the subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view" (3). Threshold concepts are thus likely to have these characteristics: they are *transformative*, offering students a new perception of the subject matter; *irreversible* such that students will not revert to an older perception; *integrative* because they expose the interrelatedness of concepts in the discipline; and potentially *troublesome* (Meyer and Land 2006, 6–8). Threshold concept knowledge may be troublesome—counterintuitive, tacit, or conceptually difficult—but this difficulty is purposeful, initiating students into new ways of thinking.

Writing studies scholars have recently articulated threshold concepts for the discipline, which Kathleen Blake Yancey (2015) notes are not "canonical statements" but "shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know in the service of writing" (xix). Twenty-nine scholars identified threshold concepts through a collaborative wiki, and the resulting book, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, outlines one metaconcept and five major concepts (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). The authors focus on *writers* and *writing*, and they avoid explicit

discussions of *student writers* and pedagogy. In their discussion of the metaconcept, *writing is an activity and a subject of study*, Wardle and Adler-Kassner (2015) note the concept is especially troublesome because "it contravenes popular conceptions of writing as a basic, ideology-free skill" (16). The idea that writing is something other than a skill is not widely known outside the discipline of writing studies, and preservice teachers may not have apprehended it through personal or educational experience.

The five threshold concepts, all of which have several supporting sub-concepts, are *writing is a social and rhetorical activity, writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms, writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies, all writers have more to learn,* and *writing is (also always) a cognitive activity* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). *Writing is social and rhetorical* highlights the idea that writing is epistemic, challenging current-traditional ideas about truth and correctness; it also defines writing as a technology that mediates activity (17–34). *Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms* calls attention to the importance of genre and intertextuality; the authors describing this concept argue that texts get meaning from other texts, that writing responds to situations in recognizable ways, and that writing enacts disciplines (35–47). The third concept, *writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies*, focuses on the relationship among literacy experiences, ideology, identity, and writing processes; it also affirms the idea from discourse theory that writing is not only a way to say something but also a way to be someone (48–58). *All writers have more to learn* frames writing as a skill—but an imperfectible one. Writing cannot be learned once and for all, and writing development requires varied practice, revision strategies, and even failure (59–70). Finally, *writing is (also always) a cognitive activity*, affirms the reality that writing requires mental processes including reflection and metacognition (71–86).

Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) suggest that the declarative knowledge captured in threshold concepts shapes procedural knowledge. When teachers and students study writing as a subject, they "should approach, learn, and teach writing differently…they are then invited to behave differently and to change their conceptions of what writing is and their practices around writing that extend from those conceptions" (16). Because the threshold concepts define writing as a subject of study and an activity—because they function as propositions (characterizing the nature of the game) and as heuristics (serving as tools for playing the game)—they bridge theoretical knowledge, writing practices, and pedagogical application. At the moment when preservice teachers are students becoming teachers and student writers becoming literacy professionals, threshold concepts offer personal and professional insight.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN THE WRITING METHODS COURSE

One important goal for the writing methods course is developing theoretical knowledge, specifically knowledge of composition theory. Threshold concepts offer this pedagogical advantage: they require students to do less work intuiting the values and assumptions of an unfamiliar discipline. Because they represent points of theoretical consensus, threshold concepts are a fruitful way to introduce major elements of composition theory and to frame theoretical and historical movements in the discipline. Certainly this advantage carries a disadvantage: threshold concepts are focused on the present moment in the discipline, and they flatten debates and theoretical movements. As Royer and Gilles (2002) note, teaching theory in the writing methods course is challenging because students often envision composition theory as a static body of knowledge rather than an evolving conversation (106). Although Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) are careful to note that the threshold concepts in *Naming What We Know* are indeed contingent, the concepts may nonetheless offer students the false sense that writing studies is static body of established knowledge.

When instructors use threshold concepts as organizing ideas in the writing methods course, the pedagogical advantages become clear. For example, students may not apprehend the concept *writing is social and rhetorical* simply by reading composition theory; they may not understand how different theories enact the idea that *writing is social and rhetorical* by making claims about the writer–audience relationship. In his discussion of this threshold concept, Kevin Roozen (2015) explains that writing is rhetorical because there is always a conscious or unconscious relationship between writer and audience, and he defines *social* in the context of writing studies: "Writing puts the writer in contact with other people, but the social nature of writing goes beyond the people writers draw upon and think about. It also encompasses the countless people who have shaped the genres, tools, artifacts, technologies, and places writers act with as they address the needs of their audiences" (18). With the concept and its disciplinary significance made explicit, students may better understand how theories of composition relate to one another. Expressivists such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray were invested in the writer–audience relationship as a way of sharing and refining personal discoveries, but James Berlin argued from a constructivist perspective that writers and audiences are necessarily shaped by social, ideological, and material forces. When students put theoretical texts in conversation with threshold concepts, they have the opportunity to understand theories of composition more deeply—as contested, evolving enactments of threshold concepts and as the conversations and debates that ultimately built those concepts.

A second goal for the writing methods course is developing pedagogical knowledge. Preservice teachers often arrive at the course seeking practical

strategies—seeking *methods* for teaching writing—they can employ even before student teaching (Alsup and Bernard-Donals, 2002; Royer and Gilles, 2002). Tulley (2013) reports that writing methods courses often include field experiences, and they address pedagogical issues such as responding to student writing, assessing student writing, designing writing assignments, working with diverse learners, and developing writing-based lesson plans (41–42). Developing practical strategies in the methods course is an important goal because students may not arrive at college with good models for teaching writing. They might transfer knowledge about writing without transforming that knowledge, a process Anne Beaufort (2007) names "negative transfer." None of the teachers interviewed by Sylvia Read and Melanie Landon-Hays (2013) remembered "feeling that they had received instruction that treated them like someone who was learning to write…much of what they did was guess how to fulfill the writing assignment; later, they received a summative evaluation that offered no opportunity for revision" (9). The methods course has the potential and the responsibility to provide pedagogical models and new frameworks for transfer, but Read and Landon-Hays (2013) note that students may struggle to use practices from the course in new teaching contexts. Looking back on their methods course portfolios and lesson plans, licensed teachers saw that their materials did not "have any real application in the classroom" and "always ended up being really contrived" (9). These comments highlight the importance of equipping preservice teachers to generate and adapt their own pedagogical practices.

Because threshold concepts function as heuristics as well as propositions, they provide writers and writing teachers generative, transcendent ways of thinking about writing pedagogy. The threshold concepts are generative, highlighting practices and pedagogies, and they are transcendent, equally applicable across workplace writing, college composition, and language arts classrooms. For example, one concept with heuristic potential for writing teachers is *habituated practice can lead to entrenchment*, a subconcept of *writing is (also always) cognitive*. Chris Anson (2015) explains that writers who "are subjected to repeated practice of the same genres, using the same processes for the same rhetorical purposes and addressing the same audiences" may struggle when their conceptual framework becomes entrenched (77). These writers may "try to apply that framework in a new or unfamiliar writing situation, resulting in a mismatch between what they produce and the expectations or norms of their new community" (77). For preservice teachers, this threshold concept is potentially troublesome because habituated practice (often associated with fluency) and reliable strategies are worthy goals for the writing classroom. The concept also functions as a heuristic for generating pedagogical practices that help writers avoid entrenchment: lessons

that incorporate different kinds of practice, activities that foster rhetorical dexterity, and writing assignments across genres.

Other threshold concepts hold heuristic potential because they have natural pedagogical connections. Two concepts address assessment, which is most often associated with writing in school. First, *assessment is an essential component of learning to write*, a subconcept of *all writers have more to learn*, forwards assessment as a skill that writers can develop and as something that all writers—and not only teachers—do. Peggy O'Neill (2015) explains, "it is essential for writers to learn to assess texts written by others as well as their own work—both the processes used to create the texts and the products that result" (67). Writers assess their own writing process as it unfolds, assess the feedback they receive on their writing, and assess their own texts alongside those written by others. Second, *assessing writing shapes contexts and instruction*, a subconcept of *writing is social and rhetorical*, defines assessment as social and ideological. In their description of the concept, Tony Scott and Asao Inoue (2015) argue that writing assessment cannot be neutral because it "shapes the social and rhetorical contexts where writing takes place, especially in school. Any assessment or evaluation applies specific values and also encourages writers to adopt those values" (30). Preservice teachers who apprehend these concepts may develop a vision of assessment that is both larger and more complex. A larger vision of assessment asks teachers to integrate assessment (self-assessment, peer assessment, and instructor assessment) throughout the writing process and to provide opportunities for students to assess their own writing; it broadens the pedagogical scope of assessment to include reflection and metacognition. A more complex vision of assessment challenges the idea that writing assessment can be neutral or objective, calling teachers to consider how their commenting and response strategies, their rubrics and evaluation criteria, and their grading procedures shape their students as writers.

Finally, a third goal for the writing methods course centers on identity and attitude: the course helps preservice teachers to understand themselves as writers and develop positive associations with writing. The major assumption underlying this goal—as well as the National Writing Project—is that writing teachers should be writers themselves. Chris Street (2003) argues that preservice teachers with strong writer identities hold greater pedagogical potential because they have a sense of intellectual belonging in a community of teachers *and* a community of writers (46). Preservice teachers who "saw themselves as writers…simply had more to offer their students than did the other participants. They could provide students with a passion for writing that the other participants were unable or unwilling to do" (46). Penny Kittle (2008) challenges writing teachers to be writers: "I believe you can't tell kids how to write; you have to show them what writers do. I believe you have to be a writer, no matter how stumbling and unformed that process is for you"

(8). She describes the dramatic change in her classroom when she began writing each day, sharing her writing with her students, and writing with them during class. Issues of writer identity are also complex for preservice teachers because they are becoming literacy experts while still learning to write for academic and professional audiences. Saidy (2015) advocates recasting the idea of "teachers as writers" as "teacher as developing writer" (109). Understanding writing and teaching as developmental has benefits for preservice teachers, including freeing them from "the need to be writing experts" (109). Students arrive at the methods course with a variety of writer identities, but the course can also be a place for those identities to be developed and potentially refigured in positive ways.

Writer identity also has emotional components, and some suggest that the methods course should help students develop positive associations with writing. Because all writers indeed have more to learn and because writing is developmental, it is not unusual for students to arrive at college with little confidence in their writing ability—and thus negative attitudes about academic writing in particular. However, preservice teachers who have positive associations with writing may be better equipped to teach. Gregory Brooks (2007) notes that a variety of factors influence how well teachers teach writing, but he highlights the role of attitude and self-concept. How teachers think of themselves as writers, he argues, "substantially affects their thinking about how they demonstrate and implement writing" and how well they can support their students (179). Peggy Daisey (2009) argues that methods course instructors must foster positive attitudes about writing: "Teachers who do not like to write ask their students to write less than teachers with positive attitudes toward writing, tend to avoid conferencing with students about writing, and avoid conversations with students about their own writing experiences" (158). Daisey suggests that the course include assignments in which students reflect on their own literacy experiences, but Street (2003) contends that preservice teachers will develop better attitudes when the methods course provides a highly supportive atmosphere. For students who have had negative writing experiences, a positive experience in the methods course could exert significant influence at a critical, transitional moment (Street 2003, 43). Because writer identity and attitudes about writing are mutually reinforcing, addressing one element in the methods course likely means addressing the other.

Threshold concepts offer a fruitful way to foster positive writer identity and attitudes because they can be intellectually and affectively transformative. According to Meyer and Land (2006), when learners acquire new intellectual perspectives on a discipline, they also develop new attitudes and emotions; apprehending a threshold concept "is likely to involve an affective component—a shift in values, feeling, or attitude" (7). The threshold concepts of writing may occasion these shifts in attitude by offering what students find to be empowering,

insider information about writing—information they may have never explicitly received in writing classes. College writing instructors who use a writing about writing curriculum, which offers explicit, scholarly information about writing, argue the approach is empowering for academically marginalized students (Carter 2010; Benedict 2018). Downs and Wardle (2012) explain that students in these courses "are empowered to better understand themselves as writers and users of language because the course treats them as authoritative speakers and asks them to take control of their own literate experiences, expertise, and questions" (136). If students develop stronger writer identities when they identify with a community of writers, working with threshold concepts offers another means of access into that community and into a community of writing teacher–scholars.

The threshold concept *all writers have more to learn* and its subconcept *failure can be an important part of writing development* offer a transformed intellectual vision of writing, and they also call for transformed attitudes about writing. These concepts cast the reality that writing is imperfectible and that failure is developmental in neutral or even positive terms, and they offer—and perhaps even require—learners to reframe their feelings about difficulty and failure. In her description of *all writers have more to learn*, Shirley Rose (2015) notes that apprehending this concept can provoke an emotional response: "Often, one of the first lessons writers learn, one that may be either frustrating or inspiring, is that they will never have learned all that can be known about writing and will never be able to demonstrate all they do know about writing" (59). Yet when writers accept this reality, they understand that "encountering difficulty in a writing situation is an indication that they are ready to learn something new about writing" (61). In the same way, *failure can be an important part of writing development* locates failure within the writing process; failure may actually be a precursor to growth. For preservice teachers who arrive at the methods course with strong writer identities and positive attitudes, these concepts encourage them to see writing as developmental, even as they are called upon to be writing experts. And for those who arrive with negative attitudes, these concepts can improve negative emotions by defining difficulty in writing as normal and even productive.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AND WRITER IDENTITY

The writing methods course I teach begins with the threshold concepts of writing studies, which I describe as declarative knowledge about writing—knowledge that characterizes the game of writing itself. Declarative knowledge about writing is important, I explain on the first day of class, not only because it is intrinsically interesting but also because it should shape procedural knowledge—knowledge about how to play the games of writing and teaching writing. During the first part of the term, we focus on developing theoretical knowledge by studying the

threshold concepts of writing studies. Students read the entire classroom edition of *Naming What We Know* over the course of several weeks, and I assign relevant pieces of composition scholarship alongside these brief, accessible descriptions of each concept. (For example, with the concept *revision is central to developing writing*, students read "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" by Nancy Sommers.) After our study of each of the five threshold concepts, I ask students to write short essays reflecting on each concept in light of their own experience and professional aspirations. Most report they had already apprehended some concepts through experience, but they also find many concepts to be troublesome and thus transformative. In this section, I quote from my students (all of whom are English education students) to illustrate the ways in which threshold concepts simultaneously enable preservice teachers to develop theoretical knowledge, understand their own writer identities, and transform their attitudes about writing.

First, my students have found the concept *writing is social and rhetorical* to be troublesome knowledge because it challenges the idea of the individual or solitary writer. When I asked students to write about this concept, many recalled their experiences writing in high school, where their writing identities were highly individual. Leeann found *writing is social and rhetorical* troublesome because her educational experience taught her that writing is a reflection of individual ability:

> I never explicitly thought about the social nature of writing. Writing in school was always solitary. We wrote essay questions on a test, short journals at the beginning of class, or longer research papers, but those were almost exclusively not group activities…Now it seems I was incredibly short sighted. Even a successful author does not get anything published before it goes through the very social, collaborative process of revising with an editor. The idea that writing is inherently social challenges me to rethink my own writing process. I question how much more my writing would have improved over the years if I had not been so entrenched in the idea that I had to do it on my own.

She connects this threshold concept to her writing process, speculating that she would have progressed further as a writer by playing a social game rather than a solitary game. Other students connected *writing is social and rhetorical* to the idea that writing is a conversation and that writers cannot exist in a vacuum. Macy found the concept troublesome because in high school, she "wrote what came to my mind, using my ideas and my words…Teachers made sure we didn't spend too much time with the words and ideas of others or else we would be stealing them." Yet after wrestling with this threshold concept, she continues, "I see how true it can be. We *should* want to interact with others as we write because they have different views,

experiences, and insights…I see this concept as an opportunity to share thoughts and ideas with others while helping sharpen our own skills and ideas." When writing is defined as solitary and knowledge as the province as individuals, writers play the game by working alone and avoiding plagiarism; when writing is social and rhetorical, writers play the game by collaborating and conversing.

Beyond issues of writer identity, the concept that *writing is social and rhetorical* addresses writer agency and responsibility. Many students found the subconcept *writing involves making ethical choices* not troublesome but transformative because they had never considered writing as an ethical act. Defining writing as ethical assigns writers agency for creating a relationship with another person, and it prompted my students to adopt positive attitudes about writing—and about what writing can do in the world. Susannah contrasts her experience learning to write for Advanced Placement graders with the idea that writing creates ethical relationships:

> For many students, just like me, the audience is simply the dehumanized grade dispenser…This threshold concept deepens the notion of writing as a rhetorical strategy, spurring writers to understand that their writing is a conversation with others. This notion of a "conversation" creates a relationship between the reader and writer, and the idea of relationship asks writers to consider their reader's humanity. A relationship asks writers to not manipulate their audience but to make ethical choices in their writing. This focus on the audience and its humanity is transformative for me in that it breathes depth into the purpose of writing I was taught.

For Susannah, the idea that writing connects to readers and "their humanity" gave her a reason to value writing more deeply; when *writing involves making ethical choices*, writing could become a relationship instead of an exercise. Christina writes that she had understood writing as rhetorical but not as social. When she began to think about writing as social, she considered the ethical weight of the choices all writers make:

> In reading more about the concept, I began to understand writing as a social construct. What helped me do this was to think about writing in an ethical sense. Every time I write something, I am choosing to make an ethical decision. That decision could be based upon what I have learned, what my experiences have been, or what things I have experienced in a cognitive realm…Writing is obviously never black and white, but the words themselves are not black and white either; they carry with them certain connotations, whether or not we are aware of it. This means that diction is extremely important because when we make ethical choices, we also make linguistic choices and cultural choices.

In this reflection, Christina demonstrates how threshold concepts offer preservice teachers new reasons for valuing particular elements of writing. (It also demonstrates how threshold concepts give them access to difficult theoretical concepts such as social constructivism.) Students may arrive at the methods course focused on diction as a matter of style and correctness, but the idea that *writing involves making ethical choices* casts diction as a matter not only of correctness but also of relationship.

Second, the threshold concept *all writers have more to learn* has helped my students see writing (and writers) as developmental. The idea that writing is developmental motivated some students to become more engaged in the writing process, even as they near the end of their formal education. Madelyn admitted that she still strongly identifies with the student writers Sommers (1980) describes in her study of revision: "I think of revision as an extra step that delays the writing process and as a sign of weakness…Even as I recognize the importance of revision strategies that look at the essay as a whole, I still find myself focusing in on what words to change instead of how my theme could improve." Encountering the subconcept *revision is central to developing writing* prompted her to "move from seeing revision as a chore to recognizing its helpfulness." For other students, the concept *all writers have more to learn* was freeing and emotionally transformative. Megan, who calls herself a "recovering perfectionist," wrote that "it is freeing to know that I will never write perfectly. It feels that, in light of this concept, some of the pressure has come off, and I am now given permission to grow without a standard of perfection." Rebecca writes, "I am incredibly insecure about what I write…I seem to sometimes equate my intelligence and value with my writing, so I am afraid that if someone reads my writing, my deep, dark secret—that I am actually quite stupid—will be revealed." She found the subconcept *text is an object outside oneself that can be improved and developed* to be "reassuring," explaining that "being able to distance myself from my writing…will make the revision process much less emotional for me, as I will be able to take criticism without feeling like it's a judgment about my own self and personal intelligence." When writing is developmental and when texts can be improved, students may find the motivation and the emotional resources to engage more deeply in writing as a challenging, imperfectible activity.

Just as the threshold concepts normalize revision as part of writing development, they also explicitly normalize failure (Brooke and Carr 2015). My students have found the subconcept *failure can be an important part of writing development* to be transformative because it helps them reframe their literacy experiences. Looking back on her experience in high school, Leeann speculates that a different view of failure would have fostered better writing development:

> My failures did not have to be a discouragement. Instead of viewing them as proof that I was untalented, I could have used them as a foundation to build from. Instead of scrapping every piece of writing that I was not happy with, I could have continued to work on them, developing my skills as a writer. I could have used them as evidence of progress, and in that way let them serve as an encouragement to continue to practice.

Esther reflected on her writing practices during college, noting that she found the threshold concept about failure comforting: "Busyness is not the only thing holding me back from revising. I believe that the fear of failure plays a role in why I do not take the time to perfect my writing…I felt a little more comforted knowing that my failure to create a perfectly coherent paper on the first go was completely normal." Normalizing failure offers students a vision of writer identity that includes failure and a vision of the writing process in which failure is purposeful. When students arrive at the writing methods class believing that good writers never fail (and consequently that their past failures preclude them from identifying as writers), this subconcept can be particularly transformative.

Threshold concepts allow me to work toward two goals for the writing methods course simultaneously: helping preservice teachers build theoretical knowledge about writing and helping them develop writer identities. Daisey (2009) argues for the value of assignments that ask preservice teachers to interrogate their own literacy histories, and I have found that my students—simply by being asked to reflect on the threshold concepts—use these concepts to reframe and rewrite their literacy experiences. In this way, using threshold concepts is not only efficient but also integrative; because students connect theoretical concepts with personal experience, they have the opportunity for better concept development. Threshold concepts enable preservice teachers to see themselves and their writing through the lens of theory, and they encourage future teachers to reframe past writing experiences, reshape their writing processes and attitudes, and envision new possibilities for writers and writing.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AND PEDAGOGY

During the second part of my writing methods course, the focus shifts from theoretical knowledge to pedagogical knowledge. Students learn best practices for teaching writing in secondary English classrooms: designing effective writing assignments, planning activities and lessons that build specific writing skills and strategies, and assessing and responding to student writing. I periodically ask students if their pedagogical materials reflect what they know about writing, if their assignments and activities offer students a vision of writing that is faithful to the threshold concepts. At the end of the term, I ask students to integrate theoretical and pedagogical knowledge by designing a writing unit—one they envision using

as student teachers—and analyzing that unit in a cover letter. I introduce this final course project with two guiding questions: What standards and outcomes do you want to meet through this unit? And what threshold concepts of writing do you want to help your students apprehend? The writing unit includes all teaching materials and lesson plans for a major writing assignment, taught over the course of several weeks, and the cover letter asks students to explain how the unit helps secondary students apprehend a specific threshold concept of writing. In this section, I quote from these cover letters to illustrate how threshold concepts enable preservice teachers to develop sound pedagogical practices and create a mutually informing relationship between theory and practice.

First, several students found *writing is social and rhetorical* pedagogically generative. Its subconcept *writing is a knowledge-making activity* prompted Nicole to create multiple opportunities for invention and writing-to-learn activities. She hopes to show ninth graders that "when they begin the first outlines or drafts of a paper, they do not need every idea already formed within their mind, but rather, they should use the activity of writing to aid in their creation of ideas and arguments." Her lesson plans include several invention activities that "encourage [students] to create multiple different ideas for the paper…By allowing them time to write and create ideas and arguments for their paper without the stress of having to generate the best idea on the first try, the goal will be to have students actually create numerous ideas." By engaging the concept *writing is a knowledge-making activity*, Nicole developed lessons that reveal the importance of rhetorical invention; her lessons affirm the reality that writers make knowledge by writing, and they help writers generate an array of preliminary ideas. For other students, *writing is social and rhetorical* led them to integrate peer review and peer discussion throughout the writing process. Megan integrated frequent peer evaluation in her unit, and she explained her reasons for doing so using several subconcepts of *writing is social and rhetorical*:

> Another threshold concept involved in the peer-evaluation that factored so heavily into the unit is the concept of writing as social and rhetorical. I wanted students to have the chance to have their papers read by an audience other than myself and hear the responses of other readers as they worked to reconstruct the meaning that the authors worked to communicate through their paper. Students have the chance to see, through reading the writing of others, that "there is a tension between the expression of meaning and the sharing of it" (Bazerman 22).

Incorporating peer review in the writing classroom is not necessarily innovative, but these reasons for using peer review are purposefully grounded in composition

theory. Peer review becomes not only an expected class activity but also a way for students to understand how they make meaning.

Second, many students hoped their future students would recognize that *all writers have more to learn*, a concept that seems troublesome in the educational context of standards and outcomes. The subconcept *learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice, time, and effort* prompted Conner to create a series of activities for seventh graders writing personal narratives. During each class meeting, students would work on their drafts in a new way: "Students are engaged in the drafting process every day—by adding newly learned narrative elements, laying out the plot, or revising based on peer review notes…By writing, adding to, editing, and revising their drafts daily, students learn to work in the trenches, discovering what works and what does not." Even if students are initially satisfied (or simply done) with their drafts, these activities demonstrate how writing involves different kinds of practice and how different kinds of practice produce different results. In the same way, Susannah argued for the importance of "developing variety in writing…I do not want [students] to achieve proficiency only in thematic writing about literature." She planned to give ninth grade students practice in multiple genres by asking them "to choose from a variety of genres to address a topic…Students would receive a list of small writing projects worth specific point values; in order to complete the project, they would choose a configuration of projects to add up to fifty points." The activities Conner and Susannah describe—one that includes multiple kinds of practice on the same essay and another that offers low-stakes practice in multiple genres—lead student writers toward the troublesome knowledge that writing is not only one skill and that writing cannot be learned once and finally.

Reflecting on the concept *all writers have more to learn* helped these preservice teachers position revision and failure in their own writing processes, and it also motived them to think about the pedagogical value of revision. Megan writes, "I required some revision by students (and encouraged time for much more) in response to the feedback of peers…with the hope that students will understand that they *always* have more to learn—even when they turn a paper in, they may have more revision to do (as allowed for by my assessment plan) and they can make even a successful paper better." Jade made explicit connections between *all writers have more to learn* and growth mindset. In her discussion of a unit for eighth graders, she explains that "all students, no matter what level, will be expected to improve their writing skills in my class," and she does this in part by delaying final grading and encouraging revision:

> I need to create an environment that allows for failure. I need to allow my students to turn in as many revisions as they need to before the final grade…If they are not happy with the score they received, they then can

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revise and do whatever it is they need in order to achieve whatever goal they have set for themselves. The grade I give them does not have to be a final grade…I would have to set a deadline of sometime before the semester or trimester ends, but I want them to have as many opportunities to succeed as they can.

Allowing space for failure and revision supports good (if somewhat idealistic) writing assessment practices, and it shows students writers that they indeed have more to learn about writing. If summative assessment comes too early in the writing process—if the game of writing does not include pauses and restarts—then students cannot learn that failure precedes growth and that all writers have more to learn.

Finally, my students hoped to foster reflection in their future classrooms, drawing inspiration from *reflection is critical for writers' development*, a subconcept of *writing is (also always) cognitive*. Kara Taczak (2015) notes that reflection can be troublesome for writers both because it is foreign and because it is developmental (79). In their writing units, several preservice teachers incorporated reflection and offered students explicit instruction on how to reflect. Christina reported she received this kind of instruction too late in her education: "I did not really even begin my journey of *effective* reflection until I got to college, so my hope was that…my students would begin their journey to effective reflection a little earlier than I did." Christina created a unit on writing college application essays, and she planned to grade students on the essay and on a final reflective essay. She explains, "a *lot* of daily journal entries are reflections on a concept learned in class…My hope in having my students do reflection exercises in their journals was that, by the time they actually had to write their final essays, they would have the hang of reflecting in an effective manner." Rae outlined how she would teach her future ninth graders to reflect throughout the unit: "Since reflection is a mode of inquiry, I want to make sure…that I provide the scaffolding (in the form of questions) that students need to ask questions, make meaning, and make those connections to unit objectives." Both preservice teachers apprehended the idea that reflection is troublesome, and I would argue it was precisely this troublesome nature that prompted them to think carefully about teaching reflection with guided practice and scaffolding.

I asked my students to begin their project by thinking about threshold concepts, and these concepts prompted good pedagogical decisions spanning the writing process—decisions about rhetorical invention and inquiry, drafting and skills practice, revision, peer review, feedback and assessment, and reflection. Some threshold concepts name specific activities and readily translate into pedagogical practices. The concepts *revision is central to developing writing* and *reflection is critical for writers' development* highlight the value of revision and reflection in the writing classroom; that these concepts are troublesome serves as a

heuristic for translating them into practice. Other concepts could call for a wide range of pedagogical practices. For example, *writing is social and rhetorical* and *writing is a knowledge-making activity* help teachers think about assignment design (designing prompts with authentic audiences and purposes), elements of the writing process (allowing time for invention and revision), and assessment schemes. As declarative knowledge about writing, the threshold concepts define what writing is, and they serve as heuristics for developing and evaluating pedagogical practices that accord with that definition.

CONCLUSION: THRESHOLDS AS BRIDGES

The first several times I taught the writing methods course, I was unusually self-conscious about my professional identity. According to Tulley (2013), I fit the profile of those who teach the course: I am a tenured rhetoric and composition specialist and a writing program administrator; I regularly teach first-year writing and have experience mentoring and evaluating new writing instructors. Yet I do not hold any degrees in education, and I have never taught at the secondary level. Although I believe, with Royer and Gilles (2002), that composition theory offers principles that can be applied across the grade levels, I also wondered if my allegiance to composition theory was too strong and too abstract in the face of particular classroom realities. I worried that my methods course would exacerbate gaps between English education and rhetoric and composition, between secondary writing instruction and college writing instruction. When *Naming What We Know* was published, I first thought the concepts would serve as a valuable form of declarative knowledge for preservice teachers, and then I quickly questioned my motives: was shifting part of the course from theories of teaching writing to theories of writing a self-indulgent desire to teach the latest research in my field?

My preliminary answer to that question is *no*. As I have argued, threshold concepts help preservice teachers and their instructors work toward the many goals of the writing methods course; these concepts offer declarative knowledge about writing that shapes writer identities and pedagogical practice. But beyond these advantages, the threshold concepts give me and my preservice teachers—and more broadly, secondary and postsecondary writing instructors—something else to hold in common: a profile of the writers we all hope to foster. The concepts outline the transformative knowledge writers need to participate fully in the activity of writing, but apprehending these ideas requires dispositions that can be developed across the grade levels. One of my students rightly noted that even very young writers can apprehend the idea that *all writers have more to learn* and that *revision is central to developing writing*, and we speculated about the value of crossing some thresholds even before entering high school. By fostering particular dispositions and providing a supportive classroom environment, teachers at all levels can

position writers to apprehend these concepts. Writers who are persistent and flexible can understand writing as an imperfectible but rewarding activity, writers who are engaged and creative can take full advantage of social and rhetorical opportunities in writing, and writers who are metacognitive can practice reflection.[3] The writing methods course should be a time for preservice teachers to think about the writers they are and the teachers they are becoming, and the threshold concepts of writing further help them—and help all writing teachers—think about the kinds of writers they hope to develop.

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[3] Published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* outlines eight habits of mind that can be developed at the secondary level: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. My discussion of these dispositions is informed by the *Framework*, a document that itself attempts to create bridges between secondary and postsecondary education.

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