Threshold Concepts, Writing, and the Transfer of Learning

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Focusing on the processes and products of a three-year, multi-institutional research seminar on writing, the presenter will unpack the multiple roles of threshold concepts in a) facilitating research about learning to write for varied audiences and purposes and b) moving that research into practice in higher education contexts.

From 2011 to 2013, forty-five writing researchers from twenty-eight institutions in five countries participated in the Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer. As part of the seminar, Elon's Center for Engaged Learning facilitated international, multi-institutional research about writing transfer and fostered discussions about recognizing, identifying enabling practices for, and developing working principles about writing transfer. Although the seminar was not designed around threshold concepts theory, threshold concepts became central to the seminar's work.

First, drawing from a case study of the research seminar structure, the presenter will examine the role of threshold concepts as a tool in the research process. By focusing on transformative, "probably irreversible," integrative, often bounded, and "potentially (though not necessarily) troublesome" concepts (Meyer & Land, 2006, pp. 7-8) in writing studies, researchers identified potential content for curricular interventions in college students' study of writing. Many seminar participants designed and tested assignments, or even entire classes, focused on providing instruction on and practice with these threshold writing concepts. Other seminar researchers used the threshold concepts to examine program-level and university-wide (mis)alignment about expectations for writing curricula at their colleges and universities. In each of these instances, threshold concepts functioned as a research tool as seminar participants investigated how learners use prior knowledge about writing when they face new contexts for writing in concurrent and subsequent coursework.

Second, the presenter briefly will examine writing transfer *as* a threshold concept. Transfer theory is "troublesome" for academic staff/faculty because it requires thinking about learning beyond the scope of a single course and beyond disciplinary boundaries (see Moore, 2013). Yet a meta-analysis of published writing transfer literature and the research seminar's studies demonstrates that writing transfer also is a threshold concept for students. Students initially do not expect to be able to apply writing knowledge gained in one course to their writing in concurrent or subsequent contexts.

Third, the presenter will highlight the implications of these threshold concepts for curriculum development in higher education. To help learners improve as writers, academic staff/faculty must be cognizant of both the disciplinary threshold concepts of writing studies *and* the identification of writing transfer itself as a threshold concept. Barradell (2012) offers a vision of curriculum development for the disciplinary component, but identifying writing transfer as a threshold concept pushes against understandings of threshold concepts as disciplinarily-bound.

Finally, the presenter will offer a visual heuristic theorizing the connections and intersections among the three roles that threshold concepts occupied in the research seminar and encouraging reflection on the potential roles of threshold concepts in other *multi*-disciplinary, scholarship of teaching and learning projects.

References

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