CHAPTER 1

ASSEMBLING KNOWLEDGE: THE ROLE OF THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN FACILITATING TRANSFER

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As the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* (2015; Appendix A) explains, recent research has examined a number of factors associated with how composers move knowledge, strategies, and/or ways of working among and between contexts. Across the range of terms used for research on transfer summarized in the statement, common threads emerge. Some studies have focused on prior knowledge, looking at the roles that understandings of activities within one context play in movement from one learning situation to the next (Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Robertson, Taczak & Yancey, 2012). Others such as Moore (2012) have used the frame of knowledge propagation (Beach, 2003), looking at "change by both the individual and the organization" (*Elon Statement*, 2015, p. 2; Appendix A). Studies focused on situated learning have examined practices associated with expertise in specific contexts, and on the ways learners develop from novice to expert within those contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). Others have looked at interactions of subject identities (including learners' perceptions of selves and of learning situations); the strategies or tools that learners bring to learning situations; and the objects/outcomes of learning situations—learners' knowledge of discourse communities, process, subject matter, and genre knowledge (Russell & Yañez, 2002). This focus on contexts for learning, often examined through activity theory or other frames affiliated with the idea of situated learning, has also informed the preponderance of research on transfer that is more firmly grounded in writing studies. Within our field, studies have focused on examining and/or engaging students around their understandings of genre or with the idea of genres as they circulate within particular activity systems (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987; Wardle, 2009). Recently, researchers have also added to this study a more specific focus on the role of dispositions (Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Robertson et al., 2012; Wardle, 2012).

This chapter focuses on an idea introduced recently to the growing body of literature on writing and transfer: threshold concepts. Researchers Meyer

and Land (2006) define these as concepts critical for epistemological participation in disciplines. More than mere concepts, threshold concepts act as portals that learners pass through; in doing so, learners change their understandings of something. Threshold concepts are, then, transformative; they are often irreversible. Expanding Meyer and Land's original conceptualization to accommodate our focus on writing instruction in postsecondary institutions, we define threshold concepts as concepts critical for participation in communities of practice, the formally or informally defined sites where participants share common rituals, values, and stances (Johns, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Within communities of practice, participants also share beliefs around what ideas are most important—threshold concepts—and the ways in which these concepts shape members' perspectives. These ways of seeing through and seeing with (Kreber, 2010) are synonymous with Meyer and Land's (2005) idea of epistemological participation. As we define them here, threshold concepts seem especially salient given the ways that academic disciplines are constituted for postsecondary undergraduate education; for learners of writing, threshold concepts create a different lens through which they interpret writing within communities of practice, like disciplines. At the undergraduate level, regardless of specialization within a discipline, faculty within departments tend to share common beliefs about how questions might be asked and investigated, how evidence might be represented, what constitutes a common discourse, and so on. Beyond the level of undergraduate study and for faculty themselves, the characteristics associated with disciplines as communities of practice are even stronger, including common sets of rituals, rules, conventions (guiding spoken and written interactions), and ideologies that are reinforced by members of the community through practices such as peer review that are critical for advancement. Of course, as Lave and Wenger's research (separately and together) also affirms, communities of practice also exist outside of the academy (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

As intrinsic as threshold concepts are for epistemological participation in communities of practice, though, only recently have researchers (Adler-Kassner, Majewski & Koshnick, 2012; Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Gogan, 2013) begun to consider the potential for synthesizing these concepts as a framework for designing for and understanding transfer of learning across contexts. Doing so creates two propositions, both of which are essential for realizing the *enabling practices* described in the *Elon Statement*:

- In order to be successful, learners must develop abilities to recognize the boundaries around the communities of practice in which they participate and change their practices accordingly. In writing classes, these boundaries include "concepts that enable students to analyze

expectations for writing and learning within specific contexts" (*Elon Statement*, 2015, p. 5). Recognizing the boundaries that distinguish one community of practice from another involves both identifying and enacting threshold concepts, as well as learning how to learn about those concepts (Wenger, 1998).

- The ability to identify threshold concepts within communities of practice is critical for learners to develop the *metacognitive awareness* described in the *Elon Statement* because with it, learners can (1) understand—and, perhaps, see through and with—concepts critical to the community; (2) identify the roles that these concepts play in delineating the community; and (3) differentiate boundaries between one community and the next.

Accordingly, because of the intrinsic role that threshold concepts play in forming and delineating communities of practice, a more explicit focus on these concepts reflects the enabling practices described in the *Elon Statement* and, as a result, might help writing teachers (and researchers) address a troubling issue that has emerged throughout research on writing transfer: "Students do not expect their writing in [first-year composition] FYC, or even classes in their majors, to transfer to other coursework or professional contexts" (Moore, 2012, "Research Outcomes," para. 1). This perception may be due, in part, to the tendency in some first-year writing courses (and curricula) to place writing *processes* at the focus of their courses (and to teach that focus through a variety of themes). In privileging process and instructor-selected themes, many writing courses seem to reflect the belief that a writing class can revolve around any content—because the role of content is merely to facilitate an often implicit focus on the development of habits of mind and strategies associated with writing process (e.g., brainstorming, drafting, revising, reflecting) that are presumed to be both generalizable and content-neutral (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Robertson, 2011; Wardle 2007, 2009; Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2014). Such an approach to writing, though, misrepresents the nature of writing and its role in both communities of practice and disciplines where writing practices are shaped by and reflective of specific communities. The more process-based universalist approach has failed to serve students well (Yancey et al., 2014). Students, of course, realize this, often early in their college careers when they discover that strategies they learn in English classes are not applicable, as near or far transfer, to other courses (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007).

In sum, working with—writing about, reading about, and using in practice—threshold concepts of writing is critical for students seeking to develop as writers both in writing classes and, because of writing studies' focus on the

study of composed knowledge within specific contexts, within other courses. In this chapter, as a mechanism for thinking about a writing curriculum informed by threshold concepts, we define five threshold concepts of writing studies that are critical for cultivating students' abilities to assemble and reassemble knowledge-making practices within and across communities of practice. We illustrate the implications of integrating these threshold concepts into instruction by drawing on data from studies that each of us has conducted in conjunction with our participation in the 2011–2013 Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer, during which we worked as a cohort focusing on questions associated with transfer from writing courses to other general education courses. We conclude by considering the implications of our focus on threshold concepts and what we have learned through this research for writing instructors and, more broadly, for general education moving forward.

THRESHOLD CONCEPT #1: WRITING IS AN ACTIVITY AND A SUBJECT OF STUDY (LINDA ADLER-KASSNER)

The idea that writing is an activity—an action in which writers engage for any number of purposes (to learn, to begin developing ideas for projects, to air grievances, to advocate for a cause, to share an experience or idea with others, and so on)—is commonly understood. Sometimes, this activity is linked to performance, demonstrating the achievement of something; sometimes, it is linked to myriad other purposes.

But at the same time that writing is an activity, it is also a subject of study. That is, it is possible to investigate writing as an activity and apply to it questions that provide insight both into individuals' encounters and experiences with writing and into the multiple roles that writing plays within specific communities of practice. These questions include ones such as: How is "good" writing (and its opposite, "bad" writing) defined in this community? What values and ideologies are reflected in those definitions? How have those definitions been constructed and reified over time? How is good writing assessed? What consequences or implications extend from definitions of good (and bad) writing, for whom, and why? How do individuals who produce this writing experience its production? How is writing used in this community of practice, and how do individuals and groups come to understand those uses? And why is it beneficial to individuals and groups to be able to understand and experience writing as a subject of study, not just to be able to practice it as an activity?

This idea, that writing is something that can be studied and that the study of writing can provide unique insights into communities of practice, is a threshold concept for learners at a variety of levels. For undergraduates entering college

writing courses, it can be particularly troublesome (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005, 2006)—one of the key characteristics associated with learners' encounters with such concepts—because in many instances, their previous school experiences have focused on writing only as an activity, as something that one does in order to represent (or, occasionally, produce) knowledge, rather than as a subject of study.

Evidence of this focus on writing-as-activity (but not as subject of study) is ubiquitous, especially as teachers, parents, and even students reflect on the ways in which high-stakes testing has led teachers to necessarily focus on teaching to the test, especially in secondary English courses. A November 2013 guest post for the popular Living in Dialogue blog written by Joan Brunetta, a student at Williams College, captures the issues that extend from this approach. Brunetta wrote that as she moved through school, students perceived that learning was aligned with the score or grade that they earned on standardized exams. Brunetta devoted special attention to writing, which by high school, she said, was exclusively about the entirely predictable representation of ideas—the activity, in other words, of performance.

> To do anything *but* constrain your ideas by the structure was *very* wrong. When we learned essay writing in high school, we were often handed a worksheet, already set up in five paragraphs, telling you exactly where to put the thesis, the topic sentences, and the "hook." In my freshman history class, I was told that each paragraph should have 5–9 sentences, *regardless of the ideas presented in the paragraph*. The ideas didn't matter—structure reigned supreme. (Brunetta, 2013, para. 13)

Brunetta's blog post highlights the way in which writing was and is taught as a rigid and highly constrained activity, limiting the opportunities that she and other students in her Cambridge, Massachusetts, high school might have to experience writing as a subject of study. Data collected as part of a listening tour organized by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) also reflects this experience. As reported by their teachers, students enrolled in college first-year writing classes in fall 2013 said that their writing in high school was largely geared toward producing particular text types to fulfill the requirements of various kinds of tests (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2013).

Students' experiences of writing as an activity, but not a subject of study, were also voiced by students enrolled in a first-year writing course where writing *was* a subject of study. As context, it is helpful to explain that these students were enrolled in a section of Writing 2, a general education writing course (taught by Linda Adler-Kassner). At the same time, they were also enrolled in History 17b,

another general education course. In the Writing 2 course, assignments asked students to analyze writing in and from 17b—both writing used in the course (such as primary sources, textbooks, assignments, and syllabi) and writing that they completed for the course—as a subject of study. Interviewed after the conclusion of both courses, the following excerpts from four students, which are typical of the range of responses from all students interviewed, point to the ways in which students' understandings of writing changed as a result of experiences in the class.

Initially, students said, they understood writing primarily as an activity constrained by particular limitations. "[In high school,] we were always taught very specific ways to write," said Jane.[1] "We weren't allowed to use certain words. . . . We had really strict rules. And ways of writing." Coming out of high school, Jonathan reported that he expected Writing 2 to be "all grammar . . . making my paper look great grammar-wise" because "all of my high school, middle school writing classes were . . . about proper sentence structure, paragraph structure, all of that stuff" (see also Hillocks, 2002). As a result of their prior experiences, both Jane and Jonathan had particular ideas about what writing was: the production or representation of ideas in a specific and rigid form. Jonathan's description of his writing captures this expectation. "I always wrote in exactly the same way," he said. "It was intros . . . and at the bottom of my intros my thesis statement, and within the intro I would structure my paper and then start para 1, para 2, para 3, concluding para. I was very structured." Writing these structured essays, he reported, was a constant. "The [Advanced Placement] AP test and everything like that—that's exactly how I was taught to do it. . . . It would just blend in with everyone else's paper."

In Writing 2, these writers began to work with the idea that writing is both a subject of study and an activity, the latter a process that can be used to develop ideas within multiple contexts. In addition, as they moved toward (and, in some instances, away from) the liminal boundary associated with threshold concepts, some began to understand the concept as transformative—that is, it changed the ways that they understand writing within and across contexts. Portions of Jonathan's interview, for instance, illustrate a learner at a less fully realized, but still developing, point along the liminal path toward full participation in threshold concepts. Jonathan said that before working with the concept that writing is a subject of study and an activity, "structure was a higher priority for me" when writing any paper. After studying writing explicitly as the content of Writing 2, Jonathan explained that he tries to "understand the question before I even start to write." Analyzing his writing for History 17b, he explained that he could look at that writing through a different lens, as well. He could see, he said, where he didn't do things in ways that were expected in the class or the assignment—and, importantly, "here's how I didn't quite accomplish what I was trying to do. . . . I

was trying this and I could see where I was going, but it didn't really work at all." Of course, the range of contexts in which Jonathan and other students in these two courses were writing was relatively narrow: both were general education courses within the same institution. There are also similarities between threshold concepts in writing studies and in history (e.g., close attention to context and the nature of text as socially constructed [see Adler-Kassner et al., 2012]). Whether Jonathan's burgeoning engagement with the threshold concept that writing is a subject of study would transfer to more disparate writing contexts, such as between a writing class and a workplace setting, is hard to say.

Ramona's and Ellen's interviews provide examples of learners at more advanced points on the way toward participating in the threshold concept that writing is a subject of study and an activity. Ramona read aloud a paragraph from her final project in Writing 2, which asked students to create a genre for a specific audience that they selected to help that audience understand the relevance of a particular approach to the study of history. For the assignment, students needed to draw on the writing of Wineburg (2001), who has long examined the process of learning and meaning-making among expert and novice historians. Ramona's paragraph focused on her analysis of the importance of explicitly presenting history as a narrative, one that is generated through interpretation of primary sources but that is also necessarily inflected with the presence of the interpreter. In her assignment, she wrote, "If a story does not have a teller, it cannot be debated. History is about people. Humans are always going to have different opinions—and that's okay. It is necessary to present history with different perspectives." As she described her work the subsequent quarter in History 17c, a class focusing on American history from roughly World War I through the 1960s, Ramona said that she realized that the process of studying the stories of history helped her understand a threshold concept of that discipline, that history consists of meaningful and competing narratives (see Adler-Kassner et al., 2012; Adler-Kassner & Majewski, 2015). "Reading . . . and understanding how to think about [history]," she said, was critical. "It's all about understanding stories, and putting things together."

In her interview, Ellen said that she realized she could study the ways that the faculty member teaching History 17b, John Majewski, structured his lectures and use that as a lens through which to view the writing for that class. Going through her lecture notes, she said she saw "a trend of how Professor Majewski discusses things . . . and then I started to notice . . . every lecture, he really outlines like it's an essay. He forms a thesis, he has an argument . . . and he includes examples. And then I looked at my essay [for 17b] and . . . how my essay compared with how he would structure a lecture [and] in my head I was thinking, 'Can I make a lecture out of my essay?'" Ellen's comment is a particularly

notable example of a learner who seems to have stepped through the threshold associated with the concept that writing is a subject of study and an activity. She applied the threshold concept from one class, Writing 2, to her lecture notes from History 17b; she then took the analysis of those notes as a subject of study and applied those to the writing she was doing for that class.

As the *Elon Statement* explains, writing classes that "focus on study and practice with concepts that enable students to analyze expectations for writing and learning within specific contexts" (2015, p. 5; Appendix A) are a central enabling practice for facilitating transfer. The threshold concept that writing is an activity and a subject of study is critical for engaging in this kind of analysis. These excerpts, generated by undergraduates after only 10 weeks grappling with this concept, illustrate the ways in which the concept is troublesome and, to varying degrees, transformative. It is also worth noting that the threshold concept that writing is an activity and a subject of study can also be troublesome for learners at other levels. This could, for instance, be understood as a central principle underscoring the effort to work with faculty outside of writing classes to understand the expectations for writing in their disciplines (as communities of practice) not as natural or common sense, but as practices embedded in the values, ideologies, and practices of those disciplines. For students and faculty, then, working with the idea that writing is an activity and a subject of study can lead to a focus on understanding and/or making more explicit expectations for writing within specific contexts (see Adler-Kassner & Majewski, 2015; Estrem, 2015; McGowan, 2014).

THRESHOLD CONCEPT #2: WRITING ALWAYS OCCURS IN CONTEXT, AND NO TWO CONTEXTS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE (LIANE ROBERTSON)

The idea that writing occurs in context is not new and is not a threshold concept on its own. However, while writers may understand that writing occurs in context, they also benefit from understanding that writing is situational even within similar contexts. The idea that writers can learn to write for a recurring context—applying what they learned during the first time they write in a given context to the next—is mistaken. Writers must differentiate between an understanding that writing occurs in context and an analysis of each context in order to write well in that context.

The contexts for writing vary even when the task and audience seem similar. For example, a marketing executive may understand how to write a proposal for a project she wants to pitch to a client or superior, one that outlines the idea and includes possible conventions (a cost-benefit analysis, a budget, and any

other rationale or potential issues that might accompany the endeavor being proposed). But the proposed idea is not the idea she previously pitched; the situation involving the client or superior is different (either involving different people or the same people who may have a revised perspective since the last proposal); the ability to allocate budget may have changed; or other intangible factors affecting the willingness to approve a proposal will be different than the last time the executive submitted a proposal. In this example, the marketing executive writer requires analysis of the situation for which the proposal is being prepared, and based upon that analysis, will write the proposal with a goal of securing approval for the proposed project. While there are conventions that guide the writing of any proposal, it is the context situating each proposal that most affects its development and its success as a written product for a specific purpose; that success is based on the writer's success in employing conventions appropriate for the context.

Russell's (1997) work in activity theory demonstrates (1) that writing occurs within contexts, particularly the *activity system* in which the writing is situated, and (2) that all writing is affected by the way in which the writer interprets or reacts to the activity system or situation in which the writing takes place. Grounding this idea in teaching, Russell asserts that classroom contexts can be made explicit by asking, "How can one analyze the macro-level social and political structures (forces) that affect the micro-level actions of students and teachers writing in classrooms, and vice versa?" (1997, p. 504). Russell contends that the connections between genres and activity systems are more easily made within professional or specialized contexts. In more general writing classes, though, there tend to be wider ranges of genres and foci evidenced across courses (as discussed in Threshold Concept #4 below). For example, writing classes can revolve around one or more virtually limitless areas of content, or, alternatively, can revolve around genres that are perceived to be associated with disciplines (natural science, social science, humanities). Within any given writing course, then, there is the possibility that the range of genres or content available to students is broad and diffused. Additionally, the connections to writing in other disciplines might be framed by the instructor through one or more of a number of lenses: a similar content, a similar process, a similar genre. Not surprisingly, then, "composition students have particular difficulty seeing the connection between the writing and other social practices" (Russell, 1997, p. 536). Activity theory, though, provides learners the opportunity to study the expectations for and specific types/genres of writing used in a specific context and to practice with those, recognizing that context is a key factor in identifying sites for writing as a subject. Through such a focus, writers can examine and begin to participate in genre systems (Bazerman, 2002), which allows writers to consider how writing works across

activity systems and how relationships between concepts develop. By exploring the interactions between systems, writers can analyze the writing within them, building on their prior knowledge with each analysis. This expands and deepens their understandings of the ways writing works and the writing approaches one might employ in various contexts, once that deeper understanding of the social systems involved is realized. By understanding writing as a subject of study, not just an activity (as suggested in Threshold Concept #1), writers can develop and continuously revise a framework (Beaufort, 2007) of knowledge about writing, which allows them to repurpose appropriately between contexts (see also Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015).

Once writers understand how to decontextualize a writing situation—to evaluate and analyze a context, to identify the rhetorical choices performed in a writing situation, and to conceptualize their own rhetorical choices as writers in a new situation—they will understand the threshold concept that writing always occurs in context and that no two contexts are exactly alike. This notion of context, in the terminology of threshold concepts, is likely *transformative* for writers in that it changes their internal view of writing to something non-formulaic and only appropriate to a given context; is *irreversible* in that writers can never return to writing without considering context; is *integrative* in that it demonstrates relationships between genres, audiences, purposes, and contexts of writing that complicate writers' understanding of the writing product; and is *bounded* in that writers who now consider context in this new way must also consider context in other ways of communicating and receiving communication from others (Meyer & Land, 2005). At the same time, this threshold concept can also constitute what Meyer and Land define as troublesome knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005, 2006) or knowledge that proves problematic, because it requires a paradigmatic shift in previous thinking: It requires writers to understand that writing within contexts requires an interpretation of each context, rather than assuming that a model or formula for writing will lead to success in any context. This idea, especially, can be particularly alien for first-year students, who may be emerging from an environment in which they have been taught to write to a particular target such as a standardized test or one model of essay writing.

This troublesomeness was particularly evident in students interviewed in a qualitative research study (see Robertson, 2011; Yancey et al., 2014) reported in *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* (Yancey et al., 2014) that introduced the Teaching for Transfer (TFT) curricular model.[2] The TFT curriculum was designed specifically to encourage transfer from first-year composition to other sites of writing through the study of rhetorical concepts about writing, the use of a systematic approach to reflection, and students' development of a "Theory of Writing" which frames their prior and developing

knowledge about writing. The research study which featured the TFT curricular model, explored the success of first-year students at writing in various disciplinary contexts after having experienced three different types of FYC content: (1) an Expressivist design, (2) a course themed around media and culture, and (3) the Teaching for Transfer curriculum described above. By comparing these three types of content across the three courses and exploring the knowledge about writing that students transferred from each of the three different courses to new writing contexts, the study demonstrated that students can transfer knowledge, but also that sometimes (as was the case for subjects from the non-TFT sections in the study) only partial knowledge transfers, or that transfer occurs without mindfulness, or is situated within a context that a writer does not understand deeply enough to appropriately interpret and successfully write in. In contrast, students in the Teaching for Transfer section that explicitly focused on content associated with the threshold concept that "writing occurs in context and no two contexts are exactly alike" were able to develop the conceptual model that research has indicated is necessary for transfer to occur (e.g., Beaufort, 2007). Students who experienced writing courses located in an Expressivist approach or a cultural theme were unable to transfer concepts about writing, but merely retained strategies or processes of writing because the content of their FYC course had not allowed for the development of a conceptual framework or of greater knowledge of the context for writing necessary for successful transfer (Beaufort, 2007, p. 19).

In particular, two students from the Teaching for Transfer course developed a conceptual model of writing knowledge, as well as both the procedural and declarative knowledge that Michael Carter purports is necessary to develop expertise (1990, p. 273). Both students demonstrated transfer between the context of FYC in one semester to the contexts of writing they experienced in other courses in a second semester. More importantly, they also transferred a conceptual model of writing that included context at its core. As a result of the transfer curriculum, both were able to articulate their approaches to contexts they were experiencing and predict approaches to the contexts they expected to experience in the future. This research indicates (see Yancey et al., 2014) that their abilities to consider writing in this abstract way were cultivated by the content of their Teaching for Transfer FYC course, which had taught them to decontextualize a writing situation to determine the role of rhetorical concepts such as audience, genre, and context, which they were then able to re-conceptualize for new contexts, both real and imagined. One subject (known pseudonymously as Clay) observed that by the end of the Teaching for Transfer FYC course he understood how the concepts of writing learned in the course worked in various contexts: "I didn't just learn strategies in [the FYC course], I learned to think about how to

write in any situation" (Robertson, 2011, p. 153) and he learned to analyze the effect of the writing he was doing for particular situations. In other words, Clay realized that his writing varied depending on the rhetorical situation and his own understanding of the context for which and in which he was writing. Evidence of Clay's ability to apply this analytical prowess was demonstrated when he was able to transfer from the context of FYC to the context of a meteorology course by mindfully abstracting the concepts of genre and audience. Specifically, he *decontextualized* these concepts so that he could *re-conceptualize* them for successful performance on an essay in the meteorology course. In doing so, he understood and acted upon the threshold concept that "writing always occurs in context and no two contexts are exactly alike," reimagining these concepts for success in other contexts for writing (Robertson, 2011, p. 154).

Another subject (known pseudonymously as Rick) experienced troublesome knowledge in attempting to understand the conceptual framework he was required to develop in order to transfer. However, in his initial failure to navigate contexts smoothly, he moved through the bottleneck of learning that Meyer and Land identify as preceding the transformation that shifts a learner's perspective (Meyer & Land, 2006). Rick remained tied to the notion of *writer's agency* (as discussed in Threshold Concept #3 below; see also Yancey, 1998) without fully understanding the concept of rhetorical situation and found himself failing at writing for a specific context—the lab report required in his chemistry class—because of his unwillingness to let go of agency. However, when Rick understood the audience (his instructor, classmates), the genre conventions of the lab report (as required by his instructor), and the purpose of the lab report (to convey observations of an experiment), he began to understand the context in which he was writing as requiring a different approach than others that called for his opinion or interpretation (Robertson, 2011, p. 139). Further, Rick's ability not only to follow the genre conventions for the lab report provided by the instructor, but also to understand that the context of the lab report involved writing for a specific situation, meant that he was able to reconsider his writing approach for other lab reports in his science classes. He reported that his grades began to improve.

In any writing course, but particularly in FYC courses where students are often very recently removed from the more formulaic experience of high school writing, the threshold concept that writing always occurs in context and no two contexts are exactly alike can help students develop the conceptual model of writing (as discussed in other sections of this chapter) they need to transfer writing knowledge and practice to new contexts. This transfer goes beyond simply matching abilities to context; successful writers *repurpose* their knowledge in ways appropriate to the specific context in which they are working, an approach critical for success in any context.

THRESHOLD CONCEPT #3: REFLECTION IS CRITICAL FOR WRITERS' DEVELOPMENT (KARA TACZAK)

To say that reflection is critical for writers' development is to suggest that reflection must be an integral part of the writing process, making it more than an after-the-fact activity, a practice in revision, or an act of self-assessment. Reflection thus needs to be a practice in which writers bridge cognition and metacognition as a way to tap into their prior knowledge and experience so they can begin to question and theorize their writing processes, practices, attitudes, and beliefs (Taczak, 2015). As a mode of inquiry, then, reflection prompts writers to recall, reframe, and relocate their writing knowledge and practices: This practice of reflection asks writers to look backward as a way to *recall* prior knowledge (which could include prior dispositions, attitudes, and understandings about writing), to look forward as a way to frame and *reframe* writing situations, and to look outward as a way to *relocate* knowledge in effective and meaningful ways in different contexts (Taczak, 2011; Yancey et al., 2014). Reflection then becomes a systematic and intentional part of writers' processes.

Systematic and intentional reflection prompts writers to transfer. For example, a writer might learn how to address an intended audience in a first-year writing course (whether an instructor, a peer, or another specific audience that has been identified for his or her writing) and later reframe and relocate that knowledge for a chemistry lab report in which the writer has identified another specific audience (e.g., a teaching assistant). In order to promote transfer like this, though, reflection must be learned as both process and product: as before-the-fact activity, during-the-fact activity, and after-the-fact activity, as well as a way to access both cognition and metacognition. Reflection therefore must be taught in deliberate and intentional ways, so that writers become active, reflective writing practitioners of their own learning about effective rhetorical practices. Later, when they enter new writing situations, they can transfer what they have already learned and begin to analyze what they need to know about what is required to construct new rhetorically situated responses.

However, much like other threshold concepts, reflection can be troublesome. As a result, it also can be absent from writers' processes. Some reasons for this include the belief that reflection happens naturally (i.e., it is assumed and thus not practiced) or that reflection is difficult (i.e., writers, at that moment, are not capable of engaging in reflective practice). To respond to these issues and others, reflection needs to be taught as a deliberate, reiterative process that creates conditions where transfer can be encouraged. In "Transfer of Learning," Perkins and Salomon (1992) identify conditions that speak to the type of deliberate reflection required to respond to this type of troublesomeness: active

self-monitoring and arousing mindfulness. Active self-monitoring focuses on the ability to monitor "thinking processes" while arousing mindfulness refers to "a generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in and to one's surroundings . . . mindfulness would foster both [explicit abstraction and active self-monitoring]" (Perkins & Salomon, 1992, para. 19). These two conditions promote near and far transfer because they respond to situations "under what conditions transfer appears" (Perkins & Salomon, 1992, para. 16).

Reflection as a mode of inquiry encourages both self-monitoring and arousing mindfulness because writers are routinely theorizing about what and how they are learning. Thus, reflection becomes a practice that enables writers to recall, reframe, and relocate their thinking, understanding, and processes about writing and link prior knowledge with new knowledge, as they develop as writers able to transfer knowledge and practices to new writing situations.

The role of reflection in transfer became especially apparent in a qualitative study examining a first-year writing course where the explicit goal was to teach for transfer (Robertson, 2011; Taczak, 2011; Yancey et al., 2014). (This qualitative study featured the Teaching for Transfer curriculum discussed in Threshold Concept #2 above but focused on students' reflection and transfer). As outlined above, the Teaching for Transfer curriculum on which the study was based centered on key rhetorical terms, a reflective framework, and the students' development of a theory of writing. The last was a semester-long reflective process that asked students to theorize about writing. The reflective framework incorporated reflection at different, intentional points during the semester using three components: reflective theory, reflective assignments, and reflective activities.

From this year-long study, two findings attest to the importance of the threshold concept that reflection is critical in the development of writers so that they might achieve successful transfer. First, over half of the participants reported that reflection offered them a chance to look backward so that they could go forward as a way to continue to develop as writers. Renee, a first-year environmental law and English double major, noted that "writing 'good' can take multiple drafts, details, and supportive arguments, but writing excellent takes an author who knows themselves as good as their reflective assignments do." She continued,

> You learn a lot from reflection because when you got back into the paper you see yourself—how you write and how you explain things—so it helps you improve on your writing making it more coherent, but it also shows who you are on the paper. (Taczak, 2011, p. 97)

This is similar to what Yancey (1998) argues about reflection when she explains that "we learn to understand ourselves through explaining ourselves to

others. To do this, we rely on a reflection that involves a *checking* against, a *confirming*, and a *balancing* of self" (Yancey, 1998, p. 11). As Renee continued, "[reflection] does not necessarily teach authors anything new, but it gives great insight into themselves on how they think and react to the situations they write about." Similarly, Yancey explains, reflection "attempts to describe what is" (1998, p. 194) and encourages writers to "know their work, to like it, to critique it, to revise it, to start anew" (1998, p. 201) (see also Beaufort, 2007; Bransford, Pellegrino & Donovan, 2000). Reflection, as defined by Renee and the other participants, provided a way for them to understand themselves as writers so that they could reframe and relocate knowledge and practices in new writing situations. All of the participants noted similar sentiments about reflection by the end of the study. Reflection was a practice that helped them think about who they were/are as writers, which promotes the kind of recalling, reframing, and relocating outlined in the beginning of this section: recalling prior knowledge and reframing the prior with the new knowledge as a way to approach the new writing context (Taczak, 2011; see also Yancey et al., 2014).

The second finding from the study is that engagement with the threshold concept that reflection is critical for writers' development (Taczak, 2015) has a direct link to transfer because of its close relationship to the development of students' theory of writing. This study, like the one outlined in Threshold Concept #2 above, showed that students are able to develop a theory of writing based on prior and new knowledge that they use to frame and reframe writing situations both inside their composition course and outside the composition course. The theory of writing asks students, in a semester-long reflective process, to explore writing: their writing processes, their understanding of key terms they enact in their own writing, and their ability to create a knowledge-base of writing and its practices. Developing the theory of writing is also a reiterative, reflective process that helps writers synthesize the learning acquired in first-year composition and the writing required in other sites. As Renee summed up, "As you reflect more and more you develop your theory of writing more and more—[reflection and a theory of writing] are coherently intertwined. It's like as [a theory of writing] goes up [reflection] has to follow it . . . without reflection I don't think you could get to the next level of writing." Renee's comments point to a specific connection between reflection and transfer. She noted that reflection and the theory of writing are intertwined; put more simply, through reflective assignments and activities, Renee and others developed their theory of writing.

In addition, the development of the theory of writing, especially one specific to each individual writer's writing practice, encourages writers to develop their identity as reflective writing practitioners. This allows writers to develop expectations of what they need to look for in different academic writing situations and

how they can respond to them. As reflective writing practitioners and based on their theories of writing, writers begin to learn to recall and reframe knowledge and practices that could be helpful in approaching new writing situations: by recalling their theory of writing, writers are able to reframe new academic writing situations and thus consider where and how they might relocate—or transfer—knowledge about writing to other contexts after the composition course. Many students in the study also understood the importance of developing a theory of writing and were able to reflect back on this well after the course ended. For example, in an exit survey 15 weeks after she initially took the course, Julia stated that her theory of writing sought "to address a rhetorical situation in an organized manner and specific genre through logos, pathos, and ethos to achieve my purpose of writing." She concluded the exit survey by suggesting the importance of having a theory of writing:

> Yes, I believe a theory of writing is very important to have to make your writing matter. It has to include specific [terms and concepts] and without these[,] the writing would not make sense. . . . I have enacted my theory of writing in most of my papers I have written this past semester [from the semester following the Teaching for Transfer course]. I will continue to use my theory of writing because it includes some of the many [terms and concepts] I think about before writing. (Taczak, 2011, p. 195)

As the findings from this study suggest, when reflection is a significant part of a writer's process, successful transfer of knowledge and practices can occur, but for this transfer to happen, reflection must be fostered in meaningful and intentional ways within the classroom. Thus, through the development of a theory of writing—which is created and fostered through reflective activities and assignments—writers are able to recall, reframe, and relocate knowledge and practices about writing to new and different writing contexts.

THRESHOLD CONCEPT #4: GENRE AWARENESS CONTRIBUTES TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSFER (IRENE CLARK)

The idea that the threshold concepts of writing discussed here facilitate learners' abilities to recognize boundaries between communities of practice, understand concepts within those communities, and begin to differentiate between the threshold concepts (and boundaries) of one community and the next suggests that threshold concepts constitute a type of knowledge (reflected in particular abilities) that will enable a novice to engage meaningfully in a particular

discipline (Meyer, Land & Baillie, 2010). However, in considering the role of threshold concepts in FYC, the concept of knowledge can sometimes become problematic. As suggested in Threshold Concept #2, when the first-year writing course is grounded only in process, strategies, and skills, students are unable to conceptualize their knowledge about writing. Furthermore, the lack of specific content in a FYC course means it is not necessarily situated in or understood as introductory to any specific community of practice or any discipline. Instead, unlike introductory courses in biology or history, FYC has often been conceived of as a generalizable and content-neutral course (e.g., Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Wardle, 2009). However, if one assumes that writing is something that can be studied, as we do here, then the idea that understanding genres of writing can help students transfer may be considered a threshold concept in that it enables students to recognize that all genres are shaped within their communities of practices—disciplines, professions, or communities—and that to be successful, writers must be aware of both the conventions of the genres and the roles that they play within those communities. As is emphasized in the *Elon Statement*, a significant element of transfer involves "a framework for continued inquiry and theory building" (2015, p. 1; Appendix A). As defined by Haskell, "Transfer isn't so much an instructional and Learning Technique as a way of thinking, perceiving, and processing information" (Haskell, p. 23, as cited in *Elon Statement*, 2015, p. 1). The Genre Awareness Project, conducted from 2012 to 2013 in a large, western, Hispanic-serving university, substantiates this connection between genre awareness and transfer, suggesting that genre awareness, which incorporates both a theoretical approach and an enabling practice, contributes to students' transfer of writing knowledge and practice.

Building on a 2010 pilot study (see Clark & Hernandez, 2011), the Genre Awareness Project, involving students enrolled in four first-year writing classes, defined *genre awareness* as a metacognitive understanding of genre, especially the ways that genres are constituted (both in terms of their conventions and in terms of the roles that genres play within communities of practice, for particular audiences and purposes, and so on) that can help students make connections between the genre knowledge emphasized in FYC and the writing genres they encounter in other contexts. The underlying idea was that understanding a text in terms of its rhetorical and social purpose and gaining metacognitive insight into the concept of genre would provide students with a type of knowledge that will enable them to address new writing situations more effectively, wherever they might occur. Metacognition in the context of genre would not only provide students with a type of knowledge that would help them approach new genres more effectively, but also it would enable them to realize that they had this type of understanding. The rhetorical concept of genre informing this project

was derived from the re-conceptualized rhetorical view of genre (Miller, 1984; see also Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bazerman, 2002; Clark & Hernandez, 2011; Dean, 2008; Devitt, 1993; Nowacek, 2011) that defines genre not simply in terms of formal or structural characteristics but in terms of function. The curriculum presented was based on this concept of genre, with assignments and class discussions focusing on similarities and differences between various genres and the rhetorical decisions writers make when they compose in a particular genre. In addition, in order to focus entering students' attention on the concept of genre, they were asked to recall the *antecedent genres* (Bawarshi, 2000) with which they were familiar—in particular, school genres such as the five-paragraph essay, books reports, research papers, and literary analyses—and to predict which of these genres they expected would be most useful for them in their college classes.

The usefulness of fostering genre awareness in FYC has been suggested in current scholarship concerned with genre study (See Bawarshi, 2000; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Devitt, 1993; Swales, 1990) and developed for this study through the Elon University Research Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer. The study began with surveys distributed at the beginning of the fall 2012 semester to 84 entering students. The surveys asked students to indicate (1) their familiarity with rhetorical terminology; (2) the genres that they predicted would be most useful for them in their college courses (from a list of genres provided); (3) their self-reported degree of writing anxiety; and (4) their self-reported evaluation of writing ability. Additional surveys were administered at the end of the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters and supplemented by interviews conducted with 10 students selected from four classes. The surveys conducted in the 2012–2013 academic year indicated that on a four-point scale of usefulness in approaching new writing tasks, all students rated rhetorical terms associated with analysis of genre within specific contexts as above a mean of 3.5. In addition, students selected four genres, from a list provided to them, that they predicted would be most useful for them in their college classes. "Academic argument," "personal narrative," "the research paper," and "the five-paragraph essay" were rated the most useful, with the five-paragraph essay receiving the highest score both at the beginning and end of the fall 2012 semester and at the end of the spring 2013 semester. This insistence on the usefulness of the five-paragraph essay confounded our expectations; however, as Hillocks' (2002) research indicates (and Linda Adler-Kassner's, cited above, echoes; see also Kathleen Blake Yancey's below, which focuses on several elements contributing to prior knowledge, including experiences, attitudes and beliefs), students likely had extensive experience writing five-paragraphs essays when they entered. Although all instructors in the project had attempted to discourage students from

a dependence on what is generally regarded as a form-based, a-rhetorical genre, students noted its usefulness for taking timed essays, and, during interviews, several students indicated that they were quite aware of when the five-paragraph essay was likely to be useful and when it was not.

Interviews conducted at the end of fall 2012 and spring 2013 indicated that students did consider the concept of genre when they engaged in writing tasks in other classes and contexts. Student #1 affirmed that he had found the five-paragraph essay useful for exams and papers written quickly, "a standard," a paper written "to get the grade. You know, that's sort of the minimum, I guess the standard." He also claimed that many professors expect a five-paragraph essay, although he qualified that "outside of school, at work, I tend to write a lot of papers for financial research and not once have I ever done a five-paragraph essay." Student #2 recalled a paper that he had written for an anthropology class, which he described as an interview project on the subject of kinship. When questioned about the extent to which that project was similar to and different from essays he had written in FYC, this student responded that it was different because he was not required to have a persuasive thesis:

> When I think of a thesis, I think about a paper that has a message that I'm trying to get across, and the papers that I've done in that class weren't like that. But now that I am thinking about it, yeah, I would say that I did have a thesis, but I couldn't have an argument for or against someone's family structure. So it was a different kind of thesis.

This conversation suggests that this student is gaining an understanding that a thesis will vary according to disciplinary context, an insight that suggests a developing awareness of genre.

However, all students indicated in their survey responses that they had found the concept of genre useful in approaching writing tasks in other classes and contexts; several responses from student interviewees indicated a primary focus on structure or format that separated those features from the rhetorical elements incorporated in the concept of genre. In terms of how this perspective pertains to the idea of threshold concepts, this separation suggests that these students were in "a suspended state of partial understanding or 'stuck place' at which understanding approximates a kind of 'mimicry' or lack of authenticity" (Meyer, Land & Baillie, 2010, p. x). At this point in their understanding, these students viewed all school writing in terms of format/structure without realizing that even in school writing, genres vary considerably in terms of situation or disciplinary context. For example, Student #3, in discussing differences between the five-paragraph essay she had learned in high school and college-level writing,

stated that in high school, "You write a thesis and then just list the main points that you're going to make, and then in college we use an argument that uses 'although' or something like that." Other differences Student #3 noted included the length of college papers (five pages, not five paragraphs) and "a lot more elements that you put into your paper, like your works cited page and your MLA formatting." Overall, responses from interviewees indicated that although students were developing an awareness of substantive genre differences, many tended to focus on the formal features of a genre rather than on how formal features reflected disciplinary or rhetorical elements.

Nevertheless, awareness of even superficial similarities and differences constitutes a fledgling stage of genre awareness that ultimately can result in effective transfer. An example of how this process works is discussed in Villanueva's (1993) well-known literacy autobiography *Bootstraps*, which narrates the process undertaken by the protagonist as he moves from writing essays assigned in community college to those assigned in a four-year college. Concerned about the grade he had received on his first paper, Villanueva goes to the library "to look up what the Professor himself had published" and was able to see the pattern:

> . . . an introduction that said something about what others had said, what he was going to be writing about, in what order, and what all this would prove, details about what he said he was going to be writing about, complete with quotes, mainly from the poetry. (Villanueva, 1993, p. 70)

As a result of his efforts, Villanueva's grades improve, and professorial analysis becomes "a standard practice: go to the library; see what the course's professor had published; try to discern a pattern in her writing; try to mimic the pattern" (Villanueva, 1993, p. 71).

In the context of how genre awareness may be considered a threshold concept, one might say that Villanueva's experience constitutes a well-articulated example of how a threshold concept works. At first, he simply replicated the genre of writing he had learned at community college. He then realized that his professor expected a different genre, and as he moved from a state of liminality, he eventually was able to understand and ultimately to produce the genre that was expected. Like the student interviewees, Villanueva learned to examine differences between genres, and his insights, at first superficial, eventually enabled him to apply or transfer previous knowledge into a new context. This learning sequence was addressed in some of the student interviews, which indicated that although some students had focused initially on formal elements, ultimately they were able to discern rhetorical distinctions in different writing tasks. Overall, both the survey responses and student interviews support the idea

that students had begun to acquire a degree of metacognitive understanding in accordance with the idea that genre awareness may be considered a threshold concept in the field of writing studies.

THRESHOLD CONCEPT #5: PRIOR KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, ATTITUDES, AND BELIEFS SET THE STAGE FOR WRITING AND SHAPE NEW WRITING EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING (KATHLEEN BLAKE YANCEY)

As suggested in the research reported in the National Research Council volume *How People Learn* (*HPL*) (Bransford et al., 2000), all "new learning involves transfer based on previous learning" (p. 53), though how the prior knowledge contextualizes new learning varies. Moreover, the prior includes a good deal more than knowledge: experience, attitudes, and beliefs—in addition to knowledge—constitute part of a larger construct of the prior. The threshold concept that prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, and beliefs set the stage for writing and shape new writing experiences and learning is thus important for two reasons: (1) it means that all writers are influenced by factors of prior knowledge that are typically tacit but often very powerful, and often in unhelpful ways; and (2) it means that in understanding prior knowledge, all writers can begin to perceive more generally why they (we) approach writing as they do, and more specifically, be more intentional in all writing situations. Likewise, this threshold concept is especially important for writing in college—which, as we have seen, involves thinking about writing as an object of study; about the role of context in writing; about reflective practice as a connector and facilitator of writing; and about genre awareness. This threshold concept, in complementary ways, calls into question the idea that writing is formulaic and unfixed, that once you know how to write in a specific genre, you can write in that genre anytime, and that you can also write in other genres anytime, an issue addressed in Threshold Concept # 4, above.

According to *How People Learn* (Bransford et al., 2000) prior knowledge in the context of new learning functions in one of three ways, as we see within the context of college writing courses, especially first-year courses. In the most hospitable function, prior knowledge and the new learning provide a good fit: As suggested in Threshold Concept #4, students entering college writing classrooms aware of genre, for example, bring a conceptual understanding of writing that college writing faculty can build on. However, prior knowledge can function in two other, less hospitable ways. In the first of these, students entering college bring with them knowledge or practices at odds with the FYC curriculum. We see this misfit between prior knowledge and new learning situations, for exam-

ple, when students enter a FYC writing classroom with an unelaborated writing process—one absent of multiple drafts, peer review, and revision—that they believe is the "right" way to write, or when they enter "knowing" that an edited text is necessarily a strong one, even if it has no purpose, claim, or contribution. In the second of these misfit situations, beginning college students experience dissonance between community-based beliefs and the required curriculum. We can see this in some international students whose knowledge of citation practices—in their cases using unacknowledged borrowed material in ways acceptable, even expected, in their home countries—puts them in danger of being accused of plagiarism in the United States, or in students whose community-based religious beliefs suggest that certain topics, ranging from evolution to abortion, already have correct answers and thus are not fit subjects for inquiry.[3] But of course, these three conditions of prior knowledge are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A student can enter college with an elaborated writing process but with community-based beliefs constraining inquiry; likewise, a student might enter college with a restricted writing process but a strong conception of rhetorical purpose and audience. As important and as indicated by research (see, for example, Yancey, 1998), unless and until we ask students, we do not know what prior knowledge(s) influences their encounters with writing in FYC, nor how. What is as interesting is that this three-part, potentially overlapping schema of prior knowledge, as explained above, only begins to map what we might call the landscape of *the prior* influencing students. This landscape includes several other areas in addition to knowledge. Summarized briefly here are three of them: experience, attitudes, and beliefs.[4]

Considerable research shows the influence of prior experience in influencing students' approaches to writing instruction. Sometimes that prior experience has occurred in a student's childhood out of school: In Roozen's (2010) study of Angelica, we see a student whose personal childhood journal writing first contextualizes both her general approach to writing and her response to critiques of her writing, which then motivates her choice of college major and career. Other times, prior experience is also out of school but more immediate: Cleary (2013) narrates the story of Doppel, a returning adult whose recent experiences in architectural drafting shape his designs for the arrangements of texts through a kind of block patterning. Similarly, Michaud (2011) describes the experiences of another non-traditional student who, in writing for class, borrows from his prior workplace experience of copying and pasting, a practice Michaud labels *right-click steal*. The extracurriculum provides another site of prior experience: As reported in Yancey et al. (2014), students cite the influences of various extracurricular activities—including high school debate and summer jobs—on their writing practices and knowledge.

Attitudes toward writing matter, as well. As both Brandt (2001) and Lunsford (2015) have reported from interviews with adults, attitudes are often formed early on; in addition, at least for adults in the United States in the twentieth century, attitudes toward writing have often, perhaps typically, been negative. Attitudes can take other forms, though: Burton (2010) reports a study in which students were invited to see a connection between writing in a given class and their future writing tasks, with the result that students expressed positive attitudes toward writing. Here we see a relationship between the threshold concept regarding context and attitudes: Context helps shape attitudes, which in turn contribute to the prior, shaping new learning.

Last but not least, beliefs contribute to the prior. Some beliefs, as outlined by Driscoll and Wells (2012), point to student behaviors and sense of self. For example, students with a strong sense of self-efficacy bring a sense of agency and possibility with them to new writing tasks. They already believe that they have some agency even in the face of a writing challenge. Other beliefs focus on writing itself: In a study conducted by Sommers (2011), students are invited, as a context for the class and for their own semester-long reflective practice, to identify their beliefs about writing by completing three sentences:

- I believe writing . . .
- I believe revising . . .
- I believe writing courses . . .

Sommers' (2011) research demonstrates that such prior beliefs can exert a very strong, even determining, influence on students' approaches to writing, a point not unrelated to the role that beliefs may play in reflective practice.

How these different kinds of prior knowledge can coalesce for even a single writer began to come into focus in an interview with Nicole, a student graduating from Florida State University with a double major in classics and Writing, Editing, and Media. The purpose in interviewing Nicole was to learn from her about the satisfactions and challenges characterizing her college writing experiences, and about how she might have transferred writing practice and knowledge from one site to another. While the prior was not a particular focus of the interview, it played a decisive role in her development as a college writer. More specifically, three observations that emerged from the interview are salient here: (1) that Nicole intentionally drew on prior writing knowledge and was able to adapt it as she moved from site to site; (2) that her sense of self-efficacy, prompted by a negative high school classroom experience, was dispositive and, again, intentional; and (3) that a combined college curricular and extracurricular experience also played a role in her development and provides something of a touchstone for her conception of herself as a writer. Put another way, the prior

for Nicole is not one kind of prior or another, but a set of priors that interact and characterize her self-identity as a writer.

In thinking about prior knowledge in the *How People Learn* sense, Nicole talked about the value of a model, specifically the five-paragraph essay she had perfected in her English AP class in high school; she called the class "training for the essay" and remarked on how her knowledge of that format had provided (1) an anchor for her as she traveled from college class to college class and (2) a flexible format that she could expand and adapt as she saw fit. Interestingly, as Irene observes above, we in writing studies might consider this kind of writing knowledge, which is somewhat a-rhetorical and absent any awareness of the essay as genre, limited or even faulty. However, for Nicole, especially in her humanities-based classes (which constituted nearly the full set of her courses), it provided a flexible starting point and an adaptable structure for the writing in each of her classes.

At the same time, Nicole talked about an experience in that same high school class and how that had influenced her even more. For one assignment in her AP language class, Nicole had wanted to use material from pop culture as evidence for a claim she was making; specifically, she wanted to include material from the *Harry Potter* series. However, she was not allowed to do so, even though, according to Nicole, she had asked repeatedly and was doing well in the class. Instead, she was told to draw exclusively on the canonical material. Interestingly, the issue troubling Nicole was not located in the kind of material; she did not see what we in writing studies might call the difference in cultural capital (Sullivan, 1997) between high canonical, sanctioned material, and low pop-culture references. Rather, what Nicole saw was that the part of herself that was relevant to the writing task at hand—as represented in the *Harry Potter* material that was hers—was deliberately excluded. In other words, the AP teacher denied what seemed to Nicole to be the reason to write, that is, to contribute something that is uniquely hers. Moreover, at that point five years ago, Nicole made the decision that she would work hard to incorporate her own interests into all academic assignments, with two results. First, this commitment that she enacted was a source of creativity for her and sometimes a challenge: She liked "tak[ing] things that don't belong" and "sticking them in academic papers." Second, and as important, the teacher's refusal prompted a sense of agency in Nicole and a belief that all writing assignments can accommodate her interests; each assignment thus now has an extra feature, what we might call Nicole's self-designed connection.[5]

Not least, this idea of connection, fostered in a high school prohibition and self-designed into college writing assignments so that "things that don't belong" find their place in her academic work, is further supported in a study abroad trip

Nicole took to London the summer before her senior year in college. The trip acted as a kind of prior for her senior year. In this experience, which is both curricular (through classes) and explicitly extracurricular (through cultural events and day and weekend trips), Nicole found multiple connections—among them, literary, historical, contemporary, pop culture, architectural, and geographical—that she could include in her writing, each of them providing what she called a "moment" when she could do what she liked best in writing, "synthesizing across fields of knowledge," something she "didn't do . . . as much in high school. When I make a connection, that's so cool. I had lots of those moments in London."

The prior for Nicole, as for all writers, was complex. In her case, it was located in knowledge about writing and linked to the five-paragraph essay, which expanded as her experience with adapting it likewise expanded; located in a sense of self-efficacy and agency unintentionally prompted by an English teacher that defined her writing, according to her, in every single college writing assignment; and located in moments of connection hosted in a combined curricular and extracurricular experience—all of which interacted with each other and which provided her with a sense of writing self.

In sum, we are just beginning to theorize the construct of the prior, but it is already clear that it casts a long shadow and that it taps a diverse set of factors—from those associated with formal schooling to others occurring in off-school sites. Accordingly, to help students transfer writing knowledge and practice into new sites of writing, Threshold Concept #5—prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, and beliefs set the stage for writing and shape new writing experiences and learning—provides us with a very good place to begin.

CONCLUSION

The threshold concepts defined above are important for our writing studies discipline, as they speak to key rhetorical concepts and strategies required for writers to evolve throughout their college journeys. These threshold concepts represent the values and beliefs that shape a community of practice, both ours—as instructors and educators of writing—and theirs—as writers and learners. Perhaps as important as epistemological participation in a discipline, though, is the ability to repurpose knowledge across the different writing situations within and beyond that discipline. We believe that the five threshold concepts outlined here encourage this repurposing by laying the groundwork for encouraging writers to be more successful in transferring knowledge and practice across contexts: from assignment to assignment within first-year composition; from first-year composition to other academic writing sites; and from first-year composition

to other non-academic writing contexts (e.g., workplaces and community sites). We argue that first-year composition cannot be limited to the teaching of process, or to focusing on a particular theme, because foci like these hinder writers' abilities to actively discern and become metacognitively aware (or, in some instances, more metacognitively aware) participants in communities of practice surrounding them, a way of embodying and enacting knowledge that is supported by these five threshold concepts.

Moreover, for writers situated within a community of practice, discerning how to identify differences among that community and others helps them adapt composed knowledge to reflect the expectations of and purposes for varying communities of practice.

This analysis does point to the ways in which the intellectual work of our discipline can play for learners (and teachers) across contexts, as well. That is, writing courses that focus on identifying the role(s) that writing plays in communities of practice are situated within one such community of practice—our own of writing studies. At the same time, when writing courses focus on helping students to identify the boundaries of communities, that knowledge can foster the knowledge writers need to understand and identify roles important from one community to the next, helping them to move between contexts and across genres, using reflection to understand and use prior knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs as a guidepost, from one community of practice to the next. To be sure, this is foundational in that it fosters a type of knowledge associated with metacognitive awareness and the connection between that awareness and cultivation of strategies that is useful across contexts. One key to successful participation in a community of practice is the understanding that writing is a subject of study as well as an activity; when writing is only an activity and not a subject of study, it can be reduced to either a process or a performance. To become good writers able to analyze purposes, audiences, and contexts for writing and move flexibly among those, writers must study writing, use writing as a process, and understand writing as a performance that is a result of study.

Essentially, in order for writers to move from one community to another, they must be able to transfer knowledge about writing across contexts, first understanding the concept of context (not just a *particular context*), and second, they must be able to decontextualize the writing in one situation in order to re-conceptualize it to be repurposed for another. They must also be able to learn from explicit instruction in the next context, should it be offered. In other words, writers must learn to transfer successfully through explicit instruction and deliberate practice, which means tapping into prior knowledge. In the process, though, instructors (and others working with learners) must understand

that writers tap into a larger constellation of the prior, including experiences, attitudes, and beliefs often interacting with one another; the prior is thus extraordinarily complex, orienting writers to writing tasks and setting the stage for new learning. We believe we should not discount the prior but instead need to articulate it, sometimes building on it and other times amending it, as we create opportunities in our classrooms for writers to develop key rhetorical strategies and practices that teach them to participate in the community of practice, but that also give them content they can transfer. One such rhetorical strategy is that of genre awareness, a metacognitive understanding of genre that contributes to the ability to successfully transfer, and a concept that, when mastered, decreases writing anxiety and builds students' confidence in their own writing. In order to achieve a level of metacognition about genre awareness or any rhetorical strategy that will enable successful transfer, reflection must be employed. As a deliberate mode of inquiry and when used as part of a writer's process, reflection will enhance a writer's ability to transfer knowledge. Specifically, the development of an individual writer's theory of writing helps him or her recall, reframe, and relocate knowledge and practices in new and different writing contexts. As students learn to participate more fully in communities of practice, and as they understand how to successfully transfer the knowledge and practices of those communities to multiple contexts within and beyond them, the threshold concepts identified here remain critical. These five threshold concepts of writing provide a framework upon which students can build a foundation of knowledge about writing and from which they can cultivate the ability to understand the concepts foundational to a community, to recognize the roles those concepts serve within that community, and to be able to discern the boundaries between one community and the next.

NOTES

1. All student names included here are pseudonyms.
2. For more information on the Teaching for Transfer curricular model and for and expanded discussion of the research study excerpted in this section, see Yancey et al., 2014).
3. For an example of the last type, see the Vander Lei and Kyburz (2005) edited collection on faith in the classroom.
4. *The prior* also includes other dispositions (Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Wardle, 2012), point of departure (Slomp, 2010); Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2014), and anxiety (Cleary, 2013; Baird & Dilger, 2013).
5. This episode also appears to constitute what Yancey et al. (2014) call a critical incident. See *Writing Across Contexts*, especially Chapter Four.

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