Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies

In Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies, editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle present thirty-seven threshold concepts of the writing studies field, composed by twenty-nine prominent scholars. The main feature is a framework that identifies and explains the knowledge the field has constructed about writing. In effect, the editors establish a disciplinary core (Yancey’s introduction, xviii) from which all stakeholders in literacy education can draw. Contributors include Charles Bazerman, David R. Russell, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Andrea A. Lunsford, Howard Tinberg, Chris M. Anson, Cheryl E. Ball, Victor Villanueva, and many more, each of whom defines specific threshold concepts related to their expertise.

Threshold concepts (TCs) were first theorized in the early 2000s by British education researchers Jan Meyer and Ray Land. They name conceptual understandings that are critical to progressive, transformational learning, typically within a discipline. Although the concept is relatively new to the writing studies field, many teachers have worked with TCs implicitly for years. When teachers aim to help students understand that writing is often a messy, reiterative process, for instance, or that good writing is context bound, a type of threshold knowledge is being emphasized. There is a before and after effect of this knowledge, with liminal space between. Crossing a learning threshold is said to be “troublesome” in that it often requires learners to struggle against previous ways of perceiving. However, once a threshold is crossed, the change in perspective is usually permanent.

The TC framework of the book contains individual entries, each of which defines a specific concept, explains how the concept applies to the teaching and learning of writing, and finally explores what makes it troublesome to learn. Here are a few for illustration: “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences” (Lunsford 20–21); “Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity” (Heidi Estrem 19–20); “Habituated Practice Can Lead to Entrenchment” (Anson 77–78); and “Revision Is Central to Developing Writing” (Doug Downs 66–67). Reading the TC entries quickly reveals the differences between skills and the deeper, transformative concepts related to writing.

Instructors can use the framework to help them identify the threshold knowledge they value most, and can then measure their curricula against...
those findings. Some may conclude there is a misalignment between the two. The concept entries themselves might stimulate new approaches to daily instruction, assignment design, and sequencing. Workshops can be developed with the goal of identifying the practices and dispositions that might support progress toward specific learning thresholds. English departments engaging in curricular reform might also use the framework as an authoritative, broad, and inclusive reference point to inform their discussions.

Besides the framework, Naming also features individually authored chapters focused on applications of TCs in different areas of literacy education, including one on professional development and cross-institutional outreach (Adler-Kassner and John Majewski 186–202). Peggy O’Neill writes on assessment; Rebecca S. Nowacek and Bradley Hughes use TC to improve tutor training; Chris M. Anson explores ways TC can benefit WAC initiatives.

Heidi Estrem’s chapter “Threshold Concepts and Student Learning Outcomes” is one of the most useful to TETYC readers. Estrem argues that while learning outcomes helpfully identify specific endpoints, which are generally skill related, TCs help name the learning that happens along the way. In her own words, “Threshold concepts offer a mechanism for faculty to articulate the content of their courses, identify student learning throughout the course experience, and create shared values for writing in a way that a focus on end products—on outcomes—cannot” (90).

TETYC readers will also likely find interest in the chapter “Threshold Concepts in First-Year Composition,” by Doug Downs and Liane Robertson. Here the authors theorize a pedagogy using threshold concepts as the “declarative content” (113) of first-year writing courses. Downs and Robertson build assignment sequences around four subject domains—rhetoric, textuality, epistemology, and process—coupled with threshold concepts that connect to them (117–18). The authors “teach threshold concepts through specific combinations of course readings, writing assignments, and classroom activities including discussion and workshopping” (117). Their approach is designed to help students encounter misconceptions about writing and facilitate knowledge transfer to other writing contexts (117–19).

A potential drawback of the book is the technical vocabulary that shows up in the concept explanations. Many contain discipline-specific wording and sometimes obscure references, some difficult even for composition specialists to follow. Few are described plainly enough to share with first-year composition students, unless accompanied by significant translation and unpacking, and the book may also be difficult for writing faculty who are not trained in composition theory (as is the case with many two-year college English faculty).

Another frustration readers may find with Naming is its leanings toward a Writing about Writing pedagogical approach. Because TC-based learning requires progression toward meta-awareness, instructors who wish to use the framework become somewhat obliged to make writing knowledge itself a major component of their courses. The theoretical rationale for this approach is powerful, but it is not
universally embraced. Some are reluctant to replace the thematic content of their courses with readings about writing; others question the assumption that knowledge about writing concepts actually improves performance in subsequent contexts. Chris M. Anson’s recent article in *College Composition and Communication* speaks to this point. Although *Naming* is careful not to endorse any exclusive way to use TCs, readers should be aware of its theoretical undercurrent.

In reflection, most of us who teach writing have developed broad, flexible, and effective literacy skills through abundant practice, feedback, and support. Aside from mastering basic skills, we probably crossed learning thresholds along our journeys that helped us deepen our understanding and control. *Naming What We Know* may aid those of us who teach writing in identifying what those thresholds were, or might be, and help us design curricula that could better guide our students up to similar thresholds.

**Works Cited**


Although other compilations of theory and/or praxis exist, this book does something significantly different than those that precede it. This book is a rare glimpse into the ways that well-respected compositionists really teach—and how they came to do so. Chris M. Anson’s lead chapter is a good example of this. Here, the reader is led on the writer’s journey toward practice—one that begins in childhood, weaves through education and research interests, and lands, finally, on an approach. Anson artfully describes the daily compromise that occurs with teaching writing: “Composition teaching always suffers the tension between a desire for pedagogical consistency (i.e., the accountability of shared outcomes) and the need for teachers to be thoughtful and creative about their instruction, to make informed, principled, and unique decisions about every aspect of their teaching” (9).

Pervading these essays is conversation about the negotiations that occur when making pedagogical choices. Paula Mathieu writes, “with just one writing course, we inevitably try doing too much with too little. On other days, I marvel at the fun and challenge that comes from nurturing just one thing: to make that writing course, or her, the best it or she can be” (111). It is the sense of striving to create classes that work as well as they possibly can within our best theories, unique institutions, and individual constraints that characterizes this book.

Two essays in this book are particularly relevant to community college English teachers. Describing the many necessary outcomes desired by community college teachers, Howard Tinberg writes, “First-year composition must be true not only to the conventions, scholarship, and best practices of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline, but it must also be true to a whole galaxy of other concerns, including the nature of the institution and the diverse needs of its students” (237). The result is a syllabus useful to any two-year college instructor who must teach to both academic and workplace concerns. Some assignments, such as the Application Essay assignment and Profile assignment, would be particularly appealing to teachers who need to appeal to both audiences.

Asao B. Inoue’s labor-focused classroom could also fit well at the community college level to those whose students host multiple—and sometimes competing—educational goals. As in other chapters of this book, Inoue’s theoretical discussion is finished with pragmatic application, complete with sample assignments, syllabi, grading contracts, project descriptions, and so on.

Although this book contains only one community college–specific essay, many essays focus on subjects that are just as applicable to two-year settings as they are to four-year ones. For example, Suresh Canagarajah’s “ESL Composition as a Literature Art of the Contact Zone” and Jodi Shipka’s “Beyond Text and Talk: A Multimodal Approach to First-Year Composition” will fit the needs of community college students well because of their focus on literacy, diversity, technology, and genre. Many other essays will do so as well.

This text will likely appeal to seasoned community college teachers as well as aspiring ones. Because the
book shows the varieties of ways that compositionists approach the classroom, it would be useful to novice teachers, especially those teaching part-time, to better understand the theoretical underpinnings of the departments and institutions where they work. Additionally, this text could serve as a piece for inspiration or discussion for chairs or instructors seeking to evaluate, reflect upon, or refit their current programs. This book is especially useful because it allows readers to see what a theoretical overhaul might actually look like, and it offers earnest discussion from authors who have pondered the costs and benefits of choosing a specific path.

First-year Composition: From Theory to Practice ends by summarizing themes from the collected author essays and classroom materials. Coxwell-Teague and Lunsford conclude that despite the diversity of approaches, compositionists share a similar focus; writing as process, the communal nature of writing, multimodal composition, knowledge creation, and language as power are among the similarities. The most consistent value of these essays, however, is that they offer excellent displays of not just why to teach first-year composition a certain way, but also how to do so.

Rebecca Sailor
Aims Community College
Greeley, Colorado

NCTE PROMISING RESEARCHER AWARD COMPETITION IN RECOGNITION OF BERNARD O’DONNELL

The 2017 Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after their dissertations between December 1, 2014 and January 31, 2017. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts (e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc.), and should have employed a recognized research approach (e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc.). In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Standing Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

Candidates must submit a manuscript based on their research. Manuscripts should be written in format, style, and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as Research in the Teaching of English, College Composition and Communication, Curriculum Inquiry, Teaching and Teacher Education, or Anthropology and Education Quarterly. Manuscripts normally range between 25 and 50 double-spaced pages.

Manuscripts can be sent to NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attention: Linda Walters-Moore, or can be emailed to researchfoundation@ncte.org. Manuscripts must be received on or before March 1, 2017.

For more complete information on manuscript preparation and submission, please visit http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/pr.