

Dis/Functionalizing First-Year Writing: A Lived Experience Approach to Understanding Transfer

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When considering the values of first-year writing (FYW) courses and their benefits to students, stakeholders frequently turn to questions of knowledge transfer. The extent to which FYW courses are considered effective and worthwhile understandably depends in great part on perceptions of how well various lessons and skills carry from FYW classrooms to later disciplinary work. It is of course incredibly easy, however, to be swept up in the quest for transfer success—particularly in times of austerity, when the pressure for quantifiable outcomes is most insistent—in ways that tend to simplify and stifle the transfer process. This simplification often entails a lesser critical focus on the act of writing itself and leads us away from the lived experience of writing. This diminished focus on lived experience represents a significant intersection with disability theory and, in particular, critical resistance to narratives of overcoming disability.

My use of the term *lived experience* draws on the terminology used widely in disability studies to describe the daily, individualized experiences of disability. Such terminology took root in discussions of disability in part as a response to the field's widespread embrace of a socially based model of disability, which conceives of disability as a relative construction, one which exists within the gaps between people and their physical and ideological environments. This model continues to shape disability studies, but much has also been made of its limitations, namely that it carries the potential to essentialize disability and deny personal realities like physical pain, disappointment, and objectification. The risk, in other words, in understanding disability through the frames of environment and society is that one may inadvertently delegitimize disability itself through the suggestion that it is not actually “real.” Scholarship has thus developed in ways that balance the generalizations of the social model with a focus on lived experiences—and, perhaps even more importantly, on the often unpleasant and difficult details of these experiences. Tobin Siebers (2013) clarified through his theory of complex embodiment, for instance, that while situated knowledge is imperative to understanding disability experience, this knowledge “does not rely only on changing perspectives. Situated knowledge adheres in embodiment. The disposition of the body determines perspectives, but it also spices these perspectives with phenomenological knowledge—lifeworld experience—that affects the interpretation of perspective” (p. 288).

A greater focus on phenomenological knowledge is likewise what is necessary for more effective composition pedagogy. Like disability study, composition has a complicated relationship with social constructionism; while social theories of writing are intended to recognize complexity and disrupt various binaries of communication, the over-extension of these theories often leads to problematic expectations for—and work done in—composition classrooms, as they adhere to models of language and literacy that

nevertheless serve an ultimate purpose of classification and simplification. The lived experience of conveying one's thoughts through writing, an individual experience inevitably replete with challenges, variability, and questions—about whom one is addressing and why, about intended outcomes, about which conventions to flout and which to follow, etc.—is often still overshadowed by or ignored in favor of broader, more manageable frames of understanding. Siebers's (2013) theory of complex embodiment “views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal” (p. 290), and in forwarding a theory of the lived experience of writing, I seek a similar balance. Through exploring disability theory, more specifically what it tells us about overcoming narratives, I offer compositionists the means to build on existing social models and more effectively assert knowledge of writing as a dialogic and highly situated lived experience.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005b) has written of overcoming as one of the cultural narratives that “dominate our collective understanding of disability,” explaining that it “defines disability as a personal defect that must be compensated for rather than as the inevitable transformation of the body that results from encounters with the environment” (pp. 1567, 1568). Through signifying disability as exclusively personal and individual, narratives of overcoming facilitate the false binary of the successful, pleasing disabled individual versus the failure. They predicate the belief that those who do not overcome their disabilities, who for whatever reason feel pain or discouragement or do not meet normative standards, are weak or deserving of pity or scorn. These individuals are stigmatized as “somehow having failed to . . . ‘beat’ life’s inevitable limitations” (Garland-Thomson, 2005a, p. 524). An arguably even greater consequence discussed by Thomson and others (see Dolmage, 2014; Mintz, 2007) is the effect of overcoming narratives on the status of disability more generally, in which conceiving of disability as an individual problem solved through might and determination absolves those who do not identify as disabled of responsibility for shaping societal conceptions of disability. As Simi Linton (1998) pointed out, “[t]he idea that someone can *overcome* a disability is not generated within the community; it is a wish fulfillment generated from the outside” (p. 18), and when this idea continues unchallenged, neither the environment nor societal norms are assumed to play a role in the conception of disability.

Understanding the mechanisms of resistance to such narratives can help us understand ways to make FYW pedagogy more transferable. Because stories of overcoming entail correction and calibration, the keys to countering them are a greater critical stance toward the stories themselves and a stronger focus on actual experiences of disability. Disrupting the linearity and purity of such narratives and acknowledging the values of those stories that refuse such standardization serve to build a more nuanced, inclusive—and ultimately more truthful—representation of disability experience. Similarly, the keys to building a more complex and effective understanding of writing transfer are active, informed resistance to oversimplification and a greater focus on the situated, first-hand experience of writing. To better illustrate these parallels, I begin by briefly examining some longstanding cultural mythoi that underpin current beliefs about both disability and writing in order to show how the uncritical adoption of such ideas has helped only to obscure the lived experiences of both. I then discuss writing studies pedagogy, and specifically threshold concepts, as the most promising ground from which to critically engage the lived experience of writing and to promote strong knowledge transfer.

Stories of Overcoming, or Lessons in Agreeability

Overcoming is a narrative thread signifying the exclusionary image of the “acceptable” disabled body and offering an unambiguous depiction of disabled experience as merely an obstacle to surmount. To accept disability, within this vein, is to admit defeat. In “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” Robert McRuer (2002) described the consequences of constant exposure to images of overcoming, the “unspoken question[s]” of the able-bodied (p. 93), as they “demand” of those who are disabled or have disabled love ones, “Wouldn’t you rather be able to walk?” or “Wouldn’t it be better if your son wasn’t hard of hearing?” He rightly asserted that “asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for” (p. 93). When one is exposed primarily to a singular representation of “valuable” disabled experience, the elements which remain constant—the character traits of those depicted, the nature of their paths to success—become *the* reality rather than one set of options among many, making it more difficult to understand or recognize their discursive roots.

Arguably the most famous American overcoming narrative is that of Helen Keller. The lesson deeply embedded throughout the history of Keller’s representation in American culture is that any challenge can be defeated with the necessary will and perseverance. In “Rethinking the Problematic Icon,” Liz Crow (2002) discussed the “myth of personal striving” and feeling as a child that “if Helen Keller succeeded, and against such odds, then there can be no excuse” for failure or shortcoming (p. 18). Keller’s image fits well into American values, but it leaves disabled individuals with few alternatives. If Keller proves that all is possible, then falling short of one’s goals or, worse, citing one’s disability as a source of frustration or pain is unacceptable. In an open letter to Keller, scholar Georgina Kleege (2007), blind herself, noted that when projecting strength “the able-bodied find us tolerable. They gush, ‘You’re so patient, so persevering. However do you manage?’ But what are they really thinking?” (p. 190). The purity of Keller’s image made it easily adaptable for lessons in personal triumph, but it also set a frustratingly perfect precedent for others. Those aspects of her life which could expose her more complex humanity, such as her beliefs about socialism, remain minimized and do little to nuance the “dehumanizing praise heaped upon” her (Hamilton, 2006, para. 13). What guides stories like Keller’s is the ever-present push for transcendence of disability. Through the American mythos of the individual’s infinite potential, arguments for environmental and societal change are completely shut out, and the disabled experience itself remains without value. According to these cultural narratives, overcoming one’s disability is the only real path to success, and thus only one sort of disability—something more akin to a non-disability or a post-disability—is valuable. Disability itself is constructed as bothersome, temporary, and eminently fixable given the proper treatment.

In critiquing representations of disability, however, my argument is not that achievement is necessarily unwarranted or detrimental. Wondering whether it is better to just ignore talent, drive, or whatever else motivates someone to achieve is understandable, but such questions miss the larger point, as achievement, per se, is not the problem. Rather, the central dilemma of overcoming narratives is that disability identity is given value only when it is undone, when it is defeated or ignored and becomes a non-disability. Through this lens disabled bodies are pressured to align with prescriptive ableist norms, which serve to ignore and/or deny the first-hand experiences, and the value, of disability. As such,

resistance to such narratives focuses on the recognition of value for such first-hand accounts, apart from any cultural calibration that may occur.

The lack of agency is clear in images of overcoming, as the disabled body is represented only as others want it to be seen. In “The Politics of Staring,” Garland-Thomson (2002) called the overcomer “contemporary America’s favorite figure of disability,” explaining that images of overcoming portray disabled individuals as “entirely ordinary” yet “still ask their viewers to feel a sense of wonder” (p. 61). Such images combine admiration and comfort, allowing the audience to gape at difference while simultaneously approving of it because it has been controlled and tuned to the proper standard. The situatedness and diversity of disabled experience are ignored, success simplified to the measure of one’s ability to become a pre-formed image. The troubling result is that such a conception leaves room for only two identities—those who succeed and those who fail. Any critical understanding of the middle—where one might find a hazy mix of things like physical pain and pride, or feelings of isolation and community—is lost, and social capital takes the form of normalcy; one either has it, through birth or overcoming, or one does not.

Rejection of the overcoming narrative entails recognition of its inherent fallacy and a subsequent assertion of identity. Garland-Thomson (1997) argued that “[n]aming the figure of the normate” is a way “to press our analyses beyond the simple dichotomies of . . . able-bodied/disabled” (p. 8), and this pressing beyond occurs most basically through a more active critical engagement with depictions of disability, ranging from the farthest-reaching representations in popular media to everyday matters of equity and access. Through understanding and potentially challenging culturally defined success or failure, the agential individual explores other means to identify him or herself within the vast range of these extremes. Choices made within the personal experiences of disability are nuanced and situated rather than imposed indiscriminately via cultural mandate. Rather than float among the categories laid before her, the individual acts in ways that may critically disrupt and defy, or even support, them. This murkiness of experience is precisely what serves to resist the notion of a single “acceptable” or “correct” image of disability. First-hand accounts are not necessarily immune to the influence of standards but rather entail the possession of intention while negotiating them. Neither communication nor signification function in ways that allow for full control in the face of cultural standards, so the exploration of lived experience becomes a search through that fruitful middle ground between universality and contextuality, a process that speaks to its effectiveness in conceptualizing not only experiences of disability but also experiences of writing.

Reclaiming the Lived Experience of Writing in Our Conceptions of Transfer

Stories of university faculty sending students to writing centers to get “fixed” remain common, as do complaints about FYW courses and writing centers not doing their (supposed) job of preparing students for all manner of college writing (Adler-Kassner, 2008; Rhodes, 2010). The challenge of writing, much like the experience of disability, is still considered by many something students should conquer and eventually leave behind as they make their way through their later work in the disciplines. To achieve the sort of transfer implied by these complaints and appeals for “more effective” writing instruction is to achieve two intertwined ideals: the writer who is fully prepared for all disciplinary writing challenges—to use the terms of disability, who has overcome the challenges of context and situatedness—and the FYW program that is able to give her this preparation.

Just as with narratives of overcoming disability, misunderstandings of composition and writing instruction are tied to long-standing beliefs—in this case about the purposes of education.

Janet Atwill's (1998) definition of humanism in *Rhetoric Reclaimed* usefully highlights the particular acontextuality of the humanist paradigm, which continues to influence university curricula and is so problematic. Atwill asserted that humanism stems from the ahistorical human, whose "knowledge can transcend the specificities of time, place, and gender" (p. 9), and defined it as a set of institutions and homogenous values, a cultural teleology that retains its power through claims to universality. She and others (Chaput, 2008; Scott, 2006) have argued that humanism is at the heart of the liberal arts tradition in higher education, and she has traced the shift toward humanist pedagogy back to Quintilian's notion of "vir bonus," the good man speaking well, explaining this focus as the precursor to the "well-rounded" student. Atwill focused on Quintilian's popularization of declamation and his shift away from traditional emphasis on principles of time, context, and ends; he instead taught students to instruct, move, and charm, goals that effectively removed rhetoric from political or social contexts and marked the start of the humanist tradition. Rather than use rhetoric and knowledge as a civic or political—and thus highly personal, contextual—force, the well-rounded individual focuses on attaining a generalized expertise, intended to pave a clear path to transferable skills. Consequently, humanist pedagogy relies heavily on a normative subject position, as one must choose values and principles to impart and subsequently work to equate them with success.

The trouble with writing instruction, of course, is its general resistance to universalization. Compositionists realize there is no universal canon of skills or knowledge, nor a subject to hold up as a humanist ideal for composition. Yet, a traditional transfer narrative persists around college writing, just as with disability, in no small part through the endurance of humanist ideology in higher education. In "Composing Bodies; or, De-Composition: Queer Theory, Disability Studies, and Alternative Corporealities," Robert McRuer (2004) called this hegemonic narrative "straight composition," describing it as "a highly monitored cultural practice" that is "focused on a fetishized final product" (p. 53). He argued that various stakeholders are "intent on producing order and efficiency where there was none and, ultimately, on forgetting the messy composing process and the composing bodies that experience it" (p. 53). Like the individual who magically defeats her disability, the humanist transfer ideal is merely an image, an imagined scenario implying a set of deeply embedded assumptions and thus advertising the way things *should* be while ignoring all the ways that they *are*. Both are examples of what Garland-Thomson (1997) in *Extraordinary Bodies* called the normate, "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and the cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (p. 8). Atwill rightly pointed out the inherent flaw of humanist treatises, that "[d]espite their claims to universality," they "frequently locate that subject in a particular historical moment and in a specific gender, class structure, and race. The result is the paradoxical claim that the humanist subject both embodies and transcends the values of a specific cultural milieu" (p. 23). As specific applications of this paradigm, the misperceptions of transfer and of overcoming both illustrate this complication. The individual who is shown to overcome her disability is paraded as a symbol of individual strength and victory yet is crafted from a specific set of cultural biases toward physicality and achievement. Likewise, the image of the writer

transferring composition knowledge seamlessly among contexts—and, by extension, the FYW which produces her—is predicated on assumptions of universal skill and linear progression of knowledge, yet these assumptions emanate from a particular ideology governing higher education.

Thus, what remains are stereotypes that placate the normative majority by offering what they are comfortable with and, subsequently, few reasons to make substantive change. This normative dilemma can be found pretty easily in attitudes toward composition instruction, as FYW spaces are often seen as *the* places where students learn college-level writing. Keith Rhodes (2010) summed up the misperceptions faced by compositionists, from not only administrators and other faculty but the general public as well, in “You Are What You Sell.” He referenced Stanley Fish’s 2009 series of editorials titled “What Should Colleges Teach?” and lamented the overwhelming amount of public support for Fish’s reductive approach to teaching composition:

Most likely 9 out of 10 doctors (or lawyers, or accountants, or welders) believe that we still set themes and mark all errors in red pen—or don’t, for reasons variously attributed to do-gooder wooly-headedness, misguided politics, or sheer laziness. If “we” refers to professional scholars and writing teachers who know better . . . then nobody understands us. (p. 59)

Composition classrooms are still often imagined as sites from which relative miracles should pour forth, as the student writer acquires expertise and overcomes the complexities of language and communication to become a generally “better writer.” Such impossibly high expectations, of course, discourage students from making informed, situated choices and leave little room for anything other than complaints of failure. The image of the prepared-for-all-contexts writer turns away from first-hand experiences of writing, in favor of a more palatable, but inherently impracticable, ideal. Just as with discussions of disability, then, the most productive discussions of writing transfer will center on the open-endedness and variability inherent to writing experiences, and a conception of transfer as the understanding of the lived experience of writing brings these issues to the forefront.

A lived experience pedagogy would focus on the various forces and associations, both of and around the writer, that influence personal experiences of writing, with the goal not of making the student a “good” writer but rather of making her a deliberate one, aware of—though not necessarily in control of—those forces and associations. As Rebecca Nowacek (2011) explained in her book *Agents of Integration*,

The word *agency* emphasizes a student’s ability to act and make change in the world; it also directs our attention to the social context in which agents operate and the standards by which they are judged. Sales agents, literary agents, secret agents: all act to accomplish their goals against some odds and perhaps against the expectations and interests of others. (p. 39)

An understanding of the lived experiences of writing is not equivalent to student success or to “good writing,” as a greater, more unpredictable web of factors serves to define these latter terms; and while it may seem counter-intuitive, this move away from success is necessary.

Rather than simply impart rules, a focus on that knowledge which comes from first-hand experiences with writing gives students the means with which to approach writing scenarios more deliberately, fostering writers with potential for conscious, purposeful engagement rather than automated compliance. A pedagogy focused on agency and experience embraces the knowledge and expectations of the field itself, recognizing the variability and situatedness of language and communication and actively seeking to work with these facets of the writing experience. Such a pedagogy will, in other words, recognize variability as fundamental to any writing experience and acknowledge that a student's writing success is a product of not merely the words on a page but also the full teleology of each writing experience. To purposefully navigate the dynamics therein, then, we must teach students about those concepts that comprise the foundation for lived experiences of writing.

Writing Studies and Its Relationship to Transfer

Discussions of transfer are closely entwined with questions about the purposes of FYW, and these questions produce an important distinction, between those who see it as a course with disciplinary content and those who do not. While the goal here is not to deny value to FYW instruction that does not include explicit writing-based content, approaches advocating greater emphasis on the disciplinary content of writing—referred to here as writing studies—are more intuitively suited to a stronger focus on lived experience. Indeed, understanding transfer as an awareness of the lived experience of writing only lends greater credence to the notion that to be most effective, and most transferable, FYW instruction must engage the metalanguage of composition explicitly and frequently.

Numerous scholars have begun to explore ways to more clearly assert the more immediate, content-based value of FYW instruction (Bruch & Reynolds, 2010; Clark & Hernandez, 2011; Downs, 2010; Fishman & Reiff, 2011; Wardle & Downs, 2013). They examine ways composition pedagogy, and disciplinary status, can be advanced through greater student engagement with theories and practices that constitute its disciplinary knowledge, and such scholarship typically treats transfer as a potential, non-exclusive goal of FYW. This is not to say that these pedagogies are *not* interested in transfer; rather, writing studies approaches tend to consider transfer possible rather than absolute, a consequence of, rather than catalyst for, instruction. In arguably the most cited example in the “movement” toward greater emphasis on FYW as the study of writing, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007) presented their proposal to move

first-year composition from teaching “how to write in college” to teaching *about writing*—from acting as if writing is a basic, universal skill to acting as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced, thereby changing their understandings about writing and thus changing the ways they write. (p. 553)

They clarified that transfer to later disciplinary work is a worthwhile goal for FYW but not to the extent that pedagogy becomes overrun with concerns about ensuring students' success in all future courses, an impossible goal. They hope, in other words, to illustrate composition's immediate value, explaining that teaching students about writing “improv[es] the possibility that students will maintain a stance of inquiry toward writing as

they write in other disciplinary systems” (p. 557). Transfer thus becomes a consequence of the specific value—the “stance of inquiry”—they imagine being imparted by FYW, a possibility rather than a requisite for FYW success. They do not resist the transfer goal but simply avoid embracing it so rigidly that, like overcoming goals, it distorts or denies the value of the immediate experience.

Through this content-based framework, students acquire knowledge of literacy and language that exists not entirely prior, conceptually, to later courses, but rather alongside them, informing them recursively. While a conception of FYW as exclusively preparatory suggests linearity, understanding first-year instruction as a site for learning *about* writing positions it as a point of continual return. Rather than a course from which students move away, FYW is a site for complex exploration, a site that students will revisit continually as they encounter new writing experiences. In this way, the writing studies model resists various humanistic norms of higher education, including the expectations of ever-increasing student independence and quantifiable outcomes related to instruction that cannot be applied wholesale to FYW.

It is important to note, however, that arguing for a content-based model of FYW is not synonymous with the arguments that we should ban all but writing studies content or only those with degrees in composition should teach FYW. Even Linda Adler-Kassner (2008), who has spoken vehemently about the need to refocus FYW around the content of composition, has also acknowledged the importance of asking students to engage specific writing contexts. Some may criticize her “no vampires” policy—shorthand for “no courses focused around non-writing content”—as too extreme, arguing for the efficacy of situated examples or citing the successes of theme-based FYW programs. However, her policy does not prohibit these possibilities. To her, the study of writing “means asking students to study writing by focusing on a specific context, then using that as a site to learn how to learn about writing” (p. 132). In other words, her students *do* learn the content of writing through the lens of a specific context, such as when they analyze writing done in other classes through the lens of their knowledge *about* writing. While she suggested that we stop teaching students *about* vampires, they could be found in a specific context for analysis—say, if students chose to analyze writing done in a class on horror fiction. A FYW course focused on the content of composition does not necessarily deny students the opportunity to situate their knowledge of writing but instead establishes writing content as the central focus, so that everything is filtered through the lens of what is being learned *about* the lived experience of writing.

Moreover, the goal here is not to give an all-purpose stamp of approval to writing studies approaches or to suggest that writing studies and preparatory approaches are necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the basic differences between them make genuine ideological overlaps rare, as the two reflect fundamentally different attitudes about value that represent deeper questions about purpose and identity. Composition is to some a field with content and to others a training ground for courses with “actual” content, a contrast that speaks to drastically differing beliefs about writing instruction and transfer. Writing studies offers the advantages of not only bringing together theory and practice but offering a steady position on the value and validity of composition as a discipline. Simply adopting a writing studies approach, though, does not guarantee a consistent or meaningful outlook on transfer processes and the value of FYW, so we must still carefully consider how we define this value—i.e., what knowledge *is* transferable and still consistent with an

understanding of language complexity. The ideals and universals are easy enough to cast away conceptually, but navigating what is left—the contextual, the variable—is much more difficult. We still need a conceptual framework that actively seeks out the first-hand truths of writing experience—a pedagogy that centers on and directly engages them in order to empower students to travel purposefully among contexts.

Threshold Concepts of Lived Experience

In “The Value of Troublesome Knowledge: Transfer and Threshold Concepts in Writing and History,” Linda Adler-Kassner, John Majewski, and Damian Koshnick (2012) argued that threshold concepts are a “productive frame” through which to explore composition and issues of transfer. They drew on the original definition of threshold concepts offered by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, who likened them to a

portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. . . without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. . . . Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people “think” in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline. (p. 3)

Adler-Kassner et al. clarified that these concepts are essentially “troublesome,” as they challenge the learner, and “liminal,” as they represent a transition from one perspective to another. While as a field composition has yet to thoroughly explore the significance of threshold concepts, Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s (2015) larger, subsequent work on threshold concepts, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, has explored more than thirty concepts specific to composition.

Concepts in composition pedagogy that may be appropriately titled “threshold” are those that do not simply alert students to matters of structure but convey their fluidity. In her introduction to *Naming What We Know*, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2015) asserted that threshold concepts allow us to “toggle” between individual and institutional beliefs, acting as both a “portal for planning” and “a set of propositions that can be put into dialogue” (p. xix). This openness to constant exchanges and in-between spaces is akin to an understanding of disability as socially constructed. Threshold concepts function in much the same way social models of disability do, as both recognize our socially constructed definitions and values—of acceptable disability, of good writing—and expose the means to disrupt and even reject them. To resist models of overcoming disability entails admitting the truth that we live in a value-laden world but not compromising, through this admission, the significance of difference, and threshold pedagogy does the same. Threshold concepts acknowledge that structural realities shape and develop students’ understanding of writing as a dialogic experience, but they are, by definition, dependent as much on difference as on structural expectations.

Engaging with a concept like genre, for instance, teaches one not only that writing is defined by genre but also that genre itself is fluid. Rather than attempt to tame or overcome variability, threshold pedagogy should embrace it as an essential trait—and not in the service of eventual categorization. It is one thing, for instance, to teach students about

different genres and how to fit one's writing into them, as if each were a static set of expectations; it is another to teach genre as a fluid set of markings and explore what this means for the writing experience. Conceptual awareness of genre allows the student to become an active participant in the writing experience, as it precipitates a set of questions and concerns to be addressed. Through an understanding of genre as concept—how it works, how it is determined and shaped, its effects—the student's stance may shift from passivity and complicity to deliberate involvement. This understanding of genre, however, will not guarantee success in subsequent writing situations; an understanding of genre, or other threshold concepts, entails less about *knowing* certain information and more about *knowing that one needs to know* certain information. David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon (1989) defined low-road transfer as “automatic, stimulus-controlled, and extensively practiced” (p. 124) processes, and while we tend to bristle at any suggestion of automation when it comes to writing, Christiane Donahue (2012) pointed out that our commitment to achieving transfer justifies a closer look into “what particular aspects of writing we would actually like writers to have acquired as ‘automated’” (p. 150). Low-road transfer may not be just the automation of basic or generic skills but rather the instilling of a mindset—a readiness to seek what one needs to know—that precedes the deliberate examination called for by the specific writing scenario.

Threshold concepts may seem troubling to work in composition, given the worry that focusing too intently on the unknown or the changeable compromises what we may productively teach. Yet, another benefit of threshold pedagogy is that it offers points of focus. While the concepts emphasize difference, they also illustrate composition's disciplinarity and that there *is* something immediate to be accomplished by FYW instruction, points which become increasingly important during periods of austerity and assessment. Because they acknowledge both structural limitations and differences, threshold concepts function as potential tools for negotiating difference and thus foster agency. Without such concepts and without a critical understanding of the writing experience, the student may simply move from one writing scenario to the next, feeling passive and powerless in the face of rules that are being continually reset. Threshold concepts cannot stop rules or expectations from changing, but they can help students to approach situations deliberately and with methods of awareness. Through threshold concepts, the student with agency need not passively wait for a short-term deposit of knowledge and skills with each new setting; rather, she may approach with an awareness that there is knowledge to gather and expectations to discern. The more threshold concepts she recognizes, and the more deeply she understands them, the more intentionally she may advance on each new experience, proving that a lack of autonomy does not equate to a lack of intention. Thresholds do not eliminate the many struggles of new writing challenges, but they allow students to progress beyond a sense of arbitrary servitude.

The example of Tim, the extended case study from Anne Beaufort's (2007) *College Writing and Beyond*, helps to illustrate the difference made by a deeper critical understanding of the writing experience. Beaufort followed this student from FYW to his major courses and eventual work at a manufacturing firm, and noted that, despite his high grades, by his senior year Tim “still did not have the ability to choose topics and shape arguments that would be considered part of the ‘ongoing conversations’ of the discourse community” (p. 74). Yet, given the work he did in FYW courses, this is unsurprising. Beaufort was careful not to unfairly criticize his FYW instructor, but her observations

illustrate a clear lack of pedagogy aimed at a critical examination of the writing experience itself. She described class discussions based on rhetorical analysis of texts as analysis “done in a vacuum. The students must judge the work without the benefit of knowing the values, the goals, the ongoing conversations of the discourse community in which the writer was addressing his argument” (p. 46). As such, students like Tim carried misconceptions about “universal norms for good writing . . . [and] the boundaries and differences between discourse communities were only hazily recognized through trial and error” (p. 42). By not employing any threshold concepts—in this case, for instance, perhaps some related to audience meaning-making or intertextuality—Tim’s professor de-emphasized the roles of situatedness and difference in a way that distorted his understanding of writing and, as Beaufort describes in great detail, hampered his later writing experiences. Tim was, in some sense, bound by a composition-based overcoming narrative throughout his college career, as he continually strove to meet a pseudo-universal understanding of good writing and never developed a meaningful understanding of writing as a dependent and situated experience.

Instructors need to teach FYW students about thresholds and transfer issues, encouraging them to explore differences among writing scenarios. It may seem counter-intuitive to acknowledge differences and thus, in some sense, the *lack* of complete transfer inherent to writing instruction, but this is precisely what must be established in order to offer students a more theoretically grounded understanding of writing. In the course of threshold concepts pedagogy, students may reasonably wonder what all this variation means for their first-year work, and we must emphasize that the questions we ask, not just the answers, are important. They will hopefully begin to realize that the context of each text helps to shape its meaning and that despite answers changing from one text to another, these questions and the active engagement they foster remain constant. In this way, beginning the discussion of transfer with what does *not* carry from one context to the next is a way to more effectively explore what does.

Conclusion

Rather than a simple carrying of skills or information, transfer is an experience of navigating within a complicated, incomplete sense of control. To define transfer through a critical understanding of the writing experience is to acknowledge that a writer may be both empowered and constrained, bound to structure and expectation but still able to discern them and to examine them within one’s own terms. Narratives of overcoming disability show what may occur when transfer is defined instead in unproductive or unrealistic terms. Conceiving—or allowing students or stakeholders to conceive—of transfer as the learning of universals or seamless movement among writing contexts leads to few outcomes other than disappointment. Striving toward the prescribed norms of overcoming disability or acquiring universal writing skills entails compromising the values that are central to informed, agential conceptions of these experiences. In both cases, then, it is necessary to push back against the narrative and assert the lived experience of variability as a necessary consideration.

The use of threshold concepts pedagogy is not the only way to achieve this end, certainly, and a great deal more discussion and research is needed to fully understand how to accomplish the task. Still, these concepts—and other writing studies approaches—encourage active critical engagement with the complexities of the writing experience and,

in doing so, work to reinforce the incredible, and transferable, value of FYW instruction. Moreover, threshold concepts pedagogy is promising because it negotiates a tension at the crux of transfer difficulty—between that which is unknowable and that which must be made known. If we are to find productive, theoretically sound methods for encouraging writing transfer, we must acknowledge the realities of context and of language, yet we must also discern a foundation from which to teach. Threshold concepts speak to both of these needs, focusing not merely on specific differences—among genres, audiences, etc.—but on the reality of difference itself as a defining influence.

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