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Changing Peer Tutors' Threshold Concepts of Writing

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One of the most generative and powerful new ideas in composition studies over the past few years has been that of threshold concepts—core concepts in a field that, once learned, transform one's understanding of the discipline. In their edited collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle posit five main threshold concepts of writing studies: "Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity" (17), "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms" (35), "Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies" (48), "All Writers Have More to Learn" (59), and "Writing Is (Also Always) a Cognitive Activity" (71). This article explores the misconceptions some of my new undergraduate tutors hold about four of these threshold concepts and discusses how their misconceptions may underlie some ineffective practices they intuitively bring to tutoring.[1] I argue that one of the best ways to help these tutors acquire the threshold concepts is to allow them to experience the concepts *as writers*.

In a chapter of *Naming What We Know* that argues for the centrality of threshold concepts to writing center work, Rebecca Nowacek and Bradley Hughes explore how the concepts guide their tutor education. Indeed, most writing center directors likely discuss these concepts with new tutors given that textbooks/materials for tutor training commonly include considerations of writing process, revision, and writing in the disciplines, as well as how aspects of identity shape writing and tutoring. However, helping tutors acquire new understandings about writing, such as threshold concepts, is complicated. As Adler-Kassner and Wardle explain, threshold concepts are difficult to acquire, involving "forms of troublesome knowledge" that are "counterintuitive" (2), and so they "often cannot be taught directly . . . but must be experienced and enacted over time" (8). Having new tutors experience the concepts as writers facilitates deeper learning that they will more likely integrate into their tutoring.

For such deep learning to occur, writing projects must engage tutors in ways that challenge their current understandings of the writing process and the nature of "good" writing. For the past few years, I have created those challenges through two multi-draft writing assignments, in genres and with rhetorical contexts that are often new to tutors. Tutors first write a social narrative, drawing from personal experience to explore issues facing a community to which they belong. They then write a literature review on a topic related to writing centers—synthesizing the scholarly conversation, drawing implications for tutoring, and suggesting areas for further research. When I ask tutors to reflect on how their tutor preparation and experiences have impacted them as writers, many mention these assignments as key and describe how the assignments changed their ideas about writing, often using language echoing the threshold concepts. Throughout this article, I quote from these tutor reflections to illustrate my points, changing names to preserve anonymity.

CONCEPT 1, "WRITING IS A SOCIAL AND RHETORICAL ACTIVITY" (ADLER-KASSNER AND WARDLE 17):

I find that new tutors often do understand that writing is a social and rhetorical activity. However, some have a circumscribed view of the rhetorical context for academic writing, seeing papers as written for the teacher, and thus thinking the teacher's expectations (as spelled out in the assignment) fully determine a writer's choices.

Consequences in Tutoring: With this view, some new tutors do not see students as having much agency in their papers, and instead see their role as limited to helping students understand assignments and meet teacher expectations. Consequently, such tutors may focus on improving the issues in a draft without considering that the deeper cause of those issues might be a fuzzy or mistaken understanding of purpose and audience. For example, in noting that a paper has a weak introduction, a lack of transitions, and some confusing or vague sentences, such tutors may assume the writer needs to learn general principles about constructing effective introductions, transitions, and sentences, not realizing that all of those vague elements result from the student writing to the teacher in order to fulfill the assignment but without a unifying vision and purpose of their own.

New Understandings: The social narrative assignment helped some tutors develop more awareness of how a clear rhetorical stance—a sense of to whom one is writing, from what position, for what purpose—guides a writer's choices. Tutors had to con-

sider how a wider social context shaped their narrative, how to present themselves, who ideally would be reading their essay, and what they wanted those readers to take from their text. As a result, some began to bring questions of audience, voice, and purpose into their writing process for other papers. Liz explains,

"This class has helped me internalize the guiding question: What idea do I want to leave the reader with? I have shifted my focus to writing more for the reader's understanding (at least in an academic setting.)." Daphne describes how thinking about audience and purpose changed her writing process, leaving her feeling empowered to enter and revise her writing in new ways:

> This class and writing the social narrative have given me the tools to study how the writing process works for myself and for my readers. I find myself considering more variables when I write: Who is the audience? What areas will people "zero in" on? What are the strongest parts of my arguments, and what parts need bolstering? What seems awkward? It feels as if I have gained the power to zoom in and out of the writing process. A paper is less like a linear product and more like a web.

With this broader understanding, tutors are more likely to pursue conversations aimed at creating a sense of rhetorical stance and agency. This more rhetorical approach often requires detective work: the consultant may need to pursue conversations that can uncover mistaken assumptions underlying a paper's issues, such as a writer's not being engaged in a research paper because it seems to involve just reporting on others' ideas, or not including enough background or supporting detail because the professor already knows that information, or not realizing it is possible to ask the professor about modifying an assignment, if that request grows from engagement with the project.

CONCEPT 2, "WRITING SPEAKS TO SITUATIONS THROUGH RECOGNIZABLE FORMS" (ADLER-KASSNER AND WARDLE 35):

When I ask new tutors why they want to become tutors, some explain that they look forward to the opportunity to share their knowledge of writing with other students and help them become better writers. Embedded in their views are ideas (shared by many professors) that there are universal qualities of "good" writing and that these qualities result from following certain processes. More specifically, some tutors (like some professors) believe that what *they* have learned about good writing applies to all writing and writers—regardless of genre or discipline (e.g., all academic writing is thesis-based, the thesis should appear at the end of the first paragraph or section, and you shouldn't include new ideas in the conclusion).

Consequences in Tutoring: This limited understanding of genre and disciplinarity may cause some tutors to offer inappropriate advice to students writing in other disciplines (e.g., encouraging the writer of a sociology paper to have a thesis in the introduction, or the writer of an education paper to avoid the first person), or to not understand why an assignment is challenging for students writing in a new genre or discipline. Furthermore, it may prevent some tutors from considering that the issues they see may be a result of a student's lack of experience with the process of writing that particular kind of paper: for example, that a writer stuck on the introduction of a science paper may not realize that writers in the sciences often begin by creating the charts/figures and figuring out the "story" told by the data, or that a writer struggling with a literary analysis paper may be new to the process of doing a close reading that connects style and form to meaning.

New Understandings: Writing both the social narrative and literature review during our training made some tutors aware of the narrowness of their own understandings of academic writing, as when Natalie, a religion major, notes she has learned that "Not every writing assignment follows the traditional thesis-driven, MLA-formatted essay that I have strictly followed for most of my academic career." It also brought more awareness of the complexity of genre. Liz observes, "I learned that a person can *know* what a certain genre should look like, without actually fully *comprehending* what it should look like. It took me a long time to internalize the feel of a literature review, which will give me much more empathy for students who don't seem to understand what tone and feeling their paper should have." And Nancy, like Liz, notes that her own struggles writing in a new genre help her understand and empathize with writers:

> Working on my lit review gave me a new appreciation for the students I work with. As someone who writes almost exclusively in the humanities, . . . I had forgotten how difficult it can be to adjust to a new genre. Part of the difficulty wasn't even the assignment but my own resistance to writing in a style I was less comfortable with. Sometimes when students came in with humanities papers devoid of voice or opinion, it was hard for me to understand why they were so averse to that style of writing. Now I can see why they might have seemed unsure or even resentful about an assignment that forced them out of their comfort zone. [T]his insight will help me relate to students who need help writing in an unfamiliar style and not take for granted the fact that things that may seem automatic or obvious to me aren't necessarily an integral part of everyone's experience with academic writing.

CONCEPT 3, "WRITING ENACTS AND CREATES IDENTITIES AND IDEOLOGIES" (ADLER-KASSNER AND WARDLE 48):

Like Concept 2, this concept is challenging for tutors who believe there are universal qualities of "good" writing. Believing that norms for writing, including the rules of "standard English," are objective, some new tutors see no connection between these norms and ideologies or identities.

Consequences in Tutoring: The unfortunate result of such beliefs is that some new tutors can be eager to impose their own ideas of the writing process and good writing on others, unwittingly becoming agents of oppression. For example, if tutors fail to recognize word inflections as dialectal and see those differences as errors, their attempts to teach the "correct" rules may stifle rather than support how students draw on their own language backgrounds. Or if tutors have no understanding of learning styles and differences, they may assume that every writer's organizational problems can be solved by learning to outline. Consequently, in not seeing the connections between identity and writing, some tutors don't see the value of having personal conversations for reasons beyond establishing rapport, including to provide students opportunities to share information about their backgrounds and preferences as writers and learners.

New Understandings: By the end of their first year, tutors have explored these notions about universal, objective qualities of good writing and writing strategies and have discovered that many assumptions they have made about writers based on their (tutors') own identities are mistaken. Danielle explains,

> I no longer expect that people will be at a similar reading or writing level as myself, because everyone simply reads and writes differently, and has very different experiences with the acquisition of those skills. . . . I almost always work with tutees who have had different experiences than me in this regard—or who come from cultures that treat writing differently—and learning to meet them where they're at—to push off what I think people *ought* to know or what I'm surprised people *don't* know—has been a very valuable endeavor.

Nancy has come to understand that writers with literacy backgrounds different from her own may experience being a writer quite differently from how she does: "I am lucky enough to have grown up in a fairly affluent suburban area with a good public education system. . . . Many students may come to the writing center having different experiences with education and writing and this may color how they feel about the writing process." And tutors have also become aware that their tacit assumptions can lead them to judge writers unfairly. By the end of the semester,

for example, Michael recognizes that he holds subconscious prejudices about languages:

> As a writing tutor, my background with the English language is both beneficial and limiting. On the one hand, my lifelong exposure to reading and writing has given me great appreciation for the craft of writing. I love reading students' papers and I can always get excited about my job. On the other hand, my appreciation for this craft can be unconsciously limited. If I don't catch myself, I will often favor writing in "Standard English" for no deserved reason.

CONCEPT 5, "WRITING IS (ALSO ALWAYS) A COGNITIVE ACTIVITY" (ADLER-KASSNER AND WARDLE, 71):

This concept relates to understanding that writing is a tool not just for conveying but also for discovering ideas, and that this discovery can take place throughout the writing process. I find that some new tutors think of writing as separate from creating ideas. Some have had little experience with revision, having been able to write an "A" paper the night before the due date. Others may hold a linear model of the writing process: first you develop ideas, then you put them in writing, and then you read your draft and correct whatever is problematic.

Consequences in Tutoring: When new tutors believe writing is separate from discovering ideas, they can expect that students will be coming to the writing center with their ideas already formed, and that the tutor's role will be to help students express those ideas effectively. This misconception can lead new tutors to read drafts for errors or problems rather than for possibilities and to overlook opportunities to help students develop or change ideas.

New Understandings: Danielle reports discovering how the "new tutor" view of the writing process as described above truncated her re-thinking and revision processes:

> Before this course, whenever I received a writing assignment, I would spend a great deal of time on the first draft, but then I would seldom genuinely revise; I would edit, which I called revision, but I hardly ever had the patience or the will to really put all my effort into making the piece better, into rearranging, rewriting, or rethinking. . . . The social narrative that we wrote . . . allowed me to realize that what I had done before was not proper revision, and that I was robbing myself of improvement because of that.

Kathy describes applying her new approach to writing—as exploring as well as expressing ideas—in her other academic papers: "All of a sudden in viewing both my personal and academic writing, I noticed gaps, spaces in which I had omitted reality for the sake of

a false image. In the months following this revelation, especially in academic papers, I have found that including more *questionable* information has actually contributed to the depths the paper achieves."

For some tutors, this new understanding of revision and the writing process transformed their tutoring. Heather feels liberated to encourage writers to pursue rather than suppress what seems questionable or difficult:

> My first draft of the social narrative was a comic example of how I would like to think about my family. If it wasn't for this class, I would have submitted the first or second draft as the final. The idea that I would have been okay leaving it so shallow makes me shudder. . . . I felt more liberated to include details I thought were imperfect, unclear, and too complicated to include. I've seen this in multiple tutees, where they question the value of what they want to add or express in their writing.

And Emily now realizes that process, not product, is at the center of tutoring: "Now that I am more intentional about my own writing process, I feel better equipped to help someone else with theirs. I came into the class with the expectation that helping someone with their writing would be looking for mistakes. Now I see that the writing center is much more than a last step on the way to turning in a paper."

CONCLUSION

Metacognition, another much-discussed idea in Writing Studies recently, is identified in WPA's *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* as one of the eight habits of mind "essential for success in college writing" (1). The *Framework* posits that students' naming of and reflection on their writing processes and choices support transfer—students using "what they learn from reflections on one writing project to improve writing on subsequent projects" (5). While many writing center directors discuss with tutors the ideas embedded in the threshold concepts, naming them as such—identifying them as core concepts in the field—encourages us to make their exploration more explicit and richer, and helps ensure the transfer of those concepts to the tutoring context. Furthermore, in preparing new tutors, we need to go beyond naming, beyond reading about and discussing these threshold concepts. When tutors encounter these threshold concepts as writers, the tacit mistaken assumptions they may bring to tutoring can become visible and open to exploration, allowing new tutors to begin the process of acquiring a deeper understanding of key concepts that have always been central to writing centers.

NOTES

1. Concept 4 ("All Writers Have More to Learn") isn't included in this article because I have not encountered many tutors with a misconception about it. Indeed, during the application process, most prospective tutors explain that they are interested in the position partly because they think it will help them improve their own writing. In the tutor training class, new tutors never question why they have to write several papers, readily accepting my explanation in the syllabus that this allows them to apply what they are learning from tutoring to their own writing.

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