Training Tutors in the ACRL Framework: Research as a Rhetorical Activity

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Even though we don't intend them to be, our writing center's staff are often the first point of contact for students with research questions. After all, writers sometimes only formulate research questions when they are in conversation with someone about their writing. They may, for example, realize during a session that they need more evidence for their claims or that they need a better understanding of a concept they're working through. Accordingly, we began to consider how we might introduce the Frames from the Association of College and Research Libraries "Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education" (ACRL Framework) to consultants at the Writing Center. As a librarian (Caitlin) and a writing center director (Dan), we reconsider information literacy instruction in the writing center—both what it means and what it might look like moving forward. In this essay, we share our experiences, consider where partnerships between the center and the library may go in future consultant training, and suggest how our efforts might inform others interested in more purposefully incorporating training on information literacy for writing center tutors.

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Central Michigan University is a large state university with over 26,000 students. Although the Writing Center reports to the College of Arts and Social Sciences, it serves students in every college. In addition to its director and associate director, the center typically employs over 35 hourly undergraduate consultants and half a dozen graduate assistants from the English department. The center is responsible for over 10,000 consultations per year as well as outreach and WAC efforts, including classroom orientations, peer review workshops, and presentations on an assortment of writing topics across a range of academic disciplines. New consultants are trained through a weekly three-credit writing center practicum where they meet once a week and complete writing assignments asking them to apply and synthesize their readings and practice.

The Writing Center's primary site is in the library, and recently it has worked to strengthen some of its ties with librarians through committee memberships, library programming, and professional development such as what we describe here.

A number of studies and essays on the value of writing center and librarian collaborations have appeared in the last decade or so, focusing especially on information literacy (Elmborg and Hook; Jacobs and Jacobs). Put briefly, information literacy refers to the ability to "recognize when information is needed and [...] locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" ("Presidential Committee on Information Literacy," 1989, para. 3). In 2000, the ACRL codified information literacy into the Information Literacy Standards. However, as Barry Maid and Barbara D'Angelo have pointed out, prior to the ACRL's 2012 revision, those original "IL Standards [...] faced significant criticism. In particular, research and theory has shown that rather than a prescriptive and de-contextualized set of skills, IL is a contextualized and situated concept" (40). The 2012 revision and eventual replacement of the Information Literacy Standards with the ACRL Framework thus shifted the paradigm of IL from a skills-centered approach to one based on threshold concepts and metacognition. Rather than focusing on standards, the new emphasis is on frames, which are "conceptual understandings that organize many other concepts and ideas about information, research, and scholarship into a coherent whole" (ACRL 7). Consequently, as Maid and D'Angelo explain, "the Framework for IL presents librarians, instructional faculty, and administrators with challenges to rethink how IL has been taught and assessed at their institutions" (37). In short, as library science's paradigm of information literacy has shifted, so too should conceptions of writing center and librarian collaborations.

Similarly, threshold concepts have become more prevalent in rhetoric and composition scholarship (Adler-Kassner and Wardle; Adler-Kassner et al.) and in writing center scholarship (Nowacek and Hughes; Hall et al.). As Brittany Johnson and Moriah Mc-Cracken argue, "The shared interest in threshold concepts across our fields means that writing programs and information literacy programs must (at the very least) reconsider what effective information literacy instruction means" (180). In this essay we thus synthesize some of the work done on threshold concepts in these two disciplines and situate them in writing center work. Grounding this consideration in a brief example from our own collaboration, we argue that such an approach helps writing tutors to see (and to explain) research as a fundamentally rhetorical activity. Given Mark Hall et al.'s observation about the efficacy of writing center training

for traversing difficult threshold concepts, the ACRL Framework may provide another way for tutors to not only traverse those concepts, but also to develop the metaliteracy (the ability to reflect on and assess one's literacy skills including information literacy) necessary for fostering these skills in the student writers and researchers that come to the center.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN WRITING STUDIES AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Rather than key or core concepts of a discipline, threshold concepts, first articulated by Jan Meyer and Ray Land in 2006, are those concepts that are particularly difficult for novices to traverse. Meyer and Land provide several characteristics of threshold concepts, defining them as transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and troublesome. That is, threshold concepts tend to transform the learner, can't be unlearned, show previously hidden relationships between concepts, are marked by disciplinary borders, and are often unsettling in the transformations that learning the concept may engender. Threshold concepts are difficult for learners to traverse because they involve a change in the learner, causing them to think and see the world differently.

Though work on threshold concepts in writing studies preceded it, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's landmark publication *Naming What We Know* has been the most exhaustive articulation of threshold concepts in writing studies. It describes five overarching threshold concepts unique to writing studies:

- Writing is a social and rhetorical act
- Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms
- Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies
- All writers have more to learn
- Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity

These concepts can be difficult for learners to traverse because they challenge the often essentialist notions of writing embedded in American culture(s). That is, it is not unusual to hear students say "I'm not good at writing," as if writing is an innate, immutable quality. Writing is thus seen as a reflection of a person's identity or thoughts rather than a social practice and process drawing on established genres and multiple identities (while challenging those genres and identities). These foundational concepts thus transform learners in that they necessitate a change in the learner's very worldview.

Similarly, librarians have long grappled with students' (and some

faculty members') understanding of information literacy as being directly related to innate intelligence rather than something that can be taught and practiced. William Badke describes information literacy as "invisible" in higher education because faculty and graduate students—the people most often tasked with teaching students how to find resources in a particular field—may themselves not remember the struggles of learning how to do research (2011). A threshold concept-based approach to information literacy is thus a way for librarians, writing center practitioners, and other educators to make visible these invisible skills and understandings.

The "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" was influenced by, among other things, Lori Townsend et al.'s work on threshold concepts for information literacy (2011). The core of the ACRL Framework consists of six frames:

- Searching as Strategic Exploration
- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value

Each of the frames is expanded upon in the Framework in a short paragraph, as well as in a set of knowledge practices and dispositions that speak to the practical and affective aspects of information literate learners. The ACRL Framework document itself offers suggestions for how to implement information literacy instruction based around the six frames that make up its core. That instruction also includes how to introduce the ACRL Framework to faculty and administrators. It is thus explicitly a document intended to support librarians to teach information literacy as well as to reach out to potential collaborators across campus. In short, both writing studies and information literacy have frameworks based on threshold concepts that learners traverse; we have found that teaching them to writing center consultants enabled consultants to traverse those concepts and apply them to their practice.

TRAINING INTERVENTIONS FOR THRESHOLD CONCEPTS
Dan has taught the threshold concepts of writing studies to writing center consultants for several years. At first, this instruction was limited to staff meetings where the concepts were introduced, summarized, and then discussed. Consultants would connect their own experiences in traversing threshold concepts with those that their session partners might traverse. They would then discuss how

it might inform their practice. Dan eventually also began devoting some of the writing center practicum class sessions to threshold concepts, taking the model used in the staff meetings and asking students to use their weekly practicum assignments to connect threshold concepts directly to sessions they had facilitated. Thus, when Caitlin came to a staff meeting to introduce the ACRL Framework, the consultants had some passing familiarity with threshold concepts. Our goal, then, for the staff training session was to a) enhance the consultants' familiarity with the idea of threshold concepts across disciplines and situations, b) foster metaliteracies within those situations, and c) nurture their dispositions toward encountering new and difficult concepts and processes.

To provide context for the ACRL Framework, Caitlin began her presentation to the consultants with a brief refresher on metaliteracy, threshold concepts, and information literacy. The consultants were then asked to describe the way that the information landscape has changed in the last few decades. Consultants identified the rise of social media, decreased barriers to sharing information, an increase in resources available electronically, and the diminished role of publishers as gatekeepers as key changes to the way we consume and share information. They formulated strategies for assessing information that were grounded in their academic experiences and disciplinary knowledge: favoring scholarly information where traditional publishing gatekeepers are still in place; identifying reputable journals and publishers by engaging with mentors in their fields; and understanding what kinds of evidence the disciplines they work in value.

Next, Caitlin explained each of the six Frames from the ACRL Framework and asked the consultants to recall a time when they encountered elements of the Frame, either as researchers themselves or in their role as writing center consultants. The session ended with discussion questions focused on information literacy-related topics that Caitlin hoped would be particularly relevant to the consultants—specifically, novice and expert perspectives on choosing good sources for a specific project, the purpose of citation, and the challenges of understanding the expectations for writing and researching for classes in different disciplines both as consultants and as students.

During discussion sections of the presentation, consultants connected their own experiences with ideas from the ACRL Framework. In many cases, they demonstrated sophisticated understandings of how information is created and used within their disciplines. For example, while discussing the Frame "Authority Is Constructed

and Contextual," a consultant majoring in history and literature described how a translation of *The Odyssey* might not be a good source for a historian studying ancient Greece, as translations often reflect the perspective and era of the translator. In contrast, translations of The Odyssey may be a great source for people looking at the way literary styles or approaches to translation change over time.

Similarly, while discussing "Information Creation as a Process," consultants focused on their own information creation process and the way the sources they use are created in equal measures. This was striking to Caitlin, who primarily uses this Frame as a way to discuss different information formats students are likely to encounter in the library and online. The discussion of "Research as Inquiry" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration" focused primarily on personal stories of research struggles and "aha" moments, on floundering in their search for relevant sources until they found the right database, or on discovering a relevant theoretical framework for their research question.

Caitlin was struck by the consultants' ability to describe why scholars cite other works in their writing. Consultants identified citations as a means for building a writer's own credibility by citing reputable sources, as a way to be in dialogue with other scholars, as a strategy for helping readers find additional relevant sources, and as a way to recognize the value of other people's scholarship. Dan was similarly intrigued by how the consultants drew on discussions from their practicum course about threshold concepts in writing studies. In particular, they drew on practicum class discussions that Dan used to help explain the concepts "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity." For instance, they compared the Frame "Scholarship as Conversation" to the Burkean Parlor, which Dan had used in the practicum to explain writing as a social act. They began articulating how this academic conversation was rhetorical not only in terms of writing but also in terms of how research informed (and was informed by) the conversation. They also drew on the frame "Information Creation as a Process" to discuss how research not only changed, but how writing about that research changed how people perceived and were able to talk about it.

In this discussion, the consultants kept returning to the notion that, like writing, research is fundamentally a rhetorical activity. That is, though Johnson and McCracken observe that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two paradigms, the overlap between several of the Frames and writing studies' threshold concept "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Act" proved to be a powerful ex-

igence for consultants to consider what may have been siloed concepts and to begin synthesizing them for application in their tutoring practices. They saw that research is a purposive, social activity that creates the conditions for change—whether changing an audience's opinion on their topic or changing their own understanding of it. In short, synthesizing the two paradigms helped the consultants articulate what was previously tacit knowledge: that research, like writing, is essentially rhetorical.

In sum, the consultants found even this brief intervention to be generative; this was especially true among newer consultants, who often used the discussion in their weekly practicum writings to work on how they might apply what they learned in actual sessions. Consultants also referred to the session during discussions in subsequent staff meetings and other exchanges. That said, we have begun considering ways to extend and sustain the training beyond a single training intervention. Given our experience with this training session, we consider how focusing on other overlaps in the two approaches may highlight still other elements of writing center practice for consultants in future sessions.

We have several avenues for future training and assessment in this area. First, we will introduce information literacy and the ACRL Framework earlier—alongside the threshold concepts of writing—to new consultants in the writing center practicum. Second, we intend to use one staff meeting each semester to highlight a different Frame and its potential overlap with writing center practice. Third, we hope to begin using the discussions in these staff meetings to consider how we might develop workshop materials for faculty members and writing classes in the disciplines. Fourth, we hope to develop some means of assessing the value added for our consultants of the approach. Finally, we hope to continue to use this collaboration to identify avenues for future research on the efficacy of these partnerships. Given both fields' practitioner orientations and interest in process, research and training collaborations such as what we have outlined here can provide sites where local need identifies disciplinary exigencies, where evidence is gathered, and where theory is developed and reconsidered, thus contributing to both disciplines' knowledge base.

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