

CHAPTER 8.

DOORWAYS TO DISCIPLINARITY: USING THRESHOLD CONCEPTS TO BRIDGE DISCIPLINARY DIVIDES AND DEVELOP THEORY-PRACTICE PRAXIS

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Our initial working title for this piece was “Feeling a Little Frazzled:’ Troublesome Knowledge in the TA Practicum.” One of our first-time composition TAs used this phrase in a reflective survey after a day-long TA preparation¹ session, to describe his feelings about using composition theory to plan his first first-year composition (FYC) course. As we guided graduate students—all of whom were pursuing Ph.Ds. in humanities disciplines—towards cultivating theory-practice connections for teaching FYC, we caught glimpses of their discomfort with negotiating two distinct roles that they inhabited: they were near-experts in one domain (their respective humanities disciplines) and novices in another (the composition field). And while adopting the ways of thinking and practicing of any field is challenging in and of itself, these TAs’ sense of liminality was likely exacerbated because they were trying to accomplish this feat while also being steeped in the privileged literate practices of their home disciplines.

So how can WPAs help TAs navigate these novice/expert dualities? What experiences from TAs’ own fields can they draw on to inform their developing

1 we prefer using the term “TA preparation” instead of “TA training.” Although the literature clearly identifies numerous approaches to “TA training”—each with their own theoretical foundations and practical considerations—we see a consequential difference in the connotation of these two terms: while “training” invokes a top-down, prescriptive model, “preparation” suggests a bottom-up, constructivist negotiation. For further discussion of the nuances between these terms, see Fulkerson; Dobrin; and/or Stenberg. In 2012, Reid et al. introduced the term “Writing Pedagogy Education,” which we also use throughout this chapter.

composition praxis? To what extent does their expert knowledge move them towards seeing composition as a discipline in its own right? And what theories and approaches can guide TA preparation efforts to allay TAs' liminality? In this chapter, we examine these questions and consider how threshold concepts—transformative insights about situated literacy—can be used to bridge disciplinary divides and help first-time writing instructors become *less* frazzled. We illustrate how TAs can move through liminality by drawing from their prior knowledge to conceptualize literacy within their home disciplines, which in turn, enables them to make theory-practice connections for FYC education.

Four conceptual strands are woven throughout our work in this chapter: liminality, threshold concepts, composition praxis, and disciplinarity. These ideas are captured within another TA's practicum reflection when he describes the role that threshold concepts can play in orienting students to new disciplinary paradigms:

[T]he feeling of ambiguity and uncertainty that accompanies entrance into a new field is often overwhelming, and students initially question the relevancy of the “big picture” concepts we try to get them to engage with. Exposing these threshold concepts directly can help introduce a new sense of meaning for students and help them understand what exactly it is we are trying to do. In history, this takes the form of competing narratives and the lived experience that they construct as they conflict or expand upon one another. This is a much more dynamic academic experience than trying to understand some distanced idea of what history “was” from a god's eye view.

Although this TA is focusing on the undergraduate experience, we contend that this excerpt also illustrates the challenges that TAs from non-composition disciplines encounter when cultivating FYC praxis. This population of TAs is sizable: according to the 2012 *National Writing Census*, non-composition graduate students (including those from English and literature) teach FYC far more regularly than those from composition programs.

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOORWAYS OF DISCIPLINARITY: CROSSING LIMINAL SPACES

Doorways are an apt metaphor for thinking about liminality. Individual courses might be thought of as rooms, disciplines as hallways, and disciplinary paradigms (i.e., social sciences, hard sciences, humanities) as wings of the building. The structure of the university itself might be conceptualized as architecture—or

perhaps *architexture*—comprised of multiple domains, each of which have their own established ways of constructing knowledge. The individuals who produce this knowledge represent a wide range of disciplines, and consequently, have particular ways of thinking and practicing (Kreber; Donald). Compositionists, for instance, have focused on generating insights into disciplinary differences in authorial stances (Hyland), styles (Sword), epistemologies and methodologies (Hyland), and genres (Soliday), among other topics. Doorways thus provide a useful framework for this piece, especially because we focus on threshold concepts, which have been conceptualized as portals that facilitate heightened epistemological participation in a given disciplinary domain (Meyer and Land).

The composition field reparatns like a hallway in the university: an academic domain whose mission is to produce new knowledge. It's unique, though, because the production, consumption, and distribution of texts *spans* disciplines, and therefore, the composition field also functions as a meta-discipline. Consequently, the field's body of knowledge extends opportunities for more consciously moving through the liminal spaces of the university. In this latter vein, the composition discipline isn't so much like a physical space—rooms, hallways, wings, or the building itself—as it is like light permeating through the space. Liminal movement, then, can be conceptualized as piecemeal progress through increasingly illuminated disciplinary spaces.

In this chapter, we consider how TAs move through these doorways so that they can conceptualize and enact their FYC pedagogy to guide their students through these doorways. This metaphor of moving through doorways suggests that liminal activity is more than mere movement through isolated rooms, hallways, or buildings; it's a learner's conscious awareness of his or her movement through space. Liminal movement suggests mindful embodiment of the ways of thinking and practicing *within* and even potentially *across* disciplines—and for novice writing instructors (or what Gramer refers to in this volume as “New Writing Teachers” or NWTs), specifically, this trajectory requires negotiating theory-practice connections while guiding students' literate development in situated academic contexts.

When FYC TAs arrive at the doorway of their composition practicum on the first day of TA preparation, they bring life-long histories of literacy with them; they've already walked through countless other doorways both within and outside of the university. They are hardly “blank slates,” as Yancey, Cole, May, and Stark (this volume), Stenberg, and others throughout this collection have made clear. And as graduate students in various disciplines, they've opened numerous “doors” en route to achieving near-expert-level ways of thinking and practicing in their own fields; consequently, they have also successfully moved through considerable liminal space in their respective disciplines. Their prior knowledge

about literacy practices in their respective humanities fields, then, is abundant—even if it remains tacit.

By encouraging TAs to access this valuable prior knowledge (Reid “On Learning”; Harris; Bishop), writing pedagogy educators can facilitate novice TAs’ movement through that metaphorical doorway and heighten their awareness of disciplinarity. Identifying threshold concepts in their home disciplines enables TAs to build upon their prior knowledge about disciplinary epistemology so that they can more deeply understand writing in and across the disciplines, and thus encourage their students to make similar connections. Activating TAs’ and other new writing teachers’ (NWTs)² prior knowledge about how literacy functions within *their own disciplines* is one pivotal step in cultivating novice writing instructors’ development. In this study, we exclusively focus on TAs’ responses to one practicum reflection prompt where they were asked to do this by exploring a threshold concept in their own discipline.³

TA PREPARATION APPROACHES AND HOW THE PRACTICUM CAN ADDRESS LIMINALITY

The observations in this chapter stem from our shared experiences guiding TAs in a “genre studies” FYC program infused with writing about writing (Downs and Wardle) and teaching for transfer (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak) perspectives. At this site, TAs lead their FYC students through the *study of* and *practice with* writing, using concepts that are central to the discipline such as genre, exigence, audience, purpose, and context. This approach is designed to equip students with flexible lenses that might guide them towards more nuanced and situated views of how and why writing functions across disciplines and within genres. While our study at this site is context specific—connected to our TAs’ disciplinary backgrounds and our FYC curriculum—it also offers expansive implications for theorizing TA preparation efforts.

This writing pedagogy education (WPE, via Reid) program reflects what Haring-Smith would refer to as an “integrated” approach, in which theory and

2 We’ve tried to carefully distinguish between graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) who are teaching composition for the first time and “New Writing Teachers” (NWT), a term we adopted from Gramer in this collection. While all first-time composition TAs are NWTs, the reverse isn’t true: not all NWTs are first-time composition TAs. We see NWT as a much more expansive term that holds applications for faculty across the disciplines who are learning to teach writing (e.g., through campus-wide WAC/WID workshops). In this sense, NWT is a much more generalizable term.

3 Our writing program’s then-WPA, Linda Adler-Kassner, designed and taught this TA preparation course for several years just prior to the year we are reporting on, which was our first year leading the course. In this piece, we are analyzing the TAs’ responses to a reflective prompt that she developed.

practice are fully integrated into TA preparation, so that the symbiosis between them is evident. Yet because filling and managing class time are often key concerns for new TAs who are grappling with their sense of liminality, they may be initially reluctant to embrace theoretical considerations. Both Huntley and Recchio chronicled TAs' resistance towards theory in favor of more practical information. TAs' interest in practice over theory has been similarly characterized as resistance by Ebest; Dobrin; Fischer; Hesse and others. From the perspective of a TA who is unfamiliar with the composition field and therefore occupying a liminal space, though, it's entirely understandable. After all, identifying and adopting a new set of theoretical paradigms is a time-consuming and challenging task that heightens a sense of defamiliarization and liminality. As Reid et al. reported in their study of new TAs' development over a three-year period, it can take several years for TAs to embrace key composition principles.

However, while a “nuts and bolts” approach may seem like a quick fix, it likely leads to even more frustration for TAs over the long run; without trekking through any of the composition field's theoretical terrain, TAs may be left wading in liminal space well into their FYC teaching appointments. At stake, then, is the development of TAs' praxis: this task of reconciling theory and practice can be managed by adopting a “novice as expert” stance—a paradox that Sommers and Saltz associated with first-year writing students, though it can apply to new TAs as well. Sommers and Saltz also conclude that the most successful college writers embrace their novice status early on; rather than viewing writing as a set of mechanical rules and tasks, they embrace it as a set of possible strategies for accomplishing goals. Similarly, the most successful TAs are likely those who grapple with theory as a means of developing a sustainable praxis, however daunting that Reid et al. contend that it may initially seem.

In her piece “On Learning to Teach: Letter to a New TA,” Reid invokes Sprague et al.'s four sequential—though somewhat recursive—stages of developing competence in any new subject: *unconscious incompetence*, *conscious incompetence*, *conscious competence*, and *unconscious competence* (also discussed in Ambrose et al.'s *How Learning Works*). Upon initial consideration, this final stage might seem counterintuitive: don't experts have a conscious awareness of their trade? Oftentimes, though, experts' mastery becomes habituated and can remain tacit thereafter. Reid introduces these stages to help new TAs recognize that becoming familiar with the practices and principles embraced by the composition field is a process that takes time. Invariably, this process involves considerable self-doubt and frustration.

Reid contends that when TAs inhabit the first stage of unconscious competence, they are blissfully unaware of all they do not yet know. The liminality that new TAs experience is particularly evident at the next stage—*conscious*

incompetence—as they recognize that they’re not yet fully competent in their roles. During the next stage—*conscious competence*—TAs’ sense of liminality naturally decreases, although they must remain carefully focused on the task at hand. We contend that once TAs reach the level of *conscious competence*, they are positioned to move through the doorway of liminality.⁴

METHODS

In this mixed-methods study, we analyzed one practicum reflection prompt that asked eighteen TAs from one WPE cohort to describe a threshold concept in their respective humanities disciplines: history, religious studies, English/literature, comparative literature, music, classics, and feminist studies. We felt that this particular reflection offered the most theoretically rich opportunity for gauging how this group of NWTs began to navigate their disciplinary divides and adopt the ways of thinking and practicing in the composition field. Because this practicum reflection embodies the lone meta-threshold concept of composition by asking TAs to conceptualize writing as a subject and an activity (Adler-Kassner and Wardle), we hoped it would illuminate aspects of TAs’ experiences with liminality during a crucial phase of their pedagogical development.

This section below opens by introducing our research site and participants. We then elaborate on our rationale for selecting this particular data set and briefly outline our coding procedures.

RESEARCH SITE

FYC at UC Santa Barbara is a component within a general education program; students must complete or place out of WRIT 2, “*Academic Writing*.” Our TAs are generally hired from the Humanities and Fine Arts Division (HFA), and, collectively, these graduate students teach the majority of these FYC courses on campus. For instance, during the 2015-2016 academic year, 27 HFA graduate students taught 67% of the total sections. Many of the TAs who participated in this study were actively preparing for their Ph.D. qualifying exams, while others had reached “ABD” status. As such, this population of TAs was deeply steeped in the ways of thinking and practicing of their home disciplines.

Prior to teaching FYC, HFA graduate students complete an intensive two-week summer training workshop. After this workshop, TAs enroll in a practicum (see Appendix 2 for the syllabus) that runs parallel to their first teaching

⁴ Due to the brevity of our 12-week-long TA preparation program, it’s unlikely that NWTs can achieve the level of *unconscious competence* within this timeframe. As such, our TA preparation efforts are confined to the first three stages.

appointment. This TA preparation sequence introduces TAs to a wide body of composition scholarship, ranging from the writing process (Elbow), to reading (Bunn; Reid 2010), to genre (Dirk; Reiff and Bawarshi), to transfer (Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey; Wardle) to threshold concepts (Meyer and Land; Adler-Kassner and Wardle), to disciplinarity (Middendorf and Pace), to FYC itself (Downs), and assessing and responding to student writing (Huot).

Here, we arrive at an important distinction about the expectations that this program places on its TAs, due to its “integrated” (Haring-Smith) approach. Because TAs design their own syllabi (they also have opportunities to review and modify former TAs’ syllabi), they must bridge theory-practice connections as they consider how the course objectives align with the major assignments and how to scaffold students’ learning on a week-to-week basis to prepare them for those assignments. TAs are also encouraged to assign readings from the *Writing Spaces* book series. However, by and large, TAs have autonomy in their classrooms to meet the program’s goals through a shared conception of what it means to teach FYC at this university.

An implicit hope underlying this principle is that TAs will not merely *adopt* their FYC curriculum—e.g., importing a former TA’s syllabus with minimal changes—but rather *adapt* their own FYC curriculum to the range of course goals based on precise self-generated pedagogical goals that evolve throughout the quarter. Novice instructors are thus encouraged to engage with both theory and practice as a way of moving towards *conscious competence* (Reid 2017), and, consequently, one step closer to expertise.

To emphasize the importance of synthesizing theory and practice, the mantra “there is no *what* without *why*” is repeatedly referenced throughout the practicum. This phrase reflects the same theoretical foundation and in-class activities that we hope TAs will integrate into their FYC pedagogy. In fact, if FYC students are also invited to make “*what* with *why*” connections—i.e., *what* is being done is accompanied by *why* it’s being done—they’ll likely be better positioned to enact those same conceptualizations.

Thereparatum itself, then, models the theory-practice connections that are so crucial for preparing novice instructors to teach writing. For instance, during the practicum, TAs bring a draft of their first writing prompt to class and engage in a peer/reader review activity. Before and after the “*what* with *why*” mantra is reinforced, TAs exchange formative feedback to improve their drafts. The activity models the collaborative approach that we hope TAs will take into their FYC classrooms, particularly since engaging in formative reader review isn’t necessarily instinctive. In fact, based on our experiences working with TAs in WPE contexts, graduate students in non-composition disciplines may not have been acculturated to formative peer/reader review within formal classroom settings, especially if they did not take FYC as undergraduates, which, as Fischer points out, historically

many haven't. Altogether, the literate activity embodied within the process of engaging in reader review reflects numerous threshold concepts of writing studies, including: (1) writing is a social and rhetorical activity; (2) text is an object outside of oneself that can be improved and developed; and (3) learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice (Adler-Kassner and Wardle).

During this practicum, TAs are required to complete various projects intended to facilitate their abilities to become reflective composition practitioners and engage in ongoing immersive praxis. Course observation reflections are one such project. The majority of these practicum reflections are primarily descriptive; per the prompt's directives, TAs offer in-class observations of teaching and learning without evaluation: counting, observing a student, observing a mentor's classroom, considering reading, and observing student-to-student interactions. These prompts are non-evaluative; they ask TAs to examine teaching and learning through a microscopic lens and take stock of *what is* rather than *what could or should be*. Two additional practicum reflections are unique because they don't call upon TAs to actively observe an educational context but, instead, require them to jostle their memories and reflect on their existing disciplinary expertise: examining writing in their disciplines and identifying a threshold concept in that discipline (see Appendix 1 for the prompt).

Of course, it's unrealistic (and likely, counterproductive) to believe that a single practicum—however thoroughly theorized—will equip NWTs with the theoretical and practical foundations necessary to teach writing. As Micciche notes in the foreword to this collection, “becoming a teacher is just that, *becoming*, which entails growth and process.” Nevertheless, we believe that this latter prompt offers potential to create traction towards this state of becoming. Finn (also in this collection) characterizes this liminal movement as an “internal transformation,” which requires “be[ing] able to articulate dissonances and make sense of their experiences to adapt or transform their pedagogical theories and practices.” To facilitate such transformation, Finn relies on reflective prompts that enable TAs to “consider prior knowledge and experiences, articulate their understanding of the new context, and reflect upon the connections or dissonances between the experiences and expectations” (this volume). In this chapter, we analyze a similar reflective prompt that provides a liminal theory-practice scaffold by activating TAs' prior knowledge about a transformative lens in their humanities fields so that they can begin to think about their FYC pedagogy through composition's threshold concepts.

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS

We examined eighteen TAs' reflections from the third week of their practicum. Their responses ranged from 477 to 1,245 words. We used a grounded theory

(Bryant and Charmaz) approach to our coding methodology to maximize our ability to detect emergent themes and patterns. Our codes emerged over the course of two phases. During the first phase, we relied on “initial coding” (Saldaña) to maximize our flexibility in capturing the existing themes that were present within TAs’ responses. Following this first phase, we refined our initial set of codes by lumping, splitting, rephrasing, and discarding them as needed.⁵

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two broad patterns permeated the data. First, in their responses to this practicum reflection, TAs outlined a range of characteristics associated with the threshold concept that they identified, oftentimes capturing the transformative power that these disciplinary ways of thinking and practicing held for the humanities. Second, TAs elaborated on the particular roles they embodied when they experienced these insights; collectively, they referenced how being an instructor, student, and researcher each created affordances for more productively grappling with higher forms of disciplinary literacy. Together, these patterns in our TAs’ responses reveal how asking NWTs to analyze threshold concepts in their respective fields can enable them to navigate the liminal space between two academic domains: their home disciplines and the composition field.

EXAMINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

TAs attributed four specific characteristics to threshold concepts in the humanities: (1) the foundational nature of threshold concepts within distinct sites of academic activity; (2) the frequent misperceptions that others hold about their discipline; (3) the social power of a particular threshold concept; and (4) the particular ways in which readers engage with texts.

5 For example, during phase one, “navigating uncertain terrain” emerged as a noteworthy code. However, in phase two, we split this code into two separate codes: one that indicated *teachers’* uncertainty—i.e., TAs’ expressed uncertainty with their FYC pedagogies—and another that specified *students’* uncertainty—including TAs’ FYC students—along with TAs themselves when they reflected on their experiences as undergraduate or graduate students. Another revealing example of splitting codes occurred when we reviewed our initial code “students’ struggles with grasping a threshold concept.” We divided this code into three separate codes: (1) “students’ struggles with grasping a *humanities* threshold concept;” (2) “students’ struggles with grasping a *compositions* threshold concept;” and (3) “students struggles *in general*.” This decision reflected a broader trend that we detail in greater depth throughout our analysis: TAs, perhaps unsurprisingly—given their disciplinary backgrounds and the nature of the prompt itself—provided considerably more insight about their humanities disciplines than they did about the composition discipline. In the third phase, we applied our refined set to the data.

FOUNDATIONAL NATURE OF THRESHOLD CONCEPTS WITHIN DISTINCT SITES OF ACADEMIC ACTIVITY

Tacitly or explicitly, eight of eighteen TAs referenced the foundational nature of a particular threshold concept, using phrases such as “constantly important for me in my own work” and “central to my teaching.” After naming a threshold concept in her field, Joan⁶ notes that it “has fundamentally shaped the way I utilize and interpret sources,” while Beverly emphasizes “how important it was to lay out this [particular threshold] concept for the students explicitly on the first day of class and again throughout the course.” Similarly, Mark clearly captures the integral role that threshold concepts play. Commenting on the study of music, he writes:

Once one understands [that music can be understood through culturally dependent conventions and practice], there are a number of new possibilities. We can understand how and why the internal logic that governs a given piece of music came about and how a composer or performer might play with those conventions, increasing our enjoyment and understanding of the art-form.

Maya explains that her field, folklore, is also culturally dependent, stating, “Once one grasps this fact, it’s hard to look at folklore, especially in its narrative forms, without analyzing the constants and the variables of a given piece.” Like Mark’s earlier utterance about music, Maya’s “once/without” phrasing implies a causal series of events. Stripped down, her response can be looked at in the following way: “Once one grasps [X] it’s hard to look at [Y] without analyzing [Z],” which directly echoes Jan Meyer and Ray Land’s (2005) claim about threshold concepts; oftentimes—once an individual grasps such knowledge—it cannot be easily unseen (or un-known). Any given threshold concept holds the power to produce a lens-like cognitive embodiment that re-orientes and re-calibrates learners’ future literate activity.

As Mark and Maya’s responses indicate, when a particular threshold concept is so foundational to a site of academic activity, it seems to hold transcendent value for a broad range of scholars within (and perhaps beyond) that discipline. The ways of thinking and practicing required and afforded by a threshold concept appear to shape disciplinary scholars’ perspectives, as another TA noted, “regardless of their objects of analysis.”

6 All names have been changed to pseudonyms.

FREQUENT MISPERCEPTIONS OTHERS HOLD ABOUT THEIR FIELD

Twelve out of eighteen TAs referenced common misperceptions about their discipline, and TAs often used these as a basis for recognizing discipline-specific troublesome knowledge. In other words, thinking about others' misperceptions helped TAs consider threshold concepts in their respective domains. Mark most directly captures this phenomenon, claiming that "Often, when I've had conversation about music with non-musicians, I get the general feeling that while they love listening to music, as a subject [of study], it is completely opaque to them. Many people claim to be tone-deaf [or] believe that music simply springs unbidden from the fingertips and voices of those who are gifted with the talent."

Kurt, a TA from comparative literature, echoes how others' misconceptions can reveal fundamental values of a given domain. He notes that assuming that texts were originally written in English can influence readers' perceptions and constrict their capacity for meaning-making. Consequently, he cautions against:

reading and scrutinizing translated work as though it has always and only been written in English and as though the words bore all the language's attendant contextual significance [...] the original sense of words and texts may have been quite different in the cultural, linguistic and temporal context in which they were first situated.

With this disciplinary awareness, Kurt interprets texts with restraint, knowing that translation(s) shapes meaning-making possibilities.

THE SOCIAL POWER OF A PARTICULAR THRESHOLD CONCEPT

Seven TAs pointed to the social power of threshold concepts. This idea is, in fact, the individual threshold concept that Barbara identified for English/literature. In explaining that "Literary Texts Have Social Power," Barbara argues that:

literary texts operate as social agents, meaning that they are imbued with an ongoing vitality that allows them to impact readers across social and historical contexts and different time periods [...] social power that exists beyond the limits of time and space. This social power allows literary texts to impact readers by altering their cognition and changing their sympathies.

Elizabeth articulates the socially powerful implications of a threshold concept in feminist studies: "The Personal is Political." She emphatically elaborates

that this idea “[A]sserts that everyday experiences can—and must—be made public in order to highlight the commonalities across different experiences.” For example, “Issues that are presumed to only affect individuals (such as healthcare, division of labor, sexuality, pay, media representations, personal liberties, etc.) must be publicized and politicized in order for change to occur.” She concludes that “[M]aking the personal political disrupts the structures of power that allow the rights of disenfranchised populations to be violated or ignored. Expanding the realm of politics to also include personal, seemingly individual, issues brings these everyday lived experiences into public consciousness.”

THE PARTICULAR WAYS IN WHICH READERS ENGAGE WITH TEXTS

Seven TAs associated a particular way of reading—oftentimes, a systematic strategy or distinct stance—with the threshold concept that they identified. Hunter observes, “History as a discourse community is predicated on the idea that different historians will read documents differently.” Similarly, Kurt claims that in comparative literature, expert readers’ engagements with texts are governed by a particular orientation towards reading, which is necessary to fully assimilate the notion that “language is a social and cultural phenomenon, and that all writing is metaphorical or translated.” More specifically, Kurt contends that “Every comparatist is keenly, perhaps painfully aware that connotations of words and turns of phrase are circumscribed by language.” Comparatists, according to Kurt, approach texts with a sophisticated awareness that translation is oftentimes already embedded within written language.

The threshold concept that Maya identified, “Folklore is Both Conservative and Dynamic,” also touches upon the implications of translating texts across languages and, therefore, considers the affordances and constraints inherent within the act of translation. She notes that it “is transmitted and tweaked not because people can’t remember every detail or couldn’t come up with something new, but because well-known stories of the past hold cultural value for us, and tweaking them in new and exciting ways breathes new life into something familiar.

Close reading is perhaps the clearest example of how integral the act of reading is to literate participation in the humanities fields. James, an English/literature TA, states that, “literature is made up of elements of language that exist independent of content but still influence meaning.” He turns to *close reading* to unearth these elements: a process that entails “what to look for in a text, how to identify metrical and sound patterns, how to analyze the way a sentence is put together, the arrangement of words in a sentence, how to consider word choice and diction.” These internal reading-based processes that James describes embody the requisite literate aptitude for thinking and practicing like a literary scholar.

IDENTIFYING THRESHOLD CONCEPTS THROUGH DISTINCT ROLES: INSTRUCTOR, STUDENT, RESEARCHER

Aside from the particular characteristics of threshold concepts, another noteworthy pattern emerged from TAs' practicum reflections: these NWTs often cited their various roles or "hats" they wore within the academy—as instructors, students (undergraduates and graduates), and researchers—and how they recognized the presence of various threshold concepts within these roles. By detailing memorable experiences from each of these three roles, TAs were able to pinpoint fundamental literate orientations in their humanities fields that had since become habituated as tacit knowledge. Each of these responses indicates liminal movement towards conceptualizing academic domains as distinct disciplinary sites that contain particular ways of thinking and practicing. By extension, this participation facilitates TAs' abilities to bridge theory and practice in relation to their FYC pedagogy: because TAs are asked to elucidate the movement, they've made along the path from novice to expert in their respective humanities programs, they become more consciously aware of how they've developed disciplinary literacies.

AS INSTRUCTORS

Ten of the eighteen TAs referenced a transformative moment that occurred when *their students*—typically in large survey-style lower-division courses—encountered bottlenecks in the curriculum. In these instances, TAs had breakthroughs in understanding *their own* discipline-specific ways of thinking and practicing—a shift that held considerable value for their ability to reconceptualize teaching and learning. After identifying *close reading* as a threshold concept of English/literature, James noted that “it was first necessary that I recognize precisely how troublesome this kind of knowledge was for my students, and then find ways of conveying the implications of this knowledge in a way that wasn't overly complex or confusing.”

A response offered by Anne underscores the importance of tacit knowledge for acquiring foundational principles in music. She cites the concept, “music is a universal language,” which first crystallized for her when she taught a music fundamentals class. She recalls:

Students would often ask me why the rules of musical notation were the way they were, and my best answer would often be the universally unsatisfying, “Because they...just ...ARE!” After a few weeks of TAing and being faced with questions like that, I realized that the reason I had trouble answering their ques-

tions was because I didn't have to think about reading music anymore. Although I never got to a point where I could always answer the students' questions in a way that was satisfying to them (or, really, to me), it did teach me the importance of stopping to think before I launched into an answer.

By being reminded of students' challenges, TAs like Anne are positioned to pinpoint previous curricular moments that required scaffolding which, in turn, may inform their FYC pedagogy.

Carlos elaborates on a threshold concept that he identified as a TA in religious studies: "theology is anthropology." "Students who are religious struggle with this threshold concept," he observes, "because it requires that they distance themselves from the claims of their tradition and recognize that their understanding of that tradition is historically specific [...] if one is to cite the Bible in religious studies, one needs to have an understanding of the historical context both for the Bible and for the traditions of its interpretation that one is drawing upon."

Similarly, Tom points to his former students' struggles in his explanation of a threshold concept from history, noting that "The concept that flummoxed the greatest number of students was the idea that history as it comes to us in textbooks and lectures was in fact written. Somebody took a lot of disparate primary documents, or more accurately for a textbook or lecture a lot of secondary source books, and synthesized them into a narrative."

As instructors who were in the process of realizing that these various essential ways of thinking and practicing were, in fact, threshold concepts in their disciplines, numerous TAs remarked feeling frustrated by the challenge of teaching or "explaining" these concepts. James, for example, noted that he was, at first, "oddly dismayed and frustrated" at his students' difficulties with conducting close readings of literary texts; however, upon later reflection, he admits that "it was first necessary that I recognize precisely how troublesome this kind of knowledge was for my students, and then find ways of conveying the implications of this knowledge in a way that wasn't overly complex or confusing." James' experiences as an English/literature instructor helped him reorient his teaching practices by considering his students' struggles with enacting the expert-level ways of thinking and practicing in that domain. In this way, he developed a more student-centered pedagogy.

AS STUDENTS

Seven TAs reported detecting disciplinary epiphanies as students. They made inductive insights by extrapolating patterns across artifacts, ideas, movements, or scholars to make connections and draw broader generalizations. These insights,

in turn, can offer clues to what a particular discipline values. As Adler-Kassner and Wardle point out, “Learning threshold concepts amounts to learning some of the assumptions of a community of practice” (8).

Tom recounts an exercise his high school history teacher used to introduce the class to historiography. The selected readings about the Civil War

. . . were written predominately by Southerners and contradicted nearly everything we knew about the Civil War. We discussed how the story differed from the history we knew. Despite employing largely the same “facts” and narrating the same events, Ulrich Phillips told a story that seemed alien to all of us. We discussed how this happened and learned that history as we understand it, despite happening just once, has been written and rewritten by every generation.

Tom also recalls a second formative instance in becoming a historian when he was a sophomore, and again, he clearly benefited from an inductive “ah ha” method of learning. As he explains, “I took a gateway seminar into the history major. They gave us a battery of about 500 pages worth of primary documents on the 1946 US presidential election, and after a couple weeks of reading told us to turn them into a historical narrative. Even though there were 15 people in the class, and we all used the same documents, none of us told the same story.”

The insights that Tom was able to make as a student—predominantly facilitated by how his instructors introduced content—is echoed by Joan, who realized as a first-year graduate student in an African American history course that “the narratives [historians] produce reflect their own perspective, personality, lived experience, and prior knowledge.” She explains that she identified this threshold concept through reading authors’ explanations of how they came to their subjects of study and notes that it was made apparent to her “when two scholars had very different interpretations of the same topic. This threshold concept was the most self-evident concept for the professor to comprehend, but for a new scholar of history, me, it was mind-blowing. I guess that’s why I love the idea of threshold concepts so much.” Tom and Joan each point to how their instructors constructed bottom-up learning experiences that held profound implications for their disciplinary orientations.

Detecting intertextual connections played a role in how another TA, George, learned to think like a historian. During his master’s program, George “trac[ed] developments of western political thought from Plato to Machiavelli to Rousseau.” Postulating an overarching question—“To what extent did the ideas of a particular historical moment reflect the social conditions in which they were

developed and disseminated?”—helped him pinpoint a threshold concept: “social contradictions, indeed, characterized nearly every aspect of society.”

AS RESEARCHERS

Seven TAs invoked their role as doctoral researchers when identifying a threshold concept in their discipline with language such as, “Within my own research project, I see this threshold concept at work in many ways;” “This threshold concept is actually the focal point of what I do within my own research;” and “This concept has played a major role in my research.” Stephen and Barbara both conceptualize larger disciplinary principles by tapping into their roles as researchers. Stephen, for instance, studies “one particularly powerful narrative of a bishop who defined the way that people characterized the theological controversies [...] As I trace this narrative and its reproduction in other contexts, I can develop a broader geographical/political picture of how individuals create a textual community and memory across space and time.”

Barbara’s ability to draw connections across “scholars from [different] schools of thought ranging from new criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response theory, psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, new historicism, gender studies, [to] postcolonial theory” helped her recognize that “one common thread could be found across all of these different movements.” She noticed this thread while preparing for her qualifying exams as a second-year graduate student, and it led her to conclude that these seemingly disparate movements “all treated literary texts as profound agents in society that should be considered for their potential impact on human thought and society.”

BUILDING ON DISCIPLINE-BASED INSIGHTS FOR PRAXIS: A MODEL OF RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS FOR TEACHING FYC

TAs’ responses to this practicum reflection yielded unique characteristics of threshold concepts and invoked memories about how they initially acquired such literacies. By acknowledging various ways of thinking and practicing *in disciplines*, TAs were able to bridge the disciplinary divide from the humanities to the composition field by developing an awareness of discipline-based learning. Such *across the disciplines* awareness offers a crucial milestone for NWTs tasked with teaching FYC from teaching for transfer and writing about writing perspectives.

As we analyzed the two patterns that we discussed in the previous section—that is, in naming threshold concepts, TAs (1) characterized their transformative power and (2) invoked their roles as instructors, students, and researchers when

they experienced these disciplinary breakthroughs—we began to see a model emerge. This model depicts TAs’ movement from (ostensibly) *unconsciously competent* humanities experts towards *consciously competent* composition instructors, and it can therefore provide insights for WPAs who are interested in emphasizing threshold concepts as a means of helping NWTs move through liminality in their TA preparation programs.

The following sections illustrate our three-tier, six-step model for how TAs make a paradoxical transition from (1) experts in their own fields to (2) novices in composition to (3) near-experts in composition. We begin most broadly by laying out three separate tiers that TAs navigate en route towards attaining *conscious competence*. We then examine the six steps that constitute these tiers. Lastly, we offer a brief case study that illustrates the role of the three tiers in one TA’s liminal movement. While the practicum reflection focuses on *consciousness* rather than on *competence*, per se (i.e., thinking versus practicing), the two are inextricably intertwined, and we argue that TAs’ enhanced *consciousness*—triggered by this practicum reflection—sets the stage for their *competence* to evolve and for the TAs to step through the doorway of disciplinarity.

The data revealed three tiers that portray how this practicum reflection facilitates TAs’ paradoxical transition: (1) using disciplinary expertise to activate prior knowledge about threshold concepts; (2) using threshold concepts to (re)conceptualize literacy across the disciplines; and (3) cultivating praxis for teaching FYC. Each tier is distinguished by its disciplinary domain and level of difficulty.

The first tier is straightforward; TAs channel their existing expertise and formulate a transformative idea in their respective humanities disciplines. The second tier is more challenging because TAs must step outside of their domains and conceptualize literacy within disciplinary sites, including the composition field’s disciplinary ways of thinking and practicing. The third tier asks TAs to consider how their still-developing theoretical foundation of composition’s threshold concepts will apply to their FYC classrooms. This task is particularly challenging because they’ve had very little in-class pedagogical experience to draw from at this point (two full weeks, to be exact). Figure 8.1 depicts these tiers. Across these three tiers, we see six unique steps at play—two steps per tier—that each play a pivotal role in facilitating TAs’ ability to move towards *conscious competence*. As TAs take these steps, they move through their liminality from tier one (*conscious competence* in the humanities) to tier two (*unconscious incompetence* in composition) and towards tier three (*conscious competence* in composition).

First, TAs (1) identify and explore a threshold concept in their home (humanities) discipline and, in turn, (2) recognize that threshold concepts do, in fact, exist. These first two initial steps encourage TAs to then (3) understand that threshold concepts are discipline-based ways of thinking and practicing. Once TAs have

crossed these three steps, they are positioned to (4) conceptualize how the composition field, like their own home discipline, also has particular threshold concepts. This fourth step is imperative because it is intended to trigger TAs' ability to identify the meta-threshold concept of composition: that writing is an activity *and a subject of study*. Because composition investigates the production, consumption, and distribution of texts—and such inquiries span disciplinary boundaries—the composition discipline examines other academic sites, like these TAs' humanities disciplines. Developing this awareness of literacy-mediated disciplinarity is crucial to TAs' development, especially because this FYC course's "genre studies" focus is predicated on the importance of transfer across disciplines.

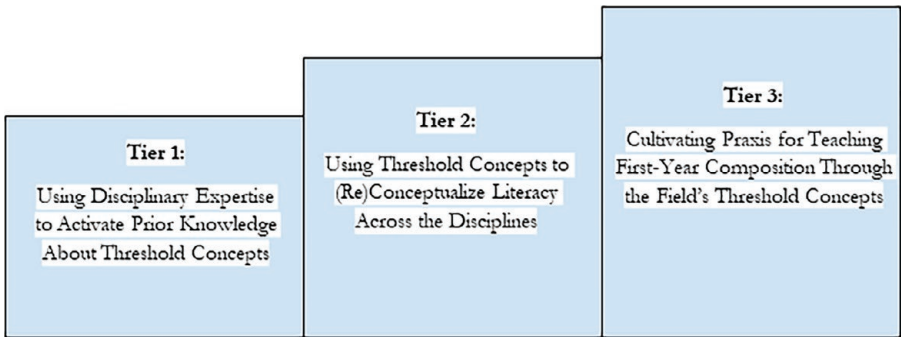


Figure 8.1. Three Tiers Towards Conscious Competence in Teaching FYC

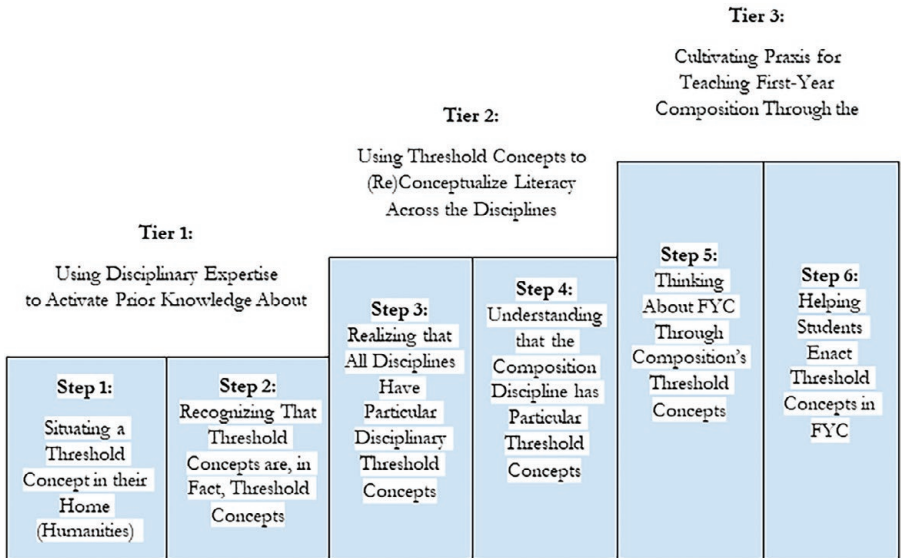


Figure 8.2. FYC TAs' Six Steps Through the Doorway of Disciplinarity

The remaining components of the reflective prompt ask TAs to (5) consider implications for their FYC course in light of these threshold concepts, as, ultimately, they are being asked to (6) help their students access and enact these same concepts. This process is designed to help the TAs become more conscious about not only composition but about their own disciplinary paradigms, as well. Figure 8.2 provides a visualization of this liminal trajectory.

STEP 1: SITUATING A THRESHOLD CONCEPT IN THEIR HOME (HUMANITIES) DISCIPLINE

In this initial step, TAs use their existing knowledge to pinpoint a threshold concept in their discipline. Chris notes that, “The discipline of history focuses primarily around one central threshold concept: the study of competing narratives.” And Beverly demonstrates Step 1 when she says, “The threshold concept in my discipline that I confront the most often is the idea that the academic study of religion is really about the study of people, not God or god.” In this way, the reflection draws out TAs’ expert-level *unconscious competence* in humanities fields to identify a transformative disciplinary insight. Unsurprisingly, Step 1 presented no challenge for this group of TAs because it merely asked them to identify habituated knowledge.

STEP 2: RECOGNIZING THAT THRESHOLD CONCEPTS ARE, IN FACT, THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

In Step 2, once TAs have identified a threshold concept in their field, they begin to recognize that threshold concepts are actually cognitive phenomena. This recognition is evident in Anne’s response when she states, “Reading Meyer and Land over the summer was a uniquely enlightening experience for me: I was finally able to put a name to this experience that I’d been facing in my classes all year, and even better, it was something that wasn’t unique to me or to the class!” Similarly, Cheryl thought back to “unlocking” foundational discipline-specific ideas as an undergraduate French major. She recalls that, “During my process of identifying a research question for my senior project [and] through the process of answering that question [...] I stepped through a couple of important ‘portals’ or threshold concepts that resulted in what Meyer and Land describe as a ‘transformed internal view.’”

STEP 3: REALIZING THAT ALL DISCIPLINES HAVE PARTICULAR DISCIPLINE-BASED THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

As TAs approach the second tier (Steps 3 and 4), they move away from their *conscious competence* in various humanities fields and begin moving towards

unconscious incompetence in a new field (i.e., composition). In Step 3, TAs discern that all disciplines have threshold concepts—a revelation that lends itself to realizing that threshold concepts are embedded within composition as well, thereby mounting Step 4. While *competence* does not suggest mastery, it does reflect the ability to operate effectively, albeit with careful attention.

Most of the TAs didn't explicitly address the third step in their reflections. A few TAs casually referenced other disciplines, like Douglas did when he notes that "One of the key threshold concepts in history, as in quite a few of the humanities [and] social science disciplines, is the idea that there is no single path of 'primitive' to 'modern' that all societies take." However, Douglas' acknowledgement of other disciplines doesn't seem to reach sufficiently useful depth for bridging his disciplinary expertise in the humanities with others' disciplinary expertise elsewhere; he doesn't spell out a particular transformative idea in another field. In another passage, Douglas points to the importance of guiding students toward recognizing threshold concepts in different fields, but also the difficulty: "Whether in history, or writing, or any number of other fields, threshold concepts can be one of the most difficult types of concepts to convey – and to convey fully, and successfully – but they are also easily among the most important." While accurate, these remarks are overly vague and therefore not particularly valuable for bridging disciplinary differences through threshold concepts.

To be fair, no other TAs explored a threshold concept from a field outside their own (aside from composition). Barbara's practicum reflection, however, begins to tap into other disciplines' distinct ways of thinking and practicing through the lens of a composition threshold concept. Her response demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how the composition field enacts literacy across all disciplines. She notes that, "Heidi Estrem's threshold concept in writing studies that 'writing creates and enacts identity and ideology' has helped me realize that writing was essential for helping me understand this foundational threshold concept in my discipline of English." She continues, "Disciplines have particular ways of asking and investigating questions that are enacted through and demonstrated in writing; teachers or researchers demonstrate their memberships in disciplines by using writing in ways validated by disciplines. It is thus through writing that disciplines, and writers' affiliations with those disciplines, are enacted."

Barbara's comment here reflects both Steps 3 and 4; she not only recognizes that all disciplines have threshold concepts, but she also transfers this understanding to composition. Her ability to navigate both steps simultaneously suggests that she's able to use the composition discipline as a lens *through which* to conceptualize literate practices in other disciplines. For this reason, Steps 3 and 4 may be best conceptualized as mutually reinforcing and iterative steps: an awareness that threshold concepts exist across disciplines and can heighten awareness that the

composition discipline is a discipline with particular ways of thinking and practicing. Conversely, knowledge about composition's threshold concepts—as Barbara demonstrates by referencing Estrem's (Adler-Kassner and Wardle) passage that “writing creates and enacts identity and ideology”—might lead to thinking about how writers create and enact these identities and ideologies in other disciplines.

STEP 4: UNDERSTANDING THAT THE COMPOSITION DISCIPLINE HAS PARTICULAR THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

As TAs approach Step 4 and enter the doorway of composition, some TAs' liminal movement begins to sputter. Evidence of both Steps 3 and 4 is much less prevalent than Steps 1 and 2. One likely explanation is because this group of TAs is still becoming acculturated to the ways of thinking and practicing in composition. In Steps 3 and 4, they're no longer relying on their prior knowledge to respond to the practicum reflection; instead, these steps require them to actively build knowledge in a new domain.

In *Naming What We Know*, Wardle and Adler-Kassner point to the importance of the overarching metaconcept that grounds all the other threshold concepts of composition: “The threshold concept that writing is a *subject of study as well as an activity* is troublesome because it contravenes popular conceptions of writing as basic, ideology-free skill” (p 16, emphasis added). Simply put, because texts and their production exist everywhere across (and beyond) the academy, it may be difficult to understand how these issues are all taken up by one field. In their practicum reflections, TAs oftentimes didn't explicitly refer to the composition discipline *as a* distinct field; however, a number of TAs alluded to the composition field's disciplinary knowledge base by paraphrasing and quoting the threshold concept literature.

The fourth step becomes central for TAs' composition praxis. By conceptualizing composition as a distinct discipline—that is, a discipline (like TAs' humanities disciplines) with a unique set of particular threshold concepts that are necessary for achieving expert-level proficiency in that domain—TAs are able to more fully theorize the goals of their FYC courses. They're taking their knowledge of disciplinaryity—including the composition field—and beginning to think through its applications for teaching composition.

STEP 5: THINKING ABOUT FYC THROUGH COMPOSITION'S THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Ultimately, the practicum reflection is intended to raise TAs' consciousness so that they can bring their still-forming theoretical foundations of the composition

discipline into their in-class teaching practices. In Step 5, as TAs begin to conceptualize their FYC course through the lens of these threshold concepts, they're striving for *conscious competence*, a process that continues to unfold as they further shape and hone their praxis. However, they inconsistently articulate these connections, which we also saw in Step 3 and 4, indicating that both tiers present challenges to TAs' liminal progression.

Nevertheless, some TAs were able to step through this fifth doorway. In the excerpt below, Barbara not only enacts Step 4, but she also points to the "vitally important" work her first-year students are doing "at [this] crucial moment in their academic careers." She goes on to say that "since the practice of writing is so key to discovering [students'] disciplinary identities, the work that they are doing in FYC (such as learning how to identify the different conventions of genre and to write within those different genres, especially the various genres of the academy) constitute a vital foundational step on their journey to becoming scholars and thinkers." Barbara grounds her understanding of her FYC course in the composition field's threshold concepts. Two phrases she utters, "the different conventions of genre and to write within those different genres" and "the various genres of the academy" implicitly invoke the meta-threshold concept—writing is an activity and a subject of study—and she uses this as the foundation for her course.

Maya also embodies Step 5 by invoking three specific threshold concepts of the composition field: "text is a subject outside oneself that can be improved and developed," "writing enacts disciplinarity, and "writing is informed by prior experience," all of which are integral to her FYC classroom. The last one is particularly essential for Maya's evolving praxis: "I think the big picture of Writing 2 actually shares a lot with this threshold concept: students need not get rid of what they know, but learn how to apply their knowledge effectively, with new strategies and approaches to help them do so." By pointing to these threshold concepts, Maya is using theory as a way to see the "big picture" of FYC's distinct role within the academy.

STEP 6: HELPING STUDENTS ENACT THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN FYC

In Step 6, TAs put their activated knowledge into practice by helping FYC students enact composition threshold concepts. The prompt for the practicum reflection doesn't explicitly address the sixth step, likely because the TAs have only just begun to teach FYC; TAs aren't yet positioned to reflect on how they are guiding their students toward recognizing the threshold concepts in the discipline. Reid et al.'s finding that it can take several years for composition TAs to embrace key principles of the field is reflected here. Indeed, the process of traversing Steps 4, 5, and 6 is ongoing while TAs continue to refine their FYC courses over time and use these experiences as a feedback loop to drive their praxis.

Our examination of TAs' responses to this practicum reflection indicate that TAs do not *consistently* address the elements of Steps 3 through 6, and so these two tiers present a source of liminal disorientation. However, one noteworthy pattern consistently emerged from the data, even for TAs who seemed to have challenges with these last two tiers: in their responses, over half of the TAs made explicit reference to the “there is no *what* without *why*” mantra that was continuously reinforced throughout TA preparation. This finding suggests that this group of TAs used this mantra as a foundation for bridging composition theory and practice. Even when they can't clearly articulate the composition discipline's threshold concepts—or how these concepts may manifest within their classrooms—they're nonetheless able to conceptualize the intertwined nature of praxis. TAs who are able to begin using praxis as a foothold to gain traction as they move through liminal space, we believe, have stepped through the doorway of the composition discipline and are moving towards *conscious competence*.

NEGOTIATING LIMINALITY: ILLUSTRATING ONE TA'S MOVEMENT TOWARDS CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

An excerpt from one TA's response encompasses all three tiers and demonstrates movement from *unconscious competence* in his home discipline of English/literature to *conscious competence* in composition. As such, it offers a useful illustration of how TAs negotiate liminality. Like so many of the other TAs, James moved his prior knowledge about his humanities discipline forward, which he then used to think through his composition praxis. He then gains liminal traction through this now-activated knowledge; he pivots from his role as an *expert* humanities scholar and then uses his previously habituated knowledge to facilitate his development as a *novice* compositionist.

When James recalls students' struggles understanding that “texts are made up of formal elements”—an essential practice for close reading in literature courses—he enacts Tier 1, “using disciplinary expertise to activate prior knowledge about threshold concepts.” He uses this knowledge, though, to think about teaching and learning in another context, thereby showing his ability to traverse Tier 2: “using threshold concepts to (re)conceptualize literacy across the disciplines.” Commenting on how students' challenges with close reading have impacted his pedagogical disposition, he continues, “I try not to underestimate just how troublesome this knowledge is, and I try to ease my students into this threshold concept slowly and deliberately, with the hope that, once fully comprehended, this knowledge might change the way they think about texts, writing, and the world around them.” At this point, James' (previously) *unconsciously competent* expertise in the humanities has already helped him move towards *conscious competence* of teaching FYC.

This “milestone,” as he describes it, is an important moment in James’ FYC praxis; it reveals a new understanding of how students develop as learners and reflects his developing composition praxis, reflecting Tier 3 “cultivating praxis for teaching FYC.” Although he has yet to apply his student-centered awareness into his FYC classroom in practical ways, the likelihood that he will do so is promising. When James says that he “tr[ies] to remind myself [...] not to underestimate” the troublesome nature of this knowledge for his students, he is demonstrating *conscious competence*. The fact that he does this “slowly and deliberately” further indicates that he has attained the level of *conscious competence* because it still requires his careful attention, yet his ability to support his students by scaffolding their learning in this way, reveals the progress he has made in recognizing and enacting the literacy practices of the composition field.

By reflecting on his past experiences as an English/literature instructor, alongside his students’ experiences in that context, James achieves liminal traction in his emerging composition praxis. Other novice composition instructors, however, may encounter challenges when they overlook these types of connections. Indeed, Lugg (in this volume) attributes the “difficulty [that] TAs have with negotiating complex and often completely foreign composition theory” to instances when “the relationship between their student and teacher identities ha[ve] not been interrogated” (92-93).

Altogether, James’ practicum reflection is unique in that it reveals successful movement across all three tiers. While this brief excerpt does not illustrate all six of the steps, per se, James’ reference to “knowledge [that] might change the way [students] think about texts, writing, and the world around them” captures the essence of this model: he is conceptualizing the goals of FYC through the ways of thinking and practicing like a compositionist, suggesting that he has indeed moved through the model. Collectively, the rest of the TAs in the cohort demonstrated similar liminal movement, albeit with varying degrees of mastery.

CONCLUSION

TAs’ experiences as experts within one disciplinary paradigm—humanities doctoral candidates—and novices within another domain—first-time FYC instructors—merit valuable opportunities for exploring liminality. Our analysis reveals how a particular practicum reflection prompt provides traction for NWTs’ liminal movement as they negotiate these two domains. Three sequential goals are embedded in this prompt: (1) activating TAs’ knowledge about the ways of thinking and practicing in their respective humanities disciplines; (2) creating knowledge *about disciplinarity* and using such insights as a means of detecting discipline-based literacy practices; and (3) eliciting the ways of thinking and

practicing of the composition field based, in part, on notions of disciplinarity. In this way, the notion of *transfer*—that is, the repurposing of literacy across disciplines—becomes leveraged as a way of bridging TAs’ theory-practice connections for their FYC praxis.

Using Reid’s (“Ten”) four stages of expertise as a frame, we contend that this particular practicum reflection facilitates TAs’ movement towards *consciousness* of composition praxis. By situating their own literate practices within context-dependent domains—e.g., history, religious studies, or comparative literature—TAs begin to situate literacy itself. This moment marks a pivotal transition in TAs’ liminal movement towards gaining expertise—or becoming *less* novice—as composition instructors. When NWTs can successfully demarcate these insights, they are able to “step through the doorway,” so to speak, of the composition discipline. The lens of disciplinarity yields the clarity necessary for transfer, and TAs’ prior knowledge of their own disciplinary literacies provides a basis for navigating this liminal space.

Based on TAs’ practicum reflections, some TAs appear to effortlessly make this leap. Others, though, seem to encounter a bottleneck when thinking about threshold concepts beyond their humanities disciplines. Despite reading about threshold concepts in *Naming What We Know*, numerous TAs didn’t point to specific threshold concepts in their practicum reflections, thereby overlooking fundamental ways of thinking and practicing of compositionists that they can—and hopefully will—bring to their FYC pedagogies.

We offer two ways for WPAs to make this practicum reflection prompt even more robust: (1) refining it through a series of more targeted directives and (2) expanding it to include opportunities for conducting empirical research. The first suggestion, drawing future TAs’ attention towards the four primary characteristics of threshold concepts that these TAs identified—their foundational nature, their social power, others’ frequent misperceptions, and ways of reading—may more firmly ground their understanding of threshold concepts. Further, encouraging TAs’ exploration of the three different “hats” they invoked when recollecting a transformative “ah ha” moment associated with disciplinary knowledge (i.e., students, researchers, and teachers) would also likely facilitate a deeper understanding of threshold concepts. In fact, the more that TAs invoke these various roles in their practicum reflections—and the deeper the experiences they draw upon to concretize their characterizations—the more fluid their liminal movement towards becoming a composition instructor seemed to become.

Secondly, instead of primarily relying on NWTs’ past reflections of disciplinary knowledge—i.e., their humanities-based literate expertise—this practicum reflection prompt—and others like it—might consider asking TAs to construct new knowledge through empirical investigation. Methods that are

conducive to education research such as surveys, interviews, and observations could yield valuable avenues for NWTs to examine threshold concepts, particularly for contexts that are unfamiliar to them. For instance, as a component of TA preparation, TAs could collectively apply Middendorf and Pace's decoding the disciplines framework in discussions with faculty. Such WAC partnerships would likely heighten TAs' ability to conceptualize literacy as a context-dependent activity, thereby providing a more concrete and nuanced view of the ways of thinking and practicing across the disciplines.

The six-step model that emerged from our analysis of TAs' responses to one practicum reflection prompt has the potential to cultivate *conscious competence* for teaching FYC by bridging divides between TAs' prior experiences and the composition field's ways of thinking and practicing. And despite this study's context-specific nature, this approach isn't limited to our specific site; it can be utilized in any writing program that employs NWTs. The composition field's threshold concepts can be used to privilege NWTs' existing expertise, guide their theory-practice connections, and assuage their sense of liminality.

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