The Ohio State University Writing Center—Dr. Genie Giaimo
Giaimo.13@osu.ed

Threshold Concepts and Transfer of Learning in the Writing Center
Training Module, 16 November, 2016

What is a threshold concept?
"A threshold concept is a concept that is critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice" (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2)
- Learning a threshold concept is transformative - it entails a conceptual shift in how we understand and see the world
- Once understood, they are often irreversible
- They are integrative, often demonstrating how phenomena are related and helping learners make connections
- Involve forms of "troublesome" knowledge, knowledge that seems counterintuitive

Example: *Writing is a knowledge-making activity*.
- Writing generates new thinking; it doesn't simply and transparently relay thinking that happens first. People often write in order to think.
- Why might this concept be troublesome for people? How does recognizing the knowledge-making potential of writing help writers and teachers or tutors of writing?

Why threshold concepts of writing studies?

Threshold concepts from writing studies are necessary to learn for people who want to participate in the discipline of writing studies/composition/writing centers, but they can also be helpful for writers outside of the discipline. Learning and naming threshold concepts about writing can help writers understand and improve their writing practice.

What threshold concepts are especially important in the writing center?
- Writing is a social and rhetorical activity.
  - Writing is a knowledge-making activity.
  - Writing addresses, invokes, and/or creates audiences.
  - Writing expresses and shares meaning to be reconstructed by the reader.
  - Words get their meaning from other words.
  - Writing is not natural.
  - Writing involves making ethical choices that arise from the relationship of the writer and reader.
  - Writing is a technology through which writers create and recreate meaning.
- Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms.
  - Genres are enacted by writers and readers.
  - Writing is a way of enacting disciplinarity.
- Writing enacts and creates ideologies.
  - Writing is linked to identity.
  - Writers' histories, processes, and identities vary
  - Writing is informed by prior experience.
- All writers have more to learn.

- - Text is an object outside of oneself that can be improved and revised.
    - Failure can be an important part of writing development.
    - Learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice, time, and effort.
    - Revision is central to developing writing.
    - Assessment is an essential component of learning to write.
    - Writing involves the negotiation of language differences.
  - Writing is (also always) a Cognitive Activity
    - Writing is an expression of embodied cognition.
    - Metacognition is not cognition.
    - Habituation can lead to entrenchment.
    - Reflection is critical for writers' development.

A possible threshold concept of tutoring:
Tutors need to learn that experienced, effective, conversational partners for writers regularly inhabit the role of "expert outsider" (Nowacek and Hughes in Adler-Kassner and Wardle).

Transfer of Learning in the Writing Center

What is transfer of learning?
- Foundational Definition: "the experience of performance on one task influences performance on some subsequent task"
- Through various experiences and reflection, people develop a *knowledge base* with which people link old and new information
  - Declarative Knowledge (writing knowledge) vs. Procedural Knowledge (writing practice)

What do we know about students' transfer of writing knowledge?
- Students need a language for that writing practice to help develop declarative knowledge about writing (so threshold concepts like "genre" can be helpful, as are reflective practices that can help students make connections across experiences)
- Some students have a difficult time seeing similarities across writing situations while others might be holding too tightly to old knowledge or practices (ex. 5 paragraph theme)

So how does transfer appear in the writing center?
- How can understanding threshold concepts of writing facilitate transfer?
- What must a writer know to be able to apply previous strategies appropriately to new writing situations?
- How can you encourage clients to make connections between current and past writing tasks?
- How do you, as a consultant, transfer knowledge of writing and/or tutoring?

Devet, Bonnie. "The Writing Center and Transfer of Learning: A Primer for Directors." *The Writing Center Journal*. 35.1 (2015): 119-151.
Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Elizabeth A. Wardle. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. 2015.