Review Essay

(Re)Considering the Past, Present, and Future of Threshold Concepts

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Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, editors. *(Re)Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*. Utah State UP, 2020. 354 pages.

In 2016 editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizbabeth Wardle embarked on an ambitious project to collaborate with writing studies scholars and generate information on the tenets and threshold concepts of our discipline. Three years later, they revisit these ideas in their book *(Re)Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*. Their edited collection works as a large addendum to the original book, *Naming What We Know* (*NWWK*), where the authors revisit threshold concepts to think more inclusively and critically about the implications of naming concepts, writing "The threshold concepts framework itself creates certain boundaries that include and exclude particular ideas . . . we should at no time use those mapping and naming exercises to suggest there is one coherent narrative of our (or any) discipline" (9). Throughout the seventeen chapters of this new book various authors across writing studies perpetuate further conversation about how the original book has shaped the work we do and the implications for the future of our discipline and beyond. The book is useful for writing studies scholars and teachers, writing program administrators, and those who seek to understand threshold concepts as a disciplinary approach. Specifically, the book helps address questions about how and why to implement threshold concept pedagogies in faculty initiatives within and across campus—such as WAC, Writing Centers, and Writing Programs—and the implications of this implementation to our discipline and communities.

Part 1: *Critiquing* Threshold Concepts

The first section of the book focuses on the implications of naming threshold concepts and offers thoughtful critiques and revisions. The author's primarily focus on who is included and excluded in the naming and throughout this section provide alternative or "aspirational" concepts (Adler-Kassner et al.), new threshold concepts for literacy (Vieira et al.), considerations for open-admission students (Phillips et al.), disciplinary questions (Hesse and O'Neill; Maher), and ideas for everyday writing (Yancey). As Adler-Kassner and Wardle pose in the introduction, "The chapters in part 1 acknowledge the contingency of knowing and naming, recognize the capaciousness of our field, and attest to the importance of being aware that any name for our field must be both inclusive of and connected to the varied work in which we all engage" (7). These chapters focus on smaller excerpts from a wide range of scholars, reminiscent of the original *NWWK*. The first chapter starts with Adler-Kassner and Wardle outlining challenges and critiques with responses from scholars who provide "aspirational concepts." The critiques largely point to the limitations of threshold concepts at large, specifically on how they "focus on boundedness between disciplines," "impose a particular kind of order that shapes epistemic contexts," "reflect and privilege particular viewpoints and leave out others," and "are not revolutionary or cutting edge to those to the field" (20–23). Thus, these critiques frame future concepts for those to attend to as we "reconsider" what we know. The aspirational concepts include: (1) "writing only occurs within accessible conditions" (Womack), (2) "writing assessment must be ethical" (Hammond, Poe, and Elliot), and (3) "writing is world-building" (Alexander and Rhodes). These newly-posed concepts illustrate the importance of acknowledging that threshold concepts are liminal and that they "are not by any means *the only ideas* we should be discussing" (31). In chapter 2, "Literacy Is a Sociohistoric Phenomenon with the Potential to Liberate and Oppress," Heap and Vieira focus on aspects of literacy, arguing that "It is incumbent upon educators and researchers to understand the conditions under which literacy can liberate, and the conditions under which it can oppress" (37). The authors describe the historical purposes for literacy and its uses as a gatekeeping tool as well as transformation. The section sets up further threshold concepts to consider such as "literacy and identity are constitutive" (Descourtis, Isaac, Senanayake, and Swift), "writing is racialized" (Castillo and Meejung Kim), "literacy is embodied" (Krzus-Shaw), "literacy is material" (Black, Ọládipọ, Krzus-Shaw, and Yang), and "literacy is an economic resource" (Vieira). The authors end the chapter by describing how literacy pedagogy *must* address power, context, and history, describing its

transformative power to resist normativity and to act as a "medium through which possibilities are both imagined and enacted" (50). Moving beyond literacy, in chapter 3 Phillips et al. describe the importance of considering threshold concepts for students gaining disciplinary knowledge at an open-access institution through instructor and ePortfolio data. Within the article they outline threshold concepts from *NWWK* and revisions for first-year writing generated from their experiences and data, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Threshold Concepts for FYW in Open-Admissions Classrooms (62)

New/revised threshold concepts for first-year writing	**Relationship to *Naming What We Know* (metaconcepts and subconcepts)**
Writing can be taught and learned	All writers have more to learn; writing is (also always) a cognitive activity
Writers write for different purposes and audiences, and often in genres with predictable conventions	Writing is a social and rhetorical activity; writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms
Reading and writing are interconnected activities	Not directly reflected in *NWWK*
Writing processes are individualized, require readers, and require revision	Revision is central to developing writing; reflection is critical for writers' development

After posing these revised outcomes, the authors argue that "Writing studies will benefit from continuing the process of *NWWK* by including more systematic analysis of student writing and writers from representative student populations" (73). The critiques in this first chapter help WPAs understand the contextual implications of using threshold concepts and how these should be revisited and revised to help serve specific faculty and student populations. Additionally, WPAs can use the authors' experiences as jumping off points to help work *with* faculty to rethink current threshold concepts and what is missing. These discussions help transition critiques from naming and revising threshold concepts to discussing implications for disciplinarity. As threshold concepts are not specific to Writing Studies, WPAs can also expand conversations about disciplinary naming and how to translate boundaries across campus and departments.

In chapter 4, Hesse and O'Neill explore whether or not writing studies should include creative writing and journalism, highlighting the implications of *writing* as the discipline name, arguing that we should acknowledge "key terms and definitions of shared terms" and "we should refer to and value those 'other' domains as we teach teachers" (91). Following the disciplinary conversation of writing studies, Jennifer Helene Maher's chapter questions the recent exclusion of "rhetoric" in the description of our discipline claiming rhetoric is "troublesome knowledge," similarly arguing as Hesse and O'Neill that we should expand and think creatively outside our discipline, helping "those in other disciplines, and the general public see the importance of rhetoric in all they produce and consume" (108). Additionally, in chapter 6 Patrick Sullivan continues expanding disciplinary boundaries describing the importance of deep reading "as a threshold concept that crosses disciplinary boundaries and links the work we do in the composition classroom with knowledge-making, meaning-making, and problem-solving activities in many areas of life outside the classroom" (126). Sullivan overall argues for teaching deep reading in the composition classroom and for our own disciplinary understanding. Part 1 is ended by Kathleen Blake Yancey, who describes how everyday writing with drawing forms the following relationships: "complements language, responds to an idea or text, complements *and* responds to an event, occasion, or text; elaborates writing; and/or works symbolically with language to respond to political events" (141). She writes that threshold concepts need to consider everyday writing and potential modifications beyond words but multimodality. Moving from revising threshold concepts to rethinking the implications of this framework for our discipline, part 1 illustrates the importance of expanding our discipline and helping scholars excluded from the original *NWWK* find space or avenues for future direction. Part 1 is particularly useful for scholars doing work on inclusive pedagogy, defining the discipline, and literacy work. As we continue to (re)consider what we know, this section helps WPAs consider critiques as specific to their context and research and identify follow-up questions that inform the work we do. The theoretical frameworks discussed in Part 1 can also help WPAs translate disciplinary ideas and future directions for their own departments and across campus. Further, these chapters help set up part 2 focusing on *how* threshold concepts are used within programs and classrooms.

Part 2: *Using* Threshold Concepts

Part 2 focuses on how *using* threshold concepts impacts larger programs, faculty learning, and undergraduate students. Throughout this section it

becomes apparent that threshold concepts provide a wide range of uses for writing studies scholars and are employed frequently and across institution type. WPAs work within a wide range of program types and part 2 helps form a roadmap for how to maneuver these different institutions and experiences. The application aspect of this section is particularly useful to exploring the implications of using threshold concepts and what needs to be (re)considered and what methods can be used to explore these practices. Within this section authors detail how using threshold concepts provides more purposeful faculty learning and conceptualizing of values from WPAs, contingent faculty, and GTAs. In chapters 8 and 9 the authors illustrate the importance of threshold concepts for community college writing programs and contingent faculty. In chapter 8 Mark Blaauw-Hara, Carrie Strand Tebeau, Dominic Borowiak, and Jami Blaauw-Hara outline the usefulness of threshold concepts personally and how they "provide a path through which faculty who hail from diverse disciplinary backgrounds can embrace the identity of community college writing teachers" (173). They pose the following recommendations to implement threshold concepts purposefully at community colleges: a robust community of practice, opportunities for early and ongoing conversation, and the compensatory value of intellectual involvement (171–72). In chapter 9, Lisa Tremain, Marianne Ahokas, Sarah Ben-Zvi, and Kerry Marsden describe how threshold concepts "*trans*formed how we think about teaching, writing knowledge, and our institutional and disciplinary identities" (176). They illustrate through reflections how their values shifted and end by stating that programs should create space for "faculty to reflect on and develop awareness of the ecologies in which such concepts are encountered and transformed" (191). Both chapters illustrate the usefulness of threshold concepts to bring people into the discipline and ground faculty learning efforts in community and context.

Chapters 10 and 11 extend these conversations beyond individual instructors to overall programs—with the first examining curricular shifts and redesigning first-year writing at a specific institution and the second focusing on redesigning GTA training to emphasize and focus on threshold concepts. Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Susan E. Shadle start by describing the importance of using *NWWK* to facilitate workshops, reading groups, faculty growth, and surveys in order to identify commonalities and spaces for further development in their writing program. They end by describing how threshold concepts work as a way to introduce and facilitate faculty development, which is taken up in the next chapter by Aimee C. Mapes and Susan Miller-Cochran. In GTA training, Mapes and Miller-Cochran describe using *NWWK* as a text to engage GTAs in conversation, introduce larger concepts and reasonings for curricular design, and facili-

tate transfer. They specifically focus on how threshold concepts provide a "shared lexicon or vocabulary and become a tool for reflection" (211). They end by describing how threshold concepts can create an entry point for GTAs for "pedagogical content knowledge in order to make sense of *what* theoretical principles they need to know to teach writing effectively (especially within a particular program), *why* those principles are important, and *how* they might put those principles into action in a writing classroom" (223). Both chapters illustrate the usefulness of threshold concepts in bridging the disparate disciplinary knowledge within writing programs and how *NWWK* facilitates useful workshops, concepts, and community building.

The next three chapters in part 2 focus on undergraduate students grappling with threshold concepts. Deborah Mutnick illustrates how threshold concepts allowed students to create a "dialectic between their formative discursive selves and their encounters with new knowledge" (228). She describes using a theme of literacy and identity to help students interrogate their past experiences with reading and writing, which led to resistance as an "object of study rather than an obstacle of learning" (241). Introducing students directly to threshold concepts is echoed in the next chapter where Rebecca Nowacek, Aishah Mahmood, Katherine Stein, Madylan Yarc, Sault Lopez, and Matt Thul describe peer tutor learning. They interrogate what threshold concepts tutors remember and value, highlighting the two most recognized concepts: (1) writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies and (2) writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms. They argue that tutors must grapple with concepts over time through three forms of knowledge: (1) common-sense knowledge, (2) ritual knowledge, and 3) conceptually difficult knowledge (250). The authors illustrate the importance of attending to the process and stages of learning to "better help students engage in deep and transformative learning" (259). The last chapter in part 2 focuses on the liminality in undergraduate writing. Fogarty et al. focus on threshold concepts at a writing center at an institution without a writing infrastructure. Drawing on data from a questionnaire, the authors describe how undergraduate students either embrace uncertainty or it prevents them from writing. They argue that "Within authentic liminality, the writer necessarily changes throughout" (272). The authors end their chapter with actions to help support writers in this structure—finalizing the section on using threshold concepts and how these actions support and sustain programs, instructors, and individual students. Part 2 is particularly important for writing program administrators who are implementing faculty and peer tutor learning within writing programs and writing centers. The chapters within this section help anticipate potential pitfalls and reveal the usefulness of reflection, contextualizing threshold concepts, and

accounting for resistance and learning across time. The final section of the book moves these same themes further by discussing the articulation of threshold concepts beyond writing studies to other parts of the university.

Part 3: *Translating* Threshold Concepts

The three chapters in the final section help WPAs and writing studies scholars maneuver articulating threshold concepts across institutions. Linda Adler-Kassner starts by describing data from a year-long faculty-development seminar on epistemologically inclusive teaching. By looking at a threshold concept framework, she engages with faculty across disciplines focusing on three framework components including: understanding disciplines, fostering learning, and understanding learners. Eventually in year two of the seminar she added the component "epistemologically inclusive disciplinarity" in order to engage faculty in how threshold concepts include and exclude individuals. The overall goal is to help instructors and students navigate the discomfort of entering liminal spaces and thresholds and "develop a framework appropriate for them as people working *in* disciplines so they can, for themselves, define and enact more epistemologically inclusive teaching" (294). Similarly, Elizabeth Wardle discusses in her subsequent chapter the importance of valuing disciplinary expertise in a WAC model for faculty development. She describes how faculty development honoring expertise allows teachers to form more disciplinary focused writing that is product and less generic. As she asserts, "Faculty are most engaged when they are acting from and examining their own expert practice" (310). In the final chapter Chris M. Anson, Chen Chen, and Ian G. Anson discuss using key writing terms across the curriculum to illustrate terminology that helps facilitate transfer across disciplines and unveil disciplinary values beyond writing studies. In their analysis they note tensions between key terms, threshold concepts, and disciplines and offer solutions such as faculty consultations, student translation of terminology, and website clarity. Overall, Adler-Kassner, Wardle, Chris M. Anson, Chen, and Ian G. Anson are focused on rethinking threshold concepts across the curriculum and discipline and argue for more explicit conversations about disciplinary values and terminology, consistency, and pedagogical interventions. As a large part of WPA work is translation across campus, these three chapters help WPAs frame conversations, explore faculty relationships in various disciplines, and provide a language for a wide variety of stakeholders. WPAs can learn how to frame faculty learning more concretely and the implications of using threshold concepts to build these initiatives. Reading about how to restructure faculty initiatives across campus also helps WPAs

doing WAC work anticipate questions and concerns from multiple angles. Further, these three chapters illustrate the usefulness of honoring a wide range of expertise and circle back to themes from Part 1 on inclusion and making space for a variety of teachers, scholars, staff, and administrators.

Conclusion

Adler-Kassner and Wardle's book helps illustrate the importance of continual knowledge building within a discipline and questioning what we name and know. They write that, "In the end, we continue to argue that threshold concepts provide *a* (not *the* or *the only*) useful framework to help disciplinary insiders investigate, make visible, interrogate, and critique the epistemological foundations of their disciplines, the values and ideologies associated with those foundations, and what ideas are included and excluded in its discourse practices" (330). The book ends with a call to continue taking up threshold concepts and interrogating what is missing, what the opportunities and challenges of using them includes, and who is excluded from these conversations. As outlined in *NWWK* one central concept is that "all writers have more to learn" and this book provides a useful way of acknowledging that all *writing scholars* have more to learn too, especially by listening to others and expanding the conversation beyond our own discipline and what is already named. For administrators, this book is a resource for translating threshold concepts within and across disciplines and how we can reconsider our boundaries for the faculty, students, and researchers we are responsible for and learning from. Adler-Kassner and Wardle have once again provided essential reading for WPAs to understand the work we do from theory to practice and the directions we can go and how we can get there.

Work Cited

Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, editors. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Utah State UP, 2016.

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