Conceptions of Work in First-Year Writing: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines the work of the composition classroom through the perceptions of two first-year students majoring in Advanced Medical Imaging Technology and their teacher, a masters-level graduate teaching assistant specializing in creative writing. While the national conversation around first-year composition suggests its ideal work is to disrupt student misconceptions about writing, a close look at the perceptions of the students and their teacher suggests other concerns to be more salient, due in part to their own anticipated professional trajectories. The essay explores why the national conversation around first-year composition should more closely attend to local conditions as well as how a threshold concept framework can engender productive reflection about the work of the composition classroom for both researchers and practitioners.

In an interview with first-year student Cailey, which took place the Spring after she completed her freshman writing requirement, I shared a story about working through a writing problem in graduate school:

> I remember being in the middle of a paper and knowing I had to change its direction. Like, the paper was going one way, but I needed to get it to go another way, to this totally different location. It was like redirecting a ship. The ship was going one direction and I was desperately at the wheel, trying to turn it, but I couldn't figure out how. So, what I kept saying to my friends was, "I don't know how to turn the ship." [*pause*] Okay, so that's a story about a writing problem that I had. I'm wondering if you relate to that problem or have had writing problems?

Cailey responded, "I wouldn't say that I've encountered any problems like that. And I like not having writing problems!" We laughed, and she continued, "Most of my problems are external, like how to please the teacher, how to get the paper long enough, stuff like that. I don't really have any turning-the-ship kind of problems. I don't know how to explain it. You seem to love writing. But it's not as important to me as anatomy or something like that." For Cailey, writing problems were hard to imagine; for me, writing problems are an unavoidable part of writing.

In the exchange with Cailey, my difficulty managing an essay's unwieldy structure seems linked to threshold concepts in writing studies. Threshold concepts refer to disciplinary ideas that act as portals, opening new ways of thinking about the subject

(Meyer & Land, 2003). Reviewing *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), which gathers a provisional list of threshold concepts in the writing studies, I might connect my experience to concepts such as "Writing is Not Natural" (pp. 27-28) and "Revision is Central to Developing Writers" (pp. 66-67). I might notice that, as I struggled to "turn the ship" of my paper through painful reorganization of transition sentences, I was engaging with *troublesome knowledge,* defined by Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land (2006) as a kind of bottleneck that happens when old ways of engaging subject matter don't accommodate new circumstances. Troublesomeness was not desirable to Cailey. A member of a learning community in the College of Allied Health Sciences, Cailey regarded her real problems as "anatomy problems," which were, of course, connected to her anticipated career.

Yet, first-year composition (FYC) has been theorized as a space for students to encounter writing problems by composition researchers (Downs & Robertson, 2015; Yancey, Taczac & Robertson, 2014). For example, Doug Downs and Liane Robertson collaborated on a chapter in *Naming What We Know* (2015) that details connections between threshold concepts and FYC curriculum. They argue that one central goal of FYC is for "students to examine and ideally reconsider prior knowledge about writing" (p. 105) and go on to explain that "early knowledge of writing is likely to be built on incomplete and inaccurate ideas about writing" (p. 105). These misconceptions tend to fall into certain domains, including: epistemology, or how knowledge is made; writing processes, or how writing is produced; writing as human interaction, or rhetoric; and textuality, or how texts should be read in relation to other texts. As students engage in the intended work of the composition classroom, misconceptions will be challenged, perhaps even corrected. Or will they?

A close look at how two students and a teacher engaged in a first-year writing class suggests alternative perceptions of the salient work of the composition classroom. Tracing the discrepancy between curricular and lived FYC work is one way to measure the distance between composition theory and practice, as Lisa Ede (2004) points out. Ede's review of the literature on the relationship between theory and practice concludes that "the hegemony of theory leads to the suppression of difference as it manifested in practice" (p. 123). Continuing to examine the everyday composition classroom, then, remains significant. A kind of dialectical movement between theory and praxis enables the refinement of each.

Threshold concepts are useful lenses for this analysis. As R. Mark Hall, Mikael Romo, and Elizabeth Wardle (2018) have noted, "we know very little about what it looks like for students to grapple with threshold concepts in writing studies" (para. 1). Likewise, we know little about engagement with threshold concepts in first-year writing, especially when the students and teacher are not particularly devoted to writing studies. Threshold concepts, as Julie Timmerans (2010) has written, "capture the inherently developmental nature of the trajectories of learning" (p. 4). As my story with writing problems suggests, engaging with threshold concepts involves negotiating a liminal space and, perhaps, being transformed. But is getting students to engage in troublesomeness a reasonable expectation for first-year writing?

The purpose of this essay, then, is to discuss how the work envisioned by the curriculum and popular conceptual frameworks circulating about composition work align with the work experienced and valued by participants in the classroom. The following sections will introduce the research site and study participants and describe how they engaged the curriculum and subsequently evaluated the class. Finally, I'll discuss how

teachers and researchers might use threshold concepts to bring theory and practice closer together in their own contexts.

Introducing the Research Site

The data shared here were collected as part of a larger IRB-approved study that explored the feedback cycle in two face-to-face first-year writing classrooms at the University of Cincinnati, an urban research university whose composition program serves nearly six thousand students annually (Carter & Malek, 2016). This essay relies on data from the interview transcripts of two students, Cailey and Nicole, and their graduate instructor, Sarah (all pseudonyms).

Curriculum is detailed in the biannual in-house publication *Student Guide to English Composition 1001* (Malek, Carter, Shivener, & Blewett, 2016). Course goals indicate that following completion of English Composition 1001, students should be able to:

1. Understand the complexity of different kinds of arguments and issues.
2. Recognize that different writing situations call for different strategies.
3. Recognize that texts are in conversation with other texts.
4. Understand and demonstrate the ethical responsibility of the writer to explore multiple perspectives on a topic.
5. Understand and demonstrate the ethical responsibility of the writer to cite sources and report findings accurately. (p. 5)

What is evident is that textuality, writing processes, and epistemology inform most of these goals—the same domains targeted by Downs and Robertson (2015). Thus, one could argue that while not explicitly referenced, threshold concepts underlie this FYC course. In fact, Downs and Robertson argue that learning outcomes can reveal the "implicit presence" of threshold concepts in a course (p. 115). This is an important point because it connects the curriculum of the focal classroom to the larger scholarly conversation around FYC.

Introducing Students Cailey and Nicole

Cailey and Nicole took FYC the first semester of their freshman year. Both were white, cis-gendered, and able-bodied eighteen-year-old women from Ohio. As previously mentioned, both were part of the Advanced Medical Imaging Technology (AMIT) learning community. Participation in learning communities is a required element of any major in the College of Allied Health Sciences and has been since 2008 (K. Metzer, personal correspondence, July 1, 2018).

When Nicole was asked about how she regarded herself as a student, she responded: "I'd consider myself a serious student, because I know what my long-term goal is and I know that I need to stay focused." Her long-term goal, to be a non-invasive cardiologist, informs her immediate perception of herself as a student. Similarly, Cailey indicated that she wanted to be in the medical field and that everything else, which I take to include her non-major courses, was "just what needed to be done" to get there.

For both students, primary social connections at the university were established through their learning community, due in part to proximity. "We have the exact same schedule," Nicole said. By the end of the term, the women she sat near in composition "ended up being, like, my best friends." Such social connections are meaningful not just for those in the group but also for university administrators, who have found that participation in a learning community improves retention and overall college satisfaction (ASHE-ERIC, 1999; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Tinto, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition to taking classes together, students enroll in a one-credit course titled "Success Skills in Health Sciences," which is peer-led by a sophomore in the major and

introduces students to a senior professor in the department. Cailey perceived the primary work of the success skills to be social cohesion: "It was just an easy class . . . just to get to know our future professor, all the people in my major, it was basically just to get closer to them."

From the perspective of writing studies, a learning community enculturates students into what John Swales (1990) has called a discourse community. It includes a mix of novices and experts, curriculum tied to advancement within the community, both informal and formal feedback mechanisms, and so forth. As Paul Prior (1997) has pointed out, students' literate trajectories are "multiple," "laminated" and "fundamentally heterogenous" (p. 20). Nonetheless, the establishment of pre-professional learning communities are likely impacting the reception of composition curriculum, as well as other general education classes, in ways that merit further investigation.

Similar investigations have been undertaken in the past. Russel Durst (1999) argued that teachers and students in composition were on a "collision course" (p. 2). While most first-year composition students were "career-oriented pragmatists" who would prefer to "learn a way of writing that is simple, quick, and efficient" (p. 2), teachers wished to "complicate rather than simplify students' lives" by stressing "much more complex and demanding notions of critical literacy" (p. 3). Although the cultural studies-based curriculum popular during the nineties has shifted, the tensions highlighted by Durst are, I argue, only increased when students engage general education courses with groups of career-oriented peers. Ray Land (2016) has recently made a similar point, arguing that increasingly "consumerist" minded students will resist the "pedagogies of uncertainty" represented by threshold concepts, which he sees as offering a "counter-discourse" to the pedagogies which are more "formulaic and comfortable" (p. 12).

In all, then, Cailey and Nicole represent a growing segment of the student body both nationally and locally. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) indicates that majors in Health Sciences increased by about 100% over the last eight years, which is higher than most other majors in terms of growth. At the local level, enrollment in the College of Allied Health Sciences has been steadily increasing over the last ten years, with around 240 undergraduate students in 2016 (K. Metzer, personal correspondence, July 1, 2018). Just as Cailey and Nicole's undergraduate efforts were funneled toward distant visions of themselves as professionals in the field of AMIT, so also their instructor was focused on her own career trajectory in the field of creative writing.

Introducing Graduate Assistant Sarah

Sarah, a second-year master's student studying creative writing, was teaching FYC for the third time in the Fall of 2016. She preferred to draw from her creative writing background when possible, especially when offering feedback:

> I've had a lot of practice responding to peers' work in workshops. It translates [to composition] mostly pretty well. So I annotate [students' writing] as I go and read with a pen in my hand and then I will just write a summation of what I did. Since composition students could be really easily overwhelmed, I give a short summation, like "do these two things and then we'll talk," and I think that goes a little easier.

Although she enjoyed teaching composition, she had a hard time understanding the curriculum that she inherited, noting "I feel like when I walk into the classroom, I am also learning what composition is at the same time that my students are because I'm such a new teacher." In order to incorporate creative writing into the composition classroom, she

added an assignment to FYC course titled "The Rhetoric of Creative Writing," which scaffolded toward the first major essay. She began the term unaware that she was teaching students in an AMIT learning community.

In all, Sarah was a type of teacher that has often been studied in composition programs (Bishop, 1990; Ebest, 2005; Estrem & Reid, 2012; Rankin, 1994; Reid, Estrem & Belchier, 2012; Restaino, 2012). While she acknowledged a lack of connection with the field of composition studies, that is not unusual. Further, her conception of the course resonated with the course goals. She said:

> One of the things I try to press on my students because I feel it so strongly is . . . that composition is relevant, and that the first draft is never the final draft. I also try to connect the course to real-world events . . . I'm trying to make them see that composition isn't something you do for one semester and then you stop. I think the most important thing is for students to realize they use rhetoric and rhetorical analysis every day of their lives and that they already had these skills before they got into the classroom.

Sarah perceived communication as rhetorical, writing as an iterative process, and composition as having broad relevance for other writing situations. While Sarah's vision for the course connected to the course goals—and, one might extrapolate, to threshold concepts—she had difficulty translating the curriculum in the classroom.

The Ups and Downs of Engaging the Curriculum

The first two times Sarah taught the course, she didn't fully understand what a rhetorical analysis was, and therefore she graded the essays leniently. When Cailey and Nicole were in her class, however, she introduced the aforementioned "Rhetoric of Creative Writing" assignment, which asked students to apply rhetorical appeals to a peer-authored commercial script before analyzing a professionally produced commercial. Sarah found the resulting analysis drafts to be "the best batch" she'd seen. As her confidence grew, she found herself holding the students to a higher standard. She elaborated:

> In the past I've been, I still think I am, a pretty easy grader. In the past I was an extra easy grader I think, where some of these students that got B's would get A's if they had me last year. Because I'm more confident in my teaching and I'm more confident that they have actually received what I have been trying to convey, I'm grading a little bit harsher I think. Before I was like, "Well it's not your fault. Here's a B when you deserve a C," or something. I thought it was a reflection of me. Now I don't think that as much.

After students turned drafts, they conferenced with Sarah about their work. From my perspective, these conferences marked a particularly effective moment in the term.

Sarah began each 20-minute conference by asking if there was anything the student wanted to talk about. Then she read the student's paper and offered immediate feedback. Cailey and Nicole were impressed. Cailey said: "I'm amazed at how fast she went through this [draft]. She got a lot [of feedback] in there. She had a lot of comments, in the two seconds that she read it. I was like, 'oh, okay.' A little shocked." She felt buoyed by Sarah's comments on her paper, particularly when Sarah expressed what she liked about Cailey's work. "I can see her response in her face," she said. "She got super excited about it . . . and I was going with her. She made me pumped up. She kept checking [parts she liked], and I was like 'You keep checking, I like that.'" Nicole, who'd had difficulty during the writing process, also appreciated the conference. "I really enjoyed that she met with us individually," she said. "I think I hear more voice-to-voice than I do [with written feedback] just on my paper. She

complimented me on some things, which I thought was really cool. She helped me fix things. She encouraged me to move things to different spots." In these exchanges, Cailey and Nicole watched their writing impact a reader. Through these conferences, then, Sarah strongly reinforced the conception of writing as human interaction.

When the units shifted to the research paper, however, Sarah felt less certain. In a sense, she felt the genre was easy to teach because, unlike a rhetorical analysis, she'd written a research paper before. However, she wasn't sure exactly how to implement the scaffolding steps, including the proposal. "I don't grade the proposal in the way I feel I should," she said. "I'm just sort of checking it off, not grading it in a nuanced way." She elaborated on her approach to the proposal:

> The proposal is sort of me looking at their stuff and being like, "looks good." Like, "You're actually writing an argument. Have a nice day." Versus something that I spend a lot of time writing on or giving back to them. It's like a check-in basically before they start writing because I find sometimes they're not actually arguing anything. They're just sort of exploring an issue, which is not the kind of paper they're meant to be writing.

To efficiently move through the line of students, Sarah would confirm that the students had a debatable topic, that they had identified their side, that they'd found at least five relevant resources, and that they knew at least one counter-argument.

Sarah's implementation of the assignment undercuts its design, which emphasizes that research topics are not simply two-sided issues. Sarah's students, however, followed her lead. In fact, Cailey and Nicole decided to write about the same topic, the impact of social media on relationships of college students, and both argued for the same broad position: that students should put down their phones. Both picked the topic because they felt it would be "easy." Both found sources

and developed similar theses. After their respective proposal conferences, both received a check. Nicole said:

> Obviously, I decided that I was against social media in interpersonal relationships. I think it breaks the relationships. [I found] my three main points. Then, luckily, my last main point was found in one of the articles. It was that social media engages in communication with other people across space and time. I decided that was going to be my counterargument. I really lucked out because I had three points for my side and then luckily I had one thing that could be my counterargument. That just happened like that, I didn't try to find a counterargument at all.

Nicole is offering an account of slotting research into paragraphs to usher the paper to tidy completion. She later said that she planned to "dedicate an entire page" to each main point "consuming roughly three pages total." When asked how she planned to write the paper, she said, "I feel like I'm going to include too many quotes and not describe them and talk about them as much. I just have to remind myself to talk about them in between the quotes." In essence, her anticipated drafting process was akin to *patchwriting*, a compositional approach that involves pasting together quotations and that can be vulnerable to plagiarism (Howard, 1995).

This is the part of the class where I see negative misconceptions about writing being reinforced. Nicole, as evidenced through her interview comments, perceived writing as an act of systematic organization of information, into which her own angle of vision was irrelevant. Neither student was deeply invested in the project. When I met with Cailey the following semester, she couldn't remember her topic. Her forgetfulness contrasted sharply with our first interview, during which she easily recalled writing assignments from high school. The idea

writing would involve troublesomeness did not emerge, at least not in our interviews. Instead, students sought to meet the assignment goals as painlessly as possible, seeking what I regard as "pedagogies of certainty" (Land, 2016).

When interviewed about their actual social media practices, both indicated that their own engagement with social media was more complex than their research essays would have suggested. Cailey said she subscribed to five social media accounts, each for particular reasons, and Nicole indicated that she used many so-called social media platforms for not terribly social purposes. For instance, she used Pinterest to find recipes, not to make connections; another social media site, Instagram, provided a way that she and her roommates kept in touch, called a "streak." In this instance, social media benefited face-to-face friendships. Neither Nicole nor Cailey felt that they would change the way they engaged social media as a result of exploring the topic for the research essay, or that their personal experiences were relevant to their essays.

What kinds of problematic misconceptions of writing are being confirmed here? First, there's an impoverished understanding of writing as a way of creating new knowledge. Rather than writing papers that reflected their own grounded understandings of online sociality, Cailey and Nicole reported the research of authorities. Second, their processes for composing were generally linear, driven by quotations from the sources more than their own syntheses. And, ultimately, they were unchanged by engaging in the assignment. In the remaining weeks, their engagement with composition became more sporadic, with both focusing more heavily on their major-related courses. Other members of the AMIT learning community reinforced these attitudes. Cailey and a friend enjoyed what they dubbed "The Procrastinator's Lunch" while Nicole and her friends made videos for their composition class's final assignment in a single day.

After the term ended, Cailey and Nicole expressed positive feelings about FYC. They particularly enjoyed having their writing read by Sarah. Both said they would take a course from her again. Yet neither Cailey nor Nicole felt that there was a link between the writing they produced for FYC and their other courses. "I'm not going to write a rhetorical analysis in a science class," said Cailey.

Sarah was also distracted throughout the final third of the semester, as she was submitting application for MFA programs and completing three seminar papers for her own classes. As she reflected on her teaching, Sarah felt conflicted. On the one hand, she felt that writing produced for FYC shouldn't be formulaic. On the other hand, she couldn't seem to find a way to assess the writing that didn't rely on formulas. She was taken aback when a student wrote in his final reflection that he'd learned that writing didn't require much individual creativity. "If he learned that, then I failed him," she said. The following semester, when we met for our final interview, she shared that she was shifting the way she taught the research essay, particularly the proposal. She was taking more time with the drafts. She regarded the previous term's class as the best she'd taught yet. She thought her current class might turn out to be even better.

Alternative Conception of Work in the Composition Classroom

Despite what I, as an outside researcher, perceived as the problems with the implementation of the research unit, the students and the teacher regarded this class as a success. It might be tempting to dismiss their evaluations of the course, particularly the student evaluations. But, of course, student evaluations are significant at a local level despite persistent concerns about their biases. By all external markers, then, this was a successful course. If the writing partly

sidestepped the intended work of the composition class, why did the students and teacher regard the course so highly?

One reason, I contend, is that the teacher had an alternative idea of the work of the composition classroom. As Durst (1999) points out, whatever the approved curriculum says, "the people teaching writing are individuals with their own understandings about the nature of writing . . . and their own styles of interacting with students" (p. 18). These goals did not have as much to do with writing as with the kind of classroom Sarah wanted to establish. She explained:

> I dress a little bit more casually, not super casually, but I dress more casually. . . . I do toe the line to be an approachable presence as opposed to an authoritative presence. . . . They're entering a world of scholarship where their opinions and voices matter and they're not expected to just digest and return. It's hard though, whenever we meet and they still say, "what do you want?" But I hope that by making my approach different than teachers in the past, [I communicate] "this is for you, not for me."

Sarah was attentive to the way she dressed, talked, moved in the class, and presented her syllabus. These performances, she hoped, added up to someone who was distinct from high school teachers, and who was interested in students authentically engaging the course material.

These goals were partially achieved. Students did see her as someone who was fundamentally like them. "She talks like us," said Nicole. "She feels older, but not that much older," said Cailey. Both felt that Sarah was, in fact, more interested in their ideas than their high school teachers had been. They responded to her persona. Put differently, Sarah successfully deployed grounding behaviors to build rapport with her students, as is common in both instructional and consumerist settings (Webb & Barrett, 2014). Sarah's goal of using grounding behaviors was not met in its second part, however, in that she wanted students to do more than to "digest and return" scholarly sources. In fact, as discussed, Cailey and Nicole did just that.

If the curriculum's intended work was to correct commonly held misconceptions about writing, the teacher and students seemed to offer a different conception of the work: to connect with each other, to meet each other's informal expectations for writing, and to establish rapport that would facilitate productive interaction. College students, as work from psychology underscores, "are attuned to the relationships they have with their professors" and ratings of "instructional effectiveness reliably identify rapport as an important and discrete dimension of college teaching" (Meyers, 2010, p. 205). I suspect that because these unstated relational goals were met, the students and teacher regarded the class as a success, even though certain elements of the class fell short of the goals of the formal curriculum.

Discussion

Classroom practices are often privatized, perhaps because, as Ede (2004) has noted, "teaching has an in-your-face immediacy that is simultaneously powerful and difficult to capture" (p. 148). For teachers, Ede writes, the good lies "primarily in interpersonal relationships," while for scholars the good lies in "textual objects" (p. 149). It might be tempting to say that Sarah's goals for relational connection and the curriculum's goals for student learning have little to say to each other, or that Sarah's goals establishing a productive classroom environment makes way for the curriculum's goals to be achieved. Yet, that's not how Sarah experienced the classroom. Teaching all happened at once for her; she figured out the curriculum as she established rapport with the students. Students, too, perceived the classroom relationships as intertwined with their

learning. Sarah herself was also changing. While more formal studies of graduate teaching assistants have found little changes between the first and third year of teaching (Reid, Estrem, & Belcheir, 2012), my interviews with Sarah and her students enables me to articulate several ways Sarah was growing as a teacher:

- She was getting clearer on what she wants from the assignments, such as the rhetorical analysis.
- She was adding scaffolding steps that help make her expectations clearer to students, such as the Rhetoric for Creative Writing assignment.
- She was experimenting with when to hold conferences for maximum positive effect.

I notice that many of the positive ways Sarah was growing as a teacher were linked to her ability to connect the curriculum of FYC to her own professional interests in creative writing, not to her understanding of threshold concepts in writing studies.

Nonetheless, the reinforcement of commonly held misconceptions about writing was disappointing. As a researcher I found myself wondering, "What went wrong here?" Perhaps Sarah's inexperience with the curriculum was a problem. Other teachers, with the benefit of more experience, added scaffolding steps that required students to view their controversial issue from multiple sides. Or perhaps her lack of investment was a problem, although Sarah seems like an unusually invested teacher. She participated in the study, for instance, in order to improve her practice.

On the other hand, perhaps the problems relate more to the shifting expectations of Sarah's students. The presence of learning communities such as AMIT creates thicker social bonds and earlier-established professional identities. Examining how this phenomenon impacts FYC makes sense. In the case of this course, it seems clear that composition papers were competing with major-related tests for students' time.

In fact, both the teacher and the students were more focused on activities linked to their own professional trajectories than the writing classroom—for Sarah, applying to MFA programs, for the students, passing their final exams. These competing interests may have led to a kind of mutually agreed upon disengagement from the course, something George D. Kuh (2003), using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, argues is increasingly common in higher education.

As I look back to the question with which I opened this study—Did Cailey have a writing problem?—I have to admit that I still don't know. As long as Cailey perceives writing problems to lie primarily in the domain of those who "love writing," perhaps she will opt out of the kind of question-seeking approach that would enable meaningful engagement with writing problems as I described them. Or perhaps Cailey's desire to please the teacher does represent a kind of writing problem. As she seeks to meet a concrete reader's expectations for a text, Cailey is doing rhetorical work linked to threshold concepts, even though she doesn't recognize it as such. While I cannot offer a definitive answer to that question, I do think asking the question itself offers a useful way to think about what is going on in FYC. As Timmermans (2010) has indicated of threshold concepts, they are best used to consider the developmental aspect of learning; that is, to pose questions about what it is teachers want students to be learning and to chart the journeys students take as they move through that process. This is work for the long-haul and, as this case study demonstrates, it sits somewhat uneasily in a first-year general education course.

Conclusion

Who gets to define and evaluate the work of

the composition classroom? Researchers and curriculum designers and writing program administrators? Expert teachers or novice teachers or students themselves? Though such a question may seem slippery and difficult, participants in the project of first-year composition from any location must answer the questions "What are we supposed to be doing here?" and "How do we know if we're doing it well?" While we already know that learning to teach, like learning to write, is a developmental process and that Sarah will continue to change her approaches to teaching, I argue that considering the interconnections between the curricular and lived work of FYC is useful. Perhaps Sarah would be aided in her immediate work of solving teaching problems via threshold concepts, especially her desire to discuss why writing formulas and creativity go together, and perhaps researchers would be pressed into addressing different questions related to the conceptual frameworks that currently inform conversations about FYC.

Both teaching and researching in rhetoric and composition require renewal, as well as continual reflection. In her study of beginning writing teachers, Wendy Bishop (1990) writes,

> What becomes clear is that "theory" or "orientation" or "attitude" means one thing to the theorist who is positing an "ideal" model . . . And it means another thing entirely to the practicing teacher who filters a theory through his or her reality and identity. (p. 139)

One might argue that the actual work of the composition classroom is being more carefully attended by to Sarah than by researchers who study declarative knowledge about writing. Yet researching composition, too, is a practice, as Ede (2004) points out. A danger of participating in the writing studies research community is that our growing body of research and conceptual frameworks is disconnected from the daily classroom work of teachers and students. In the face of these kinds of disciplinary divides, it is incumbent

on the research community to be attentive to everyday classrooms of teachers from a variety of positions in the field.

Threshold concepts offer a way to frame conversations about writing that matter with people situated differently in the composition discipline. Their emphasis on student learning, particularly the developmental trajectories students take as they move from novice to experts in disciplinary fields, opens the door for renewed investigation into the work of FYC. With their emphasis on troublesomeness and disruption, threshold concepts might not seem like an appealing addition to first-year writing. In fact, though, they offer a framework for communicating knowledge about writing that is broadly relevant to students and can foster productive reflection for both teachers and researchers. Further, their relationship with pedagogies of uncertainty, as Land has put it (2016), makes them especially relevant for investigating the particular dynamics of FYC today. If in many classrooms, as in the one featured here, teachers and students seem more interested in pedagogies of certainty than uncertainty, it may be that researchers should return to the threshold concept literature to ask how generalized thresholds for first-year courses can lead to the kind of productive troublesomeness that the thresholds promise. This research is increasingly relevant to the modern university, where there is increased pressure to treat students as consumers and teachers as solicitous providers—roles that developed into unexamined normalcy and should be disrupted in the interest of keeping more engaged and humanistic work central to the composition classroom. Examining composition classrooms through the lenses of threshold concepts, then, offers an opportunity to reflect on Composition with a capital C which, as Bruce Horner (2000) has written, designates a "historically situated institution, activity, and object of that activity" whose subject entails "the continual negotiation and value of the meaning of work

of writing, understood not simply as an
activity nor as a product but as a material and
social practice" (p. 255).

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