Re-Charting the Waters of Library-Writing Partnerships:

Sharing Threshold Concepts as the Foundation for Integrated Curricula, Collaborative Assessment, and Learning Transfer

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Introduction

Since the adoption of the ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, conversations in academic library instructional programs have shifted to discussions centering on how to incorporate threshold concepts (TCs) of information literacy into existing instructional programs. In the past year, various library instructional programs have reported on how they are using the *Framework* to further advance student learning through reinvigorated collaborations with writing programs; these collaborations are often centered on multi-session, or multi-module, information literacy instructional design.[1] Our study not only contributes to this conversation regarding the use of a multi-session model in information literacy instruction, but also further explores whether a multi-session collaboration can impact how students think about writing and researching as integrated processes informed by complementary TCs. In reading and analyzing published articulations of threshold concepts across information literacy (the *Framework*) and writing studies,[2] we identified shared TCs between the two disciplines, arguing that both fields are pushing instruction "away from skills and drills" and toward "core concepts."[3] While moving curriculum and instruction to focus on more rigorous, deep concepts can only benefit students' learning of those concepts, a challenge that emerges for programs is how to monitor and assess students' understanding of those concepts. We see the complementary TCs of our fields as an entry point into reconfiguring assessment in our programs, tracking learning "not through products but through experiences."[4] Furthermore, we see the assessment of students' understandings of these TCs as one that can only occur over time and through various avenues, as students continue to engage with the concepts in more complex ways and across multiple contexts.

Our discussion here focuses on this approach—as well as preliminary data from our current longitudinal study—to explore why and how programs can pair *teaching* concerns with plans for *assessing* students' understanding of TCs, *without* reducing the TCs to outcomes or checklists. Beginning before they ask questions and extending through the dissemination of their findings, our multi-session, two-semester approach is producing powerful albeit complicated results with our students. After outlining the pedagogical design behind our integrated curriculum, we discuss the impact that teaching shared TCs has had on our students' and our colleagues' perceptions of information literacy and writing instruction. We present preliminary findings from our longitu-

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dinal study: focus groups with instructors; quantitative data from pre- and post-learning inventories; and two case study comparisons, using interviews with students as well as reflections and research-based writing projects from their first two years of college.

Integrated Threshold Concepts: A Multi-Session Design across Two Semesters

To teach the shared TCs of information literacy and writing studies, our two-semester writing course sequence introduces students to the idea that writing is both an activity and a subject of study, drawing from Writing About Writing (WAW) approaches[5] and Teaching for Transfer (TFT) course[6] designs. The integration of shared TCs in the first-semester course, ENGW 1301, is currently in its pilot phase; we first explored integration of shared TCs in the second-semester course, ENGW 1302, as the overlap was immediately more obvious, and we are using the results of this integration to work backwards to design a scaffolded integration of shared TCs in this two-course sequence. In ENGW 1301, the emphasis is on providing students with a vocabulary for talking about and researching their own reading and writing practices. To do this, we introduce students to two of the ACRL Frames, Information Creation as a Process and Authority is Constructed and Contextual, and one of the writing studies TCs, Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity. Students read and discuss the TCs of writing studies from *Naming What We Know* (NWWK), which are connected to the overlapping Frames of information literacy through a series of three information literacy sessions. These sessions focus on helping students wrestle with the idea that authority shapes and is shaped by social and rhetorical acts and the information that is created (and consumed) as a result.

In the second-semester course, ENGW 1302, we introduce a third Frame, Scholarship as Conversation. We pair this information literacy TC with writing studies TCs to support a research proposal process used in the writing course. The focus on Scholarship as Conversation in this course stems from an underperforming Student Learning Outcome (SLO), "Formulate an appropriate research question," and echoes similar to work done with "research as conversation."[7] Previous assessments and conversations with faculty and library staff made evident that our students were not clear about how to approach answering a research question or why scholars even ask questions. Because our long-term goal is to help students see themselves as undergraduate scholars,[8] we want to help them build a schema for how to think about research. Building out from TFT assignments, students in this course complete a series of reflections through the semester, capturing the research and writing strategies they use to contribute to conversations about literacy practices in higher education—those they brought into the course and those they intend to take with them.

Shifting Schemas and Emerging Understandings: Assessing Students' Understanding of Shared TCs

Faculty Focus Group

In order for an integrated, multi-session model of information literacy instruction to be successful in enriching student learning of shared TCs, we recognized early on that developing a collaborative environment between library instructors and writing faculty was key. As we developed and slowly implemented the pilot phases of this integrated model, we sought feedback via a targeted focus group with a faculty whose sections of 1302 comprised our Spring 2016 pilot. The faculty of this cohort was overwhelmingly supportive of this new approach and offered evidence of their students' perceptions and progress, as well as specific insights for revisions of forthcoming iterations of this model.

When asked for their perspective regarding the turning over of four days of their class schedule to the information literacy sessions, faculty expressed the benefits that the different perspective (librarian as instructor)

provided to help reshape students' misconception of the library itself, as well as the topic of research and writing. Furthermore, faculty expressed that the multi-session approach reinforced the library as a hub for learning and academics, not just as a single service point for students.

Regarding the content of the sessions—Scholarship as Conversation—faculty noted that threads of the discussions from the sessions began appearing in students' discussions and conversations in the writing class, as well as in initial synthesis work that they completed in an early (Annotated Bibliography) assignment for their research projects. Faculty also expressed the benefits of their own engagement in the collaborative process of instruction on student learning and the seamlessness with which they were able to preface specific ideas to be explored in each session and then return to those ideas in the context of their assignment sequence.

Pre- and Post- Learning Inventories

Our conversations with faculty are encouraging in that they see the value that integrated information literacy instruction of shared TCs offers toward students' understanding of the link between research and writing. We were also curious as to whether *how* these shared TCs are taught makes a difference in students' self-reported understanding of the role of research in writing—specifically, is instruction of Scholarship as Conversation solely in information literacy sessions enough, or do students articulate their understanding of this concept when it is explicitly co-taught by both librarian and writing instructor, in both the information literacy sessions *and* in the writing classroom?

At the beginning and end of the semester, students in 1302 complete identical pre- and post-learning inventories, on which they self-report their understanding and application of various reading, writing, and research strategies on Likert-scale-based questions. Four questions on this inventory ask students to consider the role that their understanding of an "ongoing conversation" plays in the choices that they make when researching and writing:

1. Are you able to use the idea of entering into an ongoing conversation as a heuristic (an aid to discovery or invention) to get yourself started research and drafting academic papers?
2. Do you then use the idea of "entering an ongoing conversation" to make choices about how you write about the topic?
3. Do you use the idea of "entering an ongoing conversation" to help you find research sources about the topic?
4. Can you use the "ongoing conversation" to identify gaps in what you know about a topic?

Students respond to these questions by selecting one of the following responses:

1. Question doesn't make sense to me
2. No / Never Tried
3. Rarely / Not Very Well
4. Sometimes / Somewhat
5. Yes / Often / Fairly Well

We compared post-test scores between students in our Fall 2015 multi-session 1302 group and students in our Spring 2016 multi-session 1302 group to see whether differences in instruction of *shared* TCs affected students' self-reported understanding and use of the concept of an "ongoing conversation." Students in the Fall 2015 1302 group received direct instruction on Scholarship as Conversation both in the multi-session information literacy model (taught by a librarian) and in the writing classroom (taught by the writing instructor), whereas students in the Spring 2016 1302 group received direct instruction on Scholarship as Conversation only in the multi-session information literacy model (taught by the same librarian as in Fall 2015).

A univariate ANCOVA, with post-test responses as the dependent variable and pre-test responses as the covariate, was run for each individual question to determine whether a statistical difference exists (≤ 0.02) between post-test scores for students in each group. The analyses do not show a statistical difference between the groups. However, even though the difference in means is not statistically significant for any of the four questions, on two of the questions, the difference approaches significance (a significance value of 0.080 for Question 3 and a significance value of 0.044 for Question 4), with students in the Fall 2015 group reporting higher means than students in the Spring 2016 group.

Our initial interpretations of this data are encouraging: something *is* happening regarding the approach for teaching shared TCs and students' understanding of them, and we see it occurring in students who receive instruction of shared TCs in both the information literacy sessions, as well as the writing class.

Two Case Study Comparisons

As we continue to dive into our analysis of collected data representing student learning, we are finding that assessing students' understanding of TCs is challenging. There is no single assessment that can provide definitive proof of students' mastery of these big ideas. This is not surprising because the concepts themselves are troublesome and discursive; they are meant to be wrestled with in integrative fashion, and it is expected that learners will remain in a space of liminality as they traverse the novice-to-expert terrain on their journey toward transformed understanding.

The assessments that students currently engage with in our revised version of 1302 enable them to provide evidence of their emerging understandings of shared TCs through a variety of methods, such as metacognitive articulations of their practices, reflective writings, formal research-based writing projects, and interviews centered on reflection of transferable practices. In analyzing this evidence holistically, we are able to discern distinct moments that illustrate students' transforming understanding of the TCs. In these moments, students' articulations show that a shift is occurring in the way that they previously thought about research and writing and the new, if unstable, understandings that are emerging. Here we share articulations from two students who were a part of the Fall 2015 ENGW 1302 multi-session group. Shelby and Karolyn reflect on the understandings that they began to develop in 1302 and how those understandings are affecting their current practices in other courses.

Shelby: Scholarship as Conversation as "Post-1302" Reality

After the first information literacy session, Shelby noted how an understanding of the TC of Scholarship as Conversation was making research "less intimidating" for her. After an introduction to "listening" to academic conversation, she realized that her aim was to not think about researching an "argument or debate." On the contrary, she reflected that the TC would help her "approach the project with a more open mind because there isn't pressure to 'pick a side' or pressure to prove that one side is right or wrong, just to listen to what's out there." Ten weeks later, at the end of 1302, Shelby had refined her understanding of "what's out there," focusing now on the role of the library in her academic writing. After four information literacy sessions, she became interested in finding "writers, academics, and studies" that would help her build out her own ideas—not just report what she learned. Writing to herself, she even refers to texts and artifacts as her "helpful research friends." More importantly, she left the class asking how sources talk with each other and how other researchers' limitations are opportunities for one to further engage in the conversation.

A year later, in Fall 2016, Shelby continued to reflect upon her academic writing—and she's careful to distinguish academic writing as its own genre—as "post-1302." For her, the "game-changing" takeaway from 1302 was

the core TC: Scholarship as Conversation. Thinking about voices in conversation—extending, refining, and contributing to others—affects how she reads and annotates her sources and even how she teaches other first-year students as a writing intern. Shelby understands conversation as a distinguishing feature of academic writing, and she focuses on this work when writing for art history and when writing for co-taught classes in art and ethics. The concept of Scholarship as Conversation helps Shelby understand synthesis writing, careful representation of sources, and even argument construction and arrangement.

Shelby's interview and reflections offer a snapshot of a student who understands the significance of the TCs and who articulates methods for applying and integrating this work into her research-based writing process. From reading and annotating to drafting and revising, Shelby is listening to, engaging in, and responding to conversations by creating her own "niches." But when reading her writing projects, the moves are less obvious. When looking for how she constructs and represents ongoing conversation—at least in stand-alone, final products—the conversation is not always as apparent.

Karolyn: Researching the Research Question to "Minimize Cognitive Dissonance"

After the first information literacy session, Karolyn explained that Scholarship as Conversation "sets the stage for a more open-ended stance for the research project." She understands that her own research sources should be treated as "dynamic" and as "part of an ongoing discussion with multiple perspectives," something she notes as a change from high school; in fact, she notes an emerging understanding that she can no longer simply write out her claims or arguments. She even offers the image of a round table, one that accounts for all sides of a conversation, as a contrast for a rectangular table with "two opposing heads." Ten weeks later, at the end of 1302, Karolyn discloses that writing used to be, for her, "a hard assignment to tackle." After researching, reflecting, and writing about what she was learning in the TC-focused course, and after participating in sessions with her instructor and a librarian, she can now see writing as a "question-driven" process. She notes that research questions depend on "time, consideration, and research on the topic," or what she refers to as "the conversation," an understanding she ties back into the content of the information literacy sessions.

One year later, in Fall 2016, Karolyn still sees questions as central to research-based writing, and she continues to make researching her research questions a priority, but she also discusses how representing the whole conversation can be problematic, especially if she wants to avoid a data dump of "facts" she has learned. After noting that the value of the 1302 course was, for her, tied to its usefulness for students, she notes that before 1302, she had "never before allowed [herself] to put really put everything down on paper as words. It just really made a difference." She is finding value in writing to think across her courses.

If Scholarship as Conversation echoes in Shelby's head as she works, then Karolyn seems to hear refrains from the writing course and its TCs. Like Shelby, Karolyn understands the significance of conversations, but her interest returns to process—to the questions she is asking and the questions she can reasonably answer. She also defines good writing as writing works at "minimizing cognitive dissonance," an idea that can only be achieved if "you fully understand what you are writing about" and if the writer is keeping readers from being confused. When reading her polished writing projects, the work to research her research questions is not apparent, but we can see her "round table" approach emerging as she brings voices into conversations.

Conclusion

Because we agree with scholars who argue that TCs cannot be assessed as rote skills or reduced to learning outcomes, we propose that librarians and writing instructors collaborate to not only teach shared TCs of information literacy and writing studies, but also to assess students' learning in order to identify shifting schemas and

emerging understandings—what we argue are indicators that students are moving beyond the liminal space of TCs. The collaborations can serve as a check for both programs. The labor-intensive nature of this work—the curriculum development, the co-teaching, the endless data collection for assessment—creates pressure for immediate answers and for verification of expended resources, especially in terms of time and money of staff and contingent faculty. But, the true value of TCs for all our programs comes in the transfer of learning, something that cannot be rushed.

Notes

1. For the most recent examples of threshold concept centered, multi-session design, we recommend Donna Scheidt et al., "Pairing Course Assessment with Library Instruction Assessment of Freshman Composition: A Collaborative Project," in *Information Literacy: Research and Collaboration across Disciplines*, eds. Barbara J. D'Angelo, Sandra Jamieson, Barry Maid, and Janice R. Walker (Boulder, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse, 2016), 219–241. See also Heidi Slater, Michelle Rachal, and Patrick Ragains, "Pairing Course Assessment with Library Instruction Assessment of Freshman Composition: A Collaborative Project," in *The New Information Literacy Instruction: Best Practices*, eds. Patrick Ragains and M. Sandra Wood (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 27–40.
2. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, eds. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2015).
3. Brittney Johnson and I. Moriah McCracken, "Reading for Integration, Identifying Complementary Threshold Concepts: The *ACRL Framework* in Conversation with *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies,*" *Communications in Information Literacy* 10, no. 2 (2016): 195.
4. Ibid, 195.
5. Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" *College Composition and Communication* 58, no. 4 (2007): 552–584.
6. Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robinson, and Kara Taczak, *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* (Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2015).
7. Paula S. McMillen and Eric Hill. "Why Teach 'Research as a Conversation' in Freshman Composition Courses? A Metaphor to Help Librarians and Composition Instructors Develop a Shared Model," *Research Strategies* 20, no. 1–2 (2004): 3–22.
8. Laurie Grobman, "The Student Scholar: (Re)Negotiating Authorship and Authority," *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 1 (2009): W175-W196.

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