CHAPTER 21

TEACHING FOR TRANSFER?

Nonexperts Teaching Linked Information Literacy and Writing Classes

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Both writing studies (WS) and information literacy (IL) have the pedagogical objective of developing in students ways of thinking, researching, and writing that can transfer to other contexts. In recent years, scholars in both fields have increasingly embraced teaching the threshold concepts of their respective disciplines as a means of helping students at once recognize the situated, rhetorical character of research and writing practices but also identify those ideas, processes, and perspectives that can transfer across a range of research and writing contexts. In WS, this has taken the form of helping students study and analyze writing as compositionists do. Since “the study of writing involves consistent analysis of relationships between contexts, purposes, audiences, genres, and conventions,” when students “learn to conduct that analysis, they are both participating in the epistemological practices of the discipline and [are] likely . . . to be more adaptable writers” (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012, para. 3). IL has expressed this pedagogical emphasis in the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL, 2015) recent adoption of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education with its six frames that position information literacy as “an overarching set of abilities in which students are consumers and creators of information who can participate successfully in collaborative spaces” (para. 3).

The close conceptual and institutional relationship shared by IL and WS has initiated scholarship identifying connections between the two and theorizing how these can be applied in college and university courses on research and writing (Maid & D’Angelo, 2016; McCracken & Johnson, 2015; Purdy & McClure, 2016). While such work is necessary, introductory research and writing courses in higher education face constraints that rarely allow the implementation of theoretical or pedagogical ideals. Such courses are often taught by nonexperts, instructors who may possess terminal degrees in historically related fields but have little formal training in the threshold concepts of either IL or WS. Thus, while it is important to identify and spell out the connections between the threshold concepts of IL and WS, such work must be done with an eye for who will implement any resulting pedagogical insights and how to prepare those instructors to do so. What threshold concepts of IL and WS do nonexpert instructors (typically trained in literary studies) teach when they teach introductory research and/or writing courses? What training, support, and professional development will nonexperts need to make use of theoretical developments in their pedagogy?

This chapter will examine whether linking an IL and WS course together, taught by a nonexpert teacher, allows instructors to teach for transfer, or whether the threshold concepts of WS and IL prove to be more elusive. Conducting an analysis of two focus group sessions with nonexpert instructors who taught the same groups of students in a three-credit first-year writing course and a one-credit introductory information literacy course, this study identifies what threshold concepts of IL and WS such instructors are likely to teach and to what extent. Based on our findings, we make recommendations for how to train nonexpert writing instructors to better teach and link the threshold concepts of WS and IL in their courses.

DESCRIPTING THE CONTEXT; FORMING THE FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted our focus group sessions at an R2, private, mid-Atlantic Catholic university...
serving 9,000–10,000 students. As part of a broader CORE curriculum at the university, a number of first-year classes are grouped into learning communities in which the same group of first-year students take three classes grouped under a predetermined concept that serves as the theme of the community. Learning communities always include a first-semester composition course. The first-year writing course attached to each community is the first course in the first-year writing course sequence, a course focused on rhetorical analysis and argumentative writing. Students in the College of Liberal Arts are all enrolled in a learning community unless they are in the Honors College.

While tenure-stream faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate student teachers do teach learning community writing courses, instructors for learning community writing courses are typically drawn from full-time teaching faculty who are employed on contract for a set number of years, but who are not eligible for tenure. Full-time teaching faculty typically teach two sections of first-year writing, capped at 15 students each, in a learning community. As part of a pilot program beginning in the fall of 2016, full-time teaching faculty (and one experienced part-time instructor) were assigned to teach the required, one-credit information literacy course made up of the combined rosters of their learning community first-year writing classes. This meant that in these learning communities the same teacher would teach two sections of first-year writing and one section of information literacy taken by the students of their learning community writing courses. While many first-year writing instructors may not teach a separate information literacy course, our study provides a unique view into how first-year writing instructors view IL concepts when considering them separate from but still linked to writing, which can inform training for those teaching traditional writing courses since these often include lessons and assignments involving secondary research and the literate use of information sources as an integral part of the curriculum.

The instructors teaching both the first-year writing courses and information literacy courses in learning communities were the focus of our study since they represented nondiscipline instructors teaching introductory writing and research courses. We invited these instructors to participate in two focus groups, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end of the semester, in which we asked them a number of questions about their plans, experience, and sense of preparation in these courses. Five instructors participated in the first focus group, four of whom received their formal professional training in literary studies programs (all hold PhDs), while one had completed a master’s of fine arts. The second focus group at the end of the semester included three instructors who had been a part of the first focus group and one instructor who had not attended the first focus group meeting. All of these instructors hold PhDs in literary studies.

The focus group questions were designed to elicit instructors’ views of the goals of both courses, how they defined writing and information literacy both explicitly and in pedagogical practice, and what kinds of connections the instructors saw between the subject matter of the courses and the courses themselves (questions for both focus groups are included in Box 21.1). We allowed the participants to respond to each question as they saw fit, offering guidance or direction only when it was requested, believing that the instructors’ interpretations of the questions themselves could be
revealing about their perspectives on writing, information literacy, and the overlap between the two. We recorded both focus group sessions in their entirety and later transcribed the recordings. After transcription of each focus group recording, we coded the transcripts, identifying the IL threshold concepts and WS threshold concepts stated or implied by the participant respondents. IL threshold concepts were drawn from the ACRL framework and were identified by the director of Research and Information Skills, while the director of First-Year Writing identified the WS threshold concepts, calling primarily on the recently published *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) as a representation of widely agreed upon threshold concepts for WS.

**THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AND NONEXPERT INSTRUCTORS**

Analysis of the coded transcripts revealed patterns that seem unsurprising at first but reveal important insights about what training methods are likely to prove effective for preparing
nonexpert instructors who are likely to teach overlapping courses or even traditional composition courses in which research “skills” form a significant pedagogical component. Based on the data collected, the participants’ recognition and deployment of threshold concepts in both IL and WS was complicated and uneven. Generally speaking, participants did not typically identify or employ IL and WS threshold concepts in their pedagogy for either course as they represented it in the focus group discussions.

Rather than a genuinely rhetorical view of writing or research, participants tended to advance more universalist descriptions of composing and information literacy practices, relying on tropes of writing as self-expression and citing sources as granting a universally identifiable “credibility.” Participants used much of the terminology that might surround specific threshold concepts without pursuing the implications that would demonstrate full understanding or implementation. A particularly striking example would be the ACRL frame of Scholarship as Conversation, which is implied through a number of WS threshold concepts, identified in some recent scholarship (McCracken & Johnson, 2015; Purdy & McClure, 2016) such as “Writing is a social and rhetorical activity” (Roozen, 2015); “Writing mediates activity” (Russell, 2015); “Writing invokes/address/creates audiences” (Lunsford, 2015); “Writing is a way of enacting disciplinarity” (Lerner, 2015); and “Disciplinary and professional identities are constructed through writing” (Estrem, 2015). Each of these concepts in WS points to the ways in which writing in academic settings operates as a means of identifying and intervening in discipline-, and even subdiscipline-, specific conversations. Indeed, Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007) identify helping students see Scholarship as Conversation as a primary goal of their threshold concept–focused Introduction to Writing Studies first-year pedagogy.

Participants consistently took up the teaching of research and the deployment of sources in writing in terms of joining an existing conversation. For instance, one participant in the first focus group stated, “I’m trying to sell them this concept of entering a larger conversation actively, you know and that part of research is an active engine running toward it.” Another noted he would approach the class with the idea that students are “not necessarily researching to learn mastery of material, they’re researching to enter into an existing conversation, recognize the broad strokes of a debate or of an argument or of an issue . . .” in an attempt to give students opportunities to “react and respond that they can then write about as opposed echoing or repeating those good facts or good pieces of information that they found.” In the second focus group session, one participant said, “I was able to ask a bit more for especially the final paper in terms of putting the subject matter that we were sort of talking about in class . . . now ok, how do you put all of these resources together and think about this as a conversation?” These examples reflect a common consideration of conducting research and writing with sources as the practice of joining a larger conversation.

But while these comments exhibit an approach to teaching composition and information literacy using threshold concepts, the conceptual foundation for attending to conversations aligned less with socially understood visions of writing and research and more with expressivist conceptions of writing as the communication of individual ideas. This was most clearly expressed in the goals stated by participants for student
writing. One participant noted, “The thing I try to emphasize is, this idea of their writing to create their own knowledge, not repeating my knowledge back to me. . . . You know you have to find your own thing.” The key challenge for students, then, was not identifying the values, conventions, and widely recognized sources of authority for specific communities—disciplinary or otherwise—but finding the courage to express one’s own, individual ideas. Linked directly to this more individualized sense of what marks good writing were more generalized rules or universal strategies for what defines good writing and research. Another participant thus noted, “every paragraph, you really need to have 75% of that paragraph really your ideas your words because there’s that question of like how do you not let the voice get drowned out on the sentence to sentence level?” Another affirmed that the starting point of writing and research instruction involved “getting [students] into their own thinking and, ‘can I, can I be me?’” While, again, there is certainly some truth to these assertions that students need to see the writing they do as genuine and meaningful, the strategies implied by participant comments framed authenticity and meaning as the result of students affirming their individual selves rather than situating themselves within a community of practice in which their utterances might serve as a meaningful intervention.

Invention for these participants seemed to be an individual act that occurs when writer and topic are brought together and the individual writer is willing to move beyond repeating accepted information. Certainly helping students gain the confidence to make an argument is important and necessary and requires challenging much of their training in school situations to become passive receptacles. But framing this practice as simply a matter of identifying one’s own opinion and being willing to express it overlooks the ways in which scholarly conversations (and more public conversations) establish exigence for particular topics and not others, legitimize certain topics and not others, and demand a familiarity with particular sources, research, or intertextual traces and not others. The term “audience” was used by participants only twice in the first focus group session and not at all in the second. Related terms like “reader,” “community,” or “discourse” were as rare if not more so. So while “authority is constructed” through source use, the practice of constructing authority is the same for all discursive situations and the authority constructed thus applies to any situation.

In a similar way, the ACRL frame of Authority Is Constructed—which corresponds in many ways to the WS concept that “Disciplinary and professional identities are constructed through writing” (Estrem, 2015)—seemed superficially embraced rather than completely understood or implemented by participants. Source use was widely recognized as a means of establishing one’s authority to speak on a given topic, but how sources granted such authority depended on a view of authority as resting with objectively established associations with academe rather than with the perceptions of a particular audience. A representative view was expressed by one participant in the second focus group session when she described the work on evaluating sources in her information literacy course: “[W]e spent a lot of time talking about ‘this is what a scholarly journal looks like, this is what a scholarly book looks like,’ and I took them a lot of time like doing very simple,
fine, like this is how you know it’s credible, right? And things like, look at where it’s published, google the author, um, you know. If it’s a university press it’s automatically pretty much going to be fine.” The notion that authority or identity is constructed through source selection and writing is evident here, but like the concept of Scholarship as Conversation, the participants’ understanding reflects a narrow perspective of the dynamics of constructing authority and, thus, the implications of this concept likewise seem limited. Librarians would not be surprised to hear that some of the instructors required students to use “at least two books” or that they could not use certain Web sources; these requirements tend to ignore disciplinary or contextual situations surrounding the topics students would explore in their researched writing and to focus instead on notions of authority that tend to reflect humanities expectations.

A noteworthy exception was MLA formatting which, when discussed, was understood by all participants as narrowly applicable to humanities discourse and a problematic focus when teaching students who were generally not likely to pursue studies or careers in the humanities. Likewise, library database usage was recognized, particularly in the second focus group, as highly context- and discipline-dependent, leading participants to express doubts about their capability to teach students how to use databases for disciplines like nursing or chemistry even though database search practices may have some similarities across disciplines. Participants consistently interwove a strong sense of the contextual nature of research and citation practices throughout their discussions of the assignments they used and skills they taught in the one-credit-hour information literacy course, so much so that they did not focus as much on some of the more transferable aspects of Searching as Strategic Exploration or Information Has Value threshold concepts.

This speaks to the more interesting revelations apparent in the data. On the whole, participants lacked a sense of confidence in teaching information literacy skills despite the fact that they all identified themselves as expert researchers and many commonly teach research practices as part of their composition courses. This lack of confidence correlated directly with participants’ widespread recognition of their lack of expertise in the disciplinary knowledge of information literacy. One participant explained, “I will say, I felt like I was sort of underwater and not necessarily very prepared. It’s a whole . . . I mean . . . people you know have master’s degrees and everything in [information literacy]. It’s . . . to not have that background and to sort of jump in was difficult.” Another described the difficulty in adjusting to teaching the course and explained about his own training in multiple research methods courses that he “stretched whatever I retained from those courses, which I don’t know was a lot, until it broke [in the Information Literacy course].” The lack of confidence and desire for more expertise was such that all of the participants of the second focus group called for more training in information literacy, particularly the conceptual framework. One participant stated that she “would love to take a kind of summer crash course by librarians who’ve done library science just so I could be a little bit more like you guys” and added that she would like training on “some of the conceptual frameworks and what is currently in the discourse of library science right now.” Participants’ sense of
acquired expertise over the semester primarily took the form of greater experience with course logistics, classroom management, and hands-on use of pedagogical tools unique to the course rather than increased confidence in teaching research.

This was not, however, the case with discussions of the composition course and the WS threshold concepts. Apart from not noting that master’s degrees and PhDs are awarded in the discipline of WS just as they are in IL, participants seemed also to equate teaching first-year composition with expertise in WS. Certainly a reflective and conscientious teacher can develop significant expertise about composition and teaching composition, expertise that can include not only practitioner knowledge of classroom management but also significant insights into what writing and research are and how they work. Nor should we imagine that these instructors have no contact with WS research or do not seek supplements to their knowledge about writing and writing instruction. But the participants of our study exhibited a limited understanding of the counterintuitive, research-based knowledge of WS without a correlating recognition of those limitations or lack of confidence in their knowledge about writing or writing pedagogy. This seems easily explainable given their definitions of good writing as deriving from an assertion of one’s own opinions as well as the ways in which “writing” in most English department–based first-year writing courses is typically figured as writing according to the conventions of literary studies discourse or, at least, the humanities more generally. Given these definitions, these participants are experts in composition and are, thus, uniquely qualified for composition instruction and are unlikely to see a need for further training.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING NONEXPERT INSTRUCTORS

The results of our focus group point to specific directions that are likely necessary for training teachers to instruct students in the threshold concepts of IL and WS and the points of overlap between each. Perhaps the most obvious direction for further training demonstrated by the data is helping instructors fully understand what the overlapping threshold concepts of IL and WS are, as well as what the implications are for teaching writing and research in ways that are accurate and transferable across contexts.

As the data suggests, such training is likely to prove challenging for a number of reasons. Since threshold concepts represent the distinguishing, often counterintuitive expertise of specific disciplinary practices and ways of thinking, acquiring threshold concepts amounts to joining a discipline (Meyer & Land, 2006). Ushering nonexpert instructors into a disciplinary paradigm through limited training and professional opportunities is a tall order for trainers and trainees alike. The challenge of accomplishing this work suggests that training resources would be better focused on helping nonexpert instructors learn those concepts that most clearly align, theoretically and practically, between IL and WS.

Another important challenge to developing training that helps instructors teach the overlapping threshold concepts of IL and WS is the ways in which the language and experience of these instructors can obscure the difference between their existing approach and disciplinary perspectives. As we demonstrated above, study participants typically used language similar to the ACRL framework and WS threshold concepts but deployed that
language in rather narrowly defined and traditional ways. For participants, Scholarship as Conversation described the need for possessing differentiated opinions as a means of intervening in an existing debate but did not seem to indicate the connections between specific conversations and specific communities, the state of an existing conversation and the constraints it puts on identifying exigent topics, or the socially determined limitation on how a writer should frame one’s discussion of a given topic. Likewise, authority was seen as constructed through the use of sources but in ways that naturally derive from using scholarly sources on any topic and universally apply to any writing situation. Such appropriation of new terminology for more traditional misconceptions of writing and research is unsurprising since we all integrate new knowledge through the terministic screens in which we assess and construct meaning, but this does raise challenges for effective training.

This reality points to the usefulness of beginning training with an emphasis on the ACRL framework and then drawing out implications for writing as a similarly rhetorical practice. The National Research Council–sponsored 2000 study How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School suggests the importance of recognizing the limits of expertise in acquiring new skills and knowledge. The authors note that a view of experts as “accomplished novices” better supports initial and continued learning than a view of expertise as a destination at which one can finally arrive, stating, “Accomplished novices are skilled in many areas and proud of their accomplishments, but they realize that what they know is miniscule compared to all that is potentially knowable. This model helps free people to continue to learn even though they may have spent 10 to 20 years as an ‘expert’ in their field” (Bransford, Pellegrino, & Donovan, 2000, p. 29). Learning is thus much more likely to happen—for both the first-year college student or the long-time college teacher—when the learner perceives him- or herself as inexpert and open to the acquisition of new knowledge.

Because of participants’ recognition of the limits of their expertise in relation to the information literacy course, perhaps writing instructors would be better able to begin acquiring the necessary IL concepts than those of WS. Our participants’ recognition of a distinct, formal expert training in IL that they themselves did not possess and their failure to recognize distinct, formal expert training in WS as a reality points further to the likelihood of an openness to the ACRL framework than WS threshold concepts. To support training in both for nonexpert instructors, we would recommend focusing explicit training on the integrative aspects of the ACRL framework to show the interdependence of the framework to the practice of writing. For instance, a participant who has fully grasped how the selection of specific sources and intertextual traces constructs authority for the writer to a specific community of practice by indicating to that community that the author is not only familiar with the relevant research but knows how to manipulate it in discursively acceptable ways can be led to consider how other features of a particular text—its genre, terminology, sentence-level features, citation style, formatting, and so on—also work to construct authority for the author. In short, research and writing are part of the same socially defined practice of communicating effectively with a particular audience to mediate a specific activity (Russell, 1995).

But this itself may be a problem insofar as participants seemed to highly value the way
teaching information literacy and composition as two different courses allowed them to “compartmentalize” their teaching. In other words, the separate classes seemed to allow for instruction to focus on one or the other despite conscious efforts by participants to integrate the two courses through assignments, lesson activities, and class discussion. Valuing this kind of distinctness speaks to a view of the two practices as separate. Even for institutions where writing instructors teach information literacy as part of the writing curriculum, compartmentalization can occur in the form of a one-shot session or a series of research workshops taught by a librarian. This suggests the beginning of any training for writing instructors teaching information literacy should focus on where IL and WS threshold concepts overlap. This connection will likely challenge preconceived notions regarding writing and shift the instructors’ perceptions so that they are more open to viewing writing and research as contextualized, radically rhetorical practice.

While our study is limited due to the inclusion of a small number of participants teaching at a single institution, these instructors reflect the typical population of first-year writing instructors. Often, writing instructors teach information literacy concepts, and while they may not teach a separate IL course, first-year writing is traditionally used as an introduction to IL because of the overlap between IL and WS. Our study suggests future research evaluating the effectiveness of the training we have proposed—using IL TCs as a way to introduce writing instructors to some of the more “troublesome” WS TCs—could provide further recommendations for program directors in information literacy and writing studies. We envision that such training would enable nonexpert instructors to teach for transfer so that their students would see the integrative and rhetorical nature of research and writing, allowing pedagogical possibilities to overcome our institutional realities.

REFERENCES


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