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Re-Assessing Composition at Open Access Institutions: Using a Threshold Framework to Reshape Practice
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Recent developments in the scholarship of threshold concepts in writing studies can provide a durable and flexible conceptual framework that is responsive to neoliberal completion, job-readiness mandates within guided pathways and similar initiatives. A curriculum designed with a reflection-driven threshold concept framework is pedagogically and politically valuable to composition because of its ability to exist at the interstices theory and practice, addressing conditions surrounding composition at two-year colleges. This reflective aspect of the threshold concept framework is readily aligned with the positive element of guided pathways that emphasizes curricular cohesion through an emphasis on students' metacognitive development. Additionally, our model allows us to operate in the context of best practices in outcomes-based assessments, providing data on student writing and reflective practices, valued by a wide variety of stakeholders at our institution while maintaining a sustainable ecology of assessment that takes into account the material realities of two-year college labor.

Educational policy initiatives that deeply impact students' experiences with learning to write—sometimes in ways that are not supportive of writing development—are nothing new to compositionists. Initiatives such as tracking, ability grouping, and performance funding, while intended to increase student success, have been critiqued extensively for failing to support the diverse needs of students and creating ongoing pressures on literacy teachers to take measures of expediency that do not result in authentic learning. The Guided Pathways initiative has gained traction as a method for getting community college students to complete their degree programs, and to do it efficiently. Supporters argue its implementation ultimately leads to more college graduates and students with degrees of "value" (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015a). On one hand, we are wary of catch-all higher education reform models that do not seriously consider the complexities of students' lived experiences and goals, labor conditions, funding, and other important issues that factor into completion rates at open access institutions. On the other hand, we know these reform models shape our institutional realities as faculty members and inevitably impact composition as a disciplinary enterprise and an important site for literacy education across the US.

While we question the underlying assumptions of Complete College America and related initiatives that emphasize career readiness in a neoliberal economy, the guided pathways discussions at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) are based on a genuine desire to help uncertain students and essentially meet the very real challenges and consequences of student non-completion. Our goal as composition faculty is to ensure that SLCC implements the Guided Pathways initiative in ways that account for what we know about students' diverse literacy needs in the classroom and are responsive to the material realities of teaching composition at open access institutions. As Scott (2016) stated, "the neoliberalization of composition does not happen through explicit arguments that are more persuasive than their counterarguments; it happens operationally through the transformation of learning environments and the terms of labor of the people who work within them" (p. 33). Initiatives like Guided Pathways create circumstances that we as faculty do not have a hand in initially adopting, but that we must answer to nonetheless as they are operationalized at our institutions.

For this reason, we ask "how we might do assessment constructively, responsibly, and in a way consistent with current scholarly understandings of writers and writing, under circumstances not *yet* of our making" (Scott, 2017, p. 12). For us, this means building and sustaining the support of administrators and policymakers by providing them with empirical evidence derived from valid assessment of student writing, including reflective writing that allows us to highlight students' metacognitive growth and knowledge transfer. Writing scholars have shown the potential for threshold concepts for curricular and program design (Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, 2015)), which are particularly valuable to curricular and programmatic development because of their "flexible and contingent" nature, allowing for possible variations to emerge that inform and are informed by the local context (Yancey, 2015, p. xxviii). Still others have suggested compositionists can usefully assemble threshold frameworks that are grounded in theories of metacognition and enable knowledge transfer (Adler-Kassner, Clark, Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2017). Threshold concepts (TCs) have helped us build a curricular and programmatic framework that we believe can answer to outcomes-based models while staying consistent with the discipline's understanding of "writers and writing."

In this essay, we discuss how a threshold framework is leading us to new assessment practices that honor what we know about writers and writing while enabling us to produce data for the current outcomes-based culture at SLCC. We show how we are internally re-orienting our teaching and learning practices in response to the current climate, which is moving our faculty members to engage with each other and others about what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. As we enter the third year of our initiative, we have found that adopting a threshold framework has been a way to meaningfully engage with the challenges of administering and teaching composition at the two-year college.

We begin by considering how national initiatives in higher education, like Guided Pathways, directly and indirectly shape the institutional contexts that influence composition at SLCC. We then offer an overview of our threshold framework, and we end by

describing our program's emerging programmatic assessment initiative. Ultimately, we argue that threshold concepts can provide a durable and flexible conceptual framework that is valuable to composition because of its ability to exist "at the interstices" of theory and practice, addressing material and cultural conditions surrounding composition at two-year colleges, and readily aligning with institutional initiatives like Guided Pathways.

The Guided Pathways Initiative on the National and Institutional Levels

In 2012, according to the Government Accountability Office, "Tuition revenue for public colleges increased from 17 percent to 25 percent, surpassing state funding"—making it a momentous year in higher education (Emery-Arras, 2014, n.p.). For the first time, colleges and universities were receiving more of their money from tuition than from state and federal governments. While on the surface this may seem to show that schools were now in control of their own agendas, this was far from the truth. A neoliberal agenda was already working on community college campuses, Keith Kroll (2012) noted in his *TETYC* article, casting them as centers for career training that package job-portable skills. In this ideology, students are treated like customers and colleges are to be run as businesses, with an increasing reliance on part-time labor, a decrease in the general education core, and a shift from educating citizens to producing workers.

During this time, the federal government began paying closer attention to college completion and retention rates, an issue that spoke closely to colleges that were becoming increasingly dependent on tuition. Initiatives aimed at increasing accountability in higher education gained traction during this time, raising more questions about educational policy development. For instance, Complete College America (2016) argued for "new rules" of higher education to help policymakers "set the condition for change using money and metrics" (p. i). This statement itself illustrates the bottom-line thinking that Linda Adler-Kassner (2012 noted when she discussed the implications (and risks) of companies and nonprofit organizations shifting into positions of policy development and authority over both K-12 institutions and colleges. Ultimately, the agenda of completionist, top-down models of accountability seem to operate from one primary understanding—that the goal of higher education is to produce workers who are well-trained to stimulate the economy.

As a large, open-access institution, and the only community college in the state of Utah, SLCC faculty must have a high level of involvement in professional organizations in order to represent community college interests in the state. Its administration enjoys a close working relationship with the state legislature as well as with four-year universities. In their guidelines regarding the relationship of two-year colleges and their four-year partners, Calhoon-Dillahunt, Jensen, Johnson, Tinberg, &Toth (2016) identified the unique work done by community college scholars in shaping pedagogy and the role they play as an "essential part of national and disciplinary discussions about student literacy" (p. 8), a role SLCC has eagerly embraced in their responsiveness to developing national pedagogical trends. In 2010, for instance, SLCC was one of the early adopters of a general education eportfolio program, which requires faculty teaching general education courses to collect signature assignments and reflections from their students. Students present these assignments and reflections in their eportfolios that they share with their instructors via our learning management systems: Banner and Canvas. All signature assignments must help students achieve at least two general education learning outcomes. The general education eportfolio program at SLCC foregrounds reflective practices and metacognition as key indicators of teaching and learning. An added benefit of the eportfolio program is that it allows for a holistic general education assessment, and a variety of other assessment initiatives, including the emerging assessments in our department described in this article. Given this environment of innovation and responsiveness, and the shifting trend toward quantitatively-based accountability, it is not surprising that Guided Pathways is of particular interest to our institution.

National Scope

Prior to Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins publishing *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* in 2015, the prevailing model of college decision-making was that students are adults who will research the courses that best fit their needs for a particular goal, be it a college credential or personal exploration. However, historically low completion and retention rates of both community colleges and universities point to the inefficiencies of this system. Bailey et al. sought to address this problem by proposing a guided pathways model built upon previous research completed by the Community College Research Center, based out of Columbia University. As a result of this work, the "cafeteria-style" model of higher education, particular in community colleges, has come under intense scrutiny, with the lack of structure and support for students being linked to these historically low rates. Bailey et al. contended that if structured pathways exist to guide students through a credential program from start to finish, and that if these pathways provide cohesion between courses and disciplines, completion and retention rates will rise.

Institutional Scope

In 2016, SLCC had a completion rate of 22%, as measured by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) standards which "presents the percentage of students who earn any board-approved education credential (degree or certificate) within six years of enrollment. Transfer without an award is not included" (Strategic Plan, 2016). While this is a problematic measure for a community college like SLCC, which has transfer as one of its primary purposes—the students who achieve their educational goals of taking a few courses to transfer to their home institutions, or who will transfer before completing a credential are not included in

this figure—this number is still of concern, and sparked the development of a new strategic plan. The strategic plan focused on five primary goals: "Increase student completion, improve transfer preparation and pathways, align with and respond to workforce needs, achieve equity in student participation and completion, and secure institutional sustainability and capacity" (Strategic Plan, 2016). Collaborative work teams (CWTs) involving faculty, staff, and administration, were convened to develop recommendations around these five goals. One of the CWTs studied the ideas of guided pathways as presented by Bailey et al. (2015) and completed a site visit to Queensborough Community College (QCC) to become familiar with their pathways model (see Bailey et al., 2015c). The initial recommendation of the work team was to adopt a model similar to those at QCC.

Through input from faculty and administration, the idea of academies evolved to initially become metamajors (an alternate form of the "academies" model), and finally become concentrations. The primary purpose of the concentrations is to assist students who are unfamiliar with college environments and culture, those who arrive with less "college knowledge," to move into majors and career plans earlier in their college experience, saving them both time and money. The current concentrations that are being considered are business; arts, communication, and digital media; computer science and information technology; humanities; social and behavioral science; manufacturing, construction and applied technology; science, engineering and math; and health sciences. By requiring students to choose one of these larger concentrations early in their academic careers, students will still be able to explore different majors and options. They will not, however, have the option of a much broader general studies concentration. Currently, of the 22% of students who complete a degree, 70% graduate with a degree in general studies; unfortunately, only 40% of the credits of this degree transfers directly to other Utah institution (D. Hubert, personal communication, October 21, 2017). By requiring students to focus on a pathway rather than allowing a catch-all general studies degree, faculty and administration can then focus on negotiating more specific articulation agreements. Strengthening articulation agreements and advising students earlier about which courses will transfer and in what way are key goals for both the guided pathways model as well as SLCC.

Beyond the initial form a pathways model might take are questions about how courses within degree programs and across the institution align. One of the watchwords for the guided pathways model is cohesion, both between related courses in a sequence such as Introductory Writing and Intermediate Writing, but also among courses in an entire degree program (Bailey et al,, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Bailey et al. (2015c) argued extensively that students who do not see connections between courses are more likely to drop/stop out of college, or to pick courses at random, which leads to a more difficult path to completion and transfer. Furthermore, they argued for "clearly defining programs with a coherent set of learning outcomes" (p. 39). Student learning outcomes (SLOs), while easily assessable, tend to focus on relatively fine-grained knowledge acquisition and demonstration, such as the ability to critically analyze a piece of poetry by writing an argumentative paper using sources. TCs, as we discuss later in this piece, are in a unique position to encourage metacognition that enriches students' development as writers in transferable ways, while the particular nature of SLOs makes knowledge transfer more challenging for students. For instance, students may not be able to see that the skills they used to achieve a SLO in a poetry class are also applicable to their biology course, which asks them to analyze a journal article about stem cell research. However, a TC that applies to a whole program might state that "communication is a process of deliberation. It involves identifying and enacting choices, strategies, and moves," which would allow students to understand that while the texts they are asked to consider are different in nature, the underlying metacognitive work they are being asked to engage in is the same and can be transferred across disciplinary practices. Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick (2012) described the effects of using threshold concepts in two linked courses, Writing 2 and History 17b (an American history survey course) by studying both students and faculty in the history course. While threshold concepts were clearly shared between the courses, the authors found:

> The instructors too often relied on safe and easy conceptions of "general skills" when articulating core goals, thus obscuring the more fundamental point that historical narratives are arguments constructed within specific contexts, using particular genres, conventions, and standards that are closely linked to different purposes, audiences, and contexts. (n.p)

These findings indicate that while TCs are appropriate for this sort of wider application between related courses, instructors will need extensive training on the ideas surrounding TCs themselves, as well as on integrating them into courses in a meaningful way. Of greatest importance is the idea that the effort seems to justify the potential for the wider applications that guided pathways necessitate: "Working from this perspective enables us to consider, as we have done here, whether there are concepts that exist within specific disciplines, like composition and history, that then can also span *across* disciplines" (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012, n.p.).

To fully adopt this approach to education means a radical shift in the way current models of advising, program development, faculty development, and administrative roles are enacted, and most institutions who are adopting this change are still in the nascent stages of development. In 2016, SLCC officially began the work of implementing the guided pathways approach to student learning. While our particular set of concentrations and approaches to advising are still being solidified, the English department at SLCC has identified several ways that the current threshold concepts (TC) initiative in the composition sequence allows us to interrogate the assumptions behind guided pathways while emphasizing the more positive values of curricular cohesion and metacognition and how they fit into disciplinary best practices.

Curricular Redesign and Labor Conditions

The composition program at SLCC currently consists of two credit-bearing courses that function in sequence, English 1010: Introduction to Writing and English 2010: Intermediate Writing, along with two non-credit-bearing, developmental courses, English 900: Integrated Reading and Writing I and English 990: Integrated Reading and Writing II. While faculty have had a system of shared values about writing and student learning, several contextual circumstances and indicators have made curricular cohesion an ongoing challenge.. First, prior to Fall 2012, the developmental English program was housed in a separate Department of Developmental Education and consisted of four separate reading and writing courses for underprepared college students. In Fall 2012, the Department of Developmental Education was dismantled, and developmental reading and writing faculty who were previously housed there joined the English department, swelling the number of tenured or tenure-track (TT) faculty by twenty, nearly doubling the size of the department. Combining faculty members with different backgrounds and training, as well as putting transfer-level composition courses into institutional relations with pre-transfer level courses for the first time in institutional history, presented a clear challenge to enacting a shared vision for the composition program.

Even before the merging of the two programs, there was already some inconsistency in the credit-bearing courses. For example, research on English 1010 and 2010 completed by SLCC administration, which used data about pass rates in these courses from Fall 2009 through Spring 2015, revealed inconsistencies among sections due to the wide range of faculty—including part-time faculty—teaching these sections. The rate of success (students receiving an A, B, or C) was as high as 100% in particular sections and as low as 20% in others. The data show that greater cohesion was needed among sections of the same courses in our program, as well as different courses in the same sequence. Furthermore, conversations among full-time faculty about the curriculum were often centered around the kinds of writing assignments or genres that should be emphasized in the course, or which pedagogies are more or less effective, rather than what shared conceptual frameworks might guide our work. Janangelo and Klausman (2012) found in a study of writing faculty at two-year colleges that many faculty members did not "see a consistent underlying theoretical frame [about writing]" in their programs and viewed such interest with suspicion (p. 135). Reaching consensus about writing, let alone the curriculum, has been difficult to achieve.

Our institution's reliance on adjunct labor is another important consideration. Our department has always endeavored to be supportive of part-time faculty; however, while there are 39 full-time faculty members in the department, there are nearly 100 adjunct instructors teaching somewhere around 70% of our composition offerings. In the regional economy for composition along the Wasatch Front, SLCC pays composition adjuncts the lowest salary in the area. The next closest institution pays almost 70% more per section per semester—with some institutions doubling what we offer. For many of our adjuncts, the courses they teach at SLCC are just one source of income (and usually not the largest source); understandably, our courses become expendable as compared to the same courses at other institutions that pay more. There are other systemic issues that make it difficult for full-time and part-time faculty to meaningfully interact. For instance, there is no designated space for adjunct faculty members to occupy on campus; as a result, they therefore have no spaces to establish a presence on our campus outside the classroom. That adjunct faculty do not inhabit our campus is reflected in their absence from many campus discourses. And, though there is promise of change with administrative turnover, our institution's prevailing model of professional development leaves much to be desired. These systemic practices scatter and disperse faculty, which makes it difficult to establish and sustain connections, much less participate in meaningful work.

All of this was compounded by the nature of curriculum and program oversight of composition courses at our college. Unlike many university writing programs that are administered by a WPA, the work of curricular design and program administration at two-year colleges such as our own is often decentralized causing leadership to default to the few who take on the intellectual labor of curricular design and oversight. . These individuals are left to navigate the material conditions that undercut their designs, such as a lack of funding for meaningful and ongoing professional development initiatives to sustain such work. Further complicating the problem, the integration of curricular design initiatives across many sections of composition courses is not likely for a number of reasons, including the high reliance on adjunct labor and related institutional perspectives on the nature of professional development for contingent faculty. Without an explicitly articulated and shared framework for navigating discussions about writing and responding to classroom demands, scaling course designs and program practices is challenging for those taking on this work.

Because all of the above circumstances made cohesion in the composition program challenging, even before the guided pathways conversation began at our institution, we sought a shared conceptual framework for our composition courses grounded in theories of writing and writing pedagogy that would be responsive to our institutional realities as well as our need for more cohesion. And we needed a mechanism to enact the framework. Working as the new Department Coordinator during the 2015-16 academic year, Justin drafted a statement that articulated the challenges for curricular alignment and cohesion in the SLCC English department based on the context we have previously outlined. While maintaining ongoing communication with our Associate Dean, Stephen Ruffus, Justin reviewed existing curricular documents, conducted informal discussions with faculty members teaching ENGL 990, 1010, and 2010, and used faculty feedback to shape the document around capacious and flexible notions of writing. Called the "Vision Statement for Composition at SLCC," the statement proposed a new curriculum founded in writing threshold concepts, provided a curricular map of pre-transfer and transfer-level composition courses organized conceptually through the threshold framework, and introduced a mechanism for enacting the curricular changes at the level of institutional practice.

After sustained discussions with Stephen and other colleagues, enough full-time faculty members were confident that threshold

concepts could function as the organizing concepts for composition courses because they provide a flexible framework for exploring writing in the rich writing lives of SLCC students. The vision statement was approved by the Associate Dean, members of the ENGL 1010 and 2010 steering committees, and other curricular leaders representing the interests of both long-time English and former Developmental faculty in Spring 2015.

Also in Spring 2015, an important partnership between the English Department and SLCC's open education initiative was established, which provided leverage for implementing and scaling up the threshold curriculum. After a meeting attended by English leadership in which the threshold curriculum was workshopped and approved for use with part-time faculty, the newly formed Open English @ SLCC Committee began planning and developing open educational resources for a new curriculum informed by writing threshold concepts. This work included locating and curating existing web-based instructional resources to replace proprietary resources, writing original texts to address the emphasis on threshold concepts, and reading and discussing theoretical and pedagogical issues influencing curriculum design and related to the broader OER initiative.

Accordingly, the following TCs became the basis for redesigning our composition sequence and related programmatic practices at SLCC.

- Writing is a resource people use to do things, be things, and make things in the world.
- Rhetoric provides a method for studying the work that writing does in the world.
- Writing is a form of action. Through writing people respond to problems and can create change in the world.
- Writing is a process of deliberation. It involves identifying and enacting choices, strategies, and moves.
- The meanings and the effects of writing are contingent on situation, on readers, and on a text's purposes/uses.
- Meaningful writing is achieved through sustained engagement in literate practices (e.g., thinking, researching, reading, interpreting, conversing) and through revision.

We developed and adopted the above set of TCs based on their theoretical and pragmatic promise for engaging the challenges of teaching composition at SLCC. Within the department, we have found that threshold concepts function as a conceptual epicenter for understanding writing that is focused on points of agreement and shared values rather than historical points of disagreement. The framework has helped us interrogate the boundaries of our writing knowledge and practice as faculty at SLCC, while creating shared discourses facilitated by naming what we know. We don't intend to gloss the inevitable challenges and struggles that come with large-scale reform, but we are optimistic because of the shared discourse our faculty is now using to guide decision-making about the courses, curriculum, and many of the activities that support the curriculum and instruction.

Ultimately, the threshold curriculum was adopted because of the basic rationale that it would help our department align composition courses. Since the curricular project officially began in 2015, new goals have been established that have increased faculty participation and their commitment to the new curriculum. These include explicitly staging the curriculum design as a shared faculty enterprise within the department, one that relies on collaboration across faculty ranks (senior/junior) and lines (FT/PT) and aims to enhance teaching and learning in the core composition courses; using TCs to establish an explicit and capacious understanding of writing among faculty and students, one that is flexible and inclusive of our faculty's and students' diverse interests and backgrounds; and, using the curricular projects that a shared threshold framework has made possible to more systematically and robustly support part-time faculty teaching the composition curriculum.

Dew (2003) showed how compositionists can use curriculum to affect change at the level of practice, effectively repositioning the curriculum by transforming it, and then using the transformation to necessitate professional development and, in the long run, improve adjunct labor lines within the institution. There has always been a strong commitment to our part-time faculty in the department at SLCC. For this reason, we have used the threshold framework to engage labor conditions head-on. We have tried to be transparent about the underlying goal of transforming our curriculum and encouraging part-time faculty to adopt it. For instance, we have prioritized staffing and scheduling for those part-time faculty who have committed to teaching the threshold curriculum; and in the process, we are beginning to offer more consistent and predictable schedules. The part-time faculty members' commitment includes participating in paid professional development sessions throughout the year that address the exigencies for curricular changes in our department and the value and workings of the threshold framework and curriculum. For example, the first professional development session addressed how the threshold framework could enable curricular cohesion while preserving faculty autonomy, and whenever we hire new part-time faculty members we introduce them to the curriculum through the ideas of curricular cohesion and consistent student experiences in and across our courses. These resources and professional development opportunities are also available for new tenure-track faculty to acclimate and engage with this curriculum.

Threshold Concepts and Metacognition in Composition at SLCC

Of course, our work has always fundamentally aimed to support student success. In classroom contexts, the threshold framework has helped us organize instruction in our courses in ways that align with current disciplinary knowledge about writerly development. With the threshold framework in place and a growing faculty interest, the design of the courses began to look much like the teaching for transfer (TFT) model presented by Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak (2014). The TFT model is explicitly designed with transfer in

mind as it takes a set of interlocking concepts as course content and uses the concepts to organize instruction and writerly development in the course. Following Adler-Kassner et al. (2017), who suggested the promise of assembling these concepts to design a mental framework that matters to students' lives and is transferable to new contexts, we believe the threshold framework can present students with an engaging and useful notion of writing for students with diverse goals and interests. Practically speaking, the discourse about writing that our assemblage of TCs generate aims to prepare students to follow writing into the locations where writing occurs, circulates, and matters in their lives and to help them develop a situated, grounded understanding of writing. Put another way, the threshold framework *moves* with students, and whether students want to become an engineer or mechanic, professor or welder, the framework helps them examine writing in their lives.

Helping students intentionally examine where their writing lives requires them to further develop their metacognitive skills, which makes metacognition key to each facet of the TC framework. A learner moves through the process of metacognition—meaning making—when the learner orients their current knowledge in association with monitoring and controlling (Zimmerman, 2000) their learning habits and spaces. Making associations between thinking and learning processes deepens students' understanding of the ways in which they learn, what they learn, and how they might carry that learning alongside of and onward to other learning opportunities. Our framework, at every turn, encourages students to think about the circumstances in which their writing occurs, as well as the writing opportunities they are asked to take up inside and outside of the classroom. This metacognitive process makes student writers much more aware of how their writing allows them to make, do, and be things in the different discourse communities they navigate every day.

It would be difficult for us to understand how the TC framework informs student knowledge about writing without assigning and assessing formal reflections in the composition course sequence. Education scholars often use metacognition and reflection interchangeably, or as compliments to each other. "Reflection" in the context of our assessment plan refers primarily to a specific product students create (Yancey, 2016) in order to demonstrate how, and at what points throughout their writing processes, they are making meaning about what writing does and can do in the world. However, the reflection product cannot be created without the reflection process, which involves metacognition and self-assessment. In the conclusion to *A Rhetoric of Reflection* (2016), Kathleen Blake Yancey described reflection as a process that bridges the personal and the global:

> reflection is a process we use to make meaning and make knowledge, a kind of meaning and knowledge unique to reflection given its intersectionality, its insistence that only through bringing the human and the world together to theorize can a reflective knowledge and meaning be made. Such knowledge and meaning making is contingent, subject to change in a world also changing. (p. 304)

The formal reflections students create throughout the composition sequence rely on prompts and activities that encourage students to think about the intersectionalities that come with writing in response to rhetorical situations and their exigencies.

While still early in the implementation, the emphasis on these intersectionalities has seen positive student responses in courses generally considered to be those to "get out of the way." For example, in an end-of-project reflection assignment where English 1010 students were asked to consider their experiences with threshold concepts during the first month of the semester, one student wrote, "The goal here is to get a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. There's a lot of documenting with the job so the more I write the more comfortable and confident I'll feel." Here we see a nursing student recognizing that her sustained engagement in one type of writing in an English course can build the authorial confidence she needs for the type of high-stakes writing she will eventually do in her career.

Initial student responses to this framework indicate a high degree of student buy-in to these concepts, and it is likely that one of the primary reasons for this acceptance is because the TCs' flexibility affords students the experience of writing as a discipline of study and an act of creation with each new writing opportunity. Further, we believe TCs can guide reflective practice and support students' metacognitive awareness as writers because they emphasize students' writing development over time (within and across courses), and engage students with the practice of writing in supportive environments. As we examined English 1010 students' reflective writing based on the aforementioned prompt that asked them to consider their experience with the threshold concepts in the first month of the semester, we saw students speaking about the importance of giving and receiving feedback on their writing in rather sophisticated ways. Speaking directly to the TC about literate practices, one student wrote, "Through literate practices and processes, I've learned that you can't become a good writer alone. It requires the help of your peers and other readers to help you get where you want to be as a writer". In a similar vein, another student wrote:

> Having this English class online is not a big thing for me as I have been used to this type of schooling before. However, I was never required to give feedback and respond to others. So I never really grasped the importance of how much that can do not only for those I am responding to but myself. It makes me better understand how much of use it can be, and because of it I plan that when continuing my writing I want to make sure I always take the time to get feedback and find someone who can look over my things and help me improve.

Both of these students seem to be applying their knowledge of the importance of feedback in writing beyond the writing classroom. Moving one step further, another student considers what to do with all that feedback, as her reflection focused on the TC involving choices and her own authorship:

> I think the biggest concepts I learned regarding choices was that just because you receive feedback from peers doesn't mean you have to use it. It is your story and you can choose to use the comments only if you feel they will benefit or make your story better. I think this helped in my other writing experiences because it allowed me to think it's alright if I don't use someone's suggestions.

Thus, TCs shift the kinds of work instructors and students value in the course to that which can signify development. If SLOs are about a checkpoint, TCs are a way to develop the skills to move from one checkpoint to another. They help writers develop a "theory of writing [that] helps him or her recall, reframe, and relocate knowledge and practices in new and different writing contexts" (Adler-Kassner et al., 2017, p. 43), a move we see our student writers making in their reflections that clearly demonstrates understanding the importance of feedback in writing.

Encouraging this reflective work doesn't require a rigid integration of the TCs, though. Some instructors make the TCs very explicit, drawing students' attention to salient concepts every day and fashioning reflections that specifically call out these ideas, while others use them as a more implicit framing for the course, only occasionally making them the center of instruction. Because TCs don't seem forced into a curriculum, students are more likely to accept them as a natural part of the discipline rather than an onerous extra layer of learning. Moreover, the nature of TCs is to increase transfer knowledge and skills by having students identify larger concerns that build cohesion between courses and disciplines. Doing so gives students a path to not only understanding the role of writing in the world, but also its place in their work and larger academic lives. This understanding, in turn, helps reduce initial resistance to composition courses in general, as it answers the "why do I have to take this class?" question by emphasizing the utility of the discipline beyond the course. The reflective practices that are an integral part of each composition course reinforce this move from content to concepts as they help students to further develop their metacognitive skills which are an essential part of transfer.

The threshold concepts help organize students' metacognitive work about writing, work they need to complete in order to transfer their writing knowledge to new situations. For example, one student enrolled in a course that explicitly features TC's wrote:

> As I was looking back at what I had done with things pertaining to writing as a resource, I came to realize that being a writer doesn't mean you have to be a professional. We are all writers in a sense, whether we use that skill to write a short text to someone, or a very detailed flash narrative. I was looking back at the assignments we had done that had the "writing as a resource" threshold caption at the top, and was surprised to find it on the assignment where we had to introduce ourselves, and when we were asked to contemplate "What is Story?" in our lives. Thinking about it though, and reading the definition of this concept, we can write to convey who we are to others, like in an online class. We can also use the ability to write to internalize and contemplate things we learn, or are learning, such as the different concepts in our flash narrative unit.

Students engage in this work through reflective practices, which foreground assemblages of threshold concepts that create the field of play in their practices, and set different parameters and boundaries for exploring writing within and across the college, as well as other discourse communities circulating along the Wasatch Front.

Yancey et al. (2014) highlighted the value of reflection in the student's development, calling it an "iterative practice that students engage in before, during, and after their writing" (p. 58) to grapple with coursework (e.g., assignments, processes, readings, terms). They suggested students "theorize about and practice writing using key terms and concepts" through reflective practice, which "bridge[s] the learning acquired in first-year composition" to writing tasks in other situations (Yancey et al., 2014, pp. 56-58). Beaufort (2016) noted reflection, in general, does not always foster knowledge transfer. She argued integrating specific types of reflective practices is central to a student's ability to move knowledge across disciplinary borders and into broader contexts (Beaufort, 2016, p. 24). Her four-principle reflection model outlines the kinds of reflective practices that can help students generate the knowledge transfer they need in order to advance their thinking, learning, and doing. In particular, it is Beaufort's (2016) second principle, "introduce reflection/metacognition about deep structures, broad concepts, and process strategies as tools not only for getting writing done for an immediate rhetorical situation, but for transfer of learning to future writing tasks" (p. 33), that informed the reflective practices assessed in our threshold concept framework.

In the next section, we look specifically at how we designed assessment around threshold concepts in ways that align with pathways and lead to data that place knowledge transfer and student development at center stage. In the most straightforward sense, the key element of metacognition provided by the TCs aligns with the cohesion that Bailey et al. (2015c) identified as critical for the success of the guided pathways model. When we assess students' knowledge transfer in a TC-driven curriculum, we are also assessing their perception of the cohesion of individual tasks, major writing projects, and discrete courses in a sequence.

Emerging Assessment Practice

What we have found as we enter the third year of our threshold concept initiative are two things: 1) the threshold framework is flexible and durable enough to meaningfully engage with the challenges of administering and teaching composition at two-year colleges, particularly with the evolving constraints of guided pathways, and 2) it is complementary to best practices in writing and program assessment.

As we worked through our curricular design, we considered how to assess the curriculum and capture data that we could use to make annual arguments for funding and resources to support our many initiatives in the department. One of the first challenges we experienced is captured by scholars who have considered the relationship between threshold concepts and outcomes, particularly for the purposes of assessment. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) have the same advice for assessment as they do for curriculum: "rather than construct a threshold concepts curriculum or a threshold concepts assessment, readers might consider how these threshold concepts *inform* curriculum or assessment" (p. 9). Similarly, Yancey (2015) pointed out in her introduction to *Naming What We Know*, that threshold concepts are "contingent and flexible" whereas outcomes have become "rigid and standardized… provid[ing] a foil to threshold concepts" (p. xxviii).

Therefore, our curriculum could certainly have threshold concepts as a foundation, allowing us to maintain their flexibility, but program assessment would still require student learning outcomes framed in more measurable language, particularly due to the administrative oversight inherent in pathways-like initiatives. We used the example FYC student learning outcomes grounded in threshold concepts in Downs and Robertson's (2015) chapter in *Naming What We Know* as a starting point. Combining these examples with the existing, college-approved SLOs and our pedagogical goals for the new curriculum, we focused on four newly-articulated programmatic outcomes, separate from individual course outcomes:

- *Students will exhibit their rhetorical awareness & flexibility as readers and writers* through extended practice negotiating new and diverse reading and writing situations and tasks that require their adaptation to shifting expectations and demands.
- *Students will demonstrate their critical thinking capacity as readers and writers* through the ongoing practice of analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, and evaluating ideas, information, situations, and texts across diverse reading and writing tasks.
- *Students will develop an ability and confidence to navigate writing processes* through ongoing opportunities to write in diverse contexts, engage writing assignments in stages, and practice revision.
- *Students will develop metacognition* through the ongoing practice of reflecting on their own thinking and language use as writers and readers and theorizing, more generally, the work that language does in the world.

Due to our largely contingent faculty labor pool and other material working conditions, the composition sequence did not have a consistent, systematic assessment protocol. Over the previous ten years, we had smaller, ad hoc assessment projects in a variety of different areas, including a 2008 retention study; a 2009-2010 survey report from 1010/2010; a 2015 survey given to students in a pilot version of the threshold concept curriculum in 1010; and a 2016 assessment report on our in-person and hybrid versions of 1010/2010. While all of these efforts produced useful information for the department, none were set up with the intent to be replicated on a continual basis. This reality, combined with our newly articulated program-level outcomes, provided us with the opportunity to start with a blank slate for assessment.

The choice of how to collect student writing for this assessment was, ultimately, a foregone conclusion. In 2010, SLCC implemented an eportfolio requirement for all its general education courses as a response to the changing educational landscape, as well as the institution's outcomes assessment mandate (Miller et al. 2006). However, eportfolios aren't simply a tool to respond to neoliberal educational pushes. Bass (2012) argued eportfolios provide faculty with a mechanism for organizing "learning around the learner rather than around the course curriculum" (p. 26). Faculty in all general education courses require students to include at least one "signature assignment" (an assignment that best showcases the achievement of at least two general education learning outcomes) from the course in their eportfolio and accompany it with a reflection on the assignment and/or the course. Reflection serves its own unique purposes in SLCC's eportfolio implementation, and also in our planned assessment of TCs via 1010/2010 student reflections. As Cambridge (2010) pointed out, "Almost without exception, scholars agree that the process of reflection that goes into composing an eportfolio is central to its impact on learning" (p. 103). Reflective writing affords students opportunities to step back from their work, return to it, and move it forward in order to place that work in broader personal, political, cultural, and intellectual contexts. These reflective gestures give student writers an opportunity to make knowledge transfer concrete for themselves and to their audiences (Addler-Kassner et al., 2016). Put another way, our reflective writing assignments are intended to function as acts of metacognitive translation for students. We hope the assessment will show that our students are transferring writing knowledge and practices into contexts in and beyond our writing courses. In other words, this assessment of the reflective product will reveal the reflective process of metacognitive translation. The English Department had used eportfolios for ad hoc assessment in the past. We decided to build upon this resource because the requirement already so closely resembles a Phase 2-style portfolio (White, 2005; White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015); furthermore, White, Elliot, and Peckham described the eportfolio as "part of the gold standard" for writing program assessment (p. 104).

With the open-ended nature of the general education eportfolio requirements, our first step was to provide guidelines for what

composition instructors would require of their students to provide a more consistent dataset. Rather than a single signature assignment, we asked that students include two of the major projects of the course in the eportfolio. The flexibility of the new curriculum is an asset, but for the purposes of assessment, the variability in the requirements of a single project may not adequately represent the first three programmatic learning outcomes. The fourth outcome dealing with students' metacognitive practices represented more of a challenge when considered alongside the core TCs. The Phase 2-style reflective letter could already address general student metacognition about their writing practices, but because we wanted threshold concepts to form the core of how instructors *and* students understand writing, we had to be more specific. Ultimately, we constructed a reflective prompt that asks students to directly address specific TCs:

> Take TC1 and TC2 and describe to incoming students what they mean. Explain how you used these concepts in your work in COURSE, and provide evidence from your two projects. Explain how you have attempted to use TC1 and TC2 in another setting. What strategies did you use as a writer accomplish this task?

This prompt is intended to be a workhorse for our program assessment. Using the curricular scaffolding for reflective writing described in the previous section, students should be familiar enough with this type of writing to provide clear and authentic evidence to assess. As with the standard Phase 2 reflective letter, this prompt will allow us to assess student metacognition, gaining insights into their development of cognitive processes that are difficult to capture in non-reflective assignments; however, by also asking them to directly reflect on two of the core threshold concepts of the course and consider how they transfer to work beyond the writing classroom, we also gain data on how well students understand and are integrating these foundational concepts of effective written communication. Put another way, the reflective letter fosters metacognition that can be assessed because it asks students to, as the CWPA (2011) defined the term, "reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes and systems used to structure knowledge" (p. 9). Additionally, by having both 1010 and 2010 students explore the same TCs in their reflections, we reinforce the cohesion of the course sequence both for students and within the assessment data.

The goal of our assessment is to strengthen the TC framework and the metacognitive processes that undergird it. To find clarity in what can be the blurry connectedness between the metacognitive process, the TC framework, and writing knowledge transfer, it will be important for our assessment team to apply a similar set of questions as those posed by Gorzelsky, Driscoll, Paszek, Jones, and Hayes (2016) in their study on how metacognition informs writing instruction and writing knowledge transfer. The questions that Gorzelsky's team posed center on what metacognitive moves occur when students reflect on their writing, how those moves might show interactions between specific writing opportunities and a writer's development across tasks, and which combination of moves will facilitate successful writing knowledge transfer (2016, pp. 219-220).

Since our assessment plan addresses only two TCs a year, students will be better situated to provide more focused and detailed accounts of their engagement with these concepts in their everyday writing activities, and the assessment team will be able to present manageable curricular adjustments to the department based on the assessment data. Furthermore, a more focused prompt also makes integrating this assignment into the different courses of so many instructors more manageable logistically. Pedagogically, because all six TCs are integrated into the framework of all writing courses already, having this end-of-semester prompt focus on just two TCs at a time doesn't require instructors to make any changes in focus to their curriculum beyond what the framework already calls for, which preserves, as much as possible, faculty autonomy. Finally, by focusing on two TCs a year, we have a three-year assessment cycle for all TCs, which fits nicely into the five-year review process for general education courses at SLCC, providing time to "close the loop" by evaluating the three years of data together, making substantive changes to curricula and faculty development, and collecting data on these changes to include in the review process.

The remainder of the assessment protocol closely mirrors other Phase 2-style systems by using faculty at all ranks as readers of the portfolios. Using an expert-rater system (Haswell, 1998, 2001), we establish a shared consensus as experienced teachers within the program we are assessing by reading example portfolios individually then discussing their merits and flaws as a group. With this type of norming, combined with the expertise of the readers as a check on the validity of the assessment, readers score each portfolio on the success of the student writing on the four program outcomes using a six-point rubric. Each portfolio is read by two faculty members, whose scores are recorded separately.

Due to the diversity of the student body at SLCC, the sampled portfolios are also classified by race, sex, and first-generation status. These samples are provided by the Institutional Research office, which already tracks these demographic variables for all students at SLCC. By being able to break these data out by demographic groups, we can then compare writing assessment data with broad descriptive statistics about the success and retention of these groups at the college level. These kinds of comparisons can help us to evaluate as a program whether we are effectively empowering students from traditionally disenfranchised groups (Inoue, 2015).

As a final part to this assessment, we follow Scott's lead in "The Politics of Valuation in Writing Assessment" (2017) and gather data about the funding and staffing realities of the program to submit along with the student writing data to offer a more complete picture of the writing program. Like most community colleges across the nation, the majority of SLCC's composition courses are taught by contingent faculty (Center for Community College Engagement, 2014) who are persistently underpaid and undersupported for the work they do. While the move to open educational resources in this new curriculum has provided us with more resources to provide

paid professional development for our adjunct faculty members, the fact remains that they are paid below the national average per credit hour and are not allowed to work enough hours for us that would require SLCC to provide these teachers with health insurance or retirement benefits. Data about student learning is vital to the mission of a community college, but as a program assessment, it is incomplete without data about the labor of the teachers responsible for this student learning.

At the time of writing, the assessment program is in a pilot stage with plans to see it implemented program-wide during the next academic year. Our initial qualitative data on the curricular framework and initial assessment is encouraging, but we still face some questions about more widespread implementation. One of the anticipated challenges is encouraging, and sustaining, widespread faculty buy-in. Participants in the pilot are faculty who are highly invested in TC theory and practice. Additionally, most in the department have expressed interest in and support for our work, and many of them have also taken up the new curricular framework. With strong support from our Associate Dean and other senior faculty, we have had workshops, meetings, and a retreat all focused on fully integrating the diverse training and perspectives of the department while still working towards the goals of curricular alignment and meaningful assessment. At the institutional level, administrative assessment leaders have expressed interest in our project, recognizing that it aligns well with institutional values and student needs, ensuring funding and support that will make the model sustainable in the long term.

Conclusion

Composition at community colleges is a historically important site for literacy education in the U.S. It is also an increasingly vulnerable site. At open-access institutions, composition curricula sit at a pivotal point between the sometimes-problematic higher education practices manufactured by a neoliberal economy and our efforts as faculty to help students acquire literacies that meet their needs. At SLCC, we are finding that a threshold framework is politically valuable to composition because of its ability to exist at the interstices of theory and practice. The threshold framework we have adopted has reshaped our discourses about writing by beginning with students and faculty, and by re-orienting the curriculum to place students' metacognitive development at the center. With the help of threshold concepts, we are findings ways to creatively and systematically assess, evaluate, and respond with our curriculum. In doing so, our work with threshold concepts strives "to be global and imaginative in its consciousness *and* operational in its focus" (Scott, 2016, p. 33), attending to the conditions of teaching and learning at SLCC while using what we know about writing and writers to influence practice.

Our integration of disciplinary knowledge into the developing pathways model at SLCC and our plans for a cycle of assessment that takes into account the many stakeholders of composition at the community college has allowed us to design writing assessment that, we hope, will prove to be a true ecological system (Wardle & Roozen, 2012). The ever-growing completionist agenda emphasizes job-readiness over a robust, liberal arts education. A focus on metacognition enacted in writing classrooms through a threshold concept framework and assessed in ways that produce data for a variety of stakeholders allows us to push back at the neoliberal philosophies suffused throughout pathways-like initiatives while still responding to the realities of student struggles with success. Our model allows us to operate in the context of outcomes-based assessments, and to do so in a way that organizes assessment around the labor of teaching and learning.

Composition programs are in an ideal position to begin laying the groundwork for these practices: These courses are required for virtually every student who earns a credential from a college or university, no matter their program, and these courses already exist in a sequence that may seem disjointed to students. There also exists the potential, which is currently being explored at SLCC, to integrate pre-transfer level writing courses into the sequence, making their integration with credit-bearing courses more transparent to students. The efficacy of TCs in supporting metacognition and vice versa within this sequence, as measured by a robust assessment model, is the necessary first step to integrating TCs on a wider level. Additionally, since writing is the most assessed artifact to measure student success, growing this approach out of writing programs seems a logical first step. By grounding student learning using a threshold concept framework, we can productively influence other programmatic practices, most notably assessment, to be both locally responsive and attuned to global issues, effectively functioning as valuable curricula in our institutional economies. Doing so will ensure that, in the face of policy initiatives that might be especially narrow in their expectations and interests, we can draw on our rich disciplinary knowledge to support our students' writing development as they move into new contexts.

Author Note

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