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# 1

## RECOGNIZING THE LIMITS OF THRESHOLD CONCEPT THEORY

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*Editors' note: Unless otherwise indicated, the we in this chapter refers to Linda and Elizabeth. Other coauthors' contributions are noted in the text.*

### THRESHOLD CONCEPTS: BACKGROUND AND PURPOSES

In “Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge,” Jan Meyer and Ray Land (2006) explain that “interviews and wider discussions with practitioners in a range of disciplines and institutions” (6) led them to identify the characteristics associated with threshold concepts that have become familiar to researchers who have adopted or adapted this framework for thinking about learning and teaching. That is, threshold concepts are transformative, probably irreversible, integrative, potentially troublesome, and bounded. It’s this latter idea that is significant for this chapter. Specifically, as Meyer and Land explain, threshold concepts are “possibly often (though not necessarily always) *bounded* in that any conceptual space will have terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas. It might be that such boundedness in certain instances serves to constitute the demarcation between disciplinary areas, to define academic territories” (6). They follow this with two illustrations: one from a faculty member in cultural studies and one from veterinary sciences, both of whom explain the consequences for students of seeing through or seeing with threshold concepts from other disciplines, or of invoking ways of thinking and practicing (Hounsell and Anderson 2009) associated with operationalization of threshold concepts inconsistent with the threshold concepts of the discipline.

The idea that threshold concepts serve as portals into disciplinary participation has become an important one for teachers, learners, and researchers working with the idea. A number of researchers describe

how faculty have incorporated threshold concepts into teaching (e.g., Baillie and Johnson 2008; Berg, Erichsen, and Hokstad 2016; Martindale et al. 2016; McGowan 2016; Sibbett and Thompson 2008) or considered learners' movements around these concepts (e.g., Cousin 2006; Rattray 2016; Timmermans 2016), or how individuals and groups have attempted to explore and describe the threshold concepts of their disciplines (e.g., Reimann and Jackson 2006; Taylor 2006; Wearn, O'Callaghan, and Barrow 2016). Underscoring these uses of threshold concepts is the idea that making them more explicit enables learners greater access to elements associated with knowledge-making practices and ways of seeing *in* a discipline through expertise. *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015) is one illustration of how threshold concepts within a discipline can be identified, as twenty-nine teacher-researchers in writing studies attempted to name and define some of the threshold concepts of writing studies. In doing so, this group—which we facilitated, and to which we also contributed—was attempting to look back at the research and practice of those within writing studies and affiliated disciplines like English education, sociolinguistics, and educational psychology and to articulate some of the ideas that were (1) threshold to writing studies as an academic discipline; (2) threshold to writing in/and learning; and/or (3) threshold to teaching writing.

Since its publication, *Naming What We Know* and this attempt to describe some of the threshold concepts of writing studies has taken on a life of its own, as texts are wont to do. It has become widely used in classrooms, which was somewhat surprising as the book was not written as a textbook per se (though now it can be purchased in a classroom edition that only includes the threshold concepts section, at the request of readers). It has generated numerous conference panels and informed other studies, including theses and dissertations. Critiques have also been leveled or implied, and concerns have been voiced (e.g., Alexander 2017). While the two of us have generatively expanded our work with threshold concepts in professional development (primarily working with faculty from other disciplines, as we discuss in chapters 15 and 16), we have also had some time to consider the limitations of the threshold concepts framework.

Drawing on these developments, in this chapter we first consider several critiques of and complications related to threshold concepts theory. Then, our chapter coauthors look at some ideas that do not get named and included when threshold concepts are the organizing principle.

## THRESHOLD CONCEPTS: CRITIQUES, CONCERNS, AND LIMITATIONS

Here we outline four critiques, concerns, and limitations of the threshold concepts framework and discuss how those critiques apply to the *Naming What We Know* project in rhetoric and composition.

*Critique 1: Threshold Concept Theory Focuses on Boundedness between Disciplines Rather Than Connections and Interdisciplinarity.*

One of the characteristics of threshold concepts, according to Meyer and Land (2006), is their boundedness: “Any conceptual space will have terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas” (6). Thus, it is easy to critique a threshold concepts framework for potentially sustaining disciplinary divisions rather than helping foster interdisciplinary connections: “Sharing a way of thinking with others allows access to communities, but it may also reduce acceptance or capacity to participate in another community” (Meyer, Land, and Davies 2008, 67). As we discuss further below, naming threshold concepts can easily reify them and contribute to a sense that boundaries between disciplines are rigid and impermeable.

At the same time, naming threshold concepts can be useful precisely because they help shed light on boundaries that are often invisible, or at least difficult to see. Threshold concepts “stand in distinct relationship to each other. . . . They may complement each other, forming a web of interrelated threshold concepts . . . , [or] define distinct contrasting schools of thought” (Meyer, Land and Davies 2008, 67). Making these concepts explicit, say Meyer, Land and Jason Davies, “opens up new sources of variation that do not come into view until the concept of learning is seen as a relationship between the individual, the phenomenon, and others,” sources of variation within and among threshold concepts and their disciplinary boundaries (67).

The relevance of the threshold concepts framework for interdisciplinary work has also been taken up by a number of scholars. For example, Aminul Huq, Marcia D. Nichols, and Bijaya Aryal (2016) have examined correlations among threshold concepts in various disciplines. Jason Davies (2016) has argued that careful consideration of threshold concepts and their similarities and differences across disciplines might actually assist learners and scholars attempting to engage in interdisciplinary work. Davies points out that the incommensurability so common to interdisciplinary endeavors can not only be explained but “emphatically predicted by threshold concepts . . . given their ‘transformative,’

‘irreversible,’ ‘integrative,’ ‘bounded,’ and ‘troublesome’ nature” (122). Members of an interdisciplinary group, he says, can “approach the same task and materials very differently” (123). If the underlying differences are not understood and examined, “much time can pass with a truce rather than genuine engagement” (124). This observation helps explain the difficulty students can often face when their faculty are “literally arguing from different premises, with the implication that meaning-making construction and intellectual reference points are as different as the physical buildings” (121). Threshold concepts offer “a way to begin the task of understanding why disciplinary differences can run so deep” (121). At the same time, Davies says, making these disagreements explicit can stop threshold concepts “from becom[ing] ‘threshold guardians,’” defenders of walls surrounding disciplines (125). The process of identifying threshold concepts, then, can become a starting point and help offer vocabulary to interdisciplinary groups: what all members of an interdisciplinary team “have in common is that . . . they all operate with threshold concepts . . . [these concepts] are thus potentially a great leveler, and their articulation at some point . . . is usually a necessary part of collaboration” (131).

Given the concerns about the ways threshold concepts could impede interdisciplinary efforts, the *Naming What We Know* (NWWK) project could be understood as solidifying disciplinary boundaries. Certainly, as we note above, discipline-specific knowledge has in some ways been defined to be *exclusive* in order to distinguish one field from *other* fields (Bender 1993). While fields like writing studies have been informed by a number of other disciplines, there are beliefs, orientations, and research findings from our field that set it apart from other fields. Not recognizing this expertise, as we argue in *NWWK*, has many implications. Some of these are associated with institutional decisions. For instance, funding for faculty lines in many institutions is associated, at least in part, with the disciplines to which faculty belong. Other implications can be associated with writers, writing instructors, and/or the ways writing is taught and learned. As we and others have noted elsewhere, many feel free to define “good writing,” create definitions of “good writers,” and create assessments to sort writers and writing. The threshold concepts of our discipline can help inform these discussions—if *they are named* and if the *project* of naming continues to take into consideration the changing nature of the field’s knowledge and understandings. Too, as both of us have experienced in work with faculty across disciplines on defining and describing threshold concepts, the differences experts often point to in conjunction with inter- or cross-disciplinary work are associated

with learning by those well beyond novice status—that is, advanced undergraduates or graduate students. At the novice level, which is to say the level of introductory coursework, recognizing the existence of disciplinary boundaries via threshold concepts can itself be a threshold concept. It is our hope, then, that given Davies’s (2016) argument as outlined above, explicitly naming what we understand about writing can actually foster cross-disciplinary work with stakeholders from other communities of practice.

*Critique 2: Threshold Concepts Imposes a Particular Kind of Order That Shapes Epistemic Contexts (Whether We Name Them or Not)*

Threshold concepts are, by definition, retrospective. They represent snapshots of disciplinary communities, descriptions of what is taken as established within a discipline at a particular moment. There is, then, a critique to be leveled regarding the method by which those of us involved in the initial process of *NWWK* went about our work: it could be seen as attempting to impose a particular kind of stability and order that privileges the past. To complicate this possibility even more, it could be said that naming threshold concepts may also suggest an objective social reality at odds with constructivist perspectives that view reality as constantly *in* production and created by practices and beliefs. These perspectives, in fact, are foundational to many of the threshold concepts named in *NWWK*.

Literature from feminist, decolonial, and poststructuralist methodologies highlights these concerns. Underscoring them is an essential tension between positivist and constructivist assumptions about what knowledge is and about how it is created. A positivist perspective “[assumes] an objective external reality and [emphasizes] the need for inquirers to be objective in accessing that reality, and focuses on generalization and cause-effect linkages” (Baxter Magolda 2004, 32). Sociologist John Law (2004), critiquing positivist methods of social science research, argues that this perspective stabilizes existing processes and practices. This stabilization begins from questions designed to explore what is extant and extends through the “framing assumption” of methodologies: “that there are definite processes out there waiting to be discovered.” Law goes on to say, “Arguments and debates about the character of social reality then take place *within* this arena” (6).

In a constructivist perspective, however, methods and the process of exploration look quite different: “Realities are multiple, context-bound, and mutually shaped by interaction of the knower and known” (Baxter Magolda 2004, 35). From this perspective, Law (2004) argues, “the

argument is no longer that methods *discover* and depict realities. Instead, it is that they participate in the *enactment* of those realities” (45). As Annemarie Mol explains, “Realities are not explained by practices and beliefs but are instead produced in them” (quoted in Law 2004, 59). Thus, Law argues, “if we are interested in multiplicity then we also need to *attend to the craftwork implied in practice*,” including the practice that simultaneously constructs and reifies realities (59). Ultimately, then, Law says Mol is issuing a methodological warning. “If we want to understand practice and the objects generated in practice, then we need to make sure we don’t get caught up in that reversal. . . . Realities are not explained by practices and beliefs but are instead produced in them” (59).

From our perspective, then, this creates a bind. While we concur with Law and Mol’s perspective that practice reifies and creates realities, we also recognize that the realities that can be created through writing-associated practices can be quite harmful for our students, colleagues, and institutions. We also recognize that historically, the reality created through the practice of teaching writing has been normative. For example, James Berlin’s histories of the field (1984, 1987), Peter Elbow’s notions of voice (e.g., 1973), and even the practice of portfolio assessment (e.g., Yancey 1992) have led to realities in the field—that is, common wisdom—about who, what, and how “we” are.

Threshold concepts are ideas that have been constructed as they have been enacted across time by groups of people—people, to be sure, with the power to be heard (which we say more about in the critiques below). Threshold concepts were not created by the participants in the *NWWK* project; those participants were trying to name and explain the enactments of shared ideas as they had witnessed and participated in them across time. However, naming those ideas and publishing them in the form of a static book continues to enact and construct them, and thus to produce and reproduce particular kinds of realities, and may make it difficult to interrogate norms or imagine a different kind of future.

Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes contribute to this thinking. Writing with and to us, they have drawn on queer theory to complicate further the idea of normalization we see as an undercurrent through our discipline.

Jonathan and Jacqueline:

Queer theoretical perspectives should lead scholars to question both the sedimentation of ways of thinking into norms and how such sedimentation forecloses on the power of writing itself to act as a form of inquiry (which, ironically, works against the threshold concept that “writing

enacts and creates identities and ideologies”). Our work as queer theorists in the aftermath of the social turn has motivated our skepticism about threshold concepts and our concern that they might become normative ways of thinking about writing. The queer theoretical project is one invested in interrogating norms and questioning normalizing assumptions, specifically around sex, sexuality, and gender, but also in terms of other embodied human experiences, such as ability, age, class, race, and ethnicity.

While we value such a project of queer critique, particularly in questioning how threshold concepts might become norms and thus normalizing moves in standardizing writing instruction, we also want to forward a more utopian queerness. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) asks us to undertake the “work of not settling for the present” and of “asking and looking beyond the here and now” (28). Muñoz recovers a sense of openness and possibility for the future that is not foreclosed upon by the “no-future” queer time Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and others have famously put forward (Ruti 2017, 5). Instead, Muñoz wants us to consider how our hopes for the future constitute an aspirational thinking and feeling that critiques the present and its inadequacies while also attempting to envision a better world. Such utopian thinking and feeling are hardly prescriptive; he neither offers nor encourages “blueprints” for the future. Rather, such thoughts and feeling bring to the fore the utopian sensibility Muñoz believes lies always latent within queerness—a drawing toward and desire for alternative paths that deviate from the straight and narrow and that, in their deviation, suggest possibilities for more just, equitable, capacious, and open futures. Some queer theorists link such utopian gestures directly to writing as a technology. For instance, in their introduction to *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (2011) assert that “reading and writing, narrating, or analysis . . . have a power to open up innovative forms of intimacy that betoken not only new modes of becoming, but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission” (13). We forward such “new modes of becoming” as the promise of queer critique.

We ask: Does the very idea of threshold concepts preclude this perspective? We might argue that threshold concepts can foreclose too quickly on how our understanding of writing may change and develop over time. Imagining the future in ways threshold concepts may preclude, then, may be one of our most creative ways to revise the present. Such revision is only possible if we remember writing often functions as a powerful technology of interrogating the present and imagining future possibilities. A refusal to name fully what we know—that is, to name threshold concepts of a discipline or a context so as to be open to the future—acknowledges that present circumstances, and the concepts that currently exist, need not determine a future. That future remains queerly open for composing. In the process of refusal, we hold on to the ongoing work of critique offered by queer theory while also honoring the openness and possibility afforded by a turn to utopian horizons and any desire we might cultivate to imagine the future differently.

*Critique 3: Any Set of Ideas Stable Enough to Be Named Will Inevitably Reflect and Privilege Particular Viewpoints and Leave Out Others*

If realities are constructed, it follows that when there is consensus around those constructions, consensus invariably reflect the values and ideologies of a dominant culture. Other ideologies and values are not recognized as valid or perhaps even acknowledged at all within dominant frameworks. Threshold concepts of a discipline, whether articulated explicitly or not, are ideas that have been reified by a dominant cultural group—*some* members of the discipline and not necessarily others—those with the power to be heard. Those ideas are reinforced through disciplinary practices that inherently maintain stability and propagate particular values and points of view—classes, curricula, graduate programs, hiring practices, peer review, scholarship, and so on. Meyer and Land (2006) explain that a “non-trivial” issue with threshold concepts is the possibility that “they might become part of a ‘totalising’ or ‘colonising’ view of the curriculum,” exerting a “normalizing function in a Foucauldian sense” (17). As Glynis Cousin (2006) cautions, “A threshold concept can be a form of disciplinary property and as such, its presentation in a curriculum may carry an inherent tendency to invite congealed understandings. . . . An essentialist reading of threshold concepts is best resisted by sustaining a sense of their provisional explanatory capacity” (4).

In the larger threshold concepts literature, there is not as yet an agreed-upon methodology for explicitly identifying threshold concepts of a discipline. For this reason, when we conceived the *NWWK* project, our first instinct was to ensure a lot of people were involved. The two of us alone certainly had no authority to name concepts for an entire field—and a complicated, interdisciplinary one at that. We gathered a group of teachers and researchers, trying to make that group as representative as possible—but it inevitably represented our own networks, connections, views, and biases. We invited many others beyond those who participated, but inevitably those who chose to participate were more likely people who knew us and had some confidence that working with us and others would be a productive experience. This, of course, illustrates the earlier point: ideas, ideologies, and structures produce and reproduce themselves. Thus, though a group of people articulated some of what we described as threshold concepts of writing studies, rather than one or two individuals, a larger critique still holds: *Who says* the concepts in *NWWK* are threshold concepts? Why do these people get to name ideas that stand as thresholds representing an entire field? What’s been left out, and what would it look like if an entirely different group of people identified threshold concepts? These questions would

be appropriate and important for any group of people in any field attempting to identify central ideas with which learners struggle.

While we considered these concerns during the process of composing *NWWK*, our own goals, values, priorities, and ideologies suggested the potential benefits outweighed the risks. Our primary concern was that precisely because there are many normative ideas about what “good writing” is, means, and looks like that circulate among different groups of people, students can suffer when stakeholders who don’t study writing misunderstand how writing works. At the same time, when those with some expertise about these things—expertise, to be sure, that has been validated through dominant cultural practices associated with the credentialing systems of graduate school and employment, especially within the academy—argue with one another about what else we could say and how differently we should say it, nothing changes: assessments, gatekeeping literacy devices, placements, high-stakes writing instruction, and testing all continue when students, parents, teachers, policy makers, and others act from misconceptions about writing.

Yet this possibility does not negate the fact that there is more that needs to be said. Other groups of people must name what they know, too, and challenge ideas that have been named by others. We can always ask what is not being named, as well as emphasize the reasons naming can be important in (though is not always sufficient for) changing material conditions.

*Critique 4: Threshold Concepts by Their Nature Are Not Revolutionary or Cutting Edge to Those in the Field (Though They May Still Be Deeply Problematic, Troublesome, or Revolutionary to People Outside That Field)*

By definition, threshold concepts are articulations of established and widely agreed-upon knowledge/ideas/orientations in bounded spaces—concepts participants in the spaces have come to accept as foundational. They are central ideas most people working in the field would not question or perhaps even think about consciously. In fact, they may seem so obvious to long-time practitioners as to seem too obvious to talk about. Consider a threshold concept in *NWWK*: *writing is social and rhetorical*. Consider the opposite statement: *writing is not social or rhetorical*. Do any practitioners associated with rhetoric, composition, or writing studies believe this latter statement? Does any current scholarship in our field proceed from the belief that writers are lone workers who write in absolute isolation, unhindered by social interactions, prior knowledge, other texts, and so on? This view seems unlikely right now (though the

view that writing is social and rhetorical was not always such a prominent and widely accepted idea). There are many complications to what is meant by social and rhetorical, of course, but if a scholar were to submit an article to any journal in the field based on the opposite assumption, it seems highly unlikely it would be accepted. Yet many people who do not study writing and rhetoric for a living commonly assume such things about writing because of popular misconceptions about writing. (And other fields who may not actively disagree with the claim that writing is social may have different understandings of what social means and forefront different assumption about language. Some linguists, for example, might be more likely to forefront the idea that language is cognitive.)

Here then, is a paradox of threshold concept theory and of any process of attempting to articulate threshold concepts: threshold concepts are, by definition, conservative in the sense that they are the most frequently agreed-upon knowledge of a field at a particular moment in time. At the same time, when they are named (and sometimes they are only implied or assumed), they identify widely agreed-upon ideas and methodologies rather than pushing forward revolutionary thinking. Thus there are many important ideas in any discipline that are not (perhaps yet, perhaps ever) threshold concepts. The most revolutionary or difficult ideas in any area at a given time will not, by definition, meet the criteria for threshold concepts as laid out by Meyer and Land—nor will ideas and ideologies shared by those without disciplinary power and authority to speak or be heard. These ideas may become threshold concepts as paradigms shift or more research is conducted, but during that time of research, theorizing, and enacting, they are something other than threshold concepts.

It is important to recognize, then, that not all important ideas in a discipline are threshold concepts; in fact, according to this way of imagining the terrain, it's possible that *the most important* ideas *for and in* a discipline at a given time might not be threshold concepts because most people in the field don't (yet) understand them or can't recognize them. Meyer, Land, and Baillie allude to this point by referencing Thomas Kuhn, who said:

The practices of both development and discovery in science are community-based activities. To discover and analyze them, one must first unravel the changing community structure of the [discipline] over time. During periods of development, periods of discovery, a shifted paradigm is forged by the concentrated collective intention of a group of practitioners. Any study of paradigm-directed . . . or paradigm-shattering . . . research must begin by locating the responsible group or groups . . . The pre-paradigm

period, in particular, is regularly marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and standards of solution, though these serve rather to define schools than to produce agreement. (quoted in Meyer, Land, and Baillie 2010, 27–28)

This latter point seems particularly important: at times there may be “schools” of thought or specialized areas in a larger field, including our own, in which particular ideas are commonly accepted, but they may not be understood or even recognized by other schools within the broader field.

At the same time, the agreed-upon and at time obvious and conservative threshold concepts of a discipline are troublesome and perhaps revolutionary for *those outside the discipline*. Non-economists rarely understand opportunity cost and start seeing transactions and opportunities in new ways when—or if—they do. The ideas that writing is social and not solitary, that good writers are not just “born that way,” and that what counts as “good writing” depends on context can all feel revolutionary to students who’ve been led to believe they are “bad writers” and who are “sorted” into basic writing classes because they need feedback from others or don’t “get it right” the first time or don’t write using dominant and privileged forms of English. Meyer and Land (2006) first formulated the threshold concept framework because they noticed, when interviewing colleagues about learning, that students in all disciplines have particular spots where they tend to get tripped up and struggle to move forward—yet learners must move through those “stuck places” or “learning thresholds” if they want to do work in those fields.

In other words, these troublesome learning thresholds can be hard and even feel revolutionary to those coming to them and to the field for the first time. But they are *not* where the cutting edge of the field’s internal work is happening. They are ideas necessary for engaging in work of the field, but that engagement is only the beginning. And, of course, newcomers who engage with the ideas of the field change the work and ideas of the field. That is why threshold concepts are only ever stable for now. Maintaining this tension is central to being able to do work while also being able to critique that work and move past it innovatively.

#### LOOKING BEYOND THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Next, we turn our attention to some of the ideas circulating in rhetoric and composition that are currently not so commonly understood

and agreed upon as to be broadly named *threshold concepts*. Given the critiques described above, it seems useful to turn our attention in this chapter, if only briefly, to what is ignored or missed if we only name the dominant and most widely accepted ideas.

Within our field at this moment, there are a number of sites where boundary-pushing work is happening that is not acknowledged in a discussion of the broad threshold concepts recognized by the broad discipline—and it is important to remember this particular limitation when we engage *with* threshold concepts. Here, Anne-Marie Womack, J. W. Hammond, Mya Poe, and Norbert Elliot, and Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes outline three ideas they consider to be threshold concepts because within particular scholarly communities within the discipline they are commonly accepted and understood; at the same time, they are not widely represented as taken for granted throughout the entirety of the research literature in the field, ideas that *must* be participated in or seen through and seen with for disciplinary participation. They may thus be working more toward *changing* accepted and enacted social realities. They are evidence of a point we seek to press: threshold concepts are where our work *begins* for learners, not where it *ends*. Any work seen as truly innovative, cutting edge in the best of senses, in any discipline, is work that *pushes* on paradigms, that works from the inside to *broaden* boundaries, not to reify them.

*Writing Only Occurs within Accessible Conditions*

ANNE-MARIE WOMACK

Writers need accessible tools and environments because *writing is not natural* (Dryer 2015), and *writing depends on technology* (Brooke and Grabill 2015), and *writing is an expression of embodied cognition* (Bazerman and Tinberg 2015, p. 74)—three threshold concepts identified in *NWWW*. These concepts, however, do not fully account for problematic perceptions of the body, which separate body and mind and define them in normative, exclusionary ways. In contrast, disability studies promotes an integrated view of the person, often using the compound term *body-mind*. The field emphasizes differences in bodyminds and fosters inclusion through accessible flexible conditions.

Disability and rhetoric inform one another. Writing is not a static independent activity but rather an interaction shaped by social contexts and communities. In the same way, disability is not a static individual condition but rather an evolving interaction among people, environments, and tools. For example, if a video lacks closed captioning, deaf

students are excluded from analyzing it. In classrooms with laptop bans, disabled students could be left without a way to communicate. For timed writing assignments, learning disabled students may need extended time. Writing conditions (spaces, modes, tools, time) privilege certain abilities over others, often disabling writers different from an imagined norm. Integrating disability, though, is generative, revealing diverse ways of sensing, being, doing, and writing. In this sense of the word, *disabling* our norms has “transformative potential in rhetoric and composition” (Brewer 2016), changing practices for disabled and nondisabled students alike.

When nondisabled students read a video transcript in a quiet library, for instance, they demonstrate one of the key principles of *universal design*: inclusive design is better design for all. Following this ideal requires that instructors build disability into the framework of systems.

To promote access, composition instructors must both plan for difference (Dolmage 2003) and accommodate immediate needs (Kerschbaum 2015). Disability scholars recommend flexible conditions and redundant, multimodal texts that enable users to engage through multiple senses. That means that equivalent information appears in each modality, not that different information is conveyed in complementary text and image (Yergeau et al. 2013). Though accommodations may seem like special circumstances, they are far from out of the ordinary.

Instead, accommodation is the norm (Davis 2013). Teachers always change information and adapt processes, often with the goal of making knowledge accessible to students (Womack 2017). That’s not a justification for low standards, a popular misconception about disability; that’s a call for accessible conditions that allow students to meet rigorous standards, as well as an interrogation of which standards are truly essential.

This kind of revisionary threshold concept, as Hammond, Poe, and Elliot argue next, suggests where our focus should be rather than where it historically has been. Our field’s threshold concepts are limited (and limiting) insofar as they focus on dominant groups and ways of writing. Paradoxically, too, while disability and accessibility have not been fully accounted for in current threshold concepts, accessibility is already a central function of threshold concepts themselves, which make specialized, seemingly counterintuitive concepts understandable to novices. Any framework that strives to increase access needs disability. Amidst discussions of threshold concepts, we as compositionists must examine the many ways disability and writing intersect, challenge, and transform one another because ultimately writing demands access(ibility).

*Writing Assessment Must Be Ethical*

J. W. HAMMOND, MYA POE, AND NORBERT ELLIOT

In assessing writing, writing studies researchers attend to the social construction of language with respect to the effects of assessment on students in specific contexts (Scott and Inoue 2015). In doing so, we recognize writing assessment is deeply connected to identity (Roozen 2015), including shifts in migration and demographic patterns (Hussar and Bailey 2018; International Organization for Migration 2017; Teixeira, Frey, and Griffin 2015) and individual students' histories and body-mind differences (Yancey 2015; Womack, above). For these reasons, the design of contemporary writing assessment always involves making ethical choices (see Duffy 2015).

Philosophically, the ethics of writing assessment demand we support student learning (O'Neill 2015; Scott and Inoue 2015) while creating opportunity structures (Moss et al. 2008) and advancing social justice (see Rawls 2001). By creating opportunity structures through assessment, we make it possible for all students to succeed through educational access, advancement, and attainment (Elliot 2016). By advancing social justice, we acknowledge writing assessment carries ideological significance and can be used to confront injustice (Green 2016; Inoue 2015; Poe and Inoue 2016; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot 2018).

Methodologically, to create opportunity structures and advance social justice, the first principle of ethical writing assessment design is *fairness* (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education 2014; Elliot 2016; National Council of Teachers of English 2017). As an evidential category integrating validity and reliability, fairness may be usefully defined as "the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation. Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged" (Elliot 2016). Innovations in fairness methodologies have included attention to design (Inoue 2015; Mislevy et al. 2013), impact (Poe et al. 2014), and consequence (Slomp, Corrigan, and Sugimoto 2014). Also, empirical techniques examining differential validity and differential prediction should be used to ensure that competency-based writing assessments (such as end-of-course or rising junior examinations) have equal meaning and predictive power for all groups (Berry 2015; Elliot et al. 2016).

Employing techniques like these before scores are used provides stakeholders necessary evidence to document that neither intentional

nor unintentional discriminatory practices are being used to disenfranchise students from their own education.

A social justice stance applied to writing assessment extends beyond threshold concept theory in significant ways, naming less what assessment *has been* than what it can and *should be* (Hammond 2019; Poe and Elliot 2019). First, this stance creates a restorative milestone in the history of writing assessment by placing evidence of fairness at the center of assessment. It moves practitioners beyond validity and reliability, the evidential categories dominant groups have privileged. Second, while this stance is enriched by retrospective historical analysis, its analytic aim is forward looking and constitutive. It leverages knowledge about past assessments to help us advance opportunity to learn. It thus makes history actionable, a means of charting ethical paths for intervention. Third, this stance is theoretically and methodologically inclusive, troubling the boundedness often characteristic of threshold concepts. Benefitting from measurement research on fairness *and* theoretical scholarship on social justice, this stance invites integration of and enrichment through a diversity of critical perspectives, including feminist, poststructuralist, and critical race theories. Fourth, this stance privileges multidisciplinary and connectedness. It enables a wide variety of educational stakeholders to collaborate in designing assessments that advance opportunity to learn. And finally, fifth, this stance is intentionally revolutionary and cutting edge: it demands inclusion of diverse learners—learners too often relegated to the margins within dominant assessment frameworks or made hypervisible by them.

### *Writing Is World-Building*

JONATHAN ALEXANDER AND JACQUELINE RHODES

NWWK identifies, rightly we think, the threshold concept *writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies* (48). We would like to pivot this formulation a bit and claim a new aspirational threshold concept: *writing is world building*. Writing is never simply communicating what's already known, but, in the very process of writing, composing, inquiring, discovering—we create what we know. In many ways, writing studies scholars and practitioners already know this; theorists and pedagogues of the social turn and beyond have brought us rich ways of thinking about writing as not only refraction and dissemination but also as a shaping force in how we understand ourselves, both subjectively and more collectively as cultural and political actors in ecologies of meaning.

Indeed, writing helps us explore our sense of self and our relations with others, often in ways that use difference productively to foster better understanding, confront (and celebrate) incommensurabilities, and—at best—collectively build the future. Such an understanding rarely situates writing as easy or lacking in contention, but it's precisely the function of writing as (frequently difficult) inquiry that prompts us to conceive writing as world building, as a working through differences to co-inhabit the world.

As we've suggested in the portion we've contributed earlier in this chapter, we are somewhat skeptical of the very idea of threshold concepts. As we seek to extend the theory, then, we simultaneously remain resistant in some ways to it. At the same time, our work as queer scholars has motivated our development of this aspirational threshold concept, for queer theory's different manifestations are deeply invested in forms of critical inquiry and "worlding." This paradox is reflected in our understanding of writing itself as a technology of confronting what we know, as well as what we could know. Writing is, for us, most significantly an act of invention, and it's one that opens us to probing and generating thoughts, feelings, and even ways of being we might not have yet imagined. Writing is thus queer in the sense of enabling critique but also opening us up to possible futures.

#### CONCLUSION: THE LIMINAL SPACE

In "Threshold Concepts and Issues of Liminality," Meyer and Land (2006) repeat a story about an encounter between Albert Einstein and Gregorio Ricci-Curbastro, "inventor of . . . tensor calculus" (25). As the story goes, they say, "Einstein, in a somewhat anxious state, was complaining to Ricci . . . about the fact that he was *stuck*. Ricci explained to him what tensor calculus could do, and Einstein immediately saw it as a solution for his problems" (25). Prior to this encounter, Meyer and Land speculate, "Einstein may well have been in a liminal state, temporarily suspended" because he lacked components of a framework "to express and progress his thinking. . . . Having reached the stage of development that he had . . . he could not go backward . . . but he could not go forwards either without acquiring the language of tensor calculus" (25). While we certainly make no claims to understanding either relativity or tensor calculus, this possibly apocryphal story is important for the case we lay out here. Without the language (and signifying properties) of tensor calculus, according to the story, the pieces of Einstein's theory of relativity simply *weren't*. With that language, the pieces came together into something that *was*.

As all the authors of this chapter have outlined, there are important critiques to be made of the threshold concepts framework and of the project of attempting to articulate these concepts for an entire field. The aspirational threshold concepts here remind us that simply naming accepted and conventional concepts might be important for learners; at the same time, it is both never enough and an endeavor whose very undertaking is in some ways vexed. Both discussions seem essential for the work of a healthy and productive field; that is, continuing to consider, in an ongoing and ever-evolving way, what might be our threshold concepts. At the same time, we must also consider the ideological and material implications of such an effort. Each project, individually and in dialogue with the others, represents attempts to enact inclusive practice. If we want learners and stakeholders to join us in our work, we must be able to clearly and explicitly explain what it is we are doing and what basic assumptions we make that are different from those made in other communities of practice. For those with whom threshold concepts resonate, these concepts can be a way to identify the constituent elements of expertise. In this sense, they provide one way of helping newcomers and nonexperts understand explicitly the values and methodologies and generally agreed-upon findings of a particular field. Without explicitly identifying our threshold concepts, it is too easy for us to serve as gatekeepers or for newcomers to feel confounded by unstated assumptions and values. For our field in particular, not identifying clearly what we know about how writing and language work can leave us powerless to make change in the broader world of policy, testing, legislation, and so forth. Threshold concepts are *one* way to articulate elements of a framework through which we understand the worlds created in and through writing and through which we might bring others into that way of seeing. Doing this work with others is an inclusive practice. But it is not *solely* an inclusive practice.

We must also consider the effects of identifying threshold concepts so the effort itself is as expansive as possible and so threshold concepts are never understood as the only ideas around which we work. There are utilitarian and pragmatic purposes of threshold concept theory—and there are distinct limits to what this kind of theory can offer. Threshold concepts thus are not by any means *the only ideas* we should be discussing with one another and with learners. Naming and exploring threshold concepts for the purposes of welcoming learners and positively influencing policy and legislation around language can be useful and sometimes even necessary—but they are never entirely sufficient for the work of world building and changing making our field has long committed to do.

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## 2

# LITERACY IS A SOCIOHISTORIC PHENOMENON WITH THE POTENTIAL TO LIBERATE AND OPPRESS

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Literacy is sociohistoric phenomenon that has spread widely through the circulation of people, practices, and texts.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the contours of this sociohistoric trend we call *literacy* is essential for effective literacy instruction: whether we are cognizant of it or not, when we intervene in people's literacy development as educators, administrators, researchers, and writers, we are also intervening in history, aligning ourselves with particular ideologies of literacy and distancing ourselves from others. In other words, the social history of literacy profoundly matters for our work in the present.

While literacy is commonly understood as a set of skills, and while skills play a role in how it is experienced, current literacy research takes a wider view to understand literacy as a set of sociohistorically situated practices. Defining literacy in this way means *what we know* about literacy primarily derives from studies of how it has been used, defined, and experienced in particular settings. For example, some influential studies have examined literacy's use: among segregated working-class communities in the South (Heath 1983), multiliterate communities in Liberia (Scribner and Cole 1981), religious communities in Iran (Street 1984), African American churchgoers (Moss 2002), college students (Brandt 1990), inner-city residents (Cushman 1998), biliterate Mexican labor migrants (Kalmar 2001), Tuvalu islanders (Besnier 1995), and the list goes on. One of the conceptual problems arising from studying literacy in particular contexts is that there appears to be no easy way to

generalize about literacy's consequences. Subsequently, we can't really say what literacy *does* to a people or a society.

But what we can talk about—and talk about in theoretically rich and grounded ways, ways that have consequences for teaching and research—is what literacy *can* do under certain social conditions. And grounded studies of literacy practices in particular settings, like the ones we cite above, provide an important guide. The trick to understanding literacy, they reveal, is that it is almost never *on its own*. It is always tied up in complex agendas, personal histories, technological changes, shifting winds of power, individual bodies. For this reason, it is incumbent upon educators and researchers to understand the conditions under which literacy can liberate, and the conditions under which it can oppress.

In this chapter, we first describe the broad contours of some ways literacy has been used to oppress and liberate. Then, each subsequent section explains how particular aspects of literacy—its connection to identity, its status as a racialized social process, its embodiment, its materiality, its economic purchase—participate in oppression and liberation. This treatment of *what we know* about literacy is not exhaustive. (After all, it also begs the question of who exactly “we” are.) But our hope is that this synthesis of some widely understood ways literacy can act in contexts of inequality will serve as an invitation to readers to see literacy in their lives, classrooms, and communities in critical ways, perhaps adding their own analyses of literacy's consequences to *what we know*. To aid readers in this project, we end with implications of what literacy's embeddedness in a sociohistorical context means for socially just literacy education. In this way, this chapter extends concepts outlined in the original *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015) in order to more fully account for the sociohistorical influences that continue to shape ideologies of literacy and literacy events. We push here for an active and critical stance towards literacy, one that calls for using what we know in the service of more equitable and just educational practices.<sup>2</sup>

## LITERACY CAN BOTH OPPRESS AND LIBERATE

LAUREN HEAP AND KATE VIEIRA

Literacy is so often touted as an unconditional good that its use as a political tool to oppress people often gets erased. But in order to responsibly use and teach literacy, researchers, educators, and everyday writers and readers should be aware of its problematic history.

People and institutions have taken up literacy to colonize the Americas (Mignolo 2003); to promote the interests of corporations above those of ordinary readers and writers (Brandt 2001; Graff 1991); to racially engineer social groups (Prendergast 2004); to reinforce global educational inequities (Stornaiuolo and LeBlanc 2016); to regulate the movement of people of color across borders through immigration papers (Vieira 2016) and otherwise perpetuate immigrants' "legal, economic, and cultural exclusion" (Wan 2014, 35); as a stand-in for anti-African American racism, thereby promoting white supremacy (Young 2009); and as a punishable offense, particularly for enslaved African Americans who learned to write (Cornelius 1991). This list is necessarily incomplete, and clearly some ways literacy has been used to oppress are more nefarious than others. Nonetheless, this accumulation of historical instances points to how literacy's ideologies and technologies can be mobilized to enact violence (Stuckey 1991).

At the same time, because liberation and oppression exist in a dichotomy housed within hegemony, literacy can also be liberatory. For example, that writing among people of color has been considered dangerous to white supremacy in the example above highlights its liberatory potential. How to best use literacy for liberatory purposes has been a subject of much research. For example, liberatory pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970), in his work with Brazilian peasants pre-military dictatorship, argued for literacy as a way to dismantle oppressive structures. As Freire put it, reading the word and reading (and rewriting) the world is a dynamic process. Others have emphasized the power of critical and expressive discourse to help writers and readers develop empowered identities, social visions, and social change. To offer another necessarily incomplete list of examples, methods of critical and expressive discourse have been taken up in urban classrooms (Camangian 2015; Weinstein 2009), in programs for formerly incarcerated girls (Winn 2011), among Cherokee Indians developing and using their own syllabary (Cushman 2011), to develop syncretic historic and embodied narratives in a university migrant leadership program (Gutiérrez 2008), and in using feminista/chicana educational approaches among high-school girls whose lives have been impacted by violence in Juárez, Mexico (Cervantes-Soon 2017).

These examples of liberatory literacy pedagogy teach that literacy has the potential to be transformative: as we practice our literacies, we in turn change through that practice (Delpit 1993; Prior and Shipka 2003; Rosenblatt 1994), and as we make our writing public, our words can change the world (Lorde 1984). Literacy, as Freire theorized,

involves action. Such change can be geared towards liberatory ends, giving literacy the potential to reform rather than conform to systems of hegemony.

As a result, educators have the power to shape literacy's consequences for students. There is a popular idea that education and teachers should be neutral, not pushing political agendas or religious beliefs, but literacy, as a sociohistoric phenomenon that resonates with the power dynamics with which it comes into contact, can never be neutral. Literacy's legacy lingers in contemporary practices. For example, morality has historically been tied up in the spread of many Western literacies with concerns for the souls of receivers of literacy instruction, and morality remains an integral aspect of many literacy pedagogies and ideologies. These ideologies and others reverberate through everyday literacy practices, with the result that educators, readers, and writers are influenced in ways they may not fully realize. A critical awareness of literacy's potential to both liberate and oppress, then, is crucial for socially just writing and writing pedagogy. The rest of this chapter highlights particular areas on which readers may focus such awareness and, finally, how such awareness may be enacted in classrooms.

#### LITERACY AND IDENTITY ARE COCONSTITUTIVE

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SAMITHA SENANAYAKE, AND BRENNAN SWIFT

In the first edition of *Naming What We Know*, Kevin Roozen writes about the threshold concept *writing is linked to identity* (Roozen 2016, 50). We want to build on that notion here: *literacy* (including but not limited to writing) and identity are *coconstitutive*, by which we mean they are mutually informing and reinforcing. Our identities—corresponding to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, citizenship status, and other identity markers—are entirely imbricated in how literacy is enacted, constrained, and operationalized.

Scholars (Baxter 2003; Brandt 1998; Cornelius 1991; Kalmar 2001) have long pointed out that powerful interests actively suppress or extend literacy access to marginalized people who inhabit nondominant identities—identities such as immigrant, queer, poor, disabled, Black, trans, and others. Deborah Brandt (1998) reminds us that acquiring literacy skills (reading and writing but also nonalphabetic literacy) and engaging in literate practices comes with a financial, political, or ideological cost often shaped by the economic and material needs of

powerful institutions—needs that tend to exploit those already at the margins of society. Failing to see literacy and its acquisition through the prism of identity and power has *real* consequences—it cuts off an understanding of literacy acquisition as a political project and prevents a more nuanced understanding of how we can work to enact more just literacy practices and pedagogy.

If we recognize literacy and identity as coconstitutive, then, we can see literacies, including nonacademic and nonalphabetic literacies, as enacting “identity kits,” the complex discourses and sets of practices associated with particular social roles (Gee 2015). In this way, literacy becomes something people *do*, not something they simply possess (Kynard 2013).

Seeing literacy as something one *does* moves beyond the focus on discrete skills acquired in classroom settings to emphasize a more complete set of “social and cultural practices” surrounding identity and representation (Kynard 2013, 32). In particular, the research programs of Brandt and Kate Vieira have highlighted literacy as self-representation—the (re)definition of identity—and collective action (Miller 2016). Their work allows us to recognize the myriad expressions of identity that can disrupt systems of oppression—expressions that can include poetry (Ife 2016) and rap (which University of Virginia hip-hop professor A. D. Carson famously used to deliver his dissertation). Fully acknowledging the recursive connections among literacy, identity, and self-representation will help us move past simplistic constructions of literacy that further the role of literacy instruction in perpetuating oppression. Recognizing that literacy and identity are coconstitutive might instead support literacy’s role as a tool of resistance for people from marginalized groups, who have historically used both academic and nonacademic literacies to intervene in dominant ideologies. In this way, it may also contribute to context-sensitive understandings of threshold concepts themselves (Blaauw-Hara et al., this volume).

## WRITING IS RACIALIZED

CHRIS CASTILLO AND ANN MEEJUNG KIM

While writing may seem to be a skill or means of communication that has nothing to do with race, every act of writing is racialized. In this section, we explain how. But before we get started, a quick refrain. We are international scholars of color. We diverge at points in this section from standard academic English, what linguists have called the *language*

*of wider communication* (LWC), as a direct result of our awareness of the legacy of LWC as a construct associated with whiteness (Smitherman 2006). Our desire to incorporate aspects of African American vernacular English here derives from our continued study of people of color's language practices and from our desire to acknowledge and validate those practices—especially as those language practices serve as knowledge bases and influenced our own written and speech patterns and styles. But we ain't code switchers. We code breakers. We take the patterns and styles in the LWC and break them, play with them, and rebuild them for our own purposes and projects. We are one from Korea and one from the Chi, and our language "sprang out of the need to identify ourselves as a distinct people" (Anzaldúa 1987, 55). In a country where English is the standard, we can identify neither with the standard language nor with the language we speak at home, in the streets, or at work. So we created our own. We bring this linguistic invention into this section to exemplify our central point: that writing is racialized.

First, race ain't an inherent quality of writing. Rather, race is attached to writing over time and on multiple levels. It occurs simultaneously in a specific time and space and also across time and space; it occurs at home and in institutions; it occurs online and on paper; it occurs with family and with colleagues. The racialization of writing is so central to the infrastructure of North American life—so normalized—that the process is nearly invisible.<sup>3</sup>

Second, as a result of writing's racialization, literacy education is also a raced and racializing process. Ever since literacy scholar Shirley Brice Heath uncovered the profound ways working-class White and working-class African American children develop language skills differently, scholars have called for the need to focus their attention more explicitly on how racial differences in literacy education are socially, materially, politically, and historically produced. Such scholars have shown how literacy is (unjustly) treated as a "white property" (Ladson-Billings 2003) and a "white property right" (Prendergast 2004), belonging to Whites and systematically withheld from racially marginalized Others, perpetuating racial educational inequality.

Third, such racial inequities can inhere in the scholarly, aesthetic, and pedagogical values ascribed to academic writing. In institutions of higher education, for example, the first-year writing course often acts as a checkpoint of assimilation. As most first-year writing courses dedicate themselves to instructing their students on the conventions of academic writing, and most institutions of higher education require students to complete a first-year writing course, the success of students

in higher education can hinge on their ability to “write white” “in order to compete with ‘White Americans’” (Fordham quoted in Young 2009, 129). But, when some students try to give alphabetic form to their oral configurations of language, certain instructors do not take into account the “oral language paradigms and practices that shape the writing of some ESD students [English as a second dialect students]” (Coleman 2017, 487). As a result, instructors who adhere to traditional notions of academic writing often tell students *ain’t* is an antiquated word no longer used in wider circulation. They often tell students to remove contractions in their writing, to spell *can’t* as *cannot*. They often tell students to add a *g* at the end of the suffix *ing* and to include an *a* in the conjunction *and*.<sup>4</sup> In other words, such instructors can hear and see the linguistic variations in student’s speech patterns and writing but assume there is something wrong or incomplete in their use of language.

Schools often reinforce such ideologies by measuring student writing “based on the kinds of scholarship that have traditionally been published” (Stanford 2011, 118). These assessment practices can “reproduce social outcomes that arrange groups of people along ostensibly racial lines” (Inoue 2012, 6). In this view, academic writin’ is white writin’, and academic writin’ is good writin’ (Flores and Rosa 2015). Such associations can also adhere to racially marked multilingual writers, as there is a tendency in first-language composition to categorize such writers into an ESL, EFL, ELL, L2 “division of labor” (Matsuda 2006). Thus, through the circulation and recirculation of academic writin’ in schools, journals, and books, good writin’ can come to be associated with whiteness.

Writing’s association with whiteness in institutions of higher education, however, ain’t left unchallenged in North America. Beginning with the recognition that people develop particular dialects based on specific sociohistorical context (NCTE’s Students’ Right to their Own Language), and following with the notion that people learn to crystallize those dialects with the aid of others in particular sociocultural settings (Moll, Sáez, and Dworin 2001), writing teachers have transitioned towards leveraging dialects “as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (Horner et al. 2011, 303). In the first-year writing classroom, they have included pedagogical practices such as “self-directed writing” (Lovejoy 2014), “expressivist writing” (Palmeri 2012), “multigenre research papers” (Welford 2011), and debate activities that emphasize the use of one’s own language in writing and speech (Graff 1991). All these pedagogical practices leverage student voices in order to ensure students not only learn to speak and write in their own dialect but also become exposed to other dialects

they can combine with their own unique mode of talking and writing. Students, then, can agentively intervene in the racialization of writing through their own writing processes.

## LITERACY IS EMBODIED

KASSIA KRZUS-SHAW

In the original *Naming What We Know*, the threshold concept *writing is (also always) a cognitive activity* recognizes how psychoanalytic and physiological conditions factor into embodied writing practices. This section builds on this foundation to describe how literacy is rooted in socially and spatially situated bodily experiences—and how such embodiment matters (Canagarajah 2018; Prior and Shipka 2003).

Writing is rooted in bodily expression, whether due to our sensorium response to the material world, a visceral gut response, emotional distribution through literacy's materials, or the body's situatedness in its environment (Ahmed 2010; Fleckenstein 2003; Hawhee 2015; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Perl 2004). Regardless of how literacy is expressed within its socially contextual limitations, when the body enacts literacy, it carries the shape of its material surroundings (Squier 2004). This relationship is simultaneously empowering and limiting, especially when the boundaries between body and text, inside and outside, blur and accentuate power and social hierarchies (Crowley and Selzer 1999; Mackenzie 2009; Pennebaker and Evans 2014). Scholars such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander (2015), Malea Powell (2012), Elaine Richardson (2006), and others have worked to show how this connection effectively shapes literacy responses of resistance to oppressive power structures. In these situations, literacy moves through, by, and beyond the body to create recursive relationships with one's cultural, social, and material environment (Crowley and Selzer 1999).

Bodies also act as an "epistemological site" for literacy (Crowley and Selzer 1999; Owens and Van Ittersum 2013), meaning bodies are marked with social and cultural labels. Sharon Crowley and Jack Selzer describe such labels as "sexed, raced, gendered, abled or disabled, whole or fragmented, aged or young, fat, thin, or anorexic" (361). When bodies "inhabit" spaces through these labels, they become a "site" of meaning-making. For example, bodies marked as "illiterate" may experience obstacles for accessing the material conditions of literacy, furthering reifying power structures.

Such bodily labels shape—but do not determine—the performance of individual literacy practices. Someone marked as “illiterate” may circumvent the traditional space of literacy (by choosing a community commons instead of a classroom) to deliver a powerful message of resistance. They might do so by altering the expected genres of literacy (musical lyrics instead of a written document), by using unexpected tools of literacy (spray paint instead of a pen), challenging norms of authorship (community collaboration versus individual work), or creating new terms of literacy altogether. These practices and performances extend from the body in response to social labels through cultural and material processes with distributed social consequences (Haas and Witte 2001).

Literacy is likewise always practiced by individuals with diverse bodily contexts, including a range of abilities. For example, we know bodies can change and adapt in response to the social contexts of literacy (Miller 2016; Walters 2014). Drawing on the insights of disability studies, Elisabeth Miller’s study of the writing practices of people with aphasia has pointed out that the body is a “technology of literacy.” The body as a literacy technology is often enacted through performance and play to create new spaces that directly challenge normative literacy practices, thereby creating new literacy frameworks (Kerschbaum 2014). Though many of these practices and frameworks are often unacknowledged by dominant and normative social contexts, understanding literacy as embodied provides opportunities to recognize bodily agency and performance possibilities as critical literacies (Crowley and Selzer 1999; Hawhee 2004; Knoblauch 2012). In other words, as Anne-Marie Womack describes in this volume, recognizing literacy as rooted in the bodily experience can afford opportunities to push back against the established social and material boundaries of literacy in creative new ways.

#### LITERACY IS MATERIAL

MAGGIE BLACK, ỌLÁ ỌLÁDIPÒ, KASSIA KRZUS-SHAW,  
AND XIAOPEI YANG

Literacy is not just something we do, it is also something that is. It lives in the pen, the spray paint (Cintrón 1997), the printing press (Eisenstein 2005), the post office (Vincent 2000), the internet (Vee 2013). In other words, literacy is a “thing . . . , still there after the people around it are gone” (Brandt and Clinton 2002, 348). Because literacy is popularly thought of as a skill—decoding words on a page, for example—its

material aspect is often overlooked. But its status as a “thing” matters for the issues of equity that animate this chapter.

The materiality of literacy interacts with its social contexts, which can imbue those materials with power. For example, immigration papers can resonate with state authority (Vieira 2016), diplomas can resonate with educational prestige, and laptops gifted to family members can resonate with love (Vieira 2019). Put differently, “Literacies are materialized in things,” or objects that give them meaning and power (Burnett et al. 2014, 12). Our interactions with and around those objects shape our literacy practices, making literacy simultaneously something one does (see “Literacy and Identity” above) and some *thing*.

Literacy’s “thingness” also means it can travel (Brandt 2001) and become recontextualized in new spaces (Kell 2009). Let us, for example, consider this aspect of writing in the context of transnational migration. When people make the decision to migrate, they take their literacies with them. But, they may have to adapt those literacies to suit the social and economic realities of their destination. It is also a common practice for migrants to stay connected to those they left back home through texts, emails, and calls. In this context, the thingness of literacy is exemplified in how it is transferred across borders between migrants and their family members in their homeland. Email exchanges, video calls, and the gift of devices that aid communication serve not only as markers of love but also as avenues for family members to acquire new forms of literacies—such as digital literacy and composition skills (Vieira 2018). Understanding the inherent power of literacy to travel across time and space is essential for two reasons. First, it highlights the often-ignored and nontraditional spaces where literacy acquisition takes place (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012). Second, such knowledge also casts a broader light on the power of literacy to connect people in an age of neoliberal globalization.

Literacy’s materiality is also a crucial piece of its meaning-making ability, making attention to multimodality a powerful site for learning (Rowell 2012; Shipka 2011; Vasudevan 2014) and communication (Madianou and Miller 2012). Multimodality helps individuals move beyond the confinement of texts and imagine new ways of meaning-making. For instance, a study of the link between multimodality and belonging has shown how diverse groups of young people make “meaning in the everyday moments of intercultural communication and narrative encounters” (Vasudevan 2014, 64).

Literacy’s sociomateriality (Vieira 2016) means such technological changes interact with sociohistorical changes. Every literacy has a lifespan

because literacy is context based and forms a part of larger material human and nonhuman systems. Its incarnations, and the value of these incarnations, thus differ across generations, making it an “an unstable currency,” volatile and always evolving in relation to social norms, economic shifts, and technological innovation (Brandt 2001, 9). These changes often give rise to new forms of literacies, devalue or lower the status of old literacies, or sometimes add values to them. Thus, the values and expectations of literacy, the conditions under which literacy is produced, circulated, and acquired, are always taking on new material forms—forms that merit our attention for the social power they embody and confer.

### LITERACY IS AN ECONOMIC RESOURCE

KATE VIEIRA

We often think of literacy as having more to do with expression and meaning-making than with money and finances, yet literacy is deeply imbricated in economic transactions, making economics (along with religion and government) one of the central “domains” of literacy (Goody 1986). Understanding literacy’s often hidden relationship to money is key to understanding its potential to both liberate and oppress.

First, literacy fuels economic growth in many societies. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia, one of the birthplaces of writing, a complex inscription system involving clay tablets was developed to document who did and did not pay taxes. This writing-based bureaucratic structure allowed the temple economy to manage agricultural production and thus grow (Schmandt-Besserat 1980). This is one of the ways literacy can become, as Annette Vee (2013) has pointed out, “infrastructural” to a society.

Second, just as literacy can contribute to economic growth, so too does literacy require economic investment. Writing in particular requires raw materials, specialized human labor, and the technological development to make that writing happen. For example, the rise of literacy in medieval England depended on wax to seal envelopes (materials), scribes (labor), and quills (technology) (Clanchy 2013).

Third, as an economic resource, literacy’s financial value is often dictated by laws of supply and demand. In the example of medieval England above, for example, where wax or ink was in short supply, fewer people could be trained to be scribes, making the work of writing, crucial to the king’s increasingly bureaucratic reign, more valuable (Clanchy 2013). Likewise, in the wake of state investment in public education in modern

Europe, literacy was less remunerable as an individual skill because there was a surplus of it (Vincent 2000).

The result is that the value of peoples' literacies often shifts—many times unexpectedly and inequitably—in concert with larger political and economic trends. This volatile valuation of literacy is perhaps uniquely visible in transnational environments. In sites as diverse as postcommunist Slovakia (Prendergast 2008), the Mexico-United States border (Hernández-Zamora 2010), Central Africa (Blommaert 2008), and the Philippines (Lagman 2015), the economic consequences of global neoliberalism often curtail peoples' abilities to trade their literacy training for fair compensation. As literacy is carried across unequally positioned national borders, the value of migrants' literacy often depreciates (Lorimer Leonard 2013).

If the example above reveals how literacy is inequitably valued across geographic space, literacy research has also shown how literacy can be inequitably valued across historical time, especially as literacy standards change. Put simply, a high-school diploma is not worth as much today as it was fifty years ago. As literacy standards change, some people are economically lifted (think computer coders), and others are left behind (think typists). Keeping up with changing literacy standards requires investment—investment that depending on age, gender, race, social class, and other positions—is not equally accessible. Based on a study of oral histories of literacy collected in Wisconsin, representing lives across the twentieth century, literacy scholar Brandt (1998) called this uneven process of literacy's spread “sponsorship,” whereby corporations and other distant agents invest in the literacy practices of particular people in order to extract that literacy and thereby gain by it. Dependent on the vagaries of capitalist production imperatives in the knowledge economy, systems of sponsorship can entrench inequitable access to literacy and therefore access to its economic benefits.

Just as larger economic forces—the temple economy, global neoliberalism, colonization, oligarchy—can shape what writers earn from their writing, so too can savvy and strategic writers leverage their literacy skills to make money. Consider a few selective examples of how ordinary people have leveraged writing for economic gain: indigenous communities in Peru used *Khippu*, a native meaning-making system involving knotting, to counter the power of the Spanish alphabet (Saloman and Niño-Murcia 2011). In another quite different context, a 2011 study of online poker players revealed how expert authors leveraged both their reputations and internet savvy for maximum cash for selling high-priced poker strategy manuals (Laquintano 2010). And in contemporary

computer-coding bootcamps, low-income adults of color are learning computer coding in the hopes of entering into well-remunerated careers (albeit with uneven results) (Byrd 2020). Under certain historical conditions, writing can be a financially advantageous undertaking for those who can adapt—and keep adapting—to markets, technologies, institutions, and conventions (Watkins 2015).

In sum, literacy is deeply imbricated in the economic realm. It is never free. As literacy scholar Allan Luke (1996) notes, the value of literacy often depends on its market value and on individuals' access to institutions that can interpret or convert these literacy resources into material resources. An awareness of its cost and its tendency to exploitation by powerful financial interests entails a responsibility on the part of scholars, educators, and writers committed to equity: to be aware of the inequitable distribution of literacy; to commit to broad access to it; to promote socially just economic policies; and to cultivate, value, and invest in public writing.

#### **CONCLUSION: SOCIALLY JUST LITERACY PEDAGOGY ADDRESSES POWER, CONTEXT, AND HISTORY**

PATRICIA RATANAPRAPHART, NIKHIL M. TIWARI, LISA VELARDE,  
AND GORDON BLAINE WEST

The previous sections have delineated how literacy's imbrication in identity, race, the body, materiality, and economics can contribute to its potential to liberate or oppress. But what does "what we know" about literacy in these respects mean for how we teach it? Here we suggest that precisely because literacy has been used to oppress, subjugate, and dehumanize, pedagogically it must be used to directly counter oppressive uses of literacy. As we describe below, to enact liberatory literacy pedagogy within an increasingly globalized world requires a recognition of not only how literacy practices are embedded within specific contexts but also of how these practices are networked across space and time and utilize a number of materials and modalities (Canagarajah 2018; Hawkins 2018).

How literacy is taken up and operationalized is related to how it is understood. On one hand, it is often used as a tool to reproduce normative practices. On the other hand, it can be seen and taught as a social practice situated within contexts, housed within ideologies, and embodied within the mind, the body, and the material. What teachers believe to be the purpose of literacy is therefore undergirded by what they understand to be the consequences of it in the lives of their

students. When mobilized for liberatory purposes, it tends to space and historicity, as well as the conflicts and tensions of individuals' lived experiences (Freire 1970; Gutiérrez 2008; Winn 2011). Socially just literacy pedagogy may, therefore, foster opportunities for rich discussions and action around the ideologies that are transmitted and resisted in the act of be(come)ing literate in a particular space and time.<sup>5</sup>

Liberation, however, is a tricky concept. In looking at literacy as a contextually situated practice, the act of becoming literate involves taking on values and beliefs and ways of being. Some have argued that when literacy is seen in this way, not everyone has access to or can gain access to those literacies (Gee 2015). Others, however, argue that people, especially nondominant groups, can master, and should master, secondary, dominant discourses. They claim doing so will also empower individuals to shape those discourses in more equitable ways, since literacies and discourses are fluid and dynamic (Delpit 1993). Recent work in the field has made the case that for literacy to be truly liberatory, its conceptualization must be defined by marginalized groups to serve the needs they feel will best benefit their own liberation (Cervantes-Soon 2017; Kalmar 2001; Winn 2011).

To confront power, literacy pedagogy often draws on and privileges individual experiences and narratives to help learners establish authorship of their own stories in opposition to the stories that have been imposed on them. One example of this type of pedagogy is *testimonio*, “a genre that exposes brutality, disrupts silencing, and builds solidarity,” especially as it has been developed by Chicana feminists (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012, 363). *Testimonio* takes different forms, from formal written pieces, to performance pieces, to informal conversations among peers. The learning of literacy in this way allows for new literacy users to author their own stories in opposition to the stories of self and identity that have been imposed on them (Gutiérrez 2008). It might also promote the kind of open-minded “deep reading” Patrick Sullivan describes as a way to engage with *testimonio*, to hear the experiences of others (this volume).

In other contexts, under different forms of oppression, this power of authorship affords different possibilities. Developing literacy and pedagogies take shape in response to the needs of communities in these different contexts. Often, grassroots efforts emerge in response to injustices and are formed by individual and collective efforts to speak back to power and write paths to liberation. For example, Kalmar describes how a migrant worker community in the United States used biliteracy in ways that crossed and rewrote the social and linguistic borders that

continue to violently perpetuate injustices. (Kalmar 2001). And in this volume, Anne-Marie Womack uses a disability studies lens to describe the liberatory potential of writing under accessible conditions. Thus, literacy pedagogy may act as a medium through which possibilities are both imagined and enacted.

Playfulness and creativity are also key in developing subversive literacy pedagogies, particularly as they emerge from both individual and collective needs. As shown in Tomás Mario Kalmar's (2001) examples of learning *liricamente*, Spanish speakers learned English from other community members through the creative and coconstructed development of dictionaries that drew from Spanish language and literacy practices. Maisha T. Winn (2011) shares a different example of the importance of play in developing subversive literacies for liberation. In her work, young women in a prison-industrial complex worked collectively to both write and perform their own stories. Similarly, Anne Haas Dyson's (1997) work with young learners brought to light the transformative power of creativity. By engaging popular culture in both writing and play, young children investigated different identities, negotiated understandings of their world, and authored storylines that ran counter to official school curricula. Thus, playfulness allows for a space in which dominant literacies and power can be reimagined. Play, in fact, might be a pedagogically productive way to mediate the "unsettling shifts in perspective" the process of learning about threshold concepts themselves can provoke (Mutnick, this volume). In this space, the authoring of stories is often the first step in acting differently in the world to gain degrees of liberation.

In thinking about the pedagogical implications for teaching literacy, teachers should begin with three questions in mind: How does literacy function as an oppressive force in the lives of students? How might varied embodied and performed literacy practices serve as means to interrogate and challenge inequities? And finally, what are the possibilities literacy pedagogy can afford in creating a more socially just world?

## NOTES

1. When we discuss literacy as a social trend, we use *literacy* in the singular for conceptual clarity around its implications, which coalesce around certain axes, what we have identified here as *liberation* and *oppression*. In other moments, we use *literacies* in the plural to emphasize the vibrant diversity and multiplicity of practices, perspectives, and contexts.
2. We build in particular from concept three in the original *Naming What We Know*.
3. This process of attaching "racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified . . . social practice" over time is precisely the process that racializes writing (Omi and Winant 2015, 64).

4. The phonetic variation of the word *and* as *nd* can be heard in the hook (that is, chorus) of Dr. Dre's and Snoop Dogg's song "Nuttin' But a 'G' Thang" and in many other hip-hop lyrics that both inform and build from AAVE.
5. The act of becoming literate also includes ethical assessment, to which a social justice orientation can contribute (Hammond, Poe, and Elliot, ch. 1 in this volume).

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