



Learning at the Threshold: WAC Practices for Inclusive Education

Key Words

Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing-to-Learn, Threshold Concepts

Abstract

In 1986, David Bartholomae eloquently described the plight of the first-year university student: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university" (4). By this Bartholomae meant that, for students to succeed in the university, they must become a part of its discourse community. They must learn to communicate in the language and style of the academy in general and of its various disciplines in particular. While this transition has always been challenging for first year students, it is even more so for the growing population of multilingual, immigrant, minority, and low SES students. In this presentation, I propose that a combination of writing-to-learn activities and direct instruction in disciplinary threshold concepts can ease these students through their transitional period and help them to succeed. Threshold concepts were originally defined by Ray Land and Jan H.F. Meyer and have since become a significant research area in the discipline of Writing Studies (Adler-Kassner & Wardle). Instruction in threshold concepts introduces students to the research modalities and a priori reasoning that distinguish one discipline from another, but which typically go unspoken amongst disciplinary insiders. Writing-to-learn is one of the central pedagogical principles promoted by the Writing Across the Curriculum [WAC] movement. Writing-to-learn activities present students with low-stakes situations in which they can become proficient in disciplinary threshold concepts and practice the communication skills valued by the academic discourse community (Cox et al.). While these classroom practices are useful for all university students, they are crucial for at-risk students, especially those from diverse educational, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through a combination of threshold concepts instruction and writing-to-learn activities, instructors can help these students move from outsider status to insider status within the university. This presentation will be grounded in recent Writing Across the Curriculum research and framed by specific examples of threshold and writing-to-learn instructional practices.

References

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