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Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

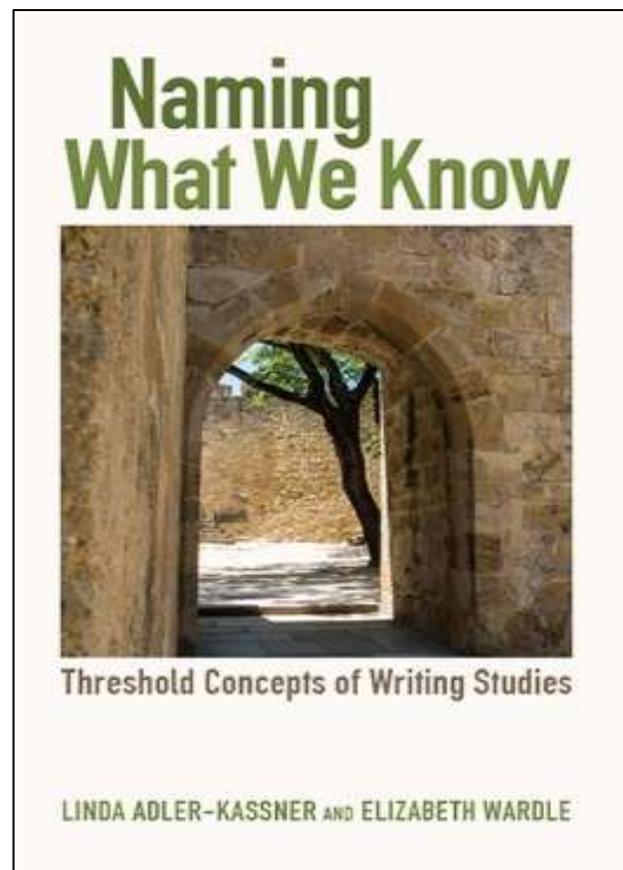
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Establishing a disciplinary identity has long been a source of tension for many scholars and instructors in the field of rhetoric and composition, largely due to varying beliefs regarding writing. There are, for instance, several competing pedagogical theories in rhetoric and composition, such as current-traditional rhetoric, social constructionism, and critical pedagogy. Moreover, teachers focus on different aspect of writing with their students: some instructors highly value the writing process and place emphasis on the drafting and revising stages of composition, while others assign more weight to the final product—a research paper, a rhetorical analysis, a reflective narrative, and so on—that students submit for a grade. To complicate matters further, debates surrounding these final products and how much they can help students write in different contexts beyond the classroom permeate composition studies.

In response to such divisiveness, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* seeks to offer some type of



unifying foundation for rhetoric and composition by “(1) identifying threshold concepts, in this case 37 of them, providing a core for the field in terms of what we know; and (2) outlining how they can be helpful in various writing-focused and writing-related contexts” (Yancey, 2015, p. xviii). The editors of the book, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, are both notable figures in the field. Adler-Kassner, a writing professor and director of the writing program at University of California, Santa Barbara, studies writing for transfer through the relationships between university writing programs and their respective internal and external stakeholders. Wardle, who is currently serving as the chair of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida, is widely considered to be the figurehead for the writing studies movement along with Douglas Downs. Their 2007 co-authored article, “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions” paved the way for curricula that integrated writing as the actual content of study in composition classes. Both Adler-Kassner and Wardle draw on their own expertise—as well as the expertise of dozens of other scholars and instructors—to provide a nuanced and multi-faceted overview of writing.

Adler-Kassner and Wardle start by defining threshold concepts and explaining why such concepts matter in their introduction to *Naming What We Know*. “Threshold concepts are concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (p. 2), and the concepts presented in the book are “currently critical for epistemological participation in our disciplines, and many of them are, we think, critical for anyone who wants to help learners write more effectively, whatever their disciplines or professions may be” (p. 5). They acknowledge, however, that the threshold concepts presented in the book are not to be considered as a check-list that must be followed absolutely—rather, the editors suggest, readers should identify which concepts are most relevant to their own

curricula and use those concepts to inform their teaching practices.

Part 1 of *Naming What We Know* introduces five major threshold concepts: (1) writing is a social and rhetorical activity, (2) writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms, (3) writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies, (4) all writers have more to learn, and (5) writing is always a cognitive activity. Each concept is also broken down into several sub-concepts. For example, the review of the first threshold concept (“Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity”) includes the sub-concepts “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences” and “Words Get Their Meanings from Other Words.” Descriptions of each of these sub-concepts are written by different experts in the field, including Andrea A. Lunsford, Neal Lerner, Victor Villanueva, and Paul Kei Matsuda. Despite their vast expertise, the contributors keep their descriptions of the sub-concepts to about one to two pages with minimal citations, opting instead to draw on shared knowledge and easily understood examples and analogies to explain the threshold concepts. Consider Lunsford’s explanation in her section “Writing Address, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences” as an example:

And, especially in a digital age, writing cannot only address and invoke but also create audiences: as a baseball announcer in the film *Field of Dreams*...says, “If you build it, they will come.” Writers whose works have “gone viral” on the web know well what it means to create an audience that has been unintended and indeed unimagined. (p. 21)

Part 2 of *Naming What We Know* moves from theory to practice by exploring how threshold concepts can be used in various writing settings in the university and—like Part 1—has overarching concepts and themes with sub-sections. The first sub-section covers how

threshold concepts might be integrated in program and curriculum design at multiple levels. Heidi Estrem's chapter begins the conversation by linking threshold concepts to student learning outcomes, serving as the framework for the subsequent chapters on threshold concepts' place in the university, whether it be in Douglas Downs and Liane Robertson's chapter on first-year composition or Kara Taczak and Kathleen Blake Yancey's chapter on doctoral programs. To complement this vertical approach of classes—from first-year to graduate-level—the next sub-section considers threshold concepts' influence on issues *around* the classroom. Peggy O'Neill starts this discussion in her chapter on assessment by drawing on threshold concepts in psychometrics as a means of understanding classroom-based and large-scale writing assessment, and the subsequent chapters follow suit. Rebecca S. Nowacek and Bradley Hughes examine how threshold concepts can assist in developing tutor expertise in writing centers, Adler-Kassner and John Majewski outline the threshold concepts for scholars and instructors undergoing professional development, and Chris M. Anson ends the book by providing an overview of the threshold concepts necessary for writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

Even with *Naming What We Know* being so packed in terms of helpful content and contributions, there are a few potentially problematic points to note. For one, the threshold concepts themselves are not necessarily new in the field of rhetoric composition. Rather, they have been integral to the teaching and study of rhetoric and composition well before Adler-Kassner and Wardle articulate them in this book. Moreover, the sheer number of the threshold concepts in *Naming What We Know* could be overwhelming for some less-experienced readers, writers, teachers, and scholars. As Fallon (2014) notes:

It sounds a lot like talking about writing, perhaps at the expense of doing writing, and makes me wonder if Wardle and others are making matters overly complicated. It seems to me that the threshold concepts for college writing are the never-go-out-of-style basics of audience, purpose, and the writing process. (p. 367)

Another issue is that threshold concepts here are framed as concepts that must be understood and actualized by students (or tutors, or professionals) as they enter a writing setting, yet there is not much consideration for prior knowledge or familiarity with writing. In other words, the threshold concepts can, on occasion, appear to be framed as what students (or tutors, or professionals) *should* understand, not what they *already* understand.

Despite these potential weaknesses, *Naming What We Know* is still a valuable book for writing scholars and instructors, as well as for anybody outside of the discipline who still engages with writing. The descriptions of each threshold concept in the first part of the book are very accessible for readers and reinforce the notion that these concepts are applicable for writers of all levels and of different backgrounds, including first-year composition students who might need a quick breakdown of the different aspects of writing. For those more entrenched in the study and teaching of writing, the second half of the book serves as a great resource in developing curricula and growing as a professional. And, as a whole, *Naming What We Know* makes an excellent contribution to the field by cogently and thoughtfully consolidating and articulating the core concepts of rhetoric and composition—and moving the conversation forward regarding the age-old question “Who are we as a discipline?”

References

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About the Reviewer

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