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"BE LIKE A WRITER": ANALYTICAL WRITING AS A THRESHOLD CONCEPT

Esther Chiang, Bryn Mawr College, 2014

A threshold concept is the part in the learning process that students often find troublesome. When a student comes to the point of understanding the troublesome concept — through achieving understanding of the concept that was once troublesome — the student transforms her perspective thus making her able to integrate it into her life. Furthermore, Meyer and Land (2005) claim that when a student crosses the threshold, her language changes, whether it is her natural, formal, or symbolic language. In this paper, I want to discuss the reasons why I have not crossed the threshold of analytical writing yet. This will involve thinking metacognitively about the dissonance between my language and learning process and history.

I came to the realization that analytical writing is troublesome for me when I was student-teaching at a middle school. As I tried to explain to a student how to use quotes effectively in his essay, I noticed that when I used words like "analyze," "significance," and "importance," he did not know how to transfer these words he knew in the abstract and apply them on paper. The reason that I was able to notice this student's frustrations was because I recognized those frustrations within myself. Even now as I take upper-level college courses, when a professor tells me to write an analytical essay, I become instantly debilitated. I cannot think past the intuitive reaction of, "I can't," so I usually try to avoid the assignment and procrastinate for as long as possible. The idea itself of writing analytical essays causes me so much stress that the process of actually writing becomes excruciating. Through spending a lot of time thinking back on all the English teachers I have had as well as my language background, I have come to the conclusion that there are three concepts that I need to understand and embody before fully crossing the threshold concept of analytical writing.

The first English teachers I always think of are the ones that emotionally scarred me the most. My senior year AP English teacher still scares me to the point that my palms start to sweat thinking about that class. Though I went to a public school in a predominantly middle class white suburb that was well resourced, I was the student that the teachers did not notice. My parents immigrated to this country from Taiwan in their late twenties, so my language and cultural background was different from the dominant hegemony at my school as well as in my town. Therefore, because of my immigrant background, when I went to school, I believed that I needed to "be seen, not heard," so I went through school trying my best to be well behaved and obedient. This led to teachers giving me "having difficulty" on report cards because I never spoke up in class. Furthermore, throughout my educational career, I was an average student; however, as an Asian American, this was unacceptable. The other students, both white and Asian American students in my class, used to call me an "Asian Failure" because I was not overly excellent like the other Asian American students. Unfortunately, these beliefs pervaded my relationship with writing and language arts.

My teachers never took the time to get to know me in the classroom or outside the classroom as I did not speak up in class. Because of this, I did not feel a sense of belonging or support throughout my time in elementary, middle, and high school. Therefore, as I have spent many times trying to reason my way out of being so afraid of analytical writing, I have realized that

often I could not write the first word on the paper because I was afraid. I was afraid of failure, afraid of being wrong, and afraid of my teachers. Because my high school was high performing, there were high expectations of students and many of the best teachers had the highest expectations. However, while I recognized that I never do well under pressure, I did not realize that the opposite of this was to feel supported and comfortable with a teacher or professor enough to make mistakes. If students do not feel safe or supported in their environment, they will not be able to produce their best work. This is the first step towards understanding how to write analytically. For me, this involves a process of healing from the past as well as having the current supportive environment to succeed.

In order to gain confidence in writing, the second aspect is to learn how to “be a writer.” Embodying this persona is important because it allows me to take ownership and make it a part of my identity. When writing becomes a part of my identity, then it is more likely to be transformative, integrative, and irreversible, which are the characteristics of a threshold concept. Because I haven’t been able to consistently maintain a supportive environment or accept my writing abilities, it is difficult to accept the idea that I am a writer let alone an analytical writer. On the other hand, this idea of “be like a…” is transferrable to other subjects as a way to scaffold threshold concepts. For example, when a student becomes an anthropology major in college, she may consider herself only a part of the major. However, the implications of being an anthropologist include extensive knowledge and practice to have confidence. Because I lack the confidence still, because I do not always feel at peace when I write, it is difficult to gain the assurance of being able to call myself a writer.

Furthermore, this also implies taking on a new jargon and language set as I have mentioned before. However, I have not always had access to these different jargons and languages because I did not grow up in a household that socialized me within the dominant cultural capital. While these are two important steps that I believe will help me reach the threshold concept of analytical writing, there are many other factors such as social and cultural capital that affect the process. Nevertheless, being able to apply the idea of threshold concepts and come to the realization that I do not know are already important steps in improving as a writer and a student.

Recently, I was able to relearn some basic concepts of writing at a workshop called “Who am I as a writer and researcher?” as a part of my research fellowship. It was really interesting to be taught analytical writing again. However, the whole time I was in the workshop, I felt really uneasy and anxious because the presenter was throwing around writing jargon and making us reflect on our writing processes. I realized during one of these times of reflection that my troublesomeness in writing manifests itself in the editing process. I hate editing and revising my work because it causes me to have to be vulnerable with myself or another person. This leads to admitting inadequacy or failure. When I am critiqued on my writing, I become devastated and cannot face the piece of writing for a long time. I think this is because writing is such a personal matter and people really take ownership of their ideas when they have to write it down. Therefore, personal struggles or issues likely become manifested in writing because of the personal nature of writing.

I not only saw this in myself, but I saw this in my middle school student that I mentioned previously. The teacher told me that he had been bullied in his neighborhood and then separately

told me that uniquely, when this student deals with troublesome activities in class, he "does battle" with the prompt. It seems that when this student does not understand a question, perhaps the inadequacy he feels when being bullied resurfaces, and he tries to keep his pride and dignity by not giving into the problem in order to disprove that he is wrong or unable. This further shows how complex it is to look at language and learning from a holistic perspective.

On the other hand, this could also be interpreted as a part of the threshold concept that involved critical thinking. When I mention critical thinking, I am referring to the process of being able to explore one's own worldview as well as understand several other concepts, opinions, and worldviews. In terms of analytical writing, I need to reach a new level of critical thinking where I can separate these feelings and emotions that I attach to writing. This does not mean that I will not write my opinions and thoughts, but it means that I am able to see writing as a tool instead of as a representative of myself. Another way to explain this is through thinking about actors and actresses. In my opinion, many actors and actresses are cast as characters that are quite similar to how these people are in reality. However, good actors and actresses are the ones who can embody a person who is completely different from whom they really are and be convincing. This is how writing should be. I can still be passionate and use writing as an art form; however, I need to reach a point where I can separate myself from the writing enough to be able to see it not as a reflection of me.

References

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