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Michael Fraas

Western Washington University, michael.fraas@wwu.edu

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Michael Fraas,
Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders
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The Value of Refining a Threshold Concept

In the summer of 2012, I had the privilege of attending the Backwards By Design workshop, where I was introduced to the “threshold concept” (Cousin, 2006). I learned how the use of this approach could shift the ontological and conceptual dimensions of students’ perspectives. That fall, I implemented the threshold concept into my undergraduate CSD 401 Writing Lab. My intention was for students to gain perspective into the lives of survivors of acquired brain injuries. I hoped the assignment would help them develop empathy for the types of clients they would work with one day as burgeoning speech-language pathologists.

While I believe some students were able to grasp the true intentions of this approach, most were overwhelmed with the daunting task of completing a 6-8-page paper on a topic about which they lacked sufficient knowledge. In addition, many students require a great deal of support and guidance with editing their writing. Finding the time to provide students with thorough and useful guidance proved to be a Sisyphean task. I was left feeling overwhelmed and ineffective as a teacher.

Last summer, I returned to the BBD workshop hoping to acquire additional guidance on how to effectively implement the threshold concept into my writing course. The opportunity allowed me to redesign the course syllabus (syllabus attached) in order to provide the students with a more effective learning experience that not only shaped their perspective, but also improved their skills as writers.

I decided to choose a more specific topic and threshold concept for students to explore. My teaching, research, and clinical interests are centered on sport-related concussion. But in addition to aligning with my own interests, I chose this topic because of the recent media attention (the movie Concussion with Will Smith was released during this time) and the likelihood that students would be able to relate to the topic – as it turned out, half of the students in the class (6/12) had experienced their own concussions.

The threshold concept I chose for the quarter was entitled, “The social construction of concussion is such that it leads to misconceptions and to mismanagement.” The prevailing attitudes that athletes should play through injury (“just shake it off”), that acknowledging injuries is a sign of weakness, and that athletes are letting their teammates down when they sit out due to injury, all contribute to an under-appreciation for the severity of concussion and to the potential for serious long-term consequences.

I hoped to enhance the students’ perspectives of this concept by designing course assignment expectations that were clear and explicit. We started with a discussion about the final assignment, a 2-page proposal for a research project focused on either dispelling misconceptions about concussion or enhancing concussion management. Once the students understood what a project like this might entail, we then examined how other assignments would serve as scaffolding for constructing such a proposal. This discussion was initiated during the first week of class.

In the second week, I presented the students with a lecture on concussion, which included a discussion about why the topic was relevant to them and to society. It also provided the students with insight into possible topics for exploration throughout the quarter.

As the quarter progressed, students began to develop their topic and the specific question that their research proposal would explore. Students shared their topics with each other during class time and were encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback that allowed each student to further shape his or her question.

In addition, to developing their topics and research questions, students further explored organizational and conventional issues related to writing, and about APA formatting and citations.

Students provided peer-reviewed feedback on all written assignments. To gain a better understanding of the peer-review and editing process, I gave the students excerpts from a recent paper that I had submitted for review, the feedback I had received from reviewers, and the subsequent changes I made to address reviewer comments. I guided the students through a discussion of the reviewer comments and how the suggested changes improved the manuscript. I felt that this provided a more tangible example that could guide the students as they reviewed each other's papers.

Around the eighth week of class, students were required to deliver a 5-minute power point presentation to their classmates. The purpose of this assignment was to have students verbally articulate their topic and research question to demonstrate that they have developed the knowledge necessary to

write about the topic, and to ensure that their classmates understand the message being conveyed.

During the last two weeks, students engage in peer-reviews and subsequent editing. Reviewers are instructed to comment on the following 4 criteria: 1) contextual knowledge, 2) focused development, 3) organization, and 4) conventions.

Throughout the quarter, students received grades for 7 assignments including their final proposal and a grade for making meaningful contributions to classroom discussion. Assignments progressed from low-stakes (assigned early in the quarter) to high-stakes assignments (final paper). This provided students with constant feedback throughout the quarter, and as one student indicated on their student evaluations, “I felt more accountable for staying on track since there were weekly assignments.”

The threshold concepts and assignment ideas that I acquired from BBD made a substantial impact on how students perceived the course compared to previous years. In addition, it reduced the burden I felt trying to provide students with substantive and effective feedback on their writing.

The following comments from student evaluations highlight the perceived benefits they received from the methods that were employed.

“I thought the development of assignments/class organization was very good. One thing led to another and was built upon. Clear instructions were given and the class discussions were helpful.”

"[The professor] had clear expectations, guidelines, due dates, etc. In addition he provided constructive criticism to help work through problems I had in constructing a topic. He didn't give me answers, he gave me the tools to do it on my own."

"The sequential development of the class was very good and student opportunities for practicing what was learned."

"My understanding of the writing process is on a different level."

"I liked how the assignments led into the final proposal."

"Organization of assignments – I liked the way they built off each other and they didn't feel like busy work."

Appendix A: CSD 401 Writing Lab: Syllabus

Threshold Topic: The social construction of concussion is such that it leads to misconceptions and to mismanagement.

Week 1: Introductions; review syllabus; discuss projects and expectations

Writing prompt: What is good/bad writing?

Discuss the competencies that allow one to analyze and communicate their ideas effectively: 1) contextual knowledge, 2) focused development, 3) organization, and 4) conventions.

Assignment: Begin to develop a topic/question related to concussions

Week 2: What is a concussion?

Writing prompt: How would you define “concussion” and provide an indication for why it is important/relevant to study.

Lecture: Concussions; discuss some issues related to concussion that influence misconception and mismanagement.

Assignment 1: Find an article related to sport concussion from a magazine, newspaper, or online site; write a one-paragraph reflection of the article and include one question that arose following reading it; submit it via Canvas (Due before the start of the next class). Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

Week 3: Discuss assignment 1: What was the main purpose of the article?
What did you learn? What questions arose from reading your article?

What are the components of a research proposal? How do you write a good research question?

Assignment 2: Develop a question that your research proposal will attempt to answer. Be prepared to share with the class your question and your reasoning for why it should be researched.

Week 4: State your research question to the class. Why did you choose this topic? Everyone should be prepared to provide constructive feedback that helps the author refine his/her question.

How do you conduct a literature search? Which databases/journals are most relevant? How do you select an appropriate article? How do you read a research article for content? How do research articles differ from other types of writings? How do you cite research with APA formatting?

In class activity: reconstruct an APA citation

Assignment 3: Do a literature search to find several studies that help you answer your research question. Chose one of these articles and in one page: 1) summarize the purpose, method, and results of the study (in your own words – don't copy the abstract); and, 2) provide a critical review of the article in which you analyze the extent to which it provides or doesn't provide a scientific basis for answering your research question. Include the references for all 3 articles that you found in your search. Submit paper via Canvas (Due before start of next class).

Week 5: Writing prompt: Based on your literature search, what do you know thus far that helps to build a rationale for your research proposal? What information do you still need to investigate? What questions do you have that could help point you in the right direction if you feel that you are "stuck"?

What feedback do you expect to receive when a professor or a peer reviews your writing? How do you use constructive feedback or reviewer comments to revise your own work? How do you provide constructive feedback to a colleague that will guide them in the revision process?

Assignment 4: Read the article below in its initial form when first submitted for peer-review, the Reviewer comments provided to the author, and the final version of the article that was accepted for publication (note: these documents can be found on Canvas). Write down your responses to the following questions: 1) Do you agree with the reviewer comments and did they seem relevant? Why? 2) Did the author address all of the Reviewer comments? 3) How did the changes affect the overall flow of the article and the message gained by the reader? Discuss in terms of: 1) contextual knowledge, 2) focused development, 3) organization, and 4) conventions. Be prepared to share your responses in class. Bring your written responses to class next week. Be prepared to submit them at the end of class.

Fraas, M. (2015). Narrative medicine: Suggestions for clinicians to help their clients construct a new identity following acquired brain injury. *Topics In Language Disorders*, 53 (3), 210-218. doi: 10.1097/TLD.000000000000063.

Week 6 Discuss your thoughts on the review process for Fraas (2015). Submit your written responses at end of class.

In class assignment: Be prepared to state your research question to the class and answer questions that members of the class may have

that would help clarify your question. What questions do you have regarding your proposal?

Assignment 5: Prepare a one-page draft of your research proposal. Bring to class next week and be prepared to have it reviewed by a classmate.

Week 7 In class assignment: Exchange your proposal draft with a classmate. Provide constructive feedback that addresses each of the following: 1) contextual knowledge, 2) focused development, 3) organization, and 4) conventions.

Assignment 6: Create a Power Point presentation using 3-4 slides (not including a title page) that summarizes your research proposal. Incorporate the feedback you received from your classmates. Be prepared to present this in class next week. Include the following: 1) Statement of the problem and a brief summary of the literature, 2) Statement of your research question and why it is relevant to study, and 3) Suggestions for how you would answer this question (i.e. Methods).

Week 8 Research presentations: Be prepared to present your research summary. Presenters will be selected at random to present a

summary of their research proposal. Those who do not present this week will present their summary the following week. All others should be prepared to provide constructive feedback to their classmates.

Assignment: Continue to revise your research proposals.

Week 9 Research presentations continued: The remaining presentations will be shared with the class. Everyone should be prepared to share constructive feedback with classmates.

Assignment 7: Prepare the final version of your research proposal. Your proposal should be no more than 2 pages, single-spaced, 11-12 point Times New Roman font. A minimum of 3 citations that support your research question should be included and accurately referenced on a separate page following APA format. See grading rubric below.

Week 10 Research proposals due at start of class. Please submit a hard copy. Late proposals will result in a drop in letter grade.

In class assignment: Reflect on what you learned from the class. Do you feel that your writing ability and/or your sense for the writing

process has changed following your participation in this class? Why or why not? Class evaluations

Evaluation measures:

Assignment	Description	Points
1	One paragraph summary of a concussion article	5
2	Development of a research question	5
3	Initial literature search for articles related to your question	10
4	Peer-review and writing revision	10
5	One-page draft of research proposal	15
6	Power Point presentation	15
7	Final version of research proposal	25
Participation	Meaningful contributions to class discussion: minimum of 5	15
Total	Maximum number of points possible	100