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Threshold Concept in Practice
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Words Get Their Meanings from Other Words

I. Annotations.

Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Jennifer Wells. "Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions." ***Composition Forum*****, vol. 26, 2012, compositionforum.com/issue/26/beyond-knowledge-skills.php.**

This article concerns research into how students transfer their writing skills between different contexts, such as from high school to college. Such research has largely focused on how methods and activities in the classroom have influenced the students in their knowledge-transfer. Driscoll and Wells argue that more research should focus on the student's side of the equation, and how individual student dispositions affect willingness and ability to carrying over skills from one context to another. This article is thorough and convincing. The application in terms of the threshold concept "words get their meanings from other words" has to to do with the student's ability to move between worlds, and their awareness of doing so. As we teach the importance of how context determines meaning (in reading as well as writing), it may be useful to keep in mind that students bring to the classroom varying levels of code-switching proficiency, and varying levels of awareness of when they do it. Driscoll and Wells argue that student dispositions may be shaped by prior learning experiences, and may influence their willingness to engage in knowledge transfer at all. In a generalized sense, they may not believe that what they learn in one context can carry over to another, or that a new context may call for a new application of the skills they already have. Driscoll and Wells consider several theories of motivation that may affect such internal value-systems, which for me are less important taken singly than they are understood as a factor to be aware of. What looks like a lack of ability or willingness to "play" with language may stem from a value system beyond the instructor's knowing.

Dryer, Dylan B. "1.4 Words Get Their Meanings from Other Words." ***Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*****, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015, pp. 23–25.**

In this sub-chapter, Dryer lays out connection between the arbitrary nature of the written linguistic sign and the practice of student writing. He briefly explains Saussure's idea that the meanings of words only exist in difference, relation, and context: words have meaning because their differences allow us to tell them apart; words only have meanings in relationship to other words, and those meanings are relative; and words only have meanings in context, with changing linguistic/situational contexts resulting in shifting

meanings. This article is succinct, relevant, and useful. The implications for our writing students are several-fold. First, this concept ties in to other threshold concepts with regard to the difference between spoken language and the artificial technology that is writing: the written form is no more valid or "correct," but is in fact changeable and arbitrary. Second, discerning context will influence the choice of words in writing: a newspaper article will not use the same language as a research paper or a human interest piece, even when writing about the same event. Words not only get their meanings from other words, but the context will determine which words get chosen at all. Lastly, writers are called upon to be mindful of potential misunderstandings, and to define their terms well, with the understanding that the text might prompt certain expectations in the hypothetical reader, which must be managed by a skillful writer.

"Students' Right to Their Own Language." ***CCCC Position Statements*****, Apr. 1974, reaffirmed Nov. 2014, cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions.**

This seminal document first released in 1974 honors linguistic diversity among English speakers and affirms students' right to use their own dialect in academic settings without penalty. Specifically, it advises against labeling any one dialect unacceptable. It not only lays out the linguistic origins of dialect formation (legitimizing regional and social variations in language), but it also argues that treating dialect as "wrong" or "bad writing" is discriminatory and oppressive. Impediments to understanding are "likely to be attitudinal" on the part of the speaker of the dominant, privileged dialect, rather than the fault of the speaker/writer of a marginalized language variety. For me, this statement is incredibly important, and its clarity and decisiveness are much needed. Considering the threshold concept of "words get their meanings from other words," I will need to talk to my students about the reality of the linguistic discrimination some of them will face, both validating their own ways of speaking/writing and preparing them to write in a world that does not. "Students' Right to Their Own Language" empowers me to empower my students, to teach them about how the meanings of words can shift and so can their prestige.

II. Metaphor.

The location of an object can tell us more than the object itself.

If we look at a tiger in the zoo, what does that tell us? It can tell us a lot about tigers: their size, their behavior, how loud their roar is. We also know something about the history of this tiger, which the tiger can't tell us. It was either captured or born in captivity. We know this because it's at a zoo.

But if we see a tiger walking across the campus quad, however, what does *that* tell us? All the same things as a tiger in the zoo, but more. It tells us we should probably run. It tells us that a tiger has somehow escaped, and because there isn't a zoo nearby, it might have escaped a private owner.

Similarly, the location of a fork gives us more information than the fork. If I'm setting out forks on the kitchen table, that probably means dinner is almost ready. But if you see forks as part of a windchime, that does not mean dinner is almost ready. Same object, different location, different meaning. It probably means someone nearby is into arts and crafts, and had extra forks. A fork at a thrift store has a different history still.

Similarly, the meanings of words change depending on where and how you use them. And the context of your writing might call for different words.

III. Activity.

Students will be put into groups and asked to compose a paragraph about a topic. The entire class will be using the same topic. Before starting, the class as a whole will be asked for three words that should be in each paragraph, depending on the topic. For instance, when writing about trees, each paragraph might need to contain the words "growth," "green," and "leaves." However, each group will be writing their paragraph as if it were from a different *type* of writing. Examples are below.

TOPIC: murder
GROUPS TASKS:
- a radio advertisement for a haunted house
- a newspaper article
- a young adult novel
- a research paper on crime trends in the US
- a historical documentary

TOPIC: trees
GROUP TASKS:
- a college essay on deforestation
- a documentary about the history of the National Forest Service
- a magazine article about invasive tree species taking over native forests
- an advertisement for a home and garden center
- a fictional diary entry written by a maple tree

TOPIC: love
GROUP TASKS:
- a spiteful series of texts during a breakup
- a scientific report on the chemical and biological bases for the experience commonly described as love
- a wedding announcement
- a magazine article about a rumored celebrity relationship
- a college essay on portrayals of love in literature