

Threshold Concepts and Their Importance in Cross Disciplinary  
Learning Between Dance and Writing Studies

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## Abstract

Threshold concepts, as introduced by Jan Meyer and Ray Land, are imperative to the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another. These concepts can also facilitate transfer from one academic discipline to another. Bridging the gap between the arts and academic disciplines is often understudied, particularly between writing studies and dance. The process of composing in dance and writing is both rhetorical and social; hence, my interest lies in examining the parallels between the two processes through the lens of Threshold Concepts.

This research draws from theories developed by scholars in writing studies around the ideas of Threshold Concepts and transfer theory. Building off the work of Elizabeth Wardle, Linda Alder-Kassner, and other scholars in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, my research investigates how Threshold Concepts can support transformative learning that can be applied across disciplines, particularly from writing to dance. Based on the parallels between writing and dance, I will develop concepts that will enrich a dancer's understanding of the two compositional processes in order to help them to write more effectively, specifically about dance.

As a Dance major with a Professional Writing minor, I first began researching this topic while taking a class titled "The Theory and Practice in Composition, Tutoring, and Teaching" (Goucher's tutor-training class) taught by professor Lana Oweidat. For my final project, I examined the composing processes in both writing and dance and their uses of rhetorical appeals. This research helped me identify that there are parallels between the two disciplines which led me to my current interest in developing this project. In continuing this research, I conducted a survey that laid out three Threshold Concepts from the above-mentioned scholars, explaining how these concepts have benefits in transferring knowledge between the two disciplines. These

concepts included: “Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Process;” “All Writers Have More to Learn;” and “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies.”

The second stage of this project included decoding the data collected, and then developing new Threshold Concepts with the purpose of advancing the transfer of knowledge between the two disciplines.

The introduction of Threshold Concepts and transformative learning principles to an arts discipline will create opportunities for more cross disciplinary learning practices within departments in my college and on a larger scale. I hope my research adds to the different interdisciplinary approaches adopted by writing scholars and hopefully disrupts the stigma associated to dance as a nonacademic discipline.

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## **Introduction**

Threshold Concepts, a term coined by Ray Land and Jan Meyer, are terms that identify broad ideas that can be transferred from one situation to another as a means of opening doors to knowledge that may otherwise not be accessible. Creating overarching themes and general ideas about one subject that a student may have a strong handle on can be transferred to another subject that they may be struggling with in order to bring those ideas to a new context and broaden the student's understanding. By deriving Threshold Concepts developed by writing studies scholars, key elements from the processes of composition in writing and dance can be compared and morphed to create mechanisms that aim to aid dancers in their abilities to write about dance with clarity and ease.

Threshold Concepts, developed through the lens of dance composition practices, will facilitate a connection between writing and dance and help to transfer knowledge that will broaden a dancer's understanding of the writing process. After facilitating a survey based on concepts derived from Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's work in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, I developed Threshold Concepts directly derived from practices in dance composition in order to provide a clear correlation and a concrete method that can be applied to dance pedagogy practices.

### **The Theory, Research, and Importance of Threshold Concepts**

According to Land and Meyer in *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines*:

A threshold concept can be considered akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents transformed ways

of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (1).

The root of the theory behind Threshold Concepts is creating thinking pathways for new ways of understanding. For dancers, who are primarily visual and kinesthetic learners, having new doors ways open in their knowledge of the writing process will greatly support their ability to write effectively, especially about dance.

Threshold Concepts exist within the thinking of transformative learning theory. Ray and Land further describe transformational learning by promoting “using ‘any strategy,’ activity, or resource that presents students with an alternative view point” (Land). Additionally, according to Ali Simsek, transformational learning is defined as “the process of deep, constructive, and meaningful learning that goes beyond simple knowledge acquisition and supports critical ways in which learners consciously make meaning of their lives” (Simsek). The essential core of transformational learning is to create different perspectives that may benefit learning for students who do not relate to conventional methods. Another aspect of transformational learning is taking a known subject, such as dance in the case of my research, and using key elements to transform the understanding of another subject, such as writing. Additionally, in the preface of *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning* written by Jan H.F. Meyer, Ray Land, and Caroline Baillie, transformational leaning is defined as “represent[ing] a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something, without which the learner cannot progress, and results in the reformation of the learners’ frame of meaning” (ix).

Dancers often lack the ability to communicate their ideas, emotions, or stories through words, because they are kinesthetic learners and communicators. It is important to foster a way for the comfortable tools used to create movement and dances to transfer to the discipline of

writing, so that dancers can more effectively communicate their ideas through words. All the elements of strong rhetorical composition are used equally in choreography classes, it is just a matter of finding ways to utilize them through different mediums. In *Naming What We Know*, Charles Bazerman states, “The concept that writing expresses and shares meaning is fundamental to the participating in writing—by writing we can articulate and communicate a thought, desire, emotion, observation, directive, or state of affairs to ourselves and others through the medium of written words” (Land 21).

Dance too can articulate thoughts, emotions, directives, and observations through the physical body. The two disciplines function with the same intention but show their work through different mediums. The vast academic discourse surrounding the process of writing can be applied to dance by deeply examining the value and critical impact, separate from solely the physicality of the movement.

In order to understand the relationship between the composition processes of writing and dance, one must understand the different compositional layers of the writing process. The writing process engages with different levels of reflection and evaluation: the textual level, the rhetorical level, and the discursive level (Mccomiskey 5). According to Bruce Mccomiskey’s text, *Teaching Composition As A Social Process*, the textual level focuses on sentence level and linguistic characteristics, the rhetorical level focuses on “generative and restrictive exigencies” like audience and purpose, and the discursive level focuses on attention to the “institutional,” paying attention to things like social, political, and economic conditions that may have an effect on a product (Mccomiskey 6-7).

In relating these ideas back to dance, choreographers often first engage with movement on a “textual” level, meaning they are experimenting with the structure, the movement, and how

to tie together different movements. In taking it to the rhetorical level, choreographers pay attention to who their audience is, what the purpose of the dance is, and what their dance is communicating. In the final level, the discursive level, choreographers can focus on how institutional understandings of economic, political, social and cultural climates influence the message of the dance work or the interpretation from the choreographers view or the audiences view (McCominsky 6-7). Through this method of engaging with writing on different levels, choreographers can use these levels to interact with more in-depth discourse around how a dance engages with different rhetorical situations and creates an opportunity to transfer the foundations of these levels to writing.

Evidently, there are many parallels between these two disciplines. In order to effectively utilize the theory of Threshold Concepts in this situation, it must be made clear that there are distinct Threshold Concepts that have been developed by Writing Scholars that identify practices that can be transferred from one situation to another. This research specifically aims to identify Threshold Concepts, but within the structured realm of using tools within dance composition to facilitate understanding of the writing process.

### **Survey**

In order to gather a more holistic understanding of how dancers feel about their relationship to the writing process, after receiving International Review Board approval, I conducted a survey in which I drew from concepts presented in *Naming What We Know*. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle present several concepts that were developed in relation to writing studies. Though, these concepts can also be transferred to theories within the composition of dance to help dancers understand the overlap between the two processes, and how that can help them form more



confidence in their writing. The concepts focused on were defined in *Naming What We Know*, and included, “Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity;” “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies;” and “All Writers Have More to Learn.” The concepts were broken down in meaning and contextual comparison. The survey began with an introduction to my research that stated,

Hello! I am examining the parallels between dance composition and writing composition through the use of Threshold Concepts. I am interested in your thoughts on the how understanding writing through the lens of dance composition practices may help your writing has a dancer. This survey is anonymous and voluntary, and the responses will aid my research for my Dance Capstone project. Your responses will be synthesized into an essay and will not prompt any risk nor provide any immediate benefit. These questions should pertain to your experience with writing composition and dance composition during your time at Goucher College. If you have any questions or want more information, feel free to contact me at: [Mabel.Lujan@mail.goucher.edu](mailto:Mabel.Lujan@mail.goucher.edu). Thank you for your participation! -Mabel Lujan

The survey then led into descriptions of the three focused Threshold Concepts derived from *Naming What We Know*, in the following format:

Threshold Concept One: “Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Process”

A rhetorical process includes paying attention to rhetorical appeals such as ethos, logos, and pathos. Within writing, this process is important in identifying audience and clarifying purpose and intention. This is also an important process in dance composition. Once an intention or purpose has been determined, there are many tools in both disciplines to help portray the intention through the work. Understanding the function and importance of intention can lead to

an informed understanding of how to convey lack of intention, or intention determined by the audience. Further, this idea of intention is developed by rhetorical appeals that focus on authority, logic, and emotion. Secondly, both dance and writing are social processes in that rely on collaboration and feedback as key elements to their process. Dancers and writers are also constantly bringing personal experiences into their work.

#### Threshold Concept Two: “All Writers Have More to Learn”

Understanding that neither dance nor writing are stagnant, and thus never produce one final product is essential in understanding both of their processes. Reflection and revision are vitally important in continuing a work. As discussed in the next threshold concept, writing and dance can both be based off prior knowledge and experience. Because the composers are never stopped in time, it can be assumed that their experiences and knowledge that add to their work are changing, and therefore, so will their work. In addition, writers and dancers are also finding new ways to understand their craft through processes and developing their strategies.

#### Threshold Concept Three: “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies”

Andrea Lunsford discusses the idea that the act of writing is not stagnant and thus can produce new ideas and thoughts. The same goes for dance, while choreographing, new ideas, concepts, and emotions can be discovered and change the dance completely. Secondly, under this Threshold Concept, Lunsford discusses that writing is informed by prior knowledge. In both dance and writing, prior experiences lend themselves to reflection that can be expressed through either medium. In reflecting on past experiences through writing and dance, new identities and ideologies are developed. Pulling from the idea of collaboration in the first Threshold Concept,

both processes are also collaborative and for that reason create new ideologies and identities within the collaborators.

Upon examining these concepts, I created a survey which illustrated how these concepts can be applied to dance. This survey questioned senior Dance Majors at Goucher College who had completed Introduction to Improvisation and Composition as directed by the Dance Program, as well as have completed the first level writing proficiency as directed by Goucher College. After demonstrating the overlap and comparison between the two concepts, I posed questions that examined how a dancer's understanding of the writing process may have shifted:

Now that I have explained how the two processes of composition are related through the lens of writing scholars' threshold concepts, has your understanding of the writing process changed?

If so, how? And if not, why not?

Did you know beforehand that both dance and writing were rhetorical processes and that they possessed many similarities in their processes of composition?

Have you ever had a hard time putting your thoughts into words or onto paper because your body feels more comfortable dancing?

Through this new mindset of Threshold Concepts, do you see yourself being able to use ideas presented in dance composition to aid your understanding of the writing process?

If so, which ones?

What areas of writing do you struggle with the most:

- a. Brainstorming
- b. Revision
- c. Understanding feedback
- d. Writing your thoughts down
- e. Solidifying intention and audience
- f. Other

What areas of dance composition do you feel most comfortable in?

- a. Improvisation
- b. Reworking choreography
- c. Taking feedback
- d. Finding intention within a dance
- e. Appealing to your audience
- f. Other

Did you draw any comparisons on your own between dance and writing? If so, what were they?

What do you find confusing about threshold concepts? Where do you wish there was more clarity?

## Survey Results

The results of the survey concluded that though dancers knew there were compositional comparisons between creative process, like dance and writing, it was beneficial for students to see the parallels laid out and compared through the method of Threshold Concepts. Furthermore, many participants in the survey responded that they would appreciate more information on the comparison and function within pedagogical situations in dance.

Participant one identified:

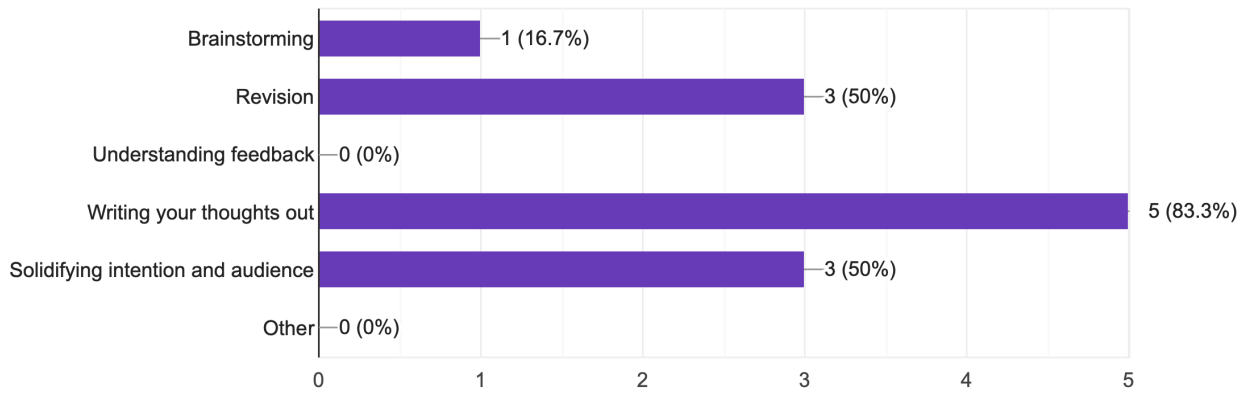
“As a dancer, I have not spent a lot of time connecting the fields of writing and dance or analyzing how they are similar in structure. They have similar goals and can work seamlessly together as they are both powerful tools of communication. I have a clearer understanding now of different writing tools and concepts that apply also to my knowledge of dance.”

This response, and ones like it, led me to create Threshold Concepts intended to be used in dance settings that draw from dance composition practices and facilitate the connection to writing composition.

Additionally, participants in my survey identified that in writing composition, revision, expressing ideas and thoughts, solidifying audience and intention, and brainstorming were the areas they most struggle in. However, the majority identified that in dance composition, they feel most competent in taking and understanding feedback, generating content (improvisation), finding intention within a dance, and appealing to the audience.

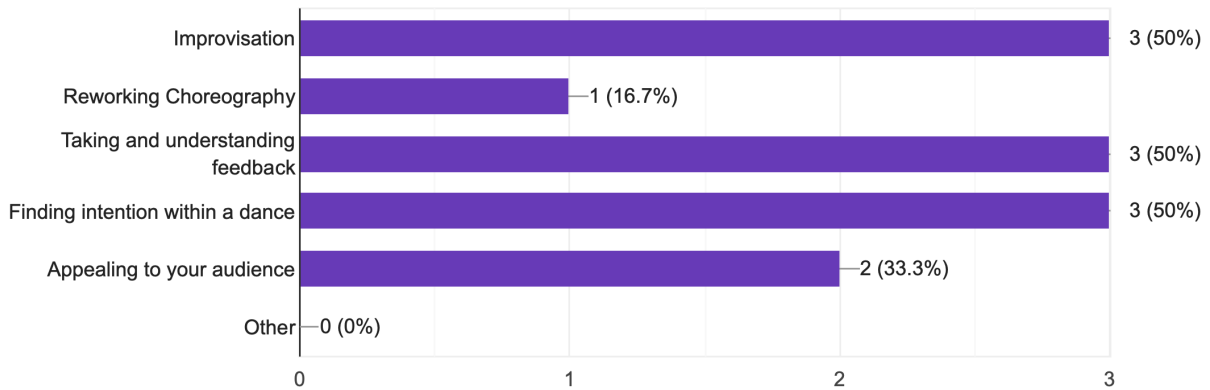
### What areas of writing do you struggle with the most:

6 responses



### What areas of dance composition do you feel most comfortable in?

6 responses



## Discussion

Identifying three Threshold Concepts within the survey created an illustrative tool that explained the foundation of how Threshold Concepts function. Under the concept of “Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Process,” Kevin Roozen explains the root of rhetorical usage in writing as, “writers are engaged in the work of making meaning for particular audiences and purposes,

and writers are always connected to other people” (Adler-Kassner 17). Evidently, these principles also apply to the theory behind composing dances. Choreographers are constantly engaged in the process of creating work for a specific audience and with a specific purpose. It is vitally important to understand the needs of an audience and how to cater to those needs (Adler-Kassner 18).

Based on the results of the survey, it became clear that several participants believed that the explanation of the three Threshold Concepts needs to be further explained to illustrate the foundation of the theory behind Threshold Concepts before being able to fully delve into the transformative practices between disciplines.

Developing new Threshold Concepts derived from dance composition practices will aid the comparison to writing in that dancers will be able to gain a more direct entry through their own personal knowledge. To develop my own Threshold Concepts, I drew from my knowledge of the comparison of the composition processes in dance and writing in order to determine the areas that would be most beneficial to cultivate transformational learning principles in. Secondly, I interpreted the results from my survey and used the feedback to help determine what areas dancers feel competent in, and what areas they generally struggle with in the writing process.

Based off the results from my survey, I found that it would be most beneficial to develop concepts that focused around the themes of audience, brainstorming, purpose/intention, and revision/reflection. These were the areas that participants of the study deemed struggling the most with in writing composition but feeling competent in with dance composition. I combined my researched knowledge of Threshold Concepts defined by writing scholars, results from my survey, and my knowledge of dance compositional practices to develop Threshold Concepts that

could be used in dance classes as means of expanding dancers' understandings of the writing process.

### **Concept One: Dance Utilizes Rhetorical Appeals**

In both writing and dance, determining intended audience signifies a key step in determining how to move forward with the composition process. It is important to “frame the rhetorical situation” as a means of better understanding who an artist is talking to and what their purpose is for addressing them. By clarifying intended audience, the central purpose of either the writing or dance piece will become clearer and will be more efficient in fulfilling its purpose. In order to determine who the audience is, artists must brainstorm in order to identify an intention.

Upon identifying an intention and purpose, artists can successfully address who their audience is. It is important to remember that writers will generally have very different audiences than dancers. Though, within each realm of audiences is the notion that there is a specificity to the attention drawn to that piece of work, and thus artists can capitalize on the ability to attract specific audience members.

Within the rhetorical level of McComiskey's evaluation of the writing process, he identifies questions that a composer may ask themselves to help identify purposes within their writing that may be extended to dance. His questions referring to the rhetorical, that focuses on audience and purpose are as follows:

Writer's Role: How does the writer define her role in relation to the audience?

Audience's Attitudes: Does the writer view the audience as receptive, oppositional, or neutral? Writer's Purpose: What is the writer's purpose for communicating to the



audience? Desired Action: What specific action(s) would the writer like the audience to take after reading the text? (Mccomiskey 12).

All of these questions can equally be applied to the choreographic process.

Understanding how these questions relate to dance, and add to the meaning and construction of dance, can help to build a dancer's understanding of how these questions can also be efficient in clarifying how to communicate to an audience through words. This transformational learning principle identifies how though questions can exist within one specific discipline, they can easily be taken out of context to serve a different purpose that may open up understandings that otherwise may not have been accessed had that transition of information not occurred.

### **Concept two: Invention: A Process of Free Thinking**

In any creative process, a composer must go through a generative stage: a part of the process where the composer is producing material to utilize in their project. The actual practice of what these generative activities look can be quite different across disciplines. However, the roots of each invention process are the same. In dance, improvisation is used to create movement and formulate a movement genre for a piece of work. Improvisation can occur in many different forms. According to *The Intimate Act of Choreography*, "Dance improvisation fuses creation with execution. The dancer simultaneously originates and performs movement without preplanning" (Blom 6).

For example, to create movement that is demonstrative of a particular intent, a choreographer can choose to prompt themselves, or their dancers, with word association tasks. A choreographer may say, "move how you would move if you were sad or experiencing a loss." Through this method, movement becomes more direct. If a choreographer were to want to create

movement with the purposeful lack of attention, they could rather practice an improvisation activity that separated emotions or thoughts from the physical form of dance. In creating these scenarios, choreographers can influence dancer's movement with physical barriers, rules about music, or direction/level constraints, among other directives.

Unlike dance, the invention process for writing is not a physical form. Practices of brainstorming for writing may include free writing, brain bubbles, charts, maps, or lists. Though these practices cannot explicitly be shared across disciplines, the central purposes that include organizing thoughts and identifying purpose for content generation can be shared.

For blocked composers or to start the choreographic process, a dancer may choose to conduct a timed improvisation session where the dancer must continue dancing for the duration of the set time. Likewise, a writer may choose to free write for a set amount of time and not allow themselves to stop writing until the time has come to an end. Additionally, as mentioned before, a dancer may choose to conduct a guided improvisation session similar to how a writer may practice guided free writing.

In understanding that the framework of the generative processes across disciplines share many similarities, dancers can gain direct entrance into the understandings of brainstorming practices in writing, thus enhancing their abilities to write with more confidence.

### **Concept Three: The Function of Intention**

Larry Lavender, in his book *Dancers Talking Dance: Critical Evaluation in the Choreography Class*, proposes the idea that the intention of dance cannot be evaluated in the same way that the intention of writing can be. He considers how the purpose of dance as a performing art is often times for the intent not to be blunt, and rather very discrete. However,

understanding the purpose and understanding of intent, will make the choreographer's choice in creating work that perhaps lacks intent, stronger. In order to process the knowledge that allows an artist to create a piece with no specific intent, an artist must know how intent serves as a function for communication. If a dancer specifically chooses to have no specific intent, and rather let the audience interpret what they see, then at least they understand how that lack of intent functions.

Participant two in the survey identified that they felt more comfortable inquiring whether an audience will understand their intention, compared to being able to cultivate their own voice in a piece of writing. The difference of a dance having a specific intention compared to leaving it up to the audience's interpretation is seen in a dance with a specific story or meaning that the choreographer is trying to convey, and a dance that has been choreographed solely based on aesthetics and space orientations.

Lavender states, "In short—comparing dance with speech for a moment—there is a difference between what one intends to accomplish by saying something and the definitions (or surface meanings) of the words one uses" (40). In dance, there is the dichotomy of the connotation of the actual dance moves as in, what does that style of movement convey, and the meaning behind the dance as a whole. What is the choreographer trying to convey? By examining these ideas of what a dance is conveying and the difference between the movement and the overall picture, dancers can understand how there is a difference between definitions of words and the power of using them to create an intention and purpose within their writing. Just like choreographing a dance. In the publication, *The Intimate Act of Choreography*, Murray Louis describes the need for clarity in intention, "With clearness of articulation there comes clearness of communication" (Blom 9).

In writing, if the intention of a piece is to persuade a reader to understand a concept a certain way, there are devices an author can use such as rhetorical appeals. In dance, a choreographer can use similar devices to convey intention. Usage of space, costumes, music choice, performance quality, and movement vocabulary, are all pieces that form the final dance. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin state, “Sometimes there is an inner necessity to grapple with, shape, and communicate some pressing idea, creating a passion that forces the blood to speak through the muscle” (Blom 8). However, sometimes there isn’t a driving force of intention, and rather the intention is formed through movement and working in the studio, as articulated by Paul Taylor, a noted choreographer (Blom 9).

#### **Concept Four: Growing Through Reflection and Revision**

To reflect upon work is to reevaluate where it falls in one’s current reality. Upon reflecting on this notion, an artist can then move forward with whether or not that reflection has given them reason to revise their current work. This constant process of reflecting upon how the current work is relevant leads to a constant process of revision. In *Dancers Talking Dance*, Lavender explains how choreography is a process of revision (16). Further, he goes on to say, “...critical evaluation focusing on an aspect of itself –that is substantive critical evaluation— plays a pivotal role through the process of creating a work of art” (Lavender 16). In that same regard, in *Naming What We Know*, it is explained that “Reflection is a mode of inquiry, a deliberate way of systematically recalling writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation” (Alder-Kassnar 78).

As mentioned before, and in relation to the threshold concept from *Naming What We Know*, “All Writers Have More to Learn,” writing is a process that is continually changing as the

composer changes. And thus, in alignment with my thesis, this concept can also be applied to dance. It is essential to remember that nothing is stagnant when composing. With every new experience, art can evolve through reflecting and revising.

Revision in writing can appear on the sentence level by reworking grammar and punctuation, or on the structural level of clarifying organization, or even further identifying that the meaning of the piece of writing is still in alignment with the initial intention. In *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Doug Downs states, “Revision works because writing shares a characteristic of other language-based endeavors: using language not only represents one’s existing ideas, it tends to generate additional language and ideas” (Adler-Kassner 66). He goes on to mention that,

From another angle revision works by building into the textual-production process time and space for further consideration of a writing problem by the writer, for garnering additional perspectives from other reader and collaborating writers, and for review of a draft against specific criteria (Adler-Kassner 66).

Revision is vitally important to executing meaning and staying connected to the creative work.

### **Benefits and Conclusion**

As discussed in this research, the processes of composition in dance and writing have many transferrable qualities. By utilizing theories that encompass transformative learning and Threshold Concepts developed by writing scholars, dancers were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how practices can be transferred from one situation to another.

Developing and clarifying Threshold Concepts directed towards pedagogical situations in dance will help to expose specifically dancers to transformative learning theories that will assist

them in their skills of writing composition. Future interactions with this topic could include workshops that help to physically facilitate the connection of using dance composition practices to engage with writing composition on similar levels.

The integration of Threshold Concepts into the curriculum of dance education will provide dancers with more tools that will open doors to better understandings of writing through mediums that they understand and interact with on a daily basis. Using transformative teaching theory, we can create pathways of understanding between a comfortable understanding to build a more confident relationship with a situation that may not have previously been accessible.

Furthermore, this research adds to the different inter-disciplinary approaches adopted by writing scholars and leads to more opportunities for cross disciplinary learning practices at my college and on a larger scale.

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