Reinventing Reading: Identifying and Describing Threshold Concepts for College Readers

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by

Meghan A. Sweeney

Dr. Jane Detweiler / Dissertation Advisor

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We recommend that the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

MEGHAN A. SWEENEY

Entitled

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Jane Detweiler, Ph.D., Advisor

Catherine Chaput, Ph.D., Committee Member

William J. Macauley, Jr., Ph.D., Committee Member

Amy Pason, Ph.D., Committee Member

Amy J. Wan, Ph.D., Committee Member

Dianna Townsend, Ph.D., Graduate School Representative

David W. Zeh, Ph. D., Dean, Graduate School

May, 2015
Abstract

Reinventing Reading: Identifying and Describing Threshold Concepts for College Readers examines academic literacies across the curriculum. Specifically, this dissertation takes on Doug Downs’s call for a theory of reading with a principle of use by exploring how college readers use texts in various communities of practice. Building an interpretive lens that combines learning theories, such as threshold concept theory by Jan Meyer and Ray Land and communities of practice theory by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, and a mediated action framework by James Wertsch, I develop a theory of reading with a principle of use by identifying threshold concepts of rhetorical reading and describing how students use concepts as they move from less to more expert readers in their disciplines. Based on classroom observations and interviews with diverse college students (multilingual, monolingual, Generation 1.5, first-generation college students, from working and service class families), this study explores the act of college reading in various communities of practice, including biochemistry, psychology, and social work. I find that particular threshold concepts of rhetorical reading—audience awareness and identifying value and descriptive assumptions—enable the act of reading and improve students’ writing practices. Further, my analysis shows that threshold concepts can transfer from one community of practice to another thereby transforming students’ rhetorical reading and writing practices; however, histories, identities, multiple goals, and cultural tools enable or constrain movement thereby mediating students’ reading and writing practices. My description of college students’ academic literacies moves the discipline toward a theory of reading that can improve reading and writing pedagogy across the curriculum because it shows how students who develop facility with threshold concepts develop extra reading strategies.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Academic reading is ubiquitous. It is at once everywhere and nowhere, and that phenomenon is most apparent in college. Campus bookstores fight to keep their monopoly on selling textbooks to students; publisher representatives seek out instructors during their office hours, hoping to convince them to adopt the latest textbook; and textbook publishers throw lavish parties at disciplinary-specific conventions for graduate students, professors, and administrators. Reading is big business. However, “it may be one of the least theorized parts of classroom practice” in college (Keller 18).

My dissertation argues that reading should be more thoroughly theorized and offers steps toward that goal. Unless we, as composition instructors, understand how college students read, we will struggle to enact classroom practices that effectively link reading and writing. Specifically, my dissertation takes up the call from Doug Downs for a “theory of reading with a principle of use” (25). A theory of reading with a principle of use considers how readers and texts are “embedded in communities of social practice” (24 italics added). While Downs explains his call for a theory of reading with a principle of use by detailing the classroom practices he uses in his Writing-about-Writing first-year composition class, he does not conduct the research needed to show how reading is used within a community of practice or how students use reading in courses beyond first-year writing. One way to build a theory of reading that can help students use texts in various contexts is to explore how college students use concepts in a new context after taking a rhetorical reading course. My dissertation takes on that exploration, offering a thick description of college students’ rhetorical reading practices and recommendations for building curricula based on what
rhetorical reading concepts students take from first-year composition to their chosen disciplines.

Through my dissertation research, I found that audience awareness and identifying assumptions in one’s own and other people’s writing are threshold concepts that when taught and learned transform student readers. However, student readers have trajectories. They have histories, current contexts, and future goals that affect how they make sense of a text. As a result, I also found that reading practices are mediated by histories and technologies and are not always supported by reading and writing assignments in other disciplines. These findings suggest we integrate the teaching of audience awareness and identifying assumptions when reading into first-year composition courses, but they also suggest that we should reach out to teachers across the curriculum to discuss how we can help students access rhetorical reading practices in their classes.

In this introduction, I offer a brief history of reading research conducted in composition studies. I then explain how my research questions stem from and contribute to the reading studies. I conclude with a preview of the dissertation chapters.

**Reading Research and Pedagogy in Composition Studies**

Foundational theories and practices of reading hold as a major premise the understanding that reading is an act of construction, rather than an act of transmission. For example, this premise exists in Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading, a theory she developed around 1978, which suggests that the reader and the text are both changed through the act of reading. In addition, composition and rhetoric textbooks that integrate reading and writing use that same premise. For example, in their textbook *The
Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue introduce Salvatori’s “difficulty paper,” an assignment that asks students to explore the difficulties they encounter as they read a text. Created in 1999 when Salvatori was a Carnegie Scholar, the assignment assumes students will not construct the meaning of the text in exactly the same way, necessitating a writing assignment that asks students to document moments of difficulty, confusion, and contradiction. Foundational scholars in integrated reading and writing, David Bartholomae and Anthony R. Petrosky’s approach to reading in composition studies relies on the same premise, that reading is an act of construction. In the late 1980s, when writing the introduction to their textbook Ways of Reading, Bartholomae and Petrosky claim they were looking for “texts that leave work for the reader to do” (Ways of Reading vi). The expectation that students will do “work” suggests that students are constructing (working) the meaning of the text rather than passively receiving a transmission. In these foundational theories and practices of reading, scholars create assignments and choose readings based on the underlying assumption that students construct texts as they encounter and grapple with meaning through the process of reading.

The development of these theories, assignments, and pedagogies from the late 1970s to the early 1990s occurred at the same time as empirical research studies on how college students and professors constructed reading. Specifically, the studies examined rhetorical reading processes. Rhetorical reading means “constructing a rhetorical frame which includes authors, readers, motives, relationships, and contexts” by rhetorically “mov[ing] beyond an ‘autonomous’ text and tr[y]ing to account for a number of
situational or rhetorical elements—author, authorial intent, reader identity, and historical, cultural, and situational context—to ‘frame’ or support the discourse” (Haas 48-9).

Research on rhetorical reading began to appear in communications and composition journals in the 1980s. I define rhetorical reading research as studies that examine how college students or professors *construct* the rhetorical situation of a text that is situated in a community of practice. For example, in 1985, Charles Bazerman studied seven research physicists’ reading processes. He found that the researchers’ broad sense of their field shaped their reading processes. In addition, in 1988, Christina Haas and Linda Flower captured the difficulty of “rhetorical reading” for first-year writing students. Haas and Flower found that first-year students and graduate students differed in how they used rhetorical knowledge to construct the meaning of texts when reading. Graduate students used rhetorical knowledge to construct the meaning of a text, while first-year writing students did not, choosing to only read for content.

The research studies by Bazerman, Haas, and Flower show that rhetorical reading is difficult for first-year writing students, but for those scholars who are embedded in the values and conversations of the discipline, rhetorical reading can be accomplished. Embedded in the discipline, graduate students and professors can make connections between a text and the context in which it was written—the purpose, the audience, and the conversation to which it contributes. The difference in reading practices between first-year composition students and scholars firmly entrenched in a discipline is not surprising, especially when disciplines are understood as communities of practice within the university.
Communities of practice are groups or collectives that have evolved sets of assumptions, practices, and ways of knowing and sharing knowledge. Participants learn through relationships with their peers and practitioners in the community how to be a contributing member of that community. Disciplines can be considered communities of practice (CoP), although there may be smaller, better-defined CoPs within any discipline. For example, Composition and Rhetoric is a CoP, in which participants learn how to contribute to the community by attending conferences and reading journal articles by more expert practitioners within the CoP. However, smaller, better-defined CoPs would be special-interest groups (SIGs) that meet at Composition and Rhetoric conferences, like the Reading SIG or Basic Writing SIG.

While Christina Haas does not use CoP theory to explain her findings from her rhetorical reading research project in 1994, the research she conducted captures and describes one student’s shift from an outside member of a biology CoP, to a practitioner. The process of enculturation was gradual. Haas’s four-year study of a student learning to read biology found that the research participant Eliza started college as a reader who saw texts as autonomous but, by the time she reached her junior and senior years, had come to a greater awareness of the rhetorical, contingent nature of discourse in biology, her area of study. In interviews with Haas, Eliza expressed an awareness of the activity and agents of discourse. Eliza’s shift towards rhetorical reading practices correlate with her working in a research lab. It was at that time that Eliza began to see texts as accomplishing scientific action as well as embodying scientific knowledge, which then allowed her to see them as rhetorical rather than purposeless or static. Haas’s study shows that rhetorical reading practices are acquired through a students’ gradual enculturation into the CoP, which for her
research participant, Eliza, happened when she entered a biology research lab in her junior year of college.

**The Seventeen-Year Hiatus and the Reading Renewal**

After this decade of rhetorical reading research from about 1985 to 1994, composition and rhetoric took a hiatus from reading research. Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue found through archival research of the College Composition and Communication Conference’s (CCCC) call for papers that for seventeen years the word “reading” was invisible, from about 1991 to 2008. Many of the CCCC chairs claimed that it did not mean people could not or would not submit their scholarship on reading, but Salvatori and Donahue claim this lack of presence discourages graduate students from investigating this field: “to say that our field is suffused with reading, but to reduce it to a kind of pervasive background influence and to push it to the borderlines is, we argue, problematic” (“Stories about Reading” 211). Reading is perceived as omnipresent, commonplace; it is taken for granted.

After several years of scholars like Patricia Donahue, Alice Horning, and Mariolina Salvatori arguing for a renewed attention to reading and writing connections, college-level reading is once again present in CCCC’s call for papers and research is again being conducted. However, there is a difference between research goals from the 1980’s and 1990’s and contemporary rhetorical reading research. The difference is that reading research in the 1980’s and 1990’s wanted to understand how students construct texts as acts of rhetorical reading, but the studies examined acquisition, not learning, and as a result not teaching. In contrast, within the last few years, scholarship on rhetorical
reading has focused on studying how students *learn* rhetorical reading practices after being *taught* them directly. For example, Brian Gogan traces the development of students’ reading practices after they are taught rhetorical genre awareness in a first-year composition course. Instead of the previous emphasis on how readers at different levels of expertise construct texts rhetorically, recent research seeks to describe how students learn new reading practices, when taught how to read rhetorically, or as Downs refers to it, “how students learn to use texts.”

The shift to pedagogical reading research is important because of the added difficulty in studying how students learn to construct texts when reading. To read rhetorically, a student must connect the text to audience, purpose, and context, which requires “work.” According to recent scholars, it is difficult to teach students to construct texts when reading because they view reading as an act of transmission, wanting to just get the information or the answers. Tracy Santa has described the process of encouraging students to view college reading as an act of construction as a “formidable challenge” (75). According to composition and rhetoric scholars, such as Kathleen McCormick, Tracy Santa, and Faye Halpern, convincing college students that reading is an act of construction is difficult because the educational system, in which the students are enmeshed, favors the factual. As Santa explains, “Though there are clearly exceptions to the rule, our academic culture on balance privileges reading protocols designed to deliver answers rather than more questions,” a choice that is driven by assessment practices (66). Reading protocols are common in any standardized test, such as the SAT or ACT, and often are used to measure reading comprehension in K-12 education and in college. As a
result, students come to realize that the educational system values information transfer, and reading becomes a closed process of transmission rather than construction.

According to E. Jennifer Monaghan and E. Wendy Saul, historically, reading has been a more clearly defined curriculum activity in educational settings as compared to writing. Reading fits more easily with traditional roles of student and teacher, one as receptor of knowledge and the other as conduit, and reading has a divine status in education in terms of budget, scholarly attention, and public concern. Deborah Brandt in “Remembering Writing, Remember Reading,” found a similar preference for reading. Her research participants remembered being read to as a young child, of being the receptor of the sounds and images.

With reading currently being seen as an act of transmission or reception, college students struggle to see reading as more than just an “extractive technology serving the recording of the known; you got it (the point) or you didn’t” (Santa 73). Kathleen McCormick’s study of college student readers demonstrates the consequences of students’ preference for transmission. In The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English, McCormick details her study, which tested how students would interpret and synthesize a short text with conflicting assertions. Two-thirds of the students ignored the conflicting assertions in the written work, but in interviews those same students admitted to noticing and dismissing the conflict. McCormick asserts that their willingness to ignore the conflicting information rather than engaging it is a product of the “dominant school ideology encouraging intellectual passivity” (110). The willingness may be a product of the educational system, as many scholars assert.
While Monaghan and Saul refer to education in the late 1980s, McCormick the 1990s, and Brandt at the turn of the century, I saw a similar predilection for intellectual passivity when it came to student reading during classroom observations in 2014. I observed the professors use texts in their courses primarily to give answers and the students use texts to get answers: students read textbooks; professors lectured on the information in the textbooks often using PowerPoint slides from the textbook publisher; and students delivered answers on comprehension quizzes with “clickers” during class and then later again through midterms and final exams.

Still, Composition and Rhetoric scholars who theorize reading and its relation to writing (e.g. Bartholomae and Petrosky, McCormick, Rosenblatt, and Salvatori and Donahue) want students to read as part of an act of construction. A survey of the literature provides an overview of how Composition and Rhetoric scholars want students to read. They want students to read as if open-ended inquiry, engagement, and reflection upon complex issues, tensions, and contradictions were valued in education (Santa 70). They want students to resist the “desire to foreclose the meanings that a text might have” (Halpern 552). They want students to “understand the relationships between texts, the ideological underpinnings of the texts, the struggle behind texts, and all information within a broader cultural context” (Fabos 844). They want students to actively seek out contradictions, to see theories and practices as not neutral, and to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society (Lankshear and McLaren).

As Christina Haas’s study of biology student Eliza captured the eventual acquisition of rhetorical reading practices as Eliza became part of the community, I suggest that we need to understand how students construct texts rhetorically after taking a
critical reading course their first semester of college. To do so, we need to study what rhetorical reading concepts students transfer to new contexts in other disciplines. Specifically, we need to study how students use texts in the communities of practice in which they strive to become full practitioners.

My suggestion that this research study is needed is not new. Downs has advocated in his Writing-about-Writing pedagogy for rhetorical reading because it is grounded in the premise that reading and writing are situated in communities of social practice. In addition, Cynthia Hynd, Jodi Patrick Holschuh, and Betty Hubbard examined how college students read history texts, in a history course, after receiving explicit instruction on strategies for approaching them. The researchers taught students to engage in sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. They used multiple, conflicting sources as texts and told students to come up with their own interpretations of the event after using the three strategies. The purpose of the study was to examine shifts in disciplinary knowledge, beliefs, and strategies. Through their analysis they found that throughout the course students shifted toward more open reading stances. They grew to see historians as potentially biased arbiters and began to worry about their own bias as readers. In history, the need to see texts as not merely fact, but rather a narrative of the past that is filtered through the lens of the historian, and therefore potentially biased by the value assumptions of that author, is key. The students were taught and learned how to read historical texts rhetorically.

I argue that the shift in reading research to connect theory to teaching is a necessary development. Following the push to reintegrate reading back into composition conversations, the combination of theory and pedagogy supports improved reading
curricula in integrated reading and writing courses that are growing in popularity as an alternative approach to basic writing, in first-year composition, and in Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs. Jodi Patrick Holschuh and Eric J. Paulson’s 2013 report commissioned by the College Reading and Learning Association exemplifies my point. They recommend a pedagogical approach that focuses on “when, where, why, and how” to use certain reading knowledge and strategies, claiming that “knowledge of the academic reading and writing expectations across the entire university and how those expectations are realized in each of the student’s classes becomes an important point of reference for the student’s understandings of academic literacy”(6). Their recommendations for college reading pedagogy reach beyond first-year composition, where direct reading instruction typically occurs, into other disciplines.

**An Overview of my Study**

The research I conduct for this research project is designed to build upon past research and contribute to current rhetorical reading conversations. As a result, I designed a study that would examine how students use rhetorical reading concepts in their chosen communities of practice the semester following a critical reading course. The critical reading course encouraged open-ended inquiry and engagement with tensions and contradictions (Santa), and encouraged students to “understand the relationships between texts, the ideological underpinnings of the texts, the struggle behind texts, and all information within a broader cultural context” (Fabos 844). To understand how students learned and transferred particular reading concepts from the reading course to new contexts
in their disciplines, like biochemistry, psychology, and social work, I explore how rhetorical reading concepts act as threshold moments for students.

Specifically, my research questions are as follow:

1. What might disciplinary threshold concepts of reading look like?
2. How do students transfer these threshold concepts?
3. How do the classroom context and the disposition of the student affect the transfer of these threshold concepts?

This dissertation benefits students, college instructors, and writing program administrators in at least three ways. First, it contributes to Composition and Rhetoric’s ongoing interest in integrating reading with basic writing and first-year writing, which has become a growing area of research and pedagogy (Bunn; Downs; Hogue Smith; Horning; Donahue and Salvatori). Specifically, Downs has called for a theory of reading with a principle of use, but he does not use qualitative or quantitative research to describe how students benefit from a reading pedagogy that is situated within a particular community of practice. My dissertation uses qualitative research to provide the description. By mapping how students move through threshold concepts of rhetorical reading within their chosen communities of practice, I produce the research needed to build curricula within composition that will teach students to use texts in new contexts.

Second, my dissertation’s goal of discovering which rhetorical reading concepts get used in other disciplines expands my composition-focused research to conversations about writing in the disciplines and writing across the curriculum. Under-theorized and ubiquitous, college-level reading has become a common concern among instructors in other disciplines who expect knowledge transfer from first-year writing. Along with
familiar complaints about students not being able to write even after a year of composition courses, many instructors have now turned their attention to reading-knowledge transfer, asking why students cannot, do not, or struggle to complete assigned reading in their courses. In 2011, a University of Nevada, Reno provost hosted a campus-wide brown bag discussion with instructors across the curriculum so they could discuss concerns about students’ inability or unwillingness to complete course readings, or to even buy the textbook. By examining how students use rhetorical reading concepts in disciplines beyond Composition and Rhetoric, this dissertation offers a better understanding of how instructors in other disciplines might revise reading and writing assignments to support reading-knowledge transfer.

Third, writing program administrators have always had to attend to occasional challenges from state and college administration about the efficacy of basic writing and first-year writing programs. As a result, several scholars (Adler-Kassner, Downs, Estrem, Roozen, and more) have been working on an encyclopedia of threshold concepts of writing designed to aid writing program administrators and other composition and rhetoric scholars who may be tasked with making arguments about what we teach, why, and how. While rhetorical reading concepts are most likely not going to be included as threshold concepts in the first edition of the encyclopedia, the research in this dissertation will provide concepts that could be included in future editions. As writing programs continue to integrate reading into their curricula, weaving threshold concepts of rhetorical reading into student learning outcomes for new course designs might improve discussions about program effectiveness.
Preview of Chapters

In chapter 1, I construct a history of reading in composition. In doing so, I show a trajectory from an early focus on reading as an act of construction rather than transmission, to the rhetorical reading studies’ focused on acquisition of strategies in the 1990s, to current studies that are shifting the conversation toward issues of pedagogy in composition courses that link reading and writing.

In chapter 2, I issue a call for more reading research in response to a general lack of resources for composition teachers and writing program administrators who want to teach college reading in ways that are connected to theory. I argue for a research project that can offer a more comprehensive definition of college reading practices. I point to two areas of research that together would provide a fairly comprehensive description of college reading: disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory. Disciplinary literacy scholars have shown that reading practices vary according to a reader’s community of practice. Therefore, historians read texts differently than mathematicians. Threshold concept theory allows me to describe learning as students grapple with and engage difficult concepts of rhetorical reading. Together, disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory drive my research design, which examines what rhetorical reading concepts students take up and use again during a semester after completing a critical reading course. Given the tendency for reading pedagogy to take a generalizable, skills based approach (see Holshuh and Paulson), chapter 2 underscores the importance of examining reading within the context of a particular community of practice—the community that the student has chosen and that the student is currently being apprenticed into (see Artevema; Lave and Wenger).
In chapter 3, I expand my lens by integrating a mediated action framework to my analysis of college reading practices in the disciplines (Wertsch). While disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory allow me to examine how reading operates within a community of practice with its shared values and expectations for making and sharing knowledge, a mediated action framework acts as a web that sanctions an extension of my lens backward, forward, and across contexts so that I can consider the trajectories of my case studies—their histories, their futures, and the multiple contexts in which literacies happen. By integrating a mediated action framework, I am answering Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton’s call for research studies of literacy-in-action, an approach that offers a more balanced analysis of individual, context, and cultural tools, or objects, that mediate literacies.

In chapter 4, I begin my analysis of college-level threshold concepts of reading in a discipline. By examining biochemistry, I demonstrate how audience awareness in reading and writing transforms how a biochemistry student reads and writes for various audiences in academic and public discourses. I argue that when students have reached a post-liminal stage of audience awareness they are able to identify and articulate when they are or are not the intended audience for a text and adjust their reading practices to accommodate gaps in knowledge or access because they can conceptualize different audiences for academic and non-academic discourses. My finding is important for college-level reading pedagogy. While previous researchers have found that students, when faced with a difficult reading assignment, will often either defer to the teacher to understand the meaning of the text (Hogue Smith “Interrogating Texts”) or choose not to read (Jolliffe and Harl; Bunn), my analysis in chapter 4 shows that students who move to
a post-liminal stage of audience awareness can create extra strategies to compensate when reading texts that are difficult.

In chapter 5, I continue my analysis of college-level threshold concepts of reading by examining social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling disciplines. These three disciplines work to apprentice students into a community of practice that values identifying assumptions. However, identifying assumptions when reading and writing is a difficult process for students. In this chapter, I describe how two students move through the threshold concepts of identifying assumptions when reading other people’s texts and writing their own texts. Students who move to a post-liminal stage of identifying assumptions when reading and writing can abstract away from the written word to identify unstated value and descriptive assumptions. This finding is important for college-level reading pedagogy because it reinforces the importance of helping students develop this reading practice, but it indicates that teaching students to identify assumptions should happen outside of the Toulmin argument structure, and of argument altogether.

In chapter 6, the conclusion of this dissertation, I explore implications for teaching in first-year writing and for outreach to instructors in other disciplines as part of writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines reform. In addition, I explore the limitations of this research study, such as the inability to include studying differences between reading online and offline.
Chapter 2

A Call for Post-Secondary Reading Research

When I studied and trained to be a college-level reading and writing teacher at San Francisco State University (SFSU) between 2002 and 2006, I worked within the framework of its well-established, award-winning integrated reading and writing program for basic writers. Designed for students working toward either a Masters in Composition or Certificates in Teaching Composition and Post-secondary Reading at SFSU, the graduate courses drew from both composition studies to help future teachers develop their own writing pedagogies and education and literacy studies to help them develop their own reading pedagogies. In SFSU’s graduate and certificate program, professors encouraged the future teachers to pull from the reading theories devised from K-12 research in order to develop assignments, lesson plans, and course designs for integrated reading and writing courses at the college-level. While the future teachers’ having to translate from K-12 reading research to college reading practices was not terribly problematic, it indicated an under-developed area of research: college-level reading practices and pedagogy.

After graduating from SFSU with the two graduate teaching certificates, I taught for a few years in community colleges and at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). All the courses I taught were writing focused, with no student learning objectives related to reading. However, when I began the PhD program at UNR in 2010, a writing-only focus changed to include reading. I was hired as a graduate coordinator to help implement the full-scale launch of courses that linked reading and writing. During the orientation for these new courses, I noticed a lack of knowledge among writing instructors about
teaching college-level reading, and I realized how few resources are available to help teachers learn how to connect reading with writing in the classroom.

My realization was not unique. In 2007, writing program administrators Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem also noted a lack of resources for college-level reading pedagogy when they were conducting teacher training courses: “as instructors ask for more explicit guidance with reading pedagogy, that pedagogy is rarely included in composition research, composition courses, or first-year writing program development materials” (36). In addition, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue found that “reading” as a topic of interest took a seventeen-year “hiatus” from the discipline’s most prominent conference, Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), from about 1991 to 2008 (“Stories about Reading” 210). The seventeen-year hiatus has consequences. According to Daniel Keller, the absence of reading from our books, articles, and conferences means, “teaching practices brought into the classroom will most likely consist of a hodgepodge of (perhaps unconscious and thus unexamined) reading strategies and theories” (24).

As a graduate coordinator for the new linked reading and writing courses at UNR, I noticed the same lack of resources resulting from this seventeen-year hiatus and struggled to quickly and efficiently immerse the teachers in the rich background of reading research from the field of education, which examines reading from cognitive, socio-cultural, and transactional perspectives. In addition, I struggled to evoke necessary questions such as what we should ask students to read, how we should ask them to read, and why we should ask them to read. Instead, I felt limited by the lack of resources to help the composition teachers learn how to scaffold reading in a way that would
transition students from high school, into college, and beyond into their chosen communities of practice.

The effect of reading’s hiatus from CCCC (Salvatori and Donahue) and the resulting lack of reading resources (Adler-Kassner and Estrem) is that post-secondary reading is stuck in a stage of theoretical infancy. In 1971, Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* marked a significant shift to asking, “How do students write?” Her study launched composition’s focus on student composing processes, which continues to dominate how we make and share knowledge about writing. I suggest that we are at a similar moment in reading theory when we need to start asking, as Emig did, “How do college students read?”

I do not mean to imply that there is no research on how college students read. In fact, the recent push to reintegrate research on reading into rhetoric and composition conversations, by scholars like Patricia Harkin, Alice Horning, Salvatori, Donahue, and Bill Thelin, has been effective in moving us past debates about whether or not we should even research college reading and has moved scholars into action, many of them conducting empirical research on college-student reading practices. For example, recent research about college-level reading has focused on the learner to discover the experiences student readers have when they struggle with motivation (Bunn), are hindered by “inattentional blindness” (Hogue Smith), and succeed in developing rhetorical genre awareness (Gogan).

By focusing on the reading experience and processes, much like Emig did, researchers like Michael Bunn, Cheryl Hogue Smith, and Brian Gogan move beyond a deficit-focused or a skills-based approach and into an understanding of how students read
within the context of college, a move which Jodi Patrick Holschuh and Eric J. Paulson advocate for in their 2013 report for the College Reading and Learning Association. Unfortunately, Holschuh and Paulson found that much instruction in college reading courses today focuses on isolated reading skills, such as selecting the main idea of a text, which is a deficit model of instruction that has been shown to offer little improvement on students’ reading abilities (Merisotis and Phipps qtd. in Holschuh and Paulson). Holschuh and Paulson’s report shows that there is a troubling lack of articulation between the recent studies on how college students read and instruction. I argue that the lack of articulation suggests we are at the beginning stages of answering questions of how students use texts in a college context and how college instruction should teach students how to use texts (see Downs).

I begin with these experiences and observations to highlight the lack of resources for composition teachers on college reading. Considering this lack of resources, I caution against the integration of reading into rhetoric and composition with an overly narrow definition of post-secondary reading practices and, as a result of that narrow definition, ineffective reading pedagogy (i.e. the skills-based instruction that Holschuh and Paulson found). In order to improve articulation between college reading practices and instruction, I conducted a study of college-level reading practices to explore how college students read, to describe what rhetorical reading concepts should be taught in first-year writing, and to help students transition to other courses in their disciplines.

The site for this study, University of Nevada, Reno, is unique because the students who participated in this research are basic readers and writers (according to locally-established SAT and ACT test score interpretations). As basic readers, they took a
critical reading course, linked to a composition and a style course, during their first semester in college. I interviewed and observed them their second semester.iii

By choosing to interview and observe students the semester after they took the rhetorical reading course, I am working under an assumption of transfer. Transfer is the process of students taking what they learned in one context and applying it to a new context. When professors ask composition teachers why students cannot write even after a year of college writing courses, they are asking for and expecting “writing-related transfer” (Wardle “What is Transfer?” 143). This expectation is not surprising since the structure of composition curricula assumes that first-year composition courses will help students utilize what they learned previously in high school, learn something new in composition classes, and then be able to succeed with new writing tasks after completing their composition courses. Still, Wardle suggests, “our unexamined assumptions about transfer could use some serious examination” (144).

Several researchers have begun this examination. Researchers have tried to uncover the locus of transfer, whether that is in the individual, the context, or the task. And researchers have tried to find a more appropriate term for writing tasks, since they are too complex for the simplified “carry and unload” metaphor with transfer. According to Wardle, researchers have described the process of writing transfer as repurposing (Prior and Shipka; Roozen), transformation (Wardle “Creative”), generalizing (Beach), expansive learning (Engstrom), and integration (Nowacek).

Despite the work by transfer scholars who continue to challenge our under-examined assumptions about students’ ability to use writing practices again in new contexts, I find the concept of movement (no matter which metaphor we pick) generative
for challenging and improving education across the curriculum. Together, teachers, curricula, and entire educational systems are set up to teach in ways that can either promote or hinder transfer. Teaching in a way that encourages problem solving and helps students to learn the concepts underlying a writing approach and to recognize the potential value of this learning for another context promotes transfer (Wardle 145).

According to Wardle, because writing situations are ill-structured rhetorical problems (i.e. there is no “right” answer when writing), curricula that support problem solving and concept learning promote transfer. When the curricula of the educational system do not support ill-structured writing and instead seeks out “right answers,” the potential for transfer breaks down. Therefore, by examining how students read in the semester following a critical reading course, I will be considering how curricula, context, and individuals promote or hinder opportunities for students to transfer rhetorical reading concepts into a new context.

If we acknowledge that rhetorical reading courses should help students to read more effectively in college within and beyond first-year composition, the challenge becomes identifying and describing reading practices that can move with the students to their chosen communities of practice, since those reading practices tell us both how college students read and what concepts we should teach. In this chapter, I explore two areas that hold such possibility: disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory.

The first, disciplinary literacy, involves expanding our definition of post-secondary reading to acknowledge that reading practices vary according to a student’s community of practice (CoP). A community of practice is a group of people who have distinct intellectual and social conventions, such as social workers (Artevema).
According to CoP theory, learners acquire the expert practices used in the CoP by being actively engaged in these practices, in a process of apprenticeship. Through what Lave and Wenger identify as legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers to the community gradually become enculturated through increased involvement in the community. Eventually, through increased commitment of time and effort, they become full practitioners. According to Downs, per this principle, “reading and writing should be taught as reading and writing the particular genres of particular activity systems, through an apprenticeship process that sees not ‘right or wrong,’ but ‘more or less expert’” (26). As students enter their chosen disciplines, or their community of practice as a social worker or a biochemist, they move from less expert to more expert readers.

The second, threshold concept theory, involves rethinking the value of reading practices according to their ability to transform student readers in ways that facilitate the students’ transfer of rhetorical reading concepts into a new context within their chosen community of practice.

In this chapter, I first explore how the two frameworks—disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory—support a research design focused on understanding how students’ reading practices develop after completing a critical reading course in order to understand which aspects of rhetorical reading we should be teaching. Then I describe my case study approach, the participants, and my attention to trustworthiness.

**Disciplinary Literacy: Reading and Writing within a Community of Practice**

As I mentioned previously, disciplinary literacy research foregrounds how reading practices change according to a person’s community of practice. Disciplinary literacy
scholars describe reading and writing as social activities situated in an activity performed by a particular community. In addition, these scholars establish as their goal transforming student readers into disciplinary insiders, or expert readers in a particular community. The research conducted in this field guides my research design choices in a few ways. It encourages me to focus on student development of reading concepts valued by particular communities of practice, including those outside of composition and rhetoric. It also encourages me to examine reading not as an isolated skill but as a social activity embedded within a particular context.

In 2012, in “What is Disciplinary Literacy and Why Does It Matter?” Cynthia Shanahan and Timothy Shanahan established the goal of disciplinary literacy:

The aim of disciplinary literacy is to identify all such reading- and writing-relevant distinctions among the disciplines and to find ways of teaching students to negotiate successfully these literacy aspects of the disciplines. It is an effort, ultimately, to transform students into disciplinary insiders who are able to approach literacy tasks with some sense of agency and with a set of responses and moves that are appropriate to the specialized purposes, demands, and mores of the discipline. (11 italics added)

The operative assumption in this definition is that reading and writing are linked in a process of apprenticeship, as students become disciplinary insiders. Often located in the field of education or specifically in literacy studies, disciplinary literacy is grounded in the premise that students must understand the “conventions of disciplinary knowledge production and communication” (i.e., writing and reading), so they can have the ability to read critically across texts and disciplines (Moje 37). According to Moje, disciplinary
literacy scholarship highlights “how members of a discipline think and how that thinking shapes the texts they produce or how they access the texts of others for disciplinary purposes” (17). The explicit linking of reading and writing as processes within a discipline makes the disciplinary literacy approach valuable for my own research design because it highlights how readers attend to particular concepts of rhetorical reading according to their community of practice.

Disciplinary literacy researchers study how experts read in the disciplines and then use that knowledge to train high school and middle-school teachers in different content areas on how to teach their students to read in these different disciplines. For example, Cynthia Shanahan, Timothy Shanahan, and Cynthia Misischia conducted a study to identify specific concepts professors considered when reading journal articles in their disciplines: math, history, and chemistry. Shanahan et al. found the disciplinary experts differed in how much they considered particular concepts—sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, text structure, graphic elements, critique, re-reading or close reading, and interest—when reading. For example, sourcing includes a consideration of where information comes from (e.g. primary or secondary sources), who the authors are (e.g. affiliations, what their “politics” are), and what kind of document it is. Historians prioritized sourcing, while mathematicians did not consider source information at all as they evaluated the reading. In addition, historians are more concerned with contextualization, which means paying attention to the context in which a text is written such as consideration of the time period, the expertise represented in the text, and the degree to which context is taken into account. The mathematicians did not consider context when reading, and the chemists did occasionally. I detail this research
study because it highlights a mainstay in disciplinary literacy: communities of practice value different rhetorical concepts in the texts that share knowledge within their community; as a result, reading research and pedagogy cannot have a skills-based, one-size-fits-all framework. Instead, reading must be taught and studied as part of a social activity.

Disciplinary literacy studies remain focused on teaching high school teachers how to integrate literacy into their content-based classes, a practice supported by the new Common Core Standards. Despite its focus on high school, the principles of the research and the goals of the researchers should be integrated into reading research for college students because it highlights the social, disciplinary aspects of reading, allowing for a “theory of reading with a principle of use,” which considers how readers and texts are “embedded in communities of social practice” (Downs 24-5).

If we embed the goals of disciplinary literacy— to transform students into disciplinary insiders who approach literacy tasks with some sense of agency—into college-level reading research, we can move past arguments about comprehension (why students cannot read) and non-action (why students do not read) to a socio-cultural view of reading, or an understanding of how students read in communities of practice. These goals and principles guide my research design, demanding I look beyond first-year writing to describe how reading operates in various communities of practice and to describe how student readers develop within those communities of practice.
Threshold Concepts of Reading

While disciplinary literacy scholarship indicates post-secondary reading practices vary among communities of practice (CoPs) or disciplines, it also highlights the need to understand the rhetorical reading concepts valued within and among those communities (e.g. sourcing, contextualization). Threshold concept theory offers a way to operationalize the way students develop and transfer rhetorical reading concepts. First, threshold concepts irreversibly transform the way a learner sees certain aspects of the CoP, which indicates the possibility of seeing these concepts used again in a new context. Second, these concepts are liminal, which allows a researcher to map the development of the learner from a pre- to a post-liminal understanding of the concept. These characteristics of threshold concept theory support my research design because they allow me to describe what rhetorical reading concepts operate as threshold concepts in other disciplines. In doing so, threshold concept theory allows me to argue for the rhetorical reading concepts that should be taught in first-year composition.

Working in the area of educational psychology, Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land developed threshold concept theory to understand the barriers to learning in higher education. They discovered that within disciplines certain concepts act as threshold moments for college students—a student either masters the concept, allowing them to continue developing in that discipline, or the student gets stuck. They describe a threshold concept as a “portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (3). Threshold concepts transform the way a learner understands, interprets, or views something. These transformations occur in various ways, happening suddenly, or over a long period of time, with that transition sometimes
proving troublesome. For example, in economics, *opportunity cost* has been identified as a threshold concept. Students studying in the economics discipline who develop an understanding of the concept will be transformed in terms of how they conceptualize cost. Students who cannot develop this more abstract way of thinking about cost will stagnate within the discipline and find it difficult to then move on to other more difficult concepts common in economics.

Threshold concepts are often delineated according to disciplines and Meyer and Land studied these concepts by interviewing practitioners in a range of disciplines. They found that a threshold concept shares six key characteristics. They are *transformative*, *irreversible*, *integrative*, *bounded*, *troublesome*, and *liminal*: a concept is *transformative* when it changes the way the learner perceives the subject, often leading to a shift in values, feelings, or attitudes; a concept is *irreversible* because it is unlikely to be forgotten; a concept is *integrative* in that it allows the learner to connect previously unconnected concepts; a concept is *bounded* in that it demarcates between disciplinary areas; a concept is *troublesome* in that it is often antithetical to common sense; and a concept is *liminal* in that it marks the development or movement of the learner.

For example, in composition and rhetoric, *rhetorical genre awareness* has been identified as a threshold concept of writing (Pope-Ruark; Adler-Kassner et. al). A learner who considers genre a set of teachable, static rules, will first encounter and struggle with the *troublesome* concept of “genre as social action.” Once the learner grapples with and understands “genre as social action,” he or she has moved to a post-liminal stage and how he or she views genre has been *transformed* in a way that will not be forgotten. The *irreversibility* of the concept means the student will take this knowledge with her or him
to other contexts and integrate related concepts, like audience awareness. Still, the concept is bounded within rhetoric and composition, which means it is a concept taught exclusively within composition and rhetoric courses and discussed within its journals.

The students who cannot progress to viewing “genre as social action,” can remain in a state of “liminality, a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity” (Meyer and Land 16). As Meyer and Land note, the concept of liminality is generative, because it encourages researchers to consider how the portal initially comes into view for a student, how it is “approached, negotiated, and perhaps even experienced as a transition in terms of sense of self” (19). Researchers refer to students as pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal as students oscillate within the metaphorical space of a discipline’s community of practice. According to Linda Adler-Kassner, John Majewski, and Damian Koshnick, a student in a pre-liminal state will find her or his tacit views interrupted when introduced to and beginning to grapple with a new threshold concept. At a liminal stage, the student “begins to enact that knowledge” and to grow awareness of her or his work with the threshold concept and her or his interactions with it” (np). In a post-liminal stage, the student is part of the community of practice, thinking, reading, and writing like a historian, a rhetorician, a social worker. At this point, the student possesses awareness of her or his own processes and epistemic processes of the discipline.

Composition and rhetoric scholars have used threshold concept theory as a framework to study how students write and to make arguments for what first-year composition teachers should teach. They have already identified several threshold concepts of writing, which Brian Gogan summarizes as follows: audience (Pope-Ruark;
Adler-Kassner, et al.); purpose (Adler-Kassner, et al.); situated practice (Adler-Kassner et al.; Wardle and Downs); professionalism (Pope-Ruark); and genre (Clark and Hernandez; Pope-Ruark; Adler-Kassner et al.). The research and conversation surrounding these concepts focus primarily on writing as the mode through which these concepts are realized. The one exception is recent research by Gogan in which he illustrates how rhetorical genre awareness is a threshold concept of reading. Gogan demonstrates how the development of rhetorical genre awareness transforms students’ reading practices, leading to more effective and successful readers and readings, and integrates with the students’ writing.

Despite these studies, Adler-Kassner et al. lament rhetoric and composition research has not yet extensively dealt with threshold concepts. In response to this research gap, they conducted a study to better understand which threshold concepts are shared across two courses taken concurrently (history and composition), how these concepts are understood by instructors, and how they are enacted by students across both courses. By examining how they are “shared,” Adler-Kassner et al. are working under the expectation of “transfer”—transfer of knowledge to a new context.

The expectation of transfer is a key assumption within threshold concept theory, because threshold concepts are transformative and irreversible. Adler-Kassner et al. wed transfer studies and threshold concept theory and enter “heated conversations” about the purpose of first-year writing courses and of general education in the university as a whole (np). They identify audience, purpose, context, and genre as threshold concepts shared between history and writing, arguing that general education should introduce students to
disciplinary threshold concepts, instead of general skills, which do not aid transfer. Adler-Kassner et al. end the article with a suggestion for how to increase transfer:

Student and instructor interviews suggest that threshold concepts that accrue across learning contexts, such as those in History 17b and Writing 2, need to be reinforced even more strongly in multiple classroom settings by students and instructors. The troublesome knowledge inherent in these concepts means that students need to engage in frequent practice with them across courses, rather than focusing on them in discrete instances. The ultimate goal of General Education courses, then, might be reconsidered to focus on identifying, comprehending, and applying multiple threshold concepts across the curriculum. (np)

For my research design, their work highlights the importance of identifying college-level threshold concepts of rhetorical reading within the context of the students’ disciplines. In addition, their research foregrounds the importance of exploring how threshold concepts taught in first-year writing might transfer to other disciplines. The goal of identifying movement to a student’s chosen academic discipline parallels the goals in disciplinary literacy in education. To explain, I return to the definition of disciplinary literacy by Shanahan and Shanahan: “It is an effort, ultimately, to transform students into disciplinary insiders who are able to approach literacy tasks with some sense of agency and with a set of responses and moves that are appropriate to the specialized purposes, demands, and mores of the discipline” (11 “What is Disciplinary Literacy” italics added). The students’ transformation into disciplinary insiders is part of a process of learning, as students begin to know how readers in their disciplines read and become readers in their discipline.
In the design of my research project, I bring disciplinary literacy research and threshold concept theory together in order to describe how college students read and to identify what rhetorical reading concepts we should be teaching in first-year writing. Rhetoric and composition scholars appropriated threshold concept theory, but to exclusively look at writing, like Adler-Kassner et al., even though much of the research blends reading and writing within these threshold concepts. For example, Adler-Kassner et al. note “Students encountering a college-level history course for the first time often find it difficult to understand that the textbook may not be the most persuasive or compelling narrative. How, they ask, can the assigned textbook be ‘wrong’?” (np). Still, Adler-Kassner et al. view this encounter as a threshold concept related to audience and to writing.

I argue that by putting disciplinary literacy research and its focus on reading in conversation with threshold concept theory, I can create a space that allows for research on threshold concepts of reading that describes concepts of rhetorical reading that can transform and transfer with students from first-year composition to their chosen CoPs.

Reading (Re)Visited

In the previous sections, I showed how disciplinary literacy and threshold concept theory allow us to expand our definition of college-level reading to acknowledge that reading effectiveness varies according to a student’s community of practice and allow us to rethink the value of reading practices according to its ability to transform student readers and through that be used again in a new context. The combination of these two
theories allows us to operationalize and understand college-level reading as part of a theory of use with a socio-cultural perspective (see also Downs).

In this research project, I use the theory of threshold concepts to analyze what rhetorical reading practices the students learned and transferred. As a theory, threshold concepts allow me to examine how the reading practices taught in a rhetorical reading course move to other disciplines because the threshold concept transforms the learner. If a rhetorical reading practice, like identifying fallacies, is a threshold concept, then it will transform the way a student sees and participates in college reading. By understanding which reading concepts students use after taking a rhetorical reading course, we can move towards developing best practices for teaching reading and comprehensive reading pedagogies for college students.

My use of threshold concept theory to build pedagogy is predicated on two key assumptions. First, I am assuming that disciplines have different approaches to reading—an assumption that is supported by disciplinary literacy scholarship. Second, I am assuming that transfer occurs through the transformation of the student via threshold concept development—an assumption that is supported by Wardle’s assertion that learning the underlying concepts aids transfer (“What is Transfer?” np). Finally, I am joining scholars like Adler-Kassner et al. who focus on the movement of threshold concepts from general education to the disciplines. In doing so, I seek to explain which concepts taught in a rhetorical reading course prove to be threshold concepts that students repurpose in their communities of practice, or rather which concepts move from general education to the disciplines.
My decision to study which concepts get taken up again by the students is my contribution to Downs’s call for “a theory of reading with a principle of use” (25). He claims we need to teach students not how to read, but how to use texts. By studying and describing the rhetorical reading concepts that students use in their chosen communities of practice, I contribute to Downs’s call, identifying how students use texts rhetorically. I also note two important research opportunities that advance our understanding of effective college reading pedagogy. First, the focus on writing in composition research has resulted in limited resources on teaching reading and limited understanding about the threshold concepts of reading. However, by identifying threshold concepts of reading, the field can better understand how certain concepts common in composition and rhetoric aid student reading throughout college. Second, threshold concepts are potentially transferable, or available again to students when reading in new contexts for different disciplines, linking threshold concept theory and disciplinary literacy studies.

Therefore, I conducted this study to identify which of the concepts taught in a critical reading course are threshold concepts, which ones change individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their subject, allowing these concept to be repurposed in other disciplines and transforming students within those communities of practice. Beyond identifying concepts, I also provide a thick description of this process, to illustrate the different stages of liminality with these threshold concepts. Liminality allows me to analyze students’ movement from arhetorical to rhetorical reading practices, as they oscillate within the threshold.

Specifically, my research questions are as follow:

1. What might disciplinary threshold concepts of reading look like?
2. How do students transfer these threshold concepts?

3. How do the classroom context and/or the disposition of the student affect the transfer of these threshold concepts?

**A Multiple Case Study Approach**

To answer these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study on how students use rhetorical reading practices in their chosen communities of practice. I chose qualitative research because I align myself with other researchers that believe events are mutually shaped by other events and that qualitative research is needed to capture the complexity of the interaction in the events (e.g., Brandt, Cintron, Duffy, Gee, Heath, and Knobel). Because I am studying threshold concepts as they occur in the classroom and during students’ reading events, I believe a qualitative approach, and in particular multiple case study approach, is fitting.

Robert K. Yin defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that (1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when (2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (13). He suggests the case study method is ideal when a researcher deliberately wants to “cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (13). With this decision to answer these questions through qualitative data, I understand that my responsibility as a researcher is oriented toward data collection, analysis, and description.
Data Collection Design

Institutional Setting. For my multiple case study research, I selected eight University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) students. The University of Nevada, Reno has a population of about 18,000, with about 14,500 of those being undergraduate students. The majority of the students are Nevada residents, but many students (about 2,000) come from neighboring states, like California and Hawaii, through the Western Undergraduate Exchange program. Despite the large number of students from Nevada, UNR is not a “commuter school.” Enough students come from Las Vegas and the rural parts of Nevada to fill the many dorms and create a local campus community near the downtown casinos. Based on a six-year graduation time frame, UNR has about a 50 percent retention rate (Robison np).

The eight research participants had completed my critical reading (English 105) courses in Fall 2012 and Fall 2013, or my composition studio (English 100J) course in Fall 2013. The writing program administrator established the following student learning outcomes for the critical reading course: (1) Build ability to read complex, academic texts efficiently and with understanding of context, form, and content; (2) Interpret, analyze, discuss, and evaluate a variety of readings; (3) Understand how academic communities make and share knowledge through scholarly genres and stylistic conventions; (4) Develop standards of "good writing" by which they can evaluate their own and classmates' essays; (5) Build facility in writing summary, paraphrase, synthesis, and analysis. The student learning outcomes for composition jumbo (100J) that relate to reading are: (1) Demonstrate critical reading skills when interpreting, analyzing, discussing, and evaluating of a variety of texts; (2) Develop standards of “good writing”
by which students can evaluate their own and classmates' essays during revision. The required textbook in English 105 was M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley’s *Asking the Right Questions*, a book that focuses on identifying and evaluating issues, conclusions, assumptions, fallacies, omitted information, rival causes, and statistics. 100J used the *McGraw-Hill Guide* by Duane Roen, Gregory Glau, and Barry Maid and *Asking the Right Questions*.

Students who took either of these courses would previously have been placed into basic writing. When administrators decided that too many students at UNR were testing into basic writing, they demanded the English department reduce the requirements to place directly into first-year writing. Instead of putting the basic writing students into first-year writing, the writing program administrator created a new combination of credit-bearing courses: 105, 106, and 100i. Piloted in 2009 and launched in 2010, these new courses satisfied the needs of the administrators (who could now claim that a lower percentage of students tested into basic writing) and satisfied the needs of the writing program administrator (who could support these basic writing students with a five-unit course combination that would better prepare them for second-semester composition). In 2013, the three courses were combined to form 100J. Whether students enroll in the credit-bearing five-unit combination (105, 106, 100i) or five-unit studio (100J), they are still basic writing students, who are now provided with direct instruction in rhetorical reading. While students in this study are taking credit-bearing composition courses, and therefore not technically basic writers, the fact that they were required to take additional courses in reading and style was not lost on the students: they still recognize that their
SAT and ACT scores were not high enough to place them in the standard first-year writing (English 101) class.

By choosing students who tested into a the additional rhetorical reading course based on their SAT or ACT scores, I am situating my study in basic writing. In earlier scholarship about basic writing students, the tendency was to study these writers as a group (e.g. Hull and Rose). For example, Patricia Bizzell describes these students, often considered the least prepared for college, as sharing a “salient characteristic [which] is their ‘outlandishness,’” meaning they seem most “alien” in the campus community (294). The outlandishness manifests in unconventional ways the students write and discuss readings. Typically, they are the students who experience the greatest distance between their home and school dialects; the students who face a clash of home and school discourse (or what Gee would call their primary and secondary discourse); and the students who face a “clash in ways of thinking” (Bizzell 296). A shift during the early 2000s occurred in this scholarship with teachers and researchers focusing more on the context of the classroom. This move marked a shift away from what Laura Gray-Rosendale calls the “cure model” (20). Even the choice to refer to these students as basic, rather than developmental or remedial, is a conscious move away from the medical terminology (Rose). In sum, I align my work in this tradition: I am choosing to study basic readers and writers because they were provided direct reading instruction, but I am not making arguments about how basic readers struggle in similar ways to each other.
Table 2.1 Case Study Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>HS Type</th>
<th>Family Ed</th>
<th>Employ</th>
<th>Career Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyrus</td>
<td>105 in 2012</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Las Vegas, NV</td>
<td>Fine Arts Academy</td>
<td>First-generation but mom currently in college</td>
<td>Yes, campus library</td>
<td>A social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>105 in 2013</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Reno / Missouri</td>
<td>State school with dual enrollment</td>
<td>First-gen</td>
<td>Yes, National Guard</td>
<td>A police investigator or/and helicopter pilot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxy</td>
<td>100J in 2013</td>
<td>Bio-chem</td>
<td>Citrus Heights, CA</td>
<td>State school</td>
<td>First-gen but older brother at UC Irvine</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Medical school to be a surgeon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>105 in 2013</td>
<td>Bio-chem</td>
<td>Reno, NV</td>
<td>State school</td>
<td>First-gen</td>
<td>Yes, server</td>
<td>Medical school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>100J in 2013</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Las Vegas, NV</td>
<td>Magnet school, academy</td>
<td>Both parents undergrad</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Medical school to be an orthopedic surgeon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>105 in 2013</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>Genoa, NV</td>
<td>State school</td>
<td>Father: undergrad</td>
<td>Yes, barista</td>
<td>CFO of corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>105 in 2013</td>
<td>Psych.</td>
<td>Reno, NV</td>
<td>State school</td>
<td>First-gen</td>
<td>Yes, service</td>
<td>Family psych. in Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badwolf</td>
<td>105 in 2013</td>
<td>Psych.</td>
<td>Las Vegas, NV</td>
<td>Magnet school: academy</td>
<td>First-gen</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Medical school for psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case study participant demographics. Because I am studying transfer of threshold concepts to various communities of practice, I chose research participants to act as pairs within a particular CoP, with a few exceptions due to research participant attrition. For example, I worked with two students in psychology, two students in biochemistry, two students in social work / substance abuse counseling / criminal justice (classes overlap for these students), one student in biology, and one student in business administration. Since reading practices vary according to the CoP, I chose students who represent particular
CoPs, providing a sample from across the UNR colleges. Summary profiles of each participant are presented in Table 2.1.

The majority of the research participants are first-generation college students. According to the Center for Student Cultural Diversity, nearly 40 percent of UNR students identify as first generation (Chacon). Of the research participants for my study, 5 out of 8 identify as first generation: Badwolf, Bruce, Cyrus, Natalie, and Roxy. Cristina’s mother has a two-year degree. Alpha and Jerry have one parent each with a four-year degree. According to Laura Horn and Anne-Marie Nunez, first-generation students struggle more with financing college and gaining support from family. As a result, they are more likely to not complete their college degree. An example of these struggles can be seen with the student Badwolf. He claims that college-saving plans are part of American, not Mexican culture. So his family, who immigrated to the United States of America, did not save for his college. As a result, he is $16,000 in debt after his first year and unsure whether he will be able to continue. Instead, he may move back in with his parents and attend the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In addition, first-generation college-student Natalie took a year off to go into the military, purely so she could pay for college through the GI Bill.

While financial difficulties are common among first-generation students (with exceptions of course), the support of family is also difficult. Most of the research participants’ parents support their children’s decision to attend college, but students do not always get support in making decisions that will benefit them. Again, I use Badwolf as an example. In his second semester of college, he took a 400-level psychology class. At UNR, 400-level courses are for seniors. Badwolf did not understand how the
numbering system worked at UNR, only seeing that the pre-requisite for the course was Psychology 101, a class he took and passed. The 400-level course was too hard for him and, when last I spoke to him, he was failing. These are the issues that affect first-generation students, whom I consider the trailblazers in their families.

The research participants are racially and ethnically diverse. Cristina and Badwolf are fluent in Spanish and English, and their parents immigrated to the US to start a family. Cristina’s ties to Mexico are still tight; her brother and father live there, and she intends to move back after finishing college. Bruce is Korean-American, also with parents who immigrated with him at a young age. Alpha’s mother emigrated from the Philippines after meeting his father, an African-American officer in the military. Jerry is Jewish, Native American, and Italian, and he is the first in the family, on his father’s side, to not attend Hebrew school. Cyrus, Roxy, and Natalie are Caucasian. While it seems tempting to lump them together, among them exist key differences that make them culturally diverse. Cyrus is from a working-class family in Las Vegas. Roxy is from a middle-class family in the Sacramento, California area. Natalie is from a military family, with her father and stepmother working in the Navy and Army respectively.iv

Case Study Participant Recruitment. I recruited volunteers from my sections of the rhetorical reading and composition studio, which meant that I already had rapport with the students and that I knew they were exposed to rhetorical and disciplinary reading concepts, allowing me to more easily observe students’ repurposing of those concepts in other courses. I was aware these students might be biased, so I paid attention for potential bias in my interviews.v I also protected against potential harm to the students by waiting until after grades were posted to invite research participants. I found that bias was not a
problem. For example, one research participant, Jerry, an information systems major, told me during an interview that he did not learn anything new in my reading course. And another research participant, Roxy, a bio-chemistry major, was not able to recall any of the rhetorical reading practices we read about and used in the course, admitting that she does not see work in English as important. Finally, in an interview following an observation, criminal justice major Natalie told me she did not complete the assigned reading for that class (even though she knew I would be there to observe). These interactions suggest to me that the students did not adjust their behavior or beliefs to spare my feelings or my research. Instead the significance of choosing these students is that they tested into these courses, being labeled as underprepared for college reading and writing.

Data collection techniques. I collected data on my case studies, the student participants, in at least three ways: I interviewed students, observed classes they took, examined the writing and reading done in their classes, and when possible, interviewed the teachers of the observed classes.

I interviewed these eight students over the course of the spring 2014 semester. One student, Cyrus, was also interviewed during fall 2013. These semi-structured interviews lasted about 60 minutes.

Conducted during the first three weeks of school, the first round of interviews focused on general questions about the students’ backgrounds and their future goals, the value they see in higher education, what they recall learning in English 105 or 100J, and questions about how they feel about reading, including how important reading is to them. For example, I asked questions like “What did you read in high school?” “What are you
majoring in and why?” “What do you read outside of school?” and “What is one of your happiest memories of reading?

In the second round of interviews, we discussed questions that arose from my observations of their research-focused English 102 (second-semester composition course), and reading and writing completed for that course. For example, I asked questions like, “What exactly are you reading in this class?” “Do you feel like you understand the readings in class?” “How important will this course be for work that you will be doing?” “What motivates you to complete or skip a reading for the class?” And for each participant there were also specific questions related to their unique class. For example, since Jerry was taking an English 102 from a teacher who focused on the Toulmin method, I asked more specific questions about that, like “[Teacher] had students discussing the warrants that Tompkins notes in Miller’s analysis. What is a warrant? Do you see any relations to English 105?”

In the third round of interviews, we discussed questions that arose from my observations of courses in their chosen discipline, like Psychology 101, and reading and writing completed for that course. For example, for Cristina, a psychology major, I asked “How did it change the way you watched the video [a video shown in class] since you had the list of questions?” “Were you relating it to your own life or did you just watch for the questions?” “What kind of notes did you take?” “What did you end up writing for that exam?” “I remember last time we met, that you found the book more helpful than the lectures: for these essay exams do you pull from the examples the professor provides or your book?” “How do you read in this class?” “How do psychologists read?” “What do they consider when reading?” “Do you like the reading in this class?” “Do you like this
type of psychology?” “How often do you complete readings for this class?” “What motivates you to complete or skip a reading for the class?” and “Are the lectures given attached to any type of reading?”

The final round of interviews focused on a wrap-up of all their courses, observations and writing. Because most of the students had turned in final written assignments for their courses, we discussed their writing in relation to their reading. For example, after looking over Jerry’s English 102 essay, which included a rubric the students had to fill out as “proof” that they accomplished each requirement, I asked questions like “I noticed the rubric at the end mentions assumptions, warrants, and biases. Did you have to account for your own assumptions or those of the readings?” “Can you explain how you worked with this requirement?” For Jerry’s communications class, I also asked about a particular assignment: “I understand you did an interpersonal case study after watching When Harry Met Sally. Can you describe that assignment to me? What did you learn from that project?” For those students in online courses, we also focused on the reading, writing, and discussion board postings.

Many of the interview questions were discourse-based questions. These questions revolved around the writing they were completing that was based on readings from their courses. The value I find in this type of interview is that it allowed for what some call participatory action research (PAR). An example of PAR is photovoice: In a study about women’s health, researchers provided people with cameras to photograph their perceived health and work realities, allowing the people to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns (Wang 186). PAR shifts research to make it more
collaborative among researchers and participants, as they work together to generate and analyze information.

While examining students’ writing with them is not as innovative as having them photograph acts of reading, the spirit of collaboration that PAR intends is captured in these interview moments, especially when participants explained their intentions behind writing moves that I would not be able to discern if I were looking over their writing by myself and without the context. For example, in preparation for an interview with Bruce, I read his research proposal for English 102. I did not notice any use of rhetorical reading practices. However, when discussing it together, he pointed out several moves he made to minimize appearances of bias, something he learned was a sign of unsuccessful writing through the reading class. Specifically, he refused to offer an opinion in his research proposal. It took collaboration between us to reach this discovery.

Along with collecting school-based texts and interviewing the participants, I observed between two to three class sessions of their English 102 and courses related to their disciplines. I wanted to observe courses that apprenticed students into a way of reading and writing as part of their community of practice (CoP). Specifically, I wanted to observe how the professors discussed the assigned texts; how they offered direct instruction on how to read; how they made assumptions about student reading; and how they referenced rhetorical reading concepts, like audience and evaluation of evidence, in their courses. Some courses did not appear related to the students’ disciplines, but I let the students decide whether or not courses were related to their goals as biochemists, psychologists, etc., to increase the collaborative nature of this research and to see what connections the students were making. For example, Cyrus, a social work major viewed
his economics course as part of his CoP even though the course did not fit into his discipline. Because social class is an issue important in a social worker’s community of practice, Cyrus wanted me to observe that class. In addition, a student majoring in biology considered his anthropology class related to his CoP because it was cultural anthropology, which he views as important for future work in medical school, which involves working with different groups and cultures.

I did not observe the classes in which they did not see themselves as being “apprenticed.” In seeking out apprenticeship, I am using communities of practice theory, which views learning as a process of increasing participation in a community of practice. With this principle, students are taught to read and write in ways that are common in that community, with the students moving from less to more expert. Participants did not choose courses like astronomy, theatre, and music appreciation for observation, because they did not have as much interest in developing into full practitioners in those areas.

Overall, I observed approximately 8-10 class sessions per participant, for a total of about 60-80 class observations. To maximize my discovery, I sought permission from all instructors and professors and during that process asked them when it would be ideal for me to visit, that is, when readings would be discussed. The majority of them told me the best days, but I had to guess in certain classes.

See Table 2.2 for my observation timetable, and Table 2.3 for observations per student.
Table 2.2 Observation Timetable (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAS 255</td>
<td>English 102 (3 sections)</td>
<td>English 102 (2 sections)</td>
<td>English 102 (1 section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CAS 254</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>COM 113</td>
<td>COM 113</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chem 121A</td>
<td>Chem</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Crim Jus 102</td>
<td>Crim Jus 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psy 261</td>
<td>Psy 261</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psy 441</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BCH 121</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ECON 102</td>
<td>ECON 102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3 Observations per student. *indicates classes I could not observe, but still discussed and examined reading and writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Class</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyrus</td>
<td>CAS 254: Signs and Symptoms of Addiction</td>
<td>Economics 100: Introduction to Economics</td>
<td>Biology 100: Principles and Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>Criminal Justice 102: Introduction to Criminal Justice II</td>
<td>CAS 154 (online)*: Problems of Substance Abuse and Addiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CRJ 211*: Police in America (online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxy</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>Psychology 101*: Introduction to Psychology</td>
<td>Chemistry 121A: General Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>Chemistry 121A: General Chemistry</td>
<td>Bio-Chemistry 121*: Current Issues in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>Chemistry 121A: General Chemistry</td>
<td>Nutrition 121: Human Nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ANTH 101: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PSY 101: General Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>PSY 261: Introduction to Social Psychology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badwolf</td>
<td>English 102: Composition II</td>
<td>PSY 441: Abnormal Psychology</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Classroom observation is a vital component of the methodology for several reasons. Observation is important because it is not unusual for people to say they are doing one thing when in practice they are doing something else (Corbin and Strauss 29). In addition, as a researcher who shares the assumption with many that language use must be understood contextually, classroom observations are needed (e.g. Heath, Gee, Knobel). Finally, this choice to include observations stems from theories of situated learning: “situated learning is based on the understanding that an individual’s higher mental functions derive from social life…that learning and knowing are context specific, that learning is active and accomplished through co-participation” (Artemeva 169). Situated learning suggests that students will learn how to think in their communities of practice through classroom interactions.

By including observation, I also align myself with a history of research that seeks to understand how students acquire disciplinary ways of thinking, reading and writing through a process of apprenticeship. My focus on apprenticeship stems from Scribner and Cole’s discovery that what really matters in literacy is the social practices into which people are apprenticed. Apprenticeship aligns with communities of practice as a framework for understanding disciplinary literacy because it focuses on the socio-cultural aspect of the classroom and literate practices. Scribner and Cole’s discovery that literacy is a social practice led to the ideological model of literacy, proposed by Brian Street in reaction against the autonomous model of literacy. The ideological model argues that “literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions
of knowledge, identity, and being” (Street 77-8). As a result of this discovery, Gee argues that a researcher cannot remove literacy from the overall social practice, or cut away the non-literacy parts from the literacy parts of the overall practice:

A way of reading a certain type of text is acquired, when it is acquired in a “fluent” or “native-like” way, only by one’s being embedded (apprenticed) as a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways. (Gee 44)

In a university context, students are apprenticed into a community of practice and into a way of thinking and being. Observations allow me to understand how students are being apprenticed into the CoP through literacy. For example, in a CAS 255 class on substance abuse prevention, I observed teachers and students correct other students when they made too many assumptions about substance abusers. This expectation of minimizing assumptions about self and other extended to discussion of reading and writing. Without classroom observations, I would have missed these interactions. Observations allow me to understand how professors frame reading and how students discuss reading.

When conducting observations, I took notes on how professors discussed the assigned texts, how they referenced the students (whether as members of the CoP or not), the cultural tools used to discuss texts, and other notable events that I had not predicted. For example, my observations of large lecture classes, such as chemistry, allowed me to understand how one professor framed the reading by using a Power Point presentation made by the publisher of the book and skipping slides that he did not deem important,
and how another professor used the white board and told students directly what to read in the chapter. The first approach resulted in students not reading, and instead relying on the slides and class lecture. The second approach resulted in students reading after lecture.

During observations, I also took notes on the students. I observed where they sat, if they answered questions related to the reading, if they asked questions about the reading, if they had the assigned text, if they took notes, and even if they showed up.

When possible, I also interviewed instructors and professors of the courses observed. In doing so, I checked the interpretation of my observations. I asked the instructors questions about their expectations of reading, the goal of writing assignments, and the importance of reading in their classes and their discipline as a whole. Understanding how the teachers perceive reading in their disciplines helped me understand how students should “transform” into “disciplinary insiders” (Shanahan and Shanahan “What is Disciplinary Literacy?”).

See Table 2.4 for an overview of data collected.

Table 2.4 Data Collection Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-class observations</td>
<td>- 5-7 hours observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Follow up interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 5-7 hours observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Follow up interview when possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>- 4 hour, semi-structured interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Audiotaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 semi-structured interview, when possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual analysis</td>
<td>- Collection and discussion of writing done in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Collection and discussion of reading done in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Syllabi for courses collected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Analysis:* In qualitative research, one of the biggest issues for researchers, especially lone researchers, is managing the data. Matthew B. Miles and Michael
Huberman suggest creating a contact summary sheet as an early step in analysis (51). These contact summary sheets ask the researcher to reflect on main concepts, themes, issues, and questions seen during the contact, a brief summary of the contact, and questions such as what was most salient during the contact and what new target questions the research has for the next contact with this person/site. These are completed directly after the contact and must be kept to one page. I wrote contact summary sheets after observations and interviews, reflecting on the most salient features of the interaction and noting questions for the next interview.

For data analysis procedures, I also followed the guidance of Miles and Huberman. Their method is similar to the more commonly known grounded theory method. In grounded theory, a researcher codes data looking for patterns or themes. The assumption, to which a researcher and her readers must agree, however, is that a researcher can code data without any preconceived notions of what she will discover. While those notions are minimized by the qualitative nature of the study, I knew that I came to the observations and interviews with notions for what I may find, just based on past research on threshold concept theory and theories of literacies. Simply writing research questions signals that the researcher has a goal. As a result, Miles and Huberman’s method of analyzing data asks the researcher to create codes based on her or his research questions, since those most clearly show how the researcher is situated.

Therefore, I initially coded data using the research questions. This meant I created codes for elements of rhetorical reading discussed in English 105 and 100J and examples of apprenticeship. For example, WT-ASSUMPTIONS would mean students identified assumptions in their written text. Then I identified and coded observable behaviors by
participants in the classroom and in interviews. For example, CoP-Identity would mean I observed a teacher refer to the class as an inclusive “we.” As I coded, I revised and added codes as needed. I revised codes throughout the process of analysis.

**Quality of Research Design**

For quality of research design, I set a goal of *trustworthiness* (Kincheloe and McLaren). One criterion for trustworthiness is the credibility of portrayals of constructed realities. The second criterion is *anticipatory accommodation*. As Michele Knobel notes, “this kind of accommodation is embodied in the reader’s familiarity with similar studies, research terrain, theoretical framings, and such,” meaning the trustworthiness of a study can only be verified by the readers of that study (15). I accepted trustworthiness as a goal for my dissertation study and used data triangulation and participant validation to maximize the credibility of portrayals and anticipatory accommodation.

For data triangulation, I interviewed students, examined texts written, examined texts read, observed classes, and interviewed professors. I checked my work by giving the research participant an opportunity to read over my notes and validate my interpretation. I also interviewed teachers about the observations, when possible, to ensure that I understood the purpose behind assignments and the choices made in the classroom. Finally, I will conduct an inter-rater reliability check by hiring a PhD student who has published on and studied literacy to code interviews and observation notes.

For participant validation, I asked the research participants to read a draft of any chapters in which I wrote about their case (Yin 159). The research participants enjoyed reading the chapters, even when it highlighted their choices to not read. Allowing
research participants to read these drafts is more than just a professional courtesy: it is a chance to check the essential facts and evidence of the case (Yin). The only edit came from Jerry, who wanted me to clarify a fact about his family in chapter 3.

Together, these research practices provide a trustworthy and robust study of college-level reading.

**Conclusion**

For a discipline that is dedicated to helping students access academic literacies, we should be more invested in increasing resources for teaching reading. Specifically, the research study I designed seeks to understand how students access rhetorical reading concepts in their chosen communities of practice (i.e. courses outside of English) after a semester of direct instruction in rhetorical reading. My goal is to describe how college students read and what we should be teaching about reading in first-year composition.

To create this description, I designed the study to observe reading in different disciplines across the curriculum, since disciplinary literacy specialists have shown how reading practices differ according to communities of practice. I also designed my study to investigate the reading and writing of research participants during the semester after they were taught rhetorical reading concepts, like audience awareness and evaluating evidence, to understand what concepts operate as threshold concepts and therefore transfer with students to new contexts (see Wardle “What is Transfer?”).

While my research design accommodates my focus on disciplinary literacies and threshold concepts, I still need to account for the trajectories of readers and texts. Downs notes that in much reading research “texts and readers seem to come ‘out of nowhere,’
with no histories, backgrounds, or reasons for being” (23). However, how a person makes sense of a text varies depending on the activity the text is a tool in mediating and the “reader’s sense of where the text came from” (Downs 24). In the following chapter, I introduce an additional lens, a mediated action framework, which allows me to analyze these trajectories—textual and individual—to account for reading practices that do not fit well into the disciplinary literacies and threshold concept theories that initially guided my research design.
Chapter 3

Reading as Mediated Action

My interviews with Jerry happen in the evenings, after his full day of classes in communication, psychology, and economics and right when he gets off work at the coffee shop on campus. Like me, he is a morning person, so he is usually pretty tired during these interviews but still slightly wired from all the coffee samples and caffeine experiments conducted during his last few hours on the clock. Because he works on the south end of campus, we meet in a small library in the English building, sitting at a large wooden conference table. Usually I meet students on their turf, the campus library, but I do not worry about Jerry. Past conversations with Jerry revealed that he is not afraid to talk honestly to me in any location.

Toward the end of Jerry’s interview, I ask him about his best and worst memories of reading. My question is not innocent. I am thinking of Deborah Brandt’s “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading” from 1994. Her research participants had fond, familial memories of reading, standing in stark contrast to writing. Reading had prestige, while writing was a dark, lonely, more romantic act. However, while sitting in front of Jerry, I am remembering that I graduated high school in 1994, and it feels like education has changed since then. 1994 was well before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which “substantially increase[d] both the expectations and consequences for accountability” through assessment in 2002, when Jerry would have been starting kindergarten or first grade (Braden and Schroeder 1). I am wondering if Jerry has memories as happy as Brandt’s research participants did. So I ask.
Leaning forward, Jerry quickly asks me a question right back: “Do you know what AR points are?” I do not. So he launches into an explanation:

Meghan: No.

Jerry: In elementary school and middle school we have what are called AR points. I think its ascended reading, something reading…AR points. It is one of the key fundamentals to elementary and middle school and every student looks forward to getting into high school because they’ll [never] have another AR quiz again. The point is the library has a compilation of all sorts of books and they’re usually just books for enjoyment. Like I read the *Harry Potter* series and the *Lemony Snicket* series and got most of my points off of that. You would read a book, take a quiz on it, and you would get points. Each teacher would be like, “Okay, so you need so many points to pass my class.” You need 10 points by August. You need 100 points by the end of the semester. You need 200 points by the end of the year. *Harry Potter* V was a big book. It would be worth like 57 points. I always figure it was about a point every 10 pages. That’s what I figured, a point every 10 pages. I did not like how I had to read for grades. I love to read for fun. I picked up the *Harry Potter* books, and I read them. It would take me two days to read each book because that’s the kind of reader I am. If I find something I like, I’m going to sit; I’m going to read it; I’m going to damn well enjoy it. I don’t like reading something to take a quiz on it. I don’t like reading textbooks. I don’t like reading because I’m told to. If I want to go read something, I’m going to go read it. I’m going to enjoy it. (Jerry, interview, 15 April 2014)

I understand that these AR or accelerated reading points may be designed to promote student reading in order to lessen the *Matthew Effect* in readers. However, Jerry’s memory indicates three key areas for further exploration. First, his memory shows that reading may not be as prestigious, uncomplicated, and pleasant as Brandt’s informants described back in 1994. Perhaps this shift is due to changes in educational policy (such as NCLB) or teaching approaches; perhaps it was Brandt’s choice of participants being different than mine. Either way it suggests that an expanded view of attitudes toward reading in K-12 education can expand our understanding of college reading. Second, it is reminiscent of Downs’s assertion that readers and texts have
trajectories. Jerry’s history includes negative memories of academic reading assignments, which he carries with him to college. Finally, it suggests that an analytical framework that accounts for the trajectory of the reader, the text, and the context is needed. Jerry’s memory is not just about him, but also the tension between him and the cultural tools. For example, “AR” books list the AR points on the binding of a book, so when a person scans books on a shelf the AR number is a prominent textual feature. In addition, some bulletin boards in classrooms include race metaphors for AR points. These books, quizzes, and charts that track his reading points, the bulletin boards with race metaphors to encourage students to read more, all mediate his college reading practices because he brings the memories of it with him.

While I offer just an excerpt from Jerry’s interview, the context of his quote is even more discouraging for reading teachers. He was explaining to me why he did not read his textbook for Psychology 101. He respected and enjoyed the teacher, and he attended every class. However, the professor on the first day of school told the students if they want an A, they must read the book and come to class, and if they want a B, they must come to class but do not have to read. Since Jerry identifies as a “B” student, he took the professor’s comment as encouragement to not read. However, Jerry is going to keep the book, and according to him maybe in 15 years he will pick it up and read it. Not only does the trajectory of past memories flooding into current reading practices affect Jerry’s choices, but also his identity as a “B” student.

Interviews with Jerry, along with several other research participants who occasionally chose to not complete assigned readings in class (e.g. Natalie, Badwolf, and Roxy), suggested to me that my original research design and theoretical framework, as
described in chapter 2, might not be sufficient. If I want to understand how college
students move through the portal of threshold concepts so we can improve resources for
teaching reading, then I knew I needed an additional framework that could capture the
complexity I was noticing in interviews and observations.

To expand my lens and investigate the trajectories of students and texts, I turn to
James Wertsch’s mediated action framework. Wertsch’s framework recommends a
researcher examine “individuals-acting-with-mediational means” (Wertsch 24). The goal
is to not privilege the individual or the social, but instead the union of the individual,
society, and the “tools one employs while engaging in a specific goal-oriented activity”—
which Wertsch calls mediated action (Shipka 42). Mediated action serves multiple
purposes or goals, is historically situated, is enabled or constrained by cultural tools, is
transformed with the introduction of new mediational means, and is enmeshed with
issues of power and authority. These characteristics—goals, the history, the cultural tools,
and issues of authority—create a frame useful when analyzing processes.

In *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Jody Shipka uses a mediated action
framework to complicate the writing process. She argues for an understanding of the
mediated processes that take place throughout the composing of a text, and in particular
she wants to account for the technological tools students use. For example, she
demonstrates how as students compose they accomplish multiple goals at various stages
of the writing process. They are not just “outlining” but doing much more
simultaneously. One research participant, Muffie, when working on the structure of a
dance (for a multimodal writing project), spends time listening to the song selected,
writing project notes, drawing a solo chart, watching video footage, and reading in-class
writings (Shipka 80). The framework allows Shipka to recognize the variety of objects used in the writing process, as the student moves between multiple goals and negotiates her history of struggling with writing. Shipka’s book complicates analyses of the writing process, which traditionally focus on the writer, by focusing on the objects used instead.

Using a framework of analysis that balances attention to individual, society, and cultural tools (or objects) is important for literacy studies, in particular. In 2002, Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton argued that literacy studies research is overly focused on either the individual or the social. Therefore, Brandt and Clinton recommend instead an examination of people and objects: literacy studies should consider what things are doing with people as well as what people are doing with things in a setting. With a new interest in how objects can be part of literacy without humans acting upon them, Brandt and Clinton recommend replacing the common term “literacy event” with “literacy-in-action.” An event suggests human actors must be taking up reading or writing for literacy to be happening. However, they suggest that literacy happens with or without human actors.

Because I observed so much “inaction” among research participants, I realized I had to introduce an analytical lens that accounted for the individual, social context, and objects (or cultural tools). Many research participants, like Jerry, did not take up the objects of literacy. However, literacy was still taking place in the cavernous lecture halls with clickers, PowerPoint slides, and professors’ warnings of what would be on the test.

Current studies of reading practices have discovered aspects of college reading that are useful for improving pedagogy, such as what motivates students to read (e.g. Bunn) and how students define reading (e.g. Keller; Smith). However, these studies have
not used Wertsch’s framework to analyze how mediated processes interfere with or aid reading practices, and in this particular case affect student movement through threshold concepts of reading. I argue that this additional theoretical lens is necessary to account for the sociocultural nature of reading—otherwise our understanding may remain limited by a faulty assumption that if we teach a threshold concept then it will transform student reading, for all students, in the same way, at the same time.

Therefore, I apply a mediated action framework to my analysis of reading in the remainder of my dissertation. In doing so, I answer Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton’s call for literacy-in-action as a replacement for what they refer to as the overly situated ethnographic literacy research. The mediated action framework is not the same as the Latour lens for which Brandt and Clinton argue. However, it shares the “belief that human behavior is social in origin and ‘mediated by complex networks of tools’” (Shipka 40). With Wertsch’s mediated action framework as my guide, I can analyze this complex network by considering how multiple goals affect students’ reading, how technologies or other cultural tools enable and constrain their reading, how their reading is affected by the past, how new cultural tools change the way students read, and how power and authority affect their action—five properties of mediated action that I detail in the following section.

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how the students’ perceptions of reading are intertwined with complementary and competing goals, histories, cultural tools, and authority to better understand literacy-in-action. I argue that these goals, histories, changing tools, and authority affect students’ movement through the threshold concepts of rhetorical reading at the college level and affect students’ ability to transfer
those concepts to new contexts. To demonstrate the difficulties for students, I will briefly explain the five properties of Wertsch’s mediated action framework most relevant to this project. Then I will describe students’ interactions with reading in the college context, referencing the five characteristics of mediated action framework. Finally, I will use one particular example to show how these five characteristics intersect to provide a method of analysis that I will use throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

**The Five Salient Characteristics of Mediated Action**

While Wertsch provides ten properties of mediated action and cultural tools, Shipka combines and rephrases some of Wertsch’s properties, focusing on the properties most associated with mediated action.1 The four properties she finds most salient are: (1) mediated action typically serves multiple purposes or goals; (2) mediated action is simultaneously enabled and constrained by mediational means; (3) mediated action is historically situated; and (4) mediated action is transformed with the introduction of new mediational means (Shipka 44). For the purposes of space and clarity, I will use Shipka’s four properties since they focus best on mediated action, but I will add one more that she did not include and that I consider essential to understanding human action in the context of education, and higher education in particular: “mediational means are associated with power and authority” (Wertsch 25).

These five properties of mediated action allow me a way to interpret how students’ actions of reading are mediated: it encourages me to consider the multiple goals or purposes of the students when they read; how their reading is enabled or constrained; how their reading is historically situated; how their reading changes with new cultural
tools; and how power and authority affect their reading. This five-part analysis allows me to understand how students’ perceptions of reading may affect their willingness to engage with threshold concepts.

My concern with capturing students’ willingness to engage with threshold concepts is also a concern with transfer. As I described in chapter 2, scholars disagree on whether transfer happens, whether it is possible to “see” transfer, and whether “transfer” is the most apt metaphor for the goal of teaching in general education courses. According to Wardle, most recently, scholars have engaged in debates about the source of transfer: is it in the individual (Bergmann and Zepernick; Wardle “Creative Repurposing”), the context (Beach; Lave and Wenger), or in the task (Judd)? The concept of transfer is perhaps so multidimensional that it may in fact be overdetermined; however, transfer remains an important aspect of threshold concept theory, because students are transformed irreversibly by learning the concept. When considering my research goal of identifying threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in the disciplines in order to discover what we should teach in first-year writing, I usually close in on the difficulty of demonstrating that teaching certain reading practices will move with the student to other courses as they move through the portal of the threshold concept.

In order to mitigate this difficulty, I note the one aspect of learning that scholars seem to agree on in the work of transfer and threshold concepts—that action is mediated. By examining the cultural tools, the individual, and the social context together, a researcher can consider how the individual transfers knowledge, how the structure of the classroom or writing program or university as a whole affects knowledge transfer, and how the cultural tools used and not used in the reading or writing act affect transfer. For
example, Leigh A. Hall’s reading research in the field of education shows how one middle school student’s choice to not transfer reading strategies was caused by the individual student, the teacher, the context of the classroom, and the cultural tools. Specifically, Hall found that the student Sarah did not use the reading strategies she learned previously in order to dis-identify as a struggling reader. The classroom’s cultural tools mediate this decision: each student in the class was given print text to read during class. The pressure of time, the fact that other students could see whether she was using a socially-marked reading strategy, and the fact that other students could see when she was not completing readings at their same pace were factors that affected her choice to not use previously learned strategies in the new context. Overall, Hall found Sarah’s opportunities to grow and develop as a reader were marginalized by the teacher and by Sarah. This “marginalization can be attributed to 1. the cognitive, print-centric view of reading held by the teacher, 2. the identity that the teacher assigned to Sarah, 3. Sarah’s goal to prevent her peers from identifying her as a poor reader, and 4. the competing academic and social goals between Sarah and her teacher” (303).

Hall is not working with transfer scholarship in composition and rhetoric or using a mediated action framework, but I find her research study and its findings useful for my research because it highlights the importance of Brandt and Clinton’s call for attention to literacy’s “capacity to connect, mediate, represent, and hold together multiple interests” (355). Hall’s research demonstrates how Sarah’s multiple interests, society, the context, and the cultural tools common in that context together affect the student’s willingness to transfer knowledge of reading practices to a new context. Sarah’s choice to not use reading strategies to help her complete difficult reading tasks is similar to the inaction I
noticed with my research participants who were taught rhetorical reading concepts, but did not use them again. By using Wertsch’s mediated action framework to analyze the choices made by research participants to not take up and use rhetorical reading concepts I am able to describe reading practices more fully.

To begin the process of analysis, in the next section I discuss the themes I watched for in interviews and observations. I then go on to analyze research participants’ reading practice as mediated action.

**Identifying Themes in Interviews and Observations**

When reading the interview transcriptions and classroom observation field notes, I used past research as a guide when identifying themes. I then interpreted the themes by surveying past research and the five properties of mediated action, which allowed me to understand how the trajectories of student readers affect their reading practices. Recent research that examined student perceptions of reading found that students value usability when reading (Allen; Bunn), that students define reading as an autonomous act (Keller; Smith), that students lack a sense of agency when reading (Smith), that a sense of identity affects reading (Hall; Mann), and that a students’ sense of the value of school and reading affects reading (Luke; Mann).

Collectively, the recent reading research indicates a tension between the institution and student reading. For example, Bunn’s finding was that students were more likely to complete reading if a teacher simply told them why they were assigning it to them. In addition, Cheryl Hogue Smith found that she had to keep students, who had been convinced that reading is autonomous because of testing, from deferring to the “right”
answer during class discussions about texts. To get the students to consider multiple interpretations, Hogue Smith asks students to reread and write and discuss texts in a recursive fashion. Finally, Sarah Mann argues that the private activity of reading is disturbed in the academic context because students know this normally private activity will be made public through the various assessments (e.g. exams, papers, classroom discussion). When reading for themes, I considered these tensions between student and institution addressed and discussed in the literature—tensions around the value of reading, definitions of reading, agency, identity, assessment, and the value of higher education.

Once I coded for these themes, I interpreted the information by using the five properties of mediated action. For example, when coding for *agency* with Roxy’s transcripts, I noted that she consistently mentions the *constraints and affordances of the cultural tools* (see Wertsch) related to the textbook, like the PowerPoint presentation slides which come directly from the publisher and the Mastering Chemistry homework which is unrelated to the textbook chapters. Her agency as a student led her to decide to not read the textbook and instead consult the professor, so I interpreted this agency as related to the constraints and affordances of cultural tools that mediate her action.

**Multiple Purposes or Goals**

Reading research has tried to understand college students’ motivation to complete assigned reading. For example, through a detailed and rigorous study of first-year composition students, Michael Bunn found that students were motivated to read when they were told how the reading would help them with the paper they were writing in
composition. In addition, David Jolliffe and Allison Harl found that college students are not motivated to read because assigned, academic reading is painfully dull. I complicate the previous research by showing that motivation is more complex. Through my analysis, I found that motivation to read was imbricated, layered with issues of identity, plays for agency, and value judgments of academic reading and higher education more generally. As I demonstrated with the opening excerpt from Jerry, students have trajectories and those trajectories affect motivation. In this section, I complicate the notion that researchers can identify a singular way to motivate students to read. Instead, multiple goals and purposes guide students’ decisions.

Wertsch contends that purposes or goals are often multiple and sometimes they are even in conflict with each other (32). Therefore, to use mediated action as an analytical lens, a researcher must not “portray and interpret action as if it were motivated by a single goal” nor represent it as a singular entity (Shipka 44). The example Shipka provides to illustrate multiple goals driving action is a person’s decision to quit smoking. A person does not decide to quit for one particular reason. Instead, they are motivated by several goals, like health, social pressure, finances, and so on. One reason may start the process, but then others may accumulate during the process.

In this section, I use two students to demonstrate the difference between a reader who is unmotivated to complete academic reading assignments and a reader who is motivated to read everything. Together, they demonstrate that students read to satisfy academic, social, and personal goals, but they also choose not to read, in order to satisfy academic, social, and personal goals. These motivations are imbricated—layered and complex.
I start with Natalie, a student who is usually not motivated to read for class. Natalie’s motivation to not read is related to her identity, the lack of value she sees in higher education, and her need for agency. For Natalie, academic reading—any reading that is required and assigned in college—is something she avoids whenever possible. While she identifies as the “not screwed up kid” in her family and the only one to go to college, she also identifies as a “shitty test taker” who “hates reading” (Natalie interview 13 Feb. 2014). Instead, she sees herself as someone who is more of a hands-on type of person who thinks a lot about society. Her hands-on preference can be seen in her volunteer work, her continued work in the National Guard, and her desired future career as either a police detective or helicopter pilot for the military or the Reno Police Department. She identifies her lack of motivation to complete reading as a dislike for being told what to read; however, I argue that her refusal to read assigned texts serves multiple purposes: her actions help her manage time and energy which is sparse because of her National Guard responsibilities, maintain her opposition to being in college, and generate overt acts of agency.

Since Natalie is a student who is paying her own way in college, she balances her time in school, her work with the National Guard, and her volunteer work, which is also part of the National Guard. She enjoys reading series like The Hunger Games and even recommends reading the book before the movie because the book is more detailed in her mind, which confirms for me that reading is enjoyable to her. However, with time management as an important goal for Natalie, academic reading becomes an act of transmission (i.e. get the information) rather than an act of construction (like with the
details she recounts in *The Hunger Games*). Her need for time management became apparent when we were discussing her second-semester composition course:

Meghan: Yeah. So you were discussing chapters from the Ridley book, which I haven’t read, but I have access to on course reserves.

Natalie: I didn’t read them.

Meghan: You didn’t read them? That was going to be my next question. Alright.

Natalie: I had so much to do this week, so I’m like, um yeah. She talks about them in class so much and once she starts talking I know what the article is about and everything. So if I listen for 10 to 15 minutes I know when I can start chiming in and make it look like I’ve read.

Meghan: That’s really funny. I thought you had read because your questions were so good. You know how to be a student.

Natalie: Yep. [laughs] But it doesn’t work in my theatre class because he’ll ask really random, specific questions to where he’ll know if you’ve read the play or not. So I’m like “Man.”

(Natalie, interview, 13 Feb. 2014)

Natalie primarily sees reading for classes as an autonomous activity designed for test taking or assessment through classroom discussion. She describes textbooks as holding facts that need to be memorized and any reading she does do is for the ultimate purpose of assessment—reading quizzes, written assignments, or online discussion boards. The metaphor she repeatedly uses in her discussion of academic reading is “stick.” She reads in the hopes that “it will stick.” If she knows there will be not assessment of the reading, she does not complete it, instead opting to get the information from lecture, allowing her to save time for other tasks.
Layered with the goal of saving time, opposition to higher education is also a goal that drives Natalie’s decision to not read. Natalie would not be in college if the military did not require it for flight school:

Meghan: So if you could go straight to flight school would you go to college?

Natalie: Mm.. (signaling “no”) Well because at that point, what’s the point? Wave this paper around “Oooh I got a degree.” (sarcastic) (Natalie, interview, 13 Feb. 2014)

Natalie sees no value in higher education and dislikes how much money it will cost her. She spent a year in the National Guard just to afford college because she is paying for it herself. Since she does not see the value in education, her motivation to read or not read often comes down to whether or not she will “get the points.” She simply needs to pass the class and to secure future employment.

Not valuing higher education, but still having to attend and pay for it, affects Natalie’s sense of agency she feels in college. Her lack of agency can best be evidenced through her description of online classes, which she prefers:

Natalie: Honestly it’s [online courses] easier because you have all week to do the stuff and they can’t be like “Oh by the way you have to do this, this, this, and this by the next time we meet up.” And it’s like they [online instructors] have to have their stuff pre-setup before we meet. So it makes it easier because I know exactly what needs to get done and when. I’m a person that loves deadlines and timelines. Those are my favorite because I just know everything that needs to be done and what time, because then I can plan my other life activities. (Natalie, interview, 13 Feb. 2014)

Natalie’s unflattering portrayal of college instructors indicates the frustration she feels and the lack of agency afforded students. In addition, college placement is frustrating to her. She describes being placed in the 100i, 105, and 106 combination courses as being
“stuck in remedial” (Natalie interview 13 Feb. 2014). The annoyance is exacerbated by the fact that she took dual credit courses in high school in Missouri, but did not pay to get the credit for English 101 and 102. After reflecting on her frustration in college with the lack of agency over assignments, time, and placement, I argue that her decision to not read assigned texts is an act of overt agency.

Natalie’s motivation to read in academic settings is complicated by multiple purposes or goals: her actions help her manage time and energy, maintain her opposition to being in college, and generate acts of agency in an institution that affords her few choices. As Bunn’s research suggests, Natalie might complete reading because she is told it will help her complete her research paper for English 102, but she will complete the reading in a way to just get by, get the points, and get to flight school as soon as possible. Multiple goals and purposes complicate an understanding of motivation.

The second research participant, Cyrus, is more motivated to complete college reading assignments. Like Natalie, Cyrus is also a first-generation college student. However, he wants to be a social worker, so the relationship between college, learning, and a future career is more cohesive for Cyrus.

He grew up in Las Vegas and attended a competitive arts academy for high school, which required auditions and he attended for band. Cyrus’s mother is currently taking college classes for photography, and she also works as an administrative assistant. His father is a heavy machine operator in construction. They are proud and supportive of his choice to go to college, but they are particularly pleased that he is studying something practical that will allow him to start a career after college. Like Natalie, Cyrus’s motivation to read is comprised of multiple goals and purposes that build upon each
other. Reading maintains his identity, garners him cultural capital, and introduces him to other ways of thinking and knowing.

One goal for completing assigned reading is Cyrus’s identification as a reader. He does not like everything he reads, but he reads often; he reads widely; and he reads textbook assignments not because he has to (which he often does not) but because the content interests him:

Meghan: So what about what you’ve been reading for the social work major? Do things you read for those classes interest you at all?

Cyrus: Kind of. A lot more the, um, drug and alcohol abuse class I find a lot more interesting because it’s stuff...I don’t know why I enjoy reading it, but learning about, [pause] maybe because I’ve had a couple of uncles addicted to stuff. But learning about, you know, when you’re happy your brain gets serotonin and drugs amplify that so you get more serotonin. And the reason why they’re depressed afterwards is that the serotonin glands don’t work well. And I find that interesting and I don’t know why. (Cyrus, interview, 3 Sept. 2013)

Cyrus is not overly excited about reading the textbooks, as most students are not, but his interest in reading to learn new things was a goal that Cyrus came back to often in his interviews, and it motivates him to read the textbook in a class that does not require it. In fiction, Cyrus appreciates the element of suspense in reading, of being surprised, of reading something that cannot be predicted, like jazz music:

Cyrus: I love the stuff you can’t predict. And the same thing with music too. Like I’m finding myself a lot more into jazz. It’s very unpredictable and what not. And so that’s the other thing. I love reading a story that I’m like ok it could be him it could be that. You know this also could happen and what not. And that’s just what I, I, I did because I was thinking a lot about the stories, like Perks of Being a Wallflower. I had no idea that what happens to the main character could happen. Like I never could predict that. (Cyrus, interview, 1 Oct. 2013)
In this excerpt, Cyrus is explaining what he likes to read, as most students did during our interviews. However, the length of time he spent describing the books he read in high school and college and what he enjoyed about them, indicated to me that he most likely identifies as a reader.

Cyrus’s goal of identifying as a reader is also influenced by his desire to gain cultural capital. During interviews, I noticed that Cyrus was motivated to complete readings when he felt the information or the references would give him cultural capital. For example, when discussing what texts he remembered from the critical reading course (English 105), his memory fell short except for one particular text: Sarah Palin’s apologia after the Tucson shooting. He claimed that he remembered only that text because people enjoy debating Palin’s actions, which meant he could discuss the speech again with other people outside of the classroom. He also was motivated to read Shakespeare plays in high school because he knows that those plays are referenced a lot in society: he wants to “get” those references. The cultural capital of “getting” literacy references is important to Cyrus because he is a student who not only identifies as a reader, but also identifies as a more sophisticated type of student:

Cyrus: People think I’m weird because I like talking to adults. And my friends are like why do you have a 30-year-old friend… And I’m like we talk about politics…So that’s my culture. For me, kind of because it gives me more value in the adult population, because I am accepted and I have more value because I can talk about because I’m up to date on politics in contemporary times. [Pause] So yeah, in a way yeah. But it’s not necessarily the culture I fall into because right now, like I said, the drinking, partying, the stupidity, when that’s not really the culture I want to be a part of. [Pause] So anyway yes and in a way no.

Meghan: It sounds like the college culture is the one you’re rejecting. If you hang out more with a 30-year-old man. And I don’t mean that…
Cyrus: Yeah. No. [Pause] Like I can’t say I’m rejecting it because I do enjoy it once in awhile. I mean, I don’t like indulge in beer bongs, but I do attend college parties and watch my roommate make an ass of himself because stupidity at times is humorous [pause] so I cannot say I’m completely rejecting it, but no that is not the trend I follow. I don’t value that. It’s not important to me. I try to keep myself as classy as possible. Even though I’m a poor college student I still try to find class and to me knowledge is class. And that seems to be working. All of my co-workers, all the adults treat me like one of theirs because I have that type of culture value. (Cyrus, interview, 1 Oct. 2013)

In this excerpt, Cyrus is explaining the cultural capital he gains from reading widely in that it separates him from the college students, with whom he does not identify.

In addition to enjoying political discussions with adults, Cyrus also finds value in reading certain texts that expose him to new ways of knowing and thinking because it might help him debate politics. For example, in his core humanities class, he read selections from The Bible. As a person who was raised without religion, Cyrus felt incapable of responding when someone would argue for or against a social issue based on The Bible, such as gay marriage. He claims when people argue many contemporary social issues they say, “‘It says in The Bible here that blah blah blah blah. And that’s why we can’t have this.’ And I was like ‘Well I’ve never read The Bible so I can’t really say you’re wrong or I’m wrong and what not because I haven’t read The Bible.’ And now I’m like ‘Oh! I get it.’” (Cyrus, interview, 1 Oct. 2013). Because he felt stifled by these arguments and wanted to be able to argue against the people who use The Bible as evidence, he was motivated to read it.

Cyrus’s motivation to read assigned texts in college is comprised of multiple goals and purposes that build upon each other. His decision to complete assigned reading maintains his identity as a reader, garners him cultural capital, and introduces him to
other ways of thinking and knowing. These goals do not mean that he wants to read everything, since not everything will give him cultural capital or offer him additional talking points in arguments. Still, these portraits of two readers motivated to read and not read through a variety of layered goals and purposes show that reading motivation is complex.

By opening up my purview to consider how mediated action is comprised of multiple goals and purpose, I am better able to understand what drives students’ reading practices and to appreciate how complicated reading practices are. These students demonstrate the breadth of differences among college students, ranging from a non-reader who would not be in college if she did not have to be, to an avid reader who identifies as a college student, but one who is in college for more than social reasons.

During the analysis of these transcriptions, I considered Leigh A. Hall’s research on the middle-school student Sarah who did not transfer reading skills because she did not want to be identified as a struggling reading. Identity determined Sarah’s goals when reading. I found a similar trajectory among these students, whether they identify as readers or not, as college students or not. This property of mediated action then complements Hall’s research, and provides a challenge to Bunn’s research that showed students are more likely to read when the teacher explains how the text will help their writing. I argue layered issues of identity, values, and agency affect students’ goals when reading, which complicates Bunn’s conclusion and supports my research of student engagement with threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their chosen CoPs.
Enabled or Constrained / Affordances and Constraints

While I found that students’ multiple and competing goals with reading affected their motivation to complete assigned texts, I also found that cultural tools in the context of the classrooms (virtual and physical) affected student engagement with texts. Wertsch’s mediated action framework suggests that action may be constrained or limited, but it may also be aided by the development of new cultural tools. Wertsch contends that while a new cultural tool may free us from earlier limitations, it introduces new ones of its own. For example, online textbooks may offer more access to texts, but they may also limit how students read and annotate those online texts.

While much of the research on reading in college examines the composition classroom (e.g. Bunn, Smith), in this section, I show that the cultural tools in classes beyond first-year composition, especially large lecture halls courses where, in most classes, clickers serve as communicative mediums, reading is mediated by these new cultural tools. Therefore, to explain how the cultural tool used may enable or constrain student readers, I turn to the non-composition classroom. I start with the changing of the cultural tool of textbooks, which have expanded from just a book to also the PowerPoint slides and online homework problems all created and sold by the book publisher. I demonstrate the issue with chemistry textbooks, although a similar story can be told about what I observed in economics and criminal justice classes.

Biochemistry major Roxy is a student who may technically be considered a first-generation college student but who acts with more agency in her schooling than might traditionally be expected. Perhaps this agency comes from the fact that her older brother is finishing up his last year of college. She calls him for advice and help with her
chemistry homework, so it seems that she has more resources than some other first-
generation students.

Some of Roxy’s motivations to read are related to her sense of agency and the
affordances and constraints presented to her through the material realities of the
classroom. For example, in English and psychology she reads, but in her chemistry class,
the class that is closest to her major, and that interests her most, she does not. In
chemistry, Roxy notes how the professor lectures about what is important to him (and
therefore what will be tested) from the textbook:

Roxy: I started ... I tried to read, like, “Okay, beginning of the semester, I'm
going to read it all!” But, it's like, once you see how big these chapters are, and it takes up so much time, and you probably retain this much from it
[indicates a small amount with her fingers], I don't see a point to it, when I can just go to class, and he explains it, and I do fine on the test, because he’s only covering what you need to know. You know?
(Roxy, interview, 10 April 2014)

The professor covering what students need to know is transparent because he, along with
many other professors I observed, uses the PowerPoint slides created by the textbook
publisher. As the professor skips over slides, Roxy notes that every page of reading is not
needed. As she indicates in this excerpt, after reading Chapter 1, Roxy stopped reading
the textbook.

Initially, I assumed that textbook reading would still be needed to complete the
online homework, but book publishers also control homework. Roxy had to complete
homework assignments online through “Mastering Chemistry,” but “Mastering
Chemistry” does not come from the textbook. Instead it is separate, similar to the “My
Grammar Lab” that instructors in composition can require of students. The work is still
created by a textbook publisher, in this case Pearson Publishing, but the problems are unconnected to a textbook. As a result, Roxy searches online when she needs help, since the homework assignments are not always related to the lectures and the exams:

Roxy: Yeah. When he actually does examples, I'm like, "Okay, that makes sense." But, on homework, the homework doesn't. Yeah, you can have some questions where, "Oh, I actually get that one," but then some of them are like, "Where is this word problem coming from? When did he do this in class? When was this on a PowerPoint? I never saw it."

Meghan: Okay.

Roxy: So, some of it's ... the reason I think everyone looks on Google, is because so many people have had trouble with the online Mastering Chemistry, because it's made by someone else, that everyone Googles it. You go on Ask.com or Yahoo or something, and it's like, "Please help, my homework's on Mastering Chemistry," and it's from five years ago. (Roxy, interview, 10 April 2014)

Not frustrated by the lack of cohesion between lectures and homework assignments, Roxy is matter-of-fact in these interviews. She identifies as a student who just wants to “get it done and get a good grade” (Roxy, interview, 10 April 2014). If doing so means “googling” for help rather than consulting the textbook that is what she does.

In addition to using the Internet instead of her textbook to complete homework, Roxy also visits the professor’s office hours until she understands how he writes exams. Her strategy works: she received a 100 percent on the second test of the semester. She is a successful student who overall understands the cultural tools of education and uses the changes in them to enable her success at test taking, but the lack of textbook reading it encourages could be also seen as a constraint, from the professor’s perspective. I found the textbook publishers and the professor influence literacy by choosing cultural tools
(online labs and publisher-created PowerPoint slides) that reduce the use of textbook reading and increase the reliance on the professor and online reading.

To further examine this enabling and constraining potential of cultural tools, I now turn to Natalie, whose reading practices also change based on the cultural tools that mediate the reading in her courses. Natalie chooses not to read in her English class, because the teacher summarizes the text during lecture. In her criminal justice course, Natalie also does not read, but in her online courses she does. Natalie’s decision not to read can be traced back to the cultural tools mediating her action.

For her criminal justice class, Natalie does not read the assigned textbook because the PowerPoint presentation slides, which the instructor uses for class lectures, are from the publisher of the book, similar to Roxy’s experience in chemistry. Natalie chooses to take notes on the slides instead of read the textbook:

Meghan: How come you don’t read that textbook?
Natalie: There’s nothing really relevant.
Meghan: What do you mean by that?
Natalie: It’s not, everything that’s on the tests and stuff is on the Power Points. So it’s like we don’t even need the book.
Meghan: Are his Power Points different than the book?
Natalie: The Power Points he gives come on a disc with the book. So it’s like there’s no reason to really open the book.
(Natalie, interview, 11 March 2014)

Natalie’s decision to not read echoes Roxy’s experience. However, in the criminal justice course, the professor explicitly told students to read the textbook before lecture, come to class, and put the textbook and lecture together. Yet the use of a PowerPoint presentation
that comes on a CD with the textbook activates the potentiality of other options that are not sanctioned by the instructor but are supported by the cultural tools of the classroom.

In her two online classes, Natalie chooses to read because she needs to in order to complete the course assignments. For her online Police in America course, the online assignments are usually discussion board posts, which Natalie suggests are assigned to assess reading:

Natalie: More so, in a way it is [a summary of the text]. But for the first one “What are the major components of the agencies of homeland security and what are their primary functions?” So I just listed them and I went back and said this is what they do, sort of thing, for the first one. And then number two “What are the major functions of the four agencies of the department of justice.” So I put the FBI, the ATF, oh no that changed, because they’ve added explosives. And then the drug, the DEA, and then the US Marshals. And then what functions do the CIA and IRS perform. So this week it was just about all the components that make up law enforcement.

Meghan: Okay.

Natalie: And what they do.

Meghan: So what is the point of having you write those?

Natalie: To make sure you’re reading, because all of his questions can be answered in the textbook. But as far as What Cops Know he doesn’t ask any questions that have to do with that book. (Natalie, interview, 10 April 2014)

The course has two assigned books, one which Natalie says is assessed via discussion board assignments and the other which is not. She tells me in the interview that she only reads the book that is assessed.

The cultural tools of the classroom—PowerPoint slides, online discussion boards for assessment, online homework labs unconnected to the textbook—constrained and enabled acts of reading for Roxy and Natalie. Shipka states that,
although it may often appear...that a cultural tool is naturally or in and of itself
tied to superior levels of performance, it is often the case that the continued use or
dominance of that tool is based on other factors such as historical precedent, fear
of or resistance to change, or the fact that the particular tool has been invested
with so much cultural or institutional authority that it appears natural. (47)

Shipka uses academic writing as an example. It enables and constrains students. It is hard
to see. And the constraints may be overlooked because of the powerful position it holds
in academia as the way to write. My findings suggest that textbooks might also still be
assigned only because of the historical precedent, fear of change, and institutional
authority of a textbook that canonizes past research, terms, and definitions; however, the
objects the students access to understand the material in their own way—such as online
searches, lecture attendance, and office hour visits—suggest students utilize different
reading practices, even if that reading is only of PowerPoint slides.

At times, cultural tools motivated students to read, but the reading practices did
not require threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in that discipline. Natalie claims that
when she reads to answer knowledge questions about the content of her textbook, she
does not use the concepts from the rhetorical reading course. When Roxy uses web sites
to get help with Mastering Chemistry homework, she also claims that she does not use
concepts from the rhetorical reading course. The new technology, which instructors and
book publishers have introduced to the classroom to support the textbook, changes the
reading practices of students and does not provide the them with the opportunity to use
rhetorical reading concepts that may otherwise be beneficial in the CoP.
Historically Situated / Developmental Paths

As the cultural tools of the classroom changed students’ motivation to read and how they accessed rhetorical reading concepts in their disciplines, so do students’ histories. As Downs has argued, readers and texts have trajectories. Readers do not enter a reading event without a past or leave without a future. Therefore, to understand reading and writing processes, as Shipka points out, “we also need to remain mindful of, and attempt to trace, how those events and actions link back and project forward to still other times, places, tools, people and opportunities for learning” (49).

Literacy research that attends to trajectories explores how participants make meaning through reading and writing. Brandt studied how people make meaning through reading and writing, studying how her research participants remembered reading and writing and how those memories framed their current relationship to them. Her participants remembered reading vividly, and those memories suggested an importance and association with pleasure and family intimacy (e.g. a parent reading stories before bedtime). While reading was often part of collective family life, much of early writing was remembered as occurring in lonely, secret, or rebellious circumstances. Often the motivation for writing emerged from the child’s immediate circumstances and feelings, and rarely were they adult-sponsored, like reading. Her research participants remembered reading and writing differently — reading brings emotional pleasure and writing assuages pain and isolation. In my student interviews, I found that their memories of academic and self-sponsored literacies and the cultural tools used mediated their college reading practices in ways that affected their engagement with rhetorical reading concepts in their disciplines.
For those students who have reading processes not halted by pain and frustration, Brandt’s study remains representative. In my study, one research participant, Cristina, describes memories of reading that involve family and evoke emotional pleasure. When she was young, her father left the family, returning to Mexico. With no financial support from her husband, Cristina’s mother worked three jobs to pay the bills. As a result, Cristina and her brother were often alone in the summers and so her childhood memories of reading involve walks to Barnes and Noble with her older brother, when her mother was working:

Cristina: I actually got into reading because my brother was always the one that was always reading. I think I was about 12 or 13 that my brother and I would walk to Barnes and Noble because we lived so close to it. We would walk to Barnes and Noble and he would just say, "Pick out a book and just sit in a corner and start reading. If you get into it, great. If not, you can pick another book," which probably is not something you're supposed to do at a bookstore. I grabbed a book in the teen section or something like that, and I loved it. I read the whole thing in Barnes and Noble and I loved it. (Cristina, interview, 13 May 2014)

Cristina’s fond memories of reading books “project forward” leading her to continue fostering a love of reading in college. In analyzing her reading processes then, we must also consider the historical development of, not the student, but how her reading process may have developed through shifting cultural tools of reading (Wertsch). Historically, Cristina’s reading process is situated and mediated by the cultural tools of a bookstore within walking distance of her home and an older brother who liked to read and suggested the daily trips.

Roxy shows a different developmental path of the reading process. Her reading memories are similar to Jerry’s narrative with which I opened this chapter. Roxy is
planning to go on to medical school to become a surgeon. She identifies as more of a math and science person, not a reader. In high school, she excelled in her biology classes, especially during dissection, and even graduated high school early, using that extra semester to make money for college by working in a coffee shop. While she garnered success and teacher praise in the sciences, she identifies as a struggling reader. She wishes she read for fun like other people she knows, but she just does not:

Roxy: So, I think it [reading] is very important because, honestly, my vocabulary, it’s okay. It’s average. But, if I read more, it would be phenomenal, like way better. But, I do not like to read, sadly. I wish I did. Like, I’ve tried reading. People are like, “Oh, try and read this book or Twilight, stuff like that.” But, I feel like it just doesn’t grab my attention, something about it.

(Roxy, interview, 6 Feb. 2014)

In this excerpt, her lack of interest in reading seems to be a source of stress or guilt because she does not fit into what she views as the norm, reading for pleasure, which she suggests results in a limited vocabulary for herself.

In order to analyze how her non-reader identity is “linked to broader histories of practice and the production of cultural tools” (Shipka 48), I “link back” to Roxy’s memories of reading to understand how she makes “meaning through reading” (see Brandt “Remembering Writing”). Like Jerry and his resistance to Accelerated Reading points, which are a development of cultural tools designed to improve student reading, Roxy pushes against the creation of monitored reading:

Roxy: Oh. I remember when I was younger. It was in 4th and 5th grade ... no, in 3rd and 4th grade, we would have "reading time." And then also, in 7th and 8th grade, we would have "reading period." So, we would have three classes ... or, I don't know if we had six classes a day, or four classes. But, we had half the classes in the day, then at break right before lunch, the best part of the day, we would have to read for 30 minutes, and they would
shh you, and you'd have to be looking at your book and reading. Every day, you would have to write what page you were on, how much you read. I would just want to sleep. It was like, you had to pick a book. None of the books I wanted to read were in the library or interesting to me. Or, if I read a book, they're like, “You need to get a book that's like this.” Uh-uh [negative]. I want something I'm interested in. I hated reading period so much. It was bad.

Meghan: What were the books that you wanted, that they wouldn't let you have?

Roxy: Younger books, with pictures.

Meghan: Okay.

Roxy: I’m not a horrible reader, it’s just ... I wish I liked to read. I just don’t. I’ve tried. I’ve tried. I can only take reading in small increments, like, read a little bit here, done. Not sit down, let me read for an hour, because that’s what’s in the book. (Roxy, interview, 10 April 2014)

In her description of reading time, Roxy mentions the accounting she had to take of “starting” and “stopping” points in the book and the labeling of books as inappropriate for certain age groups. These objects are developments in reading. Her reading was also assessed:

Roxy: First of all, I'm not a fast reader, so it takes me way longer than the average person. And, if I do try to read it fast, I don't understand what I just read. I remember when I was younger, in 4th grade, we had ... oh, these were the worst too! We had reading exams. Literally, you go to the teacher, and he schedules it during the day, like, “Okay, everyone work on your stuff, and I'll call you over.” My teacher called me over, gave you something to read, and you'd have to read it out loud. And then, it was timed, and they'd stop you at a certain time, and they'd count how many words you read, and how much you retained from it. I hated it so much because, when I tried to go hecka fast, I would totally not understand it at all. But then, when I would go slow, I would have a really low amount of words, and I would retain it. So, I feel like, either way, I couldn't reach both, so I was just like, “This is dumb, telling me I can't read a bunch of words,” or, “I'm not understanding what it's saying.” So, that was horrible. (Roxy, interview, 10 April 2014)
While Roxy still reads in college when it helps her, she does not enjoy it. Her memories are marked by isolation, accountability, and a lack of control over what, when, and at what pace she should read. As a result, her memories of reading “link back” to a tension between school-wide assessment of reading and her identity as a slow reader.

Through interviews with students, I found that the development of new tools, like the “big box” bookstores (e.g. Barnes and Noble, Borders) that create access to a multitude of books for self-sponsored literacies, and the standardized quizzes that assess reading in K-12 education, travel with students into college. The memories these tools create of reading form the trajectories that affect how the texts in college get used. For example, Cristina, who has fond and social memories of reading, completes every text that is assigned. According to her, she values the conversations that emerge from shared texts in the classroom. In contrast, students like Roxy and Jerry, who have memories of being isolated and assessed through standardized reading exams, use texts differently. They both look at the overall system of higher education critically, reading what they need to and refusing to read that which they do not.

While I do not want to make a causal claim here, I want to specify that the development of cultural tools that mediate reading affects how students engage threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in college because they come with those histories and memories. My findings bring into question Brandt’s work, which divides her participants’ memories of reading and writing to demonstrate how they are different. Her work remains invaluable by showing that examining how people make meaning of reading captures historical relationships and by demonstrating that, while reading and writing are connected in many ways, they can have different developmental paths for
people. The same is shown in this section, but Cristina and Roxy demonstrate that there is a range of how people make meaning of reading. As we consider students’ engagement with college-level threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their disciplines, we need to also understand how students like Roxy connect current reading assignments with “other times, places, tools, people” (Shipka 49).

**Transformed by New Mediational Means**

While the development of cultural tools mediates student reading and affects how they use texts in college, the transformation to new types of texts also affects student engagement with threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their disciplines. The research participants in my study listed numerous novels, poems, and plays when I asked them what they read in high school. Occasionally, a student had one course that included non-fictional texts, because those classes were designed to prepare them for college; however, this was only two students out of eight, Cyrus and Natalie, and it only happened in one English class out of four.

The shift from an association of school and English in particular with fiction, to primarily non-fiction and even academic journal articles, marked a significant change for these students. They struggle with this shift, often unsure how to read journal articles. For example, Natalie doubted whether she could use a “research article” (the genre classification listed at the top of a journal article) for her English research paper because she did not understand the difference between a journal article (what her teacher told her to use) and a research article, a difference that did not exist.
When students are assigned to read academic journal articles for the first time, they are entering a new activity system that requires an acceptance of provisionality, not certainty or closure (McCormick 110). In doing so, academic texts foster conversation rather than transmit information, which is difficult for students (Downs 37). In addition, the layout of academic journal articles, with its predominance of text and longer paragraphs, also proves a difficult shift for students (Downs 37). Smith argues for a pedagogy that highlights how academic texts are connected, one building off the next (“Basic Writers and the Echoes of Intertextuality”). Similarly, Downs advocates for a pedagogy that has students read scholar-to-scholar texts in order to establish students as *peripheral legitimate participators* in their chosen community of practice. In doing so, Downs argues that students will be able to read as part of an activity system, or a community of practice.

According to Shipka, the introduction of new cultural tools transforms action “due to different levels of skill” (50). However, these changes can also set off changes in other elements. I noticed that when one research participant shifted from a first-year psychology course to a senior-level psychology course within a year, the shift created a change in several cultural tools of the classroom: the tests, writing assignments, and texts the professor wanted the students to read were all different. This shift to new cultural tools caused a disruption in the student’s ability to use reading in successful ways.

Badwolf, a first-generation student, made the mistake of taking a 400-level abnormal psychology class in the second semester of his first year because he did not understand how the numbering system at the college worked, what it represented, and what it meant in terms of the level of difficulty of reading involved. The new level of
difficulty required meant that students were expected to connect theories or concepts, rather than just memorize examples or definitions when reading the textbook.

Badwolf took Psychology 101 in Fall 2013. I was fortunate enough to observe the same Psychology 101 course in spring 2014, with the same professor, because Jerry was taking the course. Through observations, I was able to compare how the professors linked the textbook and the tests. In Psychology 101 the professor moves through slides quickly, stopping to note when something will be on the test and how exactly he might word the question. At that point, students frantically write down everything he says. In this class, Badwolf had little difficulty moving between the textbook, the lectures, and the exams: one of the few ways they were assessed since the lecture hall held about 400 students.

In contrast, the professor for the 400-level course does not stop lecturing to inform the class what will be on the test. Instead, the students are expected to know how to read the textbook in preparation for the exams. The one time the professor mentioned how he wanted students to read was when he was discussing a research paper the students must write for the class. He wanted the students to think first, then read, so the research did not just sway them. The professor’s suggestion seems to point to a desire to not have students persuaded by the scholars but instead be part of the conversation, engaging and questioning what they read, and maintaining “provisionality” rather than “certainty” (McCormick 110). However, to read in a way that accepts articles’ findings as provisional and not final, as part of a body of research on the topic and not the final word, the student readers would have to be moving toward or closer to being full practitioners (see Lave and Wenger). As a first-year student, Badwolf was only a legitimate peripheral
participator, which as a reader means he could understand the arguments, but did not have a command of the ongoing conversations in abnormal psychology.

The professor’s expectation that the students had more knowledge of the ongoing conversations in this area of study caused issues of comprehension when Badwolf had to move from textbook to test. Badwolf’s difficulties in this course, which he did fail, seem to be a result of a disconnection between what he reads for (memorization of terms) and what the professor wants him to read for (connections between theories and concepts):

Badwolf: There’s just, I felt like in my other psychology class, my 101, I felt like I just whatever I read I remembered, and then I would see it again exactly the same on the test. I feel like the way the stuff is presented is so different. Like what I read in the book and on the slides does not match the test at all.

Meghan: Can you give me an example, anything that you remember?

Badwolf: Like I remember reading, I’ll remember some facts about you know gambling or something because we talked about gambling, like the disorder, and then I read it and it’s like “in the contextual manner theory that says that the prevalence of gambling is” they’ll ask about gambling but they’ll ask is it a cognitive addiction or, they’ll ask you something that you did not read. I would have never have thought that the test would ask me this. What I studied was not on the test. I can’t give you a 100 percent example but it’s like the questions on the test are so in depth to what I’m studying. What I’m reading in the book and what I’m seeing on the slides, does not match. So it’s kind of like, okay I’ll guess on this one. Sometimes I’ll recognize something and I’ll be like okay that was on the slide or he talked about that. But a lot of the stuff, I’m like 70 percent sure, 50 percent sure.
(Badwolf, interview, 8 May 2014)

Through Badwolf’s description of the disconnection, I note that Badwolf is remembering the example (gambling) but not the concept or theory that connects to the example. While the professor knew to discuss how he wanted students to engage journal articles for their research papers, he did not address how students should be reading the textbook and
connecting concepts and examples with lecture notes for exams. Even though the cultural tool “textbook” remains the same as Badwolf moves between psychology classes, how he should use the textbooks changes with the new level of psychology course.

The disconnections between the reading requirements for these two classes highlight the shifts that students consistently experience, first as they transition from high school to college (fiction to non-fiction) and then as they shift from general education to disciplinary courses that expect students to have a developing understanding of the ongoing conversations in the field. The new mediational means that come with these shifts—the changing genres, methods of assessment, and assignments—require new ways of using texts. Badwolf’s experience shows us that when those new ways of reading texts are left unexamined by professor and student, the student may use texts for the wrong purpose or in the wrong way. Threshold concept theorists have found that “extraneous cognitive loads” can inhibit the learning of threshold concepts (Efklides 55). The shifting to new mediational means also results in higher cognitive loads. As students shift to new types of texts, new purposes for reading, and new types of assignments related to reading, their ability to engage with and move through threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their CoPs lessens.

**Power and Authority**

One of the reasons I find mediated action such an important framework for studying threshold concepts is because of the dangerous potential for threshold concept theory to delve into an over-simplified explanation of learning that ignores how power and authority can foreclose upon a student’s ability or willingness to engage a threshold
concept of rhetorical reading. For example, during the Writing Program Administrators conference in 2014, Linda Adler-Kassner, Heidi Estrem, and Doug Downs presented on the merits of teaching new graduate teaching assistants threshold concepts of writing. During the traditional question and answer portion of the presentation, an audience member described his first high school teaching job where he worked under the direction of a skills-and-drills principal who did not welcome writing as a process (a threshold concept of writing), and instead insisted that the new English instructor teach students about the parts of speech. In this situation, this principal, the source of power and authority in that context, foreclosed upon the opportunity for the new teacher to use the threshold concept “writing as process.” The foreclosed-upon opportunity, which the principal demanded not be taken, suggests that we need a discussion of how power and authority can enable or constrain student engagement with, and transfer of, threshold concepts of rhetorical reading to new contexts.

Research participant Cristina’s experiences in high school and second-semester composition, English 102, illustrate the sociocultural situatedness of action, power, and authority. Cristina identifies as a reader and a hard-working student. However, her status as an “immigrant who over-stayed her visa” at the age of four, and actions from teachers, mediate her reading practices.

In high school, even though Cristina was an Honors English student, teachers stereotyped other Mexican-American students as underachieving:

Cristina: And so I remember my freshman year I was talking to my biology teacher, and he was trying to speak to someone in Spanish, and I asked him if he needed help because they weren’t communicating. And I still speak Spanish, and so I asked him, and he said, “Are you Mexican?” And I said,
“Yeah.” And he said, “Then why do you have all A’s?” And I was like, “oh, okay. That’s... alright.”  
(Cristina, interview, 10 Feb. 2014)

Cristina describes this moment as not one that changed the way she reads, but one that did inspire her to join the school board as the student representative. She almost did not apply for the program because she was afraid her citizenship status would not allow her to. After encouragement from a different teacher, she did. According to Cristina, when the school board discussed test scores and grades and zoning, she would use those moments to advocate for more awareness of the stereotypes that teachers place on Mexican- and African-American students.

Cristina has her status as an immigrant on deferred status and racial stereotypes from teachers affecting her actions within and beyond the classroom. According to her, these stereotypes encourage her to try harder and to work harder in classes. However, despite her ability to declare knowledge of the rhetorical concepts learned in the critical reading course and her ability to identify fallacies in the readings she is assigned in her second-semester composition course during our interviews, she is not able to engage the threshold concepts of rhetorical reading because of the hierarchies established and the practices of the instructor, which stifle her confidence in her construction of the text.

Cristina’s second-semester composition course is taught in a strict IRE script (sequences of initiation by teacher, reply by student, evaluation by teacher). According to Wertsch, the common IRE sequence is one in which the teacher occupies a position of authority in the classroom (69). Cristina’s class typically starts with students writing a summary of the reading—to assess whether or not students completed the reading—
followed by whole class discussion of the text, sometimes with close reading of particular sentences to try to explicate more difficult passages. In Cristina’s class in particular, the texts the students read are difficult, which often results in students being told they are right or wrong in their interpretations of the cultural theory they read for class discussion.

Cristina: I think that what it started … I mean I’m a person in a class that will voice my opinion and it’s really awkward when it’s completely silent. I’ll be that person if it’s … I mean if it’s too silent, I’ll be “Okay, I’ll say something,” but I think it’s happened to me in that class a little bit more which kind of got me to suppose, maybe I’m not understanding the book because when I would say something, he’d be “Oh, okay, yeah, but that’s not necessarily the idea.” I was like, “Okay, never mind.” For me in that class, I don’t necessarily say as much just because I don’t want to say something. That’s not even relevant to the reading and all teachers tell you that no questions are stupid or something like that but at the same time, it’s like, “I just don’t want to say something that’s going to be completely wrong.” (Cristina, interview, 13 Mar. 2014).

In her description of the IRE class discussion, the teacher shut down Cristina continually during the “evaluation.” As a result, Cristina has shifted from a student who participates in class discussions about texts, to one of the silent students. She voices concern about not being able to comprehend the reading, an experience she has never had before. She continues to read for the class, but the position of authority that the instructor has assumed reduces Cristina’s reading practices from rhetorical to deferent reading. Deferent reading is a stance that students assume when they believe that reading is autonomous and when they also believe that their reading is not correct (Hogue Smith “Interrogating Texts”).

Despite her questioning of texts being stifled in the classroom, Cristina does question the assigned texts, evaluating the level of evidence used:
Cristina: Yeah, well I just think, I mean, like I said, a lot of his things were theories and him just like this is the way it is and this is what I think and it has to be that way when … Where are your … Like if he … If there’s any facts or anything and there wasn’t really any facts and if there was it was just like “Well, where’s that coming from?” It was just I thought he was very self-absorbed he seems and it was he knew what he was talking and no one else was really right…He had examples but I don’t know for some reason, they’re just for me it wouldn’t do it. I was just I didn’t agree with a lot of the things he said.  
(Cristina, interview, 13 Mar. 2014)

Cristina is evaluating the writer’s use of evidence indicating that she could be transferring rhetorical reading threshold concepts to a new context, but she does not have the opportunity to share those observations because of the authority and power in the classroom. Cristina’s experience gives credence to Wertsch’s advocacy for taking into account the role of mediational means in power and authority. A focus on mediated action and its cultural tools means we can address the “sociocultural situatedness of action, power, and authority,” examining what is taught, what is not taught, and how it is taught (Wertsch 65).

When discussing assigned texts in the classroom, as Cristina’s example shows, clashes become foregrounded. If the instructor authorizes autonomous reading, then the rhetorical reading concepts learned cannot be accessed because they are not valued in the classroom. As the opening example from the Writing Program Administrator’s conference showed, even if a person learns that writing is a process if in a new context that concept is prohibited from conversation or practice, then the threshold concept learned cannot transfer to the new context. For this reason, when considering student movement through threshold concepts we must also consider how issues of authority and power and instructor practices support or stifle threshold concepts of rhetorical reading.
Bringing it Together: Coding for Mediated Action

To demonstrate how the mediated action framework allows me to describe reading practices more effectively and understand why some students may not transfer threshold concepts to other disciplines, I turn to another interview with Jerry. In this excerpt, he is discussing how he reads assigned texts for his second-semester English class:

Meghan: When I was in class it was mostly talking about the back-up plan. Looking at the claim. Looking at how the person uses evidence. Looking at how a person talked about one source. Is that kind of what he does a lot? Where he said picking it apart in terms of like, what's the writer doing?

Jerry: That's what he does. It's like ... everything you saw, that's what he does and everything he assigns he goes ... and then he doesn't say, “I want you to incorporate this in your own writing.” He ... him said he wants us to learn from reading this. He wants us to learn how to write our stuff based off how these people write theirs.

Meghan: Do you find that useful?

Jerry: If I read it.

Meghan: Did you read any of them? Did you stop reading at a certain ... Did you start reading?

Jerry: I stopped reading when he stops giving quizzes. In the beginning people weren't reading so he gave quizzes. In the beginnings he wanted us to annotate and turn in the readings. I annotated and turned in the readings until he stopped collecting them. Then I started reading them on my iPad, just a couple of pages of each one. I don't have time to read all 16 pages. I don't have the time nor the commitment to pretend otherwise. I mean if I had commitment I would find the time. I find better things to do with my time.

Meghan: All right, because that's one thing I noticed in the class, it was actually a lot of students had a printed and they had it annotated which I don't normally see.

Jerry: Because they're scared. They're scared.
Meghan: They're scared?

Jerry: They're scared of the quiz because his quizzes are not easy and also the annotated paper itself, when he does collect it, it's worth the same amount of points as a quiz. As long as people read it, and as long as they give the discussion on it ... You're supposed to bring a copy of it to class, be it electronic or physical. If it's digital or physical, as long as you have it, as long as you read it he is fine. As long as you can show that you read it and if people are participating in the discussion. There was one over Spring break that nobody read.

Meghan: Before Spring break or right after?

Jerry: It is in Spring ... during Spring break.

Meghan: Were you supposed to read during Spring break and then discuss it today?

Jerry: Yesterday.

Meghan: Or yesterday and no one did?

Jerry: I read it. I didn't discuss it because nobody else rose their hand. He's like, “Did anybody read this?” Nobody else rose their hand so I kept mine down.

Meghan: How come?

Jerry: I don't want to talk about it and one girl raised her hand and he goes, “Oh, you read it? I should give you extra credit. I'm not going to but I should.” I mean, I didn't want to talk about it. I don't care enough, I guess. I'm sure there's others in the class that read just didn't ... it's easier to be all like, “Yeah, no I didn't.” Nobody read it. People have these same general feelings towards this kind of stuff. The ones that don't ... The A+ students are the ones that will actually do everything and somewhat care, even they don't care, they just care for the grade.

Grades are tricky because you have people that don't care, they don't learn anything. All they want is that good grade. Me, I go into my Econ class, I'm actually learning something because I care. I go into my English class, I'm not learning because I don't care. Its inconsequential to me and talking to other Business Majors higher up in the field, they don't have to deal with a lot of this stuff. Once you get high up into the Business College and high into those classes you're reading ... your writing becomes minimal.

(Jerry interview 25 March 2014)
Jerry’s decision to not read, or to read just a few pages in order to get the gist, demonstrates a complicated relationship to reading, to English, and to this teacher in particular. Jerry has multiple goals here: he is attempting to save time; he is maintaining his identity as a business major; he is asserting his identity as a “B” student. He is also enabled and constrained by the development of cultural tools: here the divide between printing texts and reading them on screen seems to be an issue in this class, as it did in other text-based classes. Downs has argued that online reading encourages skimming and skipping. Jerry’s choice to read it on his “iPad” enables him to read quickly without annotating, thereby constraining a more engaged reading practice. His historically situated relationship with reading and school authority mediating his reading practices was demonstrated best in Jerry’s quote that opened this chapter. Here, I see the result of this history and the way it connects to this English class. His refusal to print the readings is related to his frustration with the style of teaching—quizzes and annotations.

Next, the shift to reading academic journal articles as mentor texts for their upcoming research papers, something that Bunn argued was an effective pedagogical practices, marks a transformation by new mediational means. Here, Jerry reacts against this change. In a later interview, Jerry expresses frustration with academic journal articles being used as examples of how to write when he knows he is not going to be an academic. Instead, he is going to be a businessperson. Finally, in his discussion of fear among the students in this class, I note the issues of power and authority that Jerry reacts against. I mentioned in my opening section that I do not worry about intimidating Jerry because he never has seemed to have issues with standing up to authority. Threats of
quizzes do not move him to read out of fear. It is not motivating for him since he does not care about getting As, but it does motivate other students in the class.

By analyzing how Jerry’s reading practices in college are mediated action, I am better able to analyze the movement of students through threshold concepts of reading and to explain how and why students transfer the concepts to new contexts. Jerry understands how to read rhetorically—adeptly identifying assumptions and managing credibility of sources throughout our interview discussions. However, he does not transfer these practices when reading for class discussion in his second-semester composition course. His action is mediated. A lack of connection to the community of practice of Composition and Rhetoric limits his willingness to use texts in ways valued by the teacher.

**Conclusion**

I introduced a mediated action framework because after I began interviewing students and observing their classrooms, I realized the ability for students to move through the portals of threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their disciplines was mediated by other factors. These other factors affected the students’ ability to transfer these concepts to new contexts. By integrating a mediated action framework with threshold concept theory and disciplinary literacy, I am better able to explore the complex reading practices in which these students engage.

By detailing and providing examples of these five salient characteristics of mediated action, I demonstrate the complexities of college students’ reading practices, a step toward the ultimate goal of increasing resources on how to teach college reading by
describing how college students do read. The complexity suggests that reading practices will be constrained and enabled by the goals of the student, their histories with reading, the changing cultural tools of reading, the shifting requirements of reading, and the power and authority in the classroom.

The widely accepted sociocultural theory of learning suggests that knowledge does not travel down a conduit and deposit inside the learner. Instead, learning occurs socially first, before being individualized (Vygotsky). As a result, the complexity this chapter has described also means that even if we do teach threshold concepts of rhetorical reading, and students develop through the portal from a pre-liminal to a post-liminal understanding, those concepts may not move to the new context for a variety of reasons.

In chapters 4 and 5, I explore the ways in which students’ reading practices were transformed by threshold concepts of rhetorical reading in their disciplines. In these analyses, I will integrate characteristics of mediated action, when appropriate, to understand the engagement with rhetorical reading concepts that operate as threshold moments for learners.
Chapter 4

How Audience Awareness Transforms Student Reading and Writing

In chapter 2, I introduced threshold concept theory and disciplinary studies, to design a research study that could describe how college students read and which concepts of rhetorical reading travel with students to their disciplines as they become more expert readers in their communities of practice (CoP). Upon discovering, during observations and interviews, that rhetorical reading concepts were not being used again by several research participants, I integrated a mediated action framework in chapter 3. A mediated action framework allows me to explore students’ multiple goals when reading for college, how cultural tools of reading enable and constrain their reading, what students’ histories with cultural tools used in academic reading are, how they adjust to changes in cultural tools of reading, and how power and authority enable and stifle college reading practices.

Having explained the theoretical framework and shown how academic reading is mediated action, I now begin the analysis by looking at how rhetorical reading concepts operate as threshold moments for biochemistry students. I demonstrate how audience awareness in reading and writing transforms the way a student reads as and writes for various audiences, in academic and public discourses. I argue that when students have reached a “post-liminal” stage of audience awareness they are able to identify and articulate when they are or are not the intended audience for a text and adjust their reading practices to accommodate gaps in knowledge or access. These students who have moved to a post-liminal stage of audience awareness can conceptualize the different audiences for academic and non-academic discourses when reading. In contrast, students
who remain in a pre-liminal stage of the threshold concept do not account for or adjust their reading when they are not members of the discourse community.

My finding is important because previous research found that students, when assigned to read a difficult text (one for which they usually are not the audience), respond in one of two ways. They either “defer” to what other people say the text means (Smith “Interrogating Texts”) or they avoid by not completing the reading (Bunn). Instead, my finding suggests that when students develop a post-liminal awareness of audience, they develop extra strategies for rhetorical reading, ones that allow them to complete difficult readings without deferring (Smith) or avoiding (Bunn).

In the remainder of this chapter, I describe how audience awareness transforms reading and writing. I begin by reviewing research on audience awareness as a threshold concept of writing. Then I show how difficult audience awareness is for student readers as they enter academic discourse. Finally, I use the case study of biochemistry student Bruce to offer a thick description of audience awareness, using a mediated action framework to guide my analysis. Bruce is one research participant who moved from a pre-liminal stage of audience awareness his first semester of college to a post-liminal stage of audience awareness by the end of his first year in college. Through the case study, I show that his development was aided by his self-sponsored literate activities, writing assignments, classroom discussions, and assigned texts.

Context: Inventing the University through Audience Awareness

In 1986, David Bartholomae argued that composition students must “invent the university, by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise
between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (5). After Bartholomae introduced the concept of “inventing the university” the phrase and its corresponding curricular arguments have circulated throughout the familiar composition and rhetoric debates—debates over what, where, and how to teach writing to college students.

Despite the nearly exclusive attention to writing that the concept garners, the metaphor of inventing the university also extends to reading. In Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, Bartholomae and Anthony R. Petrosky claim that a student “has to invent himself (sic) as a reader and he has to invent an act of reading by assembling a language to make a reader and a reading possible, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirement of convention, the history of an institution” (emphasis added 8). Specifically, just as students experience difficulties when trying to write for particular readers—they must adjust their writing, accommodate different levels of expertise, and account in different ways for known and new knowledge—they experience parallel difficulties with reading. As students encounter texts that assume different levels of expertise and contain different expectations of prior knowledge, they must “invent” audience, purpose, and context for the text in that particular discipline. Students not only need to learn how to write for particular readers as historians or anthropologists, they also need to learn how to read as historians and anthropologists. In essence, the concept of “inventing the university” links reading and writing in the process of acquiring or learning academic discourse: as students struggle to
enter the academic discourse through their writing, they simultaneously struggle to enter it through their reading.

The argument that students should acquire academic discourse through composition courses has been and remains a controversial claim. Primarily, critics suggest that the argument oversimplifies issues of access to and acquisition of the dominant discourse, especially for students who are not white middle-class males. For example, Deborah Mutnick suggests that Bartholomae’s focus on “privilege in terms of knowledge rather than race, class, gender” and more fails to account for the political or social structures that systematically exclude the individual, or social groups, from the academy: it is not just a matter of appropriation of academic discourse (190-1). Instead of the “ideologically neutral zone” that Bartholomae and Petrosky assume, Mutnick along with other scholars (e.g., Coles and Wall; Fox; Severino) challenge this assumption and instead understand the university as a “site for the reproduction of the dominant culture” (Mutnick 191). In response, these scholars offer alternative ways to bring basic writing students into the academy, such as Severino’s suggestion to find common ground through journalistic writing to extend rhetoric beyond just the traditional definition of academic discourse, and Coles and Wall’s advocacy for a process of mutual recognition rather than mere exclusion. These critiques do not negate the goal of helping students gain access to the academy and its discourse. Instead, the critics open up traditional definitions of academic discourse and reconfigure the path to student success. Together, introducing students to academic discourse, but doing so in a way that does not ignore or erase the ideological pressures within and without the academy, remains a goal for many scholars in rhetoric and composition.
I find particular value in the goal of academic discourse acquisition when studying the link between reading and writing because of the unifying concept of audience awareness. Bartholomae argues that a student’s attempt to appropriate academic discourse when writing becomes a problem of “audience awareness” (Bartholomae 10). If the student must tailor her or his ideas and words to the needs and expectations of the audience, then the student must predict and know what the teacher knows. While Bartholomae’s statement addresses writing, past and current scholarship on reading has also found that college students struggle with a problem of audience awareness when reading. For example, in 1988, when Christina Haas and Linda Flower studied graduate and undergraduate student readers, they found that first-year composition students could not “construct” the context for the text, including intended audience. Current reading research indicates that issues of audience awareness persist. For example, Cheryl Hogue Smith found that students take a deferent stance when reading, meaning they defer to whomever in the class declared the meaning or thesis of a text. I suggest that this deference emerges from an anxiety about entering academic discourse and what Bartholomae refers to as a lack of privilege. Whether the lack of privilege comes from knowledge or race, class, gender, sexuality, or other social structures, or both, Smith’s students struggle to claim ownership of the text because they are not the intended audience and not yet part of the academic discourse. Another recent reading study by Michael Bunn found that students struggled with motivation to read, but when the composition teacher explained to the students why the text was assigned and how they wanted the students to read it, thereby privileging the students to be the audience, the students’ motivation to complete reading improved.
Collectively, past and current research confirms that audience awareness is an issue for both reading and writing. However, rhetoric and composition scholars have not studied how audience awareness links reading and writing in ways that can support and even transform a student’s acquisition of academic discourse. This chapter adds to the growing body of reading research by describing how audience awareness operates as a threshold concept that can transform college-level reading practices and through that improve writing. As Brian Gogan notes in his study of rhetorical genre awareness as a threshold concept of reading, genre awareness transforms how a student reads and writes in various genres. Similarly, this chapter identifies audience awareness as a threshold concept of rhetorical reading that transforms reading and writing in biochemistry.

**Studying Reading and Writing: Audience Awareness as a Threshold Concept**

In recent years, rhetoric and composition scholars have begun to use threshold concept theory as a way to study the movement of writing practices from composition courses to other communities of practice. Educational psychologists Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land define a threshold concept as a “portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (3). These concepts transform the way a learner understands, interprets, or views something. These transformations occur in various ways, happening suddenly, or over a long period of time, with that transition sometimes proving troublesome. According to Meyer and Land, threshold concepts share six key characteristics. They are bounded, troublesome, integrative, irreversible, transformative, and liminal. A concept is *transformative* when it changes the way the learner perceives the subject, often leading to a shift in values, feelings, or attitudes; a
concept is irreversible because it is unlikely to be forgotten; a concept is integrative in that it allows the learner to connect previously unconnected concepts; a concept is bounded in that it demarcates between disciplinary areas; a concept is troublesome, meaning the concept is often antithetical to common sense; and a concept is liminal in that it emphasizes the learner’s journey. The liminality of threshold concepts highlights the movement of the learner. As a result, researchers often describe students as pre-liminal or post-liminal, or in a state of oscillation between the two.

To date, rhetoric and composition scholars have used threshold concept theory to study how students write, what first-year composition teachers should teach, and how it will transfer. They have identified threshold concepts of writing, such as audience (Pope-Ruark; Adler-Kassner, et al.), purpose (Adler-Kassner, et al.), and rhetorical genre awareness (Clark and Hernandez; Pope-Ruark; Adler-Kassner et al.). The composition and rhetoric research focuses primarily on student writing, with Brian Gogan’s research on rhetorical genre awareness as a threshold concept of reading being a notable exception. Because these concepts are considered transformative, students who have moved to what Meyer and Land refer to as the post-liminal stage of a threshold concept have also moved, I argue, beyond the “crude” mimicry that Bartholomae describes during the acquisition process of academic discourse (Bartholomae 19). Once transformed, learners can use the concept in their disciplines, or communities of practice, and in other areas of life because it is integrative. This transformation and integration then allows students to invent the university without divorcing themselves from their own histories, as I noted earlier Coles and Wall and Severino cautioned against when invoking the “invent the university” concept.
In rhetoric and composition, audience awareness is a threshold concept that has been studied in regard to writing, exclusively. For example, Linda Adler-Kassner, John Majewski, and Damian Koshnick examined lateral transfer of audience awareness between a writing course and a history course and Rebecca Pope-Ruark explored audience awareness in her written communications class. Together, these studies of student writing show that when students and teachers view audience awareness as situated within a particular community of practice, students are better able to make effective rhetorical choices. Specifically, Adler-Kassner et al.’s study showed that students who remained pre-liminal regarded audience as static and writing as rule-based; those who moved toward post-liminal instantiations considered audience as situated and writing for an audience as shifting. Also examining audience awareness, Pope-Ruark’s study further affirms that students with post-liminal audience awareness see it as situated (or contextualized), but also that moving through the threshold in writing is difficult. In particular, she notes that college students are adept at assessing their teachers as the audience for their writing, but the practice does not transfer into new contexts, like work environments, where the focus is not on getting a grade, but on being effective. Similar to Adler-Kassner et al.’s study, Pope-Ruark voices concern that students view audience awareness as a generalizable skill when it is actually situated. Together these studies indicate that the key difference between a pre- and post-liminal stage of audience awareness is a writer that views audience as static as opposed to situated.

While these studies are focused on writing, my dissertation project combines threshold concept theory and disciplinary literacy theory that has shown that professors in various disciplines—history, chemistry, and math—view audience as situated when
reading (Shanahan et al.). For example, when chemistry professors read journal articles that are not based in their particular area of research, they read less critically because they recognize that they are not the intended audience. These professors shift their orientation to the article according to the situated nature of audience.

Bringing together the writing research on audience awareness as a threshold concept and disciplinary reading research from education, I suggest that a learner who is in the pre-liminal stage of audience awareness (i.e., has not passed through the threshold) reads texts as if audience were static, and a learner who is in the post-liminal stage of audience awareness (i.e., has passed through the threshold) reads texts as if audience is situated. For the reader, this difference is important. Learners in a pre-liminal stage will struggle to identify the intended audience for a text, which will make it difficult for readers to situate themselves in relation to it and make them more likely to “defer” or “avoid.” Conversely, learners in a post-liminal stage will construct the context for a text, including the intended audience, allowing them to read the text from a position of insider or outsider and develop extra strategies when reading as an outsider. If an outsider, the reader can adjust her or his reading practices to compensate for the difference, just as a writer compensates through rhetorical choices when inventing the university. Figure 4.1 illustrates these three stages of liminality for this threshold concept.
Figure 4.1: Stages of Liminality for Audience Awareness when Reading and Writing

The Troublesome Quality of Audience Awareness when Reading

To be classified as a threshold concept, rather than just a key concept within a discipline, the concept must be troublesome for learners (Meyer and Land). Troublesomeness can stem from the concept simply being difficult to learn, but a concept can also be troublesome because it causes a paradigmatic or ideological disruption for the learner (Perkins). I suggest that in rhetoric and composition studies audience awareness is troublesome because of the pretense of the classroom. Teachers may tell students the audience for their essay is the President or school administrators, but the teacher then becomes the only actual audience during assessment. As I noted in a previous section, Pope-Ruark demonstrates just how adept students become at working within the confines of this pretense, which unfortunately slows their movement through the metaphorical threshold in their writing.

For student readers, audience awareness is just as troublesome. The pretense of the classroom invites students to engage with academic texts as if they are or can identify the audience, but, as Haas and Flower discovered, they struggle to construct the rhetorical
situation because they are not yet full participants in the community of practice. Without the construction of the rhetorical situation, students cannot identify intended audience. As a result, my research participants during interviews and in written work consistently identify the audience as “anyone interested in the topic.” This perception of audience is arhetorical because it does not account for differences such as academic versus popular texts, review articles versus research articles, or different disciplinary journals. Viewing audience as topic-driven is a static, generalized definition of audience, as opposed to a situated view of audience, which would consider certain texts as residing within a particular community of practice with its shared norms and values.

To illustrate this troublesome quality of audience awareness, I detail one text-based classroom discussion an English 102 course. UNR students take English 102 after successfully completing their first semester of composition. Reading is a significant part of English 102, with “critical analysis and use of information” as one of the core student learning objectives, and English 102 teaches students research skills, themed around a topic chosen by the instructor, and culminates in a research essay. To illustrate the troublesome quality of audience awareness, in the following paragraphs I analyze classroom discourse.

This class is a section themed on “Sex” and taught by a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition who is interested in the rhetoric of science. One of my research participants, Natalie, is enrolled in this course. Natalie is a social work major who is a first-generation college student from a military family. During a classroom observation on February 13, 2014, Natalie’s class is discussing *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* by Matt Ridley. The teacher asks the students where they might find a
book like this and who would be interested in it, i.e., the intended audience. A student responds with “someone interested in the topic.” The answer is not what the teacher wanted, which becomes apparent when she gives the students more information then asks the question again. She says, “This is popular science. Why would someone be interested in it?” This time Natalie hazards a guess: “Someone whose marriage is falling apart.” Still looking for the right answer, the teacher asks, “What’s the operative word in ‘that’s the way it is?’” A student says “It makes it a lot easier to accept it.” Perhaps giving up on the attempt to direct students toward a discussion on audience, the teacher responds, “This is a biological deterministic argument. It means you can’t change it. And that’s dangerous.”

Here, I note the derailment of the lesson. After this exchange, the teacher lectures about how a book written about science for a popular audience could be problematic—a concern that recent rhetorical studies also take up (e.g., Perrault). However, the students struggle to conceptualize the intended audience for this book, especially the difference between audiences for texts written in academic as opposed to popular discourses. In fact, the boundaries of the university seem to not be apparent to these students even though for the teacher it is important how the text is situated with regard to academic knowledge. Later, the teacher points to the back of her book to show that she purchased it at Barnes and Noble, implying that the book is for a popular audience, but the students access these readings as scans through the university library, so that bit of information was obscured.

This classroom observation reveals the difficulty students have with situating texts as part of a community of practice, leading to the reductive sense of audience (i.e., people who are interested in the topic), and the difficulty students have in moving
through the liminal space of the threshold. As a result, despite the teacher’s attention to audience as an element of rhetorical reading, students in classes and in interviews continually simplified audience, making it arhetorical. For example, in an interview with Roxy, one of my research participants who majors in biochemistry, I asked her who the audience was for the readings on voyeurism, which she selected for her English 102 research paper. She responded, “I feel like the intended audience is people who are looking to know about voyeurism or people who are wanting to know more about the case.” This understanding of intended audience being overly general—people who put in a keyword into the search function at the library’s database search portal—can also be seen in the students’ work. In research participant Badwolf’s annotated bibliography for English 102, he wrote, “this source is for people who want to get deeper into DID [Dissociative Identity Disorder].” Again, this psychology major generalizes the audience to “people” and just those who searched for it and found this article, which is correct. However, he does not extend that further to discuss the discourse community for which the text was written.

These participants—Natalie, Roxy, and Badwolf—remain in the pre-liminal stage of audience awareness. And their responses are indicative of how the research participants primarily discussed and wrote about audience, which seems to result from their own experiences as readers in the university: they have become the audience simply through searching the library database. These examples demonstrate the troublesome quality of audience awareness as a threshold concept of reading.
Pedagogy on Audience from Critical Reading Course

In order to show how Bruce moves through the metaphorical threshold, I start from our critical reading course (English 105) that discussed intended audience explicitly. When he started the class, Bruce filled out a student information sheet, noting that in his last English class (in high school) he learned that “reading is fundamental when it comes to being well informed and decisive.” He lists only novels for the texts he read in his last English class and describes his reading skills as basic, meaning he feels he can comprehend texts but he is not the “fastest reader.” Throughout the semester, the class discussed audience as a component of rhetorical genre awareness. By drawing from sections of his reading responses, I show a student standing at the metaphorical threshold of reading and oscillating between a pre-liminal and liminal stage.

During the second week of the semester, the class discusses audience for a first time, using a paired reading response of Frank Bures’s “A Mind Dismembered” from Harper’s Magazine and Kathleen McCormick’s “Text, Reader, Ideology.” Students read McCormick’s then Bures’s text and reflect on the ways in which, as the reader, their ideology conflicted or did not with the text’s ideology. Class discussion focuses on the audience for Bures’s text, but Bruce only summarizes the two readings, not engaging with the question about ideology or audience, showing that he can comprehend and summarize, but is unwilling or unable to explore how he, as the reader, constructed the reading, which I categorize as a pre-liminal stage.

However, after this initial falter in audience awareness, through two additional assignments focused on audience, Bruce begins to discuss audience in different ways. Three weeks after the Bures/McCormick readings, students read Sarah Palin’s speech
“America’s Enduring Strength,” her apologia after the tragic shooting of Congresswoman Giffords. To scaffold this reading, I use an inductive opener designed to help students recognize and name the different rhetorical appeals they use on various audiences of their lives: for example, when appealing to a parent, the students may be more apt to use ethical appeals or emotional appeals, depending on the parent, the purpose, the goal, or in other words, the rhetorical situation. This activity highlights for students the importance of understanding rhetorical situation. Afterwards, for homework, students read and/or watch Palin’s speech, but only after conducting Internet searches to determine the exigence for the speech. The following is a selection from what Bruce wrote in response to the speech:

Palin uses many different fallacies throughout her speech—avoiding many concrete details about politics and the shooting itself. Taking advantage of the situation, she starts her speech by using a plethora of loaded language to evoke the emotion in her targeted audience. Then proceeding in her speech she uses glittery generalization to evoke sympathy for Congresswoman Giffords. Palin persuades the audience that her generalization is fact, but in reality, Palin fails to give concrete evidence about Giffords. Palin then, through emotion, uses a Red Herring fallacy to shift the focus from the shooting, to politics, then back to the shooting. At the end of her speech, she then gives her target audience a false dilemma. At the end, she states that America must be stronger than evil, if not, evil would prevail. In Palin’s speech, she goes from the shooting to politics, then back to the shooting; she does this through fallacy and loaded language. By her doing this, she did not state any fact, but instead stated fallacies. She satisfied the American need
for reasons as to why this shooting happened—she did this all through fallacies to ultimately protect American interests. (Bruce “Summary and Analysis: Palin Speech” 8 Oct. 2013)

In this selection, Bruce shows an awareness of audience that has moved from his pre-liminal state with the first assignment to one that I would consider liminal, or nearing liminality, because he is mimicking what we discussed in class. He does not distinguish among Americans, but does bring in the rhetorical situation—the shooting—which is not directly referenced in the speech, to explain how her rhetorical choices to use vague language may satisfy her audience.

Towards the end of the semester, we shift from reading public arguments to reading disciplinary-specific academic texts. To scaffold this shift, students read Cynthia Shanahan et al.’s “Analysis of Expert Readers in Three Disciplines: History, Mathematics, and Chemistry” and write a difficulty paper—an assignment created by Mariolina Salvatori that asks students to reflect on difficult parts of a text in order to further engage them in those moments. Then I invite guest speakers from other disciplines to assign a reading from their area of study and come to class to discuss the reading and answer questions about reading in their discipline. I have had cultural anthropology, chemistry, biochemistry, and education graduate students conduct these classes. For Bruce’s class, we had criminal justice and business graduate students present.

This final move to disciplinary reading allows me to promote the situatedness of audience, thereby rejecting the notion that it is a generalizable skill. In Bruce’s difficulty paper for “Analysis of Expert Readers,” he attaches to a key point in the text: “people tend to critically read depending on their prior knowledge on the subject” (Bruce “Difficult
In his difficulty paper, he further summarizes this point: “She explains how that when the professors read something with which they are familiar, they tend to analyze the piece more critically and engage the text more intensely, whereas a piece that they do not know as well, the professors tend to read it with a less critical eye” (Bruce, “Difficulty Paper,” 1-2). In this article, Shanahan et al. demonstrate that professors, when reading a chemistry article that shares research in an area not directly related to their own, read less judiciously, while when the article does involve their research, professors read it more critically, scrutinizing the methodology and the findings. In other words, Shanahan et al. establish that audience is situated. Bruce applies this new knowledge of the situatedness of audience to his reading of criminal justice texts, both of them arguing that incarceration for drug offenses is ineffective in reducing crime. Bruce’s response to the graduate students’ presentation captures this movement in the threshold:

When reading for this discipline one needs to keep in mind the mindset of the author. In the New Jim Crow reading, the mindset of the author was mainly focusing on the African Americans in today’s society. One of the guest speakers mentioned to take the author’s opinions with a grain of salt, meaning not to take the author so literally, and to have an open mind when reading articles. This is important because it shows the audience a viewpoint that has not been seen before, but not to view it as the only paradigm out there… With all types of reading, there is always one common goal: to communicate a message with your audience. So with that, always remember to take everything with a grain of salt. (Bruce, “Response: Criminal Justice,” 10 Dec. 2013)
Throughout his response, he offers advice for readers on how to orient themselves to the reading, like watching for cause and effect, evidence, sources, and more. In this excerpt, however, he is particularly attuned to the relationship between writer and audience/reader, as the former seeks to influence the other through rhetorical choice and the latter seeks to keep an open mind while still maintaining an awareness of the choices made. His focus on the idiom “with a grain of salt” highlights his awareness that he should approach texts with a critical attunement, but since he is not a criminal justice student and not the rhetorical audience he knows also to keep an “open mind” and not shut down simply because he disagrees with the text. His excerpt represents a continuum that Bruce is beginning to grapple with at the close of English 105—the continuum demands a definition of audience awareness that is situated in a community of practice, with the movement from less expert to more expert reader.

Through interviews the following semester, I notice how often Bruce references the Shanahan et al. article “Expert Readers,” and in particular the realization that prior knowledge on the topic in academic reading affects the level of “open mindedness” required. Shanahan et al.’s discovery that professors are more critical of a text that they know a lot about (i.e. texts for which they are the intended audience) resonates with Bruce and offers him a way to understand audience in academia, affecting his reading process, which I describe in the following sections. As a way to preface my interpretations of his repurposing of the situatedness of audience, I first discuss the ways in which Bruce’s reading processes may be mediated by historical paths, multiple goals, affordances and constraints of cultural tools, and power.
Reading as Mediated Literate Activity

Despite the difficulty many research participants had in moving to a post-liminal view of audience awareness when reading (i.e., a situated view of audience) and Bruce’s initial difficulties with the concept, Bruce moved from a pre- to a post-liminal stage by the end of his first year of college. In the post-liminal stage, Bruce’s reading process is transformed. For example, he recognizes that he is not the intended reader for biochemistry journal articles, which transforms his reading process into a recursive activity that moves between academic and public discourse. Furthermore, because threshold concepts are integrative, when Bruce reaches the post-liminal stage of audience awareness it allows him to make and articulate rhetorical choices in his writing even as he switches his intended readers from scientists to the general public. In addition, because I augment threshold concept theory with the mediated action framework, the affordances of his self-sponsored literate activity, and the constraints that affect Bruce’s movement from a pre-liminal to a post-liminal stage of awareness, come into view.

With James Wertsch’s mediated action framework as my guide, I can analyze the act of reading by considering how multiple goals affect students’ reading, how technologies or other cultural tools enable and constrain their reading, how their reading is affected by the past, how new cultural tools change the way students read, and how power and authority affect their action—five properties of mediated action. This additional framework allows me to account for how a reader’s self-sponsored literate activities may interact with her or his academic literacies. Bruce is able to move through the metaphorical threshold of this troublesome concept, while other students remain in a pre-liminal state. Shifting the unit of analysis to the mediated action allows me to account
not just for the pedagogy, the student, and the teacher, but also the affordances of the
cultural tools that aid this movement. With this additional framework, I can more
effectively account for factors that may influence the different developmental pace of
students. In this section, I trace those factors for Bruce. I argue that his self-sponsored
literate activities (motivational speaking and reading books by motivational speakers) and
his biochemistry class’s attention to the continuum from the public to the scientist attune
Bruce to audience, assisting him toward a post-liminal understanding of the threshold
concept audience awareness.

Biochemistry major Bruce plans to go to medical school to become an
anesthesiologist. It concerns him that it is dangerous for children to be anesthetized, so he
would like to improve the practice, thereby reducing the danger for kids. His parents are
from Korea, but he and his older sister, a nursing student at Truckee Meadows
Community College, were born and raised in Reno. He is a fairly independent freshman
because, even though he lives at home for financial reasons, he rarely sees his parents: his
mom works the graveyard shift as a dealer at a casino and his dad works two jobs—from
6am to 10pm, with an hour in between for a nap—to make ends meet. Despite being
physically separated from campus because he lives at home, Bruce joined a fraternity
because he learned that students in the Greek system have higher grade point averages:
his end game. These material realities are important because Bruce witnesses hard work
in his family, and even though his dad dropped out of high school to support his own
parents and his mom did not attend college, making Bruce a first-generation college
student, it was always known and expected that Bruce and his sister would attend college.
Before attending college, Bruce became interested in motivational speaking through school sports. The interest was initially sparked by a particular incident in high school. He was a “head case” on his track team, doing well in practice with shot put but not during actual meets. So his coach had him read a book *Training Camp: What the Best Do Better Than Everyone Else* by John Gordon. When he returned the book, the coach said, “Great. Now please explain the book to the team.” So Bruce, as uncomfortable as this situation made him, stood up in front of the team and detailed the importance of hard work for success in anything, which was the thesis of the book. Since that moment, Bruce has balanced these two interests: medical school (something that his family expects and supports) and motivational speaking (an interest that his years as an athlete sparked and current reading interests continue to fuel).

I note these interests because his motivational speaking and reading emphasize the importance of influencing other people. For example, one of Bruce’s leadership teachers told him a story about saying something rude to a dad who was letting his child run wild in the airport waiting area. The dad confessed that his wife had terminal cancer and they had just flown her there to be with the best doctors possible; he was on the way home with his son and at a loss for what to do. According to Bruce, the moral of this story is that it is “hard to hate” someone once you know her or his story.

In terms of rhetorical reading and audience awareness in particular, these motivational narratives, to which Bruce ascribes, prime him for a heightened awareness of other people through a continual process of identification. It prepares him for a reading process that is rhetorical. If Bruce consistently considers another person’s story, the practice may enable him to also consistently consider the players in a rhetorical
exchange. Specifically, I suggest that Bruce’s motivational speaking primes him for
“standpoint hermeneutical rhetoric,” a theory that undergirds invitational rhetoric. In this
view of rhetoric, understanding the position of others and remaining open to them is a
step that can lead to action (Ryan and Natelle 89). Bruce’s desire then to maintain an
“open mind” when reading, which he mentioned during an interview, is a highly
rhetorical choice in his reading process, as he seeks to understand the writer.

Bruce’s motivational speaking extends to the books he reads for pleasure. During
his K-12 school years, he hated reading because his dad pushed reading on him.
However, with his new interest in motivational speaking, Bruce reads books written by
motivational speakers, such as Nice Bike: Making Meaningful Connections on the Road
of Life, by Mark Scharenbroich and Mark Sanborn. Bruce values these reading activities
because they allow him to know more and better himself. This value of reading—to
better himself—provides another affordance to his development as a reader in the
university. It is a common theme that runs through conversations with Bruce.

I suggest that the motivational speaking positions Bruce to access academic
discourse because it removes anxiety over privilege or lack thereof, as Bartholomae
defines it. It also creates the bridge for mutual recognition of both academic and public
discourses, for which Coles and Wall advocate. In sum, cultural tools—the language of
motivational speaking and influencing others—prime Bruce for audience awareness. The
prime for heightened audience awareness through his self-sponsored literate activities
indicates that when studying and teaching threshold concepts of reading, teacher-scholars
may need to consider how both academic and social literacies intersect to promote or
hinder movement for the learner through the threshold. They should also consider the
cultural tools, histories, and multiple goals that consistently influence student motivation. These influences are not solely academic; they are social and personal, indicating that examining literate activity in the threshold must bring together the layered relationship of reading for pleasure and reading for school. This relationship helps Bruce “build bridges” between his point of view and the writer’s (Bartholomae 9).

Layman’s Terms or Academic Jargon: Audience Awareness when Reading

Biochemistry

The bridge that Bruce is better able to connect between his own point of view and the writer’s is most apparent in the assigned reading Bruce completes for Biochemistry 121, Current Issues in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. It is a class that hosts guest lecturers each week. These lecturers discuss a particular problem or trend in biochemistry. As Bruce describes it, the class is designed to show students the possibilities for research, from pharmaceuticals to cancer research. Along with the weekly lectures, this course pairs students with a senior mentor, who at this time during the semester would be working on research in a lab. Bruce was paired with a senior working with the p53 gene. Before entering the lab, he was asked by the senior mentor to read two review articles about the p53 gene, both titled “The p53 tumour suppressor gene.” During the interview process, we discussed these two review articles and how he read them. These assigned readings are different than the typical textbook assignments first-year students receive. They are published in academic journals, written for experts in the field, with specialized language.
Research on difficult reading shows that most students would choose not to read the text (Jolliffe and Harl; Bunn) or would read it, but assume they did not comprehend it and defer to the instructor (Smith). As I claimed previously, these two potential strategies—avoidance or deferment—emerge from a lack of audience awareness. In contrast, as Bruce moves to a post-liminal understanding of audience as situated, he develops a strategy to compensate for reading events in which he is not the intended audience. Specifically, he creates a continuum from non-audience to audience, changing his reading process based on whether or not he considers himself the intended audience. It is a compensatory reading that shows an understanding of audience that allows him to move beyond avoidance and deference and into an invention of the university that compensates for the lack of privilege.

This invention can be seen when Bruce recognizes that he is not the intended audience for a text. In this realization, his reading process becomes a dance between the assigned text and supplemental texts, or between academic and popular texts. This practice compensates for the lack of schema, or background knowledge, Bruce needs to comprehend the scholarly journal articles written for biochemistry professors and graduate students. Specifically, when Bruce reads a journal article, he follows this basic process (with variations as would be expected): He first reads the abstract and then a section that seems most helpful. Then he leaves the text and searches terms on Google to get what he describes as the laymen terms for the biochemistry jargon. After doing that, he returns to the text and continues reading, repeating as needed in this recursive reading process.
His reading process became apparent when we were discussing the two review articles that he had been assigned to read before he could enter a biochemistry lab to help a senior biochemistry major with her senior project research on the p53 gene. The professor for Biochemistry 121 assigned Bruce to work eight hours in the lab and then write a paper about the project. To prepare him for the lab work and the writing, the senior asked him to read “The p53 tumour suppressor gene” (Levine et al.) and “The p53 tumour suppressor gene” (Steele et al.). This reading served multiple goals in that he needed to understand how the gene works before helping in the lab, and he needed to use the articles for his final paper. He had some prior knowledge of the p53 gene from last semester’s biochemistry class, so his reading process was a movement between being the audience and not, or being a part of the conversation and not, which means he must move between the academic text and the supplemental texts he finds online. Bruce’s desire to comprehend is encouraged by his desire to be a good citizen in the lab. To describe the process of how he compensated for this shifting audience position, I next detail how he reads Levine et al.’s article.

He starts by reading the abstract, noting that it will be an overview of what p53 is. Then he reads the subtitles like “the p53 gene in human cancers” and “properties of mutant and wild-type p53.” Then he decides to read the section “How does p53 normally function?” first, because his eye catches the first few words about “two hypothesis [sic]” and he wants to have a better understanding of the basics of p53 (Levine et al. 455). As he is reading, Bruce gets stuck on “the SV40 chromosome” (Levine et al. 455). He remembers briefly talking about it in class, but that is all. He does not understand from the text how it affects p53. He then stops at “ATP-dependent helicase activity of T
antigen” (Levine et al. 455) and says that he has a “general gist of it” (Bruce interview 10 April 2014). Still, he says that he would then go to Google and type in the subtitle “How does p53 normally function” to supplement his “gist” of what he calls “biochem jargon.” After this he moves on to the next most relevant section for him: “The p53 gene in human cancers.” His decision moves him from the last page of the review article back to the first page. As he reads the sections he stops periodically to put “biochem jargon” into “layman’s terms”: “What they mean by wild variations or wild-type is just found in nature, so naturally found” (Bruce interview 10 April 2014). He then reads the rest of the sections in order, stopping at the last section “Remaining Questions,” which he says he will “briefly skim over” but not really read. Throughout the process, Bruce’s rhetorical awareness of the biochemistry journal article genre affords him the privilege of reading it non-linearly. However, most notably, he continually checks his understanding based on prior knowledge, testing to see if it restates what he has already been taught.

As he nears the end of this article, Bruce stops to explain to me why as he reads he is not questioning the text, or critically reading. To clarify, he references the Shanahan et al. research article about expert readers that we discussed in English 105: “Analysis of Expert Readers.” Bruce’s choice to read instrumentally (checking for comprehension and finding the most useful sections first) is a product of audience awareness. To explain this choice in reading stance, Bruce says “things that people know more about they're more receptive to reading more critically [while] people who know less about the subject tend to absorb more…or believe what they read more because they don't really understand” (Bruce interview 10 April 2014). In this reading situation, he is the “people who know less” hence his choice to absorb, rather than read critically. This difference between
reading stances, according to audience expertise, guides his reading process: there are those who know about the subject (i.e. expert readers, professors) and those who know less (i.e. first-year students). He knows where he falls on this continuum, as non-expert, because he does not understand what he refers to as “jargon.” He references this finding from Shanahan et al.’s text a few times throughout our interviews indicating its influence over his reading was significant.

While Shanahan et al.’s article made more discoveries about expert readers in math, history, and chemistry, the finding that Bruce attached to and transferred to his reading process the following semester was the distinction between those who are in the field of research and those who are not. The exact finding from Shanahan et al. was that, Scientists reserv[ed] their critical responses for texts for which they had strong background knowledge (otherwise, the chemists thought it better that readers focus on coming to terms with the unfamiliar scientific information, an approach evident both in their own reading, but also in their stated beliefs that school science time should not be devoted to critical analysis of science texts—texts, that they note, should be “nearly authoritative”). (422)

The chemists in the study valued an open mind when they were not conducting research in that particular area, which is the stance they advocate high school students take. As a result, Bruce takes a similar stance when reading these biochemistry articles. He does not question the methods, but checks knowledge against his schema and supplements “unfamiliar scientific information” with the Internet, and most often Wikipedia—a source that has a much wider audience of which Bruce is already a member. This finding
extends the research by Shanahan et al., showing that the continuum from non-expert to expert can promote heightened audience awareness in students. It also indicates how a post-liminal understanding of audience as situated within a community of practice can help a student reader be more strategic during the reading process to monitor comprehension even when the student resides as only a legitimate peripheral participant.xvii

I claim that along with his self-sponsored literate activity of motivational speaking, Bruce’s movement through the threshold concept of audience awareness is mediated by the assignments in his biochemistry class that foreground audience. Primarily his biochemistry class promotes what Wardle describes as a problem-exploring disposition, a disposition that allows for repurposing, or transfer (Wardle “Creative Repurposing” np). Wardle notes that the habitus of the educational system encourages students to maintain answer-getting dispositions—dispositions that do not aid repurposing of processes. However, for Bruce, the educational system that he is part of does not coincide with the picture that Wardle paints. He is enrolled in a class for biochemistry majors designed to introduce students to current events in the field so the professors can steer students in the “right direction” according to their interests. Every week a different lecturer speaks to the class about her or his particular area of study. In his set of circumstances, this class highlights the notion that in a community of practice there are multiple conversations in which different scholars (a new one each week) participate. This focus on the conversations, rather than just memorizing concepts for the next exam, foregrounds areas of expertise, which Bruce repurposes into a need for less
critical reading via the Shanahan *et al.* article on “expert readers” instead of a more rhetorical and instrumental reading.

In sum, Bruce’s awareness of audience transforms his reading process in ways that are generative—it gives it purpose, connects it to the goals he has as a scientist, and is aided by cultural tools such as the Shanahan *et al.* finding, which he repurposed for and transferred to his science courses. The generative quality of audience awareness allows Bruce to see reading as a developmental process: as he moves along the continuum from a legitimate peripheral participator in the biochemistry community, to an expert member of that community, he knows that his position as an audience member will shift. As a result, when he does not understand a part of a text and when his supplemental reading does not help, he says he “holds onto” that which he does not understand. For example, as he reads about the three types of therapies for which the p53 gene is used, he comments that he did not understand the second one: “afflicted virus therapy” (*Steele et al.* 1464-1465). Bruce says that he knows there is a lot he does not understand, but he sees it as an opportunity to discuss it with the senior mentor if the topic arises. His position as an audience will change with time as he moves from the periphery of his community of practice and into his own lab, when he will be the audience for the readings he is assigned and part of the academic discourse. Until then, audience awareness offers students a way to read academic texts rhetorically.
Reading and Writing Connections: Audience Awareness when Reading Integrates Writing

In discussions about the interplay between reading and writing, scholars often highlight how reading can aid student writing. For example, Charles Bazerman shows how teachers can use reading to draw students into wider communities, like academic communities. As students read the conversations in these communities they access “factual content, ideas to work with, and models of discourse,” which improve their ability to write purposefully (Bazerman “A Relationship” 658). When Brian Gogan demonstrates that rhetorical genre awareness operates as a threshold concept in reading studies, he also shows that this concept feeds back into the students’ writing. In my analysis of Bruce’s writing, I also find that audience awareness, as a threshold concept in reading studies, aids Bruce’s writing. However, I do not see this process as unidirectional and argue that his audience awareness when writing also further aids his rhetorical reading practices. Overall, the writing assignments, the class discussions, and the assigned readings collaborate to guide Bruce through the threshold of audience awareness.

One way in which audience awareness as a threshold concept of reading aids Bruce’s writing is that it encourages him to imagine a critical reader. Because audience is situated in a particular context, the readers of Bruce’s written work may be more likely to critique his writing, especially because he identifies as a non-expert. He attributes his imagination of a critical reader to the weekly work of reading critically in English 105 and the writing textbook in his second semester English class (English 102): They Say I Say (TSIS). During our conversations, Bruce consistently connects the ideas in They Say I Say (TSIS).
Say, with the English 105 textbook, *Asking the Right Questions (ARQ)*. While *ARQ* was directly written to guide readers in how to read critically, *TSIS* guides writers to compose with a sense of the reader. As a result, Bruce visualizes a critical reader (or our English 105 class reading his essays) when writing his assignments. He adjusts his writing according to his anticipated readers, for how he wants to portray himself to them and how he wants to influence them—in both personal and academic writing, from purposefully vague Facebook posts to purposefully detailed biochemistry papers.

The first writing assignment I describe is the final assignment in his biochemistry class about his work in the senior mentor’s lab. The assignment asks students to describe, in four pages, the lab work they assisted, under the direction of the senior mentor. Specifically, Bruce says that the purpose for the paper is first to complete the assignment and second to prove to the professor that he was involved in the lab because past students did not attend lab and still wrote the paper, thereby frustrating the professor. I argue that Bruce’s audience awareness for this essay is post-liminal (despite the fact that Pope-Ruark would label Bruce pre-liminal due to his focus on the professor as audience), because Bruce attends to the needs of his audience, which the senior mentor linked to the purpose of the assignment.

Given the background information on the purpose, Bruce makes rhetorical choices that he predicts his professor will need—the details. First, Bruce shows me a sentence he wrote, designed specifically to demonstrate for the professor that he was in the lab helping:

A specific ADE2 knockout gene was engineered in the yeast strain and used in order to knockout the yeast’s ability to produce the amino acid
adenine. This is a crucial part of my senior’s experiment because she was working primarily with color assays and amino acid deficient media. It is also important that she was using the yIG397 yeast strand because on a leucine deficient media, the yeast would change colors in the presence of leucine. (Bruce “Screening for Super” 2)

This excerpt demonstrates Bruce’s desire to ensure the professor credits him for his presence in the lab, which can be seen in his focus on what the senior did in the lab and why. At the same time, however, the senior mentor and the assignment design push Bruce to consider dual audiences for his writing. The senior mentor encourages Bruce to include small details. She tells him that in scientific journals, scientists need to be specific because other “scientists get really nit picky” (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). As a result, Bruce includes the exact strand of yeast used (yIG397) because that is the information other scientists would need. And while the senior mentor tells Bruce to include such details, suggesting that he is in a liminal stage of audience, later in the interview he notes that those details are necessary for other scientists who may want to replicate his experiment, demonstrating that he understands how experts in the field use research articles. These shifts seem to be oscillations as Bruce moves from mimicking the senior mentor’s suggestions to drawing connections to the conversational model of academic discourse.

Just as the senior mentor points Bruce to audience considerations, the professor’s request for two titles—one for the public and one for other scientists—ensures even further work on audience awareness. The two titles he writes are “Screening for super transactivation in mammalian p53 gene in Saccharomyces Cerevisiae” (for the scientific
community) and “Searching for a different form of the tumor preventing p53 gene in humans” (for the public). Bruce describes the title for the scientific community as easily written because “you just have to give them that first glimpse of exactly what your research is talking about” (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). The title for the public was more difficult for Bruce. At first he wrote “Searching for a super mutant p53 gene in humans to prevent cancer.” However, the senior mentor discouraged the use of “super mutant” because “when you release these papers in the New York Times or wherever” it becomes problematic (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). According to Bruce, the media has portrayed the scientific community as not trustworthy, so descriptions such as “super mutant” will bring up images of resident evil or zombie outbreaks: “The media has actually portrayed a lot of scientific advancement as something people should fear” (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). In Bruce’s reflections on the process of writing these titles, he once again grapples with the continuum of outsider to insider, which indicates not only that his audience awareness when reading affects his writing, but also that his audience awareness when writing—mediated by the cultural tools of the assignment—affects his reading practices, which remain grounded in this continuum.

By the end of his first year of college, in his writing Bruce has moved toward post-liminal audience awareness, which can be further confirmed by his metacognitive reflections. His understanding of how the negative connotation of words like “mutant” could cause problems if his readers who are afraid of some medical advances think of “radioactive zombie babies” indicates metacognitive awareness (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). As a result, Bruce adjusts his writing to be “very neutral” and “simple to understand.” Further, the senior mentor told Bruce that when writing for the layman, he
should “catch their eye so they are interested in reading” (Bruce interview 15 May 2014). Bruce suggests that “Tumor preventing” attracts readers because they associate it with cancer prevention, a popular topic for many people. Bruce’s explanation for why readers would be attracted is reminiscent of Jenny Edbauer’s ecological model of the rhetorical situation. Since Bruce is discussing the circulation of rhetoric in a “social field,” he is not identifying a single rhetorical audience but more so discussing the thrust of a topic on a general public (Edbauer 7). I suggest that Bruce’s self-sponsored literate activities with motivational speaking prime him for considering how his word choice may affect his audience, as well as an entire community of practice.

Along with written assignments, class discussions also further support Bruce’s development of audience awareness. Just as the Biochemistry 121 professor asked the students to move between these two different audiences with their titles, during interviews, Bruce also mentioned a past biochemistry course that discussed issues of ethics, separate from audience but related in that they separate the scientific community from the public. For example, in a four-part lecture series on cancer, the class debated the issue of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were used to conduct research on cancer without her knowledge or consent, and without financial compensation to her or her family. During course recitations, students considered the difference between ethics and advancing research: if researchers have good ethics they cannot push research agendas far enough, but if they have loose ethics and therefore more aggressive research agendas “society views it as kind of a bad thing, a monstrosity” (Bruce 15 May 2014). Their discussion, again, establishes an us versus them audience dichotomy, allowing students to practice the ways of speaking about this divide. Finally, when I asked Bruce how being in
the lab has affected his work, he says, “it has changed my mind about the world. There’s a lot of people who don’t really understand the subject, who wouldn’t understand exactly the kind of research that we are doing” hence the need for two titles: two audiences, one educated in the field and one fearful of the “radioactive zombie babies.” Overall, the writing assignments, the class discussions, and the assigned readings collaborate to guide Bruce through the threshold of audience awareness.

Bruce’s audience awareness also extends to his writing in his English class. He visualizes critical readers and continually attempts to influence them through giving more detail (like in biochemistry) and holding back on making too many claims for fear that he will appear biased (in English). Still, he visualizes this critical reader as an expert in the area, because that distinction remains. A good example of his rhetorical choice can be seen in his research proposal on phobias for English. He asks a series of questions that he would like to explore, but which he says he never intends to answer in the proposal. This choice serves multiple purposes: it satisfies the requirements of the assignment and it “explains to the reader I know very little…If you are an expert in this field, yeah, I know very little about this, so just giving you a heads up that when you critically go into it, it’s the way it is because of this [lack of expertise]” (Bruce interview 6 March 2014). His writing process is mediated by these multiple goals and his audience awareness: his readers are experts, but he not so much.

In sum, while I suggest that audience awareness is a threshold concept in reading studies, I also demonstrate, through Bruce’s writing and his reflections, that as students move through the threshold concept of audience when they read, it also connects to and affects their writing in generative ways. Through these examples of Bruce’s writing in
biochemistry and composition, I note an awareness of audience that is layered. He still sees his professors as his audience when writing because he is still part of the discourse of grades, assessment, and evaluation on work completed. At the same time, however, he is purposeful in his actions. For example, he provides more details in the biochemistry essay because that audience is “nit picky.” And in English, Bruce establishes himself as a non-expert on phobias to prepare for that critical reader, a product of having no audience specified by the teacher.

**Integrating Reading and Writing through Audience Awareness**

This chapter has described how one student, Bruce, moves through the threshold concept of audience awareness in his reading and writing. He begins a critical reading course with little knowledge of audience then oscillates between the pre-liminal and post-liminal states as he works with a senior mentor, reading and writing to complete a report on his lab experience. By the end of the first-year, Bruce describes his reading and writing processes in ways that demonstrate awareness of not only rhetorical audience but also rhetorical ecology as he considers how as a reader he is not automatically the audience when reading and as he considers the circulating rhetoric about his scientific topic when writing.

Bruce’s awareness of audience leads him to realize that as a first-year student he is not yet the audience for all texts that he is assigned to read, especially journal articles and academic books which are often firmly entrenched in academic discourse. This development is important for us as researchers and teachers to understand because it allows him to move beyond the reading deficit implicit in Smith’s finding that students
defer when reading difficult texts and Bunn’s finding that students avoid when reading texts they do not see as necessary for their studies.

Instead, Bruce’s reading process compensates for this difficulty and becomes a recursive dance between the community of biochemists and the general public with their own particular ways of knowing and sharing knowledge (e.g., *British Journal of Surgery* versus Wikipedia). As part of this reading process, Bruce rejects an oversimplified, arhetorical criticality as a reading stance, which would be a critique of an isolated text for the sake of critique. Instead, his position within the community of biochemistry demands a rhetorical stance, born from the audience continuum of expert to non-expert common in reading in the sciences and supported by Shanahan et al.’s study and the written assignments from Bruce’s biochemistry class. The Shanahan *et al.* finding on expert science readers valuing the authority of writers when they do not specialize in that particular area of the discipline aided Bruce’s reading process, a process that in high school he claims he would have eschewed, but that he now embraces. In addition, his self-sponsored literate activities as a motivational speaker and reader of motivational books aid his honing of the non-expert to expert continuum upon which the concept of “inventing the university” relies. Still, because audience awareness is a threshold concept of reading and Bruce has moved to a post-liminal stage, apparent in his reading and writing practices, as he moves to a more expert position in his discipline, or as he moves from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation in his community of practice, Bruce will continue to view audience as situated even as the reading tasks become more complex.
My examination of audience awareness has implications for how we teach and research reading. While audience awareness is a threshold concept, Bruce’s movement through the stages of liminality was mediated by his academic courses and his self-sponsored literate activities in motivational speaking. This finding suggests that as teacher-scholars continue to explore threshold concepts of reading and writing, we should consider how self-sponsored reading practices affect academic reading. In particular, this implication suggests that in reading courses, teachers should discuss how students read academic texts, as well as other texts they read for pleasure. The leisure reading may prime students for particular threshold concepts of reading, such as audience awareness, and can therefore be leveraged in the classroom as a basis for discussion and exploration.

In addition, these findings indicate that effective pedagogy should link reading and writing when teaching audience awareness. In the second-semester composition course (English 102), students who were asked to evaluate the intended audience for the sources used in their research papers remained in a pre-liminal stage of audience awareness. These assignments teach audience through reading alone. Perhaps Bruce moved through to a post-liminal stage because of the apprenticeship inherent in lab work, but it is also possible the professor’s assignment that required Bruce link writing (changing the titles of his paper) and reading (reading to enter the labs) helped him move through the metaphorical portal of this threshold.

Finally, these findings suggest that teachers should highlight reading processes in the first-year writing classroom. There is already research that has shown the importance of activating schema by asking questions, by previewing, and by pre-reading, in the process of reading. However, after experiencing Bruce’s compensation when reading
texts for which he was not the intended reader, I realized that more attention should be
given to developing and discussing techniques for reading as less expert and more expert
in college.

For future research of rhetorical reading, the findings in this article suggest that as
researchers continue to explore how best to teach rhetorical reading, we should consider
self-sponsored and school-sponsored literate activity. Most of the rhetoric and
composition research on threshold concepts focuses on academic literacies and discourse
(e.g., Adler-Kassner et al.; Gogan; Pope-Ruark). But again, Bruce’s reliance on and
repurposing of his motivational books’ messages suggest that an integration of these type
of activities could further our understanding of threshold concepts. Finally, the
connections between reading and writing are illuminated by Bruce’s academic work.
Threshold concept theory and rhetorical reading research must begin addressing how
reading and writing function together as complementary practices if we intend to
continue improving learning.
Chapter 5

Identifying Assumptions as a Threshold Concept of Rhetorical Reading

Having explored college-level disciplinary reading in biochemistry and how audience awareness operates as a threshold concept for students, I now continue the analysis by examining college-level disciplinary reading in social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling. In this chapter, I argue that identifying assumptions in other peoples’ writing and one’s own writing are two threshold concepts of reading that can transfer to the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling communities of practice. In doing so, I am showing that students in these disciplines need to develop a post-liminal understanding of identifying assumptions when reading and writing in order to develop into full practitioners in these communities of practice (CoPs).

Through classroom observations, interviews with professors in this discipline, and examination of the written reading responses of students in the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling CoPs, I describe the movement through these thresholds. Learners begin in a pre-liminal stage, which is characterized by students not being able to identify assumptions either in their own or other peoples’ writing, often because of an unwillingness or inability to read for what is not on the page. In the liminal state (i.e. oscillating between a pre- and post-liminal state), learners begin to grapple with the concept of assumptions, but struggle to identify ideas and ideological underpinnings that go unstated. In the post-liminal stage, learners can abstract away from the written word and can identify assumptions in other peoples’ texts or their own, even when unstated.
I organize this chapter by first describing how the critical reading class (English 105), which the research participants took in Fall 2013, addressed identifying and evaluating assumptions and detail some of the participants’ attempts at identifying assumptions in other peoples’ texts. In doing so, I illustrate how difficult identifying assumptions can be for learners. Then I show how social work, substance abuse, and criminal justice class discussions and written reading response assignments apprentice students into identifying assumptions in those communities of practice (CoPs).

Finally, I introduce Cyrus and Natalie, two students whose reading practices are mediated by their different goals and purposes when reading and who have different relationships to the cultural tools of reading (see Wertsch), but who are both members of the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling CoPs. With Cyrus and Natalie, I describe different developments—Cyrus moves to a post-liminal stage and Natalie remains oscillating in a liminal stage with the threshold concepts. In order to accurately depict their movement through these thresholds—assumptions of one’s own thinking and others’ thinking—I separate the threshold concepts into two during my analysis. I use interviews, observations, and Cyrus and Natalie’s written reading responses to demonstrate their movement through the portals, first of identifying assumptions in other peoples’ writing, and then of identifying assumptions in their own writing. Since a goal of this dissertation research project is to contribute to college reading pedagogy resources, I conclude with implications for teaching and further research.
Identifying Assumptions is Troublesome

Most students enter the critical reading course (English 105), with little awareness of or practice in identifying and describing assumptions in the texts they read. The book assigned for the reading course, *Asking the Right Questions*, includes a chapter on identifying descriptive and value assumptions. According to the book, assumptions are “hidden or unstated (in most cases); taken for granted; influential in determining the conclusion; and potentially deceptive” (Browne and Keeley 56). The writers then divide these assumptions into two types: descriptive and value.

Descriptive assumptions are unstated beliefs that the writer or speaker has about “how the world was, is, or will be” (Browne and Keeley 66). For example, if a writer argues that women should not be allowed on the front line in military combat because they are not physically strong enough, a reader must ask what assumptions the writer is making about the way women are or can be. In this case, the descriptive assumptions may be that a certain level of physical strength is needed for combat and no matter the amount of training women’s bodies will never be strong enough.

Value assumptions express what a writer or speaker wants the world to be like and what goals she or he thinks are most important. In the military combat example, the value assumption was that physical strength is valued over other kinds of strengths, like mental, emotional, or psychological. Often value assumptions are abstract values that come from the writer’s set of beliefs. For example, *personal liberty* might be a value assumption that a writer considers more important than *social good*.

For students, identifying assumptions that are not on the page is difficult. Instead, they will often look for the assumption in the reason. In the military combat example,
many students would look to the reason in the conclusion to identify the “assumption,” which in this case is “because [women] are not physically strong enough.” Students would then say that the assumption is that women are not physically strong. This is an assumption, but it is also a stated reason. To teach students to abstract away from the text and read for what is not on the page is the difficult part.

Often, in composition and rhetoric textbooks, assumptions are introduced alongside the Toulmin model of argumentation. For example, the textbook by Andrea Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz *Everything’s an Argument* includes a section on structuring arguments. In chapter 7, they introduce the Toulmin argument model, and the ever important, but difficult, “warrant.” According to Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, a warrant “tells readers what your (often unstated) assumptions are” (152). For example, in the enthymeme, “Flat taxes are fairer than progressive taxes because they treat all taxpayers in the same way,” the warrants that follow are “treating people equitably is the American way” and “all people should be treated in the same way” (156-7). These warrants are assumptions underlying the argument.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz are explaining warrants and assumptions through their textbook to student *writers* who must then determine whether to state or leave unstated the assumptions that link their reasons and conclusions. In contrast, the writers of *Asking the Right Questions* M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley want student *readers* to identify assumptions in the arguments they encounter.

For my critical reading course (English 105) and my critical reading portion of the course in the composition studio (English 100J), the research participants read Browne and Keeley’s chapter on identifying assumptions in week 6 of the semester. In
conjunction with this chapter, they also read two short opinion pieces on Edward
Snowden. “Edward Snowden, patriot” was written by Ezra Klein and published in The
Washington Post. “Edward Snowden’s leaks are a grave threat to US national security”
was written by John Bolton and published in The Guardian. In addition to the reading
assignment (reading the chapter and two articles), I asked students to write a reading
response in which they summarized the two arguments in the Snowden articles and
identified descriptive and value assumptions made by the writers.

In both the articles on Edward Snowden, the warrants or assumptions are
unstated, so students must identify the descriptive or value assumptions by reading not
just for what is on the page, but also for that which is not on the page. Some students, like
Bruce, successfully abstracted from the text and identified the unstated warrants, or
assumptions. In his response to Bolton’s opinion piece, Bruce wrote the following: “The
assumptions made here are loyalty versus honesty. Bolton believes that loyalty to your
country is more important than revealing honest facts” (Bruce “Summary and Analysis
on Snowden” 1 italics added). In this excerpt, Bruce identifies value assumptions—
loyalty versus honesty. Because the assumptions are unstated, Bruce has abstracted these
values from the claims that Bolton makes.

In his written response to Klein’s article, Bruce also identifies the value
assumptions:

In this editorial, Klein has many different value assumptions that tie into
his paper. Overall in his paper, he states the value of cooperative action
over keeping secrets. Reading between the lines, Klein subtly states that
Snowden ignited a much-needed debate in congress by leaking those files.
Klein believes that government debate is more important than government security. (Bruce “Summary and Analysis on Snowden” 1 italics added)

Again, Bruce is able to identify these value assumptions, even when they are not stated in the texts. In this excerpt he chooses a few assumptions, such as “cooperative action,” “keeping secrets,” “government debate,” and “government security.” Still, what is important is that Klein never professes these values directly. Instead Bruce abstracts them.

For many students identifying these assumptions was difficult. In fact, for many student readers, this ability to identify assumptions is “troublesome,” to use Meyer and Land’s language for threshold concepts. A survey of research on teaching the Toulmin method confirms that many student writers and readers struggle with identifying assumptions, or unstated warrants, in their own and in others’ texts. As Lesley A. Rex, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and Steven Engel note, “Warrants…are the most difficult of the three elements for students to understand and to write…because we are asking students to put into language their subconscious prior thinking and to use a form of thinking that is new to them” (np). While Rex et al. are focused on teaching students to identify the assumptions in their own writing, teaching students to read for assumptions is also difficult, especially when the warrants are shared between the student reader and writer. According to Nancy Wood, “warrants originate with the arguer, but they also exist in the minds of the audience” (135). As a result, if the audience shares the warrants with the author, the audience will more likely accept them and not identify them as readily (Brunk-Chavez). Unless students are reading texts that go against their values and belief
systems, they will struggle to identify the unstated assumptions making the reading and writing practice troublesome for learners.

Another research participant, Natalie, shows how some students struggle to abstract the unstated assumptions from the text. She was given the same assignment as Bruce, but does not address the assumptions in the text and instead addresses rhetorical moves of the writer that are on the page and therefore easier to identify:

In this article, it puts an emphasis on the China leaks whereas in the other one it does not. So the first one makes him look like an actual patriot, but when you read the second article you find out he is not. This article also goes into great detail about the leaks whereas the first briefly describes it. The language is a bit more loaded in this article, but once you start reading you can tell a huge difference in the other article. (Natalie “Critical Summary on ‘Edward Snowden’s leaks are a grave threat to US national security’” 1)

In this critique, Natalie is evaluating the two articles, stating that one provides a lot more detail than the other, but also has more loaded language. While she is evaluating the articles, using criteria from previous chapters in the textbook such as loaded language to identify the rhetorical choices made by the writer, she is choosing the simpler task. Evaluating language choice that is on the page is easier because it is there in black and white. The significant difference between identifying assumptions in a text as opposed to something like identifying and evaluating language (or word choice) is that the assumptions are often unstated. Because they are unstated, identification requires an extra step from the reader, one of abstraction, which Natalie does not accomplish.
While Natalie does not even mention assumptions in her written responses, other students who do attempt to identify assumptions fall short in that they still want to find the “answer” in black and white on the page. For example, Cyrus in his final paper for the critical reading course refers to the writer’s stated rhetorical questions as assumptions:

> When it comes to assumptions, Cowlishaw does something unusual with the text. Every once in awhile he likes to put a list of rhetorical questions for the audience to ask themselves after he states of some evidence. For instance he asks “How did the Army get ‘a hold’ of those early documents?” and “How much choice of publisher did Stahl and company actually have?” (Cyrus “Life Itself is a Virtual Reality” 6 italics added)

Following this selection, Cyrus goes on to evaluate the use of rhetorical questions and how they fail to develop Cyrus’s argument, but he does not address the unstated assumptions of the writer. However, his mention of assumptions indicates Cyrus’s desire to identify them and the start of him grappling with the difficult concept.

I conclude that the barrier to learning how to identify assumptions (or unstated warrants) in another person’s text and one’s own is that extra step of abstraction. Students who cannot learn to read for not just the words on the page, but also the words not on the page—the ideological underpinnings of the text—will not progress through the portal of this threshold concept. In the words of Freire, if students are only reading the words on the page, they are not “reading the world.” They are not rewriting the text by moving back from the text and connecting its claims with the matrix of abstract values and descriptions that comprise a rhetorical situation.
Because of this difficulty, or troublesomeness, I suggest that identifying assumptions, or unstated warrants, in another person’s text and one’s own are threshold concepts of college reading. In the pre-liminal state, learners, like Natalie, opt for simpler tasks, like evaluating loaded language, rather than attempting to identify and evaluate assumptions. In the liminal state (i.e. oscillating between a pre- and post-liminal state), learners like Cyrus begin to grapple with the concept of assumptions, but do not identify ideas and ideological underpinnings that go unstated. In the post-liminal stage, students like Bruce abstract from the text, identifying the assumptions that are left unstated but still drive the relationship between claims and reasons, such as value assumptions like national security, which link the claim that Edward Snowden is a traitor to the nation because he put it at risk. Figure 5.1 illustrates these three stages of liminality for this threshold concept.

Figure 5.1: Stages of Liminality for Identifying and Describing Assumptions when Reading
Communities of Practice: Apprenticeship in Social Work, Criminal Justice, and Substance Abuse Counseling

Since this dissertation project seeks to identify how the threshold concepts of college reading move with students into their chosen communities of practice, I want to explore how students who are majoring in social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling move through these stages of liminality with the difficult and troublesome concepts of identifying assumptions in one’s own and others’ texts. I chose these communities of practice in particular because my work with professors, classroom observations, and student interviews in this area of study all indicated that identifying and describing one’s own assumptions and recognizing the assumptions that others hold was an important concept for students to understand if they were going to advance into full practitioners within social work, criminal justice, or substance abuse counseling. In disciplinary literacy studies, scholars seek to identify how students become disciplinary insiders. In these three disciplines—social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling—which are all related to helping others and serving the public, students become disciplinary insiders by learning to identify assumptions they and others are holding and expressing through how they read and write.

I interviewed two professors in this community of practice. Professors let me observe their 200-level courses on signs and prevention of substance abuse. Both these teachers confirmed that attending to bias and having an awareness of assumptions are concepts within their community of practice that students must become expert in if they want to develop into full practitioners. Through a process of apprenticeship, professors in this community of practice help students develop ways of making and sharing knowledge
in the discipline that maintain an awareness of one’s own and other’s value and descriptive assumptions. An attention to apprenticing students into the practice of identifying assumptions occurs at many different points of contact in these courses: reading assignments, writing assignments, and classroom discussion.

One professor attends to her students’ apprenticeship by helping them develop the ability to “synthesize information” quickly and “check their egos at the door” when reading texts and helping people. Because this area of study is closely linked to a profession in social work and counseling, the process of apprenticeship even in these large introductory courses was more apparent than in other disciplines. For example, in lecture the professor often referenced the future work the students would be doing: “When you are working with your client’s medical doctor you must….” As a result, through classroom discussions and lectures I could discern the expectations this professor had for student readers: synthesis and non-bias based on presuppositions or assumptions.

I observed three class sessions of the signs of substance abuse course and interviewed the professor toward the end of the semester. Cyrus was taking this course, so I was also able to experience what was written and read. The students in this class read a textbook, watched documentaries, and attended AA or NA meetings. During my interview, the professor said that critical thinking is a key concept for social work and addiction, defining critical thinking as being able to “triage information.” The professor wants students to be able to pull salient information from their clients and their textbooks. According to this professor, clients will say a lot and give a lot of information, and it is the job of the social worker or therapist to sift through that information, or “emotional dump,” to find what matters. The same is true of the textbook they read for the class: the
textbook chapters have a lot of information. So in lectures, the professor’s goal is to focus on the salient information. The professor suggests that this practice is important for the students in this discipline because when they are counseling a client they need to have memorized critical information especially in relation to signs and symptoms. Because of the professor’s modeling of synthesizing critical information and the references to “when they are working in this field,” I noted the apprenticeship that happens in these communities of practice. The professor guides students toward the ways of thinking and acting in the community that are most appropriate.

Beyond modeling through lecture, the professor’s desire to help students see the importance of synthesis could also be seen through certain assignments and classroom discourse. For example, one assignment asks students to watch a documentary then respond to it by synthesizing the information from the documentary with what they learned in the textbook. In addition, in the classroom discourse the professor consistently makes moves that indicate the importance of knowing certain salient facts. For example, the professor says, “You do need to know your four kinds of downers” and “What you’ll need to know for all classes of drugs is this…” While during observations I initially thought that the point of these statements was to prepare students for tests, during my participant check with the professor, I learned that the professor is indicating the information they will need to have memorized in order to help their clients. The difference between the professors in these three disciplines and professors in other disciplines who directly said “you must know this for the test” was that the substance abuse, social work, and criminal justice professors always pushed the discussion to the future when the students would be full practitioners within the community of practice.
For example, after showing students how easy it is to buy Vicodin online the response was not that students would need to know this for the test, but instead that “We need to ask where they [their clients or patients] are getting their drugs.” So this professor is concerned that students memorize certain information, not for the test, but for future work with clients. It is important to note, however, that the professor’s definition of critical thinking (synthesis of facts) is not necessarily a troublesome concept for students, which is a key characteristic for something to be considered a threshold concept. Instead, I would suggest that synthesizing materials is only a key concept, not a threshold concept. To be a threshold concept, it must be troublesome for learners.

A troublesome concept that this professor also addressed through assignments and class discussion was checking bias, or “checking one’s ego at the door.” Because the community of practice is focused on helping others, a focus on the self is necessarily important. However, I also link the practice of checking one’s own bias to identifying assumptions. Bias is often not stated, and the root of bias is often an assumption about how the world should be (descriptive assumption) or how certain values are more important than others (value assumption). The classroom discussions apprentice students by showing them how to share knowledge in a way that is aware of bias, and the reading and writing assignments link that practice to identifying assumptions in texts, both one’s own text and the texts of others.

According to the professor, students in these majors struggle to “check their egos at the door.” The difficulty that the substance abuse professor has identified along with the difficulty that I and other scholars identified with students identifying assumptions when reading and writing (e.g. Brunk-Chavez, Rex et al., and Wood) indicate that this
concept is troublesome for students in their general education composition courses and in their chosen communities of practice, which means it is most likely a threshold concept.

Because the substance abuse class included discussion, despite being a lecture hall course, there were several opportunities for students to express their opinions, but also “check their ego,” check their own assumptions about others, and check their biases.

Through interviews, I discovered that these moments of classroom discussion were teachable moments for students like Cyrus. One moment of this classroom-based apprenticeship, which Cyrus relayed to me, occurred in a class during which a professor was discussing suicide:

Cyrus: We were talking about his experience when approaching death, when it comes to family members, at the social work level...obviously in very touchy situations you have to be very, very careful in your approach because when you’re dealing with people you can break someone’s heart. It’s very sensitive and you can alienate people very quickly. You say one wrong thing and they can say “well you can go fuck yourself.” [The professor] was trying to explain that what people do not like is they do not like being told they are in a better place. They don’t like religion; they do not like “oh if it was meant to be it was meant to be. Everything happens for a reason.” And [the professor] was like “Stay away from that. What people need is they need to be touched. They need a hug. You know to be focused on the good things. They need a smile. They need laughs. They need to focus on the good.” And this girl is like “Oh well you know that can be a thing, but I believe that people need that type of afterlife reinforcement, that people will be in heaven and whatnot.” And [the professor] is like “That’s a very specific community and you cannot approach your clients like that.”...And I’m like “You’re [The girl is] not going to be very successful in this field.”

(Cyrus, interview, 18 Feb. 2014)

Cyrus’s description of a classroom environment is fairly typical in the social work and substance abuse courses, since the professors often ask for the students’ experiences with certain topics. These interactions apprentice students into a way of thinking and being that is open to others’ experiences and beliefs. Similar to the difficulty of identifying
assumptions in reading for first-year composition courses, opening one’s self to other belief systems is also difficult and troublesome for students entering the CoPs of social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse. For the female student whom Cyrus describes, not discussing the afterlife with a client who lost a loved one, goes against her core belief system. It is antithetical to her ways of knowing. As a result, it is “troublesome” (Meyer and Land). The female student is making descriptive assumptions about other people: everyone appreciates religious beliefs in moments of loss. She is also making value assumptions: Christian-based beliefs about the afterlife are more valuable than alternative beliefs about the afterlife.

For students who are being apprenticed into social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse, identifying the assumptions held by others and by one’s self is difficult. However, the concept of identifying assumptions is a potential barrier to learning. If students cannot move through this threshold, they will unlikely be able to move on to helping clients as full practitioners within the CoPs of social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse.

Cyrus and Natalie: Research Participants’ Reading is Mediated

Before I describe how the students’ ability to identify assumptions when reading aids students in the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse disciplines, I need to first describe Cyrus and Natalie to account for affordances and constraints that affect their movement from a pre-liminal to a post-liminal stage of identifying and evaluating assumptions. With James Wertsch’s mediated action framework as my guide, I analyze the act of reading by considering how multiple goals affect students’ reading, how
technologies or other cultural tools enable and constrain their reading, how their reading is affected by the past, how new cultural tools change the way students read, and how power and authority affect their actions—the five characteristics of mediated action.

I need to begin this section with a word of caution. Because chapter 3 explored how reading was mediated action, some of the descriptions about Cyrus and Natalie will seem repetitious. Some information is definitely repeated; however, I have included additional descriptions of the students’ multiple purposes when reading, which are important for understanding their movement through the portal of identifying assumptions when reading.

Cyrus grew up in Las Vegas and attended a competitive arts academy for high school, which he attended for band. He is an only child, growing up the first six years of his life with just his mother, his father later coming into his life. He is a first-generation college student, but his mother is currently taking college classes for photography. His mother is an administrative assistant, and his father is a heavy machine operator in construction. They are proud and supportive of Cyrus’s choice to go to college, but are particularly pleased that he is studying something practical that will allow him to start a career after college. To help pay for school, Cyrus works at the main campus library.

While several research participants identify as non-readers, usually attributing that role to a sibling, Cyrus identifies as a reader. I suggest that he is motivated to complete reading because of the cultural capital it garners him in society. For example, during interviews, Cyrus says that he values reading texts that get referenced a lot in society, like Shakespeare plays, because he wants to be able to understand these references and be able to talk to others about it. Also, when he was assigned to read The Bible for Core
Humanities, his motivation to read came from his desire to finally understand arguments such as those against gay marriage and women’s equality that rely on Biblical references. He claims that having this knowledge would allow him to argue with others more successfully. As a result, he remembers texts that he read for courses based on their circulation in society. If a reading is on a topic that comes up in conversation often, then he is more likely to remember it because it proved useful to him. These motivations for reading indicate that Cyrus is a rather social person, who attaches value in reading to how well it improves his ability to communicate and interact with others.

Cyrus is majoring in Social Work and minoring in Substance Abuse Counseling (in the Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies). He plans to go to a master’s program to complete the necessary fieldwork and complete his licensing. While he does not know what state he wants to settle in, he feels it probably should be Nevada because he “should probably be working on trying to fix this place” (Cyrus interview 18 Feb. 2014). Still, with the recent legalization of marijuana in Washington and Colorado, he feels that legalization may happen across the nation, thereby changing which state needs help: “So I’m not really sure where I’m needed and what’s being needed” (Cyrus interview 18 Feb. 2014). His reflection on where he will be in five years highlights Cyrus’s motivation in majoring in social work: it is to help others. In fact, when his father suggested that his chosen major and future profession would result in Cyrus ruining peoples’ lives by taking away their children, Cyrus took umbrage with this comment because he sees the good in his future profession.

In particular, Cyrus wants to practice law, working with the court systems to devise alternative punishments for criminals because “we have discovered that sending
them to prison for either drug possession or whatnot is making them better criminals” (Cyrus interview 18 Feb. 2014). Because he does not believe that people with addictions are “bad people,” he wants to advocate for them, working with the attorneys to say “Yeah this person screwed up. Instead of sending them to prison, let’s make them give back to the community. Let’s find better stuff to give them a chance because everyone deserves a second chance” (Cyrus interview 18 Feb. 2014). Along with working with the courts to secure alternative sentencing, he is also interested in working at the “macro level,” lobbying for laws. He is also minoring in substance abuse, so he can go into treatment research (Cyrus interview 18 Feb. 2014). His potential career trajectory indicates that he is still at the early stages of membership into this community of practice because he is still choosing from many possibilities and not settled on just one.

Overall, Cyrus’s identity as a helper is one that guides how he reads academic and popular texts. For example, when I asked him what he thought of Phillip Seymour Hoffman’s tragic death, Cyrus said that he hopes people can learn from it. He hopes Hoffman’s death can be used to help motivate people to be greater than he was. Cyrus’s identity as a helper and the value he places on the symbolic, cultural capital of reading are two goals that mediate Cyrus’s reading practices and will guide my analysis of his movement through the threshold concept of identifying assumptions in reading.

The second student I describe in this chapter is Natalie. She is also a first-generation college student, but she is from Reno. Her mother did not finish high school, nor did her sister. But her father and her stepmother did finish high school, and her stepmother is currently working toward a degree in criminal justice. Natalie feels a lot of pressure because she is the first person in her family to go to college: “It’s like sometimes
I’m just like ‘I want to quit. I don’t want to do this anymore. The pressure is too much.’ But then it’s like if I even thought…of dropping out of college…my dad would beat me up and throw me in a ditch somewhere…because he knows how it is not to have a college degree and try to get a job” (Natalie interview 13 Feb. 2014). The pressure she feels as the “not screwed up kid” in her family drives her to succeed. However, her view of college as a path to employability also determines some of the decisions she makes in college.

The path to employability for Natalie is more obvious than it is for other students. In fact, she would not even be in college if it were up to her. She sees a college diploma as just a piece of paper. However, flight school in the Army requires a Bachelor’s degree. As a result, she is motivated to finish college so the Army will let her fly their helicopters. Her alternative plan is to work as a detective for the Reno Police Department. Natalie comes from military lineage: her grandmother served in the army; her father the navy; her stepmother the army. This lineage inspired Natalie to enlist in the National Guard directly after high school, so she could pay for college. She now uses aid from the National Guard, for whom she still works, to pay for college. Natalie’s decision to serve for a year in the National Guard means she is one year older than the typical first-year student. The fact that she is paying for college herself, with the emotional support from her father and stepmother, makes her a very driven student, who does well in courses, but who also is more practical than many other students with her choices in college.

One result of this practicality is that Natalie takes more online classes than other students. She enjoys the predictability of these courses, meaning the professors are less likely to change plans or assignments during the semester. Therefore, Natalie knows
exactly what is due and when in these online courses. She values this predictability more than classroom discussion. In fact, online courses are limited in the amount of discussion about classroom texts, which Natalie has noted in interviews. However, her goal of finishing college while scheduling her time between school and the National Guard makes these online courses ideal.

This practicality and her view on the importance of college also results in Natalie not completing assigned readings whenever possible. For example, in her second-semester first-year composition course, she never completed the readings for class discussion. As a student who is more interested in completing a degree to get a job, Natalie opts out of class readings, especially in classes like English and Theatre, which are not related to her future career.

Natalie is majoring in criminal justice, which means she also takes courses in substance abuse counseling and social work. For these classes, she reads when she has to, but does not read anything that is not assessed. For example, in her criminal justice course, she does not read the textbook because everything on the test is on the PowerPoint slides in lecture. She does what is needed for the grade, and nothing more, as she has to work hard to balance her class load with her continued involvement in the National Guard.

Overall, reading for Natalie does not hold the same cultural capital that it does for Cyrus; however, Natalie does mention the value of knowing logical fallacies (taught in the rhetorical reading course) for debates that happen during “ops” in the National Guard. Since there is a great deal of standing around and waiting during “ops,” there is also a lot of time for debates about religion and politics. For example, when one person referred to
a claim as a slippery slope fallacy, Natalie found great pleasure in knowing the reference and being able to use it on others:

Natalie: For Ops, for my guard stuff, like we’ll just be talking and then one guy’s just, it’s unbelievable how smart he is, and I’ll say something and he’ll be like “That’s a slippery slope fallacy.” And I’m like “I know exactly what you’re talking about.”…What we’ll do is, we always like to talk about controversial issues and stuff and so then people start breaking out assumptions and then that gets everything rolling and it’s a blast…I think it’s beneficial for everybody when we do get in the arguments because you can see more than one perspective of a situation. (Natalie, interview, 13 Feb. 2014)

Natalie’s goals for reading are multiple. In college, she reads for assessment purposes: when she must take a test or write a response to a text she reads. In the National Guard, she reads for social gain. She reads the news to stay up-to-date on current events and politics. In addition, the rhetorical reading practices learned in the critical reading course (English 105) have value in the National Guard. According to Natalie, knowing how to identify logical fallacies, how to evaluate statistics, and how to identify assumptions, all concepts taught in the critical reading course, allow her to verbally spar with the other members of the National Guard.

As I describe Cyrus and Natalie’s movement through the portal of identifying assumptions in texts, I will attend to how their reading is mediated by their histories, multiple goals when reading, and relationship to the university, which all provide affordances and constraints in their engagement with the threshold concepts of understanding assumptions in one’s own and others’ texts.
Identifying Value and Descriptive Assumptions in Others’ Texts when Reading

One of the key similarities between Cyrus and Natalie is that they both use reading to argue with others about controversial topics, such as religion and politics. Cyrus values access to texts used in these types of arguments like The Bible; Natalie values knowing concepts taught in the critical reading course like logical fallacies. While these values may be unique to Cyrus and Natalie, I suggest that these tendencies to value readings that can be discussed with others are also markers of the discourse common within the community of practice (CoP) into which Cyrus and Natalie are both developing. As they are apprenticed into the CoP, moving from legitimate peripheral participants to full practitioners, they are encouraged to do “work” as they read to identify other people’s assumptions and their own.

Integrated reading and writing scholars in Composition and Rhetoric value reading assignments that require students to do “work” when they read. David Bartholomae and Anthony R. Petrosky include readings in their textbook Ways of Reading that “leave work for the reader to do” (vi). In addition, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori invented the difficulty paper assignment because she wanted students to document the “work” they did when reading. The “work” Composition and Rhetoric scholars want students to accomplish is an open-ended inquiry during the reading process. Rather than read for the test, in a process of transmission where information goes in and out of a person’s consciousness, scholars like Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Salvatori want students to construct the text as they read.

In the related communities of practice—social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling—reading as an act of construction is supported through
written assignments attached to assigned reading. These reading and writing assignments apprentice students into noticing contradictions, identifying assumptions, and questioning stereotypes and bias in social situations, print-based texts, and multimedia texts that they read.\textsuperscript{xii}

The reading assignments are not “difficult” in the way that Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Salvatori describe. The readings do not require students to have a high level of specialized knowledge as I discussed in the previous chapter, when student Bruce read journal articles published in biochemistry journals. Instead, the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling students primarily read textbooks, documentaries and movies, and social situations.

Previously, I demonstrated how Cyrus oscillated in a liminal stage of identifying assumptions in others’ texts in the final writing assignment for critical reading (English 105). He had the intention of identifying assumptions, but still looked for words on the page, which were the rhetorical questions the author asked. In his social work classes, Cyrus moves to a post-liminal stage of identifying assumptions in others’ texts.

In a social work class, the professor assigned students to choose a chapter they had not read as a class from the textbook, titled \textit{Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare}. They then had to read the chapter and “respond” to it.\textsuperscript{xii} Cyrus chose chapter 7 titled “Human Sexuality Variations, Sex Counseling, and Sex Therapy.” In his response, Cyrus constructed a reading in a way that expanded beyond just his personal reaction and instead challenged the descriptive assumptions the textbook was making about the LGBTQ community. I argue that his questioning of descriptive assumptions in the textbook is an indication that he has reached a post-liminal understanding of identifying
assumptions. Cyrus is approaching a textbook, which would normally be read for background information as an act of transmission (i.e., to get the answers for a text), as a disciplinary insider who is moving from a legitimate peripheral participant to a full practitioner who identifies assumptions in the texts he reads.

In his response to chapter 7, Cyrus begins by pointing out a contradiction in the text, but more importantly, he highlights the descriptive assumptions the textbook makes about the LGBTQ community:

In theory, this chapter gives a very respectable, neutral understanding about what the community stands for. However, by putting labels and defining everything that the gay community stands for, it gives off a negative connotation. What the LGBTQ community is trying to advocate for is not using labels. The book even states that “Alfred Kinsey found that being gay or lesbian and heterosexuality are not mutually exclusive categories….” The book then goes on to explain that “Kinsey proposed a seven-point rating scale to categorize sexuality, with heterosexuality at one end and exclusive same-sex sexual orientation at the other.” This quote contradicts the rest of the book because there is not just one type of gay, or straight, or lesbian, or whatever. Sexuality is a very complex thing. Putting labels on it is only creating issues. (Cyrus “Final Reflections” 2)

In this excerpt, Cyrus questions the textbook’s seemingly contradictory definitions of sexual orientation. Alfred C. Kinsey established sexuality on a continuum, which does coincide with Kinsey’s comment that they are not mutually exclusive categories. However, Cyrus takes issue with the fact that even with the continuum, labels are present
at each stage of the continuum (e.g., mostly heterosexual, completely heterosexual). It is this use of labeling that Cyrus questions because it still makes descriptive assumptions about how people are: they will fit on this continuum somewhere, allowing them to be named and labeled. I suggest that Cyrus’s critique of the textbook chapter is effective in questioning assumptions made by Kinsey.

In addition to the descriptive assumptions in the textbook, a value assumption that is left unstated in the textbook chapter is that group or social identity is more useful for social workers than individuality. This unstated assumption present in Kinsey’s continuum and the textbook author’s use of it is left under-examined by Cyrus. However, in an additional assignment, Cyrus examines this value assumption of social identity versus individuality.

In the same social work course, the professor asked students to write an opinion piece on bullying. For his topic, Cyrus chose bullying related to sexual orientation. Throughout the writing of the opinion piece, Cyrus uses outside source material to support his claim that social work programs designed to help students being bullied due to their sexual orientation need to not view all members of the LGBTQ community as the same. Cyrus uses an article from the *Harvard Educational Review* by Eric Darnell Pritchard to make this point:

> Essentially, what Mr. Darnell [sic] is saying is that we need to focus more of our attention on micro and mezzo levels of work rather than just macro. When everything is handled with macro thinking, it somehow puts a label on the people who are part of the community and that’s partly why they still are being harassed, because of the label. (Cyrus “Untitled” 3-4)
In this opinion article, Cyrus is attending to the value assumption made by the writer of his social work textbook and other writers in the social work discipline who value group identity above individuality. The “micro” level for social work would be programs and assistance directed at the individual, while macro and mezzo levels would include programs and assistance directed at groups that share a common interest or quality. Cyrus identifies the value assumption underlying social work programs. While I did not recognize his identification of the value assumption overtly in his opinion piece, in our discussion of the assignment during an interview, he explained it more fully:

Cyrus:  
My opinion is that [social programs for bullying] should be done on a more micro/mezzo level because everybody’s different. There is a very…negative stereotype of people in the gay community like “All gay people dress in drag, and all lesbians are butch and dress like guys,” and that’s not what the image is about. That’s not how every person is. So when an activity is focused on the macro level, the stereotypes come like that and I don’t believe you can treat people for that you know what I mean?...I know many guys that are into sports, that are jocks, and they just so happen to have that sexuality. And that stuff being done at the macro level isn’t going to meet their needs. Like they can’t, they won’t fit into that community even though they do belong because of that one factor. It’s not reaching out to them in that way. It’s not evolved on the individual level because everyone is different even though they have one common interest.

(Cyrus, interview, 18 Feb. 2014)

Cyrus’s explanation captures his critique of descriptive assumptions about the LGBTQ community and value assumptions of group over individual identity within the social work discipline. Specifically, he rejects descriptive assumptions about how “people in the gay community” were, are, and will be. In addition, he rejects a reliance on macro level social programs that will not “meet the needs” of individuals who do not fit in the group with which they have been identified by others.
Cyrus’s reading practices are mediated by multiple purposes or goals. Cyrus is often motivated to read when the topic or content offers him talking points for discussion or debate with others. Similar to the previous chapter where Bruce’s self-sponsored literate activities with motivational speaking may have primed him for a heightened awareness of audience when reading and writing, I suggest that for Cyrus his motivation to challenge other’s religious arguments especially as they pertain to issues like gay marriage may prime him for identifying assumptions in other people’s texts. Identifying the assumptions that textbooks and social work policies make about the LGBTQ community allows Cyrus to further debate and discuss topics like gay marriage with others.

In sum, whether approaching a social work textbook, journal articles in social work, or his future clients/patients, Cyrus has moved to a post-liminal stage of identifying assumptions held by others, a development that may have been precipitated by his personal goal of reading texts that enable him to discuss and debate topics with other people especially when that discussion involves challenging other people’s biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about how the world should be (value assumption) or how the world is and always will be (descriptive assumption).

A criminal justice major, Natalie also enjoys challenging other people’s biases, stereotypes, and assumptions, primarily at work in the National Guard. Since she also takes substance abuse, criminal justice, and social work courses, Natalie is assigned to read similar texts and reading responses to the texts as Cyrus. For the threshold concept identifying assumptions in other people’s writing, Natalie develops from a pre-liminal stage in the critical reading course (English 105) to a liminal stage in her chosen
communities of practice: criminal justice, social work, and substance abuse. While
Natalie chose to complete the easier task of identifying loaded language in the critical
reading course (English 105) rather than look for unstated assumptions, she does identify
assumptions in the texts she is assigned in criminal justice courses. However, she still
does not label an assumption in texts or in our conversations, marking her as liminal.

Natalie’s liminal stage of identifying assumptions is evident in her case study
analysis of Crash, a movie from 2005 that explores prejudice. For the case study analysis
of Crash, Natalie was responding to a series of questions in her written response. These
questions tell her what to “read for” when watching the movie, such as, “What are the
origins of prejudice?” and “Do individuals or organizational experiences and beliefs fuel
stereotyping?” Similar to how Cyrus was encouraged to question assumptions through
classroom discussion and assignments, these questions from the criminal justice professor
seem to prompt Natalie to identify assumptions made by the characters in the movie
about other people and connect those assumptions to society. For example, Natalie wrote
the following response:

In society today, if a bad event happens, we tend to group every person of
that same religion or race into one category. This theory can be proven by
looking at the outcome of an event like 9/11. For many years after and
even still now, Middle Easterners are still subject to prejudice because a
group of Middle Eastern terrorists decided to attack. The fear of society
was partly justified. America had a right to fear the terrorists, but we did
not have the right to presume that everyone who looked Middle Eastern
was a part of the dangerous terrorist group. (Natalie “A Case Study Analysis of *Crash*” 2).

In this excerpt, Natalie is responding to the prejudice against the Persian shop owner in *Crash*. In particular, she makes the distinction between terrorists and people who are Middle Eastern, a stereotype that was addressed in the movie. She is making a text-to-world connection in this excerpt, which nods toward the need for others to not make assumptions about other people, unlike the characters in the movie.

Still, identifying prejudice in others is not the same as identifying unstated assumptions in texts, which for a movie would have to include the unstated assumptions made by the writer or director of the movie *Crash*. Natalie does make the important move from questioning assumptions that people hold about groups of people to identifying the unstated assumptions about prejudice made by the writer and director. What I find most notable in her case analysis is that she recognizes other types of prejudice ignored by the writer and director of this film. Natalie wrote the following: “The views and beliefs of a person are carried with them everywhere they go. These stereotypes are also carried not only through race, but gender, social class and sexuality” (Natalie “A Case Study Analysis of *Crash*” 6). Gender, race, and class were well integrated in the movie, making it difficult to discern at times if interpersonal conflicts were a result of conflict among gender, race, or class. However, the movie did not address stereotypes about sexuality. It is at this moment in Natalie’s written response where she has noted a value assumption made by the writer and director of the movie: sexuality is not a valuable part of the matrix of discrimination.
Since she did not refer to the writer and director’s inattention to sexuality in the movie as an assumption, I asked her about it during an interview:

Meghan: So how come earlier you have race, social class, gender, and sexuality? The movie doesn’t really touch on sexuality does it, in terms of homosexuality or heterosexuality. How come you brought that in?

Natalie: Just because in society today, that’s one of the big topics amongst discussion and everything … But yeah I brought that in just as a way to connect it to what’s happening now in the world.

(Natalie interview 10 April 2014)

Natalie had previously described gay rights as an important topic today. When we discussed what texts she remembered from the critical reading course, she said the editorials on Sochi, when the Olympics were held there and the government was oppressing members of the LGBTQ community: “I think [I remembered those readings well] because homosexuality is such a big thing right now” (Natalie interview 13 Feb. 2014). In interviews and in her writing, Natalie does not move beyond seeing LGBTQ rights as more than a “big thing” or a “big topic.” In addition, she does not suggest that her case study is identifying assumptions even in interviews. However, she is identifying what is not on the screen or on the script, what is missing.

The back and forth I recognize through her case study analysis and interview, with Natalie noticing what is missing but not perceiving sexuality as more than a “big topic,” indicates a moment of oscillation for her. Instead, in her case analysis, Natalie moves on from this rather brief statement on sexuality to discuss the protests for marriage equality in the LGBTQ community, and then moves back to summary of the movie. I find that this moment in her paper shows a learner oscillating in the liminal space.
I claim that Natalie’s reading of *Crash* is mediated by her multiple, in this case competing, goals, which may keep her from moving through the metaphorical portal of this threshold concept. On one hand, Natalie is motivated to read current events in order to debate with her co-workers in the National Guard. She reads the newspaper daily, which might explain her awareness of gay rights as an important topic in contemporary society, locally, nationally, and globally. Still Natalie has a competing goal within college, to just finish and leave. She identifies less as a college student and more as a member of the National Guard. As a result, her writing about reading is usually completed in a way that will get her the grade she wants, but does not necessarily push beyond that to develop membership within the community of practice of social work, substance abuse, or criminal justice.

In her *Crash* case analysis, Natalie had to answer the questions the professor provided, but did not have to show how well she could identify assumptions in other people’s texts. The focus on what she “has to do” is a distinction that is worth noting for Natalie, because her identity is not tied to being a college student. For example, when explaining her writing process for the second-semester composition course’s research paper, she states that her motivation was to do the minimum required:

Meghan: Last time we met you had a research article from psychology that you were going to use for your counter argument because it was pro online dating.

Natalie: Yeah.

Meghan: Did that get dropped off?

Natalie: Yes it did.
Meghan: Okay how come? What was your reasoning behind that? Why did that happen?

Natalie: By the time I got to the point where I was looking at it, I had already reached my 8 pages that I needed so I kind of just dropped the whole counter argument.
(Natalie interview 27 May 2014)

The “whole counter argument” would have been an opportunity to identify assumptions in the writer’s research article. However, the motivation to identify assumptions in order to refute the counter argument was not needed to get an “A” in the composition course, so she chose not to accomplish it.

As a reader in a liminal stage of identifying assumptions in other people’s texts, Natalie’s reading is mediated by multiple goals. She notices the assumptions made by the director and writer when she reads, such as the inattention to prejudice related to sexual orientation, but does not indicate any intention of identifying assumptions in her interviews. She includes “sexuality” in her analysis because it’s a “big topic” but does not suggest the writers or directors assume it is less valuable than other types of prejudice. Natalie may continue to move to a post-liminal ability to identify unstated assumptions, but that movement may continue to be constrained by her dis-identification with higher education.

Check your Bias at the Door: Identifying Descriptive and Value Assumptions in One’s Own Writing

Similar to their different developments in reading for other people’s assumptions, Cyrus and Natalie also move at different paces when developing an awareness of their
own assumptions when writing. Cyrus moves to a post-liminal stage in identifying assumptions in his own writing and thinking, while Natalie remains in a liminal stage.

For Cyrus, I recognized his development during the discussion of a reflective response after attending NA or AA meetings, a writing assignment for CAS 254, titled “Can I get an Amen?” For the reflective paper, students had to attend a face-to-face and online AA or NA meeting. They then had to describe the experience and reflect on it. According to Cyrus, his goal for this paper was to show people without an addiction that these meetings are powerful, that meetings work, and that he cares, even though he is generally “cynical” and does not have a problem with addiction. Since I know that Cyrus is not a religious person, I asked him how he balanced his own beliefs and those of the 12-step program, especially in response to certain statements about religion in his response paper, such as this one:

As displayed earlier, every meeting is set up differently. Some have high usage of religious methods and some rely on humility. It all depends what works best for the client. This experience has influenced me to let the client talk. Let the client feel safe, heard, and understood. Never let the client feel discouraged or think that all hope is lost because it is not. There are diverse amounts of people with a diverse amount of addiction problems who were able to fight the battle and come out victorious and if they can do it, then so can the client. (Cyrus “Can I get an Amen?” 6) According to Cyrus, he finds himself able to accept that his clients might be religious because of the cultural humility and competence he has been taught in his social work and substance abuse courses. Cyrus claims that a social worker must maintain cultural
competence, or an understanding that every culture is different, and cultural humility, an other-oriented stance and understanding that every human is different. When Cyrus describes classroom interactions, like when the female student insisted religious discussion was appropriate for all clients, he is commenting on who is developing cultural competence and humility and through that being properly apprenticed into the community of practice. In Cyrus’s response paper, he is careful to make it clear that he has developed the awareness that another person’s belief system may be different than his own, an awareness that gives them cultural competence and displays his humility. Through the reflective paper, Cyrus practices a separation of his personal beliefs (atheism) with his clients’ personal beliefs, whatever those may be.

Again his reading practice is mediated by multiple goals. By putting his own bias and assumptions aside, he is able to maintain his identity as helper within the social work and substance abuse communities of practice. Assignments like the NA/AA reflection are designed to help students make these discoveries and adjustments in their assumptions about others. As the professor explains, the goal of the assignment is to help students get “the concept that addiction is a disease,” and that people do not knowingly choose to be an addict. So students hear about the pain of addiction in these meetings and are provided another opportunity to challenge their personal biases. The professor confirmed that in the students’ papers there were a lot of “aha moments” as they listened to the stories of addiction. As the researcher, I note that for students in this community of practice, the ability to curb one’s own tendency to make assumptions about people who need help with addiction is a threshold concept. If the students cannot “check their egos at the door” or
begin to see addiction as a disease then these students will not be able to move beyond
the classroom and into practice as a therapist, counselor, or social worker.

While Cyrus moved through the threshold concept of identifying assumptions in
his own writing, Natalie remains in a liminal stage, oscillating between making
unexamined generalizations in her writing to voicing an appreciation for different
opinions since they help her examine her own. For example, in her case analysis of
*Crash*, Natalie makes sweeping generalizations based on an unexamined assumption of
her own: “It is just more evidence about the relationship between the blacks and whites. I
feel that this type of stereotyping is more prominent in the bigger cities because there are
more people and more discrimination to throw around” (Natalie, *Crash* case analysis, 4).
In the analysis, Natalie does bring in facts from her criminal justice class about the high
rates of incarceration of people of color. However, when I asked if this information about
where stereotyping more often occurs came from the criminal justice class, she said no,
she just assumed. Her writing indicates that she is not questioning her own assumptions
about prejudice in her writing.

In contrast to her writing, Natalie expresses a desire to continually question and
challenge her thinking, when discussing issues of prejudice, stereotypes, bias, and
assumptions. However, these moments of challenge occur in the National Guard, not
college:

Natalie:       What we’ll do is, we [members of the National Guard] always like to talk
               about controversial issues and stuff and so then people start breaking out
               assumptions and then that gets everything rolling and it’s a blast.

Meghan:        Are people in your ops pretty conservative politically?
Natalie: Um yeah there’s like one or two that are just like different than the rest of us. And the funny part is they’re both atheists. So that brings up a whole other topic of conversation. So it’s like we’ll just sit there and go back and forth back and forth.

Meghan: Does that happen a lot more in the military because you’re with each other for so long? That’s what I’m visualizing like being on a ship and having to talk, for a long time.

Natalie: Yeah and so that and I think it’s beneficial for everybody when we do get in the arguments because you can see more than one perspective of a situation. So our section leader said “I like this kind of stuff.” Just because we’re not sitting there not doing anything. We’re having somewhat intelligent conversations.

(Natalie interview 13 Feb. 2014)

Natalie states that opposing viewpoints are “beneficial,” which indicates that she is beginning to grapple with the threshold concept of identifying her own assumptions, but her writing indicates that she is oscillating within the liminal space. I suggest that she has not transferred this practice of debate and discussion from her military context to the college context, making it difficult for me to recognize it in her writing.

The failure to transfer may be a result of the cultural tools mediating her reading of *Crash*. These tools constrain her engagement with the threshold concept. I posit that it may be Natalie’s tendency to choose online classes (this course being one of them) instead of face-to-face classes that hinders her engagement. A face-to-face class could have included class discussion and debate about the movie, in ways that the online course could not, possibly constraining her development to a post-liminal stage of identifying assumptions:

Meghan: What about with the reading [in a substance abuse class about prevention]? Are you encouraged to question assumptions in that class, look for fallacies, consider language?
Natalie: I don’t know. Because these are kind of, I feel like if this was a regular class it would be more of that but because it’s an online class there’s more forwardness, here’s your assignment, here’s what you need to do sort of thing.

Meghan: How do you think it would be different if it were a traditional, butts in seat class?

Natalie: Well she talked about how in her first couple weeks like if this were a traditional class this would be a PowerPoint. We’d be having a class discussion, people could chime in on what they think. I think from there is, would expand into the kind of stuff we’ve talked about and learned about in [English] 105.

Meghan: That makes sense. I think that’s true. I feel like I see it in the intoxication section. Where you’re disagreeing, someone sees it this way, or that way. Where if it was a class discussion there’d be…

Natalie: …a lot more ideas. Yeah.

Meghan: So you don’t think that discussion boards make discussions happen?

Natalie: In a way they kind of help but it’s like everyone does it because it has to be done. They don’t do it to sit there because they want to talk about it. They do it because they have to. They write theirs, they do it, they respond to somebody and then they’re done.

(Natalie interview 11 Mar. 2014)

In this interview excerpt, Natalie notes the halted discussions that occur in her online courses. The cultural tool of online learning, meant to facilitate reading, is the online discussion board. Her online courses require her to post responses after every reading. The requirement to respond motivates Natalie to read, but the discussions that ensue are non-existent, according to Natalie. In comparison to the apprenticeship I saw in Cyrus’s substance abuse courses during class discussion, Natalie’s online experience seems to constrain her opportunities for development in not only the identification of unstated assumptions in texts, but also her ability to recognize them as assumptions.
Conclusion: Learners Being Apprenticed into Identifying Assumptions

This chapter has described the reading development of two students who have chosen social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse counseling as the communities of practice into which they want to be apprenticed. As students who are still moving from legitimate peripheral participators to full practitioners, they are beginning to make and share knowledge in ways that the community values. According to the professors and my classroom observations, identifying descriptive and value assumptions when reading and writing are threshold concepts for these disciplines.

This finding has implications for teaching. It shows Composition and Rhetoric teachers that identifying assumptions is a troublesome concept for students, but in communities of practice beyond Composition and Rhetoric it is a valued practice, meaning the rhetorical reading concept can transfer to a new context. Therefore, we should continue to teach the practice of identifying assumptions both when students read texts and when students write their own. The survey of literature about assumptions indicates that first-year writing instructors typically teach identifying assumptions when introducing argument writing. In contrast, the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse teachers extend the work of assumption identification to people, situations, and popular, multimedia texts. They also value personal response over argument. These two differences—the source of identifying assumptions and the reporting of them—appear to work as scaffolds for students, allowing them to perhaps later connect assumption identification to more difficult writing tasks. I suggest that our pedagogical approaches adjust to consider additional ways to introduce identifying assumptions in the classroom.
that offer more accessible ways in than the Toulmin method. Still, more research is needed.

When studying these three related disciplines, I noticed that the process of apprenticeship for members of these CoPs was more apparent than in other disciplines. A process of apprenticeship distinguishes CoPs where “people learn through improvisation and peripheral legitimate participation…so that learning is gradually increasing participation” (Downs 26). Having noticed the apprenticeship process students undergo to develop sensitivity to other people, to the assumptions held by other people and the assumptions held by themselves, I am left wondering how these research participants, who were taking 200-level courses, will continue to develop in the 300-level and 400-level courses.

Not being able to experience these additional shifts and developments indicates a limitation in my research design. A longitudinal study, which is not feasible for dissertation work because of time constraints, would offer a thicker, fuller description of how these threshold concepts will continue to develop. For example, as a Composition and Rhetoric scholar, I was expecting students to move beyond just identifying assumptions into evaluating how those assumptions affected the argument they were reading. In more advanced classes within social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse, do students move to an evaluative stage? Will these threshold concepts evolve to include more criteria like evaluation when the students advance to 300-level and 400-level courses?

My remaining questions suggest that research findings might be better understood through a longitudinal study that could capture how these threshold concepts will become
more complex as students develop into full practitioners. Since the goal of this dissertation research project is to improve reading pedagogy by identifying the threshold concepts that transfer to students’ communities of practice, I suggest that continued research is needed in order to achieve that.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

I began the dissertation by describing a recent shift toward researching college-level rhetorical reading. The shift is the result of a push by a persistent group of scholars to reintegrate reading into composition scholarship (Donahue, Horning, and Salvatori). Scholars who have embraced the reintegration of reading into composition scholarship combine theory and pedagogy by exploring the efficacy of teaching college-level reading in basic and first-year writing (e.g. Downs, Gogan, and Hogue Smith).

The majority of contemporary rhetorical reading research contributes to Doug Downs’s call for a “theory of reading with a principle of use,” which advocates for pedagogies that teach students “a way of thinking about texts, understanding the work they do as tools in activity systems, and using them to participate in those systems” (Downs 35 emphasis in original). By focusing on the context in which texts are encountered and “used,” scholars, researchers, and teachers of college reading utilize Communities of Practice (CoP) as a framework. CoP theory views disciplinary work as a process of apprenticeship during which students move from a position of legitimate peripheral participation to full participation by increasing their contribution to the community through reading, writing, discussing, and researching. Teaching students to read texts as part of a CoP helps those students uncover, explore, and understand “why people read [and] why there is a text to begin with” (Downs 35).

Throughout the introduction and the following chapters, I have explored how students use texts within certain CoPs—biochemistry and social work / substance abuse counseling, criminal justice. In doing so, I identified what rhetorical reading concepts
operate as threshold concepts and described how students use those concepts within the CoPs with which they identify.

Within the general goal of identifying and describing threshold concepts of rhetorical reading, I have two specifically pedagogical aims. I have worked to meet the first aim, to contribute to college-level reading resources for teacher preparation in basic writing and first-year writing, by describing how audience awareness (chapter 4) and identifying assumptions in one’s own writing and in other people’s writing (chapter 5) operate as threshold concepts of rhetorical reading that transform student reading and writing practices.

Supported by my first aim, the second aim was to understand how those threshold concepts traveled with or were transferred by students to new contexts in their chosen CoPs. My analyses of research participants from various disciplines, or CoPs, show that threshold concepts do move with students, but movement is mediated by students’ histories with reading, cultural tools of academic reading, development of new cultural tools of academic reading, and authority, which all enable or constrain students’ use of rhetorical reading concepts in new contexts.

In addition to these findings, my study has implications for several groups.

**Implications**

Overall, my findings from this study are that certain threshold concepts of rhetorical reading do move with students from the first-year writing classroom to new contexts in other communities of practice. Using threshold concept theory as lens for rhetorical reading has enriched my understanding of college reading practices. This
understanding is important for me because I teach college reading and writing. The findings are also relevant for writing program administrators and writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines directors who are concerned with articulation between general education and disciplinary courses. Finally, the findings have implications for teacher-scholars currently working to improve college-level reading pedagogy; they also contribute to a larger conversation about the oft-assumed relationship between reading and writing.

**For Basic Writing and First-Year Writing Teachers and Writing Program Administrators**

The findings from my dissertation research have several implications for teachers of basic and first-year writing and writing program administrators. When reintegrating reading instruction into the composition classroom, teachers and administrators should consider threshold concepts of reading along with how reading and writing instruction inform each other.

In chapter 4, I identified audience awareness as a threshold concept of reading and described how it operates within the biochemistry community of practice. A post-liminal awareness of audience is characterized by the learner’s ability to understand audience as situated and shifting, not static. A learner with a post-liminal understanding can shift between being a less expert and more expert reader in relation to a text. In addition, audience awareness aids learners in articulating the rhetorical choices they make in their writing, as they adjust for audiences with different levels of expertise.
As composition teachers and writing program administrators, we should modify our curricula to support audience awareness. If we want students to better articulate their rhetorical choices when writing, then we should attend more closely to how students read texts that assume different levels of expertise. In composition courses, we should assign various types of texts written for different audiences, some which include college students as potential readers and some that do not. However, it is not enough to just assign readings with different levels of expertise. We must include writing assignments that require students to reflect on how they adjust their reading practices and processes to accommodate the difference in levels of expertise. Students should reflect on how they read a text that made assumptions about knowledge that did not match their background knowledge of the text—its writer, the community of practice it was written for, the conversations it joined. We must also devote classroom time to the discussion of these adjustments, difficulties, and successes, so students can again see reading as an act of construction.

My findings in chapter 4 also indicate that when taught through reading and writing, students may better be able to develop a post-liminal understanding and use of audience awareness. During observations of composition courses, I noticed that audience awareness was often taught as a reading concept only. For example, composition teachers asked many research participants to evaluate the sources they wanted to use in their research paper. Typically, identifying the audience for the source was part of that evaluation. In interviews and in their annotated bibliographies, the majority of research participants said the source was anybody who was interested in the topic. Their response indicates a lack of awareness of the community of practice in which the text was
written—the purpose of the text, the conversations it joins, the audience it writes to, and
the way the audience uses the text. They saw audience as generalizable. It is important to
note that for all these composition courses, students were not writing research papers for
a specified audience, which means the audience defaults to the teacher.

I suggest a combination of attention to audience when writing and when reading
is needed to help students develop an understanding of audience as situated (i.e. a post-
liminal understanding). When asking students to identify audiences for different sources
in research papers, teachers also need to have students revising aspects of the research
paper they are writing: the information (amount of definitions, type of evidence) included
for different audiences, the titles of their papers for different types of publications, and
the way it is written based on different purposes. Downs suggests that getting students to
investigate how journals work can help them understand the activity systems of journal
articles—who they are written for, why they are written the way they are, etc. My
findings suggest that we must also include audience awareness when writing if we want
students to position themselves as a reader in relation to a text.

In chapter 5, I described how identifying assumptions when reading other
people’s texts and when writing one’s own texts operate as threshold concepts of
rhetorical reading within the social work, criminal justice, and substance abuse CoPs. As
a threshold concept, identifying assumptions prepares students to contribute in these
CoPs by helping them learn how to check their own biases so they can better serve people
from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. The classroom discussions, writing
assignments, and reading assignments common in social work, substance abuse
counseling, and criminal justice suggest that composition instructors may benefit from
expanding the way they teach students how to identify assumptions when reading and writing.

A survey of the literature and textbooks suggests that composition instructors primarily teach students how to identify assumptions when writing arguments with the Toulmin method. However, in social work, substance abuse counseling, and criminal justice, identifying assumptions is integrated through many different interactions—classroom discussion, writing, and reading. In addition, students explore assumptions through reflective writing, which seems to scaffold the difficult concept and perhaps prepare students for more advanced assumption identification in upper-division courses.

As composition instructors and writing program administrators, we should integrate this difficult but transformative concept into various moments in our curricula, not just argumentation. Instructors should ask students to identify assumptions in different types of text (academic, popular, multimedia, and events). Throughout the reading process, instructors should ask students to identify their own assumptions and the assumptions of writers. In addition, reading and writing about prejudice and stereotypes more generally seems to prepare students for conversations about unstated assumptions (potential bias) in texts they read. Through my research, I found that identifying unstated assumptions in a text (i.e. reading for what is not written on the page) is difficult for first-year composition students, so we need to teach it in steps throughout the semester, not just with one argument essay.

As we begin to integrate threshold concepts of rhetorical reading into our curricula, we should also consider how reading is mediated. Many students come to college with baggage from the cultural tools of reading assessments and accountability
programs, so our curricula may need to address expectations of college reading. In
addition, I found that self-sponsored literacies enable the development of student reading
practices, so we should begin to discuss how best to leverage non-academic literacies for
academic literacies.

**For Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines Directors**

The findings from my dissertation research also have implications for directors of
writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines programs.

In chapter 3, I used Wertsch’s mediated action framework to explore how the
histories with, relationships to, and cultural tools of academic reading mediate student
action. I found that the cultural tools common in college courses constrain reading more
often than they enable it. In many classrooms outside of composition and rhetoric,
avademic reading was often only an expectation: it was assigned but never taught. In
addition, the lecture-style instruction common among courses at the University of
Nevada, Reno results in students not completing assigned reading, since the PowerPoint
lecture slides come directly from the publisher of the textbook, making textbook reading
redundant in many students’ eyes.

If instructors use PowerPoint slides from the textbook publisher to lecture to
students, the instructors may need to address how students should *use* the book as an aid
for lecture. I observed a criminal justice professor tell students it was important to read
the textbook in addition to coming to lectures, but it did not change behavior. Instead,
professors should make connections among the book, lecture, and exams, to show
students how to use the textbook.
We may find that instructors find it difficult to make the connections, suggesting another potential implication: textbooks are no longer as relevant as university stakeholders believe them to be. I suggest that the cultural tools of reading in college may have made textbooks irrelevant. Shipka noted that the “continued use or dominance of a tool is based on other factors such as historical precedent, fear of or resistance to change, or the fact that the particular tool has been invested with so much cultural or institutional authority that it appears natural” (47). I claim textbooks in their current traditional form may be a result of institutional authority that is so imbued with history that it appears natural. As WAC and WID directors continue to consult with professors in other disciplines about writing assignments, they may also want to reflect on and discuss the merits of textbooks. If many students ignore textbooks and instead look to websites for key terms and concepts, should textbooks be reconfigured? Should textbooks become web sites similar to the unsanctioned ones students use to supplement class lectures and complete online homework?

Alternatively, the implications for these findings support the continued movement toward flipped classrooms. If students discuss class readings in smaller settings, rather than take notes during lecture, the use of textbooks may become more apparent for students.

Overall, the findings from my dissertation project support an additional area of inquiry for WAC and WID researchers and directors who can expand their impact on pedagogy in various disciplines by now developing assignments and conducting workshops with instructors on reading in their communities of practice. These workshops
can explore how reading operates within their community—how reading is used, what conversations are entered, who the audience is and what it values.

**For Composition and Rhetoric Scholars**

With my dissertation research, I am entering several conversations in Composition and Rhetoric. Most broadly, I am joining scholars who research rhetorical reading in college with attention to theory and pedagogy. I am also joining the growing number of scholars who are using threshold concept theory as a lens for identifying, naming, and describing transformative concepts of reading and writing in Composition and Rhetoric.

My research suggests that there may be limitations to using threshold concept theory alone. In chapter 3, I introduced a mediated action framework because I found that threshold concept theory did not allow me to discuss the complicated contexts in which literacies occurred and the trajectories of students as readers and writers in the academy. In addition, I still found myself unable to discuss some of the reading and writing connections that did not act as threshold moments for students within certain disciplines, but that I still saw as informative. For example, I noticed that some students tried to write their papers in ways that emulated textual features they preferred to read. Biochemistry major Roxy prefers to read texts that seem fair and balanced, so she tries to write that way as well. Roxy used to participate in debate in high school and enjoyed the direct interaction with others when building her arguments. Through interviews, I noticed that the consideration she gives to others people’s ideas and credibility when reading and
writing seems to come from her history with debate. As a result, when she considers sources for a research paper she “googles” the authors to make sure they are credible:

Roxy: Then, as I was working on my annotated bibliography, I was looking at the authors. I don't know if the other kids did it, but what I did is whoever the author was, I went and typed in their name on Google and found out who they were. Then, I made sure it was the right name. It wasn't a duplicate name of someone else. Then it was like, “Okay, this person is an author. This guy graduated from New York University.” Just stuff like that. Kind of just the background of them and what their majors were and stuff like that, just to see if they were coming from somewhere educational and credible.

Meghan: Cool. Is that something that he told you to do or is that something ...

Roxy: I kind of just thought about it myself because he says, “Okay, you have someone's name, Jane Doe. They're the author.” Okay, well, Jane Doe is the author of this book. In my head, I'm like, okay, well they're an author. Yeah, they wrote a book. That's great. Is this their first book? Do they have the credibility to write ... are they writing a book on science and they're a science major? Or are they writing a book on psychology and they're not a psychology major? They have to actually have somewhat education in that area, I feel. I kind of just thought about it myself. (Roxy interview 10 March 2014)

Just as she is concerned with credibility when reading, Roxy makes sure that she also remains credible when writing. She does not achieve credibility through credentials that can be “googled” but by being obvious about her attention to multiple viewpoints:

Meghan: Why do you think it's good to do that ... to say some people say this, some people say that?

Roxy: It's giving kind of a wider view and showing them that you're also seeing it. You're just not closed minded just looking at one thing. You're actually evaluating every aspect to it....Basically, trying to show that you're not biased. You're not just, “Oh, well it's this way just because it’s this.” You actually looked at it and you opened your mind to maybe it could possibly be this and stuff like that. (Roxy interview 10 March 2014)
These interview excerpts from when we discussed her research paper for her second-semester composition course indicated to me that Roxy connects what she values when she reads with what she values when she writes. She also connects the importance of classroom debate in high school to her reading and writing practices.

These choices do not transfer to Roxy’s biochemistry class. I did not include her work in the chapter on audience awareness in biochemistry because she only took tests and used the Internet for her homework. Still, fascinating reading and writing connections are occurring in Roxy’s work and she even states that her focus on credibility and maintaining her non-bias by demonstrating how she integrates multiple ideas in her papers is important for the real world, just not biochemistry: “Honestly, I do think that the whole viewing the two sides is a good thing… I feel like that's kind of beneficial in the world, not generally, maybe, towards my major, but just generally in the world” (Roxy interview 10 March 2014). Threshold concept theory, with its focus on the barriers to learning in disciplines, limited my ability to explore aspects of reading that extended beyond the disciplines and the university to embrace more human, social qualities of reading and writing. For Composition and Rhetoric scholars, I suggest that as we continue to study reading and seek out the best methods for doing so, we continue to push against some of these frameworks to find one, or a combination of several, that allows us to capture the complexity of reading and its connections to writing.

In addition, I found the articulation of high school and college reading is an important area for future research. Research has been conducted to examine how writing in high school connects to and transfers to the new context of first-year writing in college. However, we might consider examining reading in high school and how it might transfer
to the new context of college. Many of my research participants read literature exclusively in high school, but changes are on the horizon through Common Core State Standards and the work of disciplinary literacy specialists in teacher preparation programs. With the increase of informational texts and disciplinary literacies, the articulation between high school and college reading may begin to change.

As we continue researching college-level reading, I suggest we continue to push against frameworks we use to study reading and look on the horizon for new areas that if left underexplored will hinder students’ abilities to advance in college.

**Limitations of my Research**

As with any research project, there are limitations to what I could accomplish. The limitations of this dissertation include the lack of a longitudinal study and my inability to account for differences between digital and print literacies.

A longitudinal study would have allowed me to track continued progress of students’ reading in their chosen CoPs. When Bruce developed an understanding of audience as situated and when Cyrus began identifying assumptions made by his textbook author, I became curious as to how these students would continue to develop these reading practices. As they move on to 300- and 400-level courses, I wonder if they will continue to complicate audience and assumptions or if new threshold concepts of rhetorical reading will become important. Will Bruce change his reading process when he begins to understand the “biochem jargon”? Will Cyrus begin to evaluate assumptions as rhetorical choices? Would Natalie have developed a post-liminal understanding of
assumptions eventually? A longitudinal study would have provided an even thicker
description of rhetorical reading in various communities of practice.

Another limitation of my dissertation study is that it does not address differences
between digital and print texts, a difference that the research participants in this study and
college students more generally encounter. In Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in
an Age of Acceleration, Daniel Keller points out that while composition scholars have
“recognized how the proliferation of interactive and multimodal communication
technologies has changed what it means to write in the twenty-first century,” changes in
what it means to read within these interactive and multimodal communication
technologies has gone under-examined (1). Keller responds to this research gap by
introducing the concept of acceleration with literacy arguing that “speed as an influential
force has become a defining feature of literacy change” (Keller 7).

This acceleration occurs in two ways: “literacy technologies and practices...aim
to achieve some end faster” and literacies are “appearing, changing, merging with other
literacies, or fading at a faster rate” (Keller 8). Through his case study research, he found
that “accumulation and acceleration seemed to contribute to a cluttered, rushed
curriculum at school” and pressure to be constantly available to others when at home
(13). When following the case study research participants to college, Keller found,
additionally, that the increase of genres on the web provides “rhetorical and literate
resources for readers and writers” (150). This change results in more students reading
from the perspective of a writer, as they seek resources and examples of how to write
new genres, like Wikipedia entries or business proposals.
While Keller notes the potential for these online reading environments in aiding student writing (if they can transfer the knowledge between domains), Doug Downs suggests the proliferation of online reading hinders students’ ability to then shift to the heavy text-laden journal articles that comprise the activity system of the university: “Scholarly texts are of a sort to be everything that research suggests students don’t like about reading. Scholarly argument…will never feel as factual, informational, and comprehensible as student readers are likely to desire” (Downs 28). Researchers have found that the long chunks of text are a deterrent (McCabe qtd. in Downs); they have found that unfamiliar text design hinders reading effectiveness (Cohen and Snowden qtd. in Downs); they also found that students value “rapid reading” (Saumell, Hughes, and Lopate np qtd. in Downs). According to Downs, all of these difficulties that students face initially with scholarly texts gets exacerbated by the “visually-driven, multi-modal online reading environments” students are used to (28). The reading style prompted by digital environments is referred to as “hyper reading” (Sosnoski 163 qtd. in Downs) and it is fundamentally different than the reading expected or prompted by linear print text.

I have just briefly touched upon a few research studies that have examined accelerating digital literacies. Because it was outside the scope of this study, I did not delve into whether or not the students were reading texts online or in print and how those choices affected the students’ reading practices. Certainly, this difference emerged. For example, Bruce moved between the unfamiliar print journal articles to the more dynamic online texts in order to manage comprehension. Students who did not read often commented on the accumulation of reading. Also, I noted how online courses often
included limited discussion about texts. While these differences seem like rich areas of additional research, they were outside the scope of this research study.

Final Thoughts

If composition and rhetoric scholars believe it has become and will continue to become increasingly important for college students to use texts in various contexts and if college students are advantaged by being able to adjust their reading practices for various contexts then we can no longer afford to continue under-theorizing college-level reading.

In working toward a fuller understanding of how college students use texts, I resist the temptation to ask deficit-laden questions, like “Why don’t student read?” or “Why can’t students read?” I see these questions asked by composition scholars, who often premise their arguments on lagging ACT scores or government reports on the “end of reading.” Instead of researching and arguing from deficit, we must ask questions about the use of reading, when combined with concepts of rhetorical reading and a framework of CoP, such as “If we provide college students with direct rhetorical reading instruction in first-year composition, how might it change the way students use texts once they leave the first-year composition classroom?” As a discipline, we need to make a concerted effort to develop ways of teaching rhetorical reading that show students how to use texts beyond the first-year writing courses. Additionally, we need to continue broadening our understanding of the different uses of texts in college.

To this end, composition courses must teach students how to use texts as closely as they teach them how to write texts. Typically, composition textbooks will include a chapter toward the beginning of the book on reading. But that is it. Even in Bean’s ever-
popular *Engaging Ideas*, he includes several chapters on writing, but only one on reading. Through its description of how students use threshold concepts of rhetorical reading and how that use transforms and affects their writing, I hope that my dissertation has shown that to disregard the importance of developing sound reading pedagogy is to potentially place students at a disadvantage, including first-generation students, students from working and service class backgrounds, and Generation 1.5 students. Again, I am not highlighting a deficit in students’ ability or motivation to read. Rather, I am suggesting that if we know how certain concepts of rhetorical reading can transform student reading and writing across the curriculum, to relegate it to a single chapter in a book on writing and to discontinue further research on it, is to diminish its import and foreclose upon the possibility of student success after first-year composition requirements have been met.


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Endnotes

i San Francisco State University’s Integrated Reading and Writing Program for basic writing won the Conference on Basic Writing’s Innovation Award in 2004. The IRW program also includes an MA in Composition, along with a Graduate Certificate in Teaching Composition and a Graduate Certificate in Teaching Post-Secondary Reading. Graduate courses include Introduction to Graduate Study in Composition, Pedagogical Grammar for Composition, Seminar in Teaching Integrated Reading and Writing, Course Design in Composition and Post-Secondary Reading, Theoretical Backgrounds in College Reading Instruction, and Pedagogy and Practice of Post-Secondary Reading.

ii Prior to Fall 2010, the first-year writing curriculum was comprised of three courses: a non-credit-bearing basic writing course, ENG 098, and two college-level courses, ENG 101 and 102. Placement was then and is now determined primarily by SAT or ACT score, though students can alternatively utilize a timed writing test or submit a placement portfolio. While most students placed into 101, with fewer into 102, basic writing enrollment had been increasing: in 2008, nearly 30% of incoming students placed into ENG 098. Concerned with these numbers, administrators at the state system level made a top-down decision in Spring 2009 to lower the ACT cut-off score for ENG 101 from 21, the number used by Core Writing, to 18. Facing this mandate, which affected nearly 60% of the existing developmental writing population, Core Writing designed a new course combination: the three-credit Composition Intensive (ENG 100-I), and two one-credit supplements, Rhetorical Reading (ENG 105) and Editing for Style (ENG 106). Students who scored between 18 and 21 where then placed into the five-course combination. Some of these students are the research participants in this study.

iii The one exception is Cyrus, whom I interviewed and observed his third and fourth semester, as part of my initial pilot study.

iv I do not seek to make claims about the students from working class backgrounds or from service class backgrounds (a common background in Nevada, with its many casinos and hotels). Instead, I will describe each student within a particular context, making specific claims about that student’s experience and how it affects reading practices. This approach seems more in line with current work in basic writing scholarship, and literacy studies more generally.

v Research shows that any study relying on volunteers is subject to bias. Robert Rosenthal and Ralph Rosnow found that people who volunteer to be in studies are “more educated, come from a higher social class, are more intelligent, are more approval-motivated, and are more sociable” (qtd. in Boughner np).

vi I modeled Christina Haas’s longitudinal study of a biology student. In her study, interviews began with background questions like “Tell me a bit about your high school English class” and “Can we start by just listing what classes you’re taking this semester?”
Later in the interviews, she delved into more complex issues like “How does this lab report compare with what you expect to do in grad school?” or “What sorts of difficulties do you have with these journal articles?” In general, the interviews consisted of five of the six types of research queries identified by Michael Quinn Patton in *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*: background or demographic questions (e.g. “How many writing classes did you have in high school?”); experience and behavior questions (e.g. “What kinds of things are you reading for the term paper?”); opinion and value questions (e.g. “Is this reading different from the reading you did last year?”); feeling questions (e.g. “Do you like ….”); and knowledge questions (e.g. “What is developmental biology?”).

I still need to hire a research assistant to conduct a check for inter-rater reliability.

The Matthew Effect is a term that is used to describe the “educational sequences where early achievement spawns faster rates of subsequent achievement” (Stanovich 381). Basically, children who are reading well, read more and continue to get better; children who do not read well, read less, and continue to fall further and further behind the good readers. It was named after the Gospel according to Matthew: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (XXV:29). The simplest way to understand the Matthew Effect may be by the common quip: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Literacy-in-action marks what Jody Shipka calls the third wave of composition research. Shipka divides composition research into three waves. The first wave focused on the individual, the research relying on methods like think-aloud protocols. The second wave focused on the social, the research turning to ethnography. The current wave attempts to bring the individual and the social together in the research.

For literacy research in particular, Brandt and Clinton argued for the current wave, calling for “literacy-in-action” research that sees not just the literacy event, but recognizes the historical influences upon the event and the technologies, or material objects present, that mediate the event. Brandt and Clinton argue that we examine literacy through a Latour lens, or what others would call activity network theory. His work shows why focusing on ethnography, by looking at literacy from inside the frame, will make reading or writing look like it is subsumed by immediate events (Brandt and Clinton 345). For example, a loan applicant and officer do not consider the impact of their actions on the Federal Reserve, but that does not mean what they are doing is not related to the Federal Reserve. As well, Latour’s perspective bridges the great divide between people and things. The failure to incorporate things into our conceptions of social interactions causes a break in theory between the local and the global. In other words, “bringing objects into play…allows us to understand that, with the help of objects, lots of different kinds of activities can be going on in and across local situations” such as a network of documents and practices (Brandt and Clinton 346). The new perspective for which they advocate is to follow the networks or threads of the sites of literacy, exposing the away that a localizing literacy event might be a globalizing accomplishment in others, exposing
the ways that local literates are recruited into distant campaigns, exposing those who benefit from the literacy practice even those who are not at the scene (347).

\textsuperscript{x} 1. Mediated action is characterized by an irreducible tension between agent and mediational means; 2. Mediational means are material. 3. Mediated action typically has multiple goals; 4. Mediated action is situated on one or more developmental paths; 5. Mediational means constrain as well as enable action; 6. New mediational means transform mediated action; 7. The relationship of agents toward mediational means can be characterized in terms of mastery and (8) appropriation; 9. Mediational means are often produced for reasons other than to facilitate mediated action; 10. Mediational means are associated with power and authority (Wertsch 25).

\textsuperscript{xi} As I discussed in chapter 1, I am using past research and my own research questions as a guide for coding. My decision to do so is a variation of grounded theory method that does not assume a researcher can read for themes without any preconceived notions of what she will find.

\textsuperscript{xii} At the University of Nevada Reno, students take a year of Core Humanities in their second year of college. As a part of general education, Core Humanities introduces students to ancient and medieval cultures, the modern world, and American experiences and constitutional changes. These courses involve extensive reading, analysis, discussion, and writing.

\textsuperscript{xiii} In threshold concept theory, liminality is one of the six features commonly cited. It highlights the progression of learning. As students move through the threshold of a concept, they are described by researchers as pre-, post-, or in a state of liminality oscillating within the threshold. Learners in a pre-liminal stage are still developing an understanding of or struggling with the difficult concept. Learners in a post-liminal stage have internalized the concept and been transformed by it (Land and Meyer).

\textsuperscript{xiv} For community of practice (CoP), I use Artevema’s definition that says each CoP has distinct intellectual and social conventions, and students, through apprenticeship, acquire the expert practices used in CoP by being actively engaged in these practices. Gradually, through what Lave and Wenger identify as legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers to the community gradually become enculturated through increased involvement in the community and increasing commitment of time and effort become full practitioners.

\textsuperscript{xv} When I use exigence, I am referring to Bitzer’s definition: “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6). In the case of my classroom assignment, students needed to find what pressing problem Palin was addressing, but not naming, in her speech.
The difficulty paper is an assignment designed by Mariolina Salvatori. It asks students to explore in writing moments of difficulty they experience during the reading process, in order to get them to engage with the text in those critical moments.

Lave and Wenger identify *legitimate peripheral participation* as the first step in joining a community of practice. Newcomers to the community gradually become enculturated through increased involvement in the community and increasing commitment of time and effort become full practitioners.

I am putting these three majors together because when I started working with the students, I realized that a student majoring in one of these disciplines would take classes in all of these areas. There is a great deal of overlap, allowing me to examine them together as one community of practice.

Two of the students took the 100J course, which included the critical reading book and assignments within it. The classroom activities and assignments for identifying assumptions were nearly identical.

The only example I have is from Cyrus’s courses, because the majority of courses that Natalie took were online. We did discuss the limitations of classroom discussion during our interviews, which I link to limitations of apprenticeship into ways of making and sharing knowledge. However, a comparison of online versus face-to-face courses is outside the scope of this chapter and dissertation.

It is important to note here that for these communities of practice, I am expanding the definition of text from print-based texts to also media and social gatherings because the students are assigned to respond to a variety of texts and experiences. In all of these assignments, they are asked to question their own encounter with the “text.”

I was not able to get a copy of this written assignment. Therefore, I am describing the assignment in this chapter as Cyrus described it in our interviews.