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Chapter Author(s): Matthew Fogarty, Páraic Kerrigan, Sarah O'Brien and Alison Farrell

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“I CAN’T GO ON, I’LL GO ON”***Liminality in Undergraduate Writing***

Matthew Fogarty, Páraic Kerrigan,
Sarah O’Brien, and Alison Farrell

According to Jan Meyer and Ray Land (2006), along with being troublesome, integrative, transformative, and probably irreversible, threshold concepts are characterized as liminal. Their liminal nature is summarized by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2016): “Threshold concepts involve what the name implies—thresholds. But the movement toward and the (hopeful) crossing of those thresholds isn’t straightforward; instead, it happens in a two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of way as learners push against troublesome knowledge” (ix). Glynis Cousin (2006) observes that the idea of liminal states aids “our understanding of the conceptual transformations students undergo” in challenging learning situations, like the grasping of threshold concepts (4). And yet, Ray Land, Julie Rattray, and Peter Vivian (2014) suggest that the liminal space “has remained relatively ill-defined, something of a ‘black box’ within the conceptual framework of Threshold Concepts” (201).

This chapter focuses on this liminal space. Specifically, we wanted to better understand the nature, occurrence, and impact of liminality in undergraduate writing through the lens of threshold concepts of writing, through which those concepts could in turn provide an effective theoretical and pedagogical framework for our particular context. Our setting is a relatively new writing center (established 2011) in an Irish university that has an undergraduate population of 10,050 students and a postgraduate enrollment of 1,900. Following a presentation of our distilled findings, we explore and contextualize one key action-oriented insight about undergraduates’ experiences with threshold concepts of writing that emerged from the data, that of the coexistence of apparent liminality, a stage that can be paralyzing for students, and authentic liminality, a stage that is important for students grappling with threshold concepts and that is therefore productive and potentially transformative.

In the next section, we review literature that has contributed to these ideas of liminality; following that review, we describe the research that led us to these definitions.

RESEARCH CONTEXT—LIMINALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

This is a world that is radically unknowable: even though we may make modest gains here and there, our ignorance expands in all kinds of directions.

—Ronald Barnett

Ronald Barnett's (2012) observation is both reassuring and devastating for researchers. For us, it suggests that despite our most virtuous and rigorous efforts, all our research, thinking, and writing is infused with uncertainty, not least because of the overwhelming quantity and breadth of scholarship that makes it an impossibility to have an entirely comprehensive knowledge of any field. Against this reality, we echo the words of our colleagues in *Naming What We Know* by "stressing the contingent changing nature of knowledge" (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015, 4).

The growing body of work in higher education around threshold concepts includes a range of interpretations, practical applications, and reflections on how seeing one's discipline in this manner can be illuminating, specifically with regards to curriculum design and assessment (Cousin 2006; Land 2011; Meyer and Land 2006; Meyer, Land, and Baillie 2010; O'Mahony et al. 2014; Peter et al. 2014). The majority of colleagues researching liminality with reference to threshold concepts cite Victor Turner's (1969, 1979) work on rites of passage as providing foundations in this area. With regard to writing and liminality, researchers have approached this topic from various perspectives including postgraduate writing (Kiley 2009; Kiley and Wisker 2009), academic literacies (Gourlay 2009), L2 writers (Das Bender 2016), comparisons across disciplines (Peter et al. 2014), and with direct reference to writing transfer (Adler-Kassner et al. 2016). In the work on this topic one theme persists: the uncertainty associated with liminality. And though a sense of arrival and comprehension can be achieved in this liminal space, this sense is frequently counteracted by the doubt and confusion of grappling with troublesome, complex ideas. Land, Rattray, and Vivian (2014) note that these thresholds, or "conceptual gateways," often involve "a letting go of customary ways of seeing things" (200). Land (2011) continues, describing this as "a space of transformation in which the transition from an earlier understanding (or practice) to that which is required is effected" (200). Liminality in learning is described in the threshold

concepts literature using a host of terms, many of which encapsulate the essence of uncertainty: *troublesome, liquid space, problematic, suspended, unsettling, oscillative, out of focus, sense of loss, nonlinear, recursive, messy, abstract, mimicry, difficult, mystery*. Generally, this language points to an academic rabbit hole that may end in anxiety of an intolerable kind and/or failure.

Threshold concept scholars also have a keen awareness of the uncomfortable nature of liminality. Patrick Sullivan (this volume), for instance, remarks that the liminal space of deep reading produces confusion, uncertainty, and chaos. Similarly, Margaret Kiley and Gina Wisker (2009) observe that in the liminal space "doctoral students are often likely to feel 'stuck', depressed, unable to continue, challenged and confused" (432). They suggest that an inability to move from this space is damaging for early career researchers: "While it is acknowledged that being in the liminal state and even being stuck . . . are probably necessary stages . . . we would argue that it is damaging for research students to remain stuck to the extent that they lose confidence and seriously question their identity as researchers" (434).

An important counterpoint, however, is also noted in the scholarship that acknowledges the potential in the liminal space and time. This idea of potential is especially important for the idea of authentic liminality we describe later in this chapter. Belinda Allen (2014), as an academic, artist, and designer, encourages us to "re-envision liminality as an authentic creative space for learners and teachers, a space for unknowing and unlearning, a disorienting and productive space" (31). Allen asserts that if the process of entering liminality "is deliberate, 'jumping' rather than 'falling' or 'being pushed', there is potential to develop confidence and self-efficacy" (33). Land, Rattray, and Vivian (2014) also remark on how the liminal space can foster creativity, a site where "students' thinking and practice would stay emergent and fresh, without becoming stylised" (2). Similarly, Beverly Hawkins and Gareth Edwards (2015) suggest when writing about liminality and leadership learning that the experience of doubt in liminality "is a central thread through the processes of *learning about* and *doing* leadership" (27). They note that the "liminal context . . . is vital because it provides a place in which students can experiment with ideologies, identities and practices that differ from those they employ teleologically in their lives outside the classroom" (34). Lesley Gourlay (2009) also sees emotional struggles as "a normal part of the academic process" (189), whereas Jason Sunder (2017) goes a step further, noting that his work around supporting this area "proceeds from the premise that it is precisely by remaining open to uncertainty, contingency, and complexity that humanities research maintains its purchase" (1).

But while the research literature on liminality seems to introduce and consider to some extent what we call *authentic liminality*, there is still a gap around explorations of the essence of liminality, a factor that especially emerged in our study. In “Liminality Close-Up,” Land (2014) discusses three analyses by Peter Vivian, Guy Walker, and Caroline Baillie, John Bowden, and Jan Meyer that “[throw] helpful light on the nature of [the liminal space]” (3). All three analyses have assisted us in our efforts to detect what our data suggest about students’ experience of liminality in writing. Similar to Vivian (2012), we believe in starting where students are and recognizing the uniqueness of that point for each student. Like Walker (2013), in turn influenced by Paul Salmon, Neville Stanton, Guy Walker, and Daniel Jenkins (2009) and indeed echoing Vivian (2012), we advocate for providing students with an opportunity not only “to relate concepts and ideas to everyday experience and raise students to the level of ‘compatible’ understanding” but to conspicuously build on what they already possess in terms of writing knowledge, skills, and processes, thus helping students navigate liminality, whether apparent or authentic (261). Indeed, Walker’s and Vivian’s studies resonate with Alison Farrell, Sandra Kane, Cecilia Dube, and Steve Salchak’s (2017) work on writing transfer, which notes the importance of “recognizing what students are bringing to college,” particularly those processes and attitudes that are useful and that, “where acknowledged and built on, could contribute to greater success for students and improved retention for institutions” (81–82). Finally, Baillie, Bowden, and Meyer’s (2013) view of “continual variation in liminality as new concepts are grasped” was something we also identified with regards to liminality in undergraduate writing (241).

Research Approach

Using threshold concepts of writing as our theoretical framework, we pursued our curiosity around liminality and undergraduate writing by exploring three key questions:

1. Do students experience uncertainty in their academic writing?
2. In what aspects of writing do they experience uncertainty?
3. What are their strategies for both tolerating and navigating their way through uncertainty in academic writing?

The research setting was the Maynooth University (Ireland) writing center, which itself embodies liminality, existing as it does apart from the disciplines, devoid of the tradition of writing studies typical in the

United States, unsupported by WAC/WID programs and their associated pedagogies, and in an infrastructural no-man's land (Farrell and Tighe-Mooney 2015; O'Brien 2017; Riedner 2015). In Irish universities, generally, writing programs are a rarity, and where modules do have an identified focus on writing, they do not necessarily have an institutional designation as writing programs. Given this context, our research into liminality using threshold concepts of writing required the provision of a locally navigable channel into this world. We provided this by enquiring into uncertainty in undergraduate writing with our students. We underpin this approach with the assertion that undergraduate writing is imbued with uncertainty and that that uncertainty is *amplified* within liminal spaces. These spaces include undergraduates' own experiences, which mirror many elements of the research summarized earlier. Because of the way our writing center is situated, uncertainty may have been amplified in that physical space, as well.

Indeed, it is precisely the liminal nature of this space that allows us to decipher the epistemological and ontological challenges associated with being a writer. In other words, we see the undergraduate writing process as having an inherent unavoidable uncertainty due in no small part to its creative essence. While it has predictable elements and features (in terms of recognizable forms, knowable rules, conventions and strategies, familiar tools/technology, learnable patterns, declarable goals, etc.) at its core, the enactment involves uncertainty and/or unpredictability, not least because of the multiplicity of possible writing moves and the uniqueness of each writing act. We argue that in addition to this suffusion of uncertainty that exists across undergraduate writing, uncertainty is accentuated in the liminal space because that space is remarkably complex, unknown, and brimful of possibilities. Given our situation, threshold concepts of writing offer both a theoretical framework and a pedagogical bridge that faculty and students can use to explain and explore writing in general, particularly in instances of liminality.

Our research methodology further reinforces the "betwixt and between" nature of the enquiry. We chose action research that blends "practical and theoretical concerns" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 357), incorporates intentions "to change and improve" (Open University 2005, 4), and "offers a means of providing an understanding to a problematic situation" (Opie 2004, 79). This intentionality "that the research will inform and change" one's practice (Ferrance 2000, 1) is a defining characteristic of the approach also described in the literature as both collaborative and individualistic, practitioner based, cyclical, incorporating critical analysis and self-reflection, and having the potential

to be emancipatory and empowering (Grundy 1987; Kincheloe 2003; McNiff 2002; Stenhouse 1975; Whitehead 1985; Zuber-Skerritt 1996).

Site and Research Participants

In order to answer our questions, we surveyed undergraduate students who had visited the writing center. An online questionnaire was employed as an efficient way to gather and process anonymous data from a potentially large number of respondents; questionnaires would also facilitate the identification and subsequent exploration of patterns or trends in the data. The research cohort, undergraduates who had visited the writing center between September 2015 and June 2017, was chosen for its representation across the disciplines and across the undergraduate-year groups. In total, 334 students were invited to participate in the research; 93 students completed the questionnaire, which was designed to gather descriptive quantitative and qualitative data using a Likert scale and open-response questions. The Likert scale data were initially analyzed within the online questionnaire tool, while the open-response questions were interrogated using thematic analysis, specifically the model described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006).

EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF UNCERTAINTY IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

While one questionnaire cannot comprehensively answer our research questions, the responses we gathered did yield useful data. The findings indicate that the vast majority of our research participants experience the uncertainty that is an intrinsic part of undergraduate writing, hint at the magnified uncertainty that occurs in instances of liminality, and are largely aware of their strategies for coping with uncertainty in writing. All these findings also point to the revised conceptions of liminality we focus on here, apparent and authentic liminality. In the remainder of this chapter, we use threshold concepts of writing as a lens with our data in order to gain theoretical and pedagogical insights specifically into the liminal space in undergraduate writing. First, we present the thematically distilled data.

Where, What, and When of Uncertainty for Undergraduate Writers

The majority of students in this research reported they experience uncertainty because they find writing in university more various and

complex than the writing they did before college. They also remark that disciplinary differences contribute to this variety and complexity. Specifically, many students experience confusion when sourcing evidence, composing through the discourse of the discipline—achieving the appropriate academic tone/register, clarifying and meeting audience expectations, crafting an argument, reliably sourcing and effectively using evidence, and conforming to the conventions of the genres required, including referencing. Students' uncertainty is reinforced by a lack of understanding around how to interact with disciplinary scholarship and ideas—interrogating, discriminating, and integrating this thinking; having some sense of what "good" university writing looks like; and having an inability to articulate and/or find a place for one's voice.

The idea of disciplinary deciphering towards argumentation was a theme distilled from this data that captures key aspects of the confusion respondents reported with regard undergraduate writing. Students reported having difficulty clarifying and understanding what is expected of them in terms of academic writing processes and outputs in the university. They remarked on the challenges of "trying to fully understand what the lecturer expects from the essay" and faculty "being unclear about what they want." This uncertainty is captured in data extracts: "The most confusing thing is how different things are expected of you from different disciplines"; "Often the lecturers do not specify what kind of a piece they want from a student and hence leaves one confused"; "Different disciplines have different writing styles and expectations." The variation among disciplines is perceived to play out also within disciplines and between faculty in a manner that can be incomprehensible to students; one respondent used words and phrases such as "inconsistencies," "ambiguous," "you have to second guess," "no uniformity," and "chaotic system."

The concerns around argument related largely to using evidence, what students described as "backing up" opinions, and sourcing what writers need in the "overwhelming information available." These concerns also included the notion of voice and the challenge of how and where one's opinion can gain a foothold amongst the other voices and within the disciplines; this concern is captured in this extract from the data: "The difficulty I often have is that I read extensively and consequently have difficulty synthesizing the information and formulating a cogent argument in a timely manner. The second difficulty is finding the balance between adequately referring to relevant literature and finding my own voice. The emphasis can be different between various departments." Other related issues included using the appropriate tone,

saying “exactly what I want to say,” knowing “if I am going in the right direction,” the need for critical engagement/thinking, and structuring.

Students' Strategies for Coping with Uncertainty in Undergraduate Writing

The diversity inherent in these students' experience of uncertainty in undergraduate writing is reflected in their strategies for coping with it. Students employ a range of strategies when it comes to coping with uncertainty; these may or may not involve other people and could be classed as inactive, reactive and proactive. Uncertainty prevents some, but not all students, from writing: some students see uncertainty as a site of opportunity; for some, uncertainty encourages writing risk taking; for others, it is a precursor to possible failure. Hence, uncertainty prompts low-risk behavior, such as choosing the “easiest” topic/assignment.

Specifically, the questionnaire data provide answers to our research questions around what students do to mitigate feelings of uncertainty. Through our thematic analysis, we delineated their responses under two main themes: seek help—expert/other, and writer resilience. Faced with uncertainty in writing, the most common action noted by students was to seek either expert help from faculty or the writing center, or to seek help from peers; students mentioned looking for assistance from other unspecified people, but this response was in the minority. According to our data, students who pursue expert help use that opportunity to talk about the writing task, to seek specific guidance, to find inspiration and encouragement, to grow in confidence, to experience success, to gain knowledge, and to get feedback. One student noted, “I spoke to my tutors in first year about the feedback from my essays and I was able to use some of the feedback into my writing. However, I didn't fully grasp the argument structure. So, I examined one particular essay with the help of my lecturer and I understood exactly where I was going wrong.” Where undergraduates talk to peers about their writing, they report they bounce ideas off each other, articulate what they want to say in their writing, clarify whether they are going in the right direction, ask for advice, and seek help with proofing. Some students also mentioned seeking help online, and some contact the library.

Of greater interest to us than the somewhat predictable, albeit sound, strategy of asking for help were the other ways students addressed or ignored their uncertainty with regards to writing. This theme has been named *writer resilience*, and we informally trace the responses along a continuum of doing nothing to doing something. A small minority of students noted that they do not do anything to mitigate feelings

of uncertainty; we return to this data specifically in the next section. Moving from that point towards doing something, a variety of strategies were employed by students, all of which we would categorize under the broader 'internal' heading. Students mentioned dithering and procrastinating, taking a break, staying positive/hoping for the best, journaling, planning, mind mapping, starting/making an attempt at the assignment, working hard, reading, researching, and writing. Writing itself emerged as the most often employed self-reliance strategy for respondents. In their comments students hint at how writing helps them to move through the uncertainty: "I keep writing and rewriting until I am happy with the work that I produced. And I also read a lot"; "I try focus on making important points in my writing and try create flow"; "I just keep writing and hope for the best." Some students noted a combination of techniques they use to address uncertainty as captured in this response: "Procrastination. . . . Although I do think that in this case the best course of action is to brainstorm for your assignment the day you get it and let it mull over in your mind for a few days and let it grow itself. . . . Sometimes you just have to go for it though, you need to take risks sometimes." Others noted that the uncertainty persists: "No, I am always uncertain until I get my grades"; "Often feel uncertain about writing pieces but have to submit them anyway."

APPARENT AND AUTHENTIC LIMINALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

When we explored our findings through the lens of threshold concepts of writing, one key insight emerged: the notion of the coexistence of apparent and authentic liminality. This insight is rhizomatic in character with synergistic, complementary strands. We explore it in the following section.

While Patricia Claudette Johnson's (2010) work in "writing liminal landscapes" includes the idea of the "'apparently' real" (522), we recognized in our research an apparent liminality that coexists with an authentic liminality; we suggest that both liminality types exist for undergraduates and that they manifest themselves in two corresponding types of uncertainty. What we call *apparent liminality* is the unnecessary and potentially paralyzing uncertainty that materializes whenever students' knowledge and skills are inadequate to the task and/or students are entirely unsure of what is required, whereas authentic liminality is the necessary, productive, and potentially transformative uncertainty that exists in some writing processes. Johnson (2010) argues that an apparent reality prevails in which the viewer claims "mastery" over a

place by bringing a particular ideology and/or perspective, historical, political or otherwise, to it in order not to “reflect reality but reproduce the ‘apparently’ real” (522). Similarly, what undergraduates bring to academic writing influences their perceptions and experiences of it, including their interpretation of its liminal quality. Given our context, with its absence of immediately identifiable theoretical and pedagogical writing frameworks, it can be very difficult for undergraduates to distinguish between apparent and authentic liminality. Using threshold concepts of writing can help both our students and faculty decipher the liminal space.

Though apparent liminality can cause confusion and frustration for undergraduates, its essence is tangible and negotiable. The disorientation of apparent liminality is akin to that one might experience in completing a complicated, many-pieced jigsaw. If, for example, one had never attempted such a task, it may appear that the jumbled pieces simply pass through some mystical space only to reappear postprocess as a perfectly coherent whole; in reality, the making involves having a clear sense of the final product and a knowledge of the processes required to reach the end goal. In writing, a process for which students lack both the knowledge and skills required, the task can seem insurmountable. However, the apparent liminality associated with the threshold concept *writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms* (Bazerman 2015, 35), in this instance the forms or genres associated with undergraduate academic writing, can be diminished for students so they know the approach to take and so they have a sense of what the finished product should look like. Our research suggests students are actively seeking information about these processes and the final outcome. What emerges from the data is that the students want clarity in terms of writing outputs. This clarity is required not least because they assume, quite rightly in some cases, that these outputs can be somewhat fixed and that the process is one through apparent liminality to a predictable end product—not unlike the picture on the jigsaw box. Hence, sharing the threshold concept *writing is a social and rhetorical activity*, which Kevin Roozen (2015) explains as “writers are engaged in the work of making meaning for particular audiences and purposes” (17), should prove more effective when our writers have a relatively clear sense of what their imagined reader is looking for. Gourlay (2009) echoes this, noting from her data that “some of the confusion and worry experienced by these students might have been avoided, and that even tentative attempts to discuss requirements might have (at least partially) illuminated the scene” (189). Equally, students want to know how to meet the

audience's expectations. Pauline Ross, Shelly Burgin, Claire Aitchison, and Janice Catterall (2011) suggest students are concerned with writing processes, and they report that in their research with doctoral candidates, "Students . . . experienced the benefits of the process of writing as a way of connecting 'doing' and 'knowing'" (25).

On the other hand, considering authentic liminality emphasizes the point that writing is in every conceivable way a malleable and developmental process, which brings sharply into focus the threshold concept *all writers have more to learn* and the elaboration that "writers never cease learning to write, never completely perfect their writing, as long as they encounter new or unfamiliar life experiences that require or inspire writing" (Rose 2015, 59–61). When our students experience this type of liminality again, they feel "pressurized," "overwhelmed," "frustrated," "confused," "lacking in confidence," and "filled with doubt." These all-too-familiar experiences are not just epistemological but intensely ontological. This is the liminality associated assuredly with the threshold concept *all writers have more to learn* but also *writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies* (Scott 2015, 48). In this liminality, we are not hampered by a fixation on those facets of uncertainty for which there are black-and-white answers; rather, we experience "writing as a creative activity, inextricably linked to thought," and we understand that "we write *to think*" (Estrem 2015, 19). When we and our students can tolerate, navigate, and perhaps even relish this authentic liminality, there is the possibility for the writer to develop in conjunction with the individual writing processes and the text.

Using our data, threshold concepts, and the extant literature, we suggest that negotiating authentic liminality in undergraduate writing is (1) a process of constant change as much as it is one of irreversible transformative learning; (2) a unique process for each student—there is no universal undergraduate writing liminality; and (3) concerned as much with thinking and becoming as it is with writing. We look at each of these in turn.

In the scholarship in this area, the sense of constant change appears sometimes alongside and sometimes in opposition to the idea of transformation. Gourlay (2009) argues that the "threshold" notion "is not without its own weaknesses . . . it can be misleading. . . . There is a danger that the metaphor can lead to an oversimplified notion of a clear transition point" (189). She suggests it might be "more useful to use the notion as one means of understanding aspects of a messy and complex process of learning and transformation over time" (189). Similarly, Baillie, Bowden, and Meyer (2013) suggest the experience of "continual

waves of less and more comfortable liminality” (243). And Pauline Ross, Shelly, Burgin, Clair Aitchison, and Janice Catterall (2011) point out that “transformation has to be understood as a matter of shifting subjectivity, not as deep changes to an essential selfhood. Subjectivity is best understood as always in process, and so shifts are commonplace, part of the negotiations that take place as a result of the discursive nature of subjectivity” (quoted in Land 2014). Our research and experience lead us to suggest that authentic liminality in undergraduate writing is closer to a process of constant change with occasional breakthrough moments, which may feel transformative. Within authentic liminality, the writer necessarily changes throughout.

How this change occurs is a unique process. Mira Peter, Ann Harlow, Jonathan Scott, David McKie, E. Marcia Johnson, Kirstine Moffat, and Anne McKim (2014) observe the individual nature of students negotiating liminality, commenting that students “vary in how fast they come to fully grasp these troublesome ideas” (18). Moving through the liminal space as a writer compares well with the liminality experienced by a traveler, “which is personal and deeply influenced by preconceived notions about place” (Johnson 2010, 508). For this reason, we must connect with what students bring to writing and value their existing knowledge, skills, and dispositions. James Purdy and Joyce Walker (2013) make an echoing claim in their consideration of liminal space and research identity when they contend that “students’ ability to continue the process . . . of building adaptive, flexible researcher identities can be significantly damaged if our instructions, methods and tools ignore, disregard, or even suppress the knowledge on which their existing identities are based” (10). This thinking in turn prompts us to return again to the area of writing transfer around which there has been much research.

Undergraduate students, we suggest, recognize the need for change and how personal this experience is when they comment on finding space for their voices in the undergraduate writing they do. The comments noted here capture the struggle associated with this process: “I continue to struggle in composing an argument that is not personally opinionated. Drawing arguments for and against from resourced material is frustrating; it is merely constructing ideas that have already been said/written. One either agrees with them or not thereby one is giving a hidden personal opinion”; “Originality is possibly the hardest part”; “While we are told we cannot give our own opinions, everything must be backed up by research, but then to be critical we have to have an opinion.” The unique nature of negotiating liminality emerged from

our data in the themes around argumentation and writer resilience. The individual behavior associated with these themes, including writing avoidance, low-risk adequate writing, and risk-taking writing, makes a decisive impact on the trajectory of the student's intellectual development and their success. Academic writing work is genuinely complex, and though we know and accept that "the relationship between disciplinary knowledge making and the ways writing and other communicative practices create and communicate that knowledge are at the heart of what defines particular disciplines" (Lerner 2015, 40), still it is a constant challenge for many of us to connect our voices with those of others in our field. For our students, the initiation into a discipline, through engagement in the community's discourse, routes them through a cacophony of others' voices amongst which "my voice" fraught with doubt is called on to begin to articulate a solid argument in a balanced and critical manner. The negotiating of this no-man's land is critical for our students' development as writers, not least because it represents the first step in recognizing the stage of the writing process about which our participants expressed the least awareness; namely, much like their texts, they too are works in progress. In addition, crucially, our students often do not know it is *how* they structure and arrange the key points formulating their argument that makes it *their original argument*.

The development of voice and self as a writer reinforces the unique experience of liminality and the key existential dynamic of the writing process. Mira Peter Ann Harlow, Jonathan Scott, David McKie, E. Marcia Johnson, Kirstine Moffat and Anne McKim (2014) also record "the interaction between the epistemological and ontological aspects of learning" (18) as a part of negotiating the troublesomeness in the liminal space, which involves both "a conceptual and an ontological shift" (Land 2014, 2). The variety in terms of students' strategies for negotiating liminality also foregrounds the individual nature of the experience, which in turn results in changes for students. Because of the inextricable relationship between writing and thinking, the liminality students experience in writing is as much a confusion around the questions What do I think? and Who am I? as it is confusion around writing processes and outputs. As Barnett (2012) notes in his article "Learning for an Unknown Future" and with reference to his concept of supercomplexity,

Under . . . conditions of uncertainty, the *educational task is, in principle, not an epistemological task*. . . . Amid supercomplexity, *the educational task is primarily an ontological task*. . . . Accordingly, this learning for uncertainty is here a matter of learning to live with uncertainty. It is a form of learning

that sets out not to dissolve anxiety—for it recognizes that that is not feasible—but that sets out to provide the human wherewithal to live with anxiety. (69)

Barnett talks about “being-for-uncertainty,” and this notion has much purchase in the world of threshold concepts of writing studies, not least in the concepts *writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies* and *all writers have more to learn*. As writers are people, being-for-uncertainty calls for trying and failing and trying again to understand the world and how it might be expressed; building relationships and collaborating in learning; finding and articulating one’s voice; and “encouraging forward a form of human being that is not paralysed into inaction but can act purposively and judiciously” (76).

REFLECTION AND ACTION

In keeping with our research methodology, we note the following potential action associated with supporting undergraduates as they negotiate liminality in their academic writing:

- to clarify with students what we understand as the nature of liminality in undergraduate writing and to continue to listen to their interpretations of liminality
- to do all we can to ensure our writing tasks and the more basic discipline-specific writing requirements are set out as clearly as possible as a means of scaffolding the writing process for our undergraduates
- to declare to our students that in writing “there is a tension between the expression of meaning and the sharing of it” and that “every expression shared contains risk and can evoke anxiety” (Bazerman 2015, 22)
- to share empathetically with them how bamboozling and tangled academic writing can seem and how we also face the challenges writing throws up as a social and rhetorical activity.

In this manner, and through the practice of providing dialogic feedback, and feed forward, we not only advocate for their questioning but we actively engage in coenquiry with them as learning partners.

As discipline specific and writing professors, the focus of our work must continue to be primarily an engagement with others—students and writers. In this manner we see ourselves as fellow travelers; “One goes forward not because one has either knowledge or skills but because one has a self that is adequate to such an uncertain world. One’s being has a will to go on” (Barnett 2012, 72).

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