"Disciplining Violence"

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Over the last few years my campus—a small liberal arts colleges in the Finger Lakes Region of New York—has seen a precipitous rise in campus activism. As I teach, advise, and struggle alongside student activists organizing in response to inadequate sexual assault policies, trans rights, and institutional racism, I have been in equal parts troubled and encouraged to see how students are—and are not—transferring their classroom learning in to their activist work and civic engagement. The term "intersectionality," for example, has moved from the women's studies or black studies classroom context into activists' demands that the university acknowledge students' intersectional identities. But how precisely does this transfer work? Are the theories learned in the college classroom shaping students' civic engagements in productive ways or are they operating as under-theorized shorthand for the expression of real, material inequalities? I think WAC scholarship, particular recent scholarship on transfer and threshold concepts, could be especially helpful in the ongoing debates about the ways, as Nathan Heller put it in a recent *New Yorker Article*, "a long-established liberal matrix is crumbling beneath a new wave of student activism."

By this point in the conference I imagine you have heard the term "transfer" dozens of times and "threshold concepts" nearly as frequently. Given the ubiquity of these terms, I won't spend much time laying out their theoretical underpinnings or scholarly deployment. So, very quickly: Research on transfer addresses the ways learners apply knowledge or skills learned in one context to an alternate context. Threshold concepts refer to those liminal, troublesome concepts that constitute the core of a discipline's worldview. Today, I want to take up and build from just one of the questions that has emerged from our field's robust engagement with research on transfer and

threshold concepts: How do we theorize those concepts that, rather than act as entryways to specific disciplinary ways of knowing, instead cut across multiple disciplines and indeed the domains of common sense and public discourse? In a key article on the theory of threshold concepts, Linda Adler-Kassner and her colleagues argue that: "Focusing on threshold concepts within and across general education courses holds particular potential as a new perspective on considering the purposes and practices of general education courses. Working from this perspective enables us to consider…whether there are concepts that exist within specific disciplines, like composition and history, that then can also span across disciplines." I want to suggest that there are indeed such concepts; concepts like gender, power, race, or the state are central to disciplinary ways of knowing in *multiple* fields *and*, by naming them as such, we might begin to sketch out the purposes of general education courses—or perhaps even liberal education more broadly—as the development of those skills, theories, and dispositions necessary for future political action and civic engagement.

Today, I want to take up violence as a paradigmatic case of a concept that carries over from discipline to discipline and, at the same time, is differently understood within disciplinary ways of knowing and writing. It is also a concept that is productive for addressing the question of how cross-disciplinary threshold concepts might enable or forestall political action. We need only to turn on the news or scroll through our Twitter feeds to confirm this intuition. From the murder of black people at the hands of the police, to unmanned drone strikes, to campus sexual assault, to the shooting at Pulse, our public discourse is awash in competing notions of violence: its causes, effects, and even its very definition. My exploration of violence as a paradigmatic cross-disciplinary concept emerges not only from political exigencies, but also from data I collected as part of an ethnographic study on the discursive construction of violence in undergraduate classes across the disciplines. While the larger study draws on analysis of twenty-five undergraduate essays written about violence from 10 different disciplines and interviews with the essays' authors, today I am going to focus on

just two disciplinary contexts: psychology and political science. Heeding the cautions of WAC scholars like Chris Thaiss and Elizabeth Wardle who have argued that notions of writing in the disciplines have led to unproductive generalizations of disciplinary writing acts and should instead focus on the contingent ways that course context shapes students' disciplinary ways of knowing and writing, I want to be very clear about my aim in this presentation: The two cases I present are not meant to be understood as representative of the ways psychologists or political scientists theorize violence; rather, I want to explore the ways two students make sense of violence given the local, disciplinary contexts in which they are learning and the ways that learning may or may not *transfer* to their civic lives beyond the classroom.

Before presenting the two cases, I do want to give you a sense of the contradictions and continuities that emerged as I talked with students about their definitions of violence; I think this helps make the case that there are indeed cross-disciplinary concepts that students may struggle to transfer across disciplines and contexts. I never explicitly asked the study participants to define violence; in fact, a key component of the study was determining which essay and course topics *students* believed were about violence. Nonetheless, nearly every student shared some definition of violence with me in the context of the interview. Here are just a few of them:

- "I think violence is characterized by ignorance and just blind passion."

- "There's always some reason behind it; it's never a random act."

- "I just think it's any act of hatred, whether physical or emotional, with bad intentions towards anybody."

- "I strongly believe that violence can be unintentional."

- "It is part of a history of violence of other people like me and it recreates the same violence of denying someone their humanity."

- "It's just an expression."

- "Violence has consequences beyond death and dying and carnage."

- "You can't eradicate violence completely. It can never happen."

The overall study revealed that a central question for students across disciplines was: Where does violence come from? In contrast to media narratives about violence as the action of "sick individuals," students tended to search for a social context to explain violence. But even the ways that students made sense of social contexts was shaped—among other factors—by discipline. Is "the social" understood as a particular neighborhood, a school, a nation, a continent, or even "society" in general? Some students took for granted the networks of power that structure a given context, while others identified histories of racism, imperialism, or capitalism as integral to the social contexts that produce violence. Some students were careful to consider their own complicity in or oppression by histories of violence, while others understood violence as an act done by and to distant "others." I want to suggest today that these varied explanations of where and how violence occurs have consequences for not only how students transfer understandings of violence across disciplinary contexts, but also for how they engage in civic discourse.

To illustrate this point, I want to begin with a writing assignment that three different students shared with me from an introductory psychology course; they all had different instructors, but a shared syllabus. The assignment asked students to explain the findings of the Zimbardo Prison Experiment and to connect them to a real life situation. For those of you who have not taken intro psych recently, the experiment simulated a prison in which some participants were given the role of guards and others of inmates; over the course of six days, the participants appeared to adapt to their roles after the guards began subjecting the prisoners to psychological torture. In interviews and writing all three psychology students agreed that it was the social situation of the simulated prison that produced the aggressive behaviors, rather than these being inherent traits; the guards and prisoners were simply fulfilling their assigned social roles. The students took this study as "proof"

that, as Liz put it "a situation can affect a person and how they behave and what they think they're supposed to do…if [an individual is] put in a situation where they're equal or above other people, they might take charge." While the observation that social roles might shape human behavior is perhaps a helpful one for developing a sophisticated concept of violence, it was quickly unmoored from the context of the study. Indeed, not one student noted that the study's make-up of white, male, US college students might complicate the impulse to generalize from its findings. Instead, the students used the example of the Zimbardo experiment to help articulate their sense of where violence comes from: individuals fulfilling their socially determined roles.

The students were also quick to extrapolate larger social lessons from the study—no doubt partially because this is what the writing assignment asked them to do. Liz, who chose to apply the lessons of Zimbardo to Abu Ghraib wrote in her paper: "Zimbardo's study showed the affect [sic] that a situation can have on an individual's personality. In the Abu Ghraib case, war is the situation." Liz goes on to explain that "a role or situation that an individual is in can overpower the individuals' [sic] identities," resulting in behaviors they would not ordinarily exhibit. Liz applies the "situation" of an experiment at Stanford to the "situation" of war, utterly erasing the geopolitical conditions at play. American imperialism, the war on terror, the cowardly embrace of torture, the gender dynamics among the soldiers, and anti-Islamic sentiment play no role in her explanation. When talking about the lessons of Zimbardo in the interview, Liz explains, "people most likely wouldn't be inclined to do what happened at Abu Ghraib, but they were in a situation so they were more likely, especially since they got commands, and they were able to do that." Liz's vague language: "do what happened" and "that situation," skirts around more precise and politically fraught terms like torture, prisoner, abuse, or homicide, but also contributes to the decontextualized conception of violence she has developed. Indeed, her language attempts to accommodate her universalizing explanation of violence as the fulfillment of social roles, rather than acknowledging its specificity and, potentially,

her complicity in the violence. In talking about "people" and "they" rather than the US military, Liz both decontextualizes the actions of the soldiers and distances herself from their behavior.

To be clear, the analysis I offer here is not a critique of Liz. It is likely that she has limited knowledge about torture at Abu Ghraib and the larger geopolitical context into which it fits; and she is sharing with me, in good faith, the understanding of violence she developed in fulfilling this particular assignment. Rather, I hope this example illustrates the ways in which the context of an introductory psychology course in both its content and writing assignment produce a very *particular and partial* understanding of violence. Violence is the result of individuals fulfilling their social roles, no matter the context or actors involved. What happens if Liz attempts to transfer this conception of violence to a course in Africana studies, history, or political science? And what possibilities for political action or civic engagement does such a definition foreclose or enable? Might Liz's intro psych conception of violence encourage her to understand extrajudicial killings by US police officers as a mere fulfillment of social roles?

The second case I want to share focuses on Lauren, a fourth-year political science major. While the specific paper she shared with me compared the actions of Hamas, the IRA, and the ETA, our conversation was wide-ranging. Unlike Liz, Lauren had a wealth of courses to draw from in articulating her conception of violence, reinforcing the developmental nature of transfer; she has had far more opportunities to identify, critique, differentiate, and integrate the discursive constructions of violence she encountered in disciplinary contexts. Speaking generally about her political science courses, Lauren explained that her "interest is in cause and effect, which is key to politics. The real implications of policies on the ground, not just politically whether someone backs down from a threat, but understanding the implications of things. These aren't just actions, but they're a lot more than that. They're calculated." In this utterance, Lauren suggests that violence is a political tool. And, according to Lauren, to understand why a group like the IRA might use violence as a political tool,

we have to understand the history of the conflict "because history informs what actions they're taking" and we must also take into account the ways "that conditions on the ground really impede any peace process." Taken together, Lauren's utterances constitute a nuanced approach to the study of violence, one that must account not only for the actions of the state, but the history of a conflict and the conditions on the ground in order to understand the calculated political decisions of armed movements. Her utterances also conform to her perception of her major's central mode of inquiry and analysis: cause and effect.

Lauren's political science major has provided her with in-depth knowledge about the histories, policies, and conditions of particular regional conflicts, but it has also encouraged her to understand violence as a tactic (or effect) in response to a particular historical factors and contemporary conditions (the causes). Lauren is secure enough in her disciplinary approach to the study of violence that she begins to wonder—in the context of the interview—if it might be usefully applied to the study of violence in her non-political science courses. She explained that she took a history of the Holocaust class, which she acknowledged is "a different kind of violence," but she struggled to engage the material because she felt "numb" to all the numbers and images. She speculated that if she had taken the course later in her college career, she might "be able to see how actions and policies led directly to that violence." Here we get a taste of what might happen if Lauren attempted to apply her "cause and effect" understanding of violence in a different disciplinary context. A course on the history of the Holocaust could conceivably take up the question: What factors caused the Holocaust? But it is equally possible that such a course might ask: How can we ethically narrate the history of the Holocaust? Or what do archival materials tell us about how the people of Europe understood the Holocaust? But drawing from the insights of research on transfer, I suspect that, because Lauren can identify and name the ways her own disciplinary training contributes to her conceptualization of violence, she would quickly begin to

differentiate and eventually (to use Rebecca Nowacek's helpful term for describing successful interdisciplinary transfer) integrate the discursive constructions of violence she encountered in a new disciplinary context. This supposition is bolstered by the remarkable care Lauren takes *not* to generalize across contexts. Even when Lauren compares the political calculations of Hamas and the IRA, she is careful to acknowledge that the groups have different histories, social conditions, and policies with which to contend. This may be, in part, because she knows her understanding of violence is partial and shaped by disciplinary ways of knowing and writing.

The analysis of these two cases—a student writing for an introductory psychology course and one writing for an upper-division political science course—affirms the research on disciplinary threshold concepts. When, as with the students writing about the Zimbardo prison experiment, students are largely unreflective about the ways disciplinary frameworks might shape their conceptions of violence, they can overgeneralize their understandings, unknowingly excluding other explanations for the initiation of violence. When, as is the case with Lauren, students can name the disciplinary frameworks that underpin their understanding of violence, they may be less likely to make generalized assertions about where and why violence occurs. This undoubtedly has consequences for the ways students transfer their conceptions of violence in new disciplinary contexts, as well as contexts beyond the classroom. While I still have more work to do to analyze the ways students mobilize these disciplinary definitions of violence in activist and public contexts, I do want to share just a few questions that my research has already compelled me to consider:

- How can theories of transfer and threshold concepts be usefully applied to cross-disciplinary concepts like violence, race, gender and power? Or am I talking about something slightly different, perhaps cross-disciplinary justice concepts?

- How might WAC research methodologies and practices help us learn how students transfer (in both negative and positive ways) classroom learning into activist and civic contexts?

- How might focusing on cross-disciplinary concepts transform curricula and locations of curricular power in post-secondary institutions? Might an examination of these concepts reposition women's studies, black studies, LGBTQ studies, and other interdisciplinary departments to the center of our curricula?

- How might a focus on cross-disciplinary concepts reshape or invigorate the political possibilities of WAC scholarship and programs?