Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies:
Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: The Social Construction of Gender

This chapter focuses on distinctions between sex and gender, exploring how gender is socially constructed, and to what ends, as well as how social constructions of gender are shaped by issues of race, class, age, ability, and sexual identity.

Chapter 3: Privilege and Oppression

Systems of privilege and oppression profoundly shape individual lives. This chapter explains how these systems play out via ideology and societal institutions, and are internalized by individuals.

Chapter 4: Intersectionality

Intersectionality is at the heart of feminist analysis. This chapter explores how different groups benefit from or are disadvantaged by institutional structures, as well as how overlapping categories of identity profoundly shape our experiences within institutions.

Chapter 5: Feminist Praxis

This chapter unpacks how women’s and gender studies prioritizes social change and discusses strategies for bringing about that change.

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Preface

*Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies: Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing* is a textbook designed primarily for use in the introductory course in the field of Women’s and Gender Studies with the intent of providing both a skills- and concept-based foundation in the field. The text is driven by a single key question: “What are the ways of thinking, seeing, and knowing that characterize our field and are valued by its practitioners?” Through extensive review of the published literature, conversations with women’s and gender studies faculty across the University of Wisconsin System, and our own systematic research and assessment of student learning needs, we identified four of the most critical threshold concepts in women’s and gender studies:

- the social construction of gender
- privilege and oppression
- intersectionality
- feminist praxis

This textbook aims to introduce students to how these four concepts provide a feminist lens across the disciplines and outside the classroom. The term “threshold concept” is defined by Meyer and Land as a core disciplinary concept that is both troublesome and transformative. As they go on to explain, “A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress.” A threshold concept is integrative, and when students cross the threshold and grasp a concept, “the hidden interrelatedness” of other concepts within that discipline becomes apparent (Cousin 4).

*What Makes This Book Unique*
The majority of WGS textbooks tend to be organized around the institutions that foster and reinforce gender hierarchies while also acknowledging the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality. Typical examples of these institutions include women and work, the family, media and culture, religion and spirituality, health and medicine, etc. Some focus exclusively on the U.S., while others integrate, to greater or lesser degrees, a global focus. Most also conclude with a chapter on activism. This approach privileges coverage of content over the disciplinary ways of knowing, seeing, and doing. These textbooks certainly introduce and employ these four threshold concepts, but often as a one-shot definition, with the assumption that students will come to understand the concepts’ centrality through encountering them repeatedly in the context of topical units, without their centrality being made explicit. What Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing: Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies does is not "cover" material but rather "uncover" the key threshold concepts and ways of thinking that students need in order to develop a deep understanding and to approach the material like feminist scholars do, across the disciplines. The advantage of this approach is that rather than the “one-shot definition” that characterizes most texts, students continually learn and re-learn how the threshold concept is illustrated across multiple contexts, thus reinforcing their understanding in more substantive ways. Further, foregrounding the “learning roadblocks” that many students encounter as part of the learning process helps circumvent and move more quickly past those misconceptions that keep students from progressing in their understanding of women’s and gender studies.

In Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies, we make the assumption that ways of thinking and doing women’s and gender studies must be made transparent to students, and that learning will be done most effectively if students understand the course goals, the pedagogical approach, and the potential roadblocks to understanding. We contend that the work happening on the part of the instructor and the work happening by students should not be “parallel tracks” that each negotiates independently, but part of the teaching and learning conversation itself, happening in and about the content, as part of the work of the classroom.
Features

Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies is organized strategically and conceptually in a reverse pyramid structure. That is, each threshold concept is introduced at a broad level as the key idea of the chapter, while subsequent chapter components add layers of depth and specificity. Each chapter contains the following elements:

- **Opening Illustration:** The opening illustration engages readers in the topic—typically these are drawn from historical, cultural, biological, or current events topics.

- **A Feminist Stance:** We use the framing concept of a “feminist stance” (Crawley, et al) to help students continue to understand the nature and strategies of a feminist approach with each chapter they read.

- **Definition of the Threshold Concept:** Each chapter focuses on one of four threshold concepts. The chapter opens with a definition of the threshold concept, drawing from established and relevant research across interdisciplinary fields of study.

- **Framing Definitions and Related Concepts:** More specificity is offered by related concepts, or other explanatory terminology by scholars in the field that help students see how the threshold concept is supported and illustrated by related terms.

- **Learning Roadblocks:** Once students have an initial grasp of the concept and its related terms, the chapter introduces common “learning roadblocks” or misconceptions that many students encounter which prevent a full grasp of the idea. These misconceptions are directly addressed along with tools that can serve as a “check for understanding” so students are able to understand not only why these learning roadblocks crop up but also where their own learning is in relation to the roadblocks. The goal of this feature is to help students identify common misunderstandings that prevent them from “crossing the threshold.”
- **Anchoring Topic Discussion**: To further develop students’ understanding of the key idea, each chapter includes a discussion about a group of three anchoring topics (work and family; language, images, and symbols; and bodies). Selected issues within the anchoring topics are discussed through the prism of the particular threshold concept, and then returned to with each chapter so that students will develop a multi-faceted, nuanced, and complex understanding of the cluster of related issues within the anchoring topics.

- **Case Study**: The case study offers an even narrower still, in-depth, and analytical perspective on one key issue that should crystallize students’ understanding of the concept. Case studies have been selected based on relevance to the threshold concept, and to represent a broad range of interdisciplinary issues.

- **Evaluating Prior Knowledge Activities**: As Ambrose, et al have observed, students’ prior knowledge (particularly commonsense understandings or everyday use of discipline-specific terms) has a strong impact on how students absorb new knowledge. Activities that ask students to evaluate prior knowledge, to monitor their progress, and to develop a metacognitive understanding of their knowledge building stem from this learning principle.

- **Application Exercises**: Gender and women’s studies classrooms typically emphasize several key, related values focused on participatory learning: validation of personal experience, activism, reflexivity, action orientation, and local-global connections (see Crawley, at al 2008; Stake and Hoffman, 2000; Markowitz, 2005; Maher, 1987a; Shrewsbury 1993). This praxis orientation (see Blake and Ooten, 2008) is reflected in application exercises for each chapter in which students are invited to connect disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge with lived experience.

- **Discussion Questions**: Consistent with the signature feminist pedagogies of women’s and gender studies classrooms that focus on collaboration, interconnectedness, and creating a community of learners (see Hassel and Nelson 2012; Chick and Hassel 2009), this book adheres to the convention of providing discussion questions for each chapter.
• **Writing Prompts:** The text includes writing activities that encourage students to process, reflect on, and integrate the course material.

• **Suggested Readings and Bibliography:** Each chapter includes a list of suggested readings. The bibliography for the chapter is combined with suggested readings. Because the text is intended to serve as a critical introduction to key concepts and not as a reader, we provide suggested, relevant readings that instructors can use to support and develop students’ learning. In this way, we imagine the book to be part of a customized course in which the instructor can structure the curriculum around key ideas, then provide a deeper learning experience for students by adding primary documents, classic essays, or online texts to the course that reflect the instructor’s specific learning goals and area of expertise.

**Goals of the Book**

As co-authors, our goals for this book have been to provide a text that reflects what we have learned about student learning needs in women’s and gender studies throughout our collective years of teaching in the field as well as current thinking in the field and in higher education more broadly about what it means to learn within a discipline or interdisciplinary area. The organization of the text around threshold concepts is intended to reflect what Lendol Calder calls an “uncoverage” model, one in which students learn to think, see, and know like feminist scholars rather than absorb a body of knowledge to be “covered.”

As a result, our intent is to help students learn those ways of knowing and then to be able to apply them to new subjects, in the way that feminist scholars do. We have tried to reflect in the text some of our shared values as teachers and writers. We have aimed to reflect an up-to-date sensibility both in including recent data and research studies as well as current phenomena. Our tone emphasizes that arguments about sex and gender (and any number of other issues within feminist scholarship and activism) are unresolved,
ongoing, and controversial, and the text contextualizes a feminist perspective by explaining what that perspective stands in contrast to.

While we treat each of the four threshold concepts in a separate chapter, which in one sense implies their separability and separateness, they are of course interconnected, and we strive to make those connections explicit within each chapter. In some instances this means returning to the same topic across chapters and highlighting different elements of it. For example, though feminist praxis is its own separate chapter, we have identified the ways that discussions of “problems” within women’s and gender studies can be responded to with action or different ways of thinking. Similarly, though intersectionality has its own chapter, we have attempted to incorporate an intersectional perspective and intersectional analysis throughout the book, addressing the interrelatedness of systems of privilege and oppression as part of an intersectional examination both across and within topics and themes.

**Logistics of Using the Text**

While individual programs and pedagogical approaches may vary, the threshold concepts we have identified are central to the content- and skills-based learning outcomes of a large number of Women’s and Gender Studies programs nationally (see Levin and Berger and Radeloff). As such, we believe that using a text like ours can be helpful in making those programmatic learning outcomes explicit, and can support the assessment plans of programs and departments.

Logistically, one way to use this book in an introductory WGS course would be to assign all five chapters in succession over the first third of the semester before moving on to a varying number of topics (drawn from our anchoring topics or others of particular interest to the instructor) that would be spread out over the remainder of the semester. In this scenario, all of the threshold concepts would be revisited in the context of each topic.
A different approach to using this book in an introductory WGS course would be to spread the assignment and reading of the five chapters across the course of the entire semester, using one or more topics in relation to each threshold concept. This approach would allow for in-depth time with each individual threshold concept before moving on to the next.

Instructors can find more materials to support their work in the classroom using this text at the companion website: www.routledge.com/cw/launius. Materials available online include the following:

- sample syllabi
- additional suggested readings
- full text journal articles for use with the text
Works Cited


Calder, Lendol. “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey.”


