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Introduction: Crossing Thresholds Together

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INTRODUCTION: CROSSING THRESHOLDS TOGETHER

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Meyer and Land developed the "threshold concepts" framework to help faculty focus their teaching on essential aspects of disciplinary knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2005). Threshold concepts act, by definition, like doorways; crossing a particular threshold enables significant new disciplinary learning, often learning that was impossible before. Mastering a threshold concept not only allows the learner to grasp important disciplinary material, but it also reshapes how the learner sees other aspects of the world. When a student understands the concept of opportunity cost in economics, for instance, she not only can apply her understanding to more advanced work in economics, but she thinks differently about how she spends her time when she is not studying economics.

While threshold concepts are transformative, Meyer and Land explain, they are not easy to learn because they involve "troublesome knowledge" (Perkins, 2006). Knowledge can be troublesome for a variety of reasons, but in all cases the crossing of a threshold involves a shift in epistemological understanding, provoking "learners to move on from their prevailing way of conceptualizing a particular phenomenon to new ways of seeing" (Land, 2011, p. 176). In addition, troublesome knowledge has an affective component that calls into question assumptions about or practices linked to identity: "Grasping a threshold concept is never just a cognitive shift; it might also involve a repositioning of self in relation to the subject" (Land et al., 2005, p.58). Precisely because of this difficulty, once crossed, thresholds are unlikely to be reversed; they cannot be unlearned.

Bryn Mawr undergraduate Sophia Abbot illustrates the threshold concept framework as she reflects in this special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* on the sociological concept of privilege:

I had read about white and class privilege before. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew what it meant, at least definition-wise…. However, I had never thought about white privilege (or class privilege) in the context of my classroom interactions. I had spent my entire life attributing my sense of comfort in the classroom to personality. To have it re-attributed to an entitlement stemming from privilege, to have it re-attributed to an assumption that I will add to the classroom and that my addition will be valued because I have shared it in the *right* way, was paralyzing for me…. After this class session, I met with professors, talked with friends, did more reading and writing, and tried to figure out how to continue to interact in the classroom with this new awareness of my privilege…. Though it is easy for me in narration to define this singular classroom moment as a threshold, I want to emphasize that part of the difficulty and impact of this experience was and is that it does not end…. Though I no longer feel paralyzed, I can never re-enter the classroom in the same way. My awareness of my privilege affects completely the way I interact with others and think about my presence, particularly in classroom situations.

Crossing this threshold clearly has been both troublesome and transformative for Sophia, shaping how she understands the discipline, herself, and the world.

As Meyer and Land intended, faculty increasingly are using the threshold concept framework to think about what, how, and who they teach (King & Felten, 2012). This special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together In Higher Education* reflects something different because the writing here comes from faculty and students who have worked together at Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College to explore threshold concepts in action. Some of the pieces included here are from individuals, and some are collaboratively written. Regardless, all of them emerged from conversations between students and faculty sponsored by The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr.

Taken together, these essays not only provide valuable insights into teaching and learning in the disciplines, but also raise three challenging questions about threshold concepts:

1. Are threshold concepts inherently disciplinary? The literature on threshold concepts answers this question clearly: Yes, they are disciplinary. Many students writing in this issue, however, aim to take a more capacious view of the framework because they find it to be a helpful heuristic beyond the disciplines. Esteniolla Maitre, for instance, initially found that definition appealing, but as she and her peers talked further, she explains: "I began to dislike the definition—not because of its inaccuracy but because of its limitation…. For me, this idea was problematic because the definition did not account for non-academic, personal experiences and a student's interpretation of those experiences as contributing factors in whether or not he or she crossed a threshold." Students, as Hannah Bahn writes, wanted to explore "what threshold concepts *could* be."

2. What tend to be the most troublesome aspects of threshold concepts? Faculty and students differ radically on this question. Faculty tend to center on challenges related either to the cognitive difficulty of disciplinary material or to a lack of student confidence or motivation. To cross a threshold, faculty often conclude that students need to develop the capacity to think deeply and creatively about the concept, without fear of getting a "wrong" answer. Sarah Jenness, a Bryn Mawr undergraduate, complicates this common faculty view by reminding us that "student anxiety is raised in this situation, though, because it is not only about knowing the right answer, but also wondering what the professor expects and what students need to know to do well in the class. In other words…school militates against uncertainty." Many students writing in this special issue extend Sarah's analysis, using strikingly different language than faculty to describe their experiences with threshold concepts. In the essays here, students call their encounters with thresholds "stressful," "debilitating," "frustrating," and "intensely emotional"; they describe themselves as "shocked," "upset," and "utterly helpless" in the face of troublesome knowledge. Both faculty and students would benefit from carefully considering what they share and how they differ as they approach troublesome knowledge.

3. Is the metaphor of "threshold" appropriate to describe these concepts? As Meyer and Land (2006) explain, a threshold concept "is akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (p. 3). Both students and faculty in this special issue challenge that metaphor, preferring to describe threshold

concepts in broader ways such as "neighborhoods" or "systems." And the idea of a single path through a doorway also seems inadequate to describe the varied and recursive experiences that students have while learning. The liminal space surrounding some thresholds might resemble a cycle rather than a threshold — as one of Laura McGrane's student explains: "We climb, we plateau, we slip, we plateau, we climb again." These reflections highlight how any metaphor serves to illuminate some aspects of a phenomenon but obscures or misrepresents others.

A heuristic like threshold concepts, of course, need not be perfect to be useful. Despite the questions raised here, the threshold concepts framework acts as a lens to focus our gaze on the most significant and troublesome things that students encounter in (and outside of) the curriculum. This attention to difficulty, to struggle, even to failure, is challenging for students, for faculty, and for higher education institutions. Our culture often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, encourages students to drift through the academy, picking up marketable job skills and building a social network without thinking too long or hard about larger issues at the heart of liberal education — questions of meaning, purpose, identity, and justice.

This special issue cannot offer a simple answer to those central questions. It does, however, capture the creative insights of students and faculty who are working to understand some of the important thresholds students cross as undergraduates. The central insight of this issue is the value of bringing together the distinct perspectives of students and faculty to envision new possibilities for teaching and learning in higher education.

References:

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