Being Comfortable with Uncertainty

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As teachers and learners we are constantly searching for new knowledge. In school, because tests often represent the conclusion of learning on a particular topic, the idea of knowledge can easily be conflated with having the "right" answers. As I have been attempting to accept in my college career, however, learning always has some "unfinishedness" (Freire, 1998). Becoming comfortable with this unfinishedness, or knowing that learning is never complete, has been essential to my role as a student consultant. Allowing for uncertainty allows for imagination and pushing intellectual boundaries, which often results in deeper learning. However, although I can proclaim the importance of being uncomfortable with uncertainty, I sometimes revert to my old ways of wanting "answers" when presented with new information. Thus, I have come to see being comfortable with uncertainty as a threshold concept — both for me in my role as a student consultant and for students more generally.

When I did my first TLI partnership as a sophomore, I somewhat eased into the position, dipping my toes in the water and moving in slowly; in my education classes I had been presented with the idea that students could be both teachers and learners, and my TLI partnership that semester, with an education professor, moved that from the level of theory to practice. However, with this new TLI focus on threshold concepts that I took on in my partnership with a sociology professor in my senior year, I felt as if I had suddenly jumped in, and the water was cold and unfamiliar. What were threshold concepts? How could I join into a partnership on a topic I knew so little about? If I didn't know what I was talking about, how could I do my job right?

In our early student consultant meetings, we talked a lot about what threshold concepts were and provided our definitions based on various readings and background knowledge. Although I felt confused, the safest thing seemed to be to cling to the definitions presented to us in the literature. I believed thresholds were specific to a particular field, because that idea had been discussed in an initial meeting. My peers, however, wanted to push that further and argued that thresholds were not contained within a specific discipline. At first, I was confused by this. I said to myself: What are they doing? The definition is right there, why are they messing with it? These kinds of questions reflect a discomfort with uncertainty: I wanted to stick with the "right answer."

However, I quickly felt grateful that my peers challenged the original definition, as their ideas expanded the possibilities and opened up a range of thoughtful questions and conversations. Could thresholds be personal? Is confidence a threshold? How do you know when you have crossed a threshold? These exploratory questions provided a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of thresholds, but did not provide concrete answers. I recognized that this experience — of getting comfortable with wrestling with questions but being uncertain of answers — was a threshold in itself: a threshold of being comfortable in not having a right answer, but still valuing and appreciating the knowledge gained from exploring a topic.

I observed a parallel process in the class I worked on with my faculty partner. I noticed throughout the semester that students were struggling with a lack of concrete answers in regard

to the subject matter. The class was about social movements throughout American history. At the beginning of the semester, various components of a social movement were discussed, but the majority of the semester emphasized movements in context, focusing on particular social movements (the Labor Movement, the Civil Rights Era, etc.) at particular times and under particular circumstances. Throughout the semester discussion and lecture revolved around a particular movement and the specific tactics of that movement — what made sense in that particular context and set of circumstances.

Students often posed questions about the "right" tactics: what is the best way to organize a movement? Is non-violence or violence more effective? There were no correct answers to these questions, though, because the strategies that work best for a social movement depend on the context of the movement. Although the professor tried to remind students of the importance of context, it seemed a common theme throughout the class was discomfort with lack of precise answers. It was clear that comfort with uncertainty, and taking the risk of generating their own answers to those questions, was a threshold for students in the class.

Reflecting back on the semester, it is clear to me that an unexpected threshold for this class was recognizing that there isn't one right answer; rather, there are multiple possibilities depending on a given context. The capacity to not know and the ability to explore is important. I think 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, comfort with uncertainty and willingness to hazard one's own interpretations clash with the need to perform and the fact that one will be evaluated on that performance. At the end of the semester, students will receive grades, and for much of their education, they have learned to associate grades with correct answers. This class was troublesome for students because it defied the traditional classroom setting where there are specific answers a professor is looking for.

In thinking about my TLI partnership and the student consultant meetings, I have begun to explore the ways in which school militates against uncertainty because we focus on getting the right answers as an end product as opposed to learning as a continuous phenomenon. At times, it may be appropriate to teach correct "answers" (or maybe it is more appropriate to call them facts); in history, there are specific dates that events happened, for instance, or in English there are certain rules for punctuation. These facts are important, but when we only teach our students in terms of fact or right/wrong binaries, what are they missing out on? The ability to explore and to analyze, without a set answer, develops critical thinking skills that are essential for students to have. If we want our students to really stretch themselves and develop higher-order thinking, we need to introduce them to and make them comfortable with the idea that there aren't always "right" answers. They need to be comfortable with uncertainty.

My own experience as a student consultant in working with a concept that was unfamiliar to me helped me to develop comfort with uncertainty and to think about what might help students more generally develop that comfort. The environment TLI creates is essential to fostering this comfort with uncertainty, and there are a couple key differences between the TLI student consultant meetings and traditional classrooms that come to mind. In the student consultant meetings, our initial goal was to explore threshold concepts, but the expectation for a set answer

never existed; in comparison, in a traditional classroom, at the beginning of the course the professor usually implies or explicitly states things you will "know" by the end of the course. Additionally, in a TLI setting, I look to other consultants as a primary source of knowledge, whereas in traditional classrooms, the professor is the primary source of knowledge and fellow students may or may not be viewed supplementary sources. In my experience as a student consultant, talking with a group of and recognizing their potential to push my thinking was important. It was also important that I was able to listen to faculty members' reasoning behind their teaching methods and in return they listened to my ideas about pedagogy. So maybe what we need as students are spaces and relationships that let us sit with uncertainty and learn from it rather than rush from it to the "right" answers. Although this could is challenging as it defies more traditional teaching, the TLI program could serve as a useful model as a space that encourages students to sit with uncertainty.

References

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