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WHY THE PROCESS OF LEARNING MATTERS: EXPANDING MY DEFINITION OF THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Hannah Bahn, Haverford College, 2014

My first semester as a student consultant with The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) enabled me to explore and expand upon the idea of “threshold concepts” in both my faculty partner’s class and my own academic experiences. In this essay, I reflect on my initial understanding of threshold concepts, how my partnership changed my thinking about this term and learning more generally, and what I recommend faculty might do to facilitate the kind of deeper learning which I (re)learned to embrace through this partnership work.

My Initial Notion of Threshold Concepts...and How I Began to Question It

My original understanding of threshold concepts was narrow. Drawing on the introductory literature we read (Meyer & Land), I initially thought a threshold concept could only refer to specific content within a particular discipline that was challenging for students to learn but both integral and transformative to their broader understanding of a field. This definition felt limiting to me, however. Harnessing my discomfort, the weekly student consultant meetings provided a valuable, exploratory space within which other student consultants and I began to challenge and expand on this definition.

As I began to explore threshold concepts in my own academic history, I quickly started to question the notion that thresholds had to be embedded within a particular discipline. My background in the social sciences propelled me to recall the transformative concepts I had learned about in my own studies which not only expanded across disciplines but also out into the real world. It was these broader connections across and beyond academic disciplines that made the concepts so valuable. Drawing on these personal reflections, I began to mold the definition of threshold concepts to my transformative learning experiences rather than attempt to reconcile them with the provided definition of threshold concepts. But while my understanding of threshold concepts evolved to challenge the discipline-bounded part of the definition, my conception was still constrained by the belief that threshold concepts had to be content-based.

My inability to expand the definition of threshold concepts beyond specific academic content spoke to a much broader problem with my understanding of the purpose of higher education. While I knew in the back of my mind that the purpose of education is just as much about the *process* of learning as it is about the content, I had become complacent in my everyday understanding of and interaction with education in the classroom. I already knew how to write, synthesize arguments, articulate my beliefs, etc. and so the difference from one course to the next was the content, not the process. Within this framework, it made sense that thresholds would also only refer to the content we learn in our courses. Luckily, TLI offered up an opportunity for me to re-explore my own learning as well as this definition.

How My Partnership Changed My Thinking about Threshold Concepts and Learning More Generally

Student-faculty partnerships enable both participants to explore new ideas and ways of being in the classroom. TLI is about the process. This semester, I had the wonderful opportunity to work with an amazing faculty partner who self-selected to embrace the true potential of a TLI partnership and truly work to push the boundaries of her classroom practice. My partnership with her enabled me to explore and expand upon my personal orientation as a student as well as my theoretical understanding of what threshold concepts *could* be.

Before TLI, I had become a comfortable student. My personal academic experience was safe. I, and other students, have identified whether we are test-takers or paper-writers, lecture-listeners or discussion-generators. We migrate towards classes and course content that enable us to remain in this bubble of learning processes, never having to step outside of our comfort zones. Our professors, similarly, can be defined — and sometimes confined — by their disciplines and their accustomed teaching methods. The result is that we, both students and faculty, too rarely think critically about *why* we do things the *way* we do them. The courses we take are focused on content and the mastery of ideas; we have forgotten that an integral part of learning is the *process* itself and that to best learn, one ought to expand the types of learning processes used.

While content is important, this semester opened my eyes back up to the skills we apply to understanding content and how challenging and pushing those skills and processes can be a threshold concept just as much as a content-based one. I think methodological thresholds need to be included within the broader definition of threshold concepts. In other words, the *way* of learning is just as, if not more, important than the *what*.

My semester as a student consultant has opened my eyes to two potential ways for students and faculty to more readily explore various methods of learning beyond the content of a specific course. Of course, there are probably many more, but these two stand out for me: First, I think faculty can challenge their students to engage with various modes of learning by altering the style of classroom time and assignments. Secondly, faculty ought to ask their students to reflect on their personal engagement with course content and to deconstruct what they have previously taken for granted as the “appropriate” ways to learn.

Strategy 1 for Supporting a Focus on Process: Challenge Students to Engage with Various Modes of Learning

Faculty members can aid students in crossing *process* thresholds or methodological thresholds by challenging them to engage with course content in a wider variety of ways. My experience in an anthropology course this semester, as a student—not a TLI consultant—personally opened my eyes to the value of this. After three years of anthropology courses, I had become well-adjusted to and comfortable with writing long research papers where I drew on a few theorists to argue a central thesis. This semester my professor instead asked me to synthesize a whopping fifteen theorists in four short pages. The task threatened me as a student. The unknown assignment pushed me out of my comfort zone and for a lot of the semester I dismissed the worth of the paper style as unfair and unhelpful. It was only in the last month of the semester, three papers

now under my belt and TLI process thresholds resonating in the back of my mind that I began to openly explore and potentially admit to the value of an assignment like this.

This new style of paper challenged me as a student. It demanded that I knew the content of the course, and knew it well, but the ultimate value was in the process of actually writing the paper itself. By providing a different type of assignment, the professor challenged and expanded my skills as a learner. My writing skills and ability to synthesize many thoughts in a small amount of space improved and, most importantly, I was once again pushed outside my comfort zone as a student. My TLI faculty partner and I engaged in a similar manipulation of assignments in her course, exploring creative approaches to traditional critical essays, peer editing, and group projects. These assignments enabled students to work with the same course content through new lenses, challenging them as learners to push beyond the comfort bubble.

Strategy 2 for Supporting a Focus on Process: Asking Students to Reflect on their Personal Engagement with Course Content

Another valuable way to assist students in crossing process thresholds is by giving them the time to reflect on themselves as learners in the classroom. In listening to and participating in many meta-conversations about what it means to be a critic, how do we read theorists' work versus other students' work, and much more while serving as a student consultant this semester, I realized that I have not been asked to think critically about myself as a student for a long time, if ever. Students and faculty members all engage with text differently, take notes in various formats, study for tests using a range of methods and participate in diverse ways, but we do not provide a space to talk about these methods and make sense of why people do them differently. Even more importantly, we do not explore how other people's approaches might assist us in our own learning or vice versa. By providing a space for students to reflect on *how* they act as learners, regardless of the specific content, we can begin to open up spaces for students to try new things and be willing to engage with content in new ways.

My Revised Notion of Threshold Concept: Process as Much as Content

If faculty use the two approaches described above, students will begin to deconstruct the comfortableness that they have with their learning methods. Threshold concepts are troublesome, and asking students to critique and expand upon the ways they have been taking notes, writing papers, and engaging with course content for years will certainly be outside of our comfort zones. But once students move past the initial hump of resistance, expanding the ways of engaging with content will also be transformative to their presence as a student and more broadly to their lives. The ability to approach a problem from a variety of angles and methods is incredibly valuable and is a skill that can be fostered in the classroom. Education should not be about simply transmitting X piece of content from the professor to the student. This is too easy. It is a passive learning experience that requires little engagement. But if faculty members expose their students to process thresholds, students will hopefully enter into a new relationship with their education.

Students should learn to play with their academic coursework. "Play" cannot be clearly defined or bounded and in this way, it will probably make students very uncomfortable for it does not

provide a clear, easy way to get an “A.” Rather, intellectual play asks students to openly dive in and explore their academics. Open-mindedness, a willingness to try new methods of learning and to reflect on your place as a learner, is incredibly valuable. Playing changes the positioning of both teachers and learners, pushing the bounds of traditional education in remarkable ways.

My first semester as a TLI student consultant has enabled me to expand the original definition of threshold concepts to include process thresholds, where students explore new modes of learning itself. But even more importantly, my first experience with TLI has reignited my passion as a student. Prior to TLI, my academic experience had become safe. I took classes where I knew what to expect and I resisted change, dismissing innovative assignments. TLI has reminded me that I must dive in to what is different and new. For it is through new processes as well as new content that I will learn. It is these skills, not necessarily the specific anthropology theorists or math equations that I will take into the real world. Furthermore, it is the mindset—the willingness to play with that which confuses and challenges me—that will be the most beneficial in my future life. I think our classroom spaces can do a better job of facilitating this type of learning. Both expanding the definition of the threshold concepts and bringing a diversity of processes into the classroom will be great places to start.

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