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ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL THRESHOLDS OVERLAP

Alia Luz, Bryn Mawr College, 2013

During my yearlong engagement as a student consultant, I have been exposed to a variety of roles. In the Fall-2012 semester, I focused on advising my faculty partner on his teaching style. The Spring 2013 semester was a veritable whirlwind of uncertainty, however, because I launched myself into a new role: helping students develop quizzes based on the previous week's readings in order to help them identify and, ideally, pass over threshold concepts within the course of the faculty member with whom I worked. In this role, I partnered with the faculty member teaching the course and, more directly, with the students taking the course.

I attempted to access and help students identify threshold concepts by going through a number of steps. While they worked, I would give them a different perspective based on my own understanding of the lessons and place these within the context of thresholds (e.g., asking them to think of critical concepts in the reading). Afterwards, I would ask them to tell me about their own experience once they used this framework. Then, they could take the understanding they gained from these processes back to their work in the course, as well as giving me feedback/opinions on using threshold concepts.

What I found was that students could see thresholds in diverse ways. Some likened thresholds to times when they learn, which can occur at random points and not necessarily within the classroom (such as while walking to lunch). However, within the classroom's group work (with which I would also help out and give a general overview of thresholds) and while making the quiz, the students found that the academic threshold was paramount. I believe the professor created a classroom environment that encouraged them to seek out and wrestle with crossing these thresholds, schooling them into a certain way of thinking that is acceptable to the discipline. Because of her pedagogical approach, when I met with them, they were thinking within this specific context.

Over the course of the semester, I noticed some patterns emerging in our conversations. Students would bring to the group work different information that they had retained through their readings and class participation, and not all of them necessarily identified the same important concepts. Questions can either be informational or conceptual, and the group bounced ideas off of each other so that these overlapped; in this way, the learning was both collaborative and guided. Issues came to light when there was a difficulty in understanding whether an informational question was based on concepts or on simple fact memorization.

Essentially, each individual and his/her group was faced with trying to achieve a balance among testing for information, memorization, and looking for broader understanding. One student, for example, said:

“I especially like the use of the word threshold because I think that regarding the way we are studying in this course, it is really important to base new knowledge on the previous week's lessons. We are building on our understandings. My only difficulty in the quiz making was coming up with questions that were more than just informational. I think it was important to

have a balance of questions to test knowing certain points of information and also understanding overarching concepts – it's hard to make these questions that test more than just your ability to memorize information.”

This statement points to the importance of moving beyond just memorizing information and understanding the academic thresholds to personal learning. Students are viscerally confronted with what the professor intends, which is to develop a framework for understanding the material. However, realizing this in a meta-cognitive way and translating it into the class readings and coursework require understanding more than just the academic thresholds. They require the ability to bridge the gap between students' previous expectations of required work and actively improving their own learning (even if they think of this bridge in an abstract, undefined way), such as, in one student's words, “building on [our] understandings.”

In addition, they must also know how to “think both like a professor and a student” and be aware of how the questions and information are being received and interpreted by their fellow classmates. Concerns about whether a question was too hard, too easy, or irrelevant plagued them, making the quiz-making process very uncomfortable and ‘troublesome.’ However, they still engaged in a transformative and discursive process, since they revised the quizzes and their understanding of the course material based on the professor's recommendations for improvement.

Thus, when students were writing quizzes, they entered into a threshold space. What they accomplished in that space eventually spilled into the classroom, wherein a single idea can spark a connection of thoughts within a single person that illustrates the type and level of personal and academic thresholds that they have already crossed.