

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 9 Spring 2013

Naming Threshold Concepts as a Threshold for Student-Faculty Partnerships

Samyuktha Natarajan
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Natarajan, Samyuktha "Naming Threshold Concepts as a Threshold for Student-Faculty Partnerships," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 9 (2013), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss9/18>

NAMING THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AS A THRESHOLD FOR STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIPS

Samyuktha Natarajan, Bryn Mawr College, 2015

During the Spring-2013 semester, I continued a partnership with a faculty member whom I had begun working with in the Fall-2012 semester. Through this initial partnership, we had focused our discussions on student engagement, ways to ask questions, and methods of building and fostering a learning community. These moments of discussing teaching and learning were both exciting, as well as reflective. In our continued partnership in the Spring 2013 semester, we transitioned into conversations about threshold concepts in the faculty member's course. For reasons we did not understand at first, our work together became more troublesome and complicated.

At the beginning of the spring semester, at the very start of our inquiry into threshold concepts in the seminar facilitated by TLI Fellow Peter Felten and TLI coordinator Alison Cook-Sather, a question that came up for student consultants was about the effect on student learning and student anxiety of identifying and naming threshold concepts in the classroom. We entered into dialogue about explicitly mentioning the presence of threshold concepts to students versus allowing students to experience them and then naming them as thresholds after the fact. We posed questions like these: Is it super scary to name something as a threshold concept? What should you address? How much should you address? When is it better to be addressing it? When is it best to leave it unnamed and just be experiencing it?

Through this dialogue, student consultants brought up the concern that naming threshold concepts might take away from student learning and engagement because of their preoccupation with identifying their own crossing of a threshold. Rather than focusing on engaging with the concepts and the material, consultants questioned whether students might instead be too anxious about finding these threshold concepts. What came from this conversation was the need to find a balance between when it is best to leave thresholds unnamed and experienced and when they should be named and addressed. In this way, I became much more aware of anxieties linked to naming threshold concepts within classrooms.

Surprisingly, however, although I didn't realize it at that moment, this anxiety is something that found its way into my work with my faculty partner. Unknowingly, even as we met weekly and talked about what was happening in her classroom, we had not taken into account our own fears and anxieties associated with discussing threshold concepts. Much of our tension came from not fully understanding this concept and from continuously engaging in conversations that seemed to further complicate the idea. Ironically, though we had discussed this anxiety for students in the class, we had not given similar consideration to our own discussions and work with threshold concepts.

As we reached the end of the academic year and were reflecting together on the semester and the work we had done in the threshold concepts seminar, my faculty partner and I felt similarly: fairly ungrounded in the work we had accomplished and uncertain of the outcomes we had achieved and gains we had made. Only through this reflection were we able to see that the same

anxiety that students faced when naming threshold concepts had seemed to permeate our discussions of threshold concepts throughout the semester. Until that moment, we had not seen that adding the simple label of “threshold concepts” to our conversation had added a level of discomfort and uncertainty, which seemed to impede us from seeing this semester’s work within the context of our other inquiries together.

As we continued reflecting on our take-aways for the semester to synthesize and process our work, we found that our various questions, discussions, and theorizations of threshold concepts had been approached in a vacuum. We had been so overwhelmed by the name “threshold concept” and the uncertainty surrounding it, that we forgot to contextualize this idea with the work we had already been doing. Rather, threshold concepts felt like a disconnected and very unmanageable entity. But in reflecting on our goals for our student-faculty partnership from last semester, we came to realize that our focus on student engagement, ways to ask questions, and methods of building and fostering a sense of a learning community were all key to understanding threshold concepts.

In seeing threshold concepts in a vacuum of complexity and uncertainty, we had gone all semester without drawing connections across the work from last semester’s partnership and the threshold seminar this semester. Had we continued working on these elements of teaching and learning like student engagement, questions, and learning community, as in the first partnership, I am sure we would have been able to better think about threshold concepts in a more grounded and contextualized way. In recognizing that we had actually been discussing and formulating spaces in which to foster the crossing of thresholds through these conversations in our first partnership, we realized the importance of not viewing threshold concepts with anxiety, as if it were separate from the other spheres of teaching and learning we had been discussing. In fact, we realized that within the context of the work we had already done, we had made some great headway into inquiries of threshold concepts.

Upon reflecting, we realized that this work had in fact given us both a starting point to really continue thinking about threshold concepts in our everyday teaching and learning. We had let the troublesome nature of the concept itself make invisible the productive nature and usefulness of the conversations we were actually engaged in. Through this experience together, we learned that sometimes worrying too much about a threshold can make it more daunting, and even prevent one from realizing that one is, in fact, passing over it.