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EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF 'THRESHOLD CONCEPT'

Esteniolla Maitre, Bryn Mawr College 2015

In spring 2013, I was invited to participate in an experimental exploration of the pedagogical notion, 'threshold concept.' I had never heard of it before and was eager to explore something new in an extended Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) partnership with Bryn Mawr College professor of Education, Alice Lesnick. In addition to the traditional partnership where I would serve as a student consultant who observed and provided feedback on the teaching and learning in the classroom, I would also observe student and teacher engagement with threshold concepts that pertained to the subject matter of the course Alice was teaching, Literacies and Education.

When I was first introduced to threshold concepts, they were defined as troublesome, transformative, integrative and irreversible "conceptual gateways" or "'portals' that lead to a transformed view of something" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 19). Thinking back on my own education, particularly moments where I struggled to learn concepts (such as a thesis statement in writing) in a middle school English class, I remember finally understanding how to write an argument when my high school Humanities teacher introduced me to transitional phrases. This high school experience became a "gateway" for me to understand how to write more complicated and thorough thesis statements in college. So, when I heard the definition of a threshold concept, I immediately agreed that such a concept transformed one's thinking so that one could never unlearn or, better yet, forget a mastered use or understanding of a concept.

However, as conversation about threshold concepts between other student consultants, TLI Fellow Peter Felten, and TLI coordinator Alison Cook-Sather unfolded, I began to dislike the definition—not because of its inaccuracy but because of its limitation. It became clear that while threshold concepts were explored in the classroom, the crossing of such thresholds seemed confined to and rooted in the classroom as well. 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. Therefore, I pursued my TLI partnership and my interest in threshold concepts hoping to widen the scope of their definition beyond the classroom.

A moment when I was convinced that a threshold concept had a lot, if not more, to do with a student's personal background and experience was during a discussion-based activity in the Literacies and Education course. As a progressive thinker on threshold concepts, Professor Lesnick often framed the class agenda around certain concepts, like understanding a dominant discourse and its relation to literacy, that students were to engage with. One method of keeping such concepts at the forefront involved "making learning visible," as she put it, where students would showcase their learning to each other as their brains were grappling with a provocative question or topic. Sometimes that involved having a white board discussion where students had a silent but active conversation with each other on the board about a relevant topic.

In one particular class activity, students were asked to discuss in groups a concept they were grappling with in their field placement; and, in addition, they were to "make meaning," as said by Professor Lesnick, of those concepts in a charade-like skit to the entire class. When the

announcement about the skits was made, I was sitting next to a student in one of the discussion groups and I noticed how disgruntled she looked after hearing it. I was surprised because she had contributed insightful thoughts to the group; but, now, she seemed to dislike the idea of sharing those same thoughts through acting. I engaged her in conversation: “What are your thoughts on the activity?” “Nothing, I just don’t like acting or having to do anything acting-related, why can’t we do a report out?” “I think this would be a cool way for students seeing the challenges you have at your placement versus hearing it...might resonate with them more. I would love for you to share. Is there a past experience that makes you resist the idea of using your body to explain versus your words?”

Unfortunately, our conversation was cut short by an announcement and by the time it was her group’s turn to play charades, I had left to be on time for my English class. However, in this brief encounter, there was something—something that was non-discipline related—that prevented the student from wanting to engage with the threshold concept she could have explored in a new and, perhaps, enriching way. Perhaps she had embarrassing moments with acting in the past, perhaps she was uncomfortable with using her body, perhaps she did not like the possibility of not being understood — all these reasons and more could have been why she hesitated. All of these reasons and more, as small as they seem, could have had a lot to do with who she is and what prior experiences hindered her full participation, and eventually her learning, that day.

Whether or not a student crosses a threshold within a discipline is not solely dependent on connections made from prior knowledge of the discipline and of other academic disciplines. When the current definition of threshold concepts fails to recognize how personal experience (including, but not limited to, learning that happens beyond the classroom walls and one’s socioeconomic status), it affects the crossing of, or the inability to cross, a threshold; thus, the classroom becomes an exclusive environment that is dependent only on attained, even explicit, knowledge. Furthermore, I have learned that threshold concepts must include the self if students are to be invested in what they learn in the classroom and effectively apply it in and to the “real world.” Otherwise acquiring knowledge becomes impersonal and becomes simply for the sake of taking in information to pass a class, for instance.

A student’s personal experiences—anyone’s personal experiences—will always cloud, dictate, expand or completely alter how she interacts with the world; so, it is no different than how the student from the charades activity would interact with Literacies and Education or any other subject. Failure to account for a more holistic definition of a threshold concept — and, ultimately, learning — threatens to perpetuate a classroom environment where there are discrepancies among students because of *their* failure to understand versus *a* failure to understand *them*. When that happens, I don’t believe education to be progressive; instead it just reflects the current test-taking, advanced vs. regular, “achievement gap” environment I was hopeful that the definition of threshold concepts would reject.

If I were to re-define a threshold concept, the current definition would be modified to include: porous and involving the self (past experiences), socio-emotional learning (the ways in which past experiences hinder or support classroom learning) and other learned disciplines (the interconnected nature of acquired knowledge). In thinking differently about threshold concepts,

the modification of its definition highlights what needs to be changed about education more generally.

References

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49, 373–388.