Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: a Transformative Approach to Learning

Presenter: Professor Ray Land, Durham University UK

This seminar will outline and invite discussion of an analytical framework to inform programme design and assessment. The approach builds on the notion of 'Threshold Concepts' which can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something, without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. Typical examples might be 'Marginal Cost', 'Opportunity Cost' or 'Elasticity' in Economics; 'Evolution' in Biology; 'Gravity' or 'Reactive Power' in Physics; 'Depreciation' in Accounting; 'Precedent' in Law; 'Geologic Time' in Geology; 'Uncertainty' in Environmental Science; 'Deconstruction' in Literature; 'Limit' theory in Mathematics or 'Programming' in Computer Science.

This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time, with the transition to understanding often involving 'troublesome knowledge'. Depending on discipline and context, knowledge might be troublesome because it is ritualised, inert, conceptually difficult, alien or tacit, because it requires adopting an unfamiliar discourse, or perhaps because the learner remains 'defended' and does not wish to change their customary way of seeing things.

Difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of 'liminality', a suspended state or 'stuck place' in which understanding approximates to a kind of 'mimicry' or lack of authenticity. Insights gained by learners as they cross thresholds can be exhilarating but might also be unsettling, requiring an uncomfortable shift in identity, or, paradoxically, a sense of loss. A further complication might be the operation of an 'underlying game' which requires the learner to comprehend the often tacit games of enquiry or ways of thinking and practising inherent within specific disciplinary knowledge practices. In this sense we might wish to talk of 'threshold practices' or 'threshold experiences' that are necessary in the learner's development.

The thresholds approach addresses disciplinary contexts and emphasises transformation in learning. It results in a reformulation of the learners' frame of meaning. It is currently being implemented in a wide range of disciplinary areas and has been the focus of three international symposia in the UK, Canada and Australia, with a fourth taking place –in Ireland in June 2012. This session will outline key dimensions of the thresholds approach followed by

discussion of implications for practice in participants' own contexts.

Lunch will be provided after this Seminar.

Ray Land is Professor of Higher Education at Durham University and Director of Durham's Centre for Academic Practice. He previously held similar positions at the Universities of Strathclyde, Coventry and Edinburgh. He has been a higher education consultant for the OECD and the European Commission and is currently involved in two EC higher education projects. He has published widely in the field of educational research, including two co-edited books on learning technology – Education in Cyberspace (RoutledgeFalmer 2005) and Digital Difference: perspectives on online learning (Sense 2011). He has also produced several volumes on the theme of threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge, including the most recent Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning (Sense 2010).

Event date:
5th Jun 2012, 11:00am to 1:00pm
Location:
Mathews Building, Level 3, room 312

Open to:
Staff Only: Event open only to UNSW Staff
Seats available:
40

Cost:
Free

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