Working with threshold concepts: resource overview

Collection: The Subject & pedagogy

Learning outcomes

This activity should help you clarify in your own mind some of the reasons why students may seem to be lagging in their grasp of the subject. It could help you identify key issues in learning. On this basis, it should help you not only to empathise with students, but to think actively about how to engage them with the modes of enquiry that characterise the English disciplines.

Overview

This resource will help you to think about an area where subject thinking and knowledge overlap in suggestive ways with educational thinking. In your PGC or Certificate of Practice you may well have come across the idea of 'threshold concepts'. The idea was put into circulation by Jan Meyer and Ray Land in 2003 and they have refined it since. (Here is a web version of the original paper.) To summarise briefly: Meyer and Land suggest that in any discipline there are foundational concepts which a learner needs to grasp before he or she can progress in the discipline.

A **threshold** concept 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.

Obviously it is important for teachers to be aware of these moments of awakening. But at the same time, from the very fact that they may themselves have been among the people for whom these concepts proved least troublesome, they may not realise the problems they present to some students. The concept may seem so obvious that they don't even think about it. Yet by the nature of a threshold subject, someone who hasn't grasped it, for whom it is not part of their mental architecture, will remain in a liminal position, on the outside of the door. Part of their problem may be that such concepts are frequently counter-intuitive: they may seem absurd, or fly in the face of commonsense understandings. So a student of language might struggle with the idea of language as a rule-governed system because the normal idea of a rule is something overt, prescriptive, and quite possibly arbitrary ('you may not skateboard on the station premises'; 'do not use 'I' in an academic essay'). Readers and literature students commonly suppose that if we could get hold of it, the best insight into a text would come from the author and her intentions, a position against which literary scholarship from the new critics to post-structuralist theory has set its collective face. Or students may think that the obvious way of reading a novel is to speculate on the psychology of the characters. Obviously, there is room for a critique of Meyer and Land on the grounds that threshold concepts are themselves contestable, not fixed. (They might even be forged anew in the dialogue with students!) But let's accept the spirit of the thing for now. If as a tutor you are to create strategies for helping your students cross such thresholds your first step must be to develop an awareness of where the problems lie.

Activities within this resource

- Crossing the line: individual activity
- Crossing the line: group activity

Resources in the *Subject and Pedagogy* Collection

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- Writing and the teacher: resource overview
  - Writing tasks: group activity
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- Hearing yourself teach: resource overview
  - Keeping a teaching journal: individual activity
- **Working with threshold concepts: resource overview (* you are here)**
  - Crossing the line: individual activity
  - Crossing the line: group activity