

Threshold Concepts in Practice Education – Grappling the Liminal Space for Social Sphere Practitioners.

Aoife Prendergast,
Department of Applied Social Sciences
Limerick Institute of Technology, Ireland.
Aoife.prendergast@lit.ie

Abstract

Social sciences and humanities undergraduate education, particularly in the areas of early childhood education and applied social studies must engage with professional practice education. There is urgency for the need for practitioners and educationalists to communicate, and for practitioners to be aware of developments in educational theory. The idea of 'threshold concepts' is currently widely discussed by educationalists. Threshold concepts are described as areas of knowledge without which the learner cannot progress, and which, when grasped, lead to a transformation in the learner's perspective and understanding. Threshold concepts have been criticized on conceptual grounds, and there is a lack of clarity as to how to identify them empirically. While they may represent a fruitful approach to the task of engaging humanities students in teaching, it is suggested that further development of the idea is required before it could be usefully applied. However empirical studies in other disciplines suggest that there may be associated benefits to the teaching of the discipline from trying to identify threshold knowledge. Practice education is one such component in undergraduate education where threshold concepts can be located and applied for future social sphere practitioners.

Keywords: threshold concepts, undergraduate education, practice education, applied social studies, humanities, social care, teaching, learning.

Introduction

Humanities education, particularly in the areas of the social sphere and allied health professions such as early childhood education and applied social studies, must engage with professional practice education. Practice education itself as a professional “block” of real-life work experience can be considered as a portal or indeed a threshold to a particular profession. Indeed, it is an incredibly powerful metaphor for any professional education undergraduate programme. Professional education programmes are both the gatekeepers of a profession and its door stewards facilitating entry and initiation. While “beginning social sphere practitioners typically conceptualize the process of learning to teach as a cumulative acquisition of concrete technical and organizational skills” (McLean 1999, p. 59), it is the development of social sphere professionals identity as professionals which is perhaps more critical to successful negotiation of the liminal space between student and professional within which they find themselves during undergraduate practice education programmes.

Threshold Concepts (Meyer & Land 2003; 2005) are defined as those without which it is not possible to engage in the practices and discourse of a discipline. Often, these concepts constitute troublesome knowledge that when integrated has a transformational and regenerative effect on the learner, integrating existing knowledge to open up new horizons of thought. The threshold concepts framework offers a framework which is quintessentially integrative, setting a number of key theories in relation to each other which facilitate the generation of insights for the field of professional learning. In particular, threshold concepts focus on transformative aspects of learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), the nature of conceptual change (Carey, 1999), specifically adaptive change entailing changes to belief systems (Heifetz, et al. 2009) and the importance and role of communities of practice in professional learning (Wenger, 1998). The potential for threshold concepts to change not only the learner’s knowledge but also their subjectivity and even identity resonates with work on professional and academic identity and the role of the self in professional development (Lipka & Brinthaup, 1999; Day, et al. 2007). Furthermore, given the interdisciplinary nature of social sphere professionals in contemporary practice, literature on teacher education has been explored to analyse practice education in greater detail. In particular, the conditions of the liminal space within a threshold, and the notion of mimicry which ties to Brookfield’s notion of impostorship for beginning teachers (2006, p. 91), is of key importance in

exploring professional learning programmes which function as a rite of passage for initiands to a profession (Kiley, 2009). This too is similar for the social sphere professions. Existing work in the area of threshold concepts for professional learning (Atherton, et al., 2008; Cove et al., 2008) points at a number of concepts that could be considered as threshold for beginning social sphere professionals. This paper extends the focus by addressing what is the relationship between possible threshold concepts integrated at practice education and the student's emerging identity.

There is urgency for the need for practitioners and educationalists to communicate, and for practitioners to be aware of developments in educational theory. Threshold concepts have been criticized on conceptual grounds, and there is a lack of clarity as to how to identify them empirically (Rowbottom, 2007). While they may represent a fruitful approach to the task of engaging humanities students in teaching, it is suggested that further development of the idea is required before it could be usefully applied. However empirical studies in other disciplines suggest that there may be associated benefits to the teaching of the discipline from trying to identify threshold knowledge.

The key questions below highlight issues in practice education that are worth analysing.

1. What are the threshold concepts underlying good professional practice and which can or must be integrated at pre-practice stage and practice education?
2. Are these threshold concepts similarly perceived by different “stakeholders” in social sphere professions?
3. What are the conditions that facilitate or challenge the integration of these threshold concepts?

Practice Education Placements: Rites of Passage

Turner (1979, p. 234) suggests that rites of passage are characterised by changes in ‘states’. ‘States’ he suggests, are ‘relatively fixed or stable conditions’ and the rite of passage describes the transition, even a transformation from one state to another. This transformation, Turner (1979, p. 235) argues, consists of three stages: ‘separation, margin (or limen) and aggregation’. With separation the learner leaves the state that

she/he knew, a state that was fixed and understood. Once having separated, the learner is not in the state in which she/he was, and nor in the state to which she/he is to become, but rather in a state of liminality. In the third stage, the transition is consummated, that is, the learner is in the new state. Many practice educators and supervisors working with students would not find it difficult to visualize new candidates separating from their stable, known state and entering into an ambiguous, liminal state, a state which can last for several weeks, culminating in the consummation of a skilled novice professional. Furthermore, within the overall rite of passage there are generally several 'mini' rites of passage, for example entry, supervision sessions, tripartite meetings, assessments and oral presentations. Cook-Sather (2006) describes Turner's traditional presentation of rites of passage (the adolescent boy taken to a different space, where, with the help of those who are already initiated, he undergoes a rite of passage), and suggests: Initiands are afforded the rare opportunity 'to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men' including societal as well as personal difficulties, and to learn from the ways in which their 'wisest predecessors' have attempted to make sense of these mysteries and difficulties. (Cook-Sather, 2006: 110, citing Turner)

She then applies Turner's theory to the twenty-first century where she argues initiands are now not in a position of withdrawing to a space where they have the luxury of contemplating life, but rather operate simultaneously across a number of contexts and within different communities and with different authorities. This complex view of rites of passage is critical in understanding the learning environment of the student in professional practice education: a learner who within a work and professional context might be skilled in applying theory to practice or up to date with the latest policy developments and at the same time an initiand into the complex professional world.

When the current definition of threshold concepts fails to recognize how personal experience (including, but not limited to, learning that happens beyond the strict confines of a structured placement and one's socioeconomic status), it affects the crossing of, or the inability to cross, a threshold; thus, the practice education setting becomes an exclusive environment that is dependent only on attained, even explicit, knowledge. Furthermore, it is vital that threshold concepts must include the self if students are to be invested in what they learn in the classroom in higher education institutions 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 module 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. Failure to account for a more holistic definition of a threshold concept — and, ultimately, learning — threatens to perpetuate the higher education environment where there are discrepancies among students because of *their* failure to understand versus a failure to understand *them*. 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).

The concepts and practices, or ways of thinking and acting, of a profession provide the structure and path for the passageway from novice to initiate within the profession, often governed by requirements of the appropriate professional body. The domain of professionalisation in Ireland is currently undergoing radical change with the launch of consistent requirements by CORU, the first health and social care professions regulator in the history of the state. Within this context of change, it is critical to focus not on key competencies, skills or knowledge for professional practice but rather on practice education as a portal and the nature of the transition and transformation inherent in students' successful negotiation of this portal, from the perspective of the student as professionals themselves.

In summary, threshold concepts theory proposes that students on social professional training programmes such as early childhood education and social care must successfully execute threshold practices to begin to understand what it means to be successful practitioners. The learning journey is akin to the successful negotiation of the early stages of the practice placement which is considered 'troublesome' for many students. All students need to be reassured that they may find the early part of placement physically, emotionally and cognitively 'troublesome'. But over time, with the support of supervisors and practice educators and through their own perseverance, students should settle, become familiar with routines and should successfully interact with a variety of clients. While practice educators and supervisors are well placed to

observe transformative learning journeys during practice placements, they should not minimise the challenges facing students early on in practice education. Reflective approaches could be used to highlight, explore, accept and normalise these challenges. For placement educators and supervisors, they must continue to ensure that practice placement education is relevant to constantly changing and diverse work practices (Lloyd et al 2002). Although there is an extensive body of literature on clinical education and the traditional practice placement models, there has been limited research on alternative practice placement education such as inter-professional learning and supervision and the implications for the application of threshold concepts are complex.

Much is known about the purpose of placement educators, but how their role is implemented is subject to conflicting expectations, partly created by the structure in which they work. Collaboration between practice education settings between universities, institutes of technology and practice provide an opportunity for academia and practice settings to collaborate in a partnership to enhance practice learning and fulfil one of the main aims of the practice educator role in any contemporary setting : to narrow the theory-practice gap. However tensions and conflict will exist. Professional standards and guidelines are of special value in the area of academic preparation, for it is this area that the seeds of professional practice are initially planted. It is essential that those who aspire to become professional student educators and supervisors receive the best preparation possible. Preparation standards are the essential foundation for quality education.

Conclusion

How the role of a practice educator in relation to those they work with is defined have implications for the purpose and process of supervision of students undertaking professional education for that role. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the lack of robust and generally agreed articulation of what constitutes professional practice in the first place has resulted in the absence of a body of literature and the development of appropriate models / frameworks of supervision for that practice. In conclusion, practice education for future social sphere professionals underscores a participatory and democratic process truly embedded in core threshold concepts that aid the practitioner engage in uncovering identities in their own practice. It also allows the practitioner to

work engage in critical reflections through a cyclic process. One argues that threshold concepts improve practices within different sites and looks at practitioners as agents of change. Similar to Mertler, 2006, p.6, one attempts to use threshold concepts as an appropriate avenue to make “a grassroots effort to find answers to important questions or to foster change”. This indeed is true for the application of threshold concepts in undergraduate practice education. Entering into the complex arena of practice education in the social sphere, a constellation of challenges is evident and one envisages that there are no easy answers or solutions to truly identifying and applying threshold concepts successfully. The shifting nature of practice education and the ever evolving complexities that exist in social sciences, we must remain cognisant that our understandings and how we position ourselves will keep changing and will be fraught with contradictions.

References

- Atherton, J., Hadfield, P., & Meyers, R. (2008). Threshold Concepts in the Wild. Paper presented at the *Threshold Concepts: from theory to practice* conference, 18–20 June 2008. Queen’s University, Kingston Ontario.
- Brookfield, S. (2006). *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carey, S. (1999). Sources of conceptual change. In E. K. Scholnick, K. Nelson, & P. Miller (Eds.), *Conceptual development: Piaget’s legacy*, pp. 293-326. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Newly betwixt and between: Revising liminality in the context of a teacher preparation program. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 110–127.
- Cove, M., McAdam, J., & McGonigal, J. (2008). Mentoring, teaching and professional transformation. In R. Land., J. Meyer & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines*, pp.197-211. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington, A., & Gu, Q. (2007). *Teachers Matter: Connecting Lives, Work and Effectiveness*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Devitt, A., Oldham, E., & Kerin, M. (2011). Beginning a career of learning about learning: a case study of student teachers in an initial teacher education programme in Ireland. Paper presented at the 36th

Annual Conference of the Association for Teacher Education in Europe, 24-28 August 2011. Riga, Latvia.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Press.

Kiley, M. (2009). Identifying threshold concepts and proposing strategies to support doctoral candidates, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 293–304.

Lipka, R. P., & Brinthaupt, T. M. (Eds.) (1999). *The Role of Self in Teacher Development*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Lloyd C., Bassett H., & King R (2002) Mental health: how well are occupational therapists equipped for a changed practice environment? *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 49(3), 163-66.

McLean, S. V. (1999). Becoming a Teacher: The Person in the Process. In R. P. Lipka., & T. M. Brinthaupt (Eds.), *The role of self in teacher development*, pp. 55-91. Albany: SUNY Press.

Mertler, C. A. (2006). *Action research: Teachers as researchers in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyer, J.H.F., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practising. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving Student Learning - Theory and Practice Ten Years On*, pp. 412-424. Oxford: OCSLD.

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. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5

Meyer, J. H. F., R. Land, et al. (2010). *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E (Eds.). (2009). *Transformative Learning in Practice*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Rowbottom, D. P. (2007). Demystifying threshold concepts. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(2), 263-270.

Turner, V. (1979). Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In W. Less., & E. Vogt (Eds.), *Reader in comparative religion*, pp. 234–243. New York: Harper and Row.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.