

Threshold Concepts: Every style, every discipline

- Nicole Eva & Bruce MacKay

In 2015, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) released their new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. This was a replacement for an older, more proscriptive set of standards which were designed to help librarians create effective information literacy instruction programmes. The new Framework is a much broader, more theoretical document which allows those teaching information literacy to talk about the 'big ideas' around information. Each Frame, or Threshold Concept, of the new Framework addresses a main theory of information literacy. These concepts are often 'troublesome' for students to grasp, but once understood is transformative in their comprehension of the discipline.

Before the ACRL Framework was released, I had never heard of Threshold Concepts. I had no idea that this was a scholarship that had existed for over a decade, and was gaining popularity both around the globe and with many different disciplines. The notion of Threshold Concepts was introduced by Meyer and Land in 2003. It gained popularity in the UK, and quickly spread around the world. As their idea took hold in the academic community, Meyer and Land decided to create a conference to bring together those doing research on threshold concepts in various disciplines, and the Threshold Concepts Conference was born in 2006. Bruce MacKay and I attended the 6th biennial Threshold Concepts Conference at Dalhousie University in beautiful Halifax, NS in June 2016 thanks to funding from the Teaching Centre's Travel Fund.

Discussing the information literacy labs in the LBED 1000 classes, Bruce noticed that students seemed to have trouble changing their search behaviour permanently despite having explicit instruction in using library resources. We thought that it was a classic example of a threshold concept, and that an exploration of the phenomenon a natural fit for the conference. We developed a reflective journal assignment which had students write about what they had learned in the library labs, what still confused them, and how they might use the information that had been taught to them in the lab that day in the future. We examined these journal entries to see how and why students might be resorting to simple Google searches and using web pages for their research rather than the scholarly materials found through the library which they had been shown (and practiced using) in the labs. We presented some of our initial thoughts at the conference, and engaged with our audience in some further brainstorming about solutions. We are continuing our research, to see if some of my changed teaching methods, will make a difference this term.

While Bruce had attended two previous Threshold Concept Conferences, this was a brand new notion for me. I had absolutely no idea the scholarship that was being explored around threshold concepts, and in such a variety of disciplines! Over the three days of the conference I saw not just librarians talking about threshold concepts in information literacy, but occupational therapists, sociologists, visual artists, and more, all discussing threshold concepts within their own areas of study. Threshold concepts are all around us! Within our own disciplines, the main concepts are so embedded in our psyche that we take for granted that they are simple for any newcomer to the field to grasp. We forget that as someone being introduced to our discipline, some of these ideas are not ingrained, but may actually be threatening to their pre-existing knowledge and a difficult hurdle to pass – or just be a difficult notion to grasp. Ray and Land saw this, and realized that explicitly labeling certain concepts within a discipline as thresholds can make us more likely to recognize these barriers as we encounter them, and in the

process become better teachers. In fact, after the conference Bruce and I thought that explicitly drawing attention to these concepts and actually labeling them as troublesome for students might actually help them in crossing over that threshold; that rather than silently struggling, thinking they are alone in having difficulty understanding what is being taught, they may be more likely to fight through the discomfort and come out on the other side if they realize it's hard for almost everyone. In shining a light on the difficulty, we can show students that we understand, we 'get' that they may be stuck, and we let them know that it's ok – and that we are willing to work with them to get to the other side. This is one of the strategies I'm using this year for the labs. The other is to be much more explicit in demonstrating the differences between Google results and a library database result – not just telling them the results will be better/more scholarly, but actually showing them 'live'. And allowing them to experiment in the lab 'live' as well, asking them to compare their Google Scholar results to their database results. It's risky, of course; it's possible that their best result will come from Google rather than the Library. But the point isn't really to say that Google is terrible, but to encourage them to seek out their 'best' scholarly source for the project, rather than defaulting automatically to Google because it is 'easier'. My initial glance at the reflective journals submitted would indicate to me that this strategy did help to convey to students the value of library resources and databases, and that sometimes Google – even Google Scholar – isn't their best, or only, place to search.

Attending the Threshold Concepts Conference allowed me to think much more deeply about threshold concepts and to recognize these 'troublesome' concepts in information literacy. It helps illuminate the areas that a newcomer can have difficulty with – and in my case, helped me remember what it was like to be a novice in the field of librarianship, and the ideas that I had trouble understanding at first. This of course helps us become better teachers, when we are able to empathize with our students' struggles. The amazing thing is that once these thresholds have been crossed, students have a lightbulb moment of true understanding, and they never go back – so it allows them to continue learning up the learning ladder in the discipline. And as teachers, that is truly the best reward we can ask for.

I encourage you to think about what the threshold concepts might be in your discipline – what ideas do students most often struggle with? What is so fundamental to your field that if a student doesn't 'get' it, they will never be able to advance in that area of study? What are the points at which you usually find students having an 'aha' moment? These are likely the threshold concepts in your classes, and the places you should be focusing on in order to lead students through to the other side.

References

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