

Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: a transformational approach to learning

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This presentation will outline the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF), a discipline-based and transformative model of learning which can be used as a conceptual tool and analytical framework to inform programme design, and spur educational research initiatives. Threshold Concepts can be considered akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something and leading the learner to new conceptual and affective terrain. Threshold Concepts represent a transformed way of understanding, without which the learner cannot progress, and invariably involve a shift in the learner's subjectivity. Threshold Concepts, it is argued, lead to a qualitatively different view of subject matter and, as the 'jewels in the curriculum', are central to the ways of thinking and practising within a discipline.

As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there is a transformed internal view of subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or protracted, 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', resisting the inevitable ontological shift that threshold concepts entail. 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. This session will explore how the framework might offer new perspectives in terms of how educators might design curricula, approach teaching and support learners. A searchable archive of thresholds research evidence across many disciplines is maintained at: <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>