Threshold Concepts: From Personal Practice to Communities of Practice
Catherine OMahony, Avril Buchanan, Mary O’Rourke & Bettie Higgs (eds.)
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Review by Eve Rapley

The January 2014 NAIRTL (National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) Threshold Concepts conference papers provide both breadth and depth, capturing and articulating both the essence and substance of Threshold Concepts. The span of papers ensures that both the largely uninitiated, and those with more knowledge and interest in this area of higher education pedagogy, are equally catered for. With a range of academic disciplines from geology, history, art, mathematics and engineering in which to contextualise underlying concepts, the papers and vignettes successfully tread the path between inaccessible and esoteric theory, and an atheoretical ‘dummies guide’ approach.

In addition to the breadth of disciplines featured, papers focus on undergraduate, postgraduate and international students and cases, as well as those from our own shores and those further afield. With a spectrum of methodological diversity from the ‘tried and tested’, to those championing the evolutionary nature of Threshold Concepts, the proceedings present a veritable smorgasbord of approaches and angles. Sensibly put together into five clearly orientated sections, the proceedings are logically ordered, with each paper being short, yet, on the whole, packing a punch. It is perhaps this snappy writing approach which makes the collection so entirely readable and worth any HE teacher taking a look at.

As an HE teacher, I am well acquainted with the difficulties oft cited and experienced by students as they grapple, often with difficulty, with the notion of moving towards and through liminal spaces; spaces where students encounter ‘troublesome knowledge’ and find themselves unable to move beyond it; a ‘stuck place’. I have seen firsthand, genuine discomfort and confusion from students as they begin to face the
prospect of their hitherto acquired knowledge and certainties being challenged and, at
times, turned inside out and given a metaphorical shake. Everything previously and
unquestioningly held as being the truth can begin to morph and change, creating a
state of confusion and a raft of questions and nascent hypotheses. Referred to in the
literature as ontological shift, it is this notion of philosophical positioning that is so
conceptually difficult to contend with, yet is presented so neatly and accessibly within
this collection.

The keynote by Professor Ray Land, a renowned founding father of Threshold
Concepts, adds some serious intellectual weight to the proceedings, giving the reader
both something of a crash course in underlying principles, as well as a particularly
potent re-visiting and re-imagining of the oft-cited definitions and constructs. Whereas
much that is written about Threshold Concepts tends to dwell upon the negative and
the aspects of difficulty and confusion, Land opts for an altogether more positive tack.
Whilst he acknowledges the disorientating and unsettling nature of being on the
wrong side of a Threshold Concept, and of the journey through to the other side, he
invites readers to see a ‘stuck place’ as a place for student re-awakenings and a place
to be embraced as one as a space for transformation, not merely as somewhere for
students to struggle and to merely ‘get through’. He talks of liminal spaces as being
difficult, but also in terms of being ‘emergent…where emergent identities arise’. He
also talks of them being a place where previously held truths and ways of viewing the
world have to be jettisoned, to be ‘let go’ in order that the new ways of thinking can
come into existence. He portrays this letting go as both necessary and emancipatory.
His vigorous assertion that Threshold Concepts and liminal spaces are there to be
seized and acknowledged as being places both for pleasure and pain, are cogently
presented.

Belinda Allen’s paper continues this theme of adopting an optimistic embrace, rather
than a fearful cower. Her talk of students moving towards and through Threshold
Concepts and liminal spaces in terms of ‘liberation’, ‘receptiveness’ and ‘growth’ all
chime with Land (and many of the other authors from the collection), again offering up
an altogether more positive and alternative reading of what has sometimes been
considered a concept firmly rooted in the realms of theory, and not the applied.

The quietly impressive range of papers within the collection abundantly illustrates the
multidimensional nature of Threshold Concepts. They take the reader beyond the
standard reading of Glynis Cousin’s notions of Threshold Concepts being ‘betwixt and
between conceptual mastery’. They paint an altogether more rich and practical
portrait that HE teachers might meaningfully take to re-shape their own practice. The
emphasis on teachers needing to be mindful of Threshold Concepts, to assist students
in negotiating their way through, and to tolerate confusion, is eloquently yet
purposefully stated. A number of papers talk in detail about the need for HE teachers
to identify their own disciplinary Threshold Concepts, to acknowledge their existence
and to develop a pedagogy both to promote learning, and to decrease teacher
frustration.
At a time when much is written in both the popular press and academic literature about the very nature and purpose of higher education (often in response to concerns about deficits in criticality and higher thinking from undergraduates), this publication could not be more appositely timed. As university teachers, it also highlights the question that we’ve been asking ourselves since time immemorial: ‘Why don’t they get it?’ Perhaps reading this will put us all in a better place to address the question, and to come at this age old problem from a different, and more enlightened space.