Hoping for Transformation: positive psychological well-being as a mediator of liminality

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The transformations associated with the acquisition of a threshold concept involve not simply the building of knowledge or addition of information to our current body of knowledge. Rather they involve a conceptual and ontological shift that brings about a change not simply in what we know but in our way of being, our subjectivity (Meyer & Land, 2005). Such changes cause us to think about, and view, the world differently, from a transformed perspective, that is irreversible. When experiencing a threshold transformation we must first come to a place of dissatisfaction or experience a troubling of our current understandings or ways of being. This might be as a result of independent learner experiences or be facilitated by the teacher who brings the learner to a place of discomfort. At this point we enter the liminal phase as we search for new understandings and embark on the journey of transformation. The journey is not always smooth and we don't always get there via a direct route but rather we often move back and forth within the liminal space as the threshold comes in and out of focus. We oscillate in our understanding (Meyer & Land, 2005). The learner must find ways to cope with the discomfort of a reconfiguration of their prevailing understanding and be willing to persist with the process of transformation until it is complete and the threshold achieved.

It is this state of liminality that has proved challenging to researchers in the field of threshold concepts as it is the less well understood part of the transformation. We know that learners pass through the liminal space or tunnel (Land, Rattray and Vivian, 2014; Land, Vivian and Rattray, 2014) en route to being transformed but quite what supports or facilitates this passage is less clear. If we characterise threshold concepts as representing the end point of a particular learning cycle (as well as being the point of departure for another) then we might think of the threshold as becoming the learning goal to be attained. Work from the field of motivation tells us that motivation is an 'important aspect of the learning experience and consequently it is an integral part of any conceptual change (Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993). Motivation can be thought of as 'the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained' (Schunk, Pintrich and Meece, 2008; p4). Motivation therefore is associated with a learner's willingness to persist with learning to attain a threshold. The question for us as researchers then is what might explain why some learners persist in their efforts to grasp a threshold concept sufficiently to traverse the liminal space and others either don't embark on the journey at all or give up part way through and remain stuck in the liminal tunnel. In considering what might explain this persistence we could explore the aspects of pedagogy that might support the conceptual shifts involved in the threshold transformation or we can look at the psychological factors that help to bring about the perseverance that is needed to cope with liminality.

If a cornerstone of threshold transformations is persistence then the individual needs to be resilient - they need to be able to cope with oscillating within the liminal space as they strive for understanding. They need to believe that the threshold will be crossed and that they are capable of crossing it - they need to be able to envision themselves, even if not clearly, occupying a new space beyond the threshold. In short, they need to have the psychological coping strategies that enable them to deal with the difficult and uncertain liminal phase and to accept that it will take time and effort to find their way through it. Cousin (2006) argues that threshold transformations might be facilitated by a student's 'emotional capital' and others have established clear links between positive psychological constructs such as hope, (Sneider et al 2002) self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; 2000) , optimism , (Seligman, 2006) and resilience (Borman & Overman, 2004). In relation to learning these psychological characteristics are associated with a willingness to engage and take ownership of the learning and an awareness that learning does not simply just happen but rather, it requires effort and agency (Seligman, 2006; Sneider et al 2002). The notion of agency is of particular importance here as threshold transformations, involving as they do, changes in individual subjectivity, could not occur without individual agency. The learner needs to come to see the threshold concept as a learning goal to be mastered and to accept that whilst they can be supported in their mastery of the threshold by a tutor or peer ultimately the transformation is theirs.

This paper explores the relationship between psychological and affective characteristics such as hope, self-efficacy and resilience with a group of full-time taught masters students as they embark on their Masters dissertation. It will present the preliminary data in relation to the students' levels of hope, academic self-efficacy and resilience. The paper will explore the extent to which these psychological characteristics might be linked to a learners prior learning experiences and current levels of academic performance as a first step to unpacking the potential relationship to learning and liminality. In addition data derived from interviews with these students (probing their understandings of some key threshold concepts within the field of education to determine the extent to which they might have acquired the threshold or be in a liminal state) will be presented and discussed. If we can identify an emerging relationship in so far as students who have greater levels of hope are more positive in the interviews about the possibility of attaining a conceptual threshold as compared to those exhibiting less hope, we might be able to start to deconstruct the relationship between positive psychological states and potential to navigate the liminal tunnel. The implications of the findings will then be discussed in relation to aspects of student support and curriculum design.

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