

Toil and trouble: troublesome knowledge as counter-discourse to neoliberalism.

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Lee Shulman, former Director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, observed that ‘without a certain amount of anxiety and risk, there's a limit to how much learning occurs. One must have something at stake. No emotional investment, no intellectual or formational yield’ (Shulman 2005, p.1). In contradistinction to this sentiment, a powerful discursive shift has occurred within higher education globally over the last three decades in which HE teaching is rendered as the facilitation of ‘the student learning experience’, and as a primarily economic rather than educational transaction (Apple 2000). In this pervasive neoliberal discourse the learner is constructed as a consumer of services, ‘a situation in which the learner has certain needs and where it is the business of the educator to meet these needs’ (Biesta 2005). Through the use of consumer satisfaction surveys and module evaluation scores, such corporatist discourse is easily deployed to put students and their teachers in an oppositional stance, and to intensify internal market competition between colleagues and courses. In this way teaching to satisfaction ratings sets different parameters for what counts as education, and as quality. The discourse is antithetical to critical or transformative notions of pedagogy. It is interwoven with empty signifiers of excellence, narratives of graduate success, representations of student happiness, a sense of student entitlement and the unfailing friendliness and helpfulness of (providing) staff. Teaching becomes risk averse, formulaic and comfortable. Worst of all, learning is depicted as easy, non-problematic, without risk, requiring minimal commitment. What Jenkins and Barnes (2014) term students’ ‘pedagogic rights’ of transformation, confusion, hard work and challenge, where liminality and uncertainty trigger different ways of thinking, different modes of knowledge and deep personal change, are curtailed. This paper presents the Threshold Concepts Framework – with its emphasis on transformation through troublesome knowledge and shifts in subjectivity – as a necessary and timely counter-discourse to the increasing commodification of learning.

The Threshold Concepts Framework

The Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) represents a way of thinking about curricula where specific elements that are challenging for students to understand have a transformational impact on their learning once they are understood. By identifying Threshold Concepts (TCs), and then adapting teaching practice and assessment, teachers can significantly benefit student learning (Flanagan 2014). The TCF can help, it is further claimed, to define critical points in a student's learning and offer a means of streamlining what is taught and assessed (Barradell 2013). The integrative nature of threshold concepts represents the antithesis of the transmission of large content volume, the 'stuffed curriculum' (Cousin 2006). It is, rather, the relationships between aspects of knowledge that are seen as transformative, in opening up new ways of seeing. 'The power and value of the threshold concept can only be recognised by a student if they can see how it is able to act in an integrative way' (Davies 2003, p. 6).

Liminality

The superordinate and non-negotiable characteristic of a threshold concept is its transformative capacity. TCF research (Flanagan 2014) has drawn extensively on the notion of troublesomeness in the liminal space. This entails both a conceptual and an ontological shift. Liminality is viewed as a transformative state in the process of learning in which there is a reformulation of the learner's meaning frame (Schwartzman 2010) and an accompanying shift in the learner's subjectivity (Meyer and Land 2005). A state of comparative uncertainty is encountered 'in which the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings' (Cousin 2006, p. 4). Learning thresholds are often the points at which students experience difficulty and are often troublesome as they require a letting go of customary ways of seeing things, of prior familiar views. This entails an uncomfortable ontological shift, as, in many respects, we are what we know.

The liminal state can be seen to perform a progressive function which begins with the encountering and integration of something new. This subsequently entails a recognition of shortcomings in the learner's existing view of the phenomenon in question and an eventual letting go of the older prevailing view. At the same time this requires a letting go of the learner's earlier mode of subjectivity. There then follows an envisaging (and ultimate accepting) of the alternative version of self which is contemplated through the threshold space, the learner's 'emergent being' as Blackie et al. (2010) portray this. This involves a 're-authoring' of self according to Ross (2011), or 'undoing the script'. Learning in the liminal space further entails the acquisition and use of new forms of written and spoken discourse and the internalising of these. In its more frustrating manifestations it can be experienced as a suspended state in which understanding approximates to mimicry or lack of authenticity. It can be unsettling, experienced often as a sense of loss, as prevailing earlier conceptual views, and earlier states of subjectivity, are relinquished.

Pedagogic rights

Clearly such a transformative approach to learning sits uneasily with a neoliberal rendering of the learner as consumer of educational services. The obligation and commitment to be provoked into liminal states of learning, to experience troublesome knowledge, to undergo ontological shifts which can lead to different ways of thinking, different modes of knowledge and deep personal change are presented here – in keeping with the work of Jenkins and Barnes (2014) – not as a commercial entitlement but as 'pedagogic rights' which offer alternative and, in our view, more valid effective notions of quality in higher education. As Barnett has observed: 'The student is perforce required to venture into new places, strange places, anxiety-provoking places. This is part of the point of higher education. If there was no anxiety, it is difficult to believe that we could be in the presence of a higher education' (Barnett 2007: 147). We feel the transformative approach outlined here offers the promise of a counter-discourse to the powerful neoliberal ideology

that has had such a pervasive and impoverishing influence on learning and teaching in higher education globally for the last three decades.

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