Threshold Concepts in Child and Youth Care

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Outline of Presentation

• Threshold concepts and threshold learning – what are they?
• The relevance of threshold concepts for child and youth care
• The Study
• Findings – Expert/Educators, Students/Practitioners, Pedagogic Concerns
• Threshold Concepts on the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care
• Impact of threshold concepts and threshold learning on our sector
Threshold Concepts

• A type of core concept
• Opens up new, previously inaccessible ways of thinking
• Can be thought of as a portal or threshold to another level
5 Characteristics of Threshold Concepts

• they are **transformative**, once they’re understood;
• they are **irreversible** – it is virtually impossible to forget them once they’re understood;
• they are **integrative** in their capacity promote the connection of previously unconnected ideas;
• they are **bounded** in that they often help to define the scope or boundaries of a subject area; and
• they are **troublesome** in that they can initially be counterintuitive or hard to grasp. (Meyer and Land, 2006a)
Once Threshold Concepts are Grasped

• Students move from more basic, compartmentalised understanding to one that is foundational, coherent and integrative, permeating the acquisition of new knowledge and ideas (Meyer & Land, 2006b).

• Extension of language and discourse transforms not just understanding but often identities and world views (Meyer & Land, 2005).
Threshold Concepts and RCC/CYC

• There is “substantial empirical evidence for threshold concepts in the disciplines, drawn from over 150 scholarly papers in 80 disciplinary or subject contexts” (Land, 2011, p. 177).

• Threshold concepts hold potential to assist in the development and delivery of curriculum for RCC/CYC and in shifting discourses about residential child care, but have yet to be applied.
Study

- Funded by the Higher Education Association in the UK with match funding from the University of Strathclyde
- Exploring the relevance and particular threshold concepts or areas of threshold learning in CYC
  - Focus groups of expert/educators
  - Focus groups of student/practitioners
  - Individual interviews with a subset of student/practitioners
- Traditional dissemination plus: online learning objects for the Learning Zone (on CYC Net); handbook; webinar.
Findings

Discussions in focus groups was expansive, fascinating, ‘messy’.

Identifying clearly defined and demarcated TC’s has been like herding cats!

“So as a learning object, I’d prefer to have them reflect the messiness rather than things that are clean and dry and neat.”
Expert/Educators

- Structural Inequality
- Colonial Legacy
- Political Awareness
- Cultural Safety
- Ontological shift
- Care as moral endeavor
- Care
- Unconditional Care
- Authority
- Ethics
- Care of the self
- Use of Self
- Intimacy
- Reciprocity
- Reflexivity
- Being With (as opposed to Doing To)
- Relational Practice
- Group
- Containment / Holding Environments
- Life-space / Milieu
- Symbolic Communication
- Working in the Natural Environment
- Projection / Splitting
- Behaviour as Meaning
- Therapeutic Use of the Everyday
- Trauma
- Child Development / Developmental Care
- The Other 23 Hours
- Safety
- Loss
- Boundary Management
- Leadership
- Noticing
- Listening
- Attachment
- Belonging
- Unconscious Processes and Psychodynamic Ways of Understanding
Practitioner Handbook and Online Learning Objects in process of being written up - observations about Threshold Concepts or Areas of Learning:

• They are **deceptively simple** – this is part of their troublesome nature

• They aren’t just out there. While students/practitioners must learn external concepts, there is also this **overriding dimension of the self** – not necessarily as present in some other disciplines

• The degree of the 5 characteristics will normally **vary** from student to student
• The concept of relationship was raised more than any other as a possible threshold concept or area of learning by student/practitioner focus group participants.
  – It didn’t mean that you were always going to get on with that young person and have this so-called good relationship, whatever that means. It was more like a developing relationship with the emphasis for our job being the relationship as opposed to the procedure or the hierarchal structure or the organisational demands....our actual job and main primary task is actually the relationship and how you work within that relationship.
• More than any other concept, area of learning or area of practice, expert/educator focus group participants discussed self as a possible threshold concept or area of learning. This included: use of self, authenticity, self-awareness, self-reflection, reflexivity and self-knowledge.

  – To really think about the level of responsibility, of demand ... It’s hard for me to stay in contact with that, with my whole self all the time. Sometimes to do the things that I have to do, I create a distance... To really connect and to really understand ... to really deal with the emotional part and to integrate that with an intellectual understanding is a very difficult thing. And it’s a very profound thing.
Relational Practice

• The term ‘relational practice’ was used on several occasions, as was ‘the nature of the therapeutic relationship’, ‘the everyday nature of relational work’ and ‘the essence of relationship’ (all offered in discussions specifically identifying potential threshold concepts).

  – The one for me that most immediately springs to mind is the nature of the therapeutic relationship, which was something that I hadn’t understood explicitly [when I was a student] but which appeared to be something that I had been doing. And so that was greatly enhanced and I would say that my skill in terms of fostering a more therapeutic relationship has definitely improved over the years.

  – Even talking about relational practice, we’re kind like, ‘everybody knows what that is, right?’ But to really embrace it, to really understand it in an integrated way is really tough. It’s a very hard thing to grasp and it’s a hard thing to teach people.
Self

Alongside relationship, the concept of self was raised most frequently as a possible area of learning by student/practitioner focus group participants. Self was raised as a topic in several different guises, sometimes referred to explicitly by name but more frequently an underlying theme within different strands of conversation.

I think I noticed early on that there is something about how you are being yourself as a person in terms of how the young people will respond to that. And for me I always just though that you actually need to be yourself. In the years that have passed I’ve found that actually young people respond to some people in one way but to different people in another way.
Pedagogic Considerations

- Across the student/practitioner focus groups, participants regularly spoke of the effects of their courses changing them. They referred to their eyes being opened and the effects this had on the way they felt about themselves and the way they saw the world.
  - Having the practice linking it to theory was really good for me...it made me feel a bit more confident in meetings...I was never a great reader. I was never into doing anything like that. But once I started to read articles I would have never read before, and I wondered why I didn’t read them when I first started residential child care ... So you’re learning language as you go along so you’re increasing your vocabulary and you’re going along to meetings and you’re feeling a wee bit more confident in how you’re speaking to people.
Pedagogic Considerations

- Student/practitioners did refer to knowledge becoming ‘second nature’ and being able to draw from it ‘in the moment’, without recourse to a textbook or a more senior colleague.
  - Certain topics sort of remain with you...why is it certain topics you completely forget?...and other things are bang, right there all the time, in your practice, in your studying, all of the time, they’re always there...I think it depends on your own background, what you see as important, your own biases...you do find new things, which they do stick with you and they do help you to grow.
Threshold Concepts on the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care

- Discourse
- Care (Clouder, 2006 – Nursing; Care Ethics)
- Development (Phelan, 2008)
- Containment and Holding Environments (Steckley)
- Lifespace (most recently, Garabahi & Stewart, 2013)
- Relational Practice (Garfat, 2008)
- Situated Leadership (Ward, 2009)
Threshold Concepts: Shifting the Discourses?

• Engagement with threshold concepts have contributed alternate discourses and/or the shifting of dominant discourses

• The MSc and activities and networks sparked by it have proved central to this process in Scotland
Impact of Threshold Concepts on our sector?

• The tacit to the explicit, invisible into visibility

• The role of naming in recognising and challenging

• The element of co-construction

• The development of voice
The research detailed in this presentation has informed the development of our distance learning Masters programme. http://www.strath.ac.uk/courses/postgraduatetaught/childandyouthcarestudies/

The programme is aimed at students with an interest in creating positive strategies for affirming and developing the professional identity of child and youth care practice. It draws from a variety of approaches including child and youth care, social pedagogy, sociology, psychology, health, education, social work, and social policy.
Further Reading


References


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