

A Tale of Two Thresholds

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Recently one of our students, a pre-service teacher, apologized for rowdiness in class when the students were filling out their course evaluations. She explained that the students liked the course (a seminar, intended to make sure they understood concepts of historical thinking they would be expected to teach as high school teachers) and the teacher, but they didn't understand why they had to take history seminars where they wrote history papers. After all, they weren't going to become historians, just history teachers.

Pre-service social studies teachers in the US stand at the openings of two different thresholds, one belonging to the professional world of high school instruction, and the other to the disciplines of the social studies they will be expected to teach, in this case history. They need to negotiate both of these thresholds, which are connected to each other through pedagogical content knowledge. (Shulman 1986) To know how to teach the ways of knowing of the discipline, the teachers themselves need to understand those ways of knowing. In particular, they need to understand the nature of the historical discipline, a high-order threshold concept (Entwistle 2008) or cluster of bottlenecks (Shopkow 2010). However, for many of the students the connection between the two is not clear and the closer the students get to actually teaching, the more likely they seem to be to fall back on the traditional notions of history pedagogy they have experienced as students, which were based on transmission. (Burns 2007; Bruner 1999). This tendency is reinforced by the way the Indiana Standards are written, in that they separate historical thinking from content knowledge. How can we move them through these interconnected thresholds so that they will be able to lead their own students through deep learning in history?

Arlene Díaz and Leah Shopkow of the History Learning Project have collected five years of data from pre-service history teachers from our seminars (on different topics and deploying somewhat different approaches) about their ideas about what historians, history teachers and history students do or should do. Each semester students have been asked what good historians are supposed to do, what good history teachers are supposed to do, and what good history students are supposed to do, both at the beginning of the semester and again at the end. In this paper, we present our findings about shifts in student understanding of these conjoined thresholds and relate them to our instructional practice. We conclude that although pre-service teachers need to grasp a specific content pedagogy to teach history, they cannot mobilize that pedagogy until they successfully negotiate the disciplinary threshold concept.

References

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