

Embedding Threshold Concepts in a Large-Lecture History Course

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This study focuses on one professor who reflected on the threshold concept literature (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012) in order to enact changes in his large-lecture American history course over the course of two years (by "large," this means a class of 450 students). The professor chose to combine short lectures on threshold concepts in history with strategic content (e.g., he discussed the concept of historical empathy before a unit on slave resistance in the American South). My research serves the following purposes: to investigate methods for incorporating threshold concepts and actions in large-lecture courses and to determine teaching assistants' and student attitudes towards this explicit framework.

While the threshold concept framework offers potential to rethink the learning context wherein students acquire and utilize key ideas from the field, little work has been done to date as to what this looks like within large lecture courses in higher education. Previous research on threshold concepts in the classroom focuses on upper-level seminars for majors (Middendorf and Pace, 2011; Meyer, Land, Baillie, 2010). As a baseline qualitative study of one large lecture course at UCSB, this study contributes to three areas of research in higher education: application of threshold concepts at the course level; the application of threshold concepts in the humanities (and how it possibly contributes to current conversations about the survival of the humanities in higher education); and research on graduate student development and pedagogy in large lecture courses.

My work addresses the following research questions: How does a professor define threshold concepts within the context of his history course and how do these definitions evolve over time? How do teaching assistants respond to those concepts in their teaching and in their own development as teachers?

Methods to answer these questions included classroom observations, online surveys, and interviews with the professor, teaching assistants, and students. My initial findings include:

1) Conceptual threads reinforce conceptual development: According to surveys, an explicit emphasis on concepts discussed in the professor's lecture and teaching assistant's discussion section, concepts are reinforced and practiced, thus establishing a conceptual thread for the student.

2) Emphasis on concepts bolsters discussion engagement: Emphasis on "threshold actions" or the work involved that leads to the understanding of a historical threshold concept provides an avenue of engagement in the discipline. When the professor delivered his lecture on how historians analyze sources, two teaching assistants (2 of 9) consistently employed these strategies in their own discussions with students.

3) Teaching assistants are key: The role of the teaching assistant in imparting threshold concepts is vital and one the professor did not take into account in the Winter 2013 version of the course. In addition to explaining these concepts to students in class, the professor realized he also had to make his intentions explicit to his nine teaching assistants. This was an unexpected outcome of the study yet one crucial to the development of teaching assistants as future professors.

These findings formed the basis for further redesign of the course currently underway (January 2014).

References

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