

What is the nature of the threshold concepts enquiry in health sciences? A meta-ethnographic study

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Over the space of a decade, the idea of threshold concepts has taken root in a diverse range of disciplines. The initial work was mainly concerned with hard and pure disciplines with particular disciplinary epistemologies (Meyer and Land, 2003; 2005). However, a range of other disciplines, notably professional and specialist disciplines have also been captivated by the framework. Health sciences – medicine, nursing and allied health – are amongst these fields. There is a small but growing body of work related to threshold concepts in health sciences. Yet what exactly is the nature of that discourse, and what kinds of enquiry have been undertaken to date?

This paper reports on a rigorous qualitative synthesis of the threshold concepts literature focused on the health sciences drawing on meta-ethnography as the approach. Meta-ethnography is not concerned with methodological critique per se but rather a collective interpretation of the findings of similar bodies of work (Noblit & Hare, 1988). To identify these similar bodies of work, the following search terms were used: threshold concept/s, published since 2003, full paper (i.e. 'abstract only' were excluded) and English language. Collated results were further screened for relevance to medicine, nursing and allied health fields.

One of the merits of a meta-ethnographic approach is that it provides a fresh and new perspective of primary literature, not just a summary. The aim of this paper is therefore to provide a synthesised commentary on the existing body of work on threshold concepts in the health sciences field. In doing so, it will provide new insights for health professional educators and researchers interested in helping induct students to a disciplinary community of practice. Commentary of this kind is unique to threshold concepts scholarship and can be used to inform both future research and pedagogical activity among higher education scholars interested in extending threshold concepts into new domains.

References

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