Yes but no but yes – students straddling the change process.

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Why were students in this research frequently reporting big life changes in their abilities, attitudes and world views which they attributed to their study, and then refuting significant changes to core beliefs/understanding all the while being seemingly unaware of these contradictions? Does this indicate they were still in the process of assimilating changes?

This presentation of findings is from a project in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector related to students of community service work courses. The project utilised a threshold concepts framework to explore and analyse their reported transformations during the course, with triangulation from comments by teachers and community service workers.

Exploration of the data has highlighted the oscillating nature of reporting by students of the extent of change within themselves. Their reports indicate significant ontological and epistemological shifts on the one hand; on the other their responses were contradictory. One example of this from Student A "it has changed my whole life completely…I haven't changed my core beliefs". Students frequently appeared to be unaware they were straddling two positions, or unable to articulate a state of straddling two contradictory positions. Teachers indicate awareness of students seesawing between old and new in the change process and intervene to facilitate the process. The oscillating is indicative of being in a state of liminality "which can be seen to perform a progressive function which begins with the encountering and integration of something new" (Land, 2013, p. 2). The instability of the liminal state, where ontological positions shift, is the space where students can engage in the mastery of subject or discipline knowledge and concepts which may prove to be problematic (Cousin, 2006).

The diversity of students within community services is extreme, in age, socio-economic status and life experiences. Meyer (2012) points out diversity in students means they are not expected to experience internalisation of transformative concepts in the same way, and variations will occur due to their "level of prior knowledge, experience, and disciplinary background "(2012, p. 8).
The nature of community services where the work is built around interpersonal relationships between worker and client, awareness of professional boundaries/ethics, awareness of the impact of socio-cultural, economic and political climates on the clients, may make threshold concepts, if they exist, problematic. They would need to create in the student an ability to understand themselves, the client, and society at a conceptual level to relate personally, professionally. Walker(2013) notes, threshold concepts "maybe small and nuanced just as much as they can be large and significant"(p. 251) and in community services success may involve the internalisation of both small and large concepts.

Students interviewed stated they were now able to call themselves community workers, comfortable, if a little nervous going into the workforce. However, it appears that until they are able to assimilate new knowledge, transform their thinking and let go of the old they will oscillate between the two states of being.

References

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