

Opening Plenary – ‘Threshold Concepts in Practice’

Plenary Paper 1

Toil and trouble: threshold concepts as a pedagogy of uncertainty.

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Lee Shulman, former Director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, observed that ‘without a certain amount of anxiety and risk, there’s a limit to how much learning occurs. One must have something at stake. No emotional investment, no intellectual or formational yield’ (Shulman 2005, p.1). In contradistinction to this sentiment, an observable – and powerful – discursive shift has occurred within higher education globally over the last three decades in which HE teaching is rendered increasingly as the facilitation of a rather ill-defined ‘student learning experience’, and as a primarily economic rather than educational transaction (Apple 2000). In this pervasive neoliberal discourse the learner tends to be constructed as a consumer of services, ‘a situation in which the learner has certain needs and where it is the business of the educator to meet these needs’ (Biesta 2005). Through the use of consumer satisfaction surveys and module evaluation scores, such corporatist discourse is easily deployed to put students and their teachers in an oppositional stance, and to intensify internal market competition between colleagues and courses. In this way teaching-to-satisfaction-ratings sets different parameters for what counts as education, and as quality. This discourse, it will be argued here, is antithetical to critical or transformative notions of pedagogy. It is typically interwoven with empty signifiers of excellence, narratives of graduate success, ubiquitous representations of student happiness, a sense of student entitlement and the unfailing friendliness and helpfulness of (providing) staff. Teaching becomes risk averse, formulaic and comfortable. In its worst incarnation learning comes to be depicted as easy, non-problematic, mainly risk-free, requiring minimal commitment. What Jenkins and Barnes (2014) importantly term students’ ‘pedagogic rights’ of transformation, confusion, hard work and challenge – where liminality and uncertainty trigger different ways of thinking, different modes of knowledge and deep personal change – are curtailed. This paper presents the Threshold Concepts Framework – with its emphasis on transformation through troublesome knowledge and shifts in subjectivity – as one possible dimension of a necessary and timely counter-discourse to the increasing commodification of learning.

References

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