

Moving Beyond the Threshold: Digital literacies and historical thinking in New Zealand Universities.

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Historical thinking has been defined as the “the reading, analysis, and writing that is necessary to develop our understanding of the past” <http://historicalthinking.ca/>. It consists of six principles that guide and shape the practice of history: historical significance; primary evidence; continuity & change; cause & consequence; historical perspectives; ethical dimension (Seixas and Morton, 2013). In theory and practice, therefore, historical thinking represents a disciplinary-specific approach to threshold concepts, exemplifying the kind of ‘unnatural act’ identified by Weinburg (2001) and evoked in parallel discussions of ‘troublesome knowledge’ and threshold concepts (Perkins, 2006). How do these concepts manifest themselves in a world of increasingly digitally mediated resources, tools and pedagogies? How do students in history-informed subjects cross and move beyond these thresholds? Are the threshold characteristics of, for instance, boundedness and irreversibility, equally apposite in a digital literacy environment?

Digital history relies on an increasing breadth of web-delivered digitised resources that enable scholars and students “to make, define, query, and annotate associations in the human record of the past” (Seefeldt and Thomas, 2009) often in the context of Web 2.0 social media (such as Twitter and Facebook) and gaming interfaces (such as Second Life or games with a purpose [GWAP]). Digital history has the potential to offer powerful tools for inquiry-based and autonomous learning, but as Stéphane Lévesque has noted in the Canadian setting, “how do we engage students in meaningful historical inquiry” (Lévesque, 2008)? Or, as Luke Tredinnick has provocatively remarked, “What does the past look like through the lens of digital culture” (Tredinnick, 2013)?

This paper reports on phase one of a two-year, nationally-funded project whose aim is to gain an understanding of how students and teachers in New Zealand universities use digital media to support the acquisition and retention of disciplinary threshold concepts for transformative learning and improved student outcomes in history-informed subjects such as history, architecture, literature, art history, music, and history of science. The project combines an academic audit of current practices, a MOOC-enabled workshop series to train and mentor junior teacher-researchers who are at the forefront of digital adoption and e-pedagogy, a rollout of threshold concepts-modelled curricula and, building on the recent work of Meyer (2012, 2013), direct engagement with teachers and students and their digital learning styles and literacies through reflective journaling, e-portfolio documentation, and focus groups.

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