

Threshold concepts and Ways of thinking and practising: the ontological road less travelled

Sarah Barradell, University of Sydney, Australia
s.barradell@latrobe.edu.au

I will argue in this paper for greater focus on the ontological dimensions of threshold concepts via a ways of thinking and practising (WTP) lens. The epistemological features of threshold concepts have had healthy uptake across the higher education academic community. Some of this work has paid attention to the student experience of learning particular kinds of knowledge – the body of literature about variation theory is an example (e.g. Akerlind et al 2010). More recent interest has used threshold concepts as a focus for the redesign of entire curriculum – occupational therapy (e.g. Rodger & Turpin, 2011; Rodger, Turpin & O’Brien, 2013) and engineering (Male & Baillie 2011a; 2011b) are notable instances. There is also a great body of work concerned with the identification of threshold concepts which for the most part involves a teacher-focus and/or attention to particular units of study.

Yet threshold concepts could be and should be more than epistemological, for that is what Meyer and Land (2003, 2005) intended in their seminal work. The real value of the threshold concepts framework is that it has the capacity to be both epistemological and ontological. Yet this dual perspective seems to have been overshadowed by the swell of interest in identification of easily describable outcomes. The current educational and professional climate also demands more from threshold concepts. In times of rapid change, global mobility and uncertainty, a singular focus on knowledge is limiting for graduates, the workforce, and the community at large (Barnett, 2000; Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001; Barnett & Coate, 2005). A broader appreciation of disciplines is now required and university curricula should concern itself with supporting students to navigate a complex array of learning experiences in which ontological transformation is front and centre.

Ways of thinking and practising (McCune & Hounsell, 2005) have helped me to see threshold concepts from an ontological perspective. They can showcase for students both the ontological and epistemological dynamics of a discipline/profession – how it comes to know, do and imagine itself. In the paper I will explore how WTP help to frame and assemble new understandings, by acting as the mesh that ties and draws threshold concepts together. The analysis will demonstrate how WTP add richness to the threshold concepts framework and help to foster an integrated and holistic view of curriculum, teaching and learning that is concerned with inducting students into disciplinary communities.

Through a WTP lens, the characteristics of threshold concepts can be interpreted more broadly, foregrounding participation as well as acquisition. The eight characteristics (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Land, 2011) will be discussed from an ontological perspective, drawing on related bodies of higher education literature. A comparison will be made with the characteristics taken from an isolated knowledge stance, to highlight the limitations of a restricted focus.

References

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