

Academics' Working knowledge, Threshold Concepts and Academic Development

Rhonda Hallett, La Trobe University, Australia
r.hallett@latrobe.edu.au

This paper discusses the findings of a phenomenographic investigation of academics' working knowledge with reference to current discussions about Threshold Concepts in academic development (cf: MCQuire & Curran 2012, Kinchin 2012, Pilkington 2012). The concept of working knowledge brings the relationship between work, learning and knowledge into sharp focus (Barnett 2000). It is tied to notions of expertise and through that, professionalism and identity formation and maintenance (Symes & McIntyre, 2000). In this argument, the findings function as initial phases in a model of curriculum design incorporating phenomenographic analysis proposed and trialled by Akerlind & McKenzie (Akerlind et al 2012). Academics' understandings of the phenomenon of working knowledge and conceptions of knowledge underpinning these are interpreted as the identification and investigation stages of the model.

As in other studies, qualitatively different conceptions of working knowledge emerging from the investigation are conceptualised as 'stuck points' or states in the liminal space of academic practice (cf Adawi & Kabo 2013). Key aspects of variation between conceptions provide insights into what is required to move through the liminal space. In the study, variation in understandings about teaching in relation to the 'Ideal' of academic work was identified at each 'stuck point'. These understandings were underpinned by understandings of knowledge itself, and influenced how the relationship between teaching and research was constructed. They were also related to different ways of being an academic. Conceptions ranged from less complex 'Fragmented' working knowledge at one end of a spectrum, to complex 'Integrated' working knowledge at the other.

Analysis of the key aspects of variation between conceptions identifies both conceptual and ontological dimensions of the liminal space (Land 2012). Across the conceptual dimension, there is a gradation in understandings about bringing teaching and research into a coherent relationship in day to day work. Evidence of 'empty' signifiers of academic work is found in all but the most complex conceptions. Varying integration of signifiers about research and its relationship to teaching in the discipline with pre-existing understandings about academic work and being an academic is evident in these cases. Across the ontological dimension, emotions associated with conceptions identify a gradation in perceptions of self-efficacy. This gradation across both dimensions of the liminal space identifies varying 'Threshold Capital' available to academics at each 'stuck point'. This in turn suggests varied experiences of liminality amongst academics, with gradation from experiences of 'striated' liminal spaces to experiences of 'smooth' or creative spaces.

Varied experiences of liminality amongst academics, identified in academics' experiences of working knowledge, make analysis of the liminal space accessible and available to interpretation for the first time. Evidence suggests that experiences of this space vary and that conceptual and ontological dimensions are associated with understandings about knowledge and its embodiment. This compliments current work on knowledge and Threshold Concepts in academic development (Kinchin 2012) while also potentially building on Threshold Concepts for teaching in Higher Education (Pilkinton 2012). It also builds on current work to link phenomenography and Threshold Concepts (Akerlind et al 2012, Adawi & Kabo, 2012).

References

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