

# **Transforming Thinking through Problem-Based Learning in the News Media Literacy Class: Critical thinking as a threshold concept towards threshold capabilities**

Dai-Ling Chen

Department of Education, Durham University

1.16 Keenan House, Old Dryburn Way, Durham, UK, DH1 5BN

dailing.chen@durham.ac.uk

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study is to empirically examine how collaborative work between the teacher as a researcher and university students transformed students' thinking in the news media literacy class and the extent to which PBL (Problem-Based Learning) contributed to the attainment of critical thinking as a threshold concept at the theoretical level leading to pragmatic capabilities. A range of studies within different disciplines have investigated to identify the characteristics of threshold concepts by using various methodologies, while the capabilities required for the mastery of specific subjects are yet to be explored in practice. This paper thus responds to Baillie et al.'s (2013: 236) definition of threshold capabilities "that are in fact threshold to professional learning in a defined area of knowledge" where individuals' epistemological development is the focus.

In media literacy concerning analysis, evaluation and critical reflection (Buckingham, 2003), critical thinking serves as the imperative gateway to achieving understanding, which requires a cluster of productive capacities for making appropriate judgments in reading and writing the media. Logic, skills and abilities, and developmental progression involving contexts in response to philosophical, psychological and sociological traditions are proposed being reviewed to construct its definition comprising varied but related elements. Given its complexity, the nature of critical thinking corresponds to that of a threshold concept which further brings about the capabilities. For exploration, the research adopted Baxter Magolda's (1992) epistemological developmental model from the constructivist perspective as the frame of reference, based on which there are four stages from absolute knowledge, transitional, independent, to contextual knowing, along with Moon's (2008) elaboration of critical thinking representation. Action research with multiple methods including observation, questionnaire, and focus group interview was conducted, together with students' group and individual work. It was found that according to the capability framework, among the five main features of threshold concepts,

transformative and troublesome are the most manifest ones based on which irreversible, integrative, and bounded are interwoven although students' demonstrations in relation to the latter three were not straightforward. In other words, the development of critical thinking through PBL was not linear but oscillatory. The outcome suggested that with the embodiment of critical thinking, the idea of threshold concepts goes beyond the level of a concept to the level of a theory resulting in capabilities, which ultimately helps the teacher to ponder over the quality of teaching and learning.

**Keyword:** Critical Thinking, Problem-Based Learning, News Media Literacy, Threshold Capabilities

Word count: 389

#### REFERENCES

- Baillie, C., Bowden, J. A., and Meyer, J. H. F. 2013. Threshold capabilities: threshold concepts and knowledge capability linked through variation theory, *Higher Education*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (February 2013), pp. 227-246
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. 1992. *Knowing and Reasoning in College Students; gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Buckingham, D. 2003. *Media education: literacy, learning and contemporary culture*, Polity Press.
- Moon, J. 2008. *Critical Thinking: An exploration of theory and practice*, Routledge.