

Engagement of UK Life Science Academics with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Threshold Concepts in Academic Practice?

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Engagement with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is increasingly becoming a requirement for UK academics. This engagement may take the form of a formal qualification in teaching in higher education, or may be a continuing professional development requirement (CPD), notably for the increasing numbers of “Teaching-only” academics employed by UK institutions to cover undergraduate teaching and course administration. However, how these individuals engage with SoTL may be confusing, and present a number of challenges, in addition to those already present in the career of an academic. For Life Scientists in particular, engagement with SoTL may offer particular challenges as individuals tackle material outwith their disciplinary expertise. Language, research methodology, confidence in data gathering, sense of identity, may present barriers to engagement with SoTL, to academics who are more comfortable within a positivistic, quantitative paradigm. While Threshold Concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003) are generally associated with student learning within the discipline, if we look on engagement with SoTL and CPD as Lifelong Learning, and the academic as student, we can explore how academics face the challenges of engagement with the field of Educational Research. Indeed, for academics considered to be expert in their field, taking on the role of student may be troublesome in itself, with the individual being required to acknowledge their lack of expertise in the area of educational research.

Taking a mixed methods approach of initial questionnaire and subsequent interview, UK Life Science academics were asked about their understanding of, and engagement with SoTL. The questionnaire and interviews revealed a range of attitudes towards engagement with SoTL, and a number of areas which could be considered to be Threshold Concepts. These areas of interest, and the extent to which they fulfil the criteria to become Threshold Concepts is explored in this study. The findings are significant in that they indicate the difficulties and challenges faced by academics attempting to engage with a paradigm outwith their disciplinary expertise, the effort expended in successful engagement, and the transformations that occur, showing the development of engagement by reading literature, to actively carrying out research projects and writing papers, in comparison to the findings of Savage et al (2011). The study also points towards areas where support can be given to academics engaging in SoTL to help encourage this development.

References

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