

'Stuck Places': Are there threshold concepts in learning to teach geography?

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The aim of this session is to explore the 'stuck places' of a group of trainees, through the eyes of the trainees, their mentors and their tutor. Some initial ideas are presented from pilot studies with a cohort of trainee teachers in 2014-15, and from work with their mentors. These explorations are put in the context of some of the literature on threshold concepts theory, liminality and mimicry.

Contextual information – who, what, where and when?

Trainees: Studying the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDipEd), a one-year, 120 credit, M level course leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). **Reflective journals** completed by **trainees** throughout SP1, to capture **lightbulb moments**. **Questionnaire** carried out with **trainees** just before second school placement (SP2) and **reflective journals** to be continued.

Mentors: many ex-trainees and MEd completers. Varying degrees of experience, with some who are mentors for the first time. Mentors have had one or two trainees for their first placement (SP1), from October to December 2014. Mentors met for a **transition meeting** in January to help trainees with target setting. Mentors completed a **progress graph** to illustrate **trainees' trajectory** throughout SP1, to capture any 'stuck places'.

Tutors: one full time and one 0.1 tutor (Paul Weeden). **Written observations** of trainees, plus **teaching sessions** in September 2014 and January 2015.

Liminality and conceptual difficulty

Meyer and Land (2005: 377) present liminality as:

a useful metaphor in aiding our understanding of the conceptual transformations students undergo, or find difficulty and anxiety in undergoing, particularly in relation to notions of being 'stuck'.

Initially, the authors applied the idea of liminality to higher education students "who find the learning of certain concepts difficult or troublesome" (2005: 375), and the transitions that take place as these students acquire new knowledge are described as "problematic, troubling, and frequently involves the humbling of the participant" (2005: 376). It can be argued that trainee teachers experience similar 'transitions', and frequently experience existing in 'stuck places'. The liminality experienced by trainee teachers is the transition from one thing to another, i.e. from a student of their discipline to a teacher of that discipline to others. Indeed, Ellsworth (1997: 71) describes the 'stuck places' that teacher education students find themselves in, and by extension the ways in which they must learn to help their own pupils escape their own 'stuck places' by:

...cultivating a third ear that listens not for what a student knows (discrete packages of knowledge) but for the terms that shape a student's knowledge, her not knowing, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances.

Mimicry

Many aspects of teacher education, particularly school based mentoring, rely on modelling of good practice as a way of supporting trainee teachers in developing pedagogical skills. However, it is suggested by Meyer and Shanahan (2003) that an early oversimplification of threshold concepts may actually form greater barriers to their being understood in the long term. This has implications for the way in which trainee teachers are shown how to lesson plan, to present and articulate ideas to pupils, and also the ways in which they themselves decide to simplify the threshold concepts of the subject they are teaching.

In 2010, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, clearly stated that:

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"Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom" (DfE, 2010).

With the subsequent expansion of Teach First and School Direct schemes for training teachers in England, it is becoming increasingly important for those in charge of delivering teacher training to understand the best ways of modelling, coaching and developing young teachers. Integral to this is an understanding of the ways in which learning most effectively takes place, the barriers and obstacles faced by learners, and the best ways to overcome these. The danger of a simplistic interpretation of 'an apprentice observing a master craftsman' is that trainee teachers aren't supported in understanding how and why experienced teachers present information and knowledge as they do. Delivering a threshold concept in a naïve and simplistic form can encourage "a form of ritualised learning or mimicry" (Meyer and Land, 2005: 382) which can ultimately hinder learning. There seems to be therefore a political imperative to get the training of new teachers right, regardless of where this training takes place. Meyer and Land (2005: 383) warn of a

...very real possibility that in certain circumstances students might well adopt what appears to be a form of mimicry as a serious attempt to come to terms with conceptual difficulties, or to try on certain conceptual novelties for size as it were. We would not wish to belittle or dismiss such responses as they may well prove to be successful routes through to understanding for certain learners. There is a clear need here for further research endeavour to increase our understanding of such coping strategies.

There are implications here for Initial Teacher Education, in particular for the support that school based mentors offer trainee teachers. Meyer and Land (2003: 5) found difficulties experienced by "expert practitioners looking back across thresholds they have personally long since crossed and attempting to understand (from their own transformed perspective) the difficulties faced from (untransformed) student perspectives". The risk of mimicry in this situation is that those involved in ITE in schools assume that trainee teachers have understood and 'can do' what is necessary to teach effectively, whereas in fact they have merely become good mimics without having understood underlying pedagogical concepts. In order to understand the implications of mimicry on mentoring and training teachers, further examination of threshold concepts both in terms of disciplinary content and pedagogy is required. This is one of the aims of this study.

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