

Title: **Threshold Concepts and Disciplinary Thinking:
a useful tool for every context?**

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

Understand two frameworks for teaching and learning in different disciplines
Analyse the usefulness of these disciplinary-aware frameworks
Consider the implications of these approaches for their own context

Session Outline

Key issues to be addressed are: the consideration of two disciplinary-aware frameworks for teaching and learning, and their implications for designing courses of initial professional development.

How much of teaching is discipline-specific, or generic, still remains a matter for contestation. Any differences, as Comber and Walsh (2008) point out, may well be perception rather than reality. However, difficulties highlighted in the evaluation of courses and qualifications utilising generic models has led to a search for a useful framework for such courses that recognises and values disciplinary differences in teaching practices. It is the aim of this session to explore such disciplinary-aware frameworks, and whether this approach can provide a meaningful tool across the disciplines.

By drawing attention to discipline-specific challenges in teaching and learning, Meyer & Land (2003; 2005) have produced a seductive framework that speaks to many as a useful tool to answer the perceived shortcomings of generic models of teaching and learning. Several courses of initial professional development in the UK now incorporate work on and around Threshold Concepts to address the concern over the absence of disciplinary distinctiveness. Such incorporation, to be worthwhile, should be amenable to evaluation that shows a beneficial effect from addressing disciplinary concerns.

Connecting the Threshold Concept framework to the ideas of 'intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines' (Becher, 1989; Becher & Trowler, 2001) raises an interesting question: can Threshold Concepts be found in every discipline? Findings from an evaluation of assessed coursework addressing Threshold Concepts suggest that some disciplinary groupings are more likely to identify candidate concepts than others. The implications of this for the design of programmes of initial professional development will provide the starting point for discussion.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

10 minutes – outline of threshold concepts and cultures of disciplines

10 minutes – discussion of connections between the two frameworks (are they complementary? Are there tensions between the two?)

10 minutes – report on the assessment findings

10 minutes – discussion of the implications of these findings for the design of PGCerts (does the thresholds framework work better for some disciplinary groups than others? Why are these differences apparent? Can we extend the framework productively?) (Depending on size of group, it may be that each of these questions is given to sub-groups to encourage full discussion).

5 minutes – depending on previous activity, either sub-groups feed back or the whole group will be invited to generate questions and priorities for further evaluation of the approach.

References

Becher, T. (1989), *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*. Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press

Becher, T., & Trowler, P. R. (2001). *Academic Tribes and Territories* (2nd ed. ed.). Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.

Comber, D. and Walsh, L., (2008), Enhancing educational development for new academic staff through the inclusion and comparison of disciplinary pedagogies, HEA Final Project Report. Available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/aboutus/sheer2_comberwalsh [accessed 2 February 2009].

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2003). *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines*. Paper presented at the 10th International Symposium on Improving Student Learning: Theory and Practice - 10 years on.

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49(3), 373-388.