

Title: **Lost in Translation: staff and students negotiating liminal spaces**

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the utility of threshold concepts and liminality
- Explore the problems of translation between disciplinary communities
- Consider ethical aspects of educational development practice
- Offer a perspective on a new research study

Session Outline

The notion of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005) has been suggested as a way of identifying and defining “critical moments of irreversible conceptual transformation in the educational experiences of learners, and their teachers” (Meyer & Land, 2005: 373) and work is currently underway across a range of disciplines (economics, electronic engineering, biology, etc.) better to understand this phenomenon. Six aspects constitute a threshold concept: transformation, whereby once understood, threshold concepts lead to a reconstruction of how students interpret an area of study; irreversibility, in that once such transformation has taken place, it is unlikely to be undone; integration, enabling students to see how previously disparate elements are interrelated; boundedness, as they will likely pertain to a limited disciplinary area; troublesomeness, as they may be constituted by alien or counter-intuitive knowledge (Perkins, 1999) and an extended use of language (Meyer & Land, 2005). They further suggest that encountering a threshold concept may lead to students entering a liminal space, that is, an uncertain space between letting go of a comfortable (and comforting) past position and entering a potentially disconcerting new one.

Other work (Green & Pilkington, 2006) looks at the importance of threshold concepts in relation to educational development practice. This session will focus on a case study of work with an engineering lecturer as he seeks to apply his understanding of this framework to the difficulties experienced by students learning to program. In relation to this specific context, I suggest that a threshold conception (Land et al, 2005) may be at work in relation to the students’ understandings of language. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on these language difficulties – or rather the problems of translation between languages – as a way of viewing liminal spaces, and to discuss what this may mean for ethical educational development practice.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

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| • [Presenter] | Explanation of conceptual framework | 10 mins |
| • [Participants] | Questions on framework | 5 mins |
| • [Presenter] | Case study findings | 10 mins |

- [Participants, in small groups] Reflection and discussion on findings for practice 15 mins
- [All] Summary and perspectives on further research 5 mins

References

Green, D. and Pilkington, R., (2006), Threshold concepts in educational development. SED A Spring Conference, Liverpool, June.

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J.H.F. and Davies, P., (2005), Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): Implications for course design and evaluation, in Rust. C., (ed), Proceedings of the 2004 12th International Symposium on Improving Student Learning: Diversity and Inclusivity, Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, 53-64

Meyer, J.H.F. and 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

Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R., (2003), Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines, in Rust. C., (ed), Proceedings of the 2002 10th International Symposium on Improving Student Learning: Theory and Practice – 10 years on, Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, 412-424

Perkins, D., (1999), The constructivist classroom – the many faces of constructivism, *Educational Leadership*, 57, (3), 6-11