Chapter 11
Reversing the Tyranny of Distance Education: 
Using Research About Threshold Concepts in Online Teaching to Humanize Online Course Design

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ABSTRACT

In today’s higher education environment, online education has become a rich and nuanced medium characterized by a dynamic and progressive use of technology. These technological advancements require research-informed guidelines and practices to facilitate understanding of how they can be used to foster positive outcomes in distance education contexts. By employing a mixed-methods multiphase design case study at Avondale College of Higher Education, the authors examine the challenges, self-confidence and threshold concepts, or transformative, conceptual understandings that academic faculty staff experience while engaging in distance education course design. The authors examine how these threshold concepts, attitudes and skills can be used to inform the design of professional development programs for academic staff who teach in online contexts. The results and associated recommendations of the six-year investigation are presented to inform professional development programs that aim to improve the quality of online teaching, course design and learning experiences of students.

INTRODUCTION

The seminal work of Meyer and Land (2003) on threshold concepts has generated interest across a range of disciplines, which have utilized this framework in assisting student learning. The notion of threshold concepts was proposed as a way of developing effective teaching and learning environments in higher education (Meyer & Land, 2003). Threshold concepts are fundamental underpinnings that are central to a body of knowledge. They are defined as “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learning cannot progress” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 53). A further related term is “troublesome knowledge”, which is knowledge that challenges the learner and can cause cognitive conflict as learners compare new ideas with their prior knowledge (Perkins, 2006). The mastery of this “troublesome knowledge” produces a transformative outcome which is permanent in learners, as they integrate what was previously apparently contradictory, alien, and counter-intuitive into an inter-relational whole, forming a foundation on which new knowledge and experiences can be attained. An important consequence of comprehending a threshold concept is a shift in the perception of the subject matter from being difficult, obscure and intimidating, to being open, accessible and rewarding, creating an environment in which learning can progress.

Meyer and Land (2005) elucidate the idea of threshold concepts by providing examples. The study of medicine is one such example where it is illustrated that the concept of ‘pain’ is put forward to students as something to inform diagnosis rather than just something for the students, as potential medical practitioners, to eliminate. They go on to put forward that: “the new ‘conceptual space’ opened up by such transfigured thought is bounded, possessing terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual spaces” (p. 374).

Threshold concepts are also integral to the context of online learning in higher education. Academic teaching staff are typically required to design online courses for university students, although they do not always have skills or experience in constructing online learning activities, resources or assessment tasks. Similarly, lecturers are increasingly expected to perform in the online classroom, but have not necessarily developed the skills for teaching in an online environment. These academics encounter key threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge as they grapple with this mode of delivery. Until those threshold concepts are clarified and mastered, the online learning environment can appear alien, intimidating and decidedly inferior as a means of learning in comparison with the face-to-face classroom.

Online education can be a rich and varied activity, potentially encompassing a range of uses of online technology to enhance or deliver learning experiences. The blended classroom uses online resources and activities in combination with the face-to-face classroom, but online learning also can involve distance education, whereby the teacher and student never physically meet, interacting exclusively in cyberspace. The differing nature of online learning and teaching suggests that a sound pedagogy of online learning needs to address the various ways in which it is used and experienced. It is vital to ensure that teachers in online environments understand the particular demands of online curriculum development in conjunction with teaching and meeting the needs of their students whose learning they moderate (Salmon, 2011), and with whom they interact and communicate online.

Some key threshold concepts that academics face when they take up online teaching have already been identified (Northcote, Reynaud, Beamish, Martin, & Gosselin, 2011). These include recognition of the following: that online learning cannot simply replicate the on-campus experience; that online students need the same levels of attention as on-campus students; that online communication can be synchronous and asynchronous; that relationships need to be fostered between all participants engaged in the online
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