

Generating threshold concepts for impactful learning development: exploring a new perspective on our work

Steve White

University of Southampton, UK

Presentation abstract

Threshold concepts (TCs) represent pivotal ‘eureka’ moments in learning, where a person makes a leap in understanding or ability ‘akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something’ (Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 1). Crossing these thresholds can be transformative, integrative, and irreversible, but also troublesome. Discussion of threshold concepts may provide a novel way of surfacing the core challenges of learning development work—whether in terms of helping students to progress or informing how we operate within the university context.

Research in learning development has identified ‘generic’ threshold concepts that students might need to support their studies. However, it is also worth considering whether we as learning developers can collectively identify threshold concepts that increase our impact when working with students, academics, and other stakeholders. This session contextualised the idea by first looking at threshold concepts for student development. This activity aimed to enhance participants’ understanding of threshold concepts.

Crucially, participants then turned to consider how threshold concepts might underpin our work as learning developers, reflecting on key concepts from teacher training and ALDinHE’s five values. Discussion was designed to surface tacit knowledge about learning development pedagogy, ways of building relationships in higher education, and how, in turn, this may influence wider teaching practices or course design. As a takeaway from the session, participants were asked to generate a list of threshold concepts that could inform their learning development practice (such as in approaches to educational interventions or learning development training/recruitment). By examining our role through the lens of

threshold concepts, looking at ourselves as ‘students’ of learning development, we might gain new insights to inform our practice and research.

Keywords: threshold concepts; professional development; learning development practice

Community response

Have you ever been asked to juggle at an academic conference before? White’s workshop at ALDcon 2023 provided participants with the opportunity to say they had done just that. In doing so, White was not encouraging participants to consider a potential career move into the circus, but rather he offered juggling as an entertaining and hands-on analogy for threshold concepts (TCs) in learning development.

In the workshop, participants were asked to start by looking at different examples of threshold concepts that had been created for students, including threshold concepts for information literacy (Dubicki, 2019), academic writing (Thompson, 2018), and postgraduate research (Kiley and Wisker, 2009). Participants found it particularly helpful to discuss a set of threshold concepts devised by Edwards (2011) that were designed for ‘generic’ learning development work. This set of threshold concepts was intended to help students in ‘identifying, evaluating and solving their problems for themselves’ (Edwards, 2011, p. 5). Such an approach was new to some participants, who emphasised that while they had explored threshold concepts in relation to specific disciplines, they had not previously considered how they could be used more broadly. As one participant explained:

I have used threshold concepts (TCs) when teaching in STEM disciplines over the last decade, but I have never considered the equivalent TCs for learning development. This workshop has helped me to systematically explore the ‘troublesome’ and ‘liminal’ states that learning developers face in their daily practice and to re-evaluate the changes of my professional identity and practices that have happened since officially being labelled as a ‘learning developer’ (about 5 years ago).

This participant's reflection emphasises how learning development practice can appear at odds with much teaching and learning theory. Such theory is likely designed around the assumption that higher education teaching and learning is focused on a consistent group of students that meets through an ongoing and sequential series of interactions. Learning developers rarely see students in these contexts, given the sporadic and often one-off nature of many of our interventions. White therefore challenged participants to think about the disconnect between the assumptions within teaching and learning theory and the learning development context.

Participants found White's questioning of how the learning development context should shape our methods, conception, and implementation of threshold concepts particularly striking. His questioning helped to move the discussion away from threshold concepts for students to threshold concepts for learning developers themselves. This repositioning was thought-provoking, as one participant shared on social media:

I really enjoyed [@unisouthampton](#)'s Steve White's session on threshold concepts in LD which started with some very bad juggling by the attendees. We might be aware of some of them for our students but considering what they might be for us as practitioners was a new take. [#ALDcon23](#)

Through exploring what threshold concepts may look like for the learning development profession, participants felt the workshop helped to surface the explicit and implicit expectations, boundaries, and prejudices that learning developers must face in their daily practice across the UK higher education sector. Participants left the workshop feeling encouraged to further explore how threshold concepts arise in learning development: do they develop from within the community or are they shaped by wider pressures on our work? Taking this step back to examine the concepts that underpin our practice is crucial to keep our juggling balls in the air.

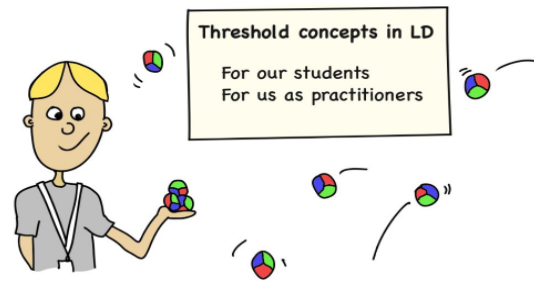


Image: Jacqui Bartram's drawing of White's talk.

Next steps and additional questions

White's workshop on threshold concepts spoke to the wider nature of learning development and how we communicate the importance of our work within and outside of our community. The positioning of our work was a wider theme that was returned to throughout ALDcon 2023; for example, as seen in White's practitioner keynote that he co-presented with Helen Webster. There is a real sense that these broader conversations need a collective approach and co-ordinated action.

As part of this conversation, the workshop's participants wondered whether threshold concepts for learning development could be connected to ALDinHE's five values to further clarify our work and its impact. In turn, such wider conversations need to feed into work at specific institutions. Participants discussed that a fruitful next step may be to (re-)consider local job descriptions and how far they capture the values and threshold concepts of learning development. Such work can help to clarify the purpose of our work within our own institutions, while demystifying our approach to would-be learning developers.

Author's reflection

I am grateful to the group who were very generous in participating so actively. We generated some indicative threshold concepts for learning developers during the session as follows:

TC1: Learning development is a subject we use but don't teach.

TC2: Learning development is about negotiating students' understanding of what is expected of them.

TC3: In learning development, questioning how we do things is as important as doing them.

TC4: Learning development is a networked practice: we are located within and connected to a wider collaborative learning and teaching community.

TC5: Kill your darlings: in interactions with students, don't try to address too many issues. Identify/negotiate the priority focus in interactions.

TC6: Pragmatism sometimes outweighs principles or vice versa.

It was interesting to think about the extent to which these contributions embody or go beyond ALDinHE's values. I think some are closely aligned, for instance TC1 is similar to value 5 through its focus on critical reflection. Other threshold concepts build on the values and go further: TC4 on networked practice links to working in partnership, but forces us to think about how we develop these partnerships as wider networks to work even more effectively. One way I like to think about the threshold concepts is how would I try to 'get at' these ideas/skills in an interview, or how would I encourage a new learning developer to engage with these ideas by shadowing colleagues from different parts of the university, role-playing situations, or developing case studies.

My reflection on my construction of the session itself is that in future I would like to 'tighten up' the second task where we look at possible threshold concepts for learning developers. I am not sure the task was clear enough. I felt I should provide some 'prompts' for thinking rather than leaving the possible threshold concepts for learning developers completely open, but I did not want to force participants to use a particular lens through which to think about our work, in case this approach limited contributions. Personally, I think that Whitchurch's third space, blended professional concepts of spaces, legitimacies, relationships, and knowledges are useful when you look at the descriptions and examples that go with them. It can be empowering when we start to see the gaps in-between university functions - the third space - and realise that we can 'get away with' filling them by doing things we think are a good idea. Provided they serve a useful educational purpose or help solve problems, they can then become a part of the territory of our jobs.

In response to specific comments from the community, I am glad some participants found the session useful, especially the focus on using threshold concepts in recruitment/training and how the concepts we generate might relate to or operationalise (is that the right word?) these values. Help translate the values into practice, I mean. I would be keen to pursue developing threshold concepts for learning developers as a way to consolidate our disciplinary knowledge and practice, and I will write a Take5 blog as a next step. Threshold Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, Special Issue 29: October 2023

concepts have received harsh criticism on technical grounds in the literature, such as in medical education and economics. By this I mean researchers have denied they are technically 'concepts', or that they can be systematically used to generate a syllabus, for example. However, even such critics recognise that threshold concepts can be a useful heuristic device for thinking about teaching and learning practice.

In sum, I am delighted that participants found the application of threshold concepts to learning development practice to be a thought-provoking take on our work. As suggested, using this kind of thinking to develop our own practice or training was one of the thoughts behind my session. Once we have devised some solid threshold concepts that capture our practice as learning developers, a next step might be to create useful metaphors or concise phrasing that communicate what they are and what they mean. This task will be challenging, as if something is easy to 'get' (whether that means 'understand' or 'acquire' as a skill), they probably are not threshold concepts to begin with!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Ralitsa Kantcheva from Bangor University and Chad McDonald from Manchester Metropolitan University.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Brown, M. E. L., Whybrow, P., and Finn, G. M. (2021) 'Do we need to close the door on threshold concepts?', *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 34(3), pp. 301–312.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2021.1897598>

Dubicki, E. (2019) 'Mapping curriculum learning outcomes to ACRL's Framework threshold concepts: a syllabus study', *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 45(3), pp. 288–298.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ACALIB.2019.04.003>

Edwards, C. (2011) 'Investigation of the relevance of the notion of a threshold concept within generic learning development work', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/JLDHE.V0I3.82>

Kandlbinder, P. and Peseta, T. (2009) 'Key concepts in postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching and learning in Australasia and the United Kingdom', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 14(1), pp. 19–31. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440802659247>

Kiley, M. (2009). 'Identifying threshold concepts and proposing strategies to support doctoral candidates', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), pp. 293–304. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290903069001>

Meyer, J. H. F. and Land, R. (2003) 'Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines', in C. Rust (ed.) *Improving student learning and practice: 10 years on*. Oxford: OCSLD, pp. 412–424.

Thomson, P. (2018) 'Threshold concepts in academic writing', *Patter*, 26 February. Available at: <https://patthomson.net/2018/02/26/threshold-concepts-in-academic-writing> (Accessed: 1 September 2023).

Author details

Steve White has been lurking in teaching, learning and research-related third spaces in HE for about 20 years. He worked in interestingly ill-defined roles while developing online MA courses and MOOCs for the University of Southampton, leading him to complete PhD research on the third space in HE. More recent roles have straddled Learning Development and Educational Development at Arts University Bournemouth and the University of Southampton.

Licence

©2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).