Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding

Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge

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Chapter 2

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Issues of liminality

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Introduction: threshold concepts revisited

In Chapter 1 the generative notion of threshold concepts was introduced. It has been argued that the acquisition of such concepts may also prove to be 'troublesome' for a variety of reasons and that such acquisition is likely to be characterised by transition through a state of 'liminality'. In thus beginning to develop and link a set of ideas around the notion of threshold concepts the integrative nature of the notion itself has also been illustrated. This chapter sets out to develop more extensively the notions of liminality within the context of threshold concept acquisition.

Chapter 1 introduced the basic idea that in certain disciplines there are 'conceptual gateways' or 'portals' that lead to a transformed view of something – 'the world looks different' when such thresholds have been crossed. Or it may be that one sees features in a familiar landscape that were previously not discernable. Certain threshold concepts acquired in the study of Economics for example allow one to distinguish for the first time, within a hitherto undifferentiated landscape, phenomena that are amenable to economic analysis. This new and previously inaccessible view of something may also prove to be troublesome for a variety of reasons.

The visual metaphor of a threshold concept represented by a portal or 'space' that needs to be approached and negotiated is a productive one because it invites a consideration of how the portal initially comes 'into view', how it is approached, negotiated, and perhaps even experienced as a transition in terms of sense of self.

Troublesomeness revisited

The following transcript, from an interview with a History lecturer, exemplifies the way in which a troublesome form of knowledge, though important and 'quite exciting' nonetheless 'can in a way seem very alien', and how it can be 'surprisingly difficult to get students to think about it':
LECTURER: The importance of personal contact and personal relationships, like impressing upon students how little could be done in this society, even by people of power, without them actually getting on their horse or whatever and going and seeing someone else, and dealing with and impressing people face to face. The language of personal power expressed through things like dress and symbols and rituals. It can in a way seem very alien. It's surprisingly difficult to get students to think about it and to be self-conscious about the way in which the manner of someone's dress could have affected their social role and could have helped them articulate and then force a particular social role. But it is quite exciting because I think it's something they could then go on and take with them into looking at cultural history and social history in other periods. It might even make them more aware of how power works in our own society, it's not that alien. The role of law too, there is a tendency for people who don't really know anything about mediaeval Europe to talk about mediaeval kings as though they're 20th Century dictators, and getting students to think about the society as a society in which people are supposed to have rights and in which law is quite important also gives an interesting perspective on later periods in European history. So, as a very general concept, we don't have a methodology in the way that some of the social sciences have methodology, but I think there are key concepts that are quite difficult and students don't seem to find them particularly easy to approach. You can get students to grapple with them and they can kind of light up whole periods of the past....

INTERVIEWER: ... Would you see that as applying to this module, would there be anything like those threshold concepts?

LECTURER: I think so, but I don't think there will be just two or three because we're trying to do something very multi-faceted, we're trying to embrace a whole society and culture and forms of political life so I think you could identify key concepts but I think there would be quite a lot of them. I do think that there are concepts that as I say if students can grasp, they illuminate the period but they would be concepts of the kind that I've just described.

Threshold concepts as discursive and reconstitutive

In developing the notion of threshold concepts Meyer and Land (2005) have initially given further consideration to their discursive nature. The acquisition of transformative concepts, it is argued, brings with it new and empowering forms of expression that in many instances characterise distinctive ways of disciplinary thinking. This discursive aspect of threshold concepts might provide an enabling and motivating source of new insight – 'action poetry' in Perkins's (2002) phrase, or it might present what Brousseau
(1983, 1997) has termed an ‘epistemological obstacle’, a source of troublesomeness, impeding and frustrating further development. Whatever the effect, the implication is that any reconceptualisation implies a discursive reconfiguration.

Meyer and Land argue furthermore that the discursive nature of threshold concepts entails a reconstitution of the learner’s subjectivity.

This might have powerful effects, as, for example, when first year students of Cultural Studies report their recognition of the implications of the concept of ‘hegemony’ for the ways in which their personal choices and behaviour might be culturally constrained, determined or gendered. Alternatively this reconstitutive effect of threshold concepts might entail a less discernible, cumulative process of skill acquisition, as when a mature student of French, patiently struggling to understand the use of the subjunctive mood, reports nonetheless a sense of slowly increasing confidence in her emerging identity as a speaker of French.

(Meyer and Land 2005, p. 375)

The emphasis here is on the indissoluble interrelatedness of the learner’s identity with thinking and language (reading, writing, listening, talking). For example, in the context of Medical Studies:

students acquire a point of view and terminology of a technical kind, which allow them to talk and think about patients and diseases in a way quite different from the layman. They look upon death and disabling disease, not with the horror and sense of tragedy the layman finds appropriate, but as problems in medical responsibility.

(Becker et al. 2005, p. 421)

There are here, as we shall see, both epistemological and ontological (states of ‘being’) considerations.

Threshold concepts lead not only to transfigured thought but to a transfiguration of identity and adoption of an extended or elaborated discourse. The elemental aspects of such discourses may be signalled by shifts in syntax and semantics that in some cases are quite far removed from threshold concepts themselves. Consider, for example, the fact that mathematics is the lingua franca of many disciplines. The meaning of mathematics is invariant. And yet within many disciplines mathematics takes on a particular syntax and may even adopt non-standard conventions. What \( y = mx + c \) is for one person is \( y = a + bx \) for another. The coefficient of \( x \), be it labelled \( m \), \( b \), or something else may, by disciplinary convention, be taken as always representing a particular entity. Thus, a slope, or gradient may be designated \( m \), a regression coefficient \( b \), and a coefficient of proportionality something else. Students are often confused by unfamiliar symbolic ways of expressing
essentially the same thing. And unfamiliar symbolism may shroud, even present a barrier to, a threshold concept.

In similar vein there is a mathematical convention when plotting functional relationships in two dimensions on orthogonal axes, namely, that the independent variable is plotted on the horizontal axis (usually labelled the $x$-axis) and the dependent variable on the vertical axis (usually labelled the $y$-axis). Economists for some strange reason find it helpful to do it the other way round when they graphically illustrate the relationship between ‘price’ and ‘quantity’ (the ‘supply’ curve) and, in particular, when they illustrate the concept of elasticity as in ‘the price elasticity of demand’. And ‘elasticity’, it should be noted, is a term used by economists and physicists in completely different senses. The variation here is in terms of semantics; to an economist ‘elasticity’ refers to the responsiveness of the demand quantity of a good to its price, while to a physicist it refers to the restoration property of a material which, having been distorted, will cause it to assume its original shape.

Liminality

Central to the acquisition of threshold concepts is a consideration of what it might mean to be ‘in the threshold’. The interest here is in variability in that state of being that may be thought of as liminal. Much has been written about the emotional and behavioural oscillation of men (in particular) undergoing the third stage of the ‘midlife transition’ or ‘midlife crisis’ — a spectacle, often tragic in its outcome, often entertaining to behold, that Carl Jung (1875–1961) describes in terms of ‘liminality’. During this liminal stage there is uncertainty about identity of self and purpose in life.

Meyer and Land (2005), drawing more specifically on the writing of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), develop the argument that acquiring a threshold concept may be likened in some disciplines to a ‘rite of passage’. The term ‘liminality’ (from the Latin limen, boundary or threshold) was also adopted by Turner to characterise the transitional state of space or time within which rituals are conducted. It should come as no surprise that this notion of a ‘rite of passage’ resonates strongly in many disciplines with entry into their communities of practice. As one medical graduate (anon.) commented, going through medical school is ‘like getting your hand caught in a meat grinder. It just keeps grinding and scooping up more of you as it goes. You gradually get bundled into a processed package and pop out as a doctor’. The experience is characterised as a matter of survival. ‘If you don’t conform you’re out’ (Coombs 1978, p. 3).

The comparison of liminality to rituals or rites of passage is useful for a number of reasons as elaborated by Meyer and Land (2005). First, there is the proposition that the condition of liminality may be transformative in function; there may be a change of state or status.
In becoming medical students, the boys enter upon one of the longest rites of passage... that series of instructions, ceremonies, and ordeals by which those already in a special status initiate neophytes into their charmed circle.

(Becker et al. 2005, p. 4)

This point raises some interesting thoughts about what it means, for example, when a student for the first time becomes conscious of the fact that they are, or are beginning to think like, an accountant, chemist, economist, historian, lawyer, mathematician, physicist, statistician, and so on. Teachers within the disciplines are certainly aware of particular patterns of thought and insights that have such ontological significance. For example, a colleague (Mears 2005), in analysing the transcript of an interview with one of her students on a particular learning episode in History, commented that 'in taking ownership of the material' in a particular way, her student was 'thinking like a historian'. The student (student A) had observed that 'when you really understand it, you've come as far as you can with your interpretation of it but you'll never really know [what happened]'. Mears recognised this as distinctive to the practice of historians: 'formulating an opinion, based on the critical analysis of complex sources, yet acknowledging it was contingent and subject to debate and challenge'. In a subsequent communication she commented further that:

the specific case student A was talking about (the abduction of Elizabeth Canning in 1753) is a particularly problematic incident in which, despite the wealth of evidence, there are so many holes and problems with that evidence that a 'definitive answer' (if there is any such thing in History) is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Student A recognised this and, though the case was extreme that allowed her to do so, I think it helped put into sharper relief what being a historian was all about (and hence become one!). It may be that this student may undergo times of 'stuckness' or 'mimicry', perhaps when she can't apply what she has learned to do in one case in another, perhaps less extreme, situation. But I felt that she had passed through (if that is the right word) a key, big threshold concept from which there would be no real turning back. I think, if pressed, most historians would be able to define what they would think of as threshold concepts for History... but because History tends to be rather anti-theory, or at least sceptical of theories like postmodernism and deconstruction etc, we might not have the jargon that other disciplines have to describe it!

Second, as a result of the ritual the participating individual acquires new knowledge and subsequently a new status and identity within the community. This is clearly true of the professions and their (often) self-regulatory status.
as gatekeepers of exclusive professional practice across vast tracts of specialised knowledge (see, for example, Goodlad 1993). But there are also examples outside professional practice. Neo-classical Economics is basically about the study of people, their wants and needs, and the choices they make regarding these in the face of scarcity. Neo-classical economic theory is open to serious criticism on a number of charges and yet a serious study of it arguably represents the indisputable, and internationally ubiquitous, undergraduate rite of passage to becoming an economist. The point here is that if you want to critique neo-classical Economics your argument is a lot more credible if you have already passed through this rite of passage.

A third consideration is that the transformation can be protracted, over periods of time, and involve oscillation between states, often with temporary regression to earlier status. This regression may be viewed as a form of ‘compensatory mimicry’. Within educational settings it would appear that, on the part of the learner, there may be an inability to achieve the new (transformed) status, occasioning similar forms of ‘mimicry’ or entry into what Ellsworth (1997) calls ‘stuck places’. But there would seem to be no rewinding of the transformative process although there may well be sporadic attempts at mimicking what has already been lost. It is tempting to equate such mimicry with the ‘surface approaches’ to learning identified by commentators working within phenomenographic traditions. In student learning terms mimicry, it seems, may involve both attempts at understanding and troubled misunderstanding, or limited understanding, and perhaps not merely an intention to reproduce information in a given form. We might speculate that a student in a ‘stuck place’, having glimpsed the outline of a threshold portal and perhaps only vaguely aware of what lies beyond it, but conscious of the failure to cross it, may engage in two forms of mimicry. The first is compensatory mimicry, in an assuage of self that something is understood – witness the novice student who rehearses what is known (but irrelevant) in learning for examinations, rather than what is required to be known for them. The second is conscious mimicry, when the student is aware that what is required is beyond grasp, other than through the mimicry of pretension.

Einstein at the party

A brief digression here provides another way of considering liminality within learning. There exists a (very possibly apocryphal!) story that occasionally circulates within senior Mathematics courses and which concerns Albert Einstein when he was wrestling with the mathematical formalisation of general relativity. The bones of the story are that Einstein met one Gregorio Ricci-Curbastro, of the University of Padua, ‘at a party’. Ricci was the inventor of a domain of mathematics called tensor calculus and in 1900 he published a fundamental paper on the subject with his student Levi-Civita. Now in 1900 Einstein had only just graduated as a teacher of Mathematics and
Physics. He published a paper proposing the special theory of relativity in 1905 (the same year, incidentally, in which he was awarded his doctorate) and sought after that date to extend the special theory to phenomena involving acceleration. Round about 1907 it appeared that he had not heard about tensor calculus. As the story is relayed (and which, of course, may well be accurate!), Einstein, in a somewhat anxious state, was complaining to Ricci at 'the party' about the fact that he was stuck. Ricci explained to him what tensor calculus could do, and Einstein immediately saw it as a solution for his problems. In fact tensor calculus became the 'language', or discourse, of general relativity. It is interesting to speculate here that Einstein may well have been in a liminal state, temporarily suspended by the lack of a formal mathematical vehicle through which to express and progress his thinking, rather than facing what we have referred to in Chapter 1 as 'boundedness'. Having reached the stage of development that he had in relation to his existing thinking about relativity, he could not go backwards – could not, as it were, unlearn or reverse out of his stuckness – but as he had no doubt worked out a considerable amount in his head, he could not go forwards either without acquiring the language of tensor calculus. In addition to the boundedness we can also identify in this account the other characteristics we have associated with threshold concepts, namely a quality of irreversibility, of integration (of existing mathematical formulations), of discursiveness (the formal language of tensor calculus) and clearly of transformation.

However, let us remember that general relativity is very much a BIG threshold concept in Physics. Einstein, in this instance, was not traversing a threshold already in existence, he was creating the threshold, and perhaps to a certain extent creating his own liminality. It is feasible that this form of liminality may be quite common to the process of conducting fundamental research, which creates new thresholds rather than extending or elaborating the domains (boundedness) of existing ones. Indeed it might be argued that all creative movements forward in research share a similar quality of liminality as that which appears within the Einstein story.

**Troublesomeness and liminality**

An insight into the interplay between troublesomeness and liminality is provided by Guest (2005), also in the context of conducting student learning interviews within a disciplinary context

in which students are most likely to learn about religious movements that are outside of their own experience (including sectarian groups, controversial 'cults' and groups associated with violence and fundamentalism) . . . presented as objects of social scientific interest; that is, they are addressed as cultural phenomena alongside more traditional religious
groups, without privileging the truth claims of any, nor offering any theological critique ... the module highlights the pluralism of the contemporary religious field (Bourdieu 1991), and encourages students to take seriously movements which might otherwise be treated as fringe, deviant or fanatical. In this respect the module may offer an approach that could be presented as ‘troublesome’ in that it emphasises ... the cultural contingency of religion ... the multiplicity of religious phenomena; and ... the complexity of religion (Juergensmeyer 2003). All challenge, and potentially undermine, understandings of reality which discern truth solely within a singular religious tradition.

He writes that, for one of his students,

the troublesome aspect identified is the absolute and uncompromising conviction of fundamentalist religious believers, which the student finds disturbing, and yet strangely alluring at the same time. He seems to find such unquestioning belief counter-intuitive and yet has some admiration for the conviction and commitment that is associated with it. Hence, the emerging, new perspective is complex: neither affirming nor condemning, neither confirming existing preconceptions nor proving them to be without grounds.

In contrast, for another student,

the ‘troublesome’ aspect of the course is our coverage of movements which alert the student to the pluralism of the religious landscape, and the decreasing social significance of the Roman Catholic Church, to which he is deeply committed. However, he appears able to consider these movements as objective areas of interest and incorporate them into his existing knowledge without any profound disruption to the learning process. One key factor here could be the social scientific approach to the topics that I encourage on this module: the sense of critical distance from the objects of study – presented descriptively and without judgement – allows students to develop their knowledge without directly challenging their personal religious convictions. Instructive here is case study #2, which suggests a contrasting form of intellectual engagement demanded by other theology modules. When the learning process overlaps with personal religious practice – as with the process of interpreting the Bible – then clashes of method are all the more likely to emerge.
Pre-liminal variation and epistemological obstacles

According to Meyer and Land, liminality can provide 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'. 'Stuck places' may of course occasion difficulty by presenting epistemological obstacles (Brousseau 1983, 1997) that block any transformed perspective.

(Meyer and Land 2005, p. 377)

and go on to suggest further that

as way of helping students, we can distinguish, in theory at least, between variation in students' 'tacit' understanding (or lack thereof) of a threshold concept. We see this situation of what we choose to call pre-liminal variation as a potentially important and useful means of opening up our understanding of why some students will productively negotiate the liminal space and why others find difficulty in doing so.

(Meyer and Land 2005, p. 384)

In developing this argument we revisit the threshold concept of 'opportunity cost' in Economics. This is a good example for the purpose in mind because the concept, and some of the difficulties surrounding its acquisition, will be accessible to readers with no prior knowledge of Economics. Two typical examples of how the concept may be formally defined in the context of making a choice are 'the cost of the next best but rejected alternative' and 'the cost of the next best alternative foregone'.

In 2003 an informal survey of students who had completed a module in Microeconomics was carried out at the University of South Australia. 'Opportunity cost' had been formally taught in this module, and students were asked to provide in their own words a description (for a hypothetical friend who had missed out that section of the module) of what it meant. Amongst the many incorrect explanations provided two stand out: 'the value of a potential opportunity in business' and 'the cost of borrowing funds - the cost incurred when you borrow money'. How these students reached these misunderstandings of the concept is an open research question that invites a consideration of how the concept may initially have 'come into view'.

First, and even before a definition is offered, the concept may literally come 'into view' as two words, spoken, or on a printed page. What might these words signify to a person who hears or sees them for the first time? In terms of the everyday use of these commonly used words there is a coupling of 'opportunity' and 'cost', and one might plausibly entertain notions of
something along the lines of ‘the opportunity of cost’ or ‘the cost of (an) opportunity’.

Asked to explain what she thought the term ‘opportunity cost’ meant, an innocent colleague with no prior knowledge of Economics but some experience in running a small business suggested two meanings (Ward 2005): ‘the premium my supplier will charge when he knows that I need something’, and ‘how much I am willing to spend on something which I know will yield me a profit in the future’. So immediately we see the potential for variation when the concept first ‘comes into view’ for students of Microeconomics. Does this potential for variation matter? Limited evidence suggests that it may in the light of the students’ apparently persistent misconceptions of the concept.

We have, second, the problem that, in terms of its definition, the concept of ‘opportunity cost’ does not usually refer explicitly to ‘opportunity’, and has very little to do with the everyday meaning of ‘cost’ in an accounting sense. Although a definition of the concept can be contrived in a form of the cost of an ‘opportunity foregone’, this is somewhat clumsy language. Henderson (2005) furthermore points out that ‘the word opportunity in opportunity cost is actually redundant. The cost of using something is already the value of the highest-valued alternative use.’ But he does go on to point out that this redundancy has a virtue in reminding us ‘that the cost of using a resource arises from the value of what it could be used for instead’. Decoding the meaning of the language being used here, and in the definitions offered earlier, is demanding. We reinforce here an earlier argument related to the concept of a limit in mathematics (Meyer and Land 2005, p. 385) that the choice of language used to introduce threshold concepts, and indeed used in the naming and explanation of the concepts themselves, can be troublesome and can present epistemological obstacles.

Moving to a rather different disciplinary context, Meyer and Land (2003) have commented briefly on the threshold concept status of a limit in pure mathematics. In the words of Cornu (1991, p. 153), ‘It holds a central position which permeates the whole of mathematical analysis – as a foundation of the theory of approximation, of continuity, and of differential and integral calculus.’ Picking up from the second section of this chapter, we can see how Mathematics combines natural and symbolic language in dealing with the abstract. But in approaching the formalised symbolic definition of a limit, it has also been recognised by several writers that the natural language form of the term can create ‘troublesomeness’. A ‘limit’ in terms of pre-liminal variation may be thought about in common-sense terms as a boundary, barrier, the end of something, and so on, that is, for example, visible, real, attainable or reachable in some everyday sense. But this interpretation is fundamentally what a limit in mathematics is not about – ‘limits’ are not reached, they are ‘tended towards’. Cornu (1991, p. 154), in referring to work by Schwarzenberger and Tall (1978), observes ‘that the words “tends to” and “limit” have a
significance for the students before any lessons begin... and that students continue to rely on these meanings after they have been given a formal definition' (emphasis added).

A third problem might arise from students’ experiences of ‘choice’. The emphasis of the concept of ‘opportunity cost’ is on the economic cost of making choices. The concept formalises one of the fundamental arguments of Microeconomics that choice involves sacrifice. Both ‘choice’ and ‘sacrifice’ are used here in an economic sense, and another potential obstacle to understanding arises for students when the introduction to the concept is trivialised as in, for example, ‘the opportunity cost of drinking a cup of coffee’. From a student learning perspective we might also argue that the concept, in formalising the dynamics of economic choice, is also an integrating concept insofar as it may bring together for the individual student a range of personal experiences and understandings of economic activity. For some students the definition of the concept may thus simply formalise tacit knowledge and experience that the student already feels comfortable with – what we refer to in the concluding chapter (drawing on Perkins in Chapter 3) as ‘the underlying game’. But for other students this might not be the case. What might the conception of choice be for a student with a very limited experience of exercising choice in an economic sense, and studying a Microeconomics course in a country that has a communist or statist economy, where the underlying game is far from being accessible? Again, the open research question here is whether there are patterns of variation in students’ conceptions of ‘choice’ that will differentially affect their acquisition of the concept.

What we are left with then are formidable challenges in responding to patterns of pre-liminal variation that students may exhibit in the passage of approaching a threshold concept. There are methodological and conceptual issues here that need to be researched. How, in terms of method and strategy, may we externalise such variation and how, in conceptual terms, may we address it?

One possible way forward is in terms of proxies (for threshold concepts) – engaging novice students with innocent-looking but authentic representations of concepts in a form that they can relate to in varying (pre-liminal) degrees. These proxies in their ‘form of engagement’ are stripped of their precise, discourse-specific and often ‘troublesome’ definitions but they retain, where appropriate, the character of what was referred to earlier as the ‘underlying game’. Formulating such proxies, as early work by Reimann and Jackson (Chapter 8) indicates, is difficult and may require a considerable process of trial and error.

Another way forward is suggested in the following transcript from an interview with a lecturer in Media Studies. A seemingly successful approach to opening up a troublesome threshold concept – the notion of Culture – is through ‘a gradual move’ into what appears like a liminal space, through which the students eventually gain ownership of the concept.
LECTURER: If there is a difficult concept I will start for 20 minutes clarifying and writing on the board, asking what they didn’t understand in the reading – getting a real framework on the board or in their minds. That would normally be a way of clearing the ground for them to go and work with these ideas. Then there is reading – some extracts or some material from books they have been reading, for example one of the first bits of material I give out is a handout which has various definitions of the word ‘culture’ and we talk about it in a lot of detail and pick it apart and think about the issues – analyse in depth and usually there will be time for some group work where the students get together and come up with some ideas and then a plenary at the end so students feel that they have gone from being told or directed to having a grasp of it for themselves. That is the pattern – a gradual move. By the end of the session the students will be a lot more in control of it than I will – in a good sense.

Ontological obstacles

In conclusion, then, we may reflect on the presence of ontological as distinct from epistemological obstacles. Ellsworth (1989 and 1997) has argued that the troublesome nature of some student learning, particularly that encountered by students who do not fit the ‘mythical norm’ that is ‘young, White, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, thin, middle-class, English-speaking, and male’ (Ellsworth 1989, p. 323) may stem from an active refusal of learning, or an anxiety about its transformative effects, which is the result of repressed desire or apprehension, emanating from the unconscious, and hence likely to prove inaccessible both to the learner and the teacher. This obviously renders problematic any simplistic schematic attempt to overcome troublesome knowledge by technicist redesign of curricula alone, and challenges easy assumptions that if the learning environment is suitably ordered and constructively aligned then the intended transformations will ensue. In a now famous critique of Critical Pedagogy she argued that the latter’s humanist, rationalist, universalist (and even dialogic) positionings were inadequate to move students on from their stuck places, owing to the incapacity of rationalist approaches to tolerate the unknown and the uncertain (because unknowable), the affective (because non-rational) and the contextualised/local (because non-universal).

Although the literature recognises that teachers have much to learn from their students’ experiences, it does not address the ways in which there are things that I as professor could never know about the experiences, oppressions, and understandings of other participants in the class. This situation makes it impossible for any single voice in the classroom – including that of the professor, to assume the position of centre or origin of knowledge or authority, of having privileged access to authentic experience or
appropriate language. A recognition, contrary to all Western ways of knowing and speaking, that all knowings are partial, that there are fundamental things each of us cannot know – a situation alleviated only in part by the pooling of partial, socially constructed knowledges in classrooms – demands a fundamental retheorising of ‘education’ and ‘pedagogy’.

(Ellsworth 1989, p. 310)

This identifies problems located not only within Critical Pedagogy but within other dominant and orthodox conceptualisations of learning within higher education environments, namely tendencies towards the disembodiment and genericisation of the learner, and an assumed lack of an affective and social dimension to their subjectivity. Ellsworth encourages her own teacher education students towards:

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.

(Ellsworth 1997, p. 71)

Lather (1998), similarly, seeking a ‘praxis of stuck places’, offers a counter-narrative located within feminist and poststructural problematics, ‘contrasting the rhetorical position of “the one who knows” with a thinking within Derrida’s “ordeal of the undecidable”’. She argues for ‘a praxis of not being so sure’, and advocates the practices of feminist pedagogy:

where the effort is to speak from discontinuities, the failures of language, self deception, guilty pleasures, and vested interests: what Ellsworth calls ‘a speech which comes from elsewhere’ to provoke something else into happening – something other than the return of the same.

(Lather 1998, p. 492)

A praxis of stuck places might tolerate ‘discrepancies, repetitions, hesitations, and uncertainties, always beginning again’ (ibid., p. 491). What it refuses is:

the privileging of containment over excess, thought over affect, structure over speed, linear causality over complexity, and intention over aggregate capacities. Ontological changes and category slippages mark the exhaustion of received categories of mind/body, nature/culture, base/superstructure, and spiritual/secular.

(Lather 1998, p. 497)

Such a praxis of stuck places, we feel, offers rich possibilities for future research.
References


