Crossing the line: individual activity

Collection: The Subject & pedagogy

Resource: Working with threshold concepts

Approximate duration

Reading time + one hour

Learning outcomes

This activity should help you clarify in your own mind about some of the reasons why students may seem to be lagging in their grasp of the subject. It could help you identify key issues in learning. On this basis, it should help you not only to empathise with students, but to think actively about how to engage them with the modes of enquiry that characterise the English disciplines.

Introduction

This activity invites you to use Meyer and Land's ideas as a framing device and to try to identify the nature of the threshold concepts in your discipline. First read the article by Meyer and Land as cited above in the resource overview. Note that in 2.2 of the 2003 version they themselves have a go at identifying a bundle of such concepts for literary and cultural studies. Observing the post-structuralist bent of the contemporary disciplines, they pick out ideas to do with signification, deconstruction, and the absence that constitutes a presence. Threshold concepts, they speculate, are transformative, (probably) irreversible, and integrative.

The activity

Once you've read the article, write yourself some notes:

1. Think of an occasion when you have been learning a new subject (this doesn't have to be academic learning: what for example about the first time you got to grips with Microsoft Word? Or learned to use a VLE?) What was it you needed to grasp which, once grasped, transformed your sense of what you needed to know or do?

2. After that go on to think about what might be the key threshold concepts in your own discipline. Aim to identify two or three of these.

3. Then ask yourself whether you can remember learning them – or did they always seem natural to you? Can you recall yourself as an A-level student, for example?

4. Next, think about the difficulties these concepts might present to students. Can you remember some examples where you thought 'this student doesn't "get" this'? Why might students have difficulty grasping this concept? Why might they even resist it?

5. On this basis, draw up a short sketch plan for a first year class where you make the task that of getting hold of and becoming fluent with one of the core threshold concepts you identified earlier.

Links and references

- Gerald Graff, 'The Problem Problem and Other Oddities of Academic Discourse', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* June 2002 1: 27-42
- Meyer and Land (as discussed in resource overview)

Some suggestions

Obviously a good deal of the Freudian lore that became so important to literary study in the 70s and 80s might provide a rich source of examples. But we'd like to propose the idea of representation as a fruitful avenue of enquiry in English as in, say, Film Studies. The concept and the intellectual procedures which surround it divert attention from the ostensibly obvious (what this utterance / poem / film / novel is *about*) to the medium through which an illusion of about-ness happens. Once you have understood that representation is at the core of the subject, you are then released to develop a variety of intellectual manoeuvres, all of which have the tendency to move you further and further from commonsense ideas of reading. An important extension to Meyer and Land's argument might be that we are not talking just about concepts, but about concepts in

action: about procedures, strategies, the materiality of the classroom. Students don't just internalise abstract concepts: they learn intellectual and dialogic procedures. So we finally commend Gerald Graff's amusing and insightful article 'The Problem Problem and Other Oddities of Academic Discourse' (2002). How might you as a teacher enable students to become conscious agents of the discourse of learning in your subject?

> *Habits of thinking and writing that are so familiar to academics that we hardly recognize them often seem counter-intuitive to high school and college students. These habits include the search for hidden meanings in texts and experience generally, the inclination to be contentious and to foment controversy, the tendency to make seemingly obvious assumptions explicit and the general obsession with searching for problems where often there do not seem to be any. The most productive way for teachers to help students cope with these unfamiliar academic habits is to identify these habits in class, inviting students to discuss them and even air their doubts about them. (Gerald Graff's abstract)*

Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Core Knowledge 3:** How students learn, both generally, and in the subject
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the Subject & Pedagogy Collection in HumBox.
http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/

Resources in the *Subject and Pedagogy* Collection

- Subject and pedagogy: introduction to the collection
- Working with the English subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the English subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the English subject benchmark: individual activity
- Working with the Creative Writing subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: individual activity
- Writing and the teacher: resource overview
  - Writing tasks: group activity
  - Metaphors: group activity
- Hearing yourself teach: resource overview
  - Keeping a teaching journal: individual activity
- Working with threshold concepts: resource overview
  - Crossing the line: individual activity **(* you are here)**
  - Crossing the line: group activity