Threshold Learning in Residential Child Care Practice

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Outline of Presentation

- Brief introduction/refresh on threshold concepts and their relevance to residential child care
- The Study
- Findings
- Implications – So what?
- Links to next session
Threshold Concepts

• A type of core concept
• Opens up new, previously inaccessible ways of thinking
• Can be thought of as a portal or threshold to another level
5 Characteristics of Threshold Concepts

• they are **transformative**, once they’re understood;
• they are **irreversible** – it is virtually impossible to forget them once they’re understood;
• they are **integrative** in their capacity promote the connection of previously unconnected ideas;
• they are **bounded** in that they often help to define the scope or boundaries of a subject area; and
• they are **troublesome** in that they can initially be counterintuitive or hard to grasp. (Meyer and Land, 2006)
Threshold Concepts and RCC/CYC

• Substantial empirical evidence supports the identification of threshold concepts in at least 170 disciplinary or professional contexts (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014).

• Threshold concepts hold potential to assist in the development and delivery of curriculum for RCC/CYC and in shifting discourses about residential child care, and there is international interest in their application. Understanding them can inform the way we support practitioners’ development.
The Study

• Scoping study funded by the Higher Education Academy in the UK with match funding from the University of Strathclyde

• Exploring the relevance and particular threshold concepts or areas of threshold learning in CYC
  – Focus groups of expert/educators (E/E) – 3 focus groups totalling 15 participants
  – Focus groups of student/practitioners (S/P) – 5 focus groups totalling 14 participants
  – Follow up individual interviews with a subset of student/practitioners – 7 total interviews
• Concepts
• Areas of learning
• Areas of practice
• All are threshold
• ‘concept’ may not be the best term

Possibly:

threshold areas of learning and practice.
Findings:
Expert/Educators

• Messy -- many different ways of putting the pieces together
  – Reflects their integrated nature

• All 5 characteristics were represented in the focus group discussions – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly
Findings (E/E): Use of Self

Spoken about the most:

- Use of self
- Authenticity
- Self-awareness
- Self-reflection
- Reflexivity
- Self-knowledge
- Self-honesty
- Authority
Use of self: complex, integrative and **troublesome**

I’m very concerned at what I hear so often in our discourse that in making our selves central to our processing, to our understanding and to our work means that at some critical level, the other is always in some danger of disappearing ... there’s a dangerous tension in that ... it’s problematic and we need to be struggling with it better than we are. (E/E fg participant)
Use of self: complex, integrative and troublesome

You’re point about focusing too much on the self is valid ... [however] for me, from a psychodynamic perspective, it’s through what the other makes us feel and the response we have that we get some sort of sense of how they’re feeling. (E/E fg participant)
Findings (E/E): Relational Practice

Repeated, related sub-themes:

- Being with (as opposed to doing to)
- Boundaries and boundary management
- Care and reciprocity
- Attachment/developmental care
- Intimacy

All offered as threshold:

- Relational practice
- Therapeutic relationship
- The everyday nature of relational work
- The essence of relationship
Use of self: complex, integrative and troublesome

What it means to be dealing with a young person who is constantly invading your space and your boundaries ... they [the students] think they’re supposed to be comfortable with everything...[they struggle to accept] that there may be young people that they don’t like or don’t want to work with...they were scared. They thought I was going to teach them the secrets [of boundary management] ...I was going to put some concepts on the board and it would be clear and neat and easy...but it’s messy as hell.
Findings: Students/Practitioners

• Similarly messy and complex
• relationship, self, life-space, working with behaviour, containment and child development were raised and explored most consistently across the focus groups
Findings S/P: Relationship/Relational Practice

• Discussed most
• Discussed in all five focus groups

• Centrality of relationship to practice
• Relationship for intervention/as intervention
• Therapeutic relationships (what makes it therapeutic?)
• Boundaries
The idea of relational practice ... the idea that the relationship is the intervention. So sometimes we might think that something that comes out of a manual might be an intervention but ... the relationship isn’t a means to some other end...the relationship by itself achieves something therapeutic because it changes the people who are involved in it...the way that they view themselves and the way that they view other people, and to me that’s quite a strong contender for a threshold concept because it changes what you think you’re trying to achieve and also the way in which you think it will be achieved.
Relational Practice: Transformative, integrative, troublesome

I guess the lines of boundaries, like when are we crossing that line and when do we have to pull ourselves back?... one of the hardest things like when I got in the field and on the front line, and here’s this young person. And I was working with him and helping him with some things and then I was kinda like, ‘Okay, what are my boundaries? Where do I stop? What can I do? What can’t I do?’.
Relational Practice: Boundaries

• Closeness/distance
• Family-like, but not family
• Temporary nature versus enduring nature
• Establishing and keeping boundaries/setting limits
• Meaning of ‘professional’
Findings S/P:
Relationship/Relational Practice

[...] it’s about professionalism and what professionalism means in a care context ... there was a sense that professionalism in a care setting meant the same thing as professionalism in a social work setting, and a professional relationship would have the same characteristics and the same boundaries in both of those situations. And over the years I’ve felt as though I’ve come to believe that less and less...we’re still stuck in a bit of a rut of trying to squeeze ourselves into relationship boundaries and a sense of professionalism that would maybe relate to social work more whereas what we should really be thinking about is what do these children need and how can I give them that safely?
Findings S/P: Self/Use of Self

- Discussed at length across all focus groups
- Presence
- Use of self
- Self-reflection
- Personal experience
- Identity
- Modelling
- Developing a sense of self as a professional
Findings S/P: Self/Use of Self

“I think that idea of looking at self is really intentionally asked of you to do, which isn’t done in most, in quite a few other courses. And so I think it hugely impacts your learning process and how you come at the rest of your programme, um, and into the field, I guess if you reach the threshold. “
Comparative findings

• All five characteristics of threshold concepts reflected in both E/E & S/P’s discussions of *relational practice and use of self* (as well as others)
  – More explicit in E/E focus groups

• S/P’s spoke more vividly and tangibly of troublesome areas of both.

• Both groups had overlap and both groups made distinct suggestions:
  – S/P’s identified *working with behaviour*

• Far more in common than divergent across the two samples
Implications (so what?)

• Transformations involve changes in identity
  – This can be unsettling (or even disturbing) and requires consideration in curricular content development and delivery

• Transformations involve increased confidence

• Role of language

• E/Es can have difficulty staying connected with their own previous experiences of transformation
  – This will influence their effectiveness in supporting S/Ps through their own threshold experiences.
Implications (so what?)

• Boundedness: implied and may reflect unsettled disciplinary boundaries in the field
• Threshold concept theory might give us some theoretical and empirical traction for redefining what ‘professional’ means in residential child care.
• Again, the role of language came up and warrants significant consideration
  – Voice
  – Naming
Implications (so what?)

Troublesomeness

• S/Ps’ frustration and anxieties:
  – Making mistakes
  – Boundaries
  – Integrating their learning into their practice and bringing it to their organisations
  – Difficult emotions provoked by the work
  – Loss of identity

• Counter-intuitive and seemingly simple (trouble not just for the learner)
  – unlearning
Educators’ use of self?
Relational education?

• What should educators’ (and supervisors and mentors) bring to the learning encounter of their selves?

• What kind of relationships should they cultivate in ‘teaching’ relational practice?

• In ‘teaching’ use of self and relational practice, what are the particular challenges for online learning (or is online learning even appropriate)?
Educators’ use of self and relational education?

Some useful concepts in considering the previous three questions:

• Parallel process

• Praxis (and its relationship with identity) (White, 2013)

• Containment
A good intro to threshold concepts:

References


References
