

# Threshold practices: meaning-making practices, cultures of inscription and emergent subjectivities in higher education

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The concepts of the 'threshold' / liminal space were originally coined by van Gennep (1909) and developed by Turner (1969) to provide a theoretical framework for the understandings of rituals of transformation within social anthropology. Liminality as a concept has enjoyed considerable purchase subsequently as a means to understand the 'in-between' and indeterminate and the boundary areas of cultural practice and resultant subject positions (e.g. Auge 1995). More recently, these powerful concepts have been applied to Higher Education as a metaphor in work on Threshold Concepts (e.g. Meyer & Land 2006). The focus of this work has been on the experiences of what has been termed 'troublesome knowledge', shedding light on the complexity and importance of certain key concepts in the disciplines.

This paper aims to apply these concepts to higher education in a way which references the original sense of the terms, by looking in particular at the transformations required in transitions into the academy. In doing so it will explore the relevant literature, drawing on data from two studies; the first a multimodal journaling and interview study into the transition experiences of first year undergraduates, and the second an audio-journaling and interview study of study into the transition experiences of new academic staff.

In both studies, the newcomers' report indeterminate and opaque nature of the requirements for participation, and also severe emotional destabilization and struggles around subject positions throughout the transition / transformation. The analysis will focus on aspects of academic *practice* which seemed to be most 'troublesome' for the students and staff. The practices, discourses, subject positions and symbolic meanings surrounding academic writing and literacy practices revealed themselves to be particularly significant in the transition experience of both groups. The paper will present a range of multimodal data from both studies, and with reference to text/visual/audio journals and in-depth interviews, it will argue for extending the notion of threshold concepts, proposing academic literacies and multimodal meaning-making practices as 'threshold practices' which can lead to a reinforced sense of identity as a student or academic. It will also argue that these findings undermine the commonly applied (e.g. O'Donnell and Tobell 2007) 'communities of practice' model (Lave and Wenger 1991) to transitions in the academy, given the centrality of textual and literacy practices to academic practice, the fundamentally tacit (Polanyi 1966) nature of those practices, and the considerable hybridity and destabilisation involved in the transition experience.

It will conclude with a critical examination of the utility of the notion of liminality, given the highly distributed and hybridised nature of ongoing subjectivities demanded by the digital university, drawing on posthuman theory (e.g. Hayles 1999).

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