

Learning to talk: A threshold concept?

Sophie Hill, Oslo University College, Norway

Disciplinary language has previously been identified as being troublesome (Shanahan and Meyer 2006; Taylor 2006). Use of disciplinary language or discourse can be considered to include the specialised language and the associated meanings (Tsui 2004). The extent to which fluency in the disciplinary discourse is achieved demonstrates the development of the student's knowledge (Northedge and McArthur 2009) and their integration into the ways of thinking and practicing (McCune and Hounsell 2005). This paper considers part of a case study of problematic areas within an allied health profession degree programme, with data generated through semi-structured interviews and email questionnaires with staff and students at the two universities in the UK providing prosthetic and orthotic education.. It is suggested that not only is language troublesome but the development and use of disciplinary language may be a threshold concept.

Disciplinary language is certainly troublesome with students questioning the need to learn these strange new words. In agreement with Taylor (2006) the data suggests that problems arise due to the word's language of origin. Explanatory definitions can cause problems as they may use other disciplinary words, compounding the problem. Disciplinary words that are similar to everyday language maybe problematic (Shanahan and Meyer 2006) but also this similarity may be helpful if they have similar definitions. Concepts used in different disciplines but with different terms to define them can be troublesome for students with experience of a different disciplinary language, indicating a boundary. As well as learning the words and phrases students must also learn to use them appropriately. Failure to do this may result in a form of mimicry (Meyer and Land 2005) where the language is used but understanding the meaning is not achieved. However when communicating with service users students must switch to everyday terms instead the disciplinary ones and this is a further development into the ways of thinking and practicing and this initially can be difficult for the students.

Is learning to talk in a discipline a threshold concept? Does it meet the criteria for a threshold concept (Meyer and Land 2003)? It certainly proves troublesome for some students. Disciplinary language is bounded with some language and associated meanings not being understood outside the discipline (Northedge 2002) though the boundaries may also be shared or blurred with other associated disciplines. Achievement of discursive fluency "*facilitates powerful meaning sharing*" (Airey and Linder 2009) through a word or phrase, integrating the student into the discipline. This integration in the community also transforms the person, they come to think and practice as a disciplinary member. Is it irreversible? As with all language learning there are words we remember and those we don't. Unless we continually or regularly use the language we lose confidence and this may cause some reversal in ability. Learning to talk certainly appears to meet the criteria for a threshold concept. Given the barriers that disciplinary language appears to generate perhaps we should give more attention to it.

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