

Transforming practice: conducting first year students through liminal space by explicitly teaching academic skills

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As Lucas and Mladenovic (2007) point out there is potential to use threshold concepts within a theoretical framework of academic literacies to improve practices in higher education. Inducting first year students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds into the higher education knowledge community can be assisted by explicitly naming the different thresholds that they will need to pass over to become active participants. It is suggested that the five characteristics of threshold concepts identified by Meyer and Land (2006) are also descriptive of the general experience at university of most first semester, first year students. Drawing on student experiences in a transition into university learning unit at Murdoch University this paper argues that explicitly teaching first semester, first year students the concepts of 'academic argument', 'categorisation' and the general rules of the 'academic language game' assists them to more easily navigate through the liminal spaces necessary to become epistemologically sophisticated learners.

The 'troublesome knowledge' that first year students' experience is firstly that of the 'challenge of voice and debate' (Northedge 2003) of gaining the confidence to communicate their thoughts in their own voices, whilst recognising that academic arguments always involve detailed evidence based debate. Secondly, in this moving landscape of academic arguments, students also have difficulty in developing their capacity for metacognition (Siegal 1999) and to self monitor both their thinking and their affective states whilst thinking. (Efklides 2006). Thirdly, first year university students may have difficulty becoming sophisticated learners who understand that learning is a process with specific strategies that can be applied and monitored to improve effectiveness rather than equating the capacity to learn with intelligence.

There are three key points at which students need assistance to navigate the liminal spaces of academic learning and become literate in academic discourse. Firstly, it is important to: name the space. To acknowledge that to be anxious or confused is an essential aspect of learning, since learning is always about moving from the known to the unknown and then back into the (expanded) realm of the known. Secondly, students need guardrails against crises of anxiety. When information is shared that a fearful response to the unknown is culturally conditioned students gain confidence to stay in a liminal space. Especially when academics model ways to stay in a state of confusion whilst waiting for clarification. Thirdly, students need to be explicitly advised as to the relationship between assessment tasks and to the threshold concepts of academic argument and categorisation. For example, when students understand that writing essays is about developing 'voice' and 'position" not just about detailing disciplinary content it changes the way they approach the task and the strategies they use to monitor their learning: it builds self-efficacy in the student (Walker 2003).