

A liminal threshold or “just a stepping stone on the way to doing a masters”? Encounters with troublesome knowledge at Honours level in English

Dr Frances Kelly, Centre for Academic Development, University of Auckland, NZ

Assoc Prof Lee Wallace, English, University of Auckland, NZ

Marcia Russell, English, University of Auckland, NZ

To date research into threshold concepts has focused on undergraduate (Meyer and Land, 2006) and postgraduate (Wisker and Kiley, 2009) encounters with transformative “troublesome knowledge” (Perkins, 1999). This paper considers how the BA (Hons) degree can engender the kind of ontological and identity shifts that Wisker and Kiley identify occurring at doctoral level in response to an increased understanding of generic research concepts, namely argument, theorising, framework, knowledge creation, analysis and interpretation, and research paradigm. Specifically, we analyse the ways in which entry-level graduate students begin to understand themselves as researchers within a particular disciplinary formation. Using data from student and staff reflections on the experience of undertaking a supervised research project in English, we argue that transformations of the kind that Wisker and Kiley describe are possible at honours level – in the right conditions. We compare two research projects that, although offered within the framework of a single course, created very different opportunities for transformative learning according to those involved.

Both research projects in our study produced dissertation-length coursework (10,000 words or equivalent) across a fourteen-week semester. Each project was supported by a mix of course-cohort seminars, library sessions, research-cluster supervision, and one-on-one supervision. One research project was explicitly framed as an interdisciplinary inquiry located at the intersection of four overlapping areas of research: historical geography, postcolonial studies, political theory and literary/media studies. The skill set developed included the ability to identify and encapsulate research issues that animate across different disciplinary fields, to reconceive or reframe research issues and objects of critical inquiry, as well as the ability to develop or adapt a methodology appropriate to the object of inquiry. The other project required students to focus on a single publication of a contemporary local writer who they would research and e-interview in the process of producing a literary-biographical commentary on the selected work. The skill set developed comprised practical application of the following methodologies and forms of analysis: biographical studies; interview preparation, execution and analysis; integration of interview material into textual analysis; library and database search skills; and bibliographic studies of the kind that underpin contemporary literary biography. Participant focus-group discussion of the graduate learning experience engaged by these different research projects yielded multiple insights into the role threshold concepts play in assisting graduate students in becoming independent researchers. What are the concepts that honours-level students in English encounter when they first undertake supervised research? The comparative framework allows us to explore the currency of the concept of “research” in relation to other more or less charismatic concepts, such as “text,” “skills,” “methodology,” “peer review” and “theory” and to consider the kinds of identity formations and disciplinary affiliations that attach to these conceptual distinctions and how students engage or resist them.

References:

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