

Bumpy moments and joyful breakthroughs: The place of threshold concepts in academic staff development programs about online learning and teaching

Dr Maria Northcote, Online Learning and Research, Avondale College, Australia
Dr Peter Beamish, Education, Avondale College, Australia
Assoc. Prof. Daniel Reynaud, Arts, Avondale College, Australia
Tony Martin, Arts, Avondale College, Australia
Dr Kevin Gosselin, Educational Psychology, University of Texas, USA

When university academic staff venture into the realm of learning about online learning and teaching, they encounter a number of key concepts along their journey. As most teaching academics have worked within a culture of on-campus teaching, with perhaps some experience of distance education, many of these staff have not yet developed the skills of how to teach in an online environment. Some of concepts associated with learning about online education are categorised as threshold concepts and are quite practical in nature whereas other concepts are more theoretical or even personal. The more practical threshold concepts are often addressed and explored in staff development workshops, during involvement in mentoring programs and in practical “how to” support sessions. However, when staff begin to explore what it means to be a teacher in an online environment from a personal and theoretical perspective, they encounter threshold concepts that can unsettle their most deeply held personal and pedagogical beliefs about what it means to teach and learn, and what it means to be an effective teacher and learner.

Although such concepts may indeed be *troublesome* and *disruptive*, both at an institutional and at a personal level, they are thought to be *integrative* and *transformative*. Some of these concepts are based on understandings of: 1) the distinctive nature of the online learning environment; 2) student attention; 3) the nature of online communication; 4) relationships between students, lecturers and other colleagues outside the institution; 5) teacher identity; 6) high quality learning; 7) humanisation of the online learning environment; 8) sense of place in online learning; and 9) technological concerns.

This paper draws on lessons from the literature including Meyer and Land’s (2003) work on the quality of threshold concepts, Perkins’ (2006) research on troublesome knowledge, Romano’s study (2006) of bumpy moments in teaching and Festinger’s ideas (1956) about cognitive dissonance. To build upon the advice from the literature to date, the paper also draws upon the experiences of the authors in their roles as lecturers, deans, curriculum designers and staff development officers in environments that increasingly employ online learning and teaching technologies to create optimal online learning experiences for their students. Data were gathered during the study from systematic observations recorded by the authors, who are academic development and administration staff, and questionnaire results from teaching staff. Outcomes of the analysis of these data provide recommendations and guidance for the design of future academic staff development programs in the areas of online learning and online teaching.

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