

Threshold concepts and economics: a critique of the approach for enhancing student teaching and learning

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The notion of threshold concepts has emerged over this decade as a teaching and learning tool to enhance student learning outcomes through identifying key concepts and ideas that students have to grasp to be able to progress through their chosen discipline.

Meyer and Land (2003) identify several key features of a threshold concept, including: transformative – leading to a significant shift in perception; irreversible – will be unlearned only with considerable effort; integrative – integrates ideas and concepts within the discipline; bounded – defining academic territories. In this paper I will argue that these features of threshold concepts can result in locking students into a particular paradigmatic framework.

The discipline of economics, as taught at undergraduate level, has been shown to be particularly well-suited for the application of the threshold concepts idea. Economics lends itself to the threshold idea because the mainstream approach grounded in neo-classical theory has clearly defined boundaries, and within these there are a set of key concepts and theories that build on each other to provide a coherent, internally consistent model. Students of this discipline make the journey through the threshold concepts of opportunity cost, partial equilibrium, and marginal analysis, and their perception of economy and society becomes transformed along the way.

This approach to conceptualising economics and the teaching of the subject is not without its critics from both within the discipline. The methodology of neo-classical economics is based on a conception of supply and demand that bears little relation to the real world. Consequently, the methodology is not only wrong but also misleading (Lee, 2005). From a student learning perspective some argue that broadening the discipline to account for other schools of thought, and to explicitly recognise the multiple perspectives for reflecting on economy and society, would enhance the quality of student learning. Peterson and McGoldrick (2009:72) argue “...a more pluralist approach to both course content and pedagogy is fundamental for better preparing economics students for the world...”

Calls for a more student centred approach that would facilitate discussion of contrasting economic ideas, are ignored for fear of “dumbing down” the discipline resulting in the erosion of the hegemony of neo-classical economic thought (Reimann, 2004). Within this context, it can be argued that applying the threshold concept to the discipline of economics as currently practiced results in further entrenchment of the neo-classical approach, leading to economics graduates that are ill-equipped to deal with the multi-dimensional challenges we face today.

Economists’ approach to addressing the climate change issue is illustrative of the narrowness and of the neo-classical model in dealing with this challenge. The policy tools advocated by economists focus on: cost-benefit analysis, emissions trading systems and environmental taxes. While policy documents prepared by economists may highlight the shortcomings in their model – issues of inter and intra-generational equity, inherent uncertainty and non-linear relationships – they are unable to develop alternative decision-making tools and policy responses to address such challenges (see Spash, 2007).

The challenge for us as educators is to ensure we do not lose sight of what we are teaching when applying threshold concepts in enhancing how we teach.

References:

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