

Troublesome courses: intellectual development in multidisciplinary programmes

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This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study undertaken at Oxford Brookes University, UK into the epistemological development of undergraduates in a multi-disciplinary business degree.

The study is grounded in the intellectual development literature which suggests that students in higher education move through stages of intellectual development in which their epistemological beliefs develop in complexity and understanding (Perry, 1970; Belenky et al, 1986; King and Kitchener, 1994 and Baxter-Magolda, 1992). The first stage of the research, which used Baxter-Magolda's (1992) 'Measure of Epistemological Reflection (MER), is reported elsewhere (O'Donovan, in press). This stage showed that the epistemological beliefs of 200 business undergraduates were mainly absolute and dualistic on entry to university, with the majority of students [174] believing largely in the existence of right answers that 'infallible' teachers should easily determine as correct. This paper presents the results of the second stage of research, which examined the beliefs of 21 of these students two years later. In particular, their awareness and methods of coping with the multiple epistemologies and knowledge structures inherent in the assessment practices of a multi-disciplinary degree theorised by the researcher as a 'threshold concept' in and of itself.

Upon re-examining 21 students at the end of their second year, two analysts found themselves unable to align responses with the Baxter-Magolda MER protocol. In their responses, students chose to focus on their experience of the conflicting requirements of different subject areas and tutors, and the pragmatic learning strategies they adopted to cope with this confusion. Consequently, the MER protocol was abandoned as too limiting, and student responses were instead thematically analysed through close reading by two researchers (Kvale's rational discourse and reciprocal technique, 1996).

This paper explores the main themes that emerged from the study, including: epistemological diversity and confusion; pragmatism and instrumentality; suppression and mimicry; and the importance of student and tutor rapport. Students seemingly recognised the range of epistemologies at play in their business and management degree. Such epistemological diversity arguably provoking an instrumental and strategic approach to learning, involving suppression of students' beliefs and mimicry of those held by their tutors. Consequently, students valued learning structures and processes that allowed them to know and be known by their tutor. This was particularly apparent in assessment: students wanted their work to be assessed by tutors who they knew personally, and whose epistemological stance they could recognise and adopt in their own work, rather than develop their own epistemological voice.

Because of their transformative properties, threshold concepts, by definition, involve ontological and epistemological change (Meyer and Land, 2003) including perhaps a liminal stage of mimicry before mastery. However, this is further problematised when 'thinking like an economist' involves different epistemic assumptions from 'thinking like an organisational anthropologist' both of which may coexist within business education. Building on the work of Bernstein cited in Moore et al. (2006), Jones (2007) and Meyer and Land (2003) the nature of student confusion is explored and implications for course design and assessment discussed.

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