

Applying threshold concepts to reform professional curriculum

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Recently, we have engaged in an extensive curriculum reform process leading to changes in each occupational therapy curriculum at the University of Queensland from 2010. This reform process resulted from staff dissatisfaction with the lack of integration across the curriculum, feedback from students, and a perceived lack of strong professional identity amongst graduates. Staff members were provided with some professional development on educational theories to assist with determining a more coherent educational philosophy to underpin our curricula. While several theories were useful, threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2005) provided us with a transformative and integrative way forward (Cousins, 2008).

In this paper we review our experiences of using threshold concepts as a mechanism for engaging in transformative curriculum renewal and planning. At semesterly curriculum review meetings over 18 months, we compiled a list of troublesome knowledge, namely aspects of each course that were difficult for students to grasp as evidenced in assessment. This resulted in 20 pieces of troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2006). Using thematic analysis (Patton, 2002) we reduced this list further to 8 items and then subjected these to rigorous questioning to determine whether any could be identified as threshold concepts. We asked whether each potential concept was transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome. Threshold concepts were only identified if they met all five characteristics. We addressed the significance/place of the threshold concept in the curriculum, and described the teacher's view of the threshold concept. We also addressed the learners' perspectives, by considering: What do students find challenging? What do students do to overcome difficulties? Are there any particular strategies that are useful while learning and mastering the concept? We also identified links between the identified threshold concepts across the program/s.

Five threshold concepts were identified from this generative process. These are; occupation; client centred practice; integral nature of theory and practice; integrated reasoning, and professional identity. These traverse the conference themes of epistemology or knowing (occupation, client-centred practice, link between theory and practice,), ontology or being (professional identity), practice or doing (integrated reasoning, link between theory and practice, client-centred practice) as well as reflexive or metacognitive thinking (integrated reasoning). We have also drawn on Barnett and Coate (2005) who framed the key features of professional programmes - knowing, doing/action and being, which are consistent with contemporary occupational therapy philosophy.

We then report our approach to making these explicit to new staff and students entering our programmes, and how we have used these to underpin our new curricula. In each course profile, we demonstrate which threshold concepts are addressed and to what extent. We make explicit the importance of these to occupational therapy, and how concepts are distributed across courses, so that each semester and year of the program we build a picture for students about which pieces of professional knowing, doing and being are addressed and map how these are linked. As a staff, cohesion has been developed through this process. We

have developed a shared language that has contributed to ownership of the curriculum and a basis for building on content from gateway courses through to capstones.

References

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