

‘Nudging’: exploring effective strategies to enable postgraduate research students to cross conceptual thresholds in their doctoral work.

Workshop

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Previous work carried out with postgraduate research students and their supervisors in the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project ‘Doctoral Learning Journeys’ (2007-10) and earlier and ongoing work by Margaret Kiley and Gina Wisker (2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) suggests that there are conceptual thresholds which postgraduate students can cross in their research and writing. While conceptual thresholds represent generic stages in transformation of understanding and the creation of meaning and knowledge, they share similar characteristics to threshold concepts in the disciplines i.e. they are moments which are troubling, and transformative, leading to irreversible ontological and epistemological change and developments. Our work to date suggests that such conceptual threshold crossings can take place at particular moments in the postgraduate student’s research journey, such as the development of a research question from a topic and interest, development and actioning of a conceptual framework (Trafford and Leshem 2009), writing the theoretical perspectives chapter, engaging in developing dialogues with supervisors and communities of peers acting as critical friends, and preparation for the examination and viva.

From our work has developed the concept of ‘nudging’, which term identifies the kind of strategies and practices which supervisors, the postgraduates themselves, institutions and such critical friend communities can usefully and effectively engage in. These have been found to enable, support, nurture and facilitate the conceptual threshold crossings and the actioning of research and writing at an appropriate conceptual, critical and creative level for the candidate to produce work worthy of a doctorate (PhD, EdD, Prof Doc etc.).

This paper is based on research and experience exploring supervisors’ and postgraduate researchers’ experience and perceptions of the activities and practice which enable such ‘nudging’ to take place effectively. Supervisors, (25+) postgraduates and post docs (25+) from UK and international contexts have been interviewed and asked to identify what the evidence of conceptual threshold crossing is in postgraduate student work and which activities seem to ‘nudge’ or support them towards such levels of work. To date these seem to be emerging as taking place at levels and points which are practical, reflective and conceptual, such as reading in the literature and entering a dialogue with it; engaging with and interpreting data; writing; learning dialogues with supervisors and critical friends separately or in communities.

Data to date reveals a number of strategies and practices which should be of interest and use to anyone undertaking postgraduate research or supervising students.

This workshop and paper will share our ongoing research exploring conceptual threshold crossing and students’ and supervisors’ perceptions of the ways in which such ‘nudging’ activities are effective in enabling such development in the postgraduate student’s research approaches, and work.

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