Threshold concept: A lens for examining networked learning

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This poster proposes an approach, which uses threshold concepts as a lens through which academic developers can examine their practice in order to explain why it has been so difficult to inspire academics to adopt technologies in their teaching. Networked learning is described as a "portal" that leads to a new ontological destination and, if fully understood and embraced, transforms the way learning is understood, teaching is practiced and, in fact, how a life is lived.

Keywords: networked learning, threshold concepts, academic development, academic identity, liminality

Introduction

Explosive development of network technologies in recent years has changed the way we create, analyse and share knowledge (Harley 2008). Connectivism and networked learning emerged as new learning paradigms that reflect the ability of today's learner to access endless sources of information, build relationships with others, and collaborate and develop knowledge, all often done outside the formal education environment, on a scale not seen before (Siemens 2005, Blackall 2007). This poses unique challenges to universities that are traditionally seen as fulfilling two roles: being at the frontier of generating and disseminating cutting edge knowledge, and providing quality education to future generations. Information, media and network literacies are becoming vital skills for academics to be able to perform in both their research and teaching roles today.

Face-to-face training workshops are common practice in introducing learning technologies to academic staff in many organisations. Various technologies are introduced, often focusing on the technical features, without necessarily drawing links to the context of actual teaching practice. Various models have since been proposed to enable a more embedded academic development approach to create a longer-term impact to teaching practice, such as models underpinned by a communities of practice approach (Cochrane and Kligyte 2007), fellowships that provide participants with an opportunity to concentrate on building interesting teaching practice over a fixed period of time (Russell 2005), and good practice databases that enable academics to share examples of interesting use of technology in practice to inspire others, such as the ALTC Exchange. While all have worked with limited success, academic development units still struggle to promote innovative use of technologies among mainstream academics, and the small group of technology enthusiasts at the forefront of the academic staff seems to be growing at a very slow pace.

Case study

Introducing innovative approaches to using technology to enhance learning and teaching is a part of the Foundations of University Learning and Teaching (FULT) program that targets teaching staff with little experience of teaching in higher education at the university.

The FULT program introduces key concepts that are often unfamiliar to academics and challenges their assumptions about learning and teaching. Such concepts include constructive alignment, reflective practice, learner-centred teaching, and networked learning. The program encourages academics to question their teaching practice and beliefs, examine their biography as a learner and take a reflective approach to developing their teaching, which, although initially quite challenging and confronting, often results in transformative learning experience. However unsettling other learning and teaching ideas often

feel, the session on networked learning and network literacy consistently receives the most extreme reactions from the participants; either absolute enthusiasm or complete rejection, as demonstrated by this sample of FULT participant anonymous feedback: “A session I was very interested in, as a neophyte. Some very good explanation of concepts” ,“I would NEVER have thought to use blogs/wikis for teaching and although I feel I had to know/learn more this has inspired me to find out more to be able to use this in my course”, “I felt bamboozled by the end of the session and more disinclined to integrate new technologies into my teaching practice (…)”, “The content was overwhelming, non-familiar language was used (…)”, “It seemed to me all buzzwords and nonsense, and generally that stuff doesn't build a 'community'. It just gives students a sense of anonymity and discourages real conversation in class. It was good to learn about the bookmark thing though.”

Threshold concept framework

I propose that the threshold concept framework can prove to be a useful lens for academic developers to examine their practice and help to explain why it has been so difficult to inspire academics to embrace technologies in their teaching. Meyer and Land define threshold concepts as “akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer and Land 2003). The argument can be made that networked learning is that type of “portal” that leads to a new ontological destination and, if fully understood and embraced, transforms the way learning is understood, teaching is practiced and, in fact, how a life is lived.

Threshold concepts are characterised by the following features, which I discuss in relation to networked learning (Flanagan 2009, Meyer and Land 2003):

<table>
<tr><td>* Troublesome - appears to be alien, incoherent or counter-intuitive
The concept of networked learning challenges the traditional understanding of how knowledge is generated and questions the very existence of the university and academic as an expert in a discipline. For example, connectivism suggests that the capacity to generate knowledge and maintain relationships in a network is more important than what is actually known (Siemens 2005). This seems counter-intuitive and alien to someone who conceptualises teaching as defining the “content” that needs to be taught and then delivering it to learners.</td><td>* Discursive - incorporates an enhanced and extended use of language
Crossing the threshold of networked learning introduces a new language and reveals the underlying principles of operating in a world where information is distributed over a multitude of modes and sources. These principles are applicable in a variety of contexts and understanding them enables one to adapt and migrate through a constantly-evolving landscape of media and technology. This new language, vocabulary and the culture of being a part of and contributing to the network is sometimes referred to as network literacy (Wall-Smith 2009).</td></tr>
<tr><td>* Irreversible – is transformative and changes the way in which the discipline is viewed
Once understood, the concept of networked learning is impossible to “unlearn”. By its very nature networked learning has a strong practical component; it has to be tried and experienced in depth to be fully understood. Almost inevitably this results in new practices being developed and network relationships being established, which are difficult to abandon and to forget.</td><td rowspan="2">* Liminality – “involves messy journeys back, forth and across conceptual terrain” (Cousins 2006)
Since lack of understanding a threshold concept prevents one from moving forward, a learner often spends time in a liminal space shifting back and forth. The ultimate destination in exploring networked learning is most often not fully understood at the starting point of the journey. For a novice it is tempting to focus on external features of specific technologies, and when it is discovered that the subject might be much larger and that it might entail a change in practice or even an ontological shift, a learner might choose to step back and not cross the threshold. However, opportunities to engage with technologies abound in today’s world and a learner almost inevitably has another chance to approach the threshold again. Learners need to find their own unique pathway to transformative understanding of networked learning. There’s no simple and straightforward way to mastery that can be taught.</td></tr>
<tr><td>* Integrative – reveals connections among different aspects that previously did not seem to be related
Embracing network technologies transforms the way of living and working, often permeating non-professional spheres of life (for example, the ways that information and entertainment is consumed and personal communication maintained). The delineation between personal and professional identity and communication becomes blurred, and all of a sudden the distributed world of information appears be coherently connected and makes sense.</td></tr>
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New technologies and networked learning have the potential not only to expand how academic staff conduct their teaching, but also to challenge their practice and how they view teaching and, with this, to

profoundly change how they see their roles and possibly how they live their lives. These changes are not necessarily welcomed by busy academic staff - introducing technologies in teaching may be perceived as an invitation to change one's practice, identity and life, which may leave academic staff confused and in a state of liminality. By viewing this process as a threshold concept with associated characteristics, academic developers are able to work with academic staff with empathy and respect. Instead of expecting immediate results, a threshold concept lens enables academic developers to focus on long-term change, recognise academic staff who are in the liminal space, and create opportunities for them to approach the threshold in iterations. Looking through the threshold concept lens, the "place" of academic development is the same, but the conceptual "space" is different.

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