

**Doctoral learning journeys:  
threshold concepts, conceptual  
threshold crossing and the role of  
supervisors and research  
development programmes**

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## Some thoughts

The best PhD is the one you finish and hand in.

We are all trying to enable  
The 'good enough' PhD

- NTFS project 'doctoral learning journeys' (2007-2010) Building on ongoing and complementary research exploring :
- postgraduate (doctoral) student learning-variations in approach, dissonance,
- supervisory practices, dialogues,
- communities of practice
- research development programmes
- metalearning
- Threshold concepts in disciplines and generically at the doctoral learning
- Conceptual threshold crossing

# Overview

- Early work (Wisker, Kiley, Trafford & Leshem) has started to identify threshold concepts and conceptual thresholds at the research education level (EARLI 2007, QPR 2006, 2008, Threshold concepts conferences 2006,208)
- Postgraduates' experiences with threshold concepts and conceptual threshold crossing
- Supervisors' experiences of identifying students' conceptual threshold crossing and 'nudging' them across.

# Research questions

- Does the theory of threshold concepts describe and appreciate the kinds of learning research candidates can/must make in their work for it to achieve a doctoral standard?
- Are there generic conceptual thresholds and how might we identify the crossing of such generic doctoral thresholds?
- Are there discipline-specific conceptual thresholds at the research level?
- How can we identify when a candidate has crossed a threshold?
- What elements of our work with research candidates can support and empower them to cross such thresholds?

# The NTFS project: Supporting and enhancing doctoral students' research and related skills development through research evidence based practices

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- Our research questions are therefore:
- How do doctoral students signify their awareness of working conceptually?
- How do students' conceptual grasp and comments display crossing of subject-specific and generic doctoral thresholds?
- How do supervisors recognise students' conceptual grasp of research?
- What strategies and activities do supervisors use to encourage conceptual grasp by doctoral students?
- How do examiners identify and assess conceptually-robust research outcomes and skills developments?

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- Conceptual threshold crossing is evidenced by
- (as per Meyer and Land's theories)  
Troublesome knowledge, movements on from stuck places through liminal spaces into new understanding - transformations,
- Ontological change –seeing the self and the world differently
- Epistemological contribution=-making new contributions to understanding and meaning

# Ontology / Identity

- We argue that when a candidate's behaviour changes it suggests that they have crossed a particular conceptual threshold and that this indicates an ontological shift, a change in identity
- Behaviours such as:
  - Working conceptually, critically and creatively rather than just busily
  - Production of an abstract and a conclusions chapter which deal with concepts not merely facts
  - Being able to put forward an argument supported by evidence

# Supervisors

- Supervisors comments on recognising students' work that evidences that they have:
  - acquired and owned various threshold concepts, and
  - crossed conceptual thresholds
  - In the following discussions, posts and interviews, supervisors identify their recognition of threshold crossing, and their thoughts about what 'nudges' students across.
  - How can they identify the crossing moments and the qualities?
  - How can they nudge? Please read and discuss their comments and inputs-
  - what are YOUR views?

## A Indicators of 'change'

- (1) SB I think er the skill of helping somebody through this thought process in terms of research er came from my own PhD. I mean, it has to, er because I think that I had such a struggle and because I had such a struggle, I knew where I was coming up against brick walls and er where I could have done with understanding the process better as I went along. And so I think that it was out of my own sort of conflicts that, that I recognised those in other peoples. Is, is being able to see that problem and then just sort of say, 'well, what do you think?' You know, 'which way do you think that you are going to go? and this is the reason why I think you should know.'

# Language and expression

- ‘the choice of language used to introduce threshold concepts, and indeed used in the naming and explanation of the concepts themselves, can be troublesome and can present epistemological obstacles’ (2006)
- Misconceptions- underdeveloped or missed- conceptions are revealed in language –which is how one articulates understanding, represents and communicates constructions of meaning
- For instance- at postgraduate level - Students have problems with the metalanguage of doctorateness which theorises their work eg ‘ conceptual framework’, instead they might choose stock phrases related to busy work

# Identifiable aspects of conceptual threshold crossing

- Ontological shift- Security of self challenged  
– moved on
- Epistemology- postmodernist – defamiliarisation, fragmentation, insecurity of established ‘knowledge’, new contribution to meaning
- What does this mean at postgraduate level?  
Where does it occur?

# Postgraduate-

- Problematising of accepted concepts
  - Conceptual frameworks
  - Conceptual level work – questions, design, data analysis, conceptual (in addition to factual) conclusions
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- Research is
  - Conceptual
  - Critical
  - Creative
- (enough)

# Facilitation of threshold crossing-moments for postgraduates

- Identifying a research question
- Theorising - interaction in a dialogue between and with the theories and own work in the theoretical perspectives chapter
- Methodology and methods-engagement at conceptual level
- Research design which actions the question
- Data analysis which carries out a theorised exploration and investigation
- Conceptual conclusions
- Enabling, encouraging, empowering students to work conceptually –critical, evaluative, problematising, creating- not just being busy...so the thinking planning research work and articulation are using the metalanguage of postgraduate level expression and the student is working at a conceptualised level
- Viva preparation

# Further ideas...

- Ensuring a bounded (doable) and conceptual enough question
- Early focus on conceptual framework, methodology and methods
- Very close reading and focus on dialoguing with experts in the literature review/theoretical perspectives chapter
- Oral prompting of conceptual, critical work individually in supervisions and in groups
- Prompt feedback encouraging conceptual and critical work
- Models, dialogues, pointing out contradictions and tensions and urging incorporation for critical conceptual engagement
- Encouragement of careful data analysis developing themes, engaging with theories
- Encouraging early writing and much editing-sharing and reflection
- Focus on using the language of 'doctorateness' e.g. conceptual framework, and the ideas, the research and theories of learning e.g. metacognition

# Summary: Please consider

- What does conceptual threshold crossing at postgraduate level look like?
- How is the conceptual level of work evidenced? What is the evidence of conceptual threshold crossing and the articulation and actioning of threshold concepts?
- What do you do? What can we do? What can the student do? What can the institution do? To enable
  - conceptual
  - critical and
  - creative enough
- Postgraduate research work and thesis completion, and the development of competent enlightened enough researchers?