

Critical approach to threshold concepts research: counterhegemonic and creative practices

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Abstract

In their think pieces, Phipps and Macfarlane challenge us to consider what we do as researchers, who we include in our work and what voice they are included. Also, Macfarlane cautions that it is important to avoid the oversimplification of ideas as they enter the mainstream. This pushes us to ask questions about the current state of thresholds knowledge and where it might need to go in the future.

Through threshold concepts, the learner enters the liminal space in which the transformation process, potentially, takes place (Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005). However, threshold concepts are always epistemologically informed (Cousin, 2008). They are socio-constructed entities or artifacts that represent a situated disciplinary worldview, accepted and legitimized by a specific community of practice (Rattray and Calduch, forthcoming), defining which knowledge is central and which is peripheral to the discipline (Barradell and Fortune, 2020).

To avoid exerting epistemic violence in our curriculum, it is essential to reflect on which thresholds are identified, legitimated and promoted. To achieve this aim, some difficult questions must be addressed: Who should be involved in the identification of thresholds (Barradell and Peseta, 2017)? How can we prevent threshold concepts from leading to epistemicide (De Sousa, 2018)? Do threshold concepts act pervasively as guardians of disciplines, as self-perpetuating of the hegemony within a discipline (Davies, 2016)? What forms of knowledge are we considering as thresholds and which ones are we marginalising (Rattray, 2021)? Should we accept certain unexpected transformations to allow for the creation and evolution of knowledge (Calduch and Rattray, 2021)?

Our aim with this paper is not to offer definitive answers, but to pose these questions to the research community, and to reflect on their implications. We highlight two directions we think that threshold concepts scholars need to move forward to achieve a more critical research approach.

Firstly, related to their identification, we want to encourage alternative methods that can help the counterhegemonic agenda: to promote the inclusion of non-privileged stakeholders, to focus on the transformative potential and not only on the dominant position of ideas, or to pay attention to variation between stakeholders and not only to consensus. Secondly, related to research on liminal space, we want to encourage methods that manage to capture the dynamics of this fluid and recursive space to overcome, potentially, reductionist and linear understandings: ethnography and micro-ethnography, visual art-based research, or narrative inquiry, among others.

Keywords

Higher Education, Threshold Concepts, Liminal Space, Critical Approach.