Crossing liminal spaces: encouraging postgraduate students to cross conceptual
thresholds and achieve threshold concepts in their research.

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In doctoral research students’ work needs to move beyond fact finding to a conceptual
level which problematises, questions fixed 'truths', enhances deep learning, and makes
a contribution to knowledge through theorising and conceptualising. There are many
ways in which we might support students in their development to work at this
conceptual level including research development programmes, effective supervision,
feedback, and the use of peer groups. This symposium focuses in particular on three
examples in 1) literature, art and design; 2) education; and 3) health sciences as
specific examples of postgraduate research and ways of supporting students as they
cross conceptual thresholds and achieve threshold concepts:

The research posed four questions to candidates:

- Are they aware of, and in which ways do they evidence their awareness, of the
  threshold concepts in their subject in their own work?
- Are they aware of, and in which ways do they evidence their awareness, of
  crossing conceptual thresholds in their own work?
- How do supervisors identify the achievement of subject related threshold
  concepts, and conceptual threshold crossings in their students’ work?

In particular the symposium looks at the moments when students are challenged in
their work in terms of knowledge and its creation (epistemology), and their identity
and being as students (ontology). The paper is underpinned by our work on notions of
conceptual thresholds and troublesome knowledge which includes a definition of
liminality as ‘A suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of
mimicry or lack of authenticity’ (Meyer and Land 2003) leading to that ‘quicksilver
flash of inspiration’ (Palmer 2001) where the understanding, creativity, engagement
and production of research and writing achieve a more complex and rich conceptual
level.

This work builds on previous work on postgraduate student learning and the roles
played by research development programmes, peer groups, supervisory dialogues and
relationships in encouraging meta-learning, and the development of understanding of
threshold concepts in discipline areas and of the crossing of conceptual thresholds
related to the postgraduate level and stages of the student’s work (Kiley and Wisker,
2006).

References
linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. In C. Rust (Ed.),
Improving Student Learning. Improving Student Learning Theory and Practice —
10 years on, OCSLD, Oxford, 412-424.
(2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and


**Paper 1)**

‘The quicksilver flash of insight may make one rich or poor in an instant’

*Palmer 2001: encouraging postgraduate students of literature and art to cross conceptual thresholds and achieve threshold concepts in their research*

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Most research into postgraduate student learning, including our own, (Wisker, et al, 2004, 2007) has focused on generic issues of research design, supervisory interactions, research development programme support, writing, communities of practice and examinations. Early work reported here focuses on the learning and supervisory support for that learning of postgraduates researching in the fields of literature and art. Students of literature and art are frequently involved in a dynamic mixture of reflective, creative, and analytic work which involves data gathering from a range of sources including collections, archives, the public, writers or artists alongside the more traditional development of literature reviewing and analysing and interpreting text or art artefacts. Such work is often socially and culturally contextualised and engaged, cross disciplinary, and can involve the production of creative work as part of the PhD product.

This research (Wisker & Robinson, EARLI 2007) grows from an individual (UK) National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) project and relates to a large cross-university NTFS project (2007-) considering research carried out with PhD students and their supervisors. Like the larger projects, this research with students and supervisors in the fields of literature and art builds on the underpinning theories of threshold concepts and the crossing of conceptual thresholds (Meyer, Land and Cousin et al 2006, Kiley and Wisker 2006, Wisker and Robinson 2006), taking threshold concept research from its base in undergraduate learning into the study of postgraduate learning.

**References:**


Wisker, Robinson, Trafford Leshem, Lilly, Warnes, 2004, in *Studies in Higher Education*