Lofty Conversations, Grounded Teaching: "Threshold Concepts," "Decoding the Disciplines," and Our Pedagogical Praxis

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION WEST
JUNE 2016
ANDREA BAER, UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA

ANDREAPBAER@GMAIL.COM

Opening Discussion

Familiarity with Decoding the Disciplines?

Influence of threshold concepts/Decoding the Disciplines on your teaching? Possibilities and limitations?

Threshold Concepts & the ACRL Framework

"Threshold Concepts"

"Core or foundational concepts that, once grasped by the learner, create new perspectives and ways of understanding a discipline or challenging knowledge domain."

(Land, Meyer, & Baillie, 2010)

Threshold Concepts: Characteristics

Transformative

Irreversible

Integrative

Bounded

Troublesome

(Meyer & Land, 2003)

ACRL *Framework* "Conceptual Understandings"

(formerly "threshold concepts")

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

Information Creation as a Process

Information Has Value

Research as Inquiry

Scholarship as Conversation

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Praise and Critique of "Threshold Concepts"

Identifying and addressing "stuck places" in student learning

Focusing on the bigger picture, moving beyond mechanics

All-or-none thinking?
- Learning as an ongoing and gradual process
- Heterogeneity of any discipline or community of practice

Threshold Concepts as Contingent

Threshold concepts "as articulation of shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know…."

(Blake Yancey, Introduction to *Naming What We Know,* 2015, xix)

"Decoding the Disciplines: Overview

"Bottlenecks of Learning"

"points in a course where the learning of a significant number of students is interrupted"
(Anderson, 1996, cited in Middendorf and Pace, 2004, p. 4)

Potential Bottlenecks

History:
distinguishing between essential and non-essential information

Literary Studies:
basing interpretation and argument on textual evidence, rather than a gut "feeling"

Decoding the Disciplines: Foundational Ideas

Mental operations expected of students differ by discipline.

In teaching a general lack of:
◦ explicit instruction in disciplinary practices and thinking
◦ opportunities for students to practice and get feedback on specific skills/tasks
◦ systematic assessment of students' understandings of disciplinary ways of thinking

(Middendorf & Pace, 2004, p.4)

7 Steps of *Decoding* (paraphrased)

1. **Identify "bottlenecks"**: Where are students getting "stuck"?

2. **"Unpacking" a process**: How does an expert do this task/process?

3. **Modeling**: How can the task be demonstrated explicitly?

4. **Student practice and feedback**: What opportunities can students have to engage in the task and get feedback?

7 Steps of *Decoding* (continued)

5. **Motivation**: How will students be motivated?

6. **Assessment**: How well are students doing the task?

7. **Sharing results**: How can the gained knowledge about learning be shared with other educators?

7 Steps of *Decoding* (paraphrased)

1. Identify "bottlenecks

2. "Unpacking" a process

3. Modeling

4. Student practice and feedback

5. Motivation

6. Assessment

7. Sharing results

"Threshold Concepts"	Decoding & "Bottlenecks"
Focus on transformational **conceptual understandings**	Focus on **disciplinary tasks/ways of thinking**
A theory for learning	A model for instructional planning
Considered discipline-specific	Considered discipline-specific

Decoding & the ACRL Framework in Conversation

Decoding:
process for identifying/addressing "stuck places"

1. Identify "bottlenecks
2. "Unpacking" a process
3. Modeling
4. Student practice and feedback
5. Motivation
6. Assessment
7. Sharing results

ACRL Framework
(or other challenging concepts)

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

Bringing Together the Conceptual & the Practical

What will students do?

How can challenging concepts be explored through modeling or activities?

"Threshold Concepts" as Contingent & the Constructed Nature of Disciplinary Practices

"Authority Is Constructed and Contextual"

- ◦ "[A]uthority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community."

- ◦ "Experts view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought."

Looking within, across, and beyond Academic Disciplines

Working with *Decoding* & Conceptual Understandings

Identifying Bottlenecks and Related Learning Experiences

- Identify 1-2 "bottlenecks." *(may be cognitive and/or affective)*

- Brainstorm about possible learning experiences that would help students engage with the bottlenecks you have identified.
  (Consider the Decoding approach, which includes modeling, student practice, and feedback.)

- Do these bottlenecks have any connections to the ACRL Framework, or to other "threshold concepts"?

Decoding Step 1

Identify "bottlenecks": Think of a context/discipline in which you often work. Where do students often get "stuck" when doing research or using sources within that context?
Examples:

◦ Narrowing a topic

◦ Gathering background information about a topic

◦ Distinguishing between one's own ideas and those of others (for example, in writing, in a presentation)

◦ Integrating sources into a paper/presentation

Decoding Step 7 - Sharing Results

How can the gained knowledge about learning be shared with other educators?

◦ Does this "decoding" process give you general insight into how to talk to faculty about information literacy?

◦ Does this give you a different perspective on teaching conceptual understandings? Or different language with which to talk about teaching and learning?

References

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015 Feb.) Framework for information literacy for higher education: The information literacy competency standards for higher education. (Final version). http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

Blake Yancey, Kathleen. "Introduction: Coming to Terms: Composition/rhetoric, Threshold Concepts, and a Disciplinary Core." In *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth A. Wardle, xvii – xxxi. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015.

Meyer, J. H. F., and R. Land. "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines." edited by C. Rust, 1–12. Improving Student Learning; Improving Student Learning Theory and Practice - 10 Years on. Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff & Learning Development, 2003. http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk//docs/ETLreport4.pdf.

Meyer, Jan, Ray Land, and Caroline Baillie, eds. *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*. Educational Futures. Rethinking Theory and Practice 42. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010.

References (con'd)

Middendorf, Joan, and David Pace. "Decoding the Disciplines: A Model for Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking." In *Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking: New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 98*, by David Pace and Joan Middendorf, 1–12, 1 edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Townsend, Lori, Silvia Lu, Amy R. Hofer, and Korey Brunetti. "What's the Matter with Threshold Concepts?" ACRLog, January 30, 2015. http://acrlog.org/2015/01/30/whats-the-matter-with-threshold-concepts/.

Shopkow, Leah. "What Decoding the Disciplines Can Offer Threshold Concepts." edited by J. Meyer, R. Land, and C. Baillie, 42:317–32. *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*. Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2010.

Wilkinson, Lane. "The Problem with Threshold Concepts." *Sense and Reference*, June 19, 2014. https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/the-problem-with-threshold-concepts/.