

Article

Autonomy and Critical Thinking as Threshold Concepts in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on our experience of learning on a MOOC that was integrated into a module while completing our Masters of Art in English Language Teaching at Coventry University. It focuses on how engaging with the integrated MOOC helped advance our comprehension of two threshold concepts: autonomy and critical thinking. Furthermore, it supports the notion that careful planning in the integration of MOOCs into existing modules could be beneficial in helping international students to manage areas of troublesome knowledge (Orsini-Jones 2015).

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Introduction

It can sometimes be challenging for students to make the required ‘conceptual leap’ in order to become experts in their field (Land, 2011). This may be particularly true in the case of international students as the conceptual leap demands both an ontological and epistemological shift. In other words, international students, such as ourselves, enter a foreign educational context holding preconceptions of how learning should take place (Land, 2011). However, in our case, there was a mismatch between our previous and new contexts. This mismatch made it important for us to identify our own personal ‘construct systems’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) and understand the reasons behind the beliefs and assumptions that we held regarding learning at university level.

Several frameworks have been developed to outline how university students might reach this transformed phase; one of these is Meyer and Land’s (2005) threshold concept framework. Threshold concepts refer to areas within the ‘content of [a] discipline or profession that pose deep challenges to learners’ (Shwartzman, 2010, p. 21). That is to say, they are concepts without which university students find it challenging to progress within the way the curriculum was originally designed (Land, 2015).

In our case, autonomy and critical thinking were considered threshold concepts. In this article, a demonstration will be provided of the epistemological and ontological transformation that occurred following Meyer and Land’s (2005) stages of threshold concept comprehension: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. A discussion will follow as to why these two concepts were troublesome, followed by how learning on a MOOC coupled with ‘meta-reflective practices’ (Orsini-Jones, 2010) transformed our understanding of these concepts.

Pre-liminal: Our Initial Contact with Autonomy and Critical Thinking

The pre-liminal stage is characterised by an interruption in students' tacit views as they are introduced to threshold concepts (Land, 2011). Our first encounter with autonomy and threshold concepts occurred when we were assigned our first coursework in the MA programme at Coventry University. We had difficulties grasping the requirements of the coursework, as we felt that both the question and marking scheme were not clear enough. This may be attributed to the nature of education in many countries, including our own. Most of our schooling tended to be teacher-centred and written assignments were very structured. The contrast between the two pedagogical approaches in the different contexts made autonomy troublesome and, therefore, a threshold concept. Similarly, critical thinking was a threshold concept because we felt intimidated critiquing the work of expert researchers as part of our coursework. This was because we viewed critique as criticism and held the belief that, as novice researchers, we were not entitled to criticise others who were established in their fields. The 'uncertain nature' of our new educational setting made us feel 'stuck' (Land, 2011) and we wanted the safety of the certainty we experienced in our previous educational context.

Liminal: Engaging with the Integrated MOOC

The liminal stage is characterised by the recognition of the shortcomings in learners' existing views of the learning phenomenon in question, and an eventual relinquishing of the previous prevailing view (Land, 2011). It is followed by students' surrendering their earlier mode of subjectivity and an acceptance of the alternative version of self, which is contemplated through the threshold space. In our case, the shortcomings in our views lead to a 'mimicry' of understanding; although we could define what autonomy and critical thinking were, we could not fully conceptualise them in practice.

To help us and other international students make 'the conceptual leap', our course director, Dr. Marina Orsini-Jones, integrated a MOOC into her module, Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching, as an innovative blended e-learning practice (Orsini-Jones, 2015). The Futurelearn MOOC in question was administered by the University of Southampton with the British Council, titled Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching. After registering on the MOOC, the interface remained accessible, even after it had finished. This feature enabled us to complete the units of the MOOC according to our own convenience.

The units covered on the MOOC were:

- Week 1 – Learning Language: Theory;
- Week 2 - Language Teaching in the Classroom;
- Week 3 – Technology in Language Learning and Teaching: A New Environment;
- Week 4 – Language in Use: Global English.

Each week's unit was divided into five sections, with each section revolving around a common theme and including a different set of activities. The number and type of activities differed from one section to another, and included articles, discussions, videos and reflections (Altamimi, 2016). Our module leader also encouraged us to share our reflections upon the completion of each week's learning activities through the use of prompts and guiding questions, which were provided through a blend of face-to-face class discussions and online Moodle discussions. Moreover, we were required to reflect on this learning process as part of our module's final assessment to determine whether it reflected the principles relating to learner autonomy and if it differed from other learning modes we were previously accustomed to.

The integrated MOOC was also accompanied by the addition of a tele-collaboration project with Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, Turkey, which included ‘an online international knowledge-sharing exchange on the MOOC with CU partners’ (Orsini-Jones, 2015). It took place between the 20th of April and 17th of May 2015. The aim of this project was to explore our beliefs before engaging with the MOOC on the aforementioned module, followed by an investigation of whether these beliefs have been affected by engaging in the meta-reflective practices detailed above (Altamimi, 2016). Subsequently, we had the opportunity to visit the university, in Turkey, on a study trip to share our reflections with fellow undergraduate students on the process of learning on a MOOC (Alhamed, Alnajjar, & Altamimi, 2015).

Engaging in meta-reflective practices through the combination of face-to-face and online discussions with the tele-collaboration project enabled us to consolidate our learning on the module. Moreover, it contributed to an increase in our intercultural awareness and facilitated a gradual transformation in our thinking processes with regards to the concepts of autonomy and critical thinking. This transformation can be attributed to our increased engagement with the MOOC, which revealed to us the different cultural stances that people hold regarding these two concepts. We were slowly accepting that the views we previously held regarding autonomy and critical thinking were not necessarily true nor objective: they were limited by our former engagement with the concepts.

Post-liminal: Epistemological and Ontological Transformation

Finally, the post-liminal stage represents the point where students become transformed as a result of comprehending the threshold concepts. Students at this stage possess a transformed internal view of the subject matter, subject landscape and even world view (Land, 2011). This changed view might result in an ontological shift as well, thus creating a change in subjectivity: this is a re-conceptualisation that may involve a reconstitution of, or a shift within students’ subjectivity or identity.

Participating in the meta-reflective process of learning on an integrated MOOC with our module leader, with the addition of the tele-collaboration project, helped our transformation into autonomous learners and critical thinkers. We now recognise that as university students and researchers, we must accept the uncertainty of the world of higher education, as there are no ultimate truths in education (Meyer and Land, 2005). This recognition was translated into a transformed way of viewing our coursework requirements and marking schemes. What we previously thought of as ambiguous and lacking structure was in fact an outlet for us to develop and find our voice as researchers. For instance, our dissertations are the most tangible evidence of this transformed state of mind. This is because the process of writing a dissertation required us to take on a critical stance regarding existing literature in order to constructively contribute to our field of study. Similarly, we understood that the role of our dissertation supervisors was to merely provide suggestions and recommendations. Thus, it can be concluded that crossing the post-liminal stages enabled to successfully complete our dissertations with distinction.

Conclusion

Considering how a cultural context is an influencing factor in terms of how international students understand a concept, we recommend that university staff become aware of the mismatch between the students' previous and current contexts. This awareness will assist module leaders in providing tasks and stimuli that are appropriate to the needs of their international students (Hill, 2012). It cannot be assumed that international students share the same starting point or enter the new educational context with the same preconceptions towards learning (Altamimi, 2016). Thus, by exploring what is troublesome to international students, module leaders could structure curricular interventions that would assist them in 'crossing the portal' (Meyer & Land, 2003) to an area where they can develop their acquisition of threshold concepts.

MOOCs are cost-effective when it comes to helping students 'cross the portal' as they allow for the expansion of the content of a programme at no additional cost, making stakeholders of universities and training institutes more likely to accept their adoption (Orsini-Jones, 2015). Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that certain MOOCs tend to be simplistic and repetitive (Alhamed et al., 2015). Furthermore, we felt that the lack of one-on-one support to students on MOOCs may impede the development of students' autonomy which was indicated by Orsini-Jones et al. (2015). However, as the MOOC was carefully integrated into an existing module, in our case, it offered the face-to-face support which MOOCs tend to lack.

Meyer and Land's (2005) framework was specifically chosen to outline our transformation in thinking with regards to the concepts of autonomy and critical thinking because it considers both the nature of the knowledge and emotional capital. Furthermore, their framework highlights the difference between expert and novice knowledge. This is because in the case of experts who have crossed the threshold to deep understanding, threshold concepts are usually held as tacit knowledge; thus, university lecturers, as experts in their fields, may not teach these concepts in an explicit manner (Peter et al., 2014). Accordingly, students might not realise their significance. Therefore, from our experience in engaging with threshold concepts like autonomy and critical thinking at Coventry University, we suggest that other universities take into consideration the learning experiences and reflections of alumni and current students. This is because students who have completed the programme in question may be able to shed some light on their experiences dealing with threshold concepts; their insights can help module leaders tailor their modules and instruction to assist new students to cross the thresholds.

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