Teaching the Art of the Academic Dialogue: A Conversation on Threshold Concepts

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Text for the presentation linked below
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0tFJcCoXhk

Introduction

Today we will be talking about learning, which is no small task. But, today we will be talking about how to identify meaningful and lasting learning for our students in an information literacy curriculum. In order to do this, we'll be talking about ACRL standards and how to prioritize them for students in higher education.

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I am not going to attempt to define the process of learning right now, but I do want you to think about a few questions as we move forward in this conversation. The first is, "What is "learning"?" From there, we can ask ourselves, "Does learning imply knowledge?" and, "Is the acquisition of knowledge a stagnant, finite event? I could go on, and include "Are there tangible artifacts that are testaments to the act of learning or acquiring knowledge? If so, how do we measure it?"

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Now that we have called into question the entire process of learning, we now have the task of challenging our understanding those who benefit from that process, the students. William G. Perry, a Harvard scholar in the 60's identified a progression in the way the college-aged mind develops. Essentially, young thinkers move from a binary, concrete way of viewing the world towards one that is multiplistic and abstract.

This is not only for the way in which they see their world but also how they approach problem solving. There are many more stages as you see here

Slide of Perry Schema

As we move forward in this conversation, think about these questions, "**what do you know about your students and what they know?**" and "How do you think they view their world", and more importantly, " What is your bias as you answer these questions?"

Today, I am going to talk to you about how threshold concepts helped me answer some of the questions above and helped me identify the best ACRL standards for my students at WMU. I will be talking about threshold concepts as they apply to students' learning but I will also be talking about threshold concepts and how they affected the way I look at teaching, because at the heart of threshold concepts is the idea that they are transformational.

I realize that I am not presenting anything new, it is more a perspective or case study on how I was able to use this conversation and make my teaching better. This presentation tells my story of applying threshold concepts to my teaching and it was enlightening.

So I start with a quote from Socrates, "all I know is I know nothing." Socrates plays a very important role in my teaching philosophy. I will be talking about him again.

Before I launch into the "seminar" part today Now I want to define threshold concepts so we all have a common definition. After this presentation portion, we will break out into 5 sessions. Each group will address one specific question, then we will reconvene and the moderators for each breakout session will summarize / identify a consensus.

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Part Two/Defining threshold concepts.

The term "threshold concepts" was coined by Meyer, Land, profs in economics in England early 2000s. It came about as part of a research project on teaching and learning.

Threshold concepts are teaching moments that are not based on skills so much as they depend on the effect they have on the student at the cognitive level. The accepted language when talking about threshold concepts are that they are:

> Transformational
> Unforgettable
> Irreversible
> Liminal
> Troublesome
> Integrative
> Bounded - Discipline specific

Transformational because they represent an ontological shift in the way a student sees a problem.

Irreversible because it is a part of a process, students need to build on threshold concepts in order to advance on to more challenging ways of thinking.

Liminal: in that it's again transitional, in critical thinking happens in a space of transition.

Troublesome because it is uncomfortable for the student to be forced into this new way of thinking. Troublesome could also mean counter-intuitive or even alien.

Integrative in that they help students make connections in a given discipline and think about what concepts will prove their mastery in that discipline. Students can ask themselves, "What must I know? Should know? could know"

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" Threshold concepts are akin to a portal opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress." Meyer and Land, 2003.

8 minutes.

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Question to poll the audience: What do you identify as a threshold concept? Here is an example: Helen Keller: water / sound. She finally understood language. It made sense. Pulling from any discipline, what else? Let's not worry about information literacy threshold concepts, we'll get to those in a second. Type in your answer and I will look at a few but fee; free to continue adding thoughts as I move on

So let's look at the Townsend, Bruneti and Hofer, 2011 article. They developed a qualitative survey asking teaching librarians to identify where students had a hard time with IL. From those comments, they identified trends and categorized them, upon which they identified threshold concepts.

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In this article, they start the discussion on challenging the relevancy of how the standards are prioritized, or rather the lack of prioritization.
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"They do not offer consistent guidance for instructors on teaching priorities. Threshold concepts are, by nature, prioritized content because they are the foundational concepts." p. 393.

They also challenge that threshold concepts are discipline specific, but as they argue IL is interdisciplinary.

They also challenge the idea that threshold concepts are discipline specific, but as they argue IL is interdisciplinary.

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My main concern with this study is that discussion is based on solicited observations from teaching librarians. In one excerpt, a comment is riddled with charged language that reveals problematic assumption and bias in teaching. It is this bias that worries me about my own teaching. With so much teacher bias it may very well impossible to translate ACRL standards into a meaningful lesson plan.

The Townsend article does progress and ask librarians to think differently about the standards. It seems they still focus on student performance and tangible outcomes.

Information literacy does not need to be bound by this language. Unfortunately ACRL standards adopted this terminology, by using terms like "performance indicators" and "outcomes." What about the part of learning that isn't visible or assessable? What about the importance of the process? It is also as relevant as the product, if not more. And these are the questions that led me to scrutinize my own teaching.

7:18

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Part Three / How threshold concepts help me my definition of learning and knowledge.

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In teaching IL for baccalaureate level writing class, I realized that I was experiencing a certain discomfort that I fondly refer to as "curricular combat fatigue." The fatigue, I found, came from my failure in not being able to successfully move away from a skills-based lesson plan. We've been told that lesson plans based on concepts is pedagogically superior yet I just couldn't make it work. And when I say concepts, I don't necessarily mean threshold concepts. For example, a skill would be to be able to say narrow down results using limiters. A concept is to be able to articulate why an article from an academic press is better than people magazine.

 I was determined to base lessons on concepts yet I was still met with the same look of "I'm not impressed." Worse, I was still faced with the question etched on 100s of students' bored faces over many semesters, which asked **"Why am I here?"** I was failing at giving IL purpose.

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It finally occurred to me that I needed to respond to their question with one simple question, **"How did you get here**?" That was my first experience with a threshold concepts as applied to teaching. It was a paradigm shift away from an ontological perspective of teaching, studying of "what is" to a phenomenological approach, which studies the process.

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It occurred to me that by focusing on the "instance" and "artifact" of teaching and learning, I was ignoring its inherently progressive nature. How could I effectively teach them when I had no idea what their past looked like? I was more interested in their process of acquiring knowledge rather than where they were right now and what they

could produce for me. My failure in teaching was that I did not consider their experiential knowledge.

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Pedagogical forensics led me to discover that I brought a lot of assumptions and bias into the classroom. I graduated from high school in 1988. I had to write a 5-page paper typed for my AP English class. I just assumed that my students, if they were in college, would have, at the bare minimum, that common experience. I was wrong.

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Poll audience: what is your bias? Age, gender, socio economic standing, education experience, race? What do you bring into the classroom that skews your perception of your students and what they know?

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I needed to learn more about my students so I could eradicate as much of this bias as possible. To do so, would mean to assess them. I've read a bit about the validity of pre-post- assessment and discussed it with colleagues. The question now wasn't should I or shouldn't I assess but more, "**what** should I assess?" Do I want to assess skills, such as, How to interpret a citation? How to define a scholarly article? These skills-based questions would indicate how they could perform right now and from that I might be able to deduce a certain learning experience, but again, that is all based on assumption.

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And while deciding on what to survey, I stumbled upon my second threshold concept for teaching: I wanted to know more about them and their experience. I didn't want them to tell me what they had learned and what at which level they could perform, I wanted to know their experience with the process research, so I asked very basic things like, "write a paper? Use your library? (was there a library?)

This isn't tracked in the university wide system that has their GPA and SAT score or their school district. This is invisible academic experience that shapes who they are now.

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Most shocking results so far: 18 % never wrote a paper (I defined a paper as 5 pages typed with a list of sources), 30% never used a library to complete an assignment, majority are coming in directly from high school. This is really important information for me to have. This experiential data tells me which personal assumptions are hindering my teaching, like the one I mentioned above.

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Poll audience: what would you like to know about your student base? I asked which classes required a paper: majority said English, many said history, some said psychology, sociology, math.

In the process of canvassing students, it dawned on me that I was anticipating a certain set of results and that these would point me to the best ACRL standards to use, like a deus ex machina of teaching. Then, my teaching would be perfect. I was shocked to find that the results led me in a much more philosophical direction. Instead I found myself on the path of rethinking why these students are in college, what they are asked to do in college, and what do they hope to carry forward after graduating.

The process of internalizing the results wasn't easy, I was outright defiant, it meant I had to restructure how I looked at my teaching and left my raw expectations exposed. I also fought it because I was still heavily attached myself to the idea that students need to perform or produce something to prove that they learned something. My thinking was that, if we didn't have these artifacts, then how would we know that they acquired any knowledge? It occurred to me that acquiring knowledge isn't a product and the process can't always be represented by a product. It can be both an internal and external activity. It was freeing when I finally rejected the consumerist attitude that I blindly accepted for so long when talking about the acquisition of knowledge. Simply because, knowledge is not a commodity.

I needed to shift my teaching from not just being a support teacher for creating academic artifacts, such as papers, presentations, My goal is to help them find their voice in these academic artifacts. I also needed to figure out how to validate the internal and external process of discovering one's academic voice not just for me or for other librarians, but also for the broader academic community.

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In high school, students are asked to produce answers, now they need to produce knowledge and then give voice to their knowledge. This could be to either critically assess accepted knowledge or produce new knowledge for an academic community, a process that is very foreign to them.

Argument & Logic.

These two comrades of rhetoric have a long, elaborate history, and in turning to their philosophical forefathers, Socrates, Aristotle, the overarching threshold concept that emerged was the art of the academic dialogue, the exchange of ideas expressed through a well-developed accountable voice.

But, What is the academic dialogue, really? And what does it have to do with information literacy?

It is where reading, writing, and research intersect, simultaneously, or apart. These can be taught individually but always need to be taught with the other in mind. A good reader makes a good researcher makes a good writer. But, what is the end goal of the academic dialogue? It is not always to write a paper or give a presentation, But to persuade? Or To find a new truth? Yes, but also to critically assess and challenge one's own accepted truths. And if we look at a few of these forethinkers, we'll realize that voice is at the core of good thinking.

Slide 25/26

For Socrates: Dialogue teaches the individual to critically evaluate knowledge. Dialectical, investigation and discussing truths empower readers to seek their own solution. (very difficult for new thinkers re: Perry). Socrates asks that we challenge the writer. The power lies in the reader.

St0p 7:30

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For Aristotle: dialogue is the art of persuasion, which synthesizes all that the student has gathered in the research process. The act of writing is the act of leading the reader . Power shifts back to the author, the writer.

As in any dialogue, there is 1. A constant shift of responsibility due to either the reader writer, or researcher. Students need to be aware of this shift as it occurs and learn how to navigate it/scrutinize it, manipulate it for their needs. 2. A dialogue can be with one's self or with many.

With this information, I was really able to scrutinize the exhaustive, skills-dependent ACRL standards and reorganize them from their hierarchical perch and start by looking at the MUST, Should, Could of IL standards. The academic dialogue is a meta threshold concept that which leads to finding voice and participating in the community of knowledge.

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Maybe maybe not.

Cognitive development theory developed by Vygotsky calls this the *zone of proximal development*: the potential to problem-solve with the guidance of a teacher or collaboration of peers; "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 8) Academic peer pressure.

But, "Where am I going?"

Now, many of our students will not have a career in academia and it may be fair to say that we have a better idea of knowing what their future holds for them. With this in mind, we can actually tailor the IL curriculum to help answer the tacit question of "where am I going?"

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Continuing on the dialogue trajectory, we can put a more modern spin on rhetoric and turn to M. Bakhtin and the theory of dialogism, which emphasizes conversation, for our students this means conversation with peers, colleagues, co-workers, or with one's self. These dialogic interactions create new truths. Truths are born between people,

collectively. **Truth is collective**. As creator or consumer of truth, students need to know they are a part of that collective.

Students needs to know that when he or she engages in this dialogic interaction, they are accepting responsibility in promoting truths or acknowledging complicity in promoting non-truths. The question to ask them, to talk to them about is whether or not they fully understand the consequences of this pact. And then, as librarians, we can tell them how to make the best choices.

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We could continue this conversation to include the philosophy of Derrida. There is an instant during the act of writing, or reading, or we could generalize it and say the processing of information, there is an instant when there is a slight hiccup, a transitional phase when the reader becomes the writer or the writer becomes the reader. There is a moment when you are neither and/or you are both and that is where one's true voice is found (auto-affection).

A good example is when you look at yourself in the mirror, you are constantly shifting back and forth between being the voyeur and viewed.

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It could be said that mastering the art of the academic dialogue can be measured by how comfortable a student is taking risks in this discursive liminal state.

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But risk is scary. Our young binary thinkers will probably not wager a bet. So we need to alleviate it with the sense of play and provide a space where risk when met with success or failure are equally important.

… .A quick note about play theory, my apologies, I have not thoroughly explored this idea, it is on my horizon. As I understand it play theory is where the process is emphasized, we are not bound by this idea of success vs. failure. No idea where I came across this idea, a TED talk maybe?

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This is all distilled down to this simple equation:

There is a certain responsibility in participating in the academic dialogue, whether it be internal or external. With the voice that the students develop, they are choosing truths or creating truths. As teachers, we need to provide a safe environment free of bias where students can explore truths, try out their voice, and be supportive/redirect them when/if they fail.

Applying this in the classroom

Now let's look at how I've been incorporating into lesson plans. Above is the theoretical foundation for my lessons and now we will look at actual teaching, classroom experience for teachers and students.

Below I present three threshold concepts that fall under the academic dialogue to be taught in the IL classroom. They are built on each other. The first needs to be taught so the learner can progress on to the next.

As I present these, do these ideas hit the descriptions of threshold concepts? Conceptual shift? Transformational? Liminal? Troublesome? How does it promote success in the academic dialogue?

I think it is easiest to look at this in terms of old language vs. new language.

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Example 1: Getting unstuck and identifying a voice

It seems like the hardest if not most common question I get at the reference desk is "I don't know where to start," I am not sure if the student doesn't understand the assignment, the reason for the assignment, how to organize thoughts, or where to look for information. In the old language, it would sound like, "I don't know where to begin or the librarian might say: narrow/broaden your topic.

In new language, in a threshold concept language, we would talk to the student in terms of "stuck places." Stuckness is a TC identified by Lather 1998, and as a tc by Savin-Baden-Wisker, 2008. This is a pre-liminal space where ideas will congeal and the dialogue will take shape.

For out students we need to remember that they are binary thinkers, this will be hard so we need to address this carefully, with play, and a certain failure rate.

Example 2: finding your truth / developing your voice

Old Language: Thesis statement for them/research Question for us

New Language: What is your truth? What is that truth you want your reader to find? This is your thesis statement.

Example 3: Trust

Old language; Credibility, accessing information

New Language: **Trust** (affective), Can you trust this? Do students under stand this better than credible? If you cite this source are you responsible for perpetuating misinformation and ignorance? Complicit? What are you going to do with your voice in the academic dialogue?

Example 4 Facts vs. Ideas

Old: Selecting the right search engine/source of information

New: What are you asking**? A fact or an idea?**

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One lesson plan to rule them all

Concept mapping

A Lesson Plan for the Threshold Concepts of the Academic Dialogue:

Whiteboards, Markers, Concept Mapping, Background Music, and Conversation with peers and professors.

Most important to remember is that this classroom is a place where students can play, explore, and fail without consequence.

15 minutes (5 minutes per student)

In small groups, work at whiteboards and draw concept maps to explore their topic, What do they already know? What do they want to know? What information is available from their peers? They use pictures and add structure to their ideas, it is visual. The teacher and librarian walk a round and help explore these topics. Help them realize it is a pre-writing, pre-research: identify the main idea, finding gaps in their argument, identifying what support they need?

The "meta" academic dialogue is in full swing with these discussions, it starts with peers and then translates into formal papers and presentations with faculty.

Many take pictures of their maps and bring them back to their seats

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Journaling 5-10 minutes

I use the idea of journaling to help students work on their first draft of a thesis statement I tell the students: you are trying to lead your reader, your instructor, towards a new truth. Write the opening paragraph of a letter to your professor. You have his or her attention and you are allowed to present your argument with any and all supporting documents you chose. This activity hits the Affective domain… personalize…responsibility on the author. Helps find a voice, and where responsibility lies, on the author or the reader?

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Playing with failed searches, make it fun with Googlewhacking

We then discuss search strategy and failed searches by making it a game. How to make a game of searching. Keep tabs on most or least results? The google game of finding only one hit for two words. Helps identify keywords figure out how search engines work**.**

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Why library resources? Web vs. deep web.

The importance of knowing which questions can be answered where. Understanding answers come in a variety of formats from various sources.

I spend minimal time on the mechanic of database. I show them subject guides instead. The apply their knowledge of their topic to the systems, still listening to music and using their pictures on phones of their maps

45 minutes ?

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Breakout sessions

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Reconvene, main points of breakout sections

Conclusion

There is a lot of conversation right now surrounding IL standards as the draft will be unveiled in February. This is an appeal to step away from the standards while acknowledging their importance because it gives our profession and those in other disciplines a common language /foundation.

But why? Why put so much emphasis on distancing ourselves? Because an important message is, we need to reassess how we define our position as teaching librarians in the university setting.

What if?

What if we were to separate ourselves from a lesson plan based on assignments that rob students on their voice. Yes, we are brokers of information and gatekeepers or translators of the information world, but more so, as Bonnie Nardi mentions, we are the keystone species in the information ecology. The academic dialogue is the mode of communication in this ecology. Students need a safe place to explore their voice, learn how to be true to their voice and faithful to truth. Being information literate can empower them.

Our role is changing and we can't remain under the same job description. It is misleading. We need to elevate our profession. There is an epistemelogical shift in our way of teaching. Do we want them to perform? Or do we want them to understand the process of knowing and their role in the process of disseminating information.

I think this shift is being acknowledged in many ways already. For example, many libraries are reconfiguring spaces and creating new integrative service points where students can engage in this academic dialogue with all the necessary support.

For now, the biggest hurdle for me is admitting defeat. Some, maybe many, teaching faculty and librarian colleagues will not understand the need for this transition.

What if we were to stop chasing after the academic artifact as the end sum that defines what we teach. We, as a profession, should identify clear, autonomous concepts for our students that transcend curricular in-fighting and administrative policing that hinder learning and critical inquiry.

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Thank you so much for your time and attention. I am happy to field any questions.

I will be presenting the lesson plan in detail at the LOEX conference in May in Grand Rapids. "A Tableau Vivant: A Multimodal/MultiSensory Teaching Experience of Threshold Concepts in an Information Literacy Classroom"

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