

Definition of a Threshold Concept

A threshold concept can be considered as 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. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time, with the transition to understanding proving troublesome. Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally).

(Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 412)

Reference

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: 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* (pp. 412-424). Oxford, UK: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

IDENTIFYING A THRESHOLD CONCEPT

- Brainstorm key concepts from your course:

- Select likely threshold concepts from amongst the key concepts:

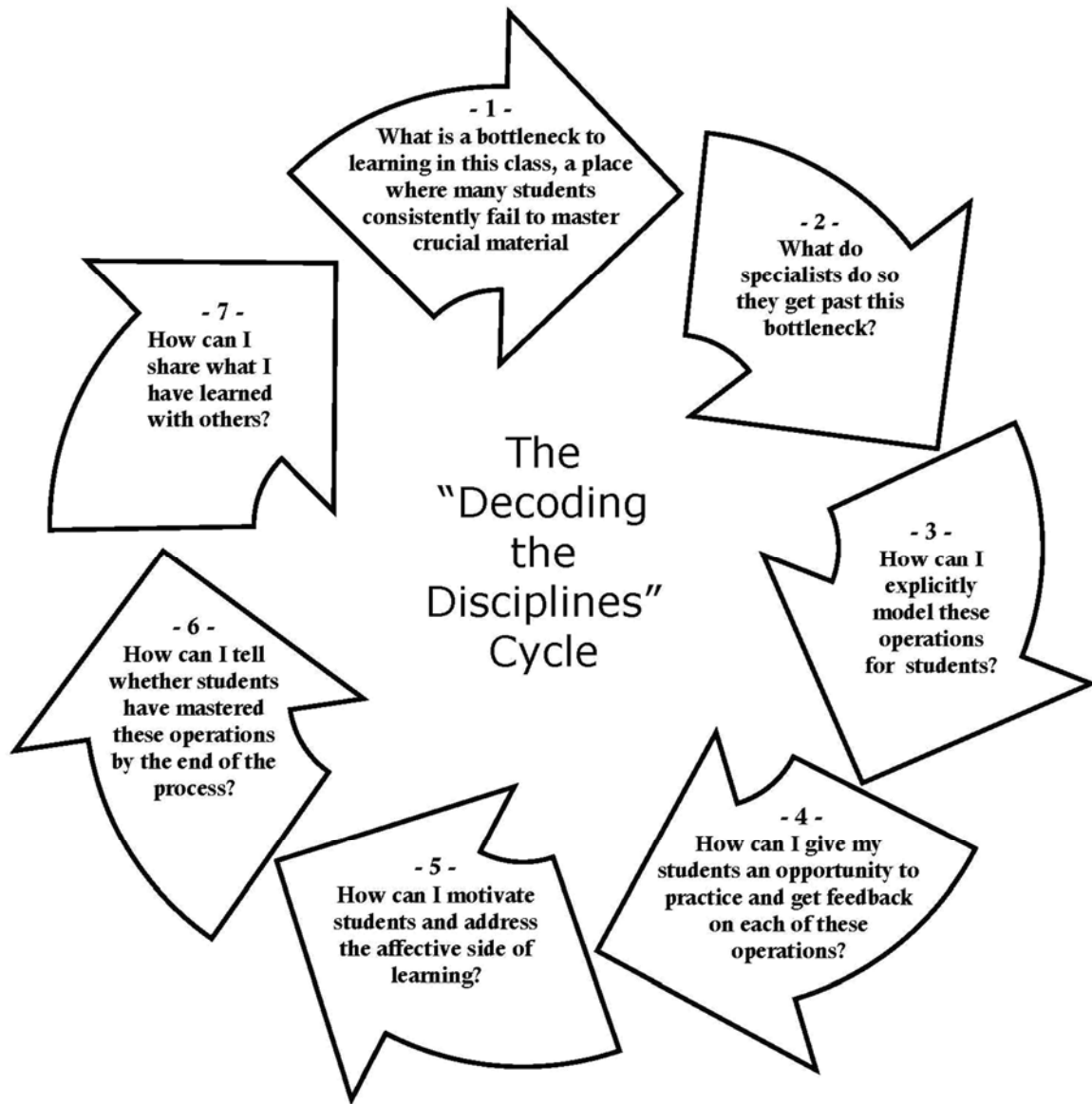
- Evaluate candidates against the following features of a threshold concept:

| FEATURES | THRESHOLD CONCEPT: | THRESHOLD CONCEPT: |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| Transformative How is it transformative? Does it change ways of thinking, identity, etc.? | | |
| Troublesome What difficulties do students encounter? How do you know? | | |
| Integrative Does it reveal the relationship between other concepts? Which ones? | | |
| Irreversible Are students unlikely to revert to earlier understandings? | | |
| Bounded Is it unique to the discipline? Does it reveal the inner workings of the discipline? | | |

Adapted from Threshold Concepts and Variation Theory website:
<http://thresholdvariation.edu.au/content/first-workshop>

Prepared by Julie Timmermans, University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence, October 2015

Decoding the Disciplines



Decoding the Disciplines Interview: What does the expert do?

I. Guidelines for the Interviewee:

Pick a specific example of a bottleneck that students get stuck on. This can be a specific moment in a course where students get lost, or it can consist of a specific exam question/assignment that students should succeed at to do well in your course, but large numbers fail. We are going to ask you questions about how *you* address the bottleneck and what intellectual moves *you* make. It is your intellectual process, not the content of your teaching that we are trying to get at.

II. Guidelines for the Interviewers:

Opener

Start by having the interviewee explain the bottleneck. Then ask what the expert does so that he or she does not get caught in the bottleneck.

What questions do we ask?

There is one basic question to ask, and all others are variations: "How do you do that?"

Getting the Interviewee Unstuck

When the interviewee is unable to unpack what s/he does intellectually, she will say such things as, "I don't know," "I'm not sure," "That's a good question," or "What *do* we do?" They may repeat your question or there may be a long pause.

- Do not get caught up in the content, but stay focused on what the expert does. You want to be able to describe the intellectual process of the speaker. Do not concern yourself with how the students should be taught.
- The key move is to repeat what the expert has told you and probe further. Tell them what you know so far. For example, "So far, I have to read this article. But I have to read it with a special view. How would I do that?"
- Another sign that the interviewee is stuck is when they launch into a lecture, telling their content, rather than their intellectual process. In a variation of this they will produce the kinds of language, often highly technical or jargon-laden, that they use to represent complex processes to colleagues who already understand them. Interviewers from other disciplines may feel lost or overwhelmed. Again, we are not interested in their content. In this situation gently interrupt their discourse, and try to get them to refocus at a higher level. Interviewers might ask the expert to go back to describing what kind of thinking this is. Or interviewers might try to explain what they know how to do so far. In an interview with a communications professor who analyzes texts involving co-dependence, the interviewers described what they knew. "So far, you have told us that you study dialogue transcriptions and make connections between the texts. Are there key words or phrases we should be looking for? How do you know what to pay attention to in the text?"