
THE SERIES

This is the seventh in the “5 Things” series. The 5 Things we recommend are intended to be eclectic and thought-provoking. They may be journal articles, blog posts, podcasts, interviews, reports, or just about anything else that we think is important to read, watch or hear about this topic. For the general concept, this series is deeply indebted to the EDUCAUSE “Seven Things You Need to Know About...” reports.

THE TOPIC

“Threshold concepts” have emerged recently in LIS as an intriguing way to reimagine information literacy concepts and content. The term encompasses challenging and underlying ways of knowing and thinking within a particular disciplinary or applied context. Surfacing and integrating these concepts can mark a transformative moment for the learner and suggest new models for teaching. The five articles selected by this year’s committee are intended to introduce librarians to some of the foundational work on threshold concepts in education, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and LIS. We would also point interested readers to a thorough bibliography of research, theory, and application of threshold concepts in a variety of contexts:

<http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>

1. Meyer, Jan, and Ray Land. 2003. *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines*. Edinburgh: School of Education, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/docs/ETLreport4.pdf>

This highly readable and much-cited report is the seminal work which introduced the term “threshold concept”: a concept that “can be considered akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding ... without which the learner cannot progress” (p. 1). Theoretical, but with concrete examples of student learning in a variety of disciplines, the report describes the qualities of threshold concepts: transformative, probably irreversible, integrative, bounded and potentially troublesome. Other works by Meyer and Land continue to explore relationship between threshold concepts and “troublesome knowledge,” i.e., knowledge that may be counter-intuitive or difficult to accept at face value.

Approximate reading time: 20 minutes

2. Hofer, Amy R., Lori Townsend, and Korey Brunetti. 2012. “Troublesome Concepts and Information Literacy: Investigating Threshold Concepts for IL Instruction.” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 12 (4): 387-405. <http://muse.jhu.edu>

Using the Myers and Land threshold concept theory as a framework, the authors surveyed fifty-nine information literacy instructors about concepts their students found difficult to understand. Presenting a detailed analysis of their results, they first identify common broad themes and then use these themes to isolate and define seven potential information literacy threshold concepts: “Metadata = findability,” “Good searches use database structure,” “Format is a process,” “Authority is constructed and contextual,” “‘Primary source’ is an exact and conditional category,” “Information as a commodity,” “Research solves problems.” By defining these core concepts, this study offers a new conceptual approach to information literacy curriculum design and instruction. **Approximate reading time: 30 minutes**

3. Hofer, Amy R., Korey Brunetti, and Lori Townsend. 2013. "A Threshold Concepts Approach to the Standards Revision." *Communications in Information Literacy* 7 (2): 108-13. <http://www.comminfolit.org>

How do threshold concepts relate to the 2014 revision of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*? This article makes a case for the value of threshold concepts in rethinking what and how librarians teach. Identifying three specific problems with the ACRL *Standards* that were approved 13 years ago, the authors describe how threshold concepts provide solutions to these problems while simultaneously challenging librarians to enhance their instructional practice and relationships with disciplinary faculty members. Although the authors acknowledge that threshold concepts are not a "miracle cure" for developing or applying information literacy standards, this article makes a strong argument for the ability of threshold concepts to help librarians clarify and prioritize information literacy concepts. **Approximate reading time: 15 minutes**

4. Tucker, Virginia M., Judith Weedman, Christine S. Bruce, and Sylvia L. Edwards. 2014. "Learning Portals: Analyzing Threshold Concept Theory for LIS Education." *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 55 (2): 150-65.

This article discusses threshold concepts as a learning theory and argues that "much may be gained by viewing core curricula, learning objectives, and LIS competencies through this theoretical lens" (p. 4). The authors explore how Meyer and Land's threshold concepts, or "learning portals," represent liminal learning spaces which students cross, experiencing a transformative shift in their understanding. They then examine threshold concepts/learning portals in LIS, specifically in modes of online searching, by focusing on four key concepts: information environment, information structures, information vocabularies, and concept fusion. **Approximate reading time: 30 minutes**

5. Moore, Jessie. 2012. "Designing for Transfer: A Threshold Concept." *Journal of Faculty Development* 26 (3): 19-24. <http://newforums.metapress.com/content/121030/>

Moore's essay posits the term "transfer" as a threshold concept for teaching faculty. Transfer is the ability to apply ideas and experiences from one course to other courses, disciplines, and life outside academia. Moore argues that "transfer" meets the criteria for a threshold concept because it is troublesome, transformative and irreversible. This has implications for faculty development, in that faculty who master transfer as a threshold concept can begin to design curricula that foster students' ability to apply new knowledge in a variety of situations. **Approximate reading time: 30 minutes**

This publication was compiled and created in spring 2014 by members of the 2013-2014 ACRL Instruction Section Research & Scholarship Committee: Anne Jumonville, Amy Slagle Kelly, Lorna Marie Dawes, Debbie Feisst, April Marie Hines, Clarence Dale Maybee, Rebecca Kate Miller, Robert M. Miller, David D. Oberhelman, and Catherine Fraser Riehle. If you have comments or questions about the "5 Things" publications, please contact the current IS Research and Scholarship Committee Chair (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/is/iswebsite/committees/research>).