Title: Expert opinions: Investigating threshold concepts for information literacy instruction

Authors:

Lori Townsend
California State University--East Bay
510-885-2354
lori.townsend@csueastbay.edu

Amy R. Hofer
Golden Gate University
415-442-7251
ahofer@ggu.edu

Korey Brunetti
California State University--East Bay
510-885-7452
korey.brunetti@csueastbay.edu

Contribution Type: Research Paper Presentation

The purpose of our research is to gain insight into a seemingly straightforward problem. As information literacy instructors, we regularly encounter students who have difficulty understanding foundational concepts of our discipline. And yet, as evidenced in the literature, there is little consensus around what it means to be information literate, let alone whether or not our field constitutes a discipline. Our study employs qualitative methodology to explore what (if any) commonalities emerge through querying information literacy practitioners about core concepts and challenging content. To this end, we are using a pedagogical framework that has been tested in a variety of disciplines called threshold concepts.

A threshold concept, as described by Jan Meyer and Ray Land, transforms the learner's view of content and helps integrate previously learned material; threshold concepts are portals that, once traversed, bring insight into how to think and act like a practitioner within a discipline. In our own teaching, we have explored several possible learning thresholds.   When a student asked us "what's the difference between a journal and a website?" we theorized that understanding why information is packaged in different formats -- and the implications about how you use different formats and where you find them -- is one of the thresholds we cross in becoming information literate. As we continue to experiment with learning thresholds in our instructional setting, we are seeking experienced perspectives on where threshold concepts fit within the broader schema of information literacy pedagogy.

The process of identifying threshold concepts in a discipline generally involves two pieces: 1) exploration and discussion between disciplinary specialists and 2) the investigation of student outcomes in relation to potential thresholds. This project will focus on the former through the systematic inquiry of practitioners in the field of information literacy.

We have organized our project into two phases. The goal of phase one is to collect, through

an exploratory survey, data on common trouble spots that students encounter, and to gauge interest in participating in more in-depth interviews. For this phase, we are targeting practitioners who teach credit courses on information literacy and in the U.S., Canada, Australia and the U.K. Our questions aim to find out:

- What are the main concepts or big ideas that your students struggle to understand?
- What strategies have you developed for assisting students in overcoming these stumbling blocks?
- If you could name three things that your students would understand or be able to do upon successful completion of your course, what would they be?

The second phase of the research project will consist of in-depth interviews with with expert practitioners who have taught information literacy for three or more years. In addition to questions that arise from our survey data, we will also query them specifically about threshold concepts as a teaching approach to information literacy. We hope to discuss these "stuck places" that students experience on a deeper level, as well as gaining input on the formulation of threshold concepts specific to teaching and learning information literacy.