Teaching & Learning Ancient Religion Network
Threshold Concepts and Ancient Religion

Jason Davies
23 September 2015

tlarnetwork.org
$3 + 4 = 8$
3 + 4 = 8

What’s wrong with this?
3 + 4 = 8

- What’s wrong with this?
- How does it make you feel (eg if you were a student)?
Threshold Concepts

Seven aspects (not all need to be present)

- Transformative
- Troublesome
- Irreversible
- Integrative
- Bounded
- Discursive
- Reconstitutive
- Liminal (recursive)
3 + 4 = 8

- Note how the equals sign said to you that the stuff on the left was (despite appearances) \textit{the same as the stuff on the right} . . .
3 + 4 = 8

- Note how the equals sign said to you that the stuff on the left was (despite appearances) *the same as the stuff on the right* . . .

- and just how much you wanted it to be true.
3 + 4 = 8

Note how the equals sign said to you that the stuff on the left was (despite appearances) *the same as the stuff on the right* . . .

and just how much you wanted it to be true.

Imagine sitting in maths classes if you hadn’t grasped the equals sign’s meaning . . .
Observation

It’s almost impossible to remember what it’s like not to understand a threshold concept.
It’s more than the stuff . . .

Assertion: the disciplinary gaze is what we are actually teaching them, not the stuff (though that comes in handy). This is acknowledged, but somewhat haphazardly.
There is no ‘learning curve’ as is often unconsciously assumed. There is a zigzag, like a set of paradigm shifts.

It will probably involve struggle and even distress.

There is a need for iteration and circling around these concepts.
Students ‘struggling’ is not just permitted but legitimised: putting such things at the centre of the curriculum might be interesting . . .
We can move away from the dichotomy of ‘student-centred’ and ‘teacher-centred’

- Mutual exploration of these concepts (spiral)
- Permits more creative material, activities and assessments
Threshold Concepts

Seven aspects (not all need to be present)

- Transformative
- Troublesome
- Irreversible
- Integrative
- Bounded
- Discursive
- Reconstitutive
- Liminal (recursive)
A lot of our (‘tacit’) understanding is internalised to the point of being a gut feeling and students learn best by articulating: this points us towards discussion and dialogue. What about (eg):

- inventing a new ‘abstract’ deity for modern times (eg ‘Wealth Redistribution’ aka ‘Fairness’) complete with festival, poetry, rituals etc
- creating rituals for class that run throughout the course (eg arriving on time?)
Consider a threefold cycle for teaching threshold concepts:

- Introduce them
- Create space for struggle, articulation, experimentation, creation
- Review