Threshold Concept’: Reflections on Education in Marketing

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Abstract

Teaching is a very personal process that combines the personality, experiences and communication capability of the teacher with their knowledge of the subject material to engage in an interaction with a body of students to facilitate each student’s individual learning experience. Marketing education literature is prolific and our understanding of teaching and learning has moved from content, through structure to engaging students in a personal learning experience. Recently a seminal paper on ‘threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge’ (Meyer and Land, 2003) has triggered debate and research on how we approach the process of teaching and how to bring transformational knowledge to the student. In response, this theoretical paper reflects on ‘threshold concept’ within the marketing discipline and proposes some challenges to our understanding of teaching marketing and creating a transformational learning environment for our students. Pursuing a threshold concept approach to teaching marketing implies significant research and changes to our current practices.

Introduction

Over the years my teaching has evolved from ‘coverage’ to understanding the requirement, to engage students in their own learning. This change in understanding has forced a revision of my approach to teaching and how I design and develop course material. From a design perspective, there is empirical evidence on the appropriate course content (Berman and Sharland, 2002); the future direction of marketing courses (Yudelson, 1999) and innovative course design (Albers-Miller et. al., 2001). There is research supporting different techniques that can improve student learning outcomes, including relating material to the real world (Adrian and Palmer, 1999), mind-mapping (Eriksson and Hauer, 2004), scenario planning (van Doren and Smith, 1999) and problem-based learning (Wee et. al., 2003).

We have research about constructive alignment concepts:

“When there is alignment between what we want, how we teach and how we assess, teaching is likely to be much more effective than when it is not” (Biggs, 2003, p. 27).

We have evidence that learning is more than information. If learning is purely information, then a lecture that effectively communicates information, covers the breadth and depth of the material and clarifies those areas that may cause confusion, is effective teaching. ‘Learning as information’ assumes that learning is controlled by the teacher (Martin et. al., 2002) and the teacher sifts information for the student (Toohey, 1999). There is adequate research showing that the same information presented to different students yields different learning outcomes. “… the learner’s perspective defines what is learned, not what the teacher intends should be learned” (Biggs, 2003, p.12). Thus learning is more than information.

The role of the student is critical in learning. The responsibility of the lecturer is to create a learning environment rather than convey information and this requires a fundamental shift in understanding:
“From a phenomenographic perspective it is argued that knowledge cannot exist in a context independent of the knower, rather knowledge is constituted in the relationship between the knower and the context” (Martin et. al., 2002, p. 104).

“The quality of the outcomes of learning is functionally related to the approaches adopted by the learners” (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p. 8-9).

Our understanding that learning occurs through the activities of the student rather than from the actions of the teacher changes the teacher’s responsibility from delivering information to facilitating student learning. Coverage and key concepts are no longer central. The design of the course moves from course content to creating a productive learning environment for the student to engage in deep learning with the relevant material. From this ‘deep learning’ educational concept we are now being challenged to facilitate student ‘transformation’ through experiencing an irreversible journey through the portals of threshold concepts.

Threshold Concept

The term ‘threshold concept’, in an education context, was coined by Professor Meyer during research into enhanced teaching and learning environments in undergraduate courses. It was first published in their seminal paper (Meyer and Land, 2003) that has stimulated debate and research. A threshold concept is ‘transformational … irreversible … and integrative (and) may also be troublesome’ (Meyer and Land, 2005, p 373-4). “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” (Meyer and Land 2003, p. 1).

Threshold concepts are discipline specific (Meyer and Land, 2003) and moving through the ‘portal’ of the threshold concept is critical to gaining knowledge of the discipline (for example, ‘thinking like’ a mathematician or economist). A review of the educational literature on threshold concepts reveals two publications by the original authors, two co-authored by the original authors and one other conference paper. There are, however numerous research programs in the UK, North America and Australia in response to the original article, with the accounting and economics being most advanced in identifying threshold concepts for their disciplines1.

Within the marketing discipline, Professor Meyer is not aware of any threshold concept research. The purpose of this paper is to explore threshold concept from a marketing perspective, suggest future research areas and explore some of the practical implications for marketing educators.

A Marketing Perspective

My marketing exposure to ‘threshold’ was through research (Lye et al, 2005) within the image theory domain (Beach, 1998) where ‘rejection threshold’ is a key concept in naturalistic decision theory (Klein et. al., 1993). Within this context, a threshold is a point of acceptance or rejection of a purchase decision based on an evaluation (logically or emotionally) of the desired product or service. Within image theory, the rejection threshold is a central theoretical concept.
Within educational research, threshold concept is not about a decision, but about the experience and process of irreversible transformational change; yet the two applications of threshold concept are not inconsistent. The current educational threshold concept literature focuses on an educators’ perspective, with consortiums of discipline experts currently identifying the threshold concepts within their area. The marketing discipline has not yet begun this process and it is incumbent upon us to explore the implications of threshold concept to the marketing discipline. Understanding threshold concept and identifying those threshold concepts that are foundational to marketing education will engender a restructuring of our course content and delivery, so this is not a task to be undertaken lightly.

A foundational concept of marketing is the customer perspective:

“The marketing concept calls for a basic reorientation of the company from looking inward toward its products to looking outward toward the customer needs” (Kotler, 1972, p. 18).

The current threshold concept literature has an inadequate exploration of the perspective and understanding of threshold concepts and their impact from a learners’ perspective. As a marketer, the customer, in this instance the student, is a central focus if we wish to irreversibly transform the students’ understanding of marketing. We know that students learn differently (Biggs, 2003). This implies that students may also experience the portal transformation differently, requiring us to know both the threshold concept we are teaching and the multiple paths that the student may experience in undergoing transformation based on their prior knowledge and experiences and their learning approach. It also requires us to design a learning environment to provide pathways for different students’ threshold experiences, probably through different learning scenarios. This assumes that there are multiple ‘portals’ for a single threshold concept and that we should incorporate the multiple paths in our course design – an area for educational research. Simply put, from a learners’ perspective there are multiple portals for a single concept and multiple pathways through the portal – a complex learning environment.

Rejection threshold literature (Beach, 1998) indicates that people make a choice to accept or reject an alternative based on their assessment (rational or otherwise) of that alternative. From a threshold concept perspective this implies that students can make a choice to reject the opportunity to explore a threshold concept when it is presented. If they chose to reject, is this an informed choice or a naïve one? If a student rejects the transformation opportunity, what caused this choice to be made, and is it reversible? What are the implications of rejecting transformation to the student’s ability to comprehend and ‘grasp’ marketing concepts? Will they fail the course or, more importantly, fail to ‘understand marketing’. To date, the student perspective has not been introduced to the educational threshold concept literature.

Assuming students choose to explore the portal to the threshold concept, is it an instantaneous transformation or one that takes time and involves a retroactive engagement of concepts previously learned with new understanding to create a transforming experience? Is there a ‘stuck in the middle’ location on the path where the student is exploring the portal, but not emerging with new and transformed understanding? If so, is this caused by a lack of information, a lack of understanding, a lack of linkage or a lack of direction to pass through the portal? This is a rich area for research and for course design.
Once a student understands a threshold concept is their understanding transformed and is the process irreversible? By definition a threshold concept is deemed to be transformational, but does this mean there is no return to a previous understanding, particularly when the transformed understanding is in error! We should not assume that in all instances an accurate transformation occurs – how do we correct error?

Initial indications are that there are multiple threshold concepts within a discipline. Is there a particular ‘best’ pathway through these threshold concepts? Do different pathways yield different understanding of the discipline? Do different students need to go through different pathways to reach the same understanding? Are there required and optional combinations of portals that facilitate the discipline understanding? If so, can the portal be called a threshold concept if it is not required understanding? Alternately, it may be required understanding that can be obtained through an alternate portal (assuming we provide alternatives), but must be obtained to be ‘proficient’ and ‘think like a marketer’. Teaching and, more precisely, learning can become quite complex.

From a student perspective, how do students understand and describe their experiences with threshold concepts? Can students articulate threshold concept experiences without being aware of their existence – initial indications are that they can (Meyer and Land, 2005). However, this research requires the interpretation of student explanations of an experience that they may not have the vocabulary to describe; even when they know a change has occurred. It is incumbent on the researcher to design research to solicit the information without biasing the answers, a challenging issue, particularly when the research incorporates measurement of the students’ experience of threshold concepts.

If we understand which concepts and formats create an environment that engenders transformation in our students we can design our courses to include both transformative concepts from within the discipline (provider perspective) and provide these concepts in a manner that engenders irreversible transformation in the students (customer perspective). The combination of these perspectives, particularly across multiple learning pathways, is the challenge in course design. If we research and understand the threshold concepts (content, conduct and assessment) that actually trigger transformation in the student we are better equipped to provide the learning environment where transformation will occur. This is our challenge in course design and conduct going forward.

Underlying this debate is a more fundamental question of our responsibility as marketing educators: ‘Is it our responsibility as marketing educators to ‘transform’ students or simply to give them the tools to survive in the market place?’ This is a fundamental pedagogical question that probably will not gain consensus among marketing educators.

Threshold Concepts in Marketing

It would be bold indeed to presume to define threshold concepts of marketing, particularly unsupported by research and so early in the life of the theory. Yet, this paper would be incomplete without postulating ideas to stimulate discussion and maybe establish a target for detractors. So with the boldness of the ‘famous 600’ charging into the ‘valley of death’ I suggest the following ideas as potential threshold concepts in marketing:

- A ‘customer perspective’ of the company’s product (service).
• ‘Perception is reality’ to the consumer.
• The nexus of consumer decision theory with segmentation theory as a competitive advantage in marketing strategy.
• Value-adding and parasites in relationship marketing.

Are these threshold concepts? Maybe!

**Threshold Concept Research in Marketing Education**

It is too early in the development of threshold concept within the marketing discipline to outline a comprehensive research agenda, however there are two main streams of research that are required to develop threshold concept based teaching in our courses:

1. **Identification of threshold concepts of marketing:** Establish a ‘panel of experts’ to create an initial list of threshold concepts in marketing. This is an important and required process, as the panel of experts can establish the foundational threshold concepts that should be incorporated in our research and practice of marketing education. This is, essentially, the provider perspective of threshold concept and is the focus of most current research.

2. **Understanding the student experience of transformation:** Developing our understanding of the students’ experience of transformation when exposed to threshold concepts is fundamental to effective teaching. Once we begin to develop this understanding we can improve the depth and breadth of threshold concept experiences in the classroom. This is the ‘customer’ perspective of threshold concepts and is under-represented in current research.

For my research, I will be convening a local panel of marketing educators to identify an initial set of threshold concepts that should be included in an introductory ‘marketing principles’ course. This list of threshold concepts will be utilised to redevelop the course material for delivery in Semester 2, 2007. The conduct of a threshold concept based course will be accompanied by a parallel research process by a separate researcher who will interview students throughout the semester to develop an understanding of the effectiveness of the threshold concept approach and to gather personal experiences of transformation from students. This will inform our understanding of the experience of transformation while allowing us to refine and develop the learning environment.

**Conclusion**

There are ontological, epistemological and pedagogical challenges with the introduction of a concept as radical as threshold concept to a discipline. The nature of threshold concept (ontology) is still being defined and there are many areas of worthy research to establish a full understanding of the concept. How students gain knowledge (epistemology), particularly threshold concepts related to a discipline, requires an understanding of knowledge generation within students in the marketing discipline. This in turn affects how we design and deliver our courses – our pedagogy. If we are to restructure our marketing courses to transform how students understand and think, we need to understand the teaching process and what we understand of our discipline from a threshold concepts framework. Challenges indeed!
In principle, threshold concepts are about transforming the way students think and understand knowledge in a manner that is irreversible. In our marketing courses we need to move from an information-intensive lecturer-centred learning environment to a student-learner based conception of the classroom. I believe it is incumbent on the convenor to structure the course to include threshold concepts and design the learning environment in a manner that allows the student to comprehend the significance of those threshold concepts and integrate them into their understanding. Perhaps with appropriate feedback loops we can discover how students experience threshold concepts, the triggers that stimulate transformation and which portal is appropriate in different contexts. This challenge seems worthy of marketing academics!

1 Professor Meyer, Threshold Concept Seminar Series, Griffith Institute of Higher Education, Griffith University, June, 2006.
Bibliography


