A new stream of research has emerged in the broader education literature which distinguishes concepts that, when learned, result in students “seeing things in a new way” from those concepts that do not lead to transformative leaps in student understanding (Meyer & Land, 2003: p.1). Threshold concepts are “portals” or gateways to transformative educational development (Meyer & Land, 2003; Trafford, 2008), and “going through” this portal leads to significant and important outcomes for the student. In particular, successful engagement with a threshold concept leads to a deeper understanding and re-integration of a focal area of study, and this in turn leads to transformative practical action for the learner (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008; Mezirow, 2000).

In their seminal development of threshold concepts, Meyer & Land (2003, 2005, 2006) identified five characteristics that distinguish threshold concepts from other concepts in education. One of these characteristics is that threshold concepts mark the boundaries of particular disciplines. The other four characteristics are more processual in nature. First, threshold concepts are seen to involve forms of “troublesome knowledge”. That is, a threshold concept involves notions that appear illogical, unfamiliar or alien (Perkins, 1999; Cousins, 2006; McCormick, 2008). For some threshold concepts, troublesomeness arises because of the way core concepts are bound together in “an underlying game” to create a “disciplinary way of knowing” which may be imperceptible to novice students (Perkins, 2006, p.42). Second, threshold concepts are integrative. Crossing the threshold brings new connections and patterns in the focal area of study into view through the new conceptual lens (this may also help to establish the conceptual boundaries of the area of study). Third, the change in understanding associated with threshold concepts is usually not reversible. Once new patterns and connections have been discerned a retreat into earlier patterns of understanding cannot easily be achieved, although the concept itself might be superseded by even more sophisticated, alternative conceptualizations (Trafford, 2008). Fourth, successful engagement with threshold concepts is transformational. The irreversible reconfiguration of patterns of understanding, which results from the engagement, has effects on the patterns of practical action that follow; if the “world” is seen anew, the way in which one should think and act must also change (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008; Mezirow, 2000).

Identification of threshold concepts allows educators to determine the places in their courses and programs that students are likely to get ‘stuck’ and to design the curriculum, learning activities, assessment, and feedback strategies to help students move through the portal to a transformed understanding. Examples of threshold concepts include opportunity cost in economics, gravity in physics and engineering, depreciation in accounting, and deconstruction for text analysis in English literature. While the potential impact of threshold concepts on educational strategies is
well developed in these disciplines, threshold concepts are only beginning to be explored in management education. Recent papers in the management field have considered threshold concepts in relation to leadership education (Yip and Raelin, 2012) and the underpinning role of theory in introductory management courses (Wright and Gilmore, 2012). We see considerable scope for ideas about threshold concepts to further inform both research and pedagogic practice in management education. In this light, this special issue aims to:

- Stimulate research on the identification of threshold concepts in management education
- Open up the processual nature of student engagement with threshold concepts to more detailed examination
- Encourage debate on the application of threshold concepts in management education, and consider the implications for course and program design as well as pedagogic strategies in the classroom
- Stimulate the development and sharing of new resources for the deployment of threshold concepts in management education

Below is a list of possible questions, issues and topics consistent with these aims that submissions might address. These questions are suggestions only and we are open to submissions that address the special issue’s aims in ways other than those described below.

- What are the threshold concepts in management? Are there any concepts that irreversibly transform students’ understanding of management in the same way that opportunity costs transform students’ understanding of economics?
- Do undergraduate and postgraduate students experience the same threshold concepts in management? How does the pre-existing understanding of business management possessed by postgraduate students impact their experience of, and engagement with, threshold concepts?
- Given that management educators are experts who have internalized our discipline’s threshold concepts and been irreversibly transformed as a result, how can we identify the threshold concepts that novice students experience?
- What is the relationship between threshold concepts and learning objectives? Can threshold concepts inform the development of learning objectives or should management educators discard learning objectives in favor of threshold concepts?
- Once a management educator has identified the points in the curriculum where students get stuck, how can we evaluate whether the source of the problem is the presence of a threshold concept?
- How can we design learning activities and assessment and feedback strategies that expose where an individual student is located on their journey toward, through and beyond the portal of a threshold concept? How do we help those students who are exposed as being stuck on their learning journey towards the threshold concept?
- What is the relationship between instructional delivery platform and threshold concepts? How do different mediums enhance and impair our ability to help students engage with threshold concepts?
- How does the accreditation process support and/or hinder threshold concepts?
We seek submissions across the Journal of Management Education’s five sections: research articles, domain reviews, essays, teaching innovations, and resource reviews. Submissions should be original, not submitted to or published in any other sources, and no more than 30 pages long, including references, figures, tables, appendices, and so on. Please submit documents as Word or RTF files and follow JME submission guidelines that are available online at:

http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jome

Prospective authors and potential reviewers are invited to contact either editor about this special issue. The submission deadline is 14 February 2014, but earlier submissions for consideration would be welcome from 1 October 2013 onwards.

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References


