

Getting Started with Key Concepts

Types of Concepts - Transcript

Interviewee

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What is a substantive concept?

Okay, so there's lots of different ways of looking at concepts and dividing them to help us talk about them. One of those ways is thinking about substantive and second order concepts. Substantive concepts refer to the substance in a particular subject or the content knowledge if you like. And there will be lots and lots of them in any particular subject. So say we were studying biology and we're looking at the parts of a flower, the sort of concepts we'll be dealing with might be things like petals, stem, stamen. We'll be learning lots of different ones, some of which perhaps might be everyday knowledge, others which might be more academic knowledge. So each subject will have lots and lots of substantive concepts, some of those will refer to very simple things, some of them will be quite complex, some might be concrete, others concepts might be abstract.

What is a second order concept?


So these are the underlining concepts in a subject that are used to organise the content knowledge. They stop it just being a mass of factual knowledge and in any particular subject they will shape the questions that are asked which are characteristic of that subject or discipline. They make it into a discipline rather than this mass of factual knowledge. So sometimes they're called disciplinary concepts because of that, they're shaping the discipline and they tend to go across all different topic areas within a particular subject.

What is a threshold concept?

So a threshold concept is a slightly different way of looking at concepts in learning and it's from the work of Meyer and Land and they had the idea that a threshold is like the threshold of a door that you cross over to develop a new understanding of your subject. So there are particular threshold concepts that are often quite troublesome ones for children to learn, but they're really worth putting that time in to developing because actually they're going to help you get a new understanding of the topic or the area that you're working within.

Reflecting upon your own learning, what was a threshold concept for you? How did it change your understanding of your subject?

So I've been reflecting back over my own learning, thinking about what perhaps a threshold concept might have been for me. Thinking as a geographer a particular threshold concept is place and its paired idea of space. When I think back over my learning obviously with place you start with quite an everyday



knowledge of place as a location, perhaps place as a particular combination of physical and characteristics in a particular place. And then you start to build up an understanding of place the concept from comparing and contrasting. Then of course you come into academic knowledge and you're thinking about place as constructed in various different ways. And I think for me that was probably the threshold element of place, was realising that it can be constructed, conceptualised in different ways by different people for different reasons at different times, and that as a geographer you can deploy those different understandings of place as you need to.

So particularly for me the idea of place as a bundle of trajectories, there's one particular geographer Doreen Massey who talks about how one particular place is a combination of living and non-living things which come together in that space/time, they're constantly changing. And the way that the place is being produced is actually in connection with other places in a contemporary and a historical way. And that I think changes your way of working with place as a geographer. So I would say that was a threshold concept. But importantly it's not a concept that is a simple step over which you pass, it's actually something that I think is an iterative process, I've returned to at different point over time as my development, my sophistication of understanding has changed and developed.