

ARTICLE

Threshold Concepts in Social Anthropology: Literature and Pedagogical Applications in a Bridging Project

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Abstract

This article considers what UK-based higher education researchers Jan Meyer and Ray Land describe as “threshold concepts,” asking how these concepts might apply to the field of social/cultural anthropology. This is explored in relation to the practical pedagogical project of constructing a curated online resource kit to support students who are “bridging” into social anthropology from other disciplines. In this article, we review the literature on threshold concepts in social anthropology as well as some adjacent writings on “key,” “core,” or “signature” anthropological concepts. The potential value of boundary work and troubled/troubling knowledge as a generative space emerge as useful points of consideration. We then present findings from our own surveys and focus groups with University of Otago students, summarizing their emphasis on “felt” and applied levels of understandings, the significance of ethnography, and a “hidden curriculum” of values. We explain how the lens of threshold concepts helped us interpret these responses, evaluate possible resources to meet their needs, and shape the content and structure of the online resource kit we called “AnthNav.” We conclude that while the threshold concepts framework is not the only way to understand anthropological education, it can be a valuable discussion-starter for those teaching in complex institutional settings.

Keywords: pedagogy; threshold concepts; resources; student experiences; transformation

Introduction

When I entered university in New Zealand, I chose social anthropology as a major without knowing anything about it. After my first year I felt as if a blindfold had been lifted. My whole worldview had shifted. It was both wonderful and unsettling.

– Robinson, Postdoctoral Researcher (excerpt from personal reflection)

I believe in teaching as a transformative practice. I teach social anthropology across a number of subject areas that could be considered fraught or troubled/troubling. [...] My goal is to create a safe space to engage with these, and to infuse students with passion for understanding cultural worlds with empathy, and in context – a way of seeing to carry with them throughout life.

– *Wardell, Lecturer (excerpt from teaching philosophy statement)*

This article considers what UK-based higher education researchers Jan Meyer and Ray Land describe as “threshold concepts” (2003). Their work lays out a framework for identifying the unique and transformative ways of thinking that are situated in, and fundamental to, specific disciplines (Cousin 2006; Flanagan 2018; Meyer and Land 2003). Originally applied to the experiences of teaching staff in the field of Economics, the idea of threshold concepts has since been taken up across multiple disciplines as a useful framework for improving pedagogy in higher education. Indeed, on encountering this literature, we found striking resonances between the idea of threshold concepts and our own experiences of both learning and teaching the tenets of social anthropology. The resonance is due, in part, to the intellectual heritage of the threshold concept – with ample work on social thresholds and liminality stemming from the work of seminal British anthropologist Victor Turner. Yet, to date, there have been only a few articles exploring this framework in relation to pedagogical practice in our field.

In this article, we present an analysis of the relevance of threshold concepts to the practices of teaching and learning social/cultural anthropology. This is grounded in the context of our own project of creating a kit of “bridging” resources for students from other disciplines who are entering social anthropology for the first time at upper undergraduate or postgraduate levels. After explaining our project, we review the small body of existing literature on threshold concepts within social anthropology and critically reflect on the usefulness, limitations, and complexities of applying this framework to our discipline. Since there is so little published work connecting social anthropology to the specific framework of threshold concepts, we open the discussion to consider adjacent literature that references “key” or “signature” concepts more generally, considering the potential links between them.

What are Threshold Concepts and Why Do They Matter?

The idea behind threshold concepts is that particular concepts can act as keystones for a particular discipline. Once these fall into place – once fully understood or embodied – they allow students to fathom phenomena in a manner specifically attuned to their discipline’s way of seeing, being, interpreting, and creating knowledge. In the words of Meyer and Land (2003, 1) a threshold concept acts like

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. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view.

The name emphasizes that by grasping these concepts, the student journeys from uncertainty and superficial knowledge of new ideas – “a state of liminality (Latin *limen* – ‘threshold’)” – to a deeper understanding of the discipline, stepping through/over a metaphorical threshold of understanding (Meyer and Land 2003, 4 and 10). Meyer and Land propose five qualities that concepts must have to qualify as threshold concepts: they must be bounded, integrative, recursive, transformative, and troublesome.

This latter quality recognizes that a “transition to understanding” can sometimes be emotionally and ontologically challenging, as Robinson mentioned experiencing as an undergraduate, and which Wardell recognizes in her teaching statement. Meyer and Land draw heavily on Perkins’ idea of “troublesome knowledge” to explain this (Perkins 1999 in Meyer and Land 2003). Engagement with threshold concepts can cause a major shift in thinking that is potentially “subversive,” “sudden,” “disorientating,” or “disturbing,” especially if it “undermines previous beliefs” (Meyer and Land 2003, 3). Knowledge can be troublesome in other ways too, such as when it is “tacit,” intuitive, or embodied, making it hard to isolate and name, let alone teach to students (Meyer and Land 2003, 7). Yet literature about threshold concepts – and closely related work on “decoding the disciplines” – suggests that if these are not grasped, or are misunderstood, it can create significant “bottlenecks” to learning (Shopkow et al. 2013a; 2013b; “Decoding the Disciplines – Improving Student Learning” 2018).

Context of the Research Project

Many scholars have acknowledged that social anthropology has its own specific ways of knowing, doing, being, and seeing (Coleman and Simpson 2004; Spencer and Mills 2011; Wolcott 2008). Students, understandably, do not always have an intuitive sense for the unique ways of thinking that distinguish social anthropology from similar disciplines – for example sociology, cultural studies, religious studies, or communication studies. Our observations, and the data we gathered from students at the University of Otago, show that transitioning into the discipline can be challenging for first-time anthropology students. Bastide (2011) discusses it as a challenge for teachers, too, to support these students appropriately. Classrooms involving a mix of students – both experienced and “new” to anthropology – can provide a practical challenge, since the teacher’s attention may then be

problematically divided between a laying out of key underlying concepts or frameworks (including schools of thought and methodologies) and delivering the topic-specific content of the course. This situation has increased in recent years at our own institution, as the university has shifted towards a “schools” model for the humanities division.¹ As a result, we have removed many paper prerequisites² and collaborated with other programs to cross-promote and cross-credit relevant papers; in some cases, this has meant establishing or teaching into cross-disciplinary minors.

In 2019, the first author (Wardell) received a University of Otago Teaching and Learning (CALT) grant to respond to this situation. The grant supported a study exploring the needs of students transitioning into the discipline from other fields as well as an effort to catalogue and evaluate existing digital resources for communicating anthropological concepts. We undertook this research with the ultimate goal of creating an online kit of accessible multimedia resources that could be used independently and flexibly by a diverse range of students to “bridge” themselves into social anthropology.

As part of developing our own understanding around this task, we engaged with literature on threshold concepts and reviewed literature relevant to our discipline within this area (Meyer and Land 2003). This was done iteratively alongside reviewing existing public web-based resources (including AV resources, diagrams, cartoons, other graphics, and web pages), analyzing the structure and layout of a range of introductory anthropology textbooks, and gathering feedback from current and past anthropology students via one focus group (n=3), an online survey (n=15), and an in-class questionnaire in two undergraduate courses (n=27). Participants self-selected for the focus groups and online surveys based on advertisements circulating via the department’s social media pages, and the in-class questionnaire was optional, with informed consent and full anonymization of data applied to all three. The research was fully approved by the Otago Human Ethics Committee (reference number D19/093).

¹ Previously “departments” had existed under the general division of humanities, but this change has introduced “schools” under which individual “programmes” are managed. This has meant Social Anthropology is now a programme that exists within a “School of Social Sciences” (alongside Archaeology; Media, Film, and Communication Studies; Social and Community Work; Sociology, Gender Studies, and Criminology; Religious Studies; and Political Studies).

² These were typically entry level courses that students were required to have completed before taking courses at a higher level.

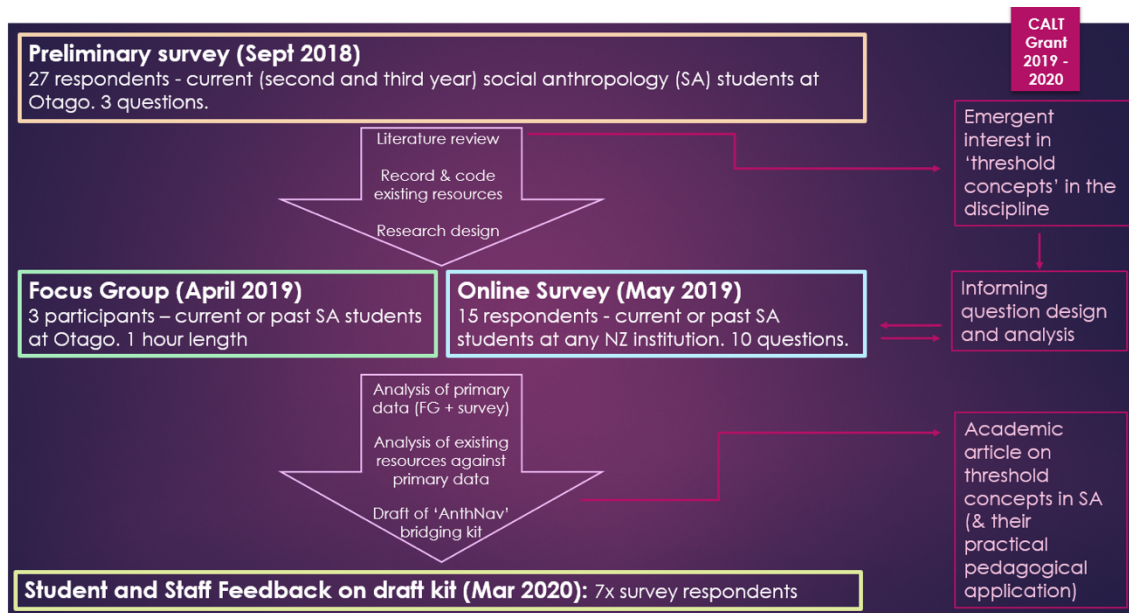


Figure 1. Research Project Outline

Throughout this process, threshold concepts provided a valuable lens for interpreting what existing students were saying about the experiences or ideas that changed them or advanced their understanding. It also proved a useful lens for evaluating resources we were considering for use in the online resource kit that we launched in early 2020 (detailed at the end of the article). The framework of threshold concepts challenged us to think beyond the idea of simply transferring information and to consider a wide array of resources that could evoke specific, tacit understandings of what it means to “be” an anthropologist.

Literature on Threshold Concepts in (and for) Social Anthropology

In the last 17 years, a collaborative and interdisciplinary body of research around threshold concepts has emerged from Meyer and Land’s (2003) original work. Researchers in this area benefit from an active web-based database on the topic: a site called *Threshold Concepts: Undergraduate Teaching, Postgraduate Training, Professional Development and School Education*.³ To begin, we used the “Subject Index” on this site, which lists disciplines alphabetically and collates literature under these headings. Under “Anthropology,” only two resources are listed: Thomson’s (2018) study of writing and the performative, and Wilson and Leitner’s (2007) interrogation of “troublesome” knowledge, both of which we explore shortly. However, given the dearth of work under this heading, we also searched for wider work in the field of social anthropology that contributes to similar conversations about

³ See <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>.

what concepts, ideas, or practices are unique to the field. These conversations use different terms such as “key,” “signature,” or “core” concepts. It is this that we turn to first, to provide a sense of the existing disciplinary conversations that the work on threshold concepts might fit into.

Adjacent and Related Work: Textbooks

The idea of identifying important concepts for the field was considered novel just 20 years ago, with few “attempts to distil ‘anthropological wisdom’ [...] by way of key concepts” (Rapport and Overing 2000, vii-viii). One early publication to take this approach, however, was Robert H. Winthrop’s textbook, which presents “major concepts that have shaped the discipline, treated historically and theoretically” (Winthrop 1991, ix). In the preface, Winthrop (1991, x) describes selecting the concepts with a student audience in mind based on “the sort of information that I wish I had had on hand during my studies.” His selection of 80 concepts are provided in alphabetical order and listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Concepts in Winthrop (1991, xiii-xiv)

Acculturation	Development	Magic	Semiotics
Adaptation	Diffusion	Mana	Shamanism
Animism	Economy	Marriage	Social Movement
Anthropology	Etic/Etic	Materialism	Social Structure
Applied Anthropology	Ethnicity	Migration	Sociobiology
Association	Ethnography	Mode of Production	State
Band	Ethnology	Myth	Structuralism
Caste	Ethnoscience	Nature	Superorganic
Chiefdom	Evolution	Network	Survival
Civilisation	Family	Pattern	Symbolism
Communication	Folk Culture	Peasantry	System
Community	Folklore	Personality	Taboo
Comparative Method	Functionalism	Primitive	Totemism
Cultural Ecology	Gender	Psychic Unity	Tradition
Culture	Historicism	Race	Trance
Culture Area	Inequality	Rationality	Tribe
Cultural Change	Interpretation	Relativism	Urbanism
Curing	Kinship	Religion	War
Custom	Language	Rites of Passage	Witchcraft
Descent	Law	Ritual	World View

In 2000, Rapport and Overing published a social and cultural anthropology textbook on “key concepts.” They note that, while some earlier introductory texts included glossaries and dictionaries, few provided a set of concepts that act as “discursive nodes from which a broader, interconnected landscape of anthropological work and understanding should become apparent” (Rapport and Overing 2000, viii). They subsequently present a list of almost 60 concepts (shown in Table 2). These are presented alphabetically rather than thematically, though the authors briefly describe how they could be framed under several broad categories (“ontological,” “epistemological,” “methodological,” “theoretical,” and “ethnographic”). Each entry is essay-like in form, covering the concept’s history and transformation “according to author and context,” and the “argumentation surrounding it” (Rapport and Overing 2000, ix).

Table 2. Concepts in Rapport and Overing (2000, xi-xii)

Agent and Agency	Discourse	Liminality	Situation and Context
Alterity	Ecriture Feminine	Literariness	Society
Auto-Ethnography	Ethnomethodology	Methodological Eclecticism	Stereotypes
Children	Form and Content	Methodological Individualism and Holism	Thick Description
Classification	Gender	Moments of Being	Tourism
Code	Gossip	Movement	Transaction
Cognition	Home and Homelessness	Myth	The Unhomely
Common Sense	Human Rights	Narrative	Urbanism
Community	Humanism	Network	Violence
Consciousness	Individualism	Non-Places	Visualism
Contradiction	Individuality	Post-Modernism	World-Making
Conversation	Interaction	Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies	World-View
Culture	Interpretation	Reading	Writing
Cybernetics	Irony	The Rural Idyll	
Dialogics and Analogics	Kinship	Science	

The 5th edition of Lavenda and Shultz’s *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology* similarly covers “fundamental key terms and issues of contemporary cultural anthropology,” or “core concepts” (2013, viii). The authors describe the book as

delivering “a rapid sketch of the basic ideas and practices of cultural anthropology in a style analogous to an expanded glossary” (Lavenda and Shultz 2013, viii). Unlike Winthrop (1991) and Rapport and Overing (2000), their list of concepts include both core ideas as well as what Winthrop (1991, x) describes as a “technical lexicon” of 400 terms in total, listed at the beginning of each of the 12 chapters. Those at the beginning of “Chapter 1: Anthropology” are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Concepts in Lavenda and Schultz, Chapter 1 (2003, 1)

Anthropology	Culture	Archaeology
Holistic	Fieldwork	Prehistory
Comparative	Informants	Applied Anthropology
Evolutionary	Participant-observation	Developmental Anthropology
Biological Anthropology	Monograph	Objective Knowledge
Primatologists	Ethnography	Positivism
Paleoanthropologist	Ethnology	Modernism
Forensic Anthropologists	Anthropological Linguistics	Postmodernism
Medical Anthropology	Linguistic Anthropology	Reflexive
Cultural Anthropology	Language	Multisited Fieldwork

The goal of the book is to help students learn a new “analytic vocabulary” and contextualize this new terminology “in the theoretical and practical history of the field” (Lavenda and Shultz 2013, viii).

Adjacent Work: Online Resources

While such textbooks are useful and thorough, many students today confess to taking a faster route to find a definition: simply “Googling” it. This often leads them to open source educational websites that are also worth reviewing.

One such source is Wikibooks, which is part of Wikipedia’s *Wikiversity* (2019) project: “a community effort to learn and facilitate others’ learning.” The Wikibook for “Cultural Anthropology” (2018) has 12 chapters following a fairly traditional textbook format: starting with an introduction to social/cultural anthropology and defining “culture,” followed by an overview of anthropological theory, practitioners, methods, and finally, popular areas of anthropological attention (e.g., language, health, globalization, and migration). Last edited in 2018 (at the time of writing), this particular Wikibook does not yet have a complete glossary of the key concepts or terms in each chapter, but these are still discoverable as sub-headings such as “holism,” “ethnocentrism,” and “cultural relativism.”

A similar resource was Lumen Learning, a US-based for-profit company producing Creative Commons-licensed courseware in sixty-five subjects, including Cultural Anthropology (Made with CC 2017). Like Wikibooks, the format of the Lumen Learning Cultural Anthropology page echoes many printed textbooks. It is based around 14 chapters, beginning with “What is Anthropology?” and proceeding with thematic chapters. Like Lavenda and Shultz (2013), Lumen Learning has a list of “key terms and concepts” at the beginning of every chapter, with the words bolded and explanations built into the chapter’s text (see Table 4).

Table 4. Key Terms and Concepts from Lumen Learning (2020), First Chapter in “Cultural Anthropology”

Anthropology	Archaeology	Cultural Relativism
Applied Anthropology	Linguistic Anthropology	Biocultural Approach
Cultural Anthropology	Holism	
Biological Anthropology	Ethnocentrism	

Notably, much of the Lumen Learning material is attributed back to the Wikibook content on Cultural Anthropology.

Without directly using the threshold concepts framework, these tools nonetheless provide an indication of some concepts that *might* be labeled as threshold concepts with adequate consideration of their relationship to Meyer and Land’s criteria. They informed our own deliberation over subject headings for our web-based resource, as we discuss later. We turn now to the authors who used the threshold concepts framework more directly, considering their justifications for what should be considered a threshold concept in social anthropology, as well as wider debates about what the framework might offer or preclude.

Reflexivity, Writing, and Performativity in Social/Cultural Anthropology

Writing up qualitative data may be a threshold concept in the social sciences in general (Humphrey and Simpson 2012, 744), but approaches to writing can also be specific to a discipline. The Howe Writing Center (HWC) for Writing Excellence at Miami University runs semester-long workshops focused on threshold concepts and writing (James Bielo, personal communication, 2019). The goal is to encourage disciplines to identify possible threshold concepts and, ultimately, go on to produce “disciplinary guides” which “explicitly name threshold concepts for their students” (Elizabeth Wardle, personal communication, 2019). In 2017, four anthropologists at Miami University attended one of these workshops, including Dr. James Bielo (cultural and linguistic anthropology); Dr. Leighton Peterson (linguistic anthropology); Dr. Jeb Card (archaeology); and Dr. Yang Jiao (cultural anthropology) (James Bielo, personal communication, 2019). In the final Disciplinary Guide they produced – under the

heading “What does Anthropology Value in Writing?” – the authors suggest **“empiricism, holism, comparative analysis, the study of bio-cultural change, relativism, and anti-ethnocentrism”** as key (Glotfelter et al. 2019, **original emphasis**). They go on to list qualities that lend credibility to anthropological writing, including: **“empirical evidence to examine claims; place findings in relevant scholarly or research contexts; accurately cite appropriate sources; and successfully use disciplinary conventions and genres”** (Glotfelter et al. 2019, **original emphasis**). They continue with an example to highlight other valued signatures of anthropological writing, such as ethnographic vignettes, “zoom[ing] out to identify broader demographics,” and contextualization (Glotfelter et al. 2019).

Anthropological approaches to writing are also discussed by Pat Thomson, a Professor of Education. Although not an anthropologist, Thomson has a strong interest in academic writing, including ethnography. Her 2018 think-piece (listed on the Threshold Concepts website under “Anthropology”) draws from key anthropological thinkers such as Clifford Geertz, and more recently Michael Taussig (1993) and Tim Ingold (2008), to argue that the notion of “writing as representation” is troubled in social anthropology. Here, Thomson explores how ethnography and the politics of representation have created ethical dilemmas and tensions for anthropologists that remain unresolved. Following the “linguistic turn,” she suggests that the idea of “writing as performative” can be identified as a threshold concept in anthropology (Thomson 2018). Quoting Michael Taussig, Thomson argues that performative, ethnographic writing is messy and contradictory; it is writing that “recognises the material reality being produced for and by readers, and also acknowledges its simultaneous duplicities, its masquerade” (Taussig 2006, v in Thomson 2018). This is similar to the entry on “Writing” in Rapport and Overing’s (2000, 405) book, which states that “in anthropology, writing comes to be conceived of not so much as a neutral medium of knowledge, facts, and experience, a window onto an independent reality, than as a way of knowing in itself.” This perspective embodies anthropology’s ongoing interest in “the nature of knowledge and knowledge production” (Thomson 2018), in itself “troubling” rather than definitive.

Troublesome, Troubling, and Regenerative Spaces

The other scholars contributing to the social anthropology section of the Threshold Concepts site are social anthropologists Lee Wilson and David S. Leitner (2007). They narrate how they were initially drawn to identify “reflexivity” as a core threshold concept. However, they decided it did not fit well with three of the five criteria for threshold concepts; it was not necessarily integrative, irreversible, or

bounded⁴ (2007, 3). They struggled to identify any other “tangible” threshold concepts (Wilson and Leitner 2007, 3) and considered whether this was due to their expertise preventing them from viewing the discipline as a new student might. In response, they conducted a focus group with first-year archaeology and anthropology students, asking them to identify some characteristics of social anthropology. Wilson and Leitner (2007, 4) summarize the students’ responses as being:

that social anthropology [...] involved an attempt to identify levels of bias; that the discipline tries to be aware and critical of preconceptions and points of view. They stressed that it was about critical thinking, made clear their anxieties over where they might ground their own interpretations in light of this, and asked ultimately whether social anthropology as a discipline is itself necessary!

From this, the authors felt students’ thoughts correlated with their view of “troublesome knowledge not as an obstacle or barrier to be surmounted, but as a desired end in itself” and “a generative space” where new insights are gained rather than a place to “move beyond” (Wilson and Leitner 2007, 4, 7). Somewhat counter-intuitive to the threshold concepts framework, they assert that in social anthropology “producing troublesomeness is the point” (Wilson and Leitner 2007, 3).

An article by anthropologist Elena Burgos-Martinez (2019) adds to this line of thought through empirical research with first-year anthropology students in the UK. She determined that the “troublesomeness” evoked by such concepts given to first-years – including “ethnocentric, culture, primitive, modern, relative, indigenous” – is often left unaddressed, with students having to cope with this uncertainty in private (2019, 58). Terms like these “are often offered to the students through recurrent, often stereotypical imagery and in the backdrop of outdated binaries (e.g. traditional vs. modern)” without sufficient time given for students to “meaningfully unpack” or contextualize them within the social history of anthropological thought (Burgos-Martinez 2019, 59). Hence her invitation to see “uncertain spaces” as “learning spaces” where “conceptual frictions” can become important teaching moments (Burgos-Martinez 2019, 58). It is worth considering, we suggest, that uncertainty or friction – or indeed “troublesomeness” – could themselves be threshold concepts for social anthropology, rather than providing evidence to counter the validity of the threshold concepts framework for social anthropology, as Wilson & Leitner (2007) imply.

Theoretical Landscapes and Individual Journeys

Other critiques of the threshold concepts framework focus less on the criteria for a threshold concept and more on the generalizing tendency of the approach. Wilson

⁴ Baillie and Armstrong (2013, 142) also identify debates among some scholars as to whether threshold concepts are necessarily “‘bounded,’ ‘integrative,’ and ‘recursive’ but that the former two qualities [‘transformative’ and ‘troublesome’] are never in question.”

and Leitner (2007) caution against homogenizing students and the learning process. Learning is subjective and “to identify a threshold concept in a theoretical landscape that is invariable for all students” may leave out the unique or culturally variable learning pathways of some students in favor of the majority (Wilson and Leitner 2007, 6). Additionally, they argue that discussions of threshold concepts tend to ignore the idea of “intersubjectivity” and paint students as “passive” receivers of knowledge, bereft of agency in the learning process (Wilson and Leitner 2007, 6-7). Burgos-Martinez (2019) substantiates this over a decade later, arguing that students should not be conceived of as empty vessels ready to receive predetermined threshold concepts, but as “experienced navigators of conceptual development” with high levels of agency (2019, 62). Anthropologist Percival Santos, in an article on “signature pedagogies” for anthropology, also argues for the need to stop seeing students as “passive consumers of knowledge” (2013, 144), noting that instructors “should be encouraging them to ‘do’ anthropology,” not “simply consume” it through reading “expert” texts (2013, 139). In aid of this, Santos suggests that the dynamic between students and professors of anthropology be viewed as a kind of apprenticeship, with “novices” and “masters” of the “art and craft of anthropology” (Santos 2013, 139).

Allowing students to explore and experience discomfort links back to a key theme in this literature. While the threshold concepts framework may regard “troublesomeness” as an obstacle to comprehension, it is often embraced in social anthropology as an opportunity for deeper learning. It is this friction between concepts that creates a fruitful uncertainty, as Burgos-Martinez discusses (2019, 58). Indeed, she describes how students seem to thrive when such conceptual uncertainties are explicitly acknowledged and discussed. Seeing uncertainty as part of the overall ethos of social anthropology helps students express agency and take control of their own learning, wherein “thresholds and their frictions are rather constructed by the students themselves, individually and in relation to others” (Burgos-Martinez 2019, 62). The recognition of “positionality” and “liminality when producing knowledge about others” as key themes by Burgos-Martinez’s (2019, 62) student participants, serves as a reminder that troublesomeness is not inherent to educational content, but articulated through sets of social relations in which students and teachers are themselves embedded.

Threshold Concepts and Boundary Work

Intentionally or not, the process of identifying threshold concepts in anthropology can be seen as “boundary work”: efforts to distinguish social anthropology as unique from other social sciences (Burgos-Martinez 2019, 58). One key aspect of this includes efforts to establish “culture” as something anthropologists are “better equipped to explore [...] than practitioners in other disciplines” (Burgos-Martinez 2019, 58). Yet somewhat paradoxically, it is attention to such “broad (and broadly used) topics” that connects teachers and students of anthropology to other disciplines (Burgos-Martinez

2019, 58). This can lead to that somewhat surprising question raised by the students in Wilson and Leitner's study (2007) – why do we need anthropology? Boundary work can be productive in this way, helping to communicate the ethos of anthropology to students, which in turn provides a way to contextualize the production of knowledge. It is also worth acknowledging that boundary work may be propelled by institutional pressures such as funding limits and structural re-organization, increased managerial scrutiny, and the need to assert a disciplinary identity, or redefine it in order to compete for resources and avoid mergers with other disciplines (in other words, “redundancies”) – none of which are uncommon scenarios in a neoliberal university setting. Another less pessimistic view is that identifying threshold concepts can actually enhance the ability to “cross knowledge boundaries and thresholds” (Baillie and Armstrong 2013). Productive and direct comparison to other disciplines can help scholars discover common ground, as well as what is distinctive about their discipline and its worth, perhaps leading to productive cross-disciplinary work. Citing Wallerstein (2003), Baillie and Armstrong (2013, 149) posit that while disciplines are not homogenous, the labels used to typify each discipline “are a useful shorthand” to elucidate some of the inherent assumptions behind threshold concepts, which enable students to grasp wider frameworks (such as social justice) and build cross-disciplinary partnerships. In addition, we argue that these labels can provide context and self-awareness to students who are crossing borders they may not have been aware of, either as a permanent shift, a brief foray, or in order to establish their expertise across disciplinary boundaries.

Threshold Concepts in Action: Findings and Reflections from Our Bridging Kit Research

Considering this body of work on threshold concepts helped us think through our own goal of assessing the needs of students who are bridging into social anthropology papers or courses at upper levels. We used threshold concepts not as an all-encompassing or rigid framework, but as a thinking-tool in our own iterative research process. In this capacity, it provided guidance in evaluating existing resources, shaped our interpretations of student comments in the focus group and surveys, and also informed our practical decisions while constructing the web-based “bridging” kit. We discuss these in the order of the process as we undertook it (represented in Figure1).

Findings from the In-Class Questionnaire

In September 2018, 27 students responded to an optional, in-class questionnaire in two of our split-level undergraduate papers (ANTH222/322 and ANTH228/328). These students included a mix of anthropology majors, minors, and students taking individual papers for “interest”; students in the latter group were enrolled in science degrees, degrees in other areas of the humanities, or, less commonly, commerce

degrees. We did not collect additional demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity) for the students who chose to complete the questionnaire.

The three questions focused on what was “challenging,” what was “most important to know,” and what they would “retain from their studies in social anthropology.” Overwhelmingly, the responses to the in-class questionnaire indicated “concepts” or “theory and concepts” as one of the biggest challenges upon entering the discipline. Understanding terminology or “jargon” was also identified as an unfulfilled need from the very beginning of their engagement. For example, several students specified “cultural relativism” and “ethnocentrism” as concepts that they wished they had understood clearly at the outset. Arguably, both terms could be considered threshold concepts, and both certainly feature regularly as key concepts in the textbooks we reviewed. A cumulative list of all the concepts mentioned by individual students as “important to know” is in Table 5.

Table 5. Concepts Mentioned in In-Class Questionnaire

Agency	Embodiment	Global vs. Local
Comparison	Enlightenment	Insider vs. Outsider
Culture	Ethnocentrism	Interpretive Lens
Cultural Relativism	Ethnography	Neoliberalism

Some students specifically responded that it would be useful to know “what exactly anthropologists looked at, and how they perform research”; grasping ethnographic methods was also mentioned, as was understanding the type and style of writing in social anthropology. Indeed, “ethnography” is part of the discipline’s essential self-concept (Mills 2011): key to “disciplinary thinking” and social anthropology’s “signature methodology” (Santos 2013). While this is richly covered in our second-year methods papers, there are many 200- and 300-level students from outside our discipline who engage with other upper-level anthropological courses without their benefit.

Additionally, students’ overall responses surprised us with their lesser emphasis on *formal* knowledge and greater focus on *value-based* positions or worldviews; for example, they mentioned empathy, open-mindedness, and appreciation of difference or diversity as key things they would take away from the course – a type of “hidden curriculum,” we might call it.

Findings from the Focus Group

The 2019 focus group had three self-selecting participants, all from our institution. Two of these were current Otago University postgraduate students. One had trained in a different field at an overseas institution and then “taught herself” social anthropology before commencing her PhD in New Zealand. One participant had

taken a couple of social anthropology papers as part of her undergraduate degree at a different New Zealand institution more than a decade ago. The third participant was a recent graduate of a Bachelor’s degree split between Science and Arts (majoring in Social Anthropology) at our own institution.

The focus group involved four different tasks that were conducted in a single audio-recorded session. Tasks one and two involved students identifying key concepts in anthropology and writing them on colored squares of paper, then (physically) arranging these papers into groups or categories, and finally discussing and rearranging them as desired. The results are shown in Tables 6, 7, and 8.

Table 6. Concepts Generated by Focus Group (Task One)

Culture	Functionalism	Language	Relativism
Diversity	Gift Exchange	Phenomenology	Religion
Empathy vs Sympathy	Imagination	Positionality	Structuralism
Ethnocentric/ism	Invisible hand	Poststructuralism	Symbols
Ethnography	Kinship	Reflexivity	Thick Description

Table 7. First Arrangement of Concepts (Task Two) – By “Order of Understanding”

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Ethnocentrism	Imagination (familiar in strange)	Thick description
Relativism	Reflexivity	Functionalism
Diversity	Empathy vs sympathy	Post-structuralism
Gift exchange		Structuralism
Invisible hand		Phenomenology

Table 8. Second Arrangement of Concepts (Task Two) – By Emergent Relationships

Cluster 1: General	Cluster 2: Positionality	Cluster 3: Methodology	Cluster 4: Theory
Culture	Imagination (familiar in strange)	Empathy vs sympathy	Functionalism
Religion	Reflexivity	Relativism	Structuralism
Diversity	Positionality	Ethnography	Post-structuralism
Gift exchange	Ethnocentrism	Thick description	
Invisible hand		Phenomenology	
Kinship			
Symbols			
Language			

This exercise elicited a rich discussion that was later transcribed and analyzed. Two themes emerged from the discussion which were particularly helpful for designing our first draft of the bridging kit: "Differentiating the field" and "The bigger picture." Students agreed there was a need to understand how social anthropology is both similar to and different from other disciplines, including through different styles of writing or different ways of using data (thus fitting with the concept of boundary work). They also emphasized the importance of having an overall sense of the discipline in terms of its history and the relation between specific concepts and larger social theories or schools of thought.

The focus group participants described having to "feel a definition" as a kind of "next step" in comprehending a concept. This lined up closely with Meyer and Land's (2003, 4) argument about the "performative" aspect of threshold concepts in that they are understood on an embodied level and may involve a change in subjectivity, "values, feeling or attitude." Confirming this, one student suggested "ethnography" was one such threshold concept, best understood while "doing," not just reading about it; this was quite similar to Santos' (2013) argument. Analyzing their responses, we identified "retroactive learning" as a key theme. For instance, one student discussed at length how moments of understanding or clarity came when a concept in anthropology suddenly gave her deeper understanding of a previous experience or directly applied to a past life event. Burgos-Martinez reports a similar finding, with student focus groups raising the topic of "whether what was learnt in class really 'clicked in with daily life'" (2019, 62).

Findings from the Online Survey

There were 15 respondents to our online survey; the participation criteria was that they had taken at least one social anthropology paper at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. Respondents included 11 students from our own institution and four more representing three other institutions. The majority of respondents were either studying towards a Bachelor's degree in the Arts or Sciences or a double degree in both a Bachelor of Arts and Science. Four participants had engaged with social anthropology at the postgraduate level. We did not collect additional demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity) for these participants.

The survey questions focused on how participants would define or explain social anthropology and what they thought to be core concepts for the discipline (including concepts they wish they'd learnt when they started and those that changed how they thought about the social world). Responses provided a substantial list to consider for inclusion in our bridging kit. As part of our iterative process, and towards this applied goal, we then organized these concepts under our own overarching headings, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Concepts Mentioned in Online Survey

Method and practice	Foundational/discipline-specific	Specialized/sub-discipline	Schools of Thought
Ethnography	Society	The limited good	Materialism
Participant Observation	Culture	Interpretive labour	Structuralism
Autoethnography	Colonialism	Dead Zones	Functionalism
Close Reading	The 'Social'	Governmentality	Phenomenology
Critical Evaluation	Power	Liminality	Post-structuralism
Theoretical Coding	Kinship	Structural Violence	
Narrative practices	Exchange	Postmodernism	
Context (awareness)	Agency		
Subjectivity	Ritual		
Reflexivity	Value		
Defamiliarization	Epistemology		
Cultural Relativism	Ontology		
Ethnocentrism	Taboos		
	Social mores		
	Embodiment		

We also asked students about any specific 'Aha!' moments they had experienced, any favorite or useful resources, and any advice they had for future students.

Like the focus group, the survey also indicated the need for a section of the bridging kit dedicated to locating social anthropology in relation to other disciplines and to clarifying a general understanding of its subject matter. Several students wrote about their desire to learn about anthropological approaches to knowledge formation and its modes of analysis. Relatedly, students emphasized the importance of learning about "subjectivity," "reflexivity," "ethnocentrism" and the process of "defamiliarization" – terms often included in textbooks that fit several qualities of threshold concepts (being integrative, irreversible, and transformative).⁵ Again, in addition to these terms, the "hidden curriculum" appeared in the form of values that were not explicitly part of course content but which were (as in the in-class survey) consistently identified as learning outcomes. This included "tolerance" and how to keep an open mind. Indeed, "open mindedness" (mentioned by five out of 15

⁵ Unlike Wilson and Leitner's (2007) terms which, as aforementioned, contested "reflexivity" being integrative or irreversible.

students in the online survey) and “empathy,” as well as “acceptance of difference” were key themes that emerged across our three data-collecting processes.

Designing our Own Learning Resource

Once we had completed the survey of literature, analysis of existing textbooks, and gathering of student responses, we returned to the task of developing our own online kit of resources for beginners and student social anthropologists. The final categories and headings used to organize the site’s content (shown in Figure 2 below) were a strategic combination of student-generated categories or concepts (shown in Tables 5-9), and those that we evaluated and selected from the existing literature (shown in Tables 1-3). Our engagement with the threshold concept framework also helped us establish criteria for assessing and curating individual resources (links, graphics, videos, cartoons, and so on) to be included under these major headings.

Disciplinary specificity was a criterion we applied carefully to all material we considered for inclusion in our kit. This proved challenging, however, due to a large overlap in the use of terms *between* disciplines. That is, there were many publicly-available online resources on concepts, theories, or theorists that we identified as central to “us” as social anthropologists – such as “discourse,” “reflexive,” or even “culture” – but that were written from the perspective of other disciplines. As the framework of threshold concepts had led us to expect, few of these resources adopted the same perspective on our selected topics as we hoped to convey, and they were thus unsuitable for the purpose of introducing and distinguishing an anthropological approach. While this narrowed our choices, it sensitized us to such subtleties. As a result, we came to the conclusion that, rather than create a curated list as initially intended, we would embed the resources (in the form of hyperlinks or graphics) in brief and accessible blocks of text that outlined their disciplinary context and mapped out their interconnections.

In particular, examining the kit both as a whole and as a collection of interrelated parts on a website involved extensive deliberation over the pedagogical significance of layout and structure, which further advanced our thinking beyond the selection and presentation of individual resources. From the texts we reviewed, it was clear that introductory anthropology textbooks tended to present information in a “thematic” manner, i.e., kinship, economics, religion, and so on, with very strong similarities across resources. However, a different subset of introductory textbooks, often those focused on ethnography as a practice (rather than anthropology as a whole discipline) – for example, Raymond Madden’s *Being Ethnographic* (2010) – focused on tacit and embodied qualities of “being,” “seeing,” “thinking,” and “doing” as an anthropologist. This latter approach is quite a different way of entering the field, one we deemed more in line with the framework of threshold concepts as well as our own findings from the focus group and surveys.

As Meyer and Land (2003) emphasize, threshold concepts are part of the “core learning outcomes that represent ‘seeing things in a new way’” (2003, 1). What we found after gathering student opinions and surveying existing resources was that in order to teach this, we needed a way to both “show” and “tell,” i.e., to strike a balance between offering examples of what social anthropologists do and value and explaining essential concepts in clear, accessible language. We considered carefully what headings we would use and how we would “file” or arrange different concepts under them. To emphasize these “tacit” aspects of threshold concepts, we designed our main section around “practicing anthropology” under which the “thinking,” “communicating,” and “researching” sections resided (see Figure 2). Four out of 15 students emphasized the importance of “doing the readings” provided in a social anthropology paper. Thus, our bridging kit includes a section on both “reading” and “writing” (reflecting the many discussions about anthropology’s approach to writing that we covered earlier in this article).

Responses from our student surveys also helped us identify the need to provide context about how influential ideas or practices were developed over time and how they are applied in contemporary research. Thus, our other main section, “About Anthropology,” aims to help students gain an overall sense of the “story” of social anthropology, locating the discipline and its relationship to other fields, as well as a general “history of the discipline” (ideally *before* they start reading about the specific concepts and practices). The emphasis on the “hidden curriculum” of empathy and open-mindedness in survey responses led to our inclusion of discussions of “Ethics” and “Values and Vision” within this broad introductory section. The literature helped us understand this as “boundary work” (Burgos-Martinez 2019). At the same time, it was important for us to eschew a static or unproblematic disciplinary identity. The site thus includes a specific module dedicated to “Schools of Thought,” which showcases disciplinary shifts, wider historical contexts, shared interdisciplinary movements, and opens up the idea of plurality and friction (even *within* the field). We also aimed for resources that highlight the uncertain and reflexive space in which even “expert” anthropologists often dwell, showing their centrality to the production of ethnography.

This variety of resources and voices of anthropological practitioners provided a sense of the terminology as *applied* and as *lived* by researchers – particularly in the “researching” section around “participant observation.” This lines up with the notion of threshold concepts in moving beyond definitions towards a sense of “being” an anthropologist via other people’s experiences. This is something we could extend in the future. For example, in the “thinking” section, more examples of how and why practicing anthropologists have applied core concepts to their research and analysis could be beneficial (if these could be sourced or created). Indeed, some of the initial beta-testers of our site provided the suggestion of more contemporary examples of anthropological research, and its application, as a way to enliven AnthNav.

Discussions about individual journeys versus constructed “maps” of thresholds led to useful reflections. Should we be using the site to pre-determine threshold concepts for students? Or instead, should we reconceptualize it as a platform that enables students to identify threshold concepts on their own and discuss the uncertainties or troublesomeness of anthropological concepts and terminology with each other? It proved expedient to allow for both by shaping the overarching layout of the bridging kit in a non-linear, non-hierarchical way (as much as was possible within the structural constraints of the web interface with its main pages and sub-pages). This structure allows students to express agency by independently navigating through the sections based on their interests and needs, rather than prescribing a single path for some assumed “majority” (as per Wilson and Leitner [2007]).

What we decided upon is available on a basic site available at <https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/anthnav/>. The sitemap below (Figure 2) shows the three main pages (blue) and five sub-pages (green).

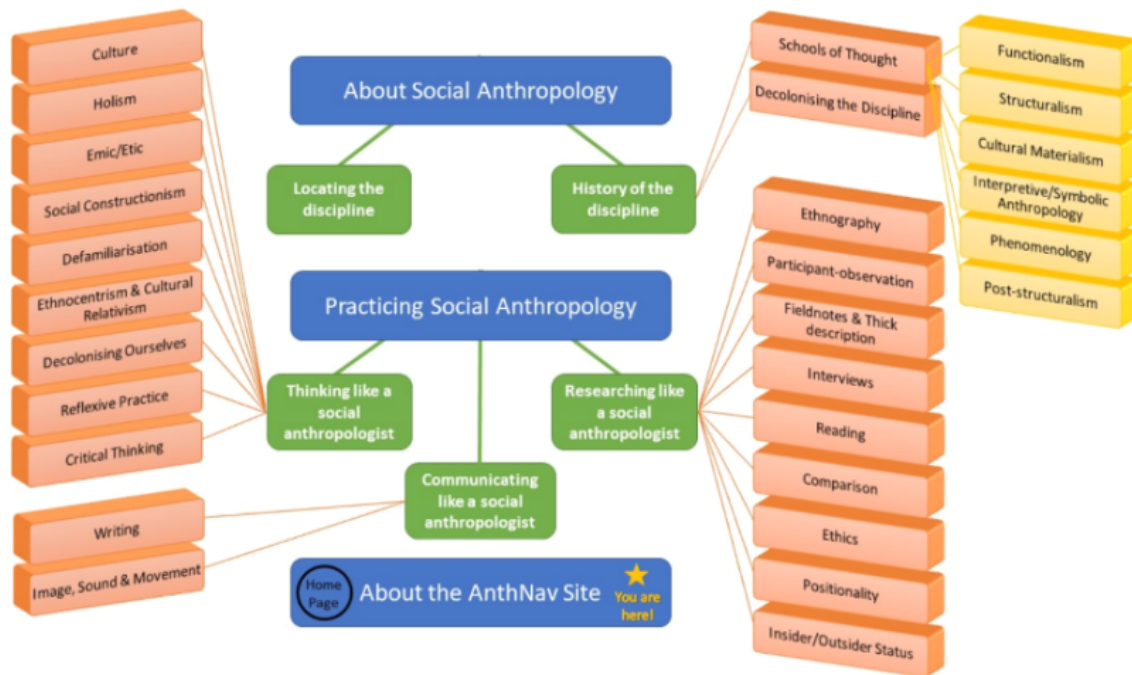


Figure 2. Sitemap, Version 1 of AnthNav (March 2020)

Most of the sub-pages have multiple headings (orange) with some sub-headings (yellow). Key words are bolded, and links to external resources or between sections are embedded in the text. Some (appropriately copyrighted) images have been added in places where they support or elucidate key points made in the text or where students’ initial feedback indicated a need to break up bigger blocks of text.

In early 2020, we launched this online resource, the culmination of our research project. After brainstorming ideas and conducting an online poll, we named it “AnthNav” – a title that utilizes a spatial metaphor for the field of knowledge and practice, just as the ideas of threshold concepts deploys a spatial metaphor for the process of understanding, e.g. “theoretical landscapes.”

Conclusions: Reviewing the AnthNav project

While it is not overtly referenced on the AnthNav site, threshold concepts were deeply influential in developing the resource. The framework shaped our choice to structure the site around thinking, writing, and communicating, with key terms fitted into this in lieu of the more common glossary-style format. This format better reflected our goal of evoking a way of being-in the-world. The frequent signposting between sections (facilitated easily by hyperlinks) also emphasizes how the discipline’s varied practices and tools fit together as one holistic – though diversely applied – paradigm. The threshold concept framework also influenced the style of resources we chose. Examples and stories, where individuals spoke to their own research projects and experiences, evoked core ideas far better than simpler, shorter definitions. Thus, we included a range of voices and case studies to illustrate how concepts are embodied and lived by practicing anthropologists.

Most significantly, our choices in constructing AnthNav embraced troublesomeness and troubled knowledges, frictions, and uncertainties, not just as a side-effect of crossing those thresholds, but as creating generative spaces in our field (Wilson and Leitner 2007; Burgos-Martinez 2019). For example, discussing and describing the embeddedness of the discipline in colonial science, ongoing decolonizing struggles, changes and debates in the field, ethics, as well as difficulties around positionality and reflexivity, feature heavily in our AnthNav website as an overt and matter-of-fact part of anthropological thinking. We maintain that these sorts of “troublesomeness” are appropriate – and in fact essential – to acknowledge, even for beginners in the field. There are connections here to Trouillot’s writing on culture as an “anti-concept” (2003). Trouillot focused on how the word “culture” had been used in North American anthropology in particular, describing how it was defined by its relationship to the concept of race, but also class and history in a manner specific to that region (2003, 99). Arguing against academic fields that hinge on *words* – as potentially dangerous short-cuts – Trouillot promoted the pursuit of a practice rooted in concepts. There is clearly much room to explore this further in relation to the pedagogical framework of threshold concepts. This argument supports our attention to designing a reflexive resource specific to our own regional setting – and based on presenting concepts as situated within this context – instead of a “universal” resource for the field. For example, the website introduces early Māori anthropologist, Mākareti Papakura and provides links to resources on decolonizing work specific to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Initial responses to the site – via survey feedback gathered from beta-readers – have been positive, calling it “helpful and inspiring” and complimenting the clear language and simple explanations of “complicated terms.” One person wrote, “I found the content language easy to read, engaging, enjoyable,” and another described it as “helpful in presenting anthropology as a discipline and providing fundamental anthropological concepts and practices.” Another respondent suggested the site could be used in a structured way in undergraduate tutorials, rather than just by individuals. An additional, interesting observation was the greater level of interest in this project from postgraduate students than was initially anticipated by our original focus on upper-level undergraduates. We surmise that this is because postgraduates often practice in a more interdisciplinary way or have mixed-discipline supervision. This introductory resource is, therefore, of use even to Masters and PhD students.

The primary limitations of the project were the small sample size of students we engaged with directly as well as the numerical bias towards students from (or related to) our own institution. Additionally, both of the researchers had received similar training at a similar time at this institution, further skewing our understanding of key disciplinary ideas, values, and pedagogical practices towards those emphasized within our own program at a specific point in time; these particularly include critical, phenomenological, and post-structuralist veins of social anthropology. We acknowledge that our evaluation of “important” concepts for inclusion is therefore not necessarily reflective of practices at other institutions, nationally or internationally. In the future, we aim to draw on collaborative work with colleagues at other institutions to develop and expand the AnthNav resource and to stimulate further discussion around the threshold concepts framework.

Ultimately, our conclusion is that threshold concepts do not have to be *the* paradigm that teachers of social anthropology use to help students “become” anthropologists. There are several critiques around the applicability of threshold concepts to social anthropology, as we discussed, and there is also a history of parallel discussions already taking place in the discipline that are important to acknowledge. Nevertheless, threshold concepts have proved a vibrant area for interdisciplinary conversations in recent years and have provided a more theoretically elaborated framework for discussing discipline-specific ways of thinking than previous conversations around “key” or “signature” concepts. For this reason, we conclude that the growing body of work on threshold concepts provides potential value for anthropologists by stimulating conversations about what we teach, how we teach it, and how students come to “get” it. This is evidenced even in the nuanced discussions that a few anthropologists have initiated via their engagement with threshold concepts, including around writing as performance, reflexivity, troublesomeness, and individual journeys.

Students coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds will ultimately navigate the discipline through a myriad of educational pathways, crossing, as they do, through a number of doors and thresholds. Therefore, conversations not only about what these thresholds are, but how to support and resource students to walk through them, are certainly worth having.

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