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**The Meyer and Land Threshold Concept**

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|  | “*The idea of threshold concepts emerged from a UK national research project into the possible characteristics of strong teaching and learning environments in the disciplines for undergraduate education (*[*Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses*](http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/etl/)*). In pursuing this research in the field of economics, it became clear to* [***Erik Meyer***](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#emeyer) *and* [***Ray Land***](http://www.dur.ac.uk/education/staff/?id=10278) *[*[*1-8*](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#ovw)*,* [*9-16*](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#meyerland)*], that certain concepts were held by economists to be central to the mastery of their subject. These concepts, Meyer and Land argued, could be described as ‘threshold’ ones because they have certain features in common.*” |  |
|  | Glynis Cousin, [An introduction to threshold concepts](http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p17/gc.pdf) |  |

Over the past eight years this concept has been embraced by many disciplines outside economics; indeed the above quote is from Glynis Cousin’s excellent short introduction to the concept written for earth scientists. The threshold concept has been seen as a valuable tool, not only in facilitating students’ understanding of their subject, but in aiding the rational development of curricula in rapidly expanding arenas where there is a strong tendency to overload the curriculum (Cousin, [[6](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#c2006a), [8](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#c2006b)]). This web page will describe, briefly, the characteristics of a threshold concept and list selected references to the work of those examining its value in a broad range of disciplines.

**Features of a Threshold**



‘Threshold Concepts’ may  
be considered to be “akin  
to passing through a portal”  
or “conceptual gateway”  
that opens up “previously  
inaccessible way[s] of  
thinking about something”  
(Meyer and Land [[9](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#ML2003)]).

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| * [**Transformative**](javascript:popup('popupTransformation.html'))**:** Once understood, a threshold concept changes the way in which the student views the discipline. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupTransformation.html')) * [**Troublesome**](javascript:popup('popupTroublesomeness.html'))**:** Threshold concepts are likely to be troublesome for the student. [Perkins](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#P1999) has suggested that knowledge can be troublesome e.g. when it is counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupTroublesomeness.html')) * [**Irreversible**](javascript:popup('popupIrreversibilityA.html'))**:** Given their transformative potential, threshold concepts are also likely to be irreversible, i.e. they are difficult to unlearn. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupIrreversibilityA.html')) * [**Integrative**](javascript:popup('popupIntegrative.html'))**:** Threshold concepts, once learned, are likely to bring together different aspects of the subject that previously did not appear, to the student, to be related. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupIntegrative.html')) * [**Bounded**](javascript:popup('popupBounded.html'))**:** A threshold concept will probably delineate a particular conceptual space, serving a specific and limited purpose. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupBounded.html')) * [**Discursive**](javascript:popup('popupDiscursive.html'))**:** Meyer and Land [[10](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#ML2005b)] suggest that the crossing of a threshold will incorporate an enhanced and extended use of language. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupDiscursive.html')) * [**Reconstitutive**](javascript:popup('popupReconstitutive.html'))**:** "*Understanding a threshold concept may entail a shift in learner subjectivity, which is implied through the transformative and discursive aspects already noted. Such reconstitution is, perhaps, more likely to be recognised initially by others, and also to take place over time* ([Smith](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#s2006))". arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupReconstitutive.html')) * [**Liminality**](javascript:popup('popupLiminality.html'))**:** Meyer and Land [[12](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#ML2006b)] have likened the crossing of the pedagogic threshold to a ‘rite of passage’ (drawing on the ethnographical studies of [Gennep](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#G1960) and [Turner](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#T1969) in which a transitional or liminal space has to be traversed; “*in short, there is no simple passage in learning from ‘easy’ to ‘difficult’; mastery of a threshold concept often involves messy journeys back, forth and across conceptual terrain.* (Cousin [[6](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#c2006a)])”. arrow[More ...](javascript:popup('popupLiminality.html')) |

Examples of the threshold concept must be transformative and involve a traverse through a liminal space. They are likely to be characterised by many of, but not necessarily all of, the other features listed above.

**REFERENCES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND PODCAST PRESENTATIONS**

Click on the author name for a link to a list of the author’s papers on threshold concepts and, where available, a link to the author’s home page.

**Overview of the Threshold Concept**

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| 1. | [Cousin](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#cousin), G. (2010) *Neither teacher-centred nor student-centred: threshold concepts and research partnerships*, Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, Issue 2: February 2010. [[http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe&page=article&op=viewFile&path[]=64&path[]=41](http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe&page=article&op=viewFile&path%5b%5d=64&path%5b%5d=41) last accessed 14 May 2010] |
| 2. | *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning* (2010) Edited by Jan H. F. [Meyer](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#emeyer), Ray [Land](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#land) and Caroline [Baillie](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#baillie) [Sense Publishers](https://www.sensepublishers.com/product_info.php?products_id=1038&osCsid=0b5914bccc45be6ada5dfbeed82c9bce), Rotterdam, 2010 [Educational Futures: Rethinking Theory and Practice, Peters, M.A. (Ed), Volume 42] The majority of chapters in this book are developments of talks first presented at the Threshold Concepts Conference: from theory to practice, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 18th - 20th June 2008. |
| 3. | *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines* (2008) Edited by Ray [Land](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#land), Jan H. F. [Meyer](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#emeyer) and Jan [Smith](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#jsmith) [Sense Publishers](https://www.sensepublishers.com/product_info.php?products_id=544&osCsid=10036ba0c512a4805c4e241b63b4531b), Rotterdam, 2008 [Educational Futures: Rethinking Theory and Practice, Michael Peters (Ed.), volume 16] ISBN 978-90-8790-267-4 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-8790-268-1 (hardback). The majority of chapters in this book are developments of talks first presented at the [Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines Symposium](http://personal.strath.ac.uk/ray.land/thresholds/home.htm), University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK, 30 August-1 September 2006. |
| 4. | [Lucas](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#ulucas), U. and [Mladenovic](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#mladenovic), R. (2007) *The potential of threshold concepts: an emerging framework for educational research and practice*, London Review of Education, Vol. 5, No. 3, November 2007, pp. 237-248 |
| 5. | [Cousin](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#cousin), G. (2007) *Exploring threshold concepts for linking teaching and research*, Paper presented to the International Colloquium: International Policies and Practices for Academic Enquiry, Winchester, April. Available online at: <http://portal-live.solent.ac.uk/university/rtconference/2007/resources/glynis_cousins.pdf> (last accessed 3 March 2008). |
| 6. | [Cousin](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#cousin), G. (2006) *An introduction to threshold concepts*, Planet No 17, December 2006, pp 4-5. [<http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p17/gc.pdf> last accessed 25 June 2008] |
| 7. | *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (2006) Edited by Jan H. F. [Meyer](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#emeyer) and Ray [Land](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#land) [Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group](http://www.routledge.com/), London and New York, 2006 ISBN10: 0-415-37430-8, ISBN13: 978-0-415-37430-9. |
| 8. | [Cousin](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#cousin), G. (2008) *Threshold Concepts: Old Wine in New Bottles or New Forms of Transactional Inquiry*, in: Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines, [Land](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#land), R., [Meyer](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#emeyer), J.H.F. and [Smith](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds_authors.html#jsmith), J., (eds), [Sense Publishers](https://www.sensepublishers.com/product_info.php?products_id=544&osCsid=10036ba0c512a4805c4e241b63b4531b), Rotterdam, pp 261-272, [[book details](http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html#gen2)]. A streamed video of Glynis Cousin’s presentation at the [Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines Symposium](http://personal.strath.ac.uk/ray.land/thresholds/home.htm), Glasgow, September, 2006 that led to this paper can be accessed at <http://video.strath.ac.uk/06/140-06-04.wvx>[last accessed 5/06/09]. |