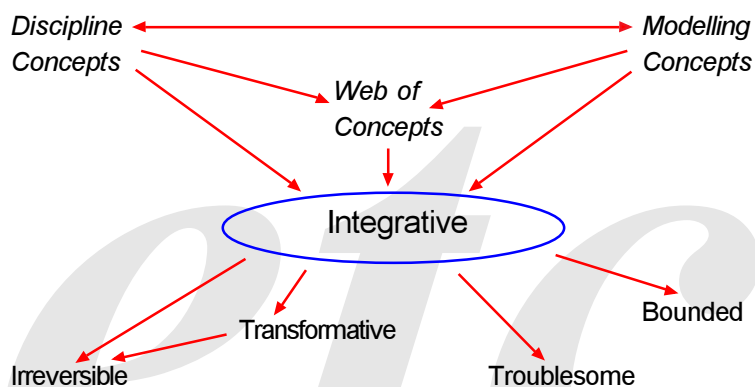


The project aims to improve students' understanding in economics by developing first year undergraduates' acquisition of threshold concepts. Our work is to extend the identification of these concepts and assess ways of embedding these in the first year curriculum for both specialists and non-specialists.

The project is led by Staffordshire University and our partners are Coventry University, Durham University and the University of the West of England. We also have a number of cascade institutions participating in our work and if you would like join us as a cascade partner please contact us.

The Integrative Nature of Threshold Concepts



In our first newsletter we argued that it is fruitful to think of threshold concepts in terms of a web given the integrated nature of mainstream analysis in the subject. The integration from threshold concepts in economics is from both the discipline (such as marginality) and modelling concepts (such as comparative static analysis) that form the ways of thinking and practicing in the discipline. This intertwining of concepts within the web may be a particular source of 'troublesomeness' for our students, as to get a deep understanding of the concepts they need to appreciate the overall picture, but that overall view is built from the same ideas they are yet to fully comprehend.

In the original development of threshold concepts, Meyer and Land proposed the following characteristics: integrative, transformative, irreversible, bounded and troublesome. Our discussions in economics have led us to regard integrative as the most important of these characteristics. For instance, if a concept integrates a spectrum of prior understanding it is likely to be both transformative and irreversible because it holds together a learner's thinking about many different phenomena. This is not to suggest that students will not often apply a threshold concept correctly in one application but retreat from the consequences of it in another. However, once they fully understand the integrative nature of the concept it becomes irreversible and they begin to 'think as an economist'. The figure above summarises these arguments.

These aspects of integration provide important design principles for our development of teaching and learning materials.

The funding is by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) under the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning.

We held a cascade partners workshop in Bristol in May and we are visiting several institutions to give seminars/workshops. If you would like us to visit you please get in touch. Although our project is directly aimed at level one economics, much of our work applies to students studying at other levels and in other disciplines and we are happy to run sessions for various types of audiences.



Website News

This section highlights the main recent additions to the website

Teaching and Learning Materials

We are currently updating and substantially increasing the teaching and learning materials on the website and this will be completed by the end of July. The existing teaching activities are being revised given our trialling this year.

There are new reflective exercises and problem-based exercises considering the role of threshold concepts in a range of macroeconomic and microeconomic topic areas.

A series of short 'concepts' questions have been added that concentrate on getting students to recognise the importance of various threshold concepts in considering problems and to develop their understanding of how concepts interrelate.

Discussion points

The discussion points from our December and April meetings are now on the website. If you would like to add to our discussions, please email the project manager with your comments.

Developments in the next few months

Conference Papers

We will be presenting papers on aspects of embedding threshold concepts at a Threshold Concepts Symposium in August in Edinburgh, at the British Educational Research Association conference in September and at the Allied Social Sciences Association conference in Chicago in January. The papers will be posted on our website after these events.

The Student's Voice

We have conducted interviews with over 50 students from the four partner institutions covering aspects of their learning histories, their approach to learning and understanding in economics. We are currently starting to analyse these and we will report our findings in future bulletins.

Teaching and Learning Activities

We will be continuing our trialling of the activities at the partner and cascade institutions. You are welcome to download the teaching and learning material from our website and to make use of these in your teaching. We would welcome any information you could give us on their impact, any problems you find with them and what, if any, adaptations for use you made given your teaching and learning environment. If you would like to join us as a cascade partner please contact us.

Contacting us.....

Contact Jean, the project manager, by email at j.t.mangan@staffs.ac.uk or telephone 01782 294096.

Bookmark our website

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/thresholdconcepts>