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THRESHOLD CONCEPTUAL SYSTEMS IN A COURSE ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Threshold concepts have been described as “conceptual gateways...to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome’, way of thinking...” that, once acquired, “may be transformative...irreversible...and integrative” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 23). Within scientific Psychology, there are undoubtedly a number of specific concepts of this sort. Among them, one might list the concept of “statistically significant group difference” (and its associated logic) and the concept of “interaction” between multiple factors. These are not easy ideas for students to understand; but once real understanding has been achieved, a new world of conceptual possibilities unfolds.

In addition, however, there are many other concepts within Psychology that do not easily fit the standard definition of “threshold concept” because, *taken individually*, they are neither especially difficult for students to acquire nor especially transformative. Indeed, students come to Psychology already possessing some level of understanding of these concepts from general education (even if the technical terms used to reference them within psychological discourse might be new). Here I have in mind concepts such as “association,” “contingency,” or “negative feedback.”

However, when concepts of this sort are taken *not individually*, but as part of larger theoretical systems in which they are interrelated in various ways, understanding expands as students come to recognize conceptual linkages that enrich and deepen meanings of individual elements in the system. Once these linkages are recognized and understood, systems of this sort function as interconnected lenses that allow students to experience, think and talk about, and act with respect to phenomena of interest in ways that are novel and integrative and provide the basis for a multiplicity of perspectives. In this way, as systems if not as individual concepts, they can become transformative.

In the most recent version of a course that I teach at Bryn Mawr College, entitled Culture and Development, I chose to approach the idea of threshold concepts in this fashion. Rather than focusing on a single concept or even a small number of individual concepts, I chose to help students acquire a related set of linked concepts that would, I hoped, transform their understanding of central psychological phenomena when taken as a system. By helping students achieve greater articulation (i.e., more sophistication) in the use of these concepts and greater recognition of the way in which these concepts link to one another to provide a set of lenses (indeed, an entire observatory of lenses) that can be used to analyze important aspects of the human condition, I hoped that our seminar would help them cross a series of thresholds.

Thresholds. These thresholds involved at least the following: a) moving from a very general diffuse understanding of a concept (e.g., culture) to a significantly more articulated view in which the relative complexities involved are recognized; b) moving from a silo-like mentality in which concepts (e.g., culture, narrativity, identity, self, and consciousness) are understood in isolation from one another to a significantly more systemic view in which the many

interrelationships among these concepts are recognized; and c) moving from a relatively shallow understanding of relevant aspects of the human condition to one that is richer, deeper, relatively more complex, and, therefore, transformative.

While no one of the concepts in this system, taken by itself, is especially difficult for students to grasp (assuming that teaching is adequate and they are given the opportunity to work with the concepts in relation to concrete examples), coming to a more articulated sense of the concepts and their interrelationships is not something that is lightly achieved.

Conceptual system. Although some of the terminology employed below may be new, in their most general form, these concepts are more or less familiar to us all. They are:

- *Conscious Experience* (i.e., consciousness);
- *Semiotic Activity* (i.e., the human activity of constructing of symbols such as words and mental images);
- *Action* (movement, such as sitting, standing, walking, eating with a fork, throwing a ball);
- *Cognitive System* (what we know and value and how we use what we know and value, defined in terms of both structures and processes);
- *Physical Environment* (world of objects and events that are not characterized by subjective states);
- *Social Environment* (world of objects and events that are characterized by subjective states);
- *Co-Construction* (the fact that experience, semiotic activity and action are actively constructed over time as a joint function of the cognitive system and the physical/social environment);
- *Development* (increase over time in differentiation and hierarchical integration of cognitive structures and processes in an ever changing (and developing) environment leading to more (or less) adaptive experience, semiotic activity, and action);
- *Rationality* (the developing ability to reason in general and engage in scientific reason in particular) and its development, including the ability to experience, represent symbolically, and act in the world on a rational basis);
- *Enculturation* (the process of becoming progressively more like-minded with one's social others through internalizing social semiotic systems (i.e., systems of meanings and ways of conveying those meanings in symbols and actions) that preexist the individual at various level of the social environment);

- *Ecological Systems* (interacting, interlocking environments, some of which, microsystems, contain the developing individual and are characterized by proximal processes—progressively more complex, reciprocal interactions with *persons*, *objects*, and *symbols* in the individual’s immediate environment—some of which, mesosystems, consist of the relationships between microsystems, and some of which, exosystems, consist of relationships between microsystems and systems of which the developing individual is not a part—all viewed as varying over time)
- *Developmentally Instigative Characteristics* (predilections, tendencies, dispositions and other personal characteristics that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with and activity in the immediate environment and thereby contribute to individuals construction of their own development);
- *Culture* (socially constructed/socially inherited systems of artifacts, meanings/symbols, and practices characteristic of stable social group (ranging from dyads to humanity taken as a whole) whose function is to adapt human beings to the natural world and to one another);
- *Narrativity* (the semiotic act of creating cultural and personal meaning through the construction of stories that create a shared social tradition a help give us a sense self);
- *Self* (including the I-self—the knowing self, the meaning maker, the cognitive system—and the Me-self, the self as known, the object of self-oriented meaning making i.e., those of our characteristics to which we give meaning);
- *Literacy/Literacies* (forms of semiotic activity characteristic of particular cultures, subcultures, and microcultures, the control of which provides a source of social capital that can be drawn upon to function successfully—defined in many different ways—within those cultures, subcultures, and microcultures)
- *Identity/Identities* (sense of personal continuity and uniqueness and yet, at the same time, similarity to those in relevant and valued reference groups)

Pedagogy. The approach taken to facilitating student understanding of this system of concepts involved a blend of:

- a) readings related to each concept taken, among others, from my own work and that of Jean Piaget, Lev. S. Vygotsky, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jerome Bruner, Erik Erikson, Ward Goodenough, James Paul Gee, Annette Lareau, and Erik Erikson;
- b) short lectures designed to provide introduction and overview of the various concepts as they were encountered in the readings and to call anticipatory attention to critical issues requiring reflection;

- c) small group (three groups of 5 students each of varying composition) discussions focused on sets of Thought Questions (see below) whose aim was to encourage student engagement with and application of the concepts and relevant issues;
- d) large group discussions of reports from the small groups on the outcomes of their deliberations;
- e) films and large group discussions of the films designed to help students concretize what might otherwise be rather abstract concepts; and
- f) a final paper on a topic of the student's choice, the only requirement being that it draw for purposes of analysis on the conceptual system of the course.

Examples of small group thought questions. The following exemplify the sort of Thought Questions around which small group discussions took place.

1. Keeping the metatheoretical framework so far discussed in class in mind, imagine that you are scheduled to attend a lecture on research in cognitive development and, at the last minute, your sister has an emergency and asks you to watch her 10-month-old, 3-year-old, and 8-year-old children. Somewhat reluctantly you agree to do it and decide to take the children with you to the lecture. Describe differences in psychological functioning among the *four* of you, using: a) *that metatheoretical framework*; b) *the fact that you are all present in the same place at the same time*; and c) *relevant theoretical claims or research findings from class lectures and readings from Piaget and Vygotsky*.
2. Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner have been invited to participate in a panel discussion entitled: *What are the important processes in children's development and why are they important?* Your group is moderating the discussion. Each of the three major participants is allowed to make a 150 word introductory statement summarizing his own views as succinctly as possible. Following this, to get the discussion rolling, your group is allowed to make a 300 word statement designed to show how these various views are related (i.e., how they complement, overlap, or conflict with one another). Provide a transcript of these events.
3. As Bronfenbrenner points out, the child's development is a function of the *interaction* of characteristics of the child and characteristics of the nested set of ecologies within which the child develops. Keeping the definition of "Interaction" in mind and the fact that events in one arena (e.g., a parent's workplace) frequently have implications for events in another (e.g., family dynamics), develop a hypothetical example (from your own experiences growing up) showing how cultural variables, classroom variables, and family variables might interact to influence developmental outcomes and how this might be expected to change over time (with changes in the child or the context or both). In your example, be sure to be explicit about how you think the interactions may take place [e.g., if one were doing workplace and home instead of culture, classroom, and family, one might use an example like the following: a working mother's level of job satisfaction and economic security may relate to her level of stress which in turn may restrict the extent to which she can be patient with a hyperactive 4-year-old which may lead to increased conflict which overstimulates the child and exacerbates the hyperactivity; however, once the

child goes to school, the critical variable will involve the extent to which the classroom can accommodate the child's hyperactivity and the extent to which the mother can reinforce teacher expectations about appropriate behavior].

4. What is culture — Identify all of the constituents of culture mentioned in the readings. Proceeding inductively from this list, can we answer the following questions:

- What is “culture”? What are the basic constituent categories of culture? Is it possible to taxonomize the “stuff” of culture to come up with major categories in terms of which cultures vary one from the other?
- To what extent is there diversity within culture and where is it located? Given our definition of culture, is there diversity within culture? If so, at what levels does this diversity exist (e.g., within ethnic groups? within differing social contexts such as the couple, family, peer group, classroom, work group? All of the above? And what form does this diversity take (i.e., what do these various groups share among themselves)?
- How are the constituents of culture socially transmitted (e.g., from one generation to another? from one person to another?) and what form does this enculturation take? How does this relate to Bronfenbrenner's “proximal processes”? To Vygotsky's “internalization of a social semiotic system”? And what is it that the child is acquiring? What is the role of narrative in this process?
- How does cultural change come about (e.g., exogenous sources such as culture contact vs. endogenous sources of cultural innovation) and who within a culture is most responsible for bringing this change about? What is the role of narrative in this process?
- Are certain aspects of culture more open to/resistant to change? And if so why and how? What is the role of narrative in this process?

5. If there is a narrative self, is the self necessarily narrative? Is there an “essential” self? How does William James's view of “self” (presented in class) articulate with that of Jerome Bruner? What, therefore, do we mean by “self” and what is the relationship between self and culture (as we have defined it)?

Evaluation. Was the course successful? Because of the nature of the course goal (i.e., changing understanding rather than learning specifics), the primary means of evaluation was via contribution to course discussions and a final paper in which students were free to chose *any* set of phenomena of human behavior or social interaction in which they had a deep interest and analyze it using the conceptual system acquired during the course. They were also asked to reflect on ways in which they now felt that they saw the relevant phenomena differently as a result of applying the various lenses provided by the course and on what aspects of course pedagogy were most helpful in that regard.

While, not surprisingly, the quality of individual contributions to discussion varied, both what I heard as discussions proceeded and reports from the students reinforced my own impression that everyone in the course made significant progress in acquiring a more articulated, sophisticated framework for viewing human behavior and interaction. Although most students reported feeling that the short lectures were helpful in providing some direction for discussion and that the films were valuable in helping bring concepts to life, it was their thought (and one with which I

would agree) that the one-two effect of intense small-group discussions in which everyone had an opportunity to contribute to a collectively evolving view followed by large group discussions in which the varying approaches and ideas of the small groups could be compared, contrasted, and critiqued by the entire class were the heart of the course from the point of concept acquisition and refinement.

Topics chosen for papers varied widely and included, among others, identity issues in adolescence, Chinese-American biculturalism, the process of acquiring an advanced skillset in African-American hair styling, power relations in hospitals as reflected in the physical examination, cultural conflicts in parental discipline techniques, the effects of early exposure to death on children, and eastern vs. western conceptions of mind and minding. What was especially striking to me in reading these papers was the extent to which students were able not only to use the concepts of the course but to do so systemically. Thus, for example, students who, on entry to the course, would have spoken broadly of cultural difference, now asked whether the locus of the difference is in conscious experience, in ways of thinking (knowing and valuing) and speaking (e.g., varying literacies, varying narratives), or in ways of acting; they now asked about variations in the social and physical contexts in which cultural difference is manifest and at what level of culture (from micro- to macro-culture); they recognized the importance of bringing individual characteristics of persons into thinking about how culture functions and changes and how children are enculturated in to the many level of culture in which they participate; and they wrote compellingly about the impact of cultural difference conceived in this more sophisticated fashion on developmental issues such as identity and parent-child relations and social issues such as the acquisition of social capital. In short, although there is certainly considerable room for improvement in future, I think on balance we achieved our goal.

References

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