Thinking Clearly About Confusion: Threshold Concepts, Bafflement, and Meaning as "Contestation" in the English Classroom

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Summary
A fundamental question at the heart of literary studies concerns the intangible—and unanswerable—question of what it means to be human. To pursue this question rigorously, literary studies has deployed methods from a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences; while interdisciplinary approaches to English have generated a wealth of important theoretical and "real-world" interventions crucial to the discipline's ongoing development, we risk diminishing the ineffability that lies at the heart of critical inquiry. The reasons behind this disconnect are too expansive and complex to discuss here (cf. Day, 2007; Griffin, 2005), but this workshop proceeds from the premise that it is precisely by remaining open to uncertainty, contingency, and complexity that humanities research maintains its purchase; while confusion is intuitively thought of as a problem to be avoided in the classroom, I posit that it is vital to developing mastery of difficult concepts in English Literary Studies. Through a sustained engagement with Meyer & Land's (2005) development of threshold concepts, this workshop deploys a short lecture, large group discussions, and individual and small group activities to invite participants to investigate "confusion" as a productive pedagogical tool under the aegis of threshold concepts.

Keywords
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SUMMARY
A fundamental question at the heart of literary studies concerns the intangible—and unanswerable—question of what it means to be human. To pursue this question rigorously, literary studies has deployed methods from a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences; while interdisciplinary approaches to English have generated a wealth of important theoretical and "real-world" interventions crucial to the discipline's ongoing development, we risk diminishing the ineffability that lies at the heart of critical inquiry. The reasons behind this disconnect are too expansive and complex to discuss here (cf. Day, 2007; Griffin, 2005), but this workshop proceeds from the premise that it is precisely by remaining open to uncertainty, contingency, and complexity that humanities research maintains its purchase; while confusion is intuitively thought of as a problem to be avoided in the classroom, I posit that it is vital to developing mastery of difficult concepts in English Literary Studies. Through a sustained engagement with Meyer & Land's (2005) development of threshold concepts, this workshop deploys a short lecture, large group discussions, and individual and small group activities to invite participants to investigate "confusion" as a productive pedagogical tool under the aegis of threshold concepts.

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LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:
- Describe how bafflement or confusion constitutes a productive element of the learning process for students of English literature.
- Conceptualize and reflect upon how they can mobilize "troublesome knowledge," described by Perkins (1999) as knowledge that is "troublesome, counter-intuitive, or 'alien,'" as a learning tool that empowers students to ask questions of a work rather than assuming that the work contains an implicit answer to be decoded.
- Encourage students to pursue confusion as a pedagogically productive intellectual space, rather than something to be avoided.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES
Belsey, C. (2005). Textual analysis as a form of research. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Research methods for English studies* (pp. 157-174). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Belsey highlights the centrality of textual analysis as a research tool in literary studies. She takes Titian's 1571 painting, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, as a case study through which she walks readers through her interpretive method, and demonstrates the way that textual analysis relies on outside research methods and theoretical approaches—Belsey deploys feminism and poststructuralism—to produce a cogent reading of the image. Central to Belsey's overarching argument is the assertion, following Roland Barthes, that no reading can ever be complete; just as every text "'is made up of multiple writings ... entering into mutual relations', including relations of 'contestation," there "cannot be a final signified" (p. 172). The "Lecture" section draws on Belsey to foreground the necessarily unstable conceptual ground upon which English studies rests. That is, threshold concepts such as feminism or poststructuralism are, themselves, open to contestation because they also consist of textual properties

that remain open to Barthes' insight about interpretation; consequently, we must remain mindful that threshold concepts in literary studies remain in dialectical play with interpretive acts more generally.

Day, H. (2007). Helicopters, jigsaws, plaits: Revealing the hidden language and literature curriculum. *Pedagogy 7*(3), 534-543.

Day makes a distinction between the "hidden curriculum," the "subtle, tacit understandings about how the curriculum is delivered" with the "formal curriculum," or the "statement of intent" of a given course (p. 535). Keeping this distinction in mind, Day then designs a module that provides students with the opportunity to vocalize what they feel are "the hidden priorities, values, and beliefs embedded in the structure and delivery" of her university's Language and Literature program. Crucial to this workshop is Day's finding that an unintentional consequence of the English department's proclivity for interdisciplinarity is its tendency to "compartmentalize" different skill sets rather than explicitly demonstrate how they might inform each other across different contexts. Activity 2B—which invites participants across sub-disciplines to engage with theoretical questions they may initially find "troublesome" insofar as they are not necessarily familiar with the context—presents an opportunity for the participants to consider the cross-applicability of their own methodological approaches as formative to their overall critical apparatus.

Irvine, N., & Carmichael, P. (2009). Threshold concepts: A point of focus for practitioner research. *Active Learning in Higher Education 10*(2), 103-119.

Irvine & Carmichael investigate how practitioners in three different disciplines—Sports Science, English, and Engineering—deploy threshold concepts as pedagogical tools (Meyer & Land 2003). For Irvine & Carmichael, threshold concepts feature prominently in the overall composition of a pedagogical approach in which "participatory" practices of "enquiry and reflection are central" to advanced knowledge acquisition (p. 103). A key sticking point in the process of mastering a threshold concept, according to Meyer & Land, lies in "liminal state[s]" (p. 104), the point at which a student's "understanding is restricted to a kind of mimicry of others with only limited meaning to the learner" (Meyer & Land, 2003 as cited in Irvine & Carmichael, p. 104). Irvine & Carmichael's review of the relevant literature demonstrates a trend in which researchers identify and describe the "liminal state" so-called as a stage in the threshold concept wherein learners remain "peripheral" or passive, but which can be eventually overcome. This workshop—following Land et al.'s (2014) suggestion that liminality is not passive, but in fact a space of both epistemological and ontological transformation—investigates the productive potential of liminality vis-á-vis threshold concepts as a phase in the learner's development of mastery over the threshold concept as a whole. In other words, I am interested in how we might help students to work their way through the discomfort of liminality such that ambiguity itself becomes an intellectually productive space. To put it another way, we can deconstruct Bloom's taxonomy such that remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories in a hierarchy of knowledge acquisition, but integrated, ongoing, and non-linear processes that inform each other across the overall experience of threshold concept mastery.

The workshop deploys Irvine & Carmichael's case study of Participant C, an English Literature professor who deploys "confusion" or "bafflement" (p. 109) as productive learning tools for literary studies, in Activity 1. Proceeding from Aristotle's formulation of an ethical life as one of "*eudaimonia*"—loosely translated as "goodness" or "well-being"—the professor reports that he asked his students how they might "define an ethical response to tragedy" (p. 109). The students' admitted to discomfort and "bafflement" at the question, but the professor encouraged them to welcome their confusion. Because

literature deals with "unanswerable questions [the professor remarks], and since there have been so many different attempts to answer these questions, [...] *they should feel slightly overwhelmed*" (Irvine & Carmichael, p. 110, emphasis in original). In light of Participant C's feedback, Irvine & Carmichael find that the significant difference between English and the sciences lies in the tendency of science disciplines to treat threshold concepts as "identifiable" signposts that "mark directions for learning"; for the English professor, however, teaching "in a 'directional way' is not easily accessible" because English "'sees itself expanding in multiple directions'" (p. 109-110).

Bearing Irvine & Carmichael's findings in mind, and with particular attention to Participant C's remarks about the "expansive" or "multidirectional" complexion of literary studies, this workshop should emphasize the instructor's role as a guide for students as they work through their confusion, with particular attention to the instructor's responsibility to encourage students to pose rigorous questions of the work under study.

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. *Higher Education 49*(3), 373-388.

Distinct from "core concepts," Meyer & Land's notion of the threshold concept is defined as "akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" that represents "a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (p. 373). Generally speaking, threshold concepts might be characterized as the higher-order conceptual components of a subject that produce "a qualitatively different view" of that subject's material. Meyer & Land emphasize the connection between threshold concepts and Perkins' (1999) notion of "troublesome knowledge," knowledge that is "conceptually difficult," "counter-intuitive," or "alien" (Meyer & Land, p. 374). Following fieldwork in a range of disciplines including pure mathematics, English, economics, and kinesiology, Meyer & Land highlight four key characteristics (in addition to troublesome knowledge) of threshold concepts:

1) *Transformative*. Once understood, a threshold concept can "occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject, or part thereof" (p. 377).
2) *Irreversible*. The shift in thinking that follows mastery of a threshold concept is difficult, if not impossible, to unlearn.
3) *Integrative*, insofar as a threshold concept reveals the relationships between seemingly unrelated ideas or objects.
4) *Bounded*. A threshold concept that holds in one discipline may not hold in another.

From a generalized, cross-disciplinary perspective, the fundamental takeaway from this study is the way in which threshold concepts, by virtue of their inherent difficulty apropos their four fundamental characteristics, act as conceptual landmarks through which a student moves from a static, rote understanding of a discipline's basic or "core" concepts to a dynamic, analytic, and evaluative application of that discipline to real-world scenarios. Meyer & Land acknowledge that their study fails to discuss the way that, all else being equal, mastery over threshold concepts should provoke students to question and engage with the conceptual structures of their discipline itself. They recommend a sustained analysis of this question for later consideration.

Particularly relevant to this workshop is the linkage of troublesome knowledge with the "transformative" aspect of threshold concepts, which will be covered explicitly in the "Lecture" section. Given that English is preeminently occupied with questions about what it means to be human (across

any number of conceptual frameworks), instructors of English literature are preternaturally disposed toward posing difficult, sometimes uncomfortable questions about politics, ethics, epistemology, ontology, and the nature of signification as a medium for how we perceive reality. In one respect, threshold concepts inform the theoretical frameworks—for instance, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, or postcolonial theory—through which we consider these big questions. Yet the process of discomfort formative to the threshold concept itself dovetails into the way that sustained pursuit of these questions, as Meyer & Land recognize, "may lead to a transformation of personal identity, a reconstruction of subjectivity" and an " affective ... shift in values, feeling or attitude" (p. 377) by virtue of the fact that literary scholars question the grounds upon which we narrate our relationship with the world. The challenge for English instructors lies in how we are to maintain a reasonable level of intellectual discomfort in the interest of sharpening critical thought without demanding too much of an undergraduate student. Hence, the threshold concept's application here is twofold: as that which applies to complex components that build toward a complete conceptual set under the aegis of critical theories, but also as an open-ended, exploratory technique of inquiry predicated on developing sharp, theoretically rigorous questions.

Additionally, the "irreversibility" of threshold concepts (p. 377) applies to "Activity 2b: Large group activity: Responding to threshold concepts," wherein participants are invited to engage in novel, discipline-specific questions posted by their colleague.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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Meyer, J., & Land, R. (2003). *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines* (pp. 412-424). Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.

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Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2006). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: An introduction. In Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (Eds.). *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 1-19). London: Routledge.

Perkins, D. (1999). The many faces of constructivism. *Educational leadership*, *57*(3), 6-11.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

DURATION (MIN)	SUBJECT	ACTIVITY	PURPOSE
20	Lecture: "Thinking Clearly about Confusion: Threshold Concepts, Embracing Discomfort, and (Mis)adventures in Meaning Production"	The facilitator provides a background for threshold concepts • Refer to Meyer & Land (2005) and Irvine & Carmichael (2009) as a tool whose basic pedagogical principles hold across humanities, social sciences, and science disciplines • Draw on the case study of the English professor in Irvine & Carmichael's article, the facilitator troubles how threshold concepts work in English literature with specific attention to confusion as an intellectually productive space for dealing with the abstract problem of meaning production; or, as Belsley (2005) puts it "Meaning is not at the disposal of the individual ... a matter of intention, [or] an isolatable 'idea'" (p. 163), but a "contestation" of ideas in tension with each other at the site of the signifier. • Finally, the facilitator emphasizes the importance of maintaining a reasonable level of discomfort without demanding too much, intellectually, of undergraduates.	Provide participants contextual justification for the workshop Illustrate relevance of threshold concepts for English instructors, including its usefulness for critical theory (Day, 2007) and its potential shortcomings with respect to encouraging students to accept a sense of discomfort or disorientation as they develop their own interpretive methods.
20	Activity 1: Small Group Discussion (a) Value of Confusion in the English Classroom (b) Role of Confusion as a Fundamental Component of Threshold Concepts	Have participants review "Vignette 2: English literature – participant C" from Irvine & Carmichael (2009). Break participants into groups of 3-4 and ask them to brainstorm responses to the questions outlined in Appendix A.	Offer participants an opportunity to respond to the lecture through structured questions and a specific example relevant to their respective sub-fields; Participant responses provide the facilitator with the opportunity to gauge the cogency of the workshop's thesis, and to consider further improvements for future workshops on this topic.

20	Activity 2a: Individual Activity: Complicating Threshold Concepts in the Context of the English Classroom	Encourage participants to write out their responses to the second question in the previous activity, followed by a brief, point-form set of descriptions that define the parameters of the question (see Participant C's breakdown of ethics and tragedy in Irvine and Carmichael [2009] for examples). • Supply participants with chart paper and markers. • Have participants post their responses around the room.	Renders Irvine & Carmichael's (2009) findings concrete in that participants are afforded the opportunity to build on Participant C's response and apply it to their own experiences as teachers.
25	Activity 2b: Large Group Activity: Responding to Threshold Concepts	Encourage participants to read one another's responses. • Supply participants with post-it notes and pens • Ask them to write and post responses using the post-it notes as they read each other's work, and the questions being posed • Have them reflect on their own processes of interest, engagement, bafflement, or discomfort, etc. with those questions.	Put participants in the shoes of students who encounter discipline-specific questions for the first time in light of Meyer & Land's (2005) finding that their respondents "have pointed to the difficulty experienced by expert practitioners looking back across thresholds they have long since crossed," and bearing in mind the "irreversible" component of threshold concepts (p. 377).
5	Wrap-up	Summary and questions	

Total Time: 90 minutes

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES
To an extent, the workshop is structured like an argument insofar as it seeks to question and build on Meyer & Land's (2005) threshold concepts model, rather than simply mapping that model onto English pedagogy. Hence, the 20 minute lecture that opens the workshop is designed to provide participants with the conceptual background that influenced it, as well as a justification for the workshop's applicability to English. To that end, it would be helpful to distribute Cousin's (2006) introduction to threshold concepts a week prior to the workshop. Participants may also be encouraged to read Meyer & Land (2006).

Activity 1
Structured questions to the lecture (Appendix A) are included in the small group activity that follows. The small group activity gives participants the opportunity to evaluate the workshop's premise—that confusion and bafflement are productive components of threshold concepts in the English classroom— and to review an example of how that premise plays out in a real-world scenario.

Activities 2a and 2b

These activities concretize the relationship between productive confusion and threshold concepts by giving participants the opportunity to act as both teachers (constructing their own approach to a threshold concept specific to their sub-discipline) and learners (as non-experts asked to respond to novel questions).

The activities also assume that the workshop takes place in a fairly large room. If space or numbers are an issue, the facilitator can make adjustments as s/he sees fit. In a small room, for instance, participants can simply note down and read aloud their responses, after which the rest of the group can provide follow-up questions or comments. Alternatively, a volunteer might wish to lead a mini-seminar based on his/her response.)

Ideally, workshop participants will come from a diverse set of subfields, so the concepts they encounter from other participants will be novel to them. The activities will be most effective if participants not only respond to the questions being posed, but to reflect on their own reactions and affects as they attempt to respond to those questions.

APPENDIX A
Handout for Activity 1 - Structured questions for small group discussion

Please discuss the following questions with your group:

1) Thinking back to the lecture, can threshold concepts as they are formulated by Meyer & Land (2005) still hold in the context of English, in which threshold concepts are not signposts for "directional learning" but states of discomfort in the overall process of meaning production?

2) Please recall Participant C's topic of ethics and tragedy in Irvine and Carmichael (2009). How would you teach a threshold concept specific to your sub-discipline?