GCSE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Virtual communities

Additional resources

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Threshold concepts

Jewels in the curriculum: threshold concepts, what are they and why are we thinking about these as an exam board?

Introduction

If you attended last autumn's Virtual communities sessions (or you have seen the materials), you will have noticed that the tone and content was slightly different from previously. Whilst the focus was on a concept familiar to all of us, that of narrative structure, the approach shifted slightly from exam preparation to a consideration of 'structure' as a core, or threshold concept (Meyer and Land, 2003).

The reason for approaching structure from this angle comes from a desire to think about the connections between Assessment Objectives and educational research and theory. This will be familiar to regulars at previous regional hub meetings which have always been directed towards the wider impact of our work as English teachers. Indeed, the breadth of quality materials introduced at hub meetings has always provoked thoughtful debate about the architecture of the English curriculum. Threshold concepts add to this ever-increasing reservoir of thought by offering a holistic way of thinking about the sequencing of learning.

So, what are threshold concepts? Hopefully, by the end of this virtual meeting, you will have a firmer understanding of threshold concepts and their connection to the knowledge and skills we work with each day in our English classrooms. However, it might be worth providing a little background to those for whom threshold concepts are relatively new. According to Jan Meyer and Ray Land threshold concepts are 'concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practising in that discipline' (Land et al., 2005: 53). They have been variously described as those big ideas and touchstones of our subject (Quigley, 2013), epiphany or 'eureka moments' (Didau, 2015), and 'jewels in the curriculum' (Cousin, 2006). For Meyer and Land:

'A threshold concept can be considered as akin to 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.'

Meyer and Land offer some key characteristics of threshold concepts:

1. Threshold concepts are **transformative**, changing the way a learner has previously understood an idea or subject.
2. They are **troublesome**, conceptually difficult, and abstract. At first, learners will find it difficult to 'get their head round' the idea presented to them or have trouble connecting it to their own context.
3. They are **irreversible**: once a learner has gone through the 'portal', they will it hard to 'un-know' the concept and to remember what it was like before they acquired it.
4. They are **integrative**: a threshold concept exposes 'the previously hidden interrelatedness of something' (Meyer and Land, 2003: 4). It allows learners to connect disciplinary elements and built secure mental models of a subject.
5. They are **discursive**: they come with their own terminology, or tier 3 vocabulary, that binds it to its discipline and has its own specific meaning within that discipline.

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The new Early Careers Framework contains some interesting ideas which validate threshold concepts as a model for learning, in particular the movement from 'novice to expert' learner, or the notion of schema or 'mental models'. Learners do not immediately grasp threshold concepts: they move from a state of *un-knowing* to one of understanding over the duration of their academic lives. Their emerging understanding may initially lead to mimicry, for example, without them having a fully worked understanding of its meaning. Meyer and Land refer to a 'framework of engagements' (2005: 57), suggesting that acquisition of the concept is the result of recursive teaching so that, by revisiting the concept in different contexts, the learner will progress to understanding. Thus, over time, and through repeated exposure to the increasingly complex layers of knowledge which characterise the concept, learners will move to a more secure understanding and thus find their way through the tangled pathway to the portal of discovery.

A telling moment in Meyer and Land's explanation of the recursive approach is that threshold concepts 'cannot be tackled in a simplistic 'learning outcomes' model where sentences like 'by the end of the course the learner will be able to ...' undermine and do not even explicitly recognise the complexities of the transformation a learner undergoes' (2005: 60). The timeline of learning is described by Meyer and Land as a liminal process which means that learning is not necessarily linear. Indeed, if 'getting' the threshold concept is like going through a portal, then the learner's emergence into knowledge will not be immediate, and there will be times when the learner's progress stutters, wavers, and perhaps the 'tunnel' through which they walk might get a bit dark at times!

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It's important to understand that the idea of threshold concepts is no silver bullet to curriculum design. Some writers suggest that they might indeed go the way of 'growth mindset' by being misapplied, misjudged, and overused.[1] This is not what we want to do. Instead, we want to add to the debate: in the autumn 2021 materials, we asked you to consider threshold concepts alongside both assessment objectives and your own ideas about core skills and concepts. In the autumn, we asked you to think about 'structure' as central to a reader's understanding of the architecture of the text. In summer 2022, we will be exploring the notion of 'evaluation' as a skill and how success in this part of the curriculum is dependent upon the integration of a number of important concepts.

Autumn 2021: Why structure?

During last autumn's sessions, we made the case for 'structure' as a threshold concept. We considered its importance to both English Language and English Literature whilst also exploring other approaches to structure that move beyond the fundamentals of (but often reductive) a chronological analysis. We considered structure as something more important than just a skill required to answer an 8-mark question on English Language paper 1. Not only did we look at structure as a continuum of knowledge and skills acquisition, one that will need to be recursive in its design, but also considered how it encapsulates the notion of threshold concepts as integrative. As Meyer and Land point out, 'on acquiring a threshold concept a student is able to transform their use of the ideas of a subject because they are now able to integrate them in their thinking' (2005:54). Understanding the concept of structure opens up the world of English to our students: it helps them negotiate narrative in all its forms, to reflect on their own composition, to analyse a writer's methods and intent, to create and even to perform.

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[1] mrbunkeredu.wordpress.com/2015/11/09/are-threshold-concepts-the-new-growth-mindset-or-why-we-need-blockers-in-the-staffroom/

Ultimately, we want our learners to understand that structure involves more than laying one textual brick on top of another, but also to see the patterns in the brickwork. We want them to stand back and admire the beauty of the architecture, to move in closer to feel the texture of the materials, and to investigate the mortar that holds the work together.

Works cited:

Cousin, G. (2006) An introduction to threshold concepts

Didau, D (2015) Using Threshold Concepts to design a KS4 English curriculum

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J., and Davies, P. (2005) Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): implications for course design and evaluation

Meyer, J. and Land, R. Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines

Quigley, A (2013) Designing a new curriculum – what are your 'big ideas'?

Further reading:

A Thematic Curriculum for Key Stage 3 English

Can paying more attention to 'threshold concepts' transform your planning?

Are Threshold Concepts the new Growth Mindset? Thoughts on the Importance of 'Blockers'

Digging Deeper: Evaluation

What is evaluation and what is it for?

Towards the end of the autumn term, I was asked by AQA to produce some materials on the Language Paper 1 'evaluation' question for the summer virtual communities. The autumn materials, which focused on the notion of threshold concepts and in particular the concept of narrative structure, seemed to be well received and we wondered whether we could continue the theme and explore the skill of evaluation in terms of threshold concepts. My immediate response to evaluation as a threshold concept is that it isn't: I've always felt that it was an amalgamation of the concepts of structure and inferential understanding. I kept an open mind and began looking into the idea of evaluation which led me down a rabbit-hole of blogs, literary theories, Aristotelian poetics, aesthetics, and an examination of student responses to an extract from Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, used for November 2021 GCSE English Language Paper 1.

To begin with, I went to the GCSE Assessment Objective (AO4) which drives the question. This AO requires students to 'evaluate texts critically and support with appropriate textual references', and whilst there is something unhelpfully tautological about 'evaluation = evaluation', the adverb 'critically' took me back once more to the skill of literary criticism and what the teaching community has been saying all along: that Paper 1 question 4 is a literature essay in response to an unseen text, a cuckoo in the language nest!

Following this, I looked up Ofqual's definition of evaluation:

> Evaluation of a writer's choice of vocabulary, form, grammatical and structural features: explaining and illustrating how vocabulary and grammar contribute to effectiveness and impact, using linguistic and literary terminology accurately to do so and paying attention to detail; analysing and evaluating how form and structure contribute to the effectiveness and impact of a text.
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> Ofqual © Crown Copyright 2015. Open Government Licence v3.0

Interestingly, Ofqual explicitly requires students to attend to methods: not merely at the micro-level of language, but at a macro-level, ie, the use of form and structure. Here, evaluation is qualified as 'explaining', 'illustrating', 'using' terminology, 'analysing' and then 'evaluating': it almost takes us on a tour of Bloom's taxonomy. But it is the final phrase in the definition that is helpful to us as teachers in that it requires students to evaluate how these macro and micro features 'contribute to the effectiveness and impact' of the text. It appears, then, that evaluation here is not pure literary criticism, but an engagement with the dialogue between writer and reader.

To cover a few more bases I looked up an online dictionary definition of evaluation which defines it as, and I paraphrase, the judging of the value of something. *judge* the value of a literary text, and I can only refer you at this point to the number of writers who precede me in the problem of expecting GCSE students to evaluate the merits of a literary work from a relatively narrow knowledge (and experiential) base.

I then searched the internet using the terms 'evaluating literary texts', or 'evaluating literary fiction' which, of course, pointed towards evaluation as the skill of literary criticism. Again, this is a difficult task for students who are not literary critics and who do not have the breadth of reading, the experience, or the critical tools to make effective and meaningful judgements on a text.

What emerges as a commonality is the notion that evaluation is bound up with the skills of critical thinking, and this statement, from the Open Resources for English Language Teaching (ORELT) website, is helpful in synthesising the concepts of literature, critical thinking, and evaluation:

> Literature is an effective tool for engaging students in critical thinking. Teaching children to analyse and evaluate literary texts appropriate to their age and interests, we can help them develop critical thinking skills. This involves seeing relationships between events, drawing inferences, analysing events, synthesising evidence and evaluating both the content of a text and the language used to the express ideas contained within it.[2]

> Unit 5: Facilitating Critical Thinking through Literature by Open Resources for English Language Teaching

ORELT highlights the already-known, but still vital, notion that the reading of literature is multi-facetted, drawing on skills that are at times sequential, at others over-lapping, concurrent or repeated: it is a complex process. In this definition, 'evaluation' appears at the end of a string of 'command words', a string which builds in complexity (borrowing from Bloom's taxonomy) and thus implies that the process of evaluation is synoptic, in much the same way as we saw in Ofqual's definition above. The appreciation of literary texts thus requires inferential skill, an understanding of narrative structure (seeing relationships between, and analysing the importance of, story events) and the ability to comment on the text's stylistic and linguistic qualities. However, the final phrase, which asks us to consider the *ideas* in a text, is particularly important in considering the skill of evaluation. These 'ideas' exist as *intra*-, *inter*-, and *extra*-textual information: meaning is acquired intra-textually, using information *within* the text such as narrative structure and cohesion, causality and motivation; inter-textually, through a grasp of genre conventions; and extra-textually, through the reader's background knowledge and prior schema that they bring to the text. Through this complex synoptic process, readers develop elaborative inferences which enhance and enrich comprehension. This, coupled with the understanding that text is a construct, born from a writer's imagination and experiences, enables readers to deepen their understanding of the text's *significance* which, according to Robert Eaglestone embodies the relationship between text and the big ideas contained therein: it is 'the way the big picture helps us see the detail, and the detail helps us compose the big picture'.[3] In short, significance is disciplinary knowledge, hinterland knowledge, it is the application of a schematic base to the comprehension of the text.

> Eaglestone, R. (2020), 'Powerful knowledge', 'cultural literacy' and the study of literature in schools. Impact, 2020: 2-41. © 2021 Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain

So, is the evaluation question a work of literary criticism? One final stop in this tour is to look at the Assessment Objectives for literature, as follows:

> AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to:
> - maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response

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[2] orelt.col.org/about-orelt
[3] Powerful knowledge', 'cultural literacy' and the study of literature in schools: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/2048-416X.2020.12006.x

- use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written

This reads almost like a sub-set of Language AO4, with Literature AO1 equivalent to the student's response to the statement, their ability to form an opinion that is supported by textual evidence; Literature AO2 is equivalent to that which is invisible in Language AO4 but present in the mark scheme (as I will discuss later) which is reference to the writer's methods and AO3? AO3 is the textual significance, the interpretative and philosophical (or 'big') ideas that emerge from the text. Of course, for GCSE English Language, with its unseen texts, this cannot be pre-taught, not at least in the same way as we can teach context for *Macbeth*: instead, as I will explain later, it forms part of a broader approach to curriculum planning.

What are the skills required in evaluation?

Let's look (again) at the AQA's Assessment Objectives, questions, and mark scheme for the evaluation questions. Here is exhibit 1, the objectives (I have included AO2 as well):

AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.

AO4: Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.

And here is exhibit 2, a question 4 taken from the November 2021 GCSE English Language Paper 1:

Focus this part of your answer on the second part of the source, from **line 20 to the end**.

A student said, 'From the moment he arrives at Master's compound, the writer portrays Ugwu's feelings of pure excitement, but by the end it seems that he may be very disappointed.'

To what extent do you agree?

In your response, you could:

- consider your own impressions of Ugwu's feelings
- evaluate how the writer describes Ugwu's feelings by the end
- support your response with references to the text.

[20 marks]

The first thing we notice about the AOs is that there is no explicitly stated requirement to comment on a writer's methods in AO4, unlike AO2 which requires 'relevant subject terminology'. However, the question 4 shown above implies that students should refer to methods ('evaluate how the writer creates a sense of impending danger') a requirement that is ultimately stated explicitly in the mark scheme which asks examiners to assess a student's ability to show 'understanding of writer's methods'.

Question 2	Question 4
Shows clear understanding of language: • Explains clearly the effects of the writer's choices of language • Selects a range of relevant textual detail • Makes clear and accurate use of subject terminology	Shows clear and relevant evaluation: • Evaluates clearly the effect(s) on the reader • Shows clear understanding of writer's methods • Selects a range of relevant textual references • Makes a clear and relevant response to the focus of the statement

Another observation worth making about the AOs for each question is that, taxonomically, evaluation is a higher order skill than 'explain, comment, analyse' thus demarcating explicitly the increased challenge of the question. However, AO2 also requires students to be able to respond to the question by exploring 'how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers'. It might be argued that this part of the AO requires similar skills to evaluation in that students need to weigh up the impact of a writer's choice of words and how these fit with the whole. Here is question 2 from 2019:

> How does the writer use language here to describe the Hartop family? You could include the writer's choice of:
> • words and phrases
> • language features and techniques
> • sentence forms.

In this question, students need to explain how the language features impact upon our understanding of the question focus (in this case, the Hartops). In a sense, we are also asking students to draw conclusions that might border on the evaluation of the methods a writer uses to create an effect: in other words, how effective the word or phrase is in conveying a mood or idea, for example.

So, what do students need to do differently in the evaluation question then? Isn't it, essentially, a language question in disguise? I would argue that it is not. Responses to the language question can be based solely on a granular approach: students can select two or three appropriate quotations to analyse, but these need not be connected, other than through their relationship to the focus of the question. A response to the Hartop question can include a quotation about each of the characters but does not need, necessarily, to provide an overarching, synoptic statement. On the other hand, effective evaluation, requires students to think about 'how well' or the writer presents their ideas through their selection of methods, or 'how far' ('to what extent' in the question) they agree with the question-statement. This 'how well' or 'how far' (rather than merely 'how' in the language question) emerges from the student's engagement with the statement. Evaluation is thus synoptic, drawing together a number of elements within the text to arrive at a judgement in response to the statement. The table below summarises some of these differences:

Language question	Evaluation question
How	How **well**/how **far**
Granular	Synoptic
Fragment	Whole
Discrete	Connected
Primarily close-up	Wide-angle to close-up

What students need to do is read the text with a critical mind; to think about the narrative and structural features, the causal links between events, the desires, motives, actions, goals, and consequences of events and characters' actions. They need to see the text as a construct and activate their outside knowledge when reading and interpreting both fiction and non-fiction texts (see Kispal, 2008: 28).[4] Students therefore need to be taught to combine an understanding of the text as construct with a wider knowledge of narrative features and conventions. Alongside this, they need to understand the text's significance, and to do so they need to draw on wider elaborative inferences and real-world schema. A model of effective reading might thus be organised around a number of different strategies. One of these might be reading the text with 'why' questions which help students uncover the 'constructedness' of the text and can be linked to narrative functions such as characters' desires, motives, actions, goals, and consequences, or writerly methods such as 'why has the writer organised the text in this way or used this word instead of another'. Another strategy might be to read the text visually: 'reading with a television in the head' can help students to apply cinematic schema to narrative structure and sequencing. Finally, elaborative inferences can be deepened by students asking questions such as 'what do I feel as I read this', 'what emotions does the text provoke'; or else they can ask 'what does this [text/character/event etc] remind me of'. Such meta-questions can help students to arrive at the text's significance, and thus enhance their evaluative skills.

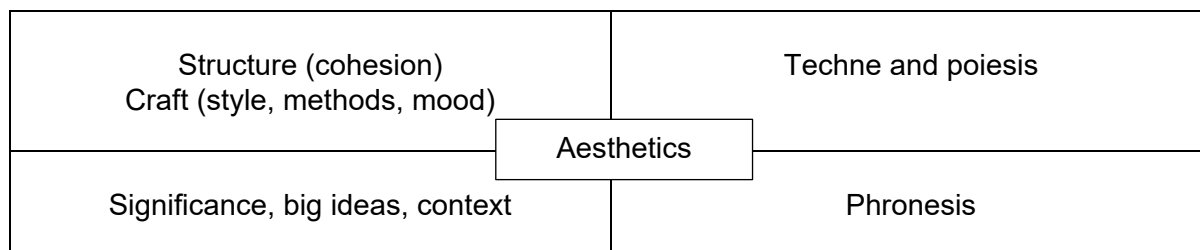## Conclusion: Aristotle and evaluation

I shall return then to the notion of evaluation as a threshold concept, and consider briefly some Aristotelian concepts, in particular those of poiesis, techne, and phronesis. The reason for this is, in the autumn materials, I referred to Ian Warwick's blog on the *London Gifted and Talented* website.[5] Warwick suggests that some of the key threshold concepts in English can be drawn from Aristotle's poetics. There isn't space here to discuss Warwick's ideas in detail, but I was attracted to the timelessness of classical aesthetics, and whilst Aristotle's theories have been filtered through two thousand years of processing, modification, and criticism, some of the fundamentals are still relevant.

In brief, poiesis is the process of production, the work of art as artefact. It encapsulates the creative force, wrapping it up in the final piece of work (as Nussbaum states, novels epitomise poiesis). Techne is the artist's craft, the practical knowledge that a writer draws on to produce the work. Combined, these two elements help us see the work as a product of a writer's imagination, an object forged from the creative mind. Phronesis, a rather slippery term, is bound up with practical reason and wisdom. It is the ability to judge what universal ideas are relevant and applicable in order to make the right decision to act. Phronesis requires an understanding of the relationship between self and society, the particular and the universal, and so for students of literature, it is being able to understand the text's significance, its contextual importance, its big ideas, and how these relate to our experiences and the world we live in.

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[4] Effective Teaching of Inference Skills for Reading: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/edr01/edr01.pdf
[5] londongt.org/some-key-threshold-concepts-for-english/

Because it synthesises these three elements, evaluation, in my mind, is not really a threshold concept in itself but a fusion of several concepts: an understanding of structure, of the writer's craft, of story and the ability to combine these to explore the significance of the text from a wider perspective. Evaluation therefore incorporates poiesis, techne, and phronesis and combined, these all contribute to an aesthetic appreciation of the work itself.

Structure (cohesion) Craft (style, methods, mood)	Techne and poiesis
Aesthetics	
Significance, big ideas, context	Phronesis

In fact, it is this overall aesthetic appreciation that separates the language questions from the evaluation task. As Peter Lamarque writes:

'…merely noting the presence of metaphors, images, repetition, rhyme schemes, rhetorical devices of any kind, will not determine that a passage is effective or moving ... [such elements] do not have intrinsic aesthetic value but gain their effectiveness by the contribution they make to a desired end, be it emotional impact, realistic depiction, humour or poetic insight.' (2008: 21-22)[6]

Instead, a reader must have a 'holistic grasp of [the text's] achievement which exceeds a sentence by sentence understanding of its component parts.' (Lamarque, 2008: 21).

The Philosophy of Literature by Peter Lamarque, Wiley-Blackwell © 2008

Evaluation therefore emerges from the combination of techne and poiesis (methods, style, product) and phronesis (the response to the statement and consideration of the text's significance). In order to evaluate a text effectively, then, a student should be provided with these skills through the curriculum. The ORELT website goes on to say that evaluation requires students to 'present their views in a logical and creative manner'.[7] But what is meant by 'creative'? Creative, in a non-exam situation, can take many forms: blogs, vlogs, drama, discussion, imaginative writing, filmed responses etc. However, in an exam, students are stuck with the written word. The creativity is thus in the outcome and the approach, a student's response to question 4 and the position they take in responding to the text and the statement, and filtering this through their own knowledge and understanding of textual significance. However, in order to be creative and critical thinkers, to be able to grasp and articulate their views on a text's significance, students must apply the knowledge and skills acquired over their educational lifetime, not just that learnt in key stage 4. As Anne Kispal (2008) notes, 'the natural growth of the knowledge base as we grow up, repeatedly being tapped into, in different contexts, may be responsible for the increase in elaborative inferences with age' (35).

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[6]www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Philosophy_of_Literature/zwVMEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover
[7] orelt.col.org/module/unit/5-facilitating-critical-thinking-through-literature

Of course, GCSE English Language is an untiered exam and so we will meet many challenges in the course of developing students' understanding of textual significance. But this is not an unwinnable battle and textual significance can take many forms: from an understanding of genre, identifying common tropes in texts, to philosophical concepts such as the relationship between humans and the environment (as will be shown in the summer virtual communities materials).

Curriculum architecture thus needs to provide opportunities for students to engage with unseen fiction, to discuss its merits and to be 'creative' in their responses. Lamarque, in discussing the aesthetics of literature, makes an observation that is strikingly similar to Kispal's when he writes: 'artistic appreciation is a learned response, acquired through experience and training'(2008: 26).

<div align="right">The Philosophy of Literature by Peter Lamarque, Wiley-Blackwell © 2008</div>

Critical thinking, and by extension evaluation, is enhanced through a broad and creative curriculum, one that is replete with great narratives, ones that inspire both teachers and pupils; it is honed by discussion and debate. But it can also be blanched by endless 'practice' responses founded upon a belief that doing more is doing better.

Contact us

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