American Educational Research Association

2008 Annual Meeting Program
Research on Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities: Toward Civic Responsibility

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• Authors may choose to place a copy of the final paper in the AERA Central Repository of Annual Meeting Papers following the Annual Meeting.

B. Submitting a Session Proposal

A symposium, panel discussion, or other session format (see descriptions in the “Session Formats” section of this call) provides opportunities, not afforded by a single paper, to examine a specific problem or topic from a variety of perspectives, engage in intensive discussion, or draw on a wide range of experiences. Organizers of sessions propose the topic, solicit participants, and describe the format to be used. The organizer must obtain the consent of all participants before submitting a session proposal.

The Program Committee encourages session proposals that demonstrate diverse approaches, reflecting various racial, cultural, language, and gender perspectives; disciplinary bases and/or research paradigms; education levels (K–12 schools and institutions of higher education); and kinds of research, practice, and policy.

Note: Some divisions, committees, and SIGs use blind reviews for session proposals; others allow participants to be identified. Specific information can be found in the “Call Details” section. If blind review is not specified, all participants must be identified when a session proposal is submitted.

To submit a session proposal, follow these instructions for the Online Proposal Submission System:

1. After you enter the All Academic system, the first screen will allow you to select the unit (division, committee, or SIG) to which your proposal is to be submitted.
2. The system will prompt you to select the type of proposal presentation.
3. The system will prompt you to enter the following information:

   • **Title.** The paper title should be entered with proper capitalization: Make sure that the first letter of each appropriate word is capitalized.

   • **Abstract.** Submit an abstract of 100 to 120 words. Abstracts for accepted proposals may be made publicly available online or in print.

   • **Consent for audiotaping of presentation.** You will be asked to provide consent for yourself and on behalf of all other authors/presenters on the proposal so that the session can be audiotaaped if the proposal is accepted and the session is selected for audiotaoping.

   • **Length of session.** Sessions are generally scheduled for 1½-hour periods. Specific requests may be made for a 2-hour time slot; sessions requiring 2 hours generally are scheduled for either the first or the last period of the day. The number of 2-hour time slots is limited; these slots are scheduled based on availability.

   • **Estimated attendance.** Please provide a best estimate of the number of prospective session attendees.

   • **Descriptors.** Provide descriptors for the proposal that will be used in the subject index of the Annual Meeting Program. The Online Proposal Submission System will prompt you to choose up to three descriptors from a list.

   • **Special requests.** Please use this space to detail any special requests, such as scheduling considerations.

   • **ADA.** Please use this space to detail any requirements related to the Americans with Disabilities Act.
submitted only as a paper discussion presentation (check “paper discussion” on the electronic Individual Submission Proposal).

Criteria for assessment of proposals include (a) theoretical and practical significance; (b) originality; (c) soundness of scholarship and research design; (d) proper study execution; (e) soundness of findings and conclusions; (f) implications for practice, clarity, and organization of the proposal; and (g) applicability across the professions. Proposals summarizing well-conducted inquiry (including theoretical analyses or integrative reviews) grounded in a variety of disciplines and research traditions are welcome.

The division strongly encourages proposals that (a) have application across professions; (b) intersect with the work of other divisions, such that joint sponsorship may be appropriate; and (c) are related to the Annual Meeting theme. Innovative formats designed to increase collegial interaction and discourse are also encouraged, such as interactive symposia, technology demonstrations, and paper discussions. Also, the Program Committee welcomes suggestions for invited sessions. Please direct your suggestions for speakers or topics to the Program Chair.

In addition to other required materials, a 100-word abstract must be included with all proposals. Abstracts of accepted proposals will be published in the Professions Education Researcher Quarterly, which is distributed to Division I members in advance of the Meeting. Division I strictly adheres to the AERA word limit on proposals and cannot consider those proposals that do not stay within the word limit. We expect a statement to be included indicating that the study has received institutional review board approval.

Address questions to Susan Case, scase@ncbex.org.

Division J: Postsecondary Education

Program Chair: Kristen Renn

Division J invites proposals for papers, symposia, paper discussions, and posters concerning postsecondary and adult education at institutions of all types. The division encourages proposals covering a broad range of scholarship, including empirical, theoretical, and policy directed. Note that for the first time, Division J has divided proposals related to students into two categories, as noted in Sections 1 and 2, below.

Questions about proposals should be directed to Kristen Renn, the program chair, at renn@msu.edu.

Section 1: College Student Learning and Development

Proposals focused on how students learn formally and informally and/or how they develop in a variety of domains (e.g., cognitive, social, psychological, identity). Also included are topics related to assessment of programs and services for students. Section Chairs: Jane Pizzolato, University of Pittsburgh, jane.pizzolato@gmail.com; Terrell Strayhorn, University of Tennessee, strayhorn@utk.edu.

Section 2: College Student Access, Success, and Outcomes

Proposals focused on student access (e.g., college choice, financial aid), success (e.g., retention), and outcomes (e.g., equity), including policies and programs designed to promote access and achievement. Section Chairs: Shouping Hu, Florida State University, shu@coe.fsu.edu; Juan Carlos González, University of Missouri–Kansas City, jcg@umkc.edu.
Section 3: Organization, Management, and Leadership
Proposals dealing with organizational structures and management practices in higher education, as well as the impact of institutional, state, and national policies on the behavior of postsecondary institutions. Section Chair: Michael Bastedo, University of Michigan, bastedo@umich.edu.

Section 4: Faculty, Curriculum, and Teaching
Proposals dealing with the professoriate and/or alternative academic careers; the preparation of faculty and administrators through graduate education and professional development, or the assessment of policies and programs that serve faculty or prospective faculty. Also, proposals focused on postsecondary teaching and learning methodologies. Section Chairs: Audrey Jaeger, North Carolina State University, audrey.jaeger@ncsu.edu; Pilar Mendoza, University of Florida, pilar.mendoza@ufl.edu.

Section 5: Policy, Finance, and Economics
Proposals centered on issues of funding and/or incentives, focusing on students, faculty, or institutions. Also, proposals dealing with policy at the institutional, state, national, or international level related to postsecondary education. Section Chairs: Bradley Curs, University of Missouri, cursb@missouri.edu; Kimberly Rogers, University at Buffalo, krogers@buffalo.edu.

Section 6: Society, Culture, and Change
Proposals centered on issues related to higher education’s societal and cultural contexts, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability, and organizational change in postsecondary education. Section Chairs: Tara Parker, University of Massachusetts–Boston, tara.parker@umb.edu; Patricia Marin, University of California–Santa Barbara, pmarin@education.ucsb.edu.

Division J encourages proposals covering a broad range of approaches, including those that employ alternative paradigms, theoretical approaches, and methods to inform the study and practice of postsecondary education. The division is especially interested in cross-national perspectives that relate to the current status and future role of postsecondary education in the United States. International and comparative studies are invited in any section.

Symposia that promote dialogue among persons of diverse interests, disciplinary affiliations, and backgrounds are also encouraged. Submitters may propose innovative presentation formats and/or joint sponsorship with other AERA divisions or SIGS by providing information about the format or sponsorship intentions in the body of the proposal. If the proposal describes or addresses “work in progress,” we encourage submitters to select the poster format for the proposal.

Criteria for assessment of proposals include (a) practical and theoretical significance; (b) innovation and originality; (c) soundness of research methods/execution and/or scholarship; (d) proposal clarity; and (e) membership appeal.

The Division J Program Committee invites suggestions for topics and speakers for invited sessions, dialogues/debates, and conversations. Please send suggestions prior to July 20 to the Program Chair: Kristen Renn, Michigan State University, renn@msu.edu.

All proposals must be submitted electronically to the AERA online proposal submission system at www.aera.net. All proposals for Division J will be assigned to at least two individuals for review. Individual presentation format proposals are reviewed without author identification—“masked” or blind review. Individual proposals involve a single presentation or paper, including papers with multiple authors. Symposium, session, or multiple presentation proposals are reviewed with authors identified—an “unmasked” review. In making decisions on individual submissions, the program committee will emphasize building coherent sessions within the program. The committee will also focus on developing an overall program for Division J related to the major theme of the conference.
2008 Annual Meeting Program

The 2008 Annual Meeting Program is now available online in a searchable format and also as a print-ready PDF.

Searchable Format

Annual Meeting Program (PDF)

The program has been segmented into the following files to give readers the ability to select only the sections of interest and to reduce download time. The program is also available in a single file by clicking here. Please view the 2008 Annual Meeting Program Exec for edits to the final program. Please note, that the full program file is 12,433 KB and may take several minutes to download.

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8. Building Reciprocity into a School-University Service Learning Partnership: Analysis at Year Three. Scott Wall. California State University Monterey Bay

9. Diversity in Primary Teacher Training: Sex Differences in Motivation, Curriculum Perception, and Student Achievements. Gerda Groendijk, Vocational University of Arnhem and Nijmegen


11. Supporting Transfer Students in Education: Evaluation of a Program for Recruiting and Retaining Teachers From Diverse Backgrounds. Joanna Angelique Gilmore, University of South Carolina - Columbia, Tammy S. Dickerson, University of South Carolina - Columbia, Stephen L. Thomas, University of South Carolina - Columbia, Jane Zerger, University of South Carolina - Columbia

15.109. High School Course Taking: Discussions on AP/IB, Gender Differences, and Relationship to Graduation and Dropout. SIG-Longitudinal Studies Hilton New York, Trianon Ballroom/Petit Trianon, 3rd floor 2:15 pm to 2:55 pm

12. Where Are All the AP Courses? Examining AP and IB Course Offerings by Selected School Characteristics. Laura F. Logesko, Department of Education


14. State Course Credit Requirements and High School Graduation. Mike Plante, National Center for Education Statistics

15. State High School Course Credit Requirements and Dropouts. Lauren Gilbertson, American Institutes for Research, Mike Plante, National Center for Education Statistics

Discussion:

Douglas F. Becker, ACT, Inc.

15.100. The Impact of Perceptions and Practices in the Identification and Retention of Gifted Students. SIG-Research on Giftedness and Talent Hilton New York, Trianon Ballroom/Petit Trianon, 3rd floor 2:15 pm to 2:55 pm

16. Effectiveness of DISCOVER in Identifying Gifted Lebanese Students. Tony M. Sarour, Lebanese American University


18. Monitoring Progress in Gifted Teacher Education Programs. Susan Johnson, Baylor University, Paige P. Pennington, Baylor University

19. My Class Activities: Comparative Analysis of Students’ Perceptions in an Enrichment Program. Nielsden L.S. Pereira, Purdue University, Josh de Lon, Purdue University

20. Preservice Teacher Beliefs Regarding Diverse Learners: Impact of a Child Development Course. Nancy DeParis-Dorsch, Northern Illinois University, Deborah Kalman, Northern Illinois University


22. Understanding Academically Gifted High School Dropouts’ Reasons for Leaving School. Michael S. Mathews, University of South Florida - Tampa

15.101. Contemporary Issues in Classroom Management. SIG-Classroom Management Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, Metropolitan Ballroom, Metropolitan East, 2nd Floor 2:15 pm to 2:55 pm

1. Classroom Management: Definition as a Meta-Skill and Processes That Foster It. Celicah T. Levens, College of Education


3. From Disciplinarians to Orchestra Conductors and To Reflective Practitioners: Teaching Classroom Management Through Case-Based Pedagogy. KyungHwa Lee, University of Georgia, Iksoon Choi, University of Georgia

4. Iowa Teachers’ Acceptance of the New Classroom Management Paradigm. Keith Roxwe, University of Lethbridge, Edwin Wasiak, University of Lethbridge

5. Nature or Nurture: The Relationship Between Teachers’ Experience, Childhood Punishment, and Their Preferred Model of Discipline in the Classroom. Cynthia A. Lundeen, Florida State University, Charles H. Wolfgang, Florida State University, Sibel Kayar, Florida State University


15.102. Critical Perspectives and Practices in Curriculum. Division B-Curriculum Studies Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, Metropolitan Ballroom, Metropolitan East, 2nd Floor 2:15 pm to 2:55 pm


8. A Critical Middle School Curriculum: Aiming to Construct a Contingent and Recursive Adolescence. Mark D. Vagle, University of Georgia

9. Addressing Economic Inequality Through Financial Capability Education: Is There Evidence of Empowerment? Valerie L. Farnsworth, University of Manchester, Pauline S. Davis, University of Manchester


12. Investigating Models of Curriculum at a School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens. Heidi L. Hallman, University of Kansas

13. Is There Room for Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Special Education. Tracy J. McLeod, University of Wisconsin - Madison, Sophia M. Ward, University of Wisconsin - Madison

15.103. Exploring Various Aspects of the Doctoral Degree Process. SIG-Doctoral Education across the DisciplinesSheraton New York Hotel & Towers, Metropolitan Ballroom, Metropolitan East, 2nd Floor 2:15 pm to 2:55 pm
Addressing the concepts that challenge doctoral candidates

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Note to Discussant: Dotted throughout this paper I have noted the word Discussion. It is at these spots that I would like to stop for a minute or two and invite members of the audience to suggest examples from their own experience.

Based on early empirical research this paper addresses the issue of threshold concepts at the research education (doctoral) level. Following a discussion of threshold concepts and what they mean for doctoral candidates and supervisors, the paper then suggests possible ways of addressing the challenges that these concepts pose for doctoral student learning. Threshold concepts have five characteristics i.e. they are transformative, integrative, irreversible, bounded, and (potentially) troublesome (Meyer & Land, 2006 pp. 7-8). The term ‘threshold’ identifies the ‘crossing over’ nature of the concept embodied in its five characteristics. The analysis of experienced supervisors’ responses to an initial survey suggests several concepts that could be classified as threshold concepts: framework, knowledge creation, analysis, scholarship, paradigm, and quality. The responses also suggested a number of strategies that experienced supervisors have found useful in assisting candidates understand these concepts and hence cross the conceptual threshold.

Introduction

For most, if not all doctoral candidates, there is at least one stage during candidature when they could be described as being “stuck”. The experience of being “stuck” can manifest as depression, a sense of hopelessness or being too “stupid” to do a PhD, knocking one’s head against a brick wall, going round in circles and so on. For supervisors/advisors to be able to assist candidates in recognising this “stuckness” and to suggest ways the candidate might become “unstuck” and move on, is the focus of this paper.

The work of Meyer and Land and colleagues (2006), on threshold concepts appears to provide a useful framework for researching learning and development at the postgraduate/doctoral level. Most of the work on threshold concepts to date has been at the undergraduate level with a specific discipline focus. From this undergraduate work threshold concepts are generally described as having at least the following five characteristics, that is, they are:

- **Transformative** in that once the conceptual threshold has been crossed the learners’ views of what has been learned, and often themselves as learners, is transformed
- **Integrative** as they bring together, in a way that makes sense and can be understood, disparate aspects of learning
- **Irreversible** in that once understood, the concept cannot be ‘un-understood’
- **Bounded** in that each threshold concept has boundaries in meaning and that in any one discipline, or in the case of the research learning experience, there are likely to be several threshold concepts, and
- Troublesome, in that the learning with which they are engaging is challenging, difficult even sometimes counter-intuitive.

While identifying through empirical research possible threshold concepts at the research education is a critical aspect of the ongoing work in this area (see Kiley & Wisker, 2008) another aspect of the threshold concepts research from Meyer and Land et al is that of the liminal state. This is the state prior to crossing the threshold, and the state, often referred to as a rite of passage. This state is frequently evident in the often agonising experiences of doctoral candidates; a state so wonderfully illustrated in PhD Comics (http://www.phdcomics.com).

One of the particular issues associated with the liminal state is being “stuck”, as Lather (1998) suggests, the ‘praxis of stuck places’. For example, as with most learning, one candidate might find him/herself “stuck” for several months in the liminal space approaching the threshold concept of ‘framework’ outlined below, whereas another might address the learning challenge with relative ease. Yet the experiences of the same candidates might be reversed in the liminal space related to paradigm (again see below). Hence, suffice to say; while liminality is common to all research candidates’ approaches to threshold concepts, being stuck in ways that can be counter-productive and perhaps even destructive to self-confidence and self-esteem is not a necessary condition of liminality. Such considerations fit well with the work of Lovitts (2005, p. 139) who questions what it is that ‘facilitates or impedes graduate students’ ability to make the transition [from good course taker to researcher] and what leads some students to produce outstanding research and scholarship where outstanding is defined as original, creative and innovative?"

The liminal state, according to Meyer and Land (2006) is illustrated by three characteristics, in addition to the possibility of being “stuck”.

Firstly, the liminal state involves the learner in a transformation of ‘state’ for example, in research education this is where the candidate starts to see him/herself as ‘a researcher’, or at the undergraduate level where the student starts to think like an accountant or historian. Secondly, the liminal state, when viewed as a rite of passage, suggests that the candidate is seeking a new ‘status’. So for example, at the doctoral level, the candidate seeks to become the ‘Dr’. In a manner which is associated with rites of passage, gaining the new status is generally associated with ceremony and the ‘trappings’ of position. Thirdly, the liminal state is characterised by oscillation, the ‘two steps forward and one step backwards’ phenomenon.

During the liminal state, what is particularly significant for this paper is the notion of mimicry. It is argued that learners, prior to full understanding and the crossing of the conceptual threshold, mimic the language and behaviours they consider appropriate for the understanding with which they are struggling, often times even managing to graduate with an undergraduate degree still not really understanding some of the major concepts underpinning that discipline. Meyer and Land (2006, p. 24) note that:

We might speculate that a student in a ‘stuck place’, having glimpsed the outline of a threshold portal and perhaps only vaguely aware of what lies beyond it, but conscious of the failure to cross it, may engage in two forms of mimicry. The first is compensatory mimicry, in an assuage of self that something is understood—witness the novice student who rehearses what is
known (but irrelevant) in learning for examinations, rather than what is required to be known for them. The second is conscious mimicry, when the student is aware that what is required is beyond grasp, other than through the mimicry of pretension.

The work on threshold concepts and liminality has appeal for those of us working and researching in the area of doctoral/research education in that these approaches might provide considerable explanatory power for why some candidates have difficulty in progressing through their doctoral education and why some of them experience dislocation and even despair. For example, it takes very little imagination by most candidates and research supervisors to conjure up a time when they, or their candidate, was in a liminal state and feeling “stuck”.

Discussion

Research questions and method

Given this brief introduction to threshold concepts and the suggestion that the threshold concept research provides an attractive approach to examining the concepts that challenge doctoral candidates, three questions spring to mind:

• What might be some of the threshold concepts at the doctoral level?
• How does the notion of being “stuck” while in the liminal state manifest in research education?
• How might supervisors assist candidates who are “stuck”?

As a means of identifying some of the main research education threshold concepts a small-scale study was developed involving experienced research supervisors across five countries (Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, England and Israel) and across Humanities, Social Sciences, Engineering, Science, and Health Science. Following an explanation of the threshold concepts research similar to the explanation above, each of the 26 experienced supervisors who agreed to participate was invited to respond in writing to the following:

• Briefly describe the main conceptual issue that you find your research candidates seem to struggle with most during candidature.
• Note any strategies that you have found effective in assisting your students to come to terms with that conceptual issue.

It was considered that experienced research supervisors might be in a better position than their less experienced colleagues to identify the concepts and strategies, hence the responses from inexperienced research supervisors were not sought for this particular. In light of the relatively small number (n=26) of respondents it is not possible to use this data source to identify disciplinary difference, however, that work is in progress in a related study.

Example of threshold concepts at the doctoral level

Using the work by Leshem and Trafford (2007) on ‘conceptual framework’ it is possible to argue that the concept of framework, whether it be theoretical or conceptual, is a threshold concept, at least in the social sciences.

Leshem and Trafford (2007, p. 99) argue that a conceptual framework provides:

1) an integrative function for the research
2) a scaffold on which to build and develop the research and that
3) it shapes the conclusions of the research.

Knowing what a conceptual framework does and that is important for research does not necessarily help research candidates actually develop and use such a framework for their own research. The authors, however, proposed that candidates arrive at a conceptual framework through reading, experience, and reflecting on their reading and experience.

While it is mostly in the social sciences that one hears discussion of ‘conceptual frameworks’ it is possible that the concept of ‘framework’ is across many disciplines. For example, during an interview with a very experience Physicist he suggested that:

Doing scientific research is like giving a student a torch and sending them into a dark room and asking them to look in all the cupboards. When the student brings out the various bits the good student, the one who has crossed the threshold, is able to see some pattern, some linking of the pieces and can develop a conceptual framework. The genius scientist, for example Einstein, can look in the cupboards and put what they find together in a new way. One of the keys about Einstein was that he was able to link all the evidence together and not the bits that fitted a particular theory. (Sci1)

To test whether the concept of framework (theoretical/conceptual) is a threshold concept, given the definition earlier, it is necessary to work through each of the characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformative</th>
<th>Unlike undergraduate study, when a candidate truly appreciates the need for a framework for their research and they understand the need for parameters (as in Physics) or a framework on which to base their research design, they understand research in a quite different way.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>The concept of a framework enables the candidate to integrate various aspects of their research learning in a meaningful manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreversible</td>
<td>As with many other transformative experiences, once learners understand and appreciate the need for a framework for their research, they are in a position to apply this way of thinking to all further research work, not the framework itself, but rather the concept of a framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bounded</td>
<td>The concept of a framework is only one of several concepts at the research level (see below) and it is bounded in that it only explains one particular aspect of thinking like a researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troublesome</td>
<td>Many supervisors and candidates report the concept of framework as one of the most difficult in their learning. It is not uncommon for candidates to have difficulty in appreciating why it might be important to have a framework and often even more difficult to develop such a framework from the disparate literature and previous research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other threshold concepts arising from empirical research and reported in a paper by Kiley and Wisker (2008) include the concepts of:

- **Knowledge creation**, for example, what does ‘an original contribution to knowledge’ actually mean and how, and why, might a candidate make this contribution?
- **Analysis**, for example, what is the difference between analysis and description and why, at the doctoral level, is description on its own unacceptable?
- **Scholarship**, for example, why must a research candidate follow the ‘rules’ of the discipline regarding issues such as citations, punctuation and referencing? One might ask, for example, why has the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* grown from a seven page article in 1929, to a 368 page document in its fourth edition (American Psychological Association, 1994)? Furthermore, why do different disciplines have different scholarly approaches and ‘rules’ for publishing? Perhaps an even more interesting question to ask is why do scholars in those disciplines adhere to those rules and standards?
- **Research paradigms**, for example, why do different disciplines have rules, boundaries, theories and ways of researching that are considered appropriate and aligned with the discipline (Crotty, 1998)?
- **Quality**, for example the concept that there is an understood level of work that is considered appropriate in particular areas of research and that, among the initiated, these quality levels are well understood.

These concepts are likely to involve both ontological and epistemological shifts, as well as, at the doctoral level, identify shifts.

**Discussion**

*How does the notion of being “stuck” during the liminal state manifest at the doctoral level?*

As outlined earlier, the liminal state is one which involves oscillation, a sense of being “stuck”, and of trying to mimic the acceptable behaviour which has been demonstrated, but not fully understood.

A small case study is used below to demonstrate “stuckness”.

Lee, a mature age, part-time candidate, had been enrolled for two years (the equivalent of one year full-time). Lee had a topic to which he was committed and he had started candidature with a strong idea of what he thought was the answer. He considered that this answer could really make a difference within his profession and that the research would provide evidence to support this solution.

Lee’s supervisor worked hard at helping him to develop a conceptual framework for the research and so encouraged Lee to read widely around the topic and look for the concepts that could be drawn from the literature in an effort to develop a framework.

Experiencing difficulty in understanding the concept of both conceptual level thinking and of developing a framework Lee would seek advice from a range of friends who thought that the
main problem, given the way that Lee outlined it each time, was related to content and so each suggested ways of going about the research, generally each in a different way. Hence, each time Lee would take two steps forward in the development of content for the research he would take one step backwards when confronted with the concept of framework.

Lee’s two supervisors also experienced difficulty in assisting him with understanding the concept, and hence, to use a hackneyed phrase, they just kept going round in circles. Lee becoming increasingly frustrated with his inability to fully understand what he knew to be a critical concept but seemingly out of reach despite apparent assistance from many, and the supervisors experiencing similar frustration at not being able to assist Lee in this understanding, so critical in advancing the research.

While many stories such as this have sad endings with the candidate withdrawing from sheer frustration and inability to progress, or with candidature being terminated due to lack of progress, this story has a happy ending (to be revealed below)! The attrition rates of doctoral candidates varies considerably, with Nettles and Millet (2006) suggesting that it could be as high as 50% in some disciplines within the USA. In her study of US non-completers Lovitts (2000) argues that attrition is a result of poor fit and poor programs and, not poor students. Poor fit she suggests relates to candidates not feeling that they belonged to the department and its research environment, and poor programs including intellectual and academic support. I would argue that one aspect of intellectual and academic support is related to the way in which supervisors assist candidates to recognize:

1. When they are in a stuck place and how that it is manifesting
2. That this is not uncommon, in fact increasingly well documented, and
3. That there are strategies for addressing this ‘stuckness’.

Furthermore, assisting candidates to more positively and perhaps more quickly approach and cross doctoral-level conceptual thresholds, it is argued might assist in decreasing time to completion. The issue of time to completion is a serious one in the Australian university system where government funding is for four years of candidature only, and yet many universities have a mean completion time substantially greater that four years (Sinclair, 2004).

Discussion

How might supervisors assist candidates who are stuck?

Many experienced research supervisors are in fact able to identify strategies that they adopt to assist their candidates to become “unstuck” and hence to cross a conceptual threshold. Many of the supervisors surveyed suggested that one of more useful strategies that they had used was to ask candidates to read other doctoral dissertations and look for the specific issue with which the candidate was having difficulty. For example: ‘Read a previous PhD thesis that is considered to have...’ made an original contribution to knowledge, or developed a clear conceptual framework, or been written in a scholarly manner. However, every supervisor who suggested this strategy included comments such as ‘and then discuss how this works with the student.’
Hence, one of the most common strategies was using a model of good practice and then discussing and analysing that model.

The second most common strategy was involving candidates in working and discussing, with other candidates. This might be through journal clubs, writing retreats, disciplinary seminars, and laboratory groups. Golde (2007) suggests that journal clubs in Science, for example, not only allow participants to keep up with the literature in the field and develop a shared understanding of how to evaluate scientific findings, but to cross disciplinary boundaries. However, one can only cross these boundaries when one has an understanding of what the boundaries are, and this can be developed through engaging in such discussions. A variation on this strategy was involving other academics and candidates who have recently completed their candidature in the discussions.

A third strategy that was suggested by some of the respondents was what one called “the hands-on” strategies, for example ‘finding (visually) lines, pathways and possibilities for topic and thesis structure’ (Kiley & Wisker, 2008). This strategy assists those candidates and supervisors who like to “see” what they are doing, that is the visual learners. Concept maps (Novak & Canas, 2006) can be particularly helpful for candidates who find visual ways of learning appropriate.

A fourth strategy, which one of the respondents suggested needed to be adopted with care and sensitivity, was, what might be termed ‘playing Devil’s advocate’ that is, challenging the candidate with an opposing argument. If handled insensitively, such a strategy might harm candidate’s confidence and self-esteem. However, handled well, such a strategy can assist a candidate to see that there might be “holes” in their argument and that there are alternative, and defensible, views on the same issue.

Finally, one respondent concluded quite a lengthy set of strategies with the comment: ‘But, whilst it [a recommended book] puts forward a definition of originality, it doesn’t really solve the problem—doing original research can only be learnt by doing’ (Kiley & Wisker, 2008). While this respondent was referring specifically to writing in a scholarly manner, it suggests that an effective strategy that can be adopted to assist candidates is getting them to undertake a very small piece of research that might eventually contribute to their overall research program, thereby giving them experiences of success and learning by doing.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the threshold concepts research (see for example Meyer & Land, 2006) provides a useful way of examining doctoral student learning. In particular it was suggested that the work related to liminal spaces and the possibility of learners being “stuck” in these states for some time is particularly useful at the doctoral level. The suggestions of oscillation and of mimicry have considerable resonance with most candidates and research graduates.

Further is has been argued that identifying strategies that supervisors can adopt to assist candidates when they are in “stuck places” might assist with decreasing attrition rates, and possibly also enhance time to completion.

The answer to Lee’s difficulty? Firstly acknowledging and describing the issue and explaining that it was not because Lee was incapable of undertaking a doctorate, but that he was in a liminal state and experiencing difficulty within that state. Secondly, a number of very small, controlled pieces of writing, with extensive discussion and
analysis, that is scaffolding, eventually leading to an understanding of the concept of framework and its application in research. Thirdly, celebrating having crossed one threshold and recognising that there would be others, and other liminal states, but that each time it was possible to be able to stand back and appreciate what was happening.

References


