

Open Space Learning in mixed methods pedagogy: Navigating the 'threshold concept'

Marie Murphy, Dr Rebecca Johnson and Professor Frances Griffiths

Division of Health Sciences, Warwick Medical School

Background



- Setting: One week module on mixed methods in health research for postgraduate health sciences students
- Students come from different epistemological backgrounds (positivist and constructivist traditions)

Threshold concepts act as “conceptual gateways’ or ‘portals’ that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome’, way of thinking about something” [1]

Aims and rationale

Aims:

- Reflect on differences between summary and synthesis in mixed methods
- Transform perspectives and understandings of mixed methods within health sciences
- Test the value of Open Space Learning in a health sciences setting



Open Space Learning (OSL): promotes collaborative and active learning using challenging topics and tactile, memorable experiences in open spaces [2]

Open Space Learning group activity

Session 1: June 2015

- **Session plan:** Positioned mid-module as part of ‘mixed methods synthesis’ teaching block
- **Resources:** Two sets of A4 cards featuring images, text or graphical representations on set topics

- 1) 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone
- 2) fruit and vegetable consumption

- **Task:** Use space to “make sense of the narrative” & feedback to group
- **Reflection:** Teaching team reflected on what worked well and what didn’t, and changes to be made for next time

Image 1. Example cards for OSL activity



Session 2: January 2016

The following changes were made:

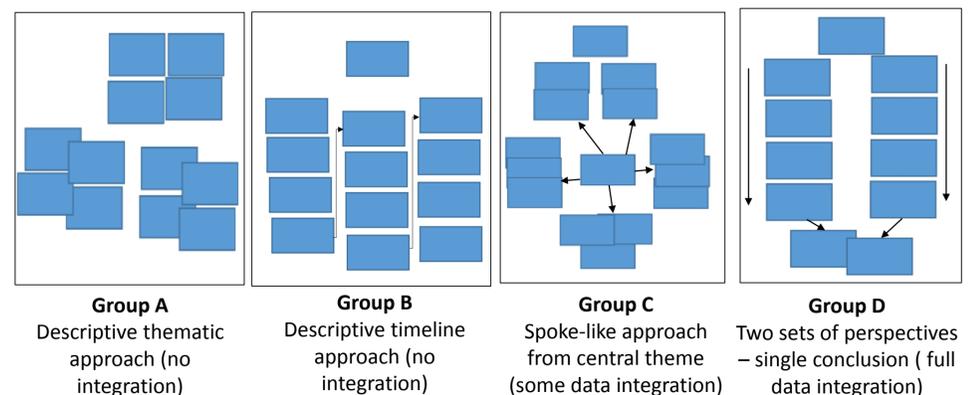
- OSL used on two occasions in the module
 - 1) at the start as an introduction to the concept of ‘synthesising’
 - 2) at the end as a reflective opportunity
- Simplified the task: students to choose one or two ‘concepts’ (to avoid the tendency to simply organise and describe the cards)
- Simplified the space: more in keeping with the principles of OSL

Outcomes

Group feedback to class

Each student group used a different approach to their narratives, with some using simplistic grouping or linear descriptions (groups A and B) and others using more net-like and complex integrations (groups C and D)

Image 2. Graphical representation of students’ conceptual maps



Teaching team reflections

- Mixed methods synthesis is a troublesome concept for some health sciences students (so characteristic of threshold concepts)
- Group feedback element enhanced peer-to-peer learning: students observed the variety of approaches for constructing the narratives
- OSL offered a chance to replicate the interdisciplinary, collaborative and complex nature of mixed methods health research

Student formative feedback

Table 1. Student evaluation formative responses (Response rate 78%, n=7)

Rate the following statements of a scale of 1 (low) – 10 (high)	Mean score
This activity was useful in helping to learn about mixed methods	8.7
This activity taught me to think about mixed methods in a different way	8.4
The quality of the teaching was... (poor to excellent)	9.7



Student summative feedback

“Good for developing group negotiating skills and highlighting different perspectives and perceptions of data – and broadening own thoughts.”

“It was very useful to do the same exercise again but with a different perspective.”

“Was interesting to see the change throughout the week”

“...it has really helped me not to fear including quant and qual”

“...it made you think about things diagrammatically... it helps to make things clearer in your mind and aids your explanation/justification of why you put certain categories together”

Conclusions

- Through piloting, evaluation and a team reflection, we were able to refine and deliver a high quality teaching activity
- OSL helped meet the objectives by providing a memorable, collaborative learning experience and bringing about transformed perspectives and understandings of mixed methods research for these students
- OSL proved an appropriate and valuable tool for helping students to negotiate difficult threshold concepts of mixed methods synthesis



Corresponding author:

Marie Murphy

Marie.murphy@warwick.ac.uk

@mariemurphyPH

about.me/marie.murphy

References

- [1] Meyer JHF and Land R. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. Higher Education (2005) 49: 373–388.
- [2] Monk N, Chillington Rutter C, Neelands J and Heron J. (2011) Open-space Learning. A Study in Transdisciplinary Pedagogy. Bloomsbury Publishing: London.