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# On the affective threshold of power and privilege

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**Abstract**
Higher education is facing increasing calls to engage in a process of intellectual decolonisation. This process necessitates that we take time to consider both the content of our curriculum and the pedagogic practices used to facilitate its understanding. Drawing on discussions of both intellectual decolonisation and its underpinning principles of epistemic justice, I consider the implications of these ideas for the threshold concept framework. These implications are likely to relate to both the identification of potential future threshold concepts and the experience of engaging with them. As threshold scholars, we may need to reconsider our ideas about who the experts are within a discipline or practice in our efforts to identify candidate threshold concepts and consider alternative sources of evidence in support of this. In addition, we need to reflect on how the learning experiences that arise as a result of encounters with thresholds that have emerged as a result of the privileging of knowledge and ways of knowing from the 'global north' might serve as a source of epistemic trouble to learners from the 'global south'. Such learning experiences are likely to be highly emotive and represent a significant source of troublesome learning.

**Keywords** Threshold concepts · Epistemic justice · Decolonisation · Affect

## Introduction

It is 20 years since the publication of Meyer and Land's (2003) seminal paper on threshold concepts (TCs). In this time, a considerable body of work has emerged, exploring both the theoretical underpinnings of the work itself and its application in a range of disciplinary and professional contexts (Flanagan, 2022; Land et al., 2016; Meyer & Land, 2006a; Timmermans & Land, 2020). In acknowledging how far we have come as threshold scholars, it is time to consider where we might need to go, and the potential challenges we face, as we move forward into the next phase of threshold work. In this paper, I explore one of the challenges that I have been reflecting on and consider its implications for the work we do and the future of the threshold concept framework (TCF).

I am not arguing that this challenge is a new one, but suggesting that it is time to revisit some of the warnings of the original threshold architects and to consider their

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relevance in the current higher education (HE) context. In addition, it is important to acknowledge and respond to, as far as we can, the critiques of the framework (Barradell, 2013; Brown et al., 2021; Rowbottom, 2007; Salwén, 2019; Stopford, 2021). Rowbottom (2007) has argued that it is impossible and even meaningless to categorise concepts as threshold or not, as all concept acquisition is associated with shifts in understanding. Stopford's arguments about existential certainty imply that it is not the concept itself that is a threshold but rather, its potential to challenge what he terms our 'existential certainties' that might represent the threshold. One implication of Stopford's work is that it is the experience that is threshold, not simply the knowledge. This is in line with Land (2014) who argues that we need to think about thresholds as reflecting an experience not simply a concept. Rowbottom argues that there is no differentiation between different concepts in respect of their nature, function and form. Such critiques are often centred on essentialist views of knowledge and concepts and reflect a view of knowledge as certainty or objective truth (Berlin, 2003). Stopford (2021) recognises that TCs are about more than the knowledge being engaged with, arguing that the nature of the learner's response to encounters with knowledge is important. He argues that troublesomeness arises for the learner when knowledge challenges our existential certainties. Such a critique, I would argue, has something valuable to offer in terms of the way we think about how troublesome knowledge relates to the TCF, as it reflects the assumption within the TCF that learning is an interactive experience (Land, 2014). In his critique however, Stopford does seem to take a similar view of knowledge as objective truth to Rowbottom (2007). At times, this seems to be counter to his more socio-constructivist ideas about existential certainty which he characterises as a more socially constructed and individually held set of beliefs and understandings (Stopford, 2021). For me, thresholds are associated with both knowledge and experience, and I take a view of learning that does not separate the learner from what is being learned (Illeris, 2007). Elsewhere, I argue that it is perhaps time to rethink the discourse we use when talking about TCs to reflect the idea that they are about more than mastery of a 'concept' (Rattray, in preparation) and argue instead that 'threshold learning experiences' represent a particular form of learning that is associated with ontological transformations. Indeed, this view of TCs as representing a learning experience is implied in much of the work on the TCF. But the discourse or continued use of the term 'concept' perhaps implies a focus that is more on the knowledge than on the experience. By reconceptualising TCs as threshold learning experiences, we might make explicit the notion that they involve much more than simply engagement with an idea. In doing this however, we cannot ignore the idea that knowledge or what is being learned is part of the experience and this knowledge may manifest certain properties that are, in part, an explanation for what turns a learning experience into a threshold learning experience. In this paper I retain the use of the term 'threshold concept' as arguments about 'threshold learning experiences' aren't fully developed and require more attention.

A second area of critique focuses on the way that TCs are discussed and represented in the research literature being categorised as both a theory and a framework by different scholars (Barradell, 2013; Brown et al., 2021; Tight, 2014). Such critiques are predicated on ideas of how one evaluates a concept, a theory or a framework (Tight, 2014). This perhaps reflects the relative newness of the idea and is something that threshold scholars need to address—the positioning of the idea as a theory or a framework. I typically use the term 'framework', and have done so in this paper, but agree with Brown et al. (2021) that this is not unproblematic. It may be more helpful to simply characterise TCs as a lens—a way to reflect on learners, learning, pedagogies and practices and argue that this better reflects

the original intent. However, at this juncture and without a more extended discussion, I am reluctant to add another label into the TC discourse without fully considering the implications of such a choice.

Learning is both an emotional and effortful experience (Beard et al., 2007, 2014; Bowden et al., 2021; Efklides & Volet, 2005; Rattray, 2016). It requires us to invest time and effort in each learning task as we work towards its accomplishment. This effort involves not only our cognitive capabilities and capacities but frequently also our affective or emotional selves (Athanasiou et al., 2009; Bowden et al., 2021; Efklides & Volet, 2005). As we engage with the learning task, our ability to accomplish it is determined not just by our intellectual abilities and cognitive skills but our beliefs in what we think we can achieve, i.e. self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997); our ability to keep trying in the face of failure, i.e. resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2009; Rutter, 2012); and our capacity to see multiple approaches to a task, i.e. hope (Davidson et al., 2012; Usher et al., 2019). The troublesome nature of TCs potentially makes their mastery particularly effortful as learners grapple with the new and often counterintuitive knowledge to be learned. This troublesomeness coupled with the transformative nature of TCs results in a learning experience that is both powerful and highly emotive (Cousin, 2008; Felten, 2016; Rattray, 2016; Timmermans & Meyer, 2020). It is easy to think of the emotional or affective side of threshold mastery as relating to the effort it takes to master the concept and to cope with the experience of being in a liminal state. This is not the only affective element of TCs we should be paying attention to. The thresholds themselves, i.e. the knowledge to be mastered, can provoke in us an emotional response that further complicates our engagement with them. After all, we talk of thresholds as bringing about an ontological shift in our being (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005), a change to the very way we view the world—thus, the nature and content of the knowledge itself and the way we respond to it can be emotive. Drawing on the growing body of literature on intellectual decolonisation, we need to reflect on where our current disciplinary and interdisciplinary thresholds come from and whose voices are heard in relation to influencing and shaping them. Responding to calls for epistemic justice (Fricker, 1998, 1999, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Parviainen et al., 2021; Walker, 2019), I reflect on the nature of TCs and consider the potential implications of competing or contradictory epistemologies and ontologies as they might influence a learner's capacity to engage with them. In doing this, I hope to show how the TCF can be utilised as a powerful tool to support a more inclusive approach to both disciplines and pedagogies and help to address and redress the issues of dominant power and privilege that are typical of much of contemporary higher education. I will explore the extent to which epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2010, 2015) potentially serves as an affective barrier to threshold work. I will also illustrate, however, that through application of the ideas of epistemic justice, such barriers might be overcome.

The paper draws on a number of ideas which are open to contestation, and it is not possible to explore each of these fully in their own right here. I include them to encourage discussion and to open up a dialogue. I don't purport to have answers to all the issues raised or to be able to do justice to the full complexities that arise when we try to make sense of issues that are simultaneously thought-provoking and troublesome. The paper reflects my own struggles and attempts to consider the place of powerful knowledge (Gramsci, 1987, 1991), hegemonic and counter hegemonic practices (Brookfield, 2005) and privilege (Abbot, 2013) in my own work and how this might influence engagement with knowledge, curriculum and learning. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality as it relates to the framing of this paper and the arguments and questions it raises. I am an advocate of Freire's (1970) ideas of critical pedagogy and believe that education is a space

for social justice. As such I agree "… that educational landscapes are sites of struggle. Competing ideas contend in multiple ways and the search for counter- hegemonic pedagogical practice has been ongoing" (Chisholm, 2021; p1).

## Epistemic justice

As epistemic injustice underpins much of the discussion, it is important to consider how this term is being used here. Whilst Fricker (1998, 1999, 2007) introduced this term, its meaning and implications have been embedded within a long history of work by feminists of colour such as Spivak (1988, 2012), Dotson (2011, 2014) and Wells (2014). Epistemic injustice is essentially referring to ideas of justice in relation to knowledge. It is about the value we place on different forms of knowledge, knowers and knowing (Walker, 2020). It is associated with the silencing and oppression of certain individuals or groups within societies and the resultant inequalities that this can cause (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012; Walker, 2020). Ideas of epistemic injustice and epistemic justice provide a powerful explanatory framework within which we can consider the privileging of certain forms of knowledge and 'knowers' in HE. They offer an opportunity for us to reflect and redress the various forms of intellectual disempowerment that exist (Seats, 2022). However, we cannot assume that this term is universally understood (Dotson, 2014; Pohlhaus, 2012; Turner, 2021), with some scholars arguing that without careful attention to, and consideration of, the aims of epistemic justice, there is a danger that inequalities may be reproduced rather than eliminated (Moosavi, 2020; Turner, 2021). Epistemic injustices can exist wherever the voices of marginalised people are silenced or where the views and experiences of marginalised people are represented by those who have power (Spivak, 1988). In this paper, I draw heavily on work from the intellectual decolonisation movement—a movement frequently underpinned by notions of epistemic justice. I hope to show that the principles of epistemic justice might serve as an important lens to consider the place of affect within the TCF and, in turn, that the TCF offers a way to support the re-establishment of epistemic justice in contemporary HE.

## Intellectual decolonisation and the TCF?

HE has been criticised for the 'whiteness' of its curricula and the predominance of ideas, concepts and theories being taught that are derived from research and scholarship from the 'global north' (Arday, 2018; Behari-Leak, 2019, 2020; Moosavi, 2020; Seats, 2022). Such criticisms have resulted in calls for the intellectual decolonisation of HE (Arday, 2018; Behari-Leak, 2020; Dawson, 2020; Heleta, 2016; Manathunga, 2020).

Whilst the concept of decolonisation is bigger than HE, at its heart, the central premise that underpins this movement is one of "responses to the violences of modernity" (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, 21). For us, it manifests as a call to undo the "global Apartheid in Higher Education" (Mbembe, 2016, 38). It reflects a "… belief that coloniality continues to impact how academia is experienced, as well as what is researched, published, cited, and taught" (Moosavi, 2020, 1).

Intellectual decolonisation is not simply a challenge for postcolonial societies, however—it involves all of us (Manathunga, 2020). Manathunga argues that it is equally as important for "… (the former colonial powers) who need to critically examine their own

cultural beliefs and practices, including the ways they have been unconsciously shaped by structured inequalities between cultures, classes, genders and so on" (2020, 6). Intellectual decolonisation therefore requires us, particularly those of us in the global north, to apply the principles of reflexivity and introspection to our research and teaching in order to identify and acknowledge the privilege that arises from our location as scholars in the global north (Manathunga, 2020; Mogstad & Tse, 2018; Moosavi, 2020; Dei and Lordan, 2016). Without this retrospection, we are in danger of replicating and perpetuating those forms of knowledge production and epistemic violence that have given rise to the systemic inequalities that have dominated our disciplines and practices.

Decolonisation is not a new idea (Behari-Leak, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Thiong'o, 1986/1994) nor is it an idea that emanates from the global north (Bhambra et al., 2018; Moosavi, 2019). Intellectual decolonisation has been a focus of attention in the global south for several decades stemming from the work of scholars such as Alatas (1971), Alatas (2006), Ake (1979) and Thiong'o (1986/1994). These authors have repeatedly drawn attention to the need to address what is known as second-generation colonisation—the colonisation of the mind—and argued for a more inclusive approach to knowledge production. It is also important to recognise that whilst there is growing support for intellectual decolonisation, it lacks universal support (Arday, 2018; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Mignolo, 2018; Mogstad & Tse, 2018). Indeed, the term 'decolonising' is itself a contentious and complex term (Heleta, 2016; Morreira et al., 2020). As Bhambra et al. argue, it is a concept that is complicated, "…multifaceted and consists of a heterogeneity of viewpoints, approaches, political projects and normative concerns" (2018, 2). It challenges a Eurocentric view of the world in favour of plurality and multiple ontologies (Bhambra et al., 2018; Heleta, 2016). It is also important to acknowledge that even the use of terms such as 'global north' and 'global south' reflects potential for essentialisation or 'othering', as it implies a homogenised view of these regions that speak with one voice (Behari-Leak, 2019; Manathunga, 2020; Moosavi, 2020; Walker, 2019, 2020). Whilst this is clearly not the case, I use the terms here to draw attention to the issue of intellectual decolonisation fully aware the terms themselves aren't unproblematic.

There are a number of implications of intellectual decolonisation for the TCF. Firstly, we need to ask where our TCs come from and what this does to the nature of our curricula and the ways that we think about learning and learners. Indeed, Meyer and Land warned (2006a) that

> A further significant issue is that threshold concepts might be interpreted as part of a 'totalising' or colonising view of the curriculum. Such a view would point to the effects of power relations within curricula with threshold concepts serving to provide a measure and exert a 'normalising' function in the Foucaldian sense (Foucault, 1979, 1980). Whose threshold concepts then becomes a salient question. (16)

Central to much of the work on intellectual decolonisation is the dominance and position of epistemologies derived from the global north and the extent to which these serve as epistemic hegemonies or borders (Behari-Leak, 2019, 2020) that privilege forms of knowledge production (typically from the global north) whilst excluding others (particularly from the global south) (Mignolo, 2007; Spivak, 1988, 2012). "Epistemic borders demarcate the distinctions between the epistemes that are kept in, protected or sanctified and those that are kept out of the mainstream, whence they become marginalised epistemologies" (Behari-Leak, 2020, 10). This practice of privileging epistemologies from the global north and the consequent 'othering' of those from the global south results in what Spivak (1988, 2012) terms epistemic violence, or what de Sousa Santos (2010) calls 'epistemicide'. Arguably,

it serves to perpetuate the idea that expertise and models of good practice are to be sought and found in the global north and not the south.

In relation to TCs, Perkins (2006) suggests that in mastering a discipline, learners need to master the 'underlying game' associated with disciplinary epistemes reflecting ways of thinking and practicing within a particular discipline. Disciplinary epistemes represent the methods of enquiry used, forms of justification and problem-solving adopted and ways of evaluating outcomes within a specific discipline or practice. Whilst the idea of disciplinary epistemes provides a useful way to think about disciplinary boundaries and allows different disciplines to treat the same concepts differently, we must take time to reflect on the nature of the epistemes themselves. If these disciplinary epistemes are based on epistemic hegemonies from the global north, then they are potentially exclusionary by definition and will ensure that certain learners either never grasp the 'underlying game' or have significant difficulty in doing so. This is a point to which I will return. Here, I am not contesting Perkins' assertion that learners need to master the 'underlying game' but rather cautioning that if the disciplinary epistemes associated with the 'underlying game' are based on epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2010), we might be perpetuating epistemic hegemonies that potentially will result in a narrow understanding of disciplines and might even limit their future development. This may reflect the way that disciplines themselves are defined and characterised with the underlying episteme being associated with rarefied and specialist 'vertical' knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). This type of knowledge is typical of academic curricula and disciplinary thinking and frequently reflects ways of thinking and knowledge production that are derived from Eurocentric hegemonies (Seats, 2022). Traditionally, academic disciplines have tended to marginalise or delegitimise what Bernstein called horizontal knowledge—i.e. knowledge that is derived from everyday experiences or common-sense ways of thinking (Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018; Nduna et al., 2022; Seats, 2022). If we do not acknowledge the privileging of powerful (in the Gramscian sense) vertical knowledge in our disciplines, and simultaneously recognise the absence of horizontal knowledge, we are in danger of replicating already legitimated codes (Maton et al., 2016). The challenge for TC scholars is to consider how multiple and different thresholds that reflect both vertical and horizontal knowledge in the Bernsteinian sense can co-exist legitimately. It is about recognising the value of both and not privileging one over the other—coming to see that both have explanatory power and that each must be understood within the cultural and sociohistoric context within which it emerged. Such a challenge reflects wider concerns about the legitimisation of knowledge (Maton et al., 2016) and is worthy of future consideration.

Cousin (2008) appears to have recognised this danger noting "TCs are always epistemologically informed, which is why they are theorised as provisional, contestable and culturally situated" (Cousin, 2008, 263). She continues, "We must keep reminding ourselves that we are characterising what some people hold to be TCs in given situations at given moments" (263). Cousin's words remind us of the importance of not treating thresholds as universal constructs that are culture-free and static (Calduch & Rattray, 2022). Indeed she says, "For researchers into this area a degree of reflexivity about such rival concepts and their own investments in their selection and representation of threshold concepts is important" (p263).

Cousin's call for reflexivity in considering how we might determine TCs resonates with Manathunga's (2014, 2020) call for greater levels of reflexivity and introspection when considering what counts as knowledge and how we value it. This reflexivity, whilst essential if we are to start to recognise and relinquish our privilege, is inevitably an emotive experience (Behari-Leak et al., 2021). It requires not only the letting go of currently held

ideas about the nature of knowledge and knowledge production (Behari-Leak, 2019, 2020; Dawson, 2020; Manathunga, 2014; Moosavi, 2020; Spivak, 1988, 2012), it requires epistemic curiosity and, potentially, ontological transformations. Consequently, the kinds of reflexivity needed for us to explore the intellectual decolonisation of HE might place us in a liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2006b). Mignolo (2011, 2018) suggests that a 'delinking' from northern-centric epistemologies as a means of generating new forms of knowledge requires us to put ourselves into liminal states or places that serve as a kind of 'between place' that bring together differing ways of thinking that are rarely considered together. Mignolo's suggestion resonates with Baillie et al.'s (2012) idea of liminality as a heterotopic space. These authors suggest that the fluidity and non-linear nature of the liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2006b) in the TCF allows it to be viewed as a heterotopic space where counter-hegemonies can be brought together and explored. Such a space would allow for the kinds of new forms of knowledge production that might be needed. This is not an easy accomplishment, and a number of scholars recognise the complexity in trying to achieve this (Khumalo & De Klerk, 2018; Nduna et al., 2022; Seats, 2022). In order to recognise and give power to traditionally marginalised ways of knowledge production, we effectively need to legitimate the hitherto-delegitimated—in Bernstein's terms, make the horizontal vertical. But in doing this, we must be careful not to disregard existing ways of knowing and knowledge that are well-founded and still legitimate (Turner, 2021). It is not a case of an either-or approach to the valuing of knowledge or knowledge production—rather, there is a need to allow for a plurality of ways of knowing that transcends traditional knowledge boundaries and reflects a more inclusive approach to knowledge and knowledge production.

I am not assuming here that all threshold scholarship is founded on epistemic violence, nor do I presume that all threshold scholars will experience the same emotional and affective reactions to the calls to engage in the reflexive practices that are necessary to bring about intellectual decolonisation. But I think it is pertinent nonetheless to acknowledge openly that such work is not without its affective dimensions (Gupta et al., 2010; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2020).

If we are able to navigate this liminal space, we can use the TCF to support an intellectual decolonisation of HE curricula by extending our work to include new forms of knowledge and different knowledge producers who can help to further elucidate our disciplinary thresholds and the multiple uses of the framework itself. Experts that reflect cultural, geographical and epistemological diversity might necessitate that we reconsider the notion of the 'expert' in relation to threshold knowledge (Brown et al., 2021) and to consider different kinds of evidence in support of threshold identification. Consideration of how Indigenous knowledge and oral narratives might be used to inform threshold identification and experiences (Page, 2021), for example, might provide opportunities for the identification of new and hitherto-unidentified thresholds. This would also enable us to further explore the potential for different understandings of the same threshold—for example, 'opportunity cost', frequently cited as a TC in economics (Davies & Mangan, 2007; Meyer & Land, 2003; Reimann & Jackson, 2006), potentially has a different meaning in capitalist vs non-capitalist societies or cultures—so we may need to be open to different forms of transformation or post-liminal variation (Calduch & Rattray, 2022).

Whilst I am arguing that, as threshold scholars, we need to make a concerted effort to apply the principles of intellectual decolonisation to our existing TCs and disciplines in the hope that we can establish a set of thresholds that are based on epistemic justice and do not silence or oppress the voices of those from the global south or other marginalised groups, I acknowledge that this will take time to achieve, as it is not an easy process. It involves what

Manathunga (2014) calls 'deep listening' and 'slow time'. It necessitates that we ask questions about what kinds of knowledge we are asking learners to engage with and why. It also requires us to reflect on the kinds of experiences engagement with this knowledge might provoke, and the influence this might have on understanding.

## Curriculum and pedagogy—focusing on learners

I now turn to the question of whether existing thresholds, particularly those that represent epistemic borders, might constitute affective barriers for learners. In doing this, it is difficult to separate the threshold knowledge from the threshold experience, as the two are inevitably intertwined. The former refers to the knowledge that is being encountered, and the latter to the experience of encountering and engaging with it. I am arguing here that both are potential affective barriers to learning. This is especially salient for learners who are being confronted with knowledge that is underpinned by contradictory or conflicting epistemologies and being asked to absorb this knowledge into their existing epistemic frameworks. More concerning is the, potentially unintended, assumption that any resistance or reluctance learners show in their engagement with such thresholds is taken as an indication that they are unable or unwilling to master the TC.

In this section of the paper, I want to consider the additional pressures placed on learners, particularly those from the global south, by these problematic epistemologies and explore how the coming together of the learner with these might serve as a further layer of affective challenge and disempowerment.

## Epistemic trouble

If we revisit the idea of troublesome knowledge, the first 5 forms of which—Ritual, Inert, Conceptually Difficult, Alien and Tacit—were identified by Perkins (1999), and troublesome language added by Meyer and Land (2006b), we are reminded that one of the causes of the trouble is the extent to which the knowledge to be engaged with might be aligned with the current knowledge of the learner. The extent to which the new knowledge fits within the learners' existing ontologies and epistemologies will influence the ways they are both willing and able to engage with it.

For example, what Perkins (1999) terms alien knowledge might come from a place so far from our current view of the world that it is hard to bring it in to focus. Whilst Perkins' discussions of both ritual knowledge and alien knowledge imply a socio-cultural dimension to the troublesomeness that learners encounter, this has never fully been explored in relation to the kinds of epistemic conflicts that some learners might experience. Many of the illustrations and examples of troublesome knowledge that are considered to represent alien knowledge, for instance, focus on disciplinary alienation when the disciplinary understanding of the concept is potentially in conflict with, or misaligned with, the lay, or novice, understanding, i.e. recovery in mental health nursing (Watson, 2019). Watson notes that the idea of recovery for mental health nurses has less to do with healing in a medical sense and more to do with adaptation and adjustment to the mental health condition. If thresholds bring about ontological shifts, what happens when such experiences challenge our epistemic or ontological identities? This might occur when we are presented with knowledge and experiences that are far removed from our current frames of reference. Here, Stopford's

ideas about existential certainty might be a useful aid to understanding—suggesting, as they do, that it is when our certainties are challenged that the rupture is created (Stopford, 2021). Stopford argues that rather than troublesome knowledge being characterised as resulting from the introduction of uncertainty, it is actually the result of a challenge to our certainty. Whilst at first glance this might be viewed as a matter of semantics, it reflects an important way to consider the pre-liminal phase of TC mastery as identified by Meyer and Land (2006a, b). It is not that learners come to the new knowledge with no understanding of the concept—rather, they have existing understanding or existential certainties that this new knowledge challenges. In confronting this challenge, the learner must navigate not only the new knowledge itself but potentially new ways of knowledge production.

Engaging with such knowledge is likely to be a highly emotive experience and one that is not just about the threshold knowledge itself but potentially has learners asking questions about whether they want to take that road or embark on the journey at all. Such questions might be asked not because the learner is resistant to the idea of engaging with new knowledge but rather because, even though they have not yet attempted to master the threshold, they are being confronted by something that is 'epistemically and affectively troublesome' in terms of the nature of the knowledge that it represents and the expectations of how this knowledge is to be understood and mastered. Epistemic troublesomeness therefore reflects Fricker's (2007) notions of epistemic injustice, in that it creates injustices in the knowledge, the known and the knower. Epistemic troublesomeness is potentially an unintended consequence of the current state of threshold research; however, it is by no means universal or irreversible.

Thus, we might want to add "epistemic troublesomeness" to our existing categories of troublesome knowledge. As an example of this, we might consider the case of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006) which Morgan (2012) argues is a TC in social work. This construct represents both a social and political ideology and as such is strongly situated within a particular epistemic framework that makes certain assumptions about the nature of disability and its implications for people with disabilities (Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability offers a way to look at disability that is not accorded universal agreement and that might be counter to certain political, social or cultural ideas about disability (Duke & Mudge, 2016; Morgan, 2012; Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006). Learners whose underlying experiences and understandings are located in such epistemologies might find encounters with the social model of disability epistemically troublesome because it perhaps requires them to master a view of disability that does not fit within their existing epistemological frameworks and might challenge their cultural or religious belief systems. In offering this example, I raise a further issue of complexity. I am not suggesting that we don't want learners to master the concept of the social model of disability, but rather, arguing that as educators it is important to acknowledge the source of the trouble if we are going to be able to support and facilitate mastery of the threshold. This example also draws attention to the need not to dismiss all knowledge derived from the global north as inherently epistemically violent and reminds us that knowledge construction is an evolving process. By considering the extent to which learners might experience epistemic troublesomeness, at least for now, we can start to take account of this in our practice. It might provide further explanation of aspects of learners' behaviour—as they confront knowledge and ways of knowing and being a knower that are epistemologically violent.

This brings us to the socially just nature of current curricula and the extent to which the knowledge contained within them empower some learners to engage with liminality whilst at the same time disempowering others. TCs are often referred to as the 'jewels in the curriculum' (Cousin, 2006), and as such, they are a powerful source of disciplinary

knowledge and development. If these jewels, however, represent narrow or colonised views of the discipline, they become not sources of empowerment but represent yet another form of epistemic violence (Behari-Leak, 2019).

Aoki (1999) suggests that we need to focus more on what he called the lived curriculum, as compared to the curriculum as planned. He argues that it is not that the planned curriculum is unimportant or irrelevant but that it is important that we take time to consider how learners actually experience the curriculum and the implications this might have for their learning. For me, this is a very powerful idea and one that speaks to the affective or emotive aspects of learning. It encourages us to treat the knowledge that is embedded within our curricula (the planned) as something that is 'lived' or living and as such fluid and subject to change rather than seeing it as a representation of an accepted fact or body of knowledge that is static and fixed (Calduch & Rattray, 2022; Cousin, 2008).

This idea of conceptualising the curriculum as a lived curriculum (Aoki, 1999) would seem to sit well with Baillie et al.'s (2012) idea of heterotopic liminality. Both require that knowledge and learning are treated as living or evolving entities that are shaped and changed by the very act of encountering and engaging with them. This has implications for both teachers and learners.

In our pedagogic practices, we might need to consider how we can create and support such heterotopic space. This might necessitate the valuing of different ways of learning and different outcomes of learning (Calduch & Rattray, 2022), as our existing notions of how thresholds might be encountered and mastered will inevitably be challenged, and our curricula changed

> Likewise there are implications for learners, who need to be willing and open to the learning experiences that introduce them to different forms of knowledge and knowledge production - irrespective of where they are from. Epistemic trouble is not simply something that those from the global south might experience, indeed it could occur whenever learners encounter competing epistemologies and so it is important for learners to be open to new kinds of learning and new ways of knowing. So even when we facilitate heterotopic spaces or delinking opportunities as Baillie et al. (2012) and Mignolo (2011) suggest we should, learners need to be willing to enter into them.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I am in no way devaluing the vast array of TC work that has been done to date. It has served us well and given us important insights into the current state of disciplinary knowledge, ways of thinking and practising and new ways to think about pedagogy and curriculum. I am, however, suggesting that it is time to confront some difficult questions about the extent to which some of the existing disciplinary TCs that have been identified and valued might be exclusionary in terms of their ontological and epistemological underpinnings. We need to be mindful of how powerful thresholds can be and to acknowledge that with that power comes a responsibility to ensure that we do not privilege certain knowers, or forms of knowledge, over others. In doing this, we may be able to reduce the affective barriers to mastery that potentially arise if troublesome knowledge is both conceptually difficult and a source of epistemic troublesomeness as I have conceptualised it.

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## Declarations

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