Threshold Concepts

Academic Cultures and Disciplines

Academic cultures and disciplines have very particular ways of thinking and constructing knowledge. This particular way of thinking can be challenging to someone unfamiliar with academic discipline. Student difficulty in learning might be tied to how instructors and students see the discipline.

Bottlenecks

Unfamiliarity with a discipline's culture can create bottlenecks:

- Procedural bottlenecks in which students have not mastered the steps that are necessary for successfully completing the tasks required in a course.
- Epistemological bottlenecks in which students fail to understand the basic nature of knowledge construction in a discipline.
- Emotional bottlenecks in which students affective reaction to the nature of the discipline or of the subject matter hinders learning.

Threshold Concepts

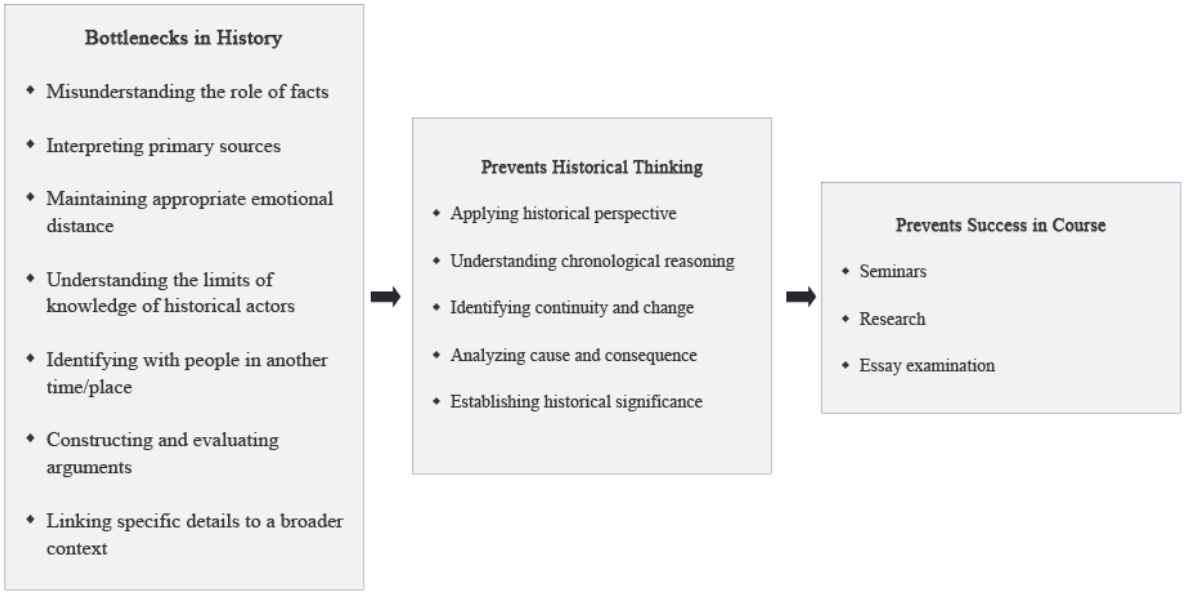
Threshold concepts, a learning theory developed by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, "represent a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress."

Threshold concepts are not content knowledge or course objectives, but instead are ways of thinking that are specific to disciplines and academic cultures.

History and Historical Thinking

"History, like all subjects, represents an integrated way of thinking, defined by a system of ideas, leading to a distinctive and systematic way of questioning." Thus historians have a particular way of thinking about the past and a particular way of constructing knowledge about the past. The method used to achieve this by historians is referred to as historical thinking.

The bottlenecks commonly experienced by students in college level history courses can be linked to faculty failure to expose students to the threshold concepts associated with historical thinking. Students cannot successfully complete assessments that require the use of historical thinking if they have not been exposed to it.



"Identification of threshold concepts allows educators to determine the places in their courses and programs that students are likely to get 'stuck' and to design the curriculum, learning activities, assessment, and feedback strategies to help students move through the portal to a transformed understanding."