

Managing the Monsters of Doubt: Liminality, Threshold Concepts and Leadership Learning

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Abstract

In this article we argue that management and business undergraduate students who are engaged in learning about leadership occupy a liminal space or state of between-ness. Drawing on anthropological conceptualizations of liminality in which those undergoing liminal rituals must grapple with symbolic monsters, we point to the experience of doubt and uncertainty as 'monsters' with which students must come to terms. We link this to scholarship that characterises dealing with uncertainty as a central element of leadership practice. Drawing on notions of 'threshold concepts', we suggest that students experience the monster of doubt as they progress in their learning experience and that there are a number of potential ways students might 'think like a leadership scholar'. We set out some opportunities for leadership educators to engage students with threshold concepts as they seek to become familiar with 'doubt' as central to the study and practice of leadership. Applying a liminality framework to the understanding of threshold concepts helps to identify threshold concepts as crucial to learning, infused with cultural assumptions, and situated within an understanding of the student experience.

Keywords Liminality, threshold concepts, leadership learning, education and development

Introduction

This article contributes to knowledge on teaching and learning leadership within higher education by exploring the experiences of doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity within the studying for and learning of leadership. In so doing, we develop the findings of a recent article published in *Management Learning* (Yip and Raelin, 2012) that relates threshold concepts to teaching leadership practice. Our discussion, however, demonstrates how the concept of liminality (Turner 1969; 1979; 1987) can articulate undergraduate students' positions of 'being on a threshold' between one identity and another as they develop new and transformative understandings. We explain why we have identified doubt and anxiety about many aspects of the learning process as symbolic liminal 'monsters' experienced by these students. We then relate this discussion to the notion of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005, 2006; Korosteleva, 2010) – concepts which, once grasped, can facilitate the learning of 'troublesome knowledge' which can result in perspective transformation.

The liminal aspects of learning activities in relation to threshold concepts have been discussed by Meyer and Land (2003) and more recently by Wright and Gilmore (2012). Our work goes beyond these recent articles, by drawing more fully on the anthropological literature, from which the concept of liminality originated, to offer a richer and more complex understanding of the links between threshold concepts and liminality. Understanding liminality in relation to threshold concepts has theoretical and practical implications for students and educators of leadership studies. For example, understanding links between liminality and threshold concepts in leadership studies enables us to build on Wright and Gilmore's recent work on 'thinking like a management scholar' by highlighting a number of ways students can 'think like a leadership scholar'.

We also show that by situating threshold concepts within the liminal process, it is possible to identify a broader range of threshold concepts within leadership learning than just those relating to theories of leadership such as situational and shared leadership (c.f. Yip and Raelin, 2012). Rather, threshold concepts occur where students experience doubt and confusion about an aspect of leadership theory and practice, which requires them to alter their perspective. Our focus on bringing liminality to bear on the multiplicity of undergraduate learning experiences, enables us to take the leadership educator, as well as the diverse backgrounds and understandings of undergraduate students, into account when considering threshold concepts as opportunities to grapple with the monster of doubt. We use our own experiences as leadership educators in two British business schools as a basis for understanding the implications of acting as 'host' of these liminal processes and offer some exploratory thoughts as to how liminal hosts might enable students to successfully negotiate their own, personal monsters of doubt.

Our experiences are derived from delivering two undergraduate leadership 'modules' (semester-long leadership courses), often taken as part of undergraduate Business Management programmes at two universities in the United Kingdom. One module explores leadership as a set of practices and interactions in response to a range of individual, organizational and societal challenges (Pedler *et al* 2010). It is taken by approximately 100 students every year and is available to undergraduates in

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their second or third year of study, from all disciplines in the University. No prior management experience or theoretical knowledge is expected. Content is delivered through a series of interactive, participative workshops, each of which deals with a new challenge such as 'developing a vision' or 'making change'. These workshops include small experiential group activities centred on a specific leadership challenge, or class debates precipitated by guest speakers. The module is assessed through individual assignments in which students are asked to relate leadership theories to either their experiences of the leadership activities undertaken in class, or to examples of leadership challenges which interest them from current affairs, historical, or fictional accounts.

The second undergraduate leadership module is delivered as an elective as part of a business management undergraduate degree in the third year of study. Students (between 50 and 90 in total) experience lectures on a number of leadership studies topics, followed by tutorials where they work with case study material based on written case studies and film analysis. Students also engage in some small-scale experiential exercises based on basic management simulations and role-play activity. In both modules, the student cohort incorporates a diverse mix of home and international students from a variety of countries, and a small minority have managerial experience.

Drawing on our experiences of designing, delivering and assessing students on these modules, we suggest that helping undergraduates grasp threshold concepts can facilitate their diverse, personal encounters with the liminal monsters of doubt and ambiguity, but that there are challenges within this for both the teacher and student of leadership studies, often relating to issues of power and identity. In short, we demonstrate that by implicating liminality in how threshold concepts contribute to the leadership learning process, we can shed light on the challenges relating to identity, transformation and power implicit in studying leadership.

Betwixt and Between: Learning Leadership in a Liminal Space

The concept of liminality is characterised by Turner (1979; 1987) as a state of between-ness, applying to individuals on the verge of a different stage of being. It originates from the anthropological study of tribal rituals, such as carnivals, pilgrimages, rites of passage or rituals in which the normative assumptions, relationships and conventional practices are suspended. For this reason liminal moments have been described as 'moments in and out of time,' (Delanty, 2010: 31), during which a transition occurs, transporting an individual from one state of being to another (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1969).

Liminality has been used by anthropologists to examine the implications and function of rites and rituals for tribal cultures and those who inhabit them. One example of a liminal ritual within a Western culture includes the marriage ceremony, marking the transition from single life to a new, shared life together. Van Gennep (1960) suggests that subjects undertaking a liminal ritual experience three phases, which are:

- 1) *Separation*, in which the individuals are *symbolically* (and occasionally, for the purposes of the ritual, physically) detached from their previous role in the social structure and from related social ties and conventions. This separation is not always physical – indeed, during many rituals such as weddings or christenings, the liminal subject is surrounded by family members. However the symbolic separation and ‘difference’ from other members from the party is notified through the conferment of a new ‘name’ onto the liminal subject such as ‘bride’ or ‘groom’ – which signals that they are undergoing a liminal transition. Separation has also has an association with leadership, where leaders have often been framed at a distance (physical, symbolic, or virtual) or as a ‘heroic’ character (Grint, 2010), Grint goes on to describe leadership as sacred, separated in some way from followers. This separation, therefore, seems relevant to leadership learning and links to the notion of liminality.
- 2) *Limen* or threshold, a state of transition which Turner (1969: 80) describes as ‘a cultural realm that has few of the attributes of the previous or coming state’, in which the liminal subject is ‘passenger.’
- 3) *Reincorporation*, in which the transition is consummated, often ceremoniously, and the subject regains a stable, usually higher status identity with clearly defined roles and obligations in relation to others, and is once again expected to behave in line with culturally defined norms and ethical frameworks.

Following on from Ford and Harding’s (2007) observation of many leadership development interventions being held outside the organisation and thus in a liminal space, we bring the notion of liminality to bear on the undergraduate experience of learning about leadership. We draw on reflections from teaching leadership modules on leadership, management and business studies programmes within two UK based business schools. From this experience, and developing arguments made by Wright and Gilmore (2012), we suggest that it is possible to apply van Gennep’s (1960) three phases of liminal passage to the learning processes of undergraduate management and business students. Whilst students are not necessarily physically detached from previous social ties or conventions, their new title of ‘leadership studies student’ identifies them as involved in engaging with and learning about new, transformative ideas and concepts that may differ from previously held assumptions about leadership or management – assumptions which Wright and Gilmore (2012) have termed ‘pre-liminal’ understandings.

Meyer and Land (2003) and Wright and Gilmore (2012) identify the undergraduate learning process as as a time of liminal passage, in which students learn how to think ‘like a management scholar’ (Wright and Gilmore 2012: 625) by applying scholarly techniques and protocols that are conventional within the discipline. They point to threshold concepts (aspects of the curriculum where students get ‘stuck’) as key to the passage through liminality. Following a successful passage through this realm, reincorporation is signified as students learn how to apply new understandings and epistemologies to existing assumptions and experiences. Wright and Gilmore (2012) call this ‘post-liminal’ knowledge.

Whilst others have pointed out the liminal implications of undergraduate education (Meyer and Land 2005, Cook-Sather and Alter 2011), our argument focuses on leadership students, and their experience of doubt in this liminal context. We argue this context is of particular note because the experience of doubt is a central thread through the processes of *learning about* and *doing* leadership.

Our argument in this article is that encounters with 'doubt' are central to understanding the learning process in leadership studies, and regarding this process as a liminal passage, laced with power relationships and transformative potential, is essential. A closer inspection of the anthropological literature confirms this: Turner suggests that a liminal space offers its occupants the possibility to engage in transformative practices: trying out, questioning and adopting or rejecting new identities, ways of acting, and frames of reference. He likens the function of the liminal to the subjunctive mood in verbs, regarding it as 'a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen' (1979: 465). As such, the learning process, seen through the lens of liminality, is a sacred place in time and space, a kind of symbolic social limbo, loaded with promise, potential, and the unknown (Turner 1969). Understanding the learning process as a liminal passage provides a way of articulating the experiences of management and business studies undergraduates as they negotiate the links between leadership, learning, identity and transformation.

Presiding over the undergraduate liminal space is the leadership educator. Anthropologists have noted that liminal rituals require the presence of a 'master of ceremonies', who supports the liminal subjects in their passage through liminal space, and whose role is to 'maintain order once the stabilities of everyday life are dissolved in the separation' (Horvath and Thomassen, 2008, p13). From the students' perspective, the leadership educator is the permanent occupant or 'host' of the liminal space, who provides the conditions and support, that make learning possible, and who thereby facilitates a potential transformation in how the student sees him or herself, and the world around them. This is not to say that the leadership educator can determine the outcome of the transformation process, or is in some way immune to the transformative potential of liminal spaces. Most leadership educators in Higher Education are themselves likely to have encountered doubt' as undergraduates and they may well be familiar with its presence. Yet their role in the learning process continuously exposes them to new uncertainties and opportunities to think about teaching in new ways, which are potentially transformative for both student and 'host'.

Indeed, the metaphor of host has been used in the scholarship on leadership practice (Wheatley, 2004), because it characterises the way in which leaders work with others in conditions of complexity and uncertainty – in short: where there is doubt. Our own experiences as 'hosts' within business and management education give us cause to reflect on how students come to terms with doubt, and how doubt is implicated in the role of host itself. As we suggest later, hosting liminal transformations is fraught with tensions and challenges for the educator. Firstly though, we set out the dangers of doubt as experienced by the student.

The Monster of Doubt: Coming to Terms with Uncertainty in Learning Leadership

Despite its links with the sacred, there are dangers associated with inhabiting a liminal space in which previous identities dissolve and new ones begin to form – dangers associated with the indefinable or incoherent (Douglas 1966). Turner (1987) points out that those occupying liminal spaces may encounter symbolic ‘monsters’. Encountering the monster – and possibly sometimes taming, mastering or overcoming it, indicates that the threshold has been crossed, and the transition from one state of being to another is nearing an end. These monsters can be witnessed in many cultural rituals. One such example is the monster Nian who is said to appear in China on New Year’s Eve, terrorising children and eating livestock. Just before midnight, firecrackers are let off in public places to frighten the mythical beast away. The following day sees families and friends visiting one another to offer their good luck and congratulations for the new season, confirming that the transition to Spring has taken place (Lü 2010).

Monsters tend to appear at times of ‘un-knowing’ (like during the transition to a New Year, during which ‘*anything might happen*’) and are linked to the ambiguity and ‘blurring of distinctions’ within liminality (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003). We argue that students of leadership studies programmes commonly encounter symbolic monsters in the course of their learning, derived from the ambiguity and incoherence characteristic of the liminal space they occupy. In common with many others who experience liminality, students of leadership experience a ‘blurring of distinctions’ in relation to the way they understand the notion of leadership, their own leadership practice and their ability to view the world in terms of what is ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’. The liminal monster experienced by undergraduate students therefore takes the form of the doubt and uncertainty they experience in relation to many aspects of their leadership studies.

There may well be other subjects besides leadership studies where the learning process has liminal aspects, in particular where students are faced with uncertainty over ‘how to think like a [insert discipline of choice] scholar’. The work of Meyer and Land (2005) and Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) would suggest that this is the case. However our argument about leadership studies is that the experience of such uncertainty is central to both *learning* and *practicing* leadership, and that therefore studying leadership can help to prepare students in some ways for the experience of doing it, by encouraging them to become familiar with the presence of doubt. This is not to say that learning and doing leadership are the same thing – but the experience of uncertainty is something that binds them together.

In the following section, we explain in greater detail why doubt is a key element of learning and practicing leadership. We set out its characteristics as ‘liminal monster’, and its central role in providing leadership learning for management and business studies undergraduates. We then demonstrate how understanding doubt in this way can offer insight into the grasping of ‘threshold concepts’, which act as portals to new understandings and facilitate the accumulation of troublesome knowledge: which is difficult to grasp but can help students bridge the liminal divide.

Experiencing Doubt within Leadership Education and Practice

Our own experiences of acting as host to students' encounters with doubt-monsters have been the impetus for this article. One such monster came to our attention after one of us received an email from an undergraduate student in which the student had pasted a sentence from their draft assignment followed by the question '[Author Name], can you tell me whether this counts as critical thinking?'

The monster of doubt may have many origins and take many guises. Some encounters with this monster may be more valuable and transformative than others. The student in the above example may be doubt-ful about what critical thinking really 'is', or about what represents a high quality piece of scholarship in the eyes of the educator. Either (or both) are possible given that students are assessed on their critical thinking skills in the assignment in question, and given that this is reflected in the School's qualitative assessment marking criteria, which is very familiar to students.

However, doubt is not simply a lack of understanding about new theories or where new knowledge 'fits' with old knowledge – although this may be part of it. As hosts of liminal spaces, we often encounter anxious students who are struggling to come to terms not just with the complexity of leadership theories, but with the practices of critique, analysis and evaluation which are crucial elements of scholarship. This is acknowledged by Wright and Gilmore (2012: 625), who argue that the underlying way of thinking about management, or 'thinking like a management scholar,' represents a significant challenge for students undergoing liminal transition.

Here, we articulate three ways in which doubt is implicated and experienced by students of leadership.

1) Confusion over the plethora of preconceived ideas and theoretical notions of leadership.

Leadership is the focus of so much discussion, story-telling, and mythologizing that Alvesson and Spicer (2011) suggest, on the back cover of their latest book, that '*we live in a leadership-obsessed society*'. Ford and Harding (2007) have also commented on the state of the contemporary business and management discourse in their paper – 'Move over management: We are all leaders now.' These authors highlight the obsession for leadership within contemporary Western discourse. This discourse appears reflected in our experience of students arriving at college to study leadership, brimming with their own certainties, preconceptions, experiences and accounts of what 'is' and what 'isn't' leadership. Leadership educators have reported in the literature (e.g. Yip and Raelin, 2012, Wright and Gilmore 2012) that the leadership assumptions of undergraduate students often bear resemblance to the 'great man leadership theories' (Carlisle, 1866), which assume leaders are 'born, not made' and focus on the characteristics of individual leaders (Bolden et al 2011). However, leadership educators often encourage students to challenge this notion because it focuses on the leader as individual at the expense of exploring leadership at organizational or societal levels,

neglecting the implications of context, followership, and the socio-cultural construction of what leadership 'means' (Bolden et al 2011).

2) *Encounters with doubt themselves offer transformative potential.*

Asking challenging questions about how leadership can be studied and understood can lead to the overturning of previously held convictions. For example, in their discussion regarding making doubt generative in a research context, Locke *et al* (2008: 908), state:

"The living state of doubt drives and energizes us to generate possibilities, try them out, modify, transform, or abandon them, try again, and so on, until new concepts or patterns are generated that productively satisfy our doubt."

Similar to Locke *et al.* (2008), we see doubt as a living condition. Just as Locke *et al* (2008) advocate the cultivation of doubt in relation to belief in the research process, we encourage cultivating doubt in relation to belief in the leadership learning process. Locke *et al* suggest that belief without doubt produces action without examination, which is often inappropriate to the specific context.

This is important from a leadership learning perspective given the focus on and importance of context with regards to leadership more generally (e.g. Fairhurst, 2009; Fry & Kriger; 2009; Jepson, 2009; Liden and Antonakis, 2009; Osborn, *et al.*, 2002; Osborn and Marion, 2009; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006). This leads us to our third related reason as to the significance of doubt: the relevance of doubt to leadership practice itself.

3) *The experience of doubt, and learning to cope with it, is central to leadership development and practice* (Sinclair, 2007; Weick, 2001).

Our argument here is that a leadership course which does not require students to experience the 'monsters' of ambiguity and doubt lacks an element of experience which Sinclair (2007) and others (e.g. Gosling and Mintzberg 2004) argue is crucial to learning how leadership is *done*. Social constructionist perspectives on leadership suggest that the *doing* of leadership involves making sense of messy, competing and ambiguous frames of reference (Grint 2005, Weick *et al* 2005). Those we refer to as 'leaders' are required to cope with the uncertainty of the future whilst enacting an illusion of security and safety to those around them. Weick (2001) has characterised leadership practice as 'the legitimation of doubt': the acceptance that doubt is a central part of our social experience, explicitly pointing to the role of 'doubting' in developing leadership wisdom (1998, 2001). Those scholars who view leadership (e.g. Kempster and Stewart, 2010) or management (e.g. Parker, 2004) as a process of becoming highlight that it is an anxiety-ridden process (Ford, 2010; Grint, 2010; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Parker, 2004; Schedlitzki, et al., 2011). Therefore, helping students to successfully engage with the liminal monster of 'doubt' is a *vital* part of teaching leadership studies.

Locke *et al* (2008) identify three strategic principles, which may help leadership educators facilitate students grappling with this monster: (1) embracing not knowing; (2) nurturing hunches, and (3) disrupting order. In what follows, we explore how 'threshold concepts' can be used as way of helping

students grapple with the monster of doubt and suggest that Locke *et al*'s strategic principles play a core role in students grappling with threshold concepts. Indeed, the authors (Locke *et al*, 2008: 911) illustrate an example of a student overcoming a threshold concept, with what they call a 'Eureka' moment of 'Oh, I get it!' It seems, therefore, that Locke and colleagues appear to be discussing doubt in relation to threshold concepts, but not necessarily recognising this theoretical connection. We contribute in this paper by making this link more explicit. We do so by exploring literature that has addressed the use of threshold concepts in teaching and learning in higher education, drawing on Yip and Raelin's (2012) work on threshold concepts in leadership studies and Wright and Gilmore's (2012) in relation to management learning. We show how locating threshold concepts within the framework of liminality sheds light on both the efficacy of these concepts themselves, and the challenges faced by teachers as they use them to help students bridge liminal divides.

Threshold Concepts: Resources for Tackling the Monster of Doubt?

Meyer and Land (2003) and Wright and Gilmore (2012) have argued that threshold concepts are implicated in ensuring that students successfully cross the liminal divide and learn how to think 'like a management scholar'. Threshold concepts, according to Meyer and Land, are places in any curriculum where students 'get stuck', but which once grasped allow students to access new understandings (Meyer and Land 2005). Herein, therefore, we are suggesting that some forms of doubt can be evidenced by students 'getting stuck'.

Viewed from the anthropological perspective of liminality, threshold concepts can therefore be thought of as resources that help students grapple with the 'monsters of doubt they encounter in their study of leadership. Meyer and Land (2005) identify five characteristics possessed by threshold concepts:

- 1) They have transformative potential – the potential to cause 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow 1991); that is, new ways of conceptualizing, challenging and integrating experiences and assumptions. Once learned, therefore, threshold concepts may have a transformative effect on the students' sense of self (Davies 2006). An example of this might be the grasping of the implications of a Marxist or feminist political standpoint. Within contemporary leadership literature, this might occur when students grasp a feminine voice in the leadership discourse (e.g. Ford, 2010).
- 2) They are integrative: allowing students to identify patterns in the learning material and make links between previous and new understandings, and work through the implications of these relationships.
- 3) They are irreversible: once grasped, a threshold concept is unlikely to be un-learned and therefore any identity transformation is likely to be long-standing.
- 4) They are troublesome: unsettling, off-putting and incommensurate with the student's intuitive understanding (Perkins 1999).

5) They establish boundaries within certain areas of knowledge.

Although a relatively new concept within higher education (Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005, 2006; Korosteleva, 2010), common threshold concepts have been identified in some management areas such as responsible management and reflexive practice (Hibbert and Cunliffe, forthcoming), economics (e.g. Shanahan and Meyer, 2006; Reimann and Jackson, 2006) and accountancy (e.g. Lucas and Mladenovic, 2006). Meyer and Land (2003) for example, identify the notion of 'opportunity cost' as a threshold concept for economics students, because it is cognitively troublesome; that is, 'difficult, counter-intuitive, and alien' (Perkins 1999).

Yip and Raelin (2012) identify situational leadership and shared leadership as threshold concepts within the field of leadership studies. Through case study research involving undergraduate leadership studies, they discovered that these concepts were difficult to grasp because students had previously associated leadership with the traits and characteristics of leaders. They highlighted that if they showed that leadership required different leadership skills or attributes in different contexts (c.f. situational leadership) or that influence could be dispersed across all levels of an organizational hierarchy (c.f. shared leadership), this led to distinct shifts in the students' understandings of their own potential ('Am I a leader?') and of leadership theory and practice more generally ('What counts as leadership?').

Further to these findings regarding more mainstream leadership theories like situational and shared leadership, we believe other leadership perspectives may also act as threshold concepts for students studying leadership. For example, notions of the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich 1985), or of leadership as a performative effect – the fact that leadership may not exist outside of dialogue and discourse and could be influenced by professional voices (Ford *et al.*, 2008) as well as other more unusual, critical, relational and discursive approaches to leadership studies (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2009; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst, 2009; Ford, 2010; Ford and Harding, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Western, 2008; Zoller and Fairhurst 2007), may prove a challenge to students who come to studies with preconceived ideas of leadership based around individualism. In our modules, students often describe leaders who are popular in the media, such as Alan Sugar, Richard Branson or Steve Jobs. Not only are these masculinised, Western interpretations of leadership (Ford, 2010), they represent what Ford and Harding (2007) see as memories or encounters with leaders and leadership that derive from heroic tales from business. A threshold concept that we are familiar with, therefore, is the challenge of overcoming the impossibility of "... *someone to hear the word 'leader' and dissociate it from its earlier meanings*" (Ford and Harding, 2007: 482). This impossibility is therefore connected to encouraging students to move from seeing 'leaders' to seeing a sociological representation of leadership, the shift from conceptualising leadership as individual to viewing leadership as a sociologically constructed phenomenon (Grint 2005) or a distributed phenomenon (Bolden, 2011; Brown and Hosking, 1986; Edwards, 2011; Gronn, 2002; 2008; Harris 2004; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009; Ray *et al.*, 2004; Thorpe *et al.*, 2011).

Deepening Understanding of Threshold Concepts in Relation to Studying Leadership

We are positing here that the character of threshold concepts is broader, deeper and more complex than Yip and Raelin (2012) and Wright and Gilmore (2012) suggest. Two conceptual points must be made in relation to this argument, both of which strengthen the links between doubt-monsters and threshold concepts.

The first point relates to the *connectedness* of threshold concepts. Wright and Gilmore (2012) point out that threshold concepts rest within a threshold conception – a way of thinking or ‘underlying game imperceptible to the student’ (Land et al 2005: 58). The implication is that threshold concepts should not be viewed as isolated from one another. We develop this to show that threshold concepts are neither experienced one at a time, nor do they represent a fixed, linear route through liminality (pre-liminal, liminal, post-liminal). In our second, related point, we also argue that threshold concepts cannot be viewed as separate from the student experience.

In relation to the first point, our experiences as hosts tell us that threshold concepts act with and on one another, nested in hierarchies and networks, so that once one threshold concept is grasped, others come into reach. Once a student has learned to question some of the assumptions embedded in individualistic perspectives on leadership, for example, other ways of understanding become available, such as emergent, shared or distributed leadership. Once a ‘one size fits all’ approach to leadership has been challenged, students are able to access threshold concepts like situational leadership or notions of leadership as a social construction. This argument supports, to an extent, Wright and Gilmore’s (2012) suggestion that helping students understand the threshold conception, the underlying game of how to ‘think like a management scholar’, is key to the successful grasp of threshold concepts. But we cannot accept that one ‘threshold conception’ is the foundation of all leadership studies, situated as it is across fields as diverse as history, philosophy, sociology, psychology and anthropology. Indeed, scholars have highlighted the contested nature of the term leadership, and acknowledged the value of viewing the subject from many different perspectives (Billsberry, 2009; Bolden *et al* 2011; Grint, 2005), each of which add something of value to our understanding. This would suggest, therefore, that there can be many ways of ‘thinking like a leadership scholar’. Hence the liminal process of studying leadership is not a simple, linear one. Doubt-monsters are not encountered or tackled in a predictable chronology. As a result, the phases of understanding in relation to threshold concepts mentioned by the authors (pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal), are not encountered one-at-a-time, in succession, as these authors suggest. Rather, just as threshold concepts can be encountered simultaneously, or nested within one another, so too can these different phases of liminal experience. We cannot assume that the student experience is fixed or ‘non-liminal’ before or after they have grappled with a threshold concept because they may be experiencing a different stage of liminality in relation to other concepts.

Furthermore, in relation to our second point, undergraduate cohorts are diverse in terms of age, level of experience, social and cultural background, and nationality. Each student will have different experiences or preconceptions, based on background such as international and managerial experience, which may enable threshold concepts to be grasped or challenged in different manners and varying chronologies.

The route taken through the maze of threshold concepts depends on the students' subjective experiences and approach to learning, and on their own ability to manage uncertainty as they experience it in theory and practice. Whilst grasping the limitations of universal or individualistic perspectives acts as a route for some of our students to access new knowledge about situational leadership, these concepts might equally be accessed in the opposite direction, so that, for other students grasping the assumptions within situational leadership theory leads them to question a 'one best way' approach to leadership. In fact, understanding and 'hosting' the different routes through the maze of portals that students take is one of the challenges faced by educators like ourselves as we seek to help large numbers of very different students bridge the liminal divide. Threshold concepts and conceptions cannot be accessed in the abstract, but are comprehended in relation to – or possibly out of – the undergraduates' own experiences and preconceptions.

The doubts and uncertainties faced by our students take other forms too, for example, relating to their own experiences, their assumptions about the value of studying leadership, or the skills required for academic study. For example, take the student mentioned earlier who wanted to know what 'counts' as critical thinking. A student's ability to reflect critically on his or her own experience fits the key criteria characteristics of threshold concepts defined by Meyer and Land (2005, see above): by reflecting on experiences students may begin to look at their actions from a new perspective (transformative potential), they may begin to see patterns and links which help them to access other knowledge (integrative), they are not likely to 'un-learn' these reflective skills (irreversible), they may access knowledge which is 'troublesome' because it does not fit pre-existing understandings of scholarship as the property of ivory towers and textbooks, and they also enter into a new domain of knowledge that they can engage and describe (boundaries).

Threshold concepts are therefore not only the portals to a deeper theoretical understanding, nor do they stand alone or in isolation from other threshold concepts in their interpretation by students. Once grasped, they offer opportunities to view phenomena (including the students' own life experiences) from new perspectives. It is this *potential to transform identities*, which situates the threshold concept within the liminal context, and to which we now draw our attention. In what follows, we articulate the transformative potential of threshold concepts more fully in relation to a framework of liminality and the monster of doubt. We set out the implications for educator and student in relation, bringing notions of power to bear on the transformative process.

Threshold Concepts and Identity Work

We have shown how threshold concepts have implications for learning that resonate beyond simply acting as places in the leadership literature where students 'get stuck'. They have been usefully described as 'portals' (Korosteleva, 2010, Meyer and Land, 2006) embedded in a liminal context where nothing is certain. Grasping a threshold concept is not easy to do, but it enables students to experience a transformed way of understanding, interpreting or viewing a particular aspect of leadership (Yip and Raelin, 2012). As a consequence a student may have an enhanced view of the leadership theory and practice or even a different 'world view' (Meyer and Land, 2006).

It follows that the learning process, when seen through the lens of liminality, is linked to identity work - that is, it has implications for a student's self-interpretation and their relationships with others. Indeed, the potential for threshold concepts to be transformative (Davies 2006), that is to impact on the student's sense of themselves and their place in the world, is the reason why they have been linked to 'rites of passage' (Meyer and Land, 2005) in which learning and transformation can occur, and to 'post-liminal' understanding in which the student becomes able to 'think like a [leadership] scholar' (Wright and Gilmore 2012).

It has been noted elsewhere that doing leadership, talking about leadership and developing leadership capacity are forms of identity work (Svenningsson and Larsson 2006, Ford et al 2008, Cunliffe 2009, Carroll and Levy 2010). Viewing both leadership and learning as sites for identity work has implications for how leadership educators, as 'hosts' of liminal learning processes, might teach leadership. Notions of leadership or leadership development as identity work might be threshold concepts in themselves, which once understood act as resources that broaden understanding and offer new perspectives on leadership processes. However, since threshold concepts are themselves tools in developing new perspectives, they too are implicated in the process of developing the self through learning.

Understanding these interstices significantly affects how 'hosts' might employ threshold concepts within this liminal process, with the aim of facilitating reflexive awareness – itself considered a cornerstone of leadership development (Sinclair 2011). Kempster and Stewart (2010) highlight the need to develop leadership through a process of situated learning that involves consideration of historical and social context factors through an interaction with significant others. With these views in mind we suggest that hosts of the liminal process that is leadership learning might also encourage students to reflect on various aspects of leadership and leadership development in relation to their own experiences.

Applying a variety of threshold concepts such as performativity, experiential reflection, shared leadership, or social constructionism to leadership, enables students to 'try out' a variety of perspectives, apply them to their own practices or to case study examples, and identify strengths and

weaknesses in each. This resembles the work of other authors regarding encouraging students to become academically-informed, reflexive practitioners (Cunliffe, 2002; Ford *et al*, 2008).

The liminal context here is vital because it provides a place in which students can experiment with ideologies, identities and practices that differ from those they employ teleologically in their lives outside the classroom. For example, Ford and colleagues (2008) draw on Butler (1993) to suggest that the leadership literature invokes a leader-identity that managers feel pressurised to embody. Ford *et al* move away from the dominant psychological perspective of a unitary construction by an individual (Sinclair, 2011) towards multiple competing identities. Leadership viewed through this paradigm is not one fixed role or identity that we can adopt or develop. In the liminal classroom, therefore, students are encouraged towards an awareness of different selves as leaders and in doing so are also encouraged to strengthen voices of alternative leadership paradigms than the heroic, masculine, aggressive, self-reliant and individualistic model.

This kind of reflexive practice requires an awareness of the doubts and anxieties that may be experienced during the process of becoming and being a leader. By grasping a range of threshold concepts, students are able to explore a variety of potential reasons for their discomfort during encounters with doubt, and to examine their responsibility in the learning process for acting on that discomfort (Hibbert and Cunliffe, forthcoming).

Familiarity with Doubt as part of Learning and Leading.

These arguments follow a similar thread as in Hibbert and Cunliffe (forthcoming), but by situating the notion of threshold concepts more clearly within a framework on liminality, we do not suggest that grasping these concepts should be expected to help students of leadership 'conquer' the monster of doubt and uncertainty. This would be unhelpful because as we have argued above, doubt and uncertainty are in fact central to the study and practice of leadership.

Rather than allowing students to overcome doubt, each new threshold concept, once grasped, helps them to acknowledge and come to terms with doubt's presence by offering an additional 'way of seeing' theory and practice. Threshold concepts are therefore helpful tools, which facilitate perspective transformation by encouraging acceptance of and familiarity with the incoherence that is common, and, we argue, necessary, to the undergraduate experience and practice of leadership.

The monster of doubt can be grappled with, or perhaps even managed, but never overcome. Accepting the presence of doubt offers students ways of becoming comfortable with the existence of many perspectives on leadership, and with the multiplicity of leader-identities that are identified in the scholarly literature and in practice. In addition, familiarity with doubt offers a valuable insight into the 'doubt-full' practice of leadership in organizations. However, the idea that threshold concepts are part of a web of normative assumptions which lead students to regulate their beliefs and practices in line with certain discourses about what leadership 'is' and 'is not', leads us to question the role of

leadership educator in the liminal passages and transformations of undergraduates. In the next section, we demonstrate how the anthropological literature on liminality can shed light on the complex relationships and ambiguities that shape the learning process for teacher and student alike.

Leadership Educator: Spirit Guide or Trickster?

Whilst we recognise that occupying liminality has a potentially transformational effect on the self, it is important to note that this transformation may be sudden or it may take a few weeks, months or even years (Meyer and Land, 2006), and that the transformative process might act on the perception of the subject (leadership) or the perception of the self (Davies, 2006).

From a liminal perspective, by engaging students in discussion over threshold concepts, leadership educators are accompanying the student in this journey and enabling them to access new understandings that lead to self-transformation. Yet the leadership educator is not separate from the tensions of 'betwixt and 'between'. The anthropological literature reveals a number of archetypal figures, which may be present in the liminal space. These figures enable us to understand the role of 'host', presiding over the passages of undergraduate students in a variety of ways.

The host is said to walk with liminal subjects as they encounter doubt, and keeps them safe on their liminal journey, and guides their passage to reincorporation (Campbell 1993). The role of the master of ceremonies of liminal spaces could be described as to that of a spirit guide similar to St Christopher, who is thought according to Roman Catholic tradition to protect and guide travellers on their journeys. An alternative metaphor is the Japanese martial arts coach or 'sensei', meaning 'one who has gone before'. This metaphor indicates that the host has faced similar monsters themselves during their transition towards new understandings of leadership, and is able to identify and point out some of the hazards and uncertainties that the student might encounter. As such, the host might be well placed to help the student develop an 'attitude of wisdom', using threshold concepts as a means to incorporate the process of doubting into the students' approach to knowing, in a way that helps to contain their anxieties about dealing with doubt (Weick 1998).

However, given that leadership educators offer students ways of understanding threshold concepts as tools, which enable them to grapple with their liminal monsters, educators too are participating in the process through which 'new' norms become internalised, performed and regulated by these liminal subjects. In this more critical vein, threshold concepts as described by Meyer and Land (2006) might be interpreted as part of a totalising or normalising effect based on Foucauldian notions of self-discipline (Foucault 1979, 1980). Certainly, threshold concepts need to be understood as embedded within relations of power through which they achieve legitimacy and relevance as 'knowledge' (Foucault 1979, 1980).

An understanding of the normalising potential within threshold concepts, which open up new ways of seeing the world and the self, requires us to see the role of the host of this transformative process in a

more ambiguous light. If leadership educators offer students ways to grasp new perspectives, they could be simultaneously breaking down the certainty and safety of known frameworks for understanding the world. The anthropological literature tells us that there is another way to see the role of the leadership educator. Liminal subjects undergoing cultural rituals have often been exposed to the antics of a 'trickster' (Douglas 1966), who can take advantage of their uprooted vulnerability and expose them to false assumptions and trickery. Tricksters in cultural rituals 'defy category' (Ellis 1993) and are defined by place rather than characteristics. They occupy liminal sites characterised by the monster of doubt: confusion, subversion, and the suspension of traditional hierarchies. Like the leadership educator who is perceived by students as permanently occupying the classroom, the trickster is perceived by liminal subjects as the constant occupant of the liminal site – he or she has no interest in leaving. At home in liminality, the interest of the trickster is to perpetuate confusion and misunderstanding (Horvath and Tomassen, 2008). We wonder how many students have felt this way after their leadership educator has set out for them a particular 'tricky' assignment. Within cultural rituals, a trickster can be a bumbling buffoon (as lecturers are often no doubt perceived by their undergraduate students) or a hero (Radin 1972). Commonly however, his or her actions have destructive consequences for liminal subjects, who are vulnerable to the machinations of others who might distort their perspectives. Coming into contact with a trickster is dangerous: a trickster can lead the liminal into making false assumptions, into having a false sense of security about their actions and place in the world. In making this claim we are not suggesting that undergraduates are easily duped by trickster-educators. Rather we are pointing out the vulnerability of liminal subjects as they encounter new ideas and are encouraged to leave old ones behind.

Given the Foucauldian assumption that knowledge is produced out of relations of power (1990), the leadership educator's role in making threshold concepts accessible to undergraduate students automatically places them, the educator, in the role of trickster. If leadership theories, or the techniques of 'thinking like a leadership scholar' are taught uncritically, or if the student comes from an educational background where the word of the educator is taken for granted, then consequently the student may perceive the educator as providing a set of 'truths' about leadership. By offering the student ways to grasp threshold concepts, the educator opens up routes through which the student can access and engage in discourses which produce different identities, giving them confidence in the processes of identity work which develop alongside their engagement with leadership theory and practice. The knowledge which produces these identities in the student is seductive because it is grounded in the power relations that configure the leadership educator as figure of authority, and dispenser of legitimate knowledge (Foucault 1979).

For us, the experience of being a leadership educator has also been one of doubt: constantly treading the tightrope between appearing as the purveyor of knowledge and truth and expressing uncertainty ourselves. This is reminiscent of Carroll and Levy's (2010) observation regarding differing kinds of agency in leadership development work. As Carroll and Levy point out, the ability and capacity to maintain alternative narratives is a vital part of leadership learning and development processes for both students and educators. Similarly, Hibbert and Cunliffe (forthcoming) highlight that educators

enter into different and ongoing roles – that of coach, mentor, counsel and so on. They suggest this comes from students and/or educators feeling unsettled and therefore developing a sense of dependency. So whilst experiencing doubt or feeling unsettled may be valuable within management or leadership learning, further monsters relating to dependency and identity may result.

Lessons from Liminality: Suggestions for a Liminality-sensitive Approach to Teaching Leadership.

As Pye (2005) has suggested, there is a need to examine relationships more closely in understanding leadership – and from our explorations in this paper, it seems that the relationships central to the *teaching* of leadership cannot be excluded from this examination. By bringing liminality to bear on the teaching and learning of leadership, we suggest that relationships between students, between students and educators and between educators themselves are an inherent part of the leadership learning process. This is particularly relevant given the potentially contradictory roles assigned to the leadership educator when considering the leadership learning process from a liminal perspective. The relationship between student and spirit guide / trickster can impact on how liminal monsters, including the monster of doubt, are encountered, dealt with, and accepted or rejected. Furthermore we suggest threshold concepts can help to mediate the relationship(s) between student, educator, and liminal monster.

A focus on relationships supports a dialogical approach to leadership education that encourages an analysis of ongoing relational and inter-subjective acts between people (Ford and Harding, 2007). A corresponding need for reflexivity upon our role as hosts of liminal spaces and of the experiences of students in the learning and development process (Hibbert and Cunliffe, forthcoming) might enable clearer identification of how threshold concepts might act as timely resources, when liminal monsters rear their ugly heads. We are not implying that dialogical practices can overcome inequalities or suspend the power relations that construct the student-teacher relationship, but they may offer opportunities where both sides might attempt to – partially – articulate them.

By incorporating dialogical and reflexive approaches similar to those suggested by Ford and Harding (2007) and Hibbert and Cunliffe (forthcoming), with an appreciation of differing agencies and narratives in the role leadership educator and/or student, a familiarity and comfortableness with doubt on the part of the student and educator may be achieved. As we have suggested previously, this is valuable because it offers students insight into how practising leaders cope with the monster of doubt and uncertainty in their own professions.

Processes of debate, critical reflection and questioning appear to be vital to overcoming the monster of doubt on both sides of this relationship. Wright and Gilmore (2012) have suggested that a series of exercises in which students are encouraged to make links between theories learned in class and management practice are useful tools to help students grasp the threshold conception of how to ‘think like a management scholar’. The modules we have used as a basis for our own reflections in this

article incorporate similar techniques. However, an understanding of the normative and homophilic processes at work in teaching students to 'think like we do' also requires that students and educators reflect together on *why* management or leadership scholars think this way, and what challenges this represents. As we have pointed out previously, there is no single threshold conception at the heart of leadership studies. There are many ways of 'thinking like a leadership scholar'.

Within our own teaching experiences, we have found participative, group-based exercises effective in stimulating discussion and reflection in this area. We offer the exercises below as potential examples of 'good practice', because they provide opportunities to explore the dynamics of peer and student-teacher relationships, within small-scale experiential leadership and team-based challenges.

- 1) Separating students into small groups and asking them to explore the University campus and photograph examples of disciplinary or normative forms of power, which shape their experiences as students. In subsequent discussions, students shared photographs depicting *inter alia* their leadership studies assignment marking criteria, library classification guides, and empty lecture theatres with rows of chairs facing the podium where the Leadership educator traditionally stands.
- 2) Asking groups of students to build representations of their learning experience from modelling clay, and articulate the reasons for their choice of imagery. Mazes, replete with dead-ends, traps, short-cuts and even on occasion, resident monsters and 'guiding' teachers, were commonly-chosen portrayals of what it is like to be an undergraduate studying leadership. Supporting our arguments about the monster of doubt, many students explained that their creations symbolised the uncertainties they faced: for example over the open-ended nature of leadership studies, or their experience of the perceived chasm between studying leadership and other typical management disciplines such as finance or economics.

Such activities have three objectives, each of which relates to perspective transformation. Firstly, the exercises are experiential in that they offer a means for students to undertake leadership in groups, in relation to a specific task. As a result, they allow students opportunities to reflect on their own leadership practice and that of others. Secondly, they are designed to make the most of the liminal aspect of the learning process by encouraging students to try out new ways of thinking about their own world. Finally, they provide a basis for discussing how the normative processes embedded in academic scholarship impact on teaching and learning relationships. Each of these objectives has the potential to alter the students' perception of themselves and their environment and to cause them to think differently about leadership theory and practice. They also offer opportunities for the leadership educator to reflect on the students' experiences of liminal passage and their role as host of the space in which this takes place.

Hosting Diverse Student Experiences of Liminal Passage

This approach to teaching and learning might well be especially challenging for students unused to a participative pedagogic style, and in particular, perhaps, for international students (Currie 2007). Many business schools in Western countries are welcoming an increasingly international and diverse student body (Maringe and Carter, 2007; Varga-Atkins and Ashcroft, 2004), who may have vastly different cultural assumptions and/or experiences of what it means to engage in a learning process (Ryan and Carroll 2005, Currie 2007). Doubt is likely to be a particular feature of these undergraduate students' preconceptions of both studying and practising leadership, as well as what it 'means' to be a leader, as they encounter new leadership ideas and ways of generating knowledge. Incorporating these differences into the discussions above might help students understand the varied contexts within which leadership is studied, practiced and experienced. In our own modules this has led to groups of students exploring the cultural assumptions behind those leaders who are feted by the media of their home countries, or who are recognised as effective or ineffective in their workplaces. In addition we use language as a basis for discussing leadership with international students, whereby we encourage the investigation of the construction of leadership by exploring the word for leadership in their own language (e.g. Jepson, 2010) and what this means in social, business and organisational settings.

Following from this exploratory article, we suggest that future work on threshold concepts and liminal monsters might compare and contrast the experiences of students. In this article we have argued that liminality is embedded in the learning process and therefore is experienced by potentially all leadership studies undergraduates. Within this cohort, there are certain groups who may experience differing or additional liminal challenges. For example, international students are often separated (geographically at least) from their pre-existing social ties and conventions, and may be subjected to a new and unfamiliar form of pedagogy from that which framed their educational experiences in their home countries (Currie 2007). The liminal passage of part-time or mature students, on the other hand, might incorporate different challenges such as combining the learning process with work or family commitments. Further research is needed to explore how leadership educators might acknowledge a variety of liminal monsters in their teaching practice, and how students and educators can learn to harness threshold concepts in relation to their own situated knowledge.

Conclusions

By situating a discussion of threshold concepts within a framework which takes the undergraduate experience of studying leadership as an one of liminal passage, we have contributed to understanding on the nature and function of threshold concepts, on the student learning process as a rite of passage, and on the role of the educator in helping students bridge the liminal divide. Our argument is that for leadership studies undergraduates, threshold concepts are valuable tools that help students negotiate a symbolic monster, a figure common to many liminal contexts that involve a blurring of distinctions. In this instance, the monster is doubt, often evidenced by students feeling 'stuck', and characterised by uncertainties about the validity of different kinds of knowledge, the multitude of

theoretical concepts and epistemologies they experience within leadership studies and the practice of leadership.

Yet it is this liminal process that enables the student to try out, perhaps to 'try on', a variety of new perspectives, mindsets and identities. Threshold concepts are the portals through which these perspectives are accessed. Negotiating a variety of these concepts is crucial because it enables the student to become comfortable with doubt, with the existence of contrasting, conflicting ways of thinking, knowing, doing and being. Becoming familiar with the monster of doubt is not only crucial to understanding the development of numerous theoretical perspectives on and constructions of leadership *theory*. We suggest it is also a vital experiential learning process, which familiarises students with a common way in which the *practice* of leadership is experienced: research indicates that *doing* leadership requires an acceptance of the presence of similar monsters (Sinclair, 2007; Weick, 2001). Dealing with doubt is central to *learning about leadership* because *the practice of leadership* itself is fraught with doubt and uncertainty.

Our arguments have identified the value of threshold concepts in the process of encountering the monster of doubt. We have identified that threshold concepts do not necessarily refer only to conceptual knowledge: other aspects of studying leadership such as valuing and reflecting on experience have also been shown to be transformative, irreversible, integrative and troublesome. We have also suggested that threshold concepts do not exist in isolation but are linked in networks and nested in hierarchies, and they are accessed via a series of routes or paths as students undertake a journey as 'passengers' through liminality. Finally, our contribution makes the point that there is not one single 'threshold conception' or way of 'thinking like a leadership scholar' – rather, the foundations of the disciplines on which leadership studies rests are multiple and shifting. As a result, familiarity with conflicting, contrasting and 'doubt-ful' knowledge is an even greater part of the experience of studying – and teaching – leadership.

We have begun to explore the implications of the lens of liminality for leadership educators in this article. Presiding over the liminal context, leadership educators might be masters of ceremony, guiding students through nests of threshold concepts that open up new opportunities for transformation. Yet leadership educators are not the purveyors of value-free knowledge. Rather, an understanding of the power relationships within which both the legitimacy of the leadership educator, and the knowledge they transfer, are similarly constituted, indicates the potential for leadership educators to act as 'tricksters'. Tricksters offer a false sense of security by presenting threshold concepts as truths rather than concepts to be engaged with critically. As a result, the role of the educator is, like any other liminal identity, chimerical, precarious and doubt-laden.

The presence of the host indicates that students do not encounter liminality by themselves. However, they are not dupes who absorb everything the host has to say. Undergraduates are also capable of 'trickster' activities in the liminal space – plagiarism being one example of how students might try to lull their educators into believing a false 'truth' about their engagement with course content.

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The relationship between leadership educator and undergraduate student is a central aspect of the liminal process and can act as a vehicle for critical reflection about the learning process, as well as the theory and practice of leadership. It is the means through which doubt is encountered, negotiated and legitimised by *both* parties. Examining, questioning and critiquing threshold concepts is one way in which, we argue, both educator and student can familiarise themselves with doubt-monsters in the creation of a productive and potentially transformational learning relationship.

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