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# Waikato Journal of Education

## Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 19, Issue 2, 2014

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## Transformed understandings: Subjective interpretation and the arts

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### Abstract

*This article focuses on two key stages in 2012 and 2013 research on threshold concept theory in a foundational BA course, ARTS101. Meyer, Land, and Baillie (2010) write of the need to identify the critical points where students get “stuck” so that their learning experiences may be a journey towards a new, “transformed” place of understanding (pp. ix-xii). We identified ‘subjective interpretation’ as a complex and crucial threshold concept in the arts and humanities. This multifaceted concept covers understanding the role and function of perspective, point of view, and voice in the critical appreciation and analysis of texts and other media. Our article outlines our research goals and how we constructed and revised the ARTS101 course to ascertain the points at which students were ‘stuck’ and to help students develop new and enlarged understandings. Drawing on our teaching experiences, assessment results, and students’ written and verbal responses we conclude that subjective interpretation is a troublesome concept that students at times struggle to master, but that carefully designed and aligned teaching, learning and assessment activities can assist in the journey to understanding (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010). Once students have made the ‘learning leap’ they are increasingly able to locate their own viewpoint within a range of critical interpretations.*

### Keywords

Threshold concepts, subjective interpretation, arts, perspective, unreliable narrator

### Introduction

This article describes two key stages in research conducted in 2012 and 2013 on teaching and learning threshold concepts (TCs) in a first year BA foundation course, ARTS101. The authors were part of a small multidisciplinary team working on a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative project (2012–2014), *Re-envisioning Tertiary Teaching and Learning of Difficult Concepts*. Drawing on Threshold Concept Theory (TCT) developed by Meyer and Land (2003), this collaborative project explored how threshold concept (TC) focused pedagogies and assessments can create opportunities for student learning of hard-to-grasp concepts (Harlow & Peter, 2014).

Meyer and Land (2003, 2005), Land, Meyer, and Smith (2008), and Land, Meyer and Baillie (2010), have led much of the research, defining TCs as critical points where students make ‘learning leaps’ as they journey towards a “new conceptual space and enter ... a postliminal state in which both the learner and the learning are transformed” (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010, pp. xxxvii, xi). Land,



Cousin, Meyer, and Davies's (2005) description of TCs as involving "a repositioning of self in relation to the subject" (p. 58) helped to shape our identification of 'subjective interpretation' as a potential TC in our foundation Arts paper. Students entering our programme often seemed ill equipped to think independently, to articulate their ideas coherently and to approach a variety of genres from a range of critical perspectives. By explicitly focussing on interpretation as a critical and subjective activity we hoped to assist students to become more self-directed learners and to make a transformative learning leap. We also wished to promote the kind of engaged learning that enables greater student "self-authorship" (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2008).

'Subjective interpretation' is the term we chose to describe a complex and crucial concept in the arts and humanities. As our research and teaching progressed, we began to realise that 'subjective interpretation' may well best be described as a 'meta-threshold' that serves as an umbrella term for a number of interrelated TCs. This meta-threshold involves being able to grasp that the act of reading a text, listening to a piece of music, watching a film, or looking at a sculpture or painting is a deeply subjective act on two levels. Firstly, texts and other works of art are often ambiguous and multi-layered, with authors, directors, artists and composers constructing works that can be interpreted in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels. Secondly, the interpretation of literature, music, film, and art involves a constant positioning of views within a wider body of critical discourse. These symbiotic skills are of fundamental importance to students studying the arts. Over the course of the two-year project, we came to appreciate that if students in our BA foundation course were to grasp the concept of subjective interpretation they also needed to master related concepts, in particular the role and function of perspective, point of view, and voice in the critical appreciation and analysis of texts and other media. Some of these emerged as likely TCs in their own right, and we became increasingly aware that a wider understanding of the meta-threshold of subjective interpretation is only possible once these integral thresholds are fully understood. This paper outlines some of the teaching and assessment strategies we employed to assist students in mastering the concepts of first and third person narrative points of view and another concept we learned, in the course of our research, that students struggled to grasp: the unreliable narrator.

Both our meta-threshold of subjective interpretation and the closely related thresholds of narrative point of view and the unreliable narrator share the transformative characteristics of TCs identified by Meyer and Land (2003). Our discussion focuses on this fundamental, *transformative* aspect of TCs. We argue that subjective interpretation is *integrative*, binding together interconnected disciplinary parts in a meta-threshold and linking together related arts disciplines (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008, p. x). Likewise, we profile the *troublesome* nature of such thresholds and the way in which they operate on a 'liminal' level, demonstrating through our discussion of teaching activities and assessment tasks that many students struggle to master subjective interpretation (Land et al., 2008, p. x). Through our research-led teaching we became aware that our threshold of subjective interpretation also exhibited the other two elements of Land et al.'s (2008) list of threshold characteristics. Subjective interpretation is deeply embedded in the disciplinary language of the arts and is thus both *discursive* and *bounded* (Meyer & Land, 2005); this is particularly true of narrative point of view and the unreliable narrator which are discipline-specific to literary, writing and cinema studies.

It has been argued that TCs are more readily identifiable in the so-called 'hard disciplines', with a "paucity of research exploring TCs in the humanities" (Wuetherick & Loeffler, 2014, p. 119). However, a number of recent studies have begun to explore the implications for tertiary teaching and learning in the arts and humanities of focusing on these concepts (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012; Kelly, Russell, & Wallace, 2011; McEntee, 2007; O'Brien, 2008; Wisker & Robinson, 2009, Wuetherick & Loeffler, 2014). Likewise, there have been calls for humanities researchers to bring their distinctive approaches and "sensibilities" to higher education research (Kelly & Brailsford, 2013, p. 1). Grogan (2013) argues that both reading and writing involve a number of threshold learning leaps and a recent article on reflective learning in a music paper connects TCs to student progression towards self-awareness and self-authorship (Countryman, 2012). Some previous TC research in the arts and humanities has already posited that interpretation is a potential threshold. One research study, focused on TCs and curriculum development in English Studies at a British university, reports that lecturers identified "issues of engaging students with TCs and ways of

engaging both their critical conceptual and their emotional and creative responses” as well as “issues about the transition from pre-university study to university study” (Wisker, Cameron, & Antoniou, 2008, p. 27). Wuetherick and Loeffler (2014, p. 220) describe student struggles with “how to ‘read’ art—or how to interpret the ‘language’ of art” as a potential “bottleneck”, a threshold to be crossed.

This paper focuses on two key stages in our research where what we did facilitated students’ ‘learning leaps’ and what we learned from our students about where they got stuck again enabled us to identify other thresholds students found challenging. What we learned informed the curriculum and pedagogical changes we implemented in the second year of the project, including teaching to, and assessing, the concepts.

## Background and Contexts

The aim of ARTS101 is to assist students to appreciate the wider cultural contexts in which texts and ideas are produced. The organising narrative of the course is the motif of journey and cultural encounter and the paper draws on the skills of colleagues throughout the School of Arts. In 2012 and 2013 the authors of this paper convened the course.

As the name of the course—Old Worlds-New Worlds—highlights, students encounter a series of texts, images and sounds from different historical and cultural contexts. The emphasis is on the confrontations, debates, and conflicts that emerge when old and new worlds meet and sometimes collide. In 2012 and 2013 we began with an accessible work, James Cameron’s film *Avatar* (2009), and explored issues of cultural encounter in this science-fiction, fantasy universe. Having established these contexts, we journeyed through the other texts in the course in a more or less geographically coherent way. We began with European imaginings of the new world, with William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s theories of the Noble Savage, and Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*, before following the journeys of explorers and travellers to the Americas and the Pacific. As the course progressed, we moved to a consideration of indigenous perspectives, from the experiences of the African American poets of the Harlem Renaissance, to Chinese-New Zealand authors, to Robert Sullivan’s *Star Waka* (1999). In the final part of the course we shifted attention from largely textual worlds to other media: artistic worlds, musical worlds, game worlds, and that wonderfully multivalent film, *Inception* (2010).

The course outline for Arts101 includes the following learning objectives:

- Students will be encouraged to think independently and critically.
- Students will develop their ability to identify subjective points of view, both within texts and in terms of their own approaches to texts.
- Students will increase their capacity to approach a variety of genres from a number of critical perspectives.
- Students will be able to interpret a range of sounds, images, and written texts.
- Students will develop their capacity to evaluate concepts critically through a range of media.

Concentrating on subjective interpretation as a TC provided an ongoing focus for these learning objectives. In the disciplines comprising the arts and humanities “critical pluralism” allows for many interpretations of the same work to be considered simultaneously. As Abbott (2008, p. 236) explains, while interpretation may take a number of forms, it can be summed up as: “The act of expressing in one’s own way the meanings—including ideas, values, and feelings—communicated by a text [or other media].” Such an interpretative act “is not a formulation of some unchanging ‘objective’ truth, but the motivated construction of someone’s mind ... unalterably subjective, and the systematic study of interpretive work and the interpretive process must proceed under the assumption of its subjective character” (Bleich, 1975, pp. 740, 751).

In ARTS101 we taught the interlocking TC of subjective interpretation using a variety of teaching, learning and assessment methods. We scheduled an initial lecture on subjective interpretation, experimented with teaching method, regularly invoked the concept in lectures and tutorials and

explicitly related it to the set texts throughout the course. In order to detect student progress and areas of difficulty we also researched our students' learning through a range of methods, including two class surveys (Ashwin, 2008), focus group interviews (Taylor, 2006, 2008; Kabo & Baillie, 2010; Pang & Meyer, 2010), and observation (Carstensen & Bernhard, 2008). We also designed specific assignment and final exam questions on subjective interpretation. According to Land and Meyer (2010), transformative concepts require methods of assessment that allow the learner to evaluate the degree to which the concepts are integrated. It is therefore important to "construct a meaningful assessment process for students for whom, in many instances, what is to be assessed *lies outside their prior knowledge and experience*" (2010, p. 62). Here, we reflect on two key elements: an assessment task that we designed to assist students to master narrative point of view; and how we discovered, and responded to, students' grappling with the related, problematic, concept of the unreliable narrator.

## Theoretical Perspectives

According to TCT, TCs are inherently problematic for learners because they demand an integration of new ideas into the learner's frame of reference and this requires the student to accept a transformation of their own understanding (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005). An increasingly confident use of the new knowledge confirms the new frame of reference (Glancy & Isenberg, 2011). Once learners have internalised a TC they are more able to integrate different aspects of a subject in their analysis of problems, and to transform their use of the ideas of a subject because they are now able to integrate them in their thinking. Such integration and subsequent transformation, though necessary for progress within the subject, may prove troublesome to certain learners for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that such transformation entails a letting go of earlier, comfortable positions and encountering less familiar and sometimes disconcerting new territory, the liminal state where they experience "discomfiting ontological oscillation" (Land & Meyer, 2010, p. 62). Adler-Kassner et al. (2012, n. p.) write about "challenging the learner to reflect on tacit knowledge". As they move through the liminal state "their knowledge becomes less tacit and more explicit, discursive, and conscious".

Teachers can nurture the learner's ability to negotiate "new conceptual complexity and transformation" (Land & Meyer, 2010, p. 62). The challenge lies in creating conditions that support student learning of the TC and build a strong foundation of understanding on which students can connect new knowledge. It is recommended that lecturers and students construct "a framework of engagement" that is most appropriate "to bring about these particular transformative understandings at various points in the curriculum and which will assist students to acquire the TCs" (Land et al., 2005, pp. 57–58). Learners' capacity to achieve an appropriate academic understanding of a topic "appears to be contingent on the conceptual structures they are able to bring into being", according to Davies (as quoted by Entwistle & Smith, 2013, p. 28). This may explain why academic understanding within a university is necessarily recursive, as new concepts are introduced at successively more complex levels to produce sophisticated ways of dealing with topics and so extending existing conceptual frameworks.

As Entwistle and Nisbet (2013, p. 6) observe:

[T]he ability to develop appropriately academic understandings depends on acquiring the necessary concepts and theories used to create conceptual structures. In the first year of a degree, there are usually some basic technical concepts that have to be mastered and, later, these concepts are integrated into increasingly complex combinations, some of which act as *threshold concepts* that provide a portal into a more advanced level of understanding (Meyer & Land, 2006), but which often prove difficult for students.

There needs to be both a recognition that "some ideas may be resistant to change, but interrelationships with other ideas may be more fluid" and an emphasis on discovering "what each student knows (rather than trying to anticipate it)" through "a meaningful assessment process" (Land & Meyer, 2010, pp. 62, 64). These authors recommend, "a more nuanced and generative model of assessment to help us purposefully identify variations in progress and understanding between different

learners” (p. 63). They point out, too, that transformative concepts require methods of assessment that allow the learner to evaluate the degree the concepts are integrated (Land & Meyer, 2010).

Assessment was a pivotal part of our research. Not only did this offer us an opportunity to measure student progress—the learning leaps that they had made—and continuing gaps in their understanding, but it was also a core means through which students learned about subjective interpretation. Our teaching practice is grounded in Dochy and McDowell’s (1997) argument that assessment is a tool for learning. Rather than focusing on a “testing culture”, we wanted to cultivate what Birenbaum (1997) terms an “assessment culture” in which students can be transformed, as well as measured, by the assessment tasks they are given. In their 2008 study of student assessment preferences, van de Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, and van der Rijt (2008) assert that:

In the past, assessment was primarily seen as a means to determine grades; to find out to what extent students had reached the intended objectives. Today, there is a realisation that the potential benefits of assessing are much wider and impinge on all stages of the learning process. Therefore, the new assessment culture strongly emphasises the integration of instruction and assessment, in order to align learning and instruction more with assessment (p. 646; see also Brown, Rust, & Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, 1999; Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003).

In designing the assessment tasks in ARTS101 we sought to align teaching and learning activities with course objectives (Biggs, 1996). Rather than thinking of the teaching objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks in a course as separate entities, alignment involves integrating these components so that students are continually learning through interconnected, relevant activities.

Land et al. (2010) argue that an integrated approach to learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment tasks makes it possible “to define potentially powerful transformative points in the student’s learning experience” (p. 73). This builds on Biggs’ (1996) identification of five stages of students’ understanding evident in their completion of assessment tasks. Students who remain in the “prestructural” phase have not understood the task, while those with a “unistructural” knowledge are only able to understand one aspect of the task. Other students may progress to a “multistructural” stage and be able to grasp several aspects of the task, although these are understood in isolation, while others make the leap to the “relational” stage which involves integrating the components into a “coherent whole”. Finally, Biggs identifies a final stage, “the extended abstract” in which students are able to transfer their skills and discoveries to new, related areas of enquiry (pp. 351-352).

Given that TCT is as much attuned to the learning ‘leaps’ that students make as to the ‘troublesome’ moments where they get ‘stuck’, assessment which follows such alignment principles can be a useful tool for identifying points of student difficulty as well as being potentially transformative. This is inextricably linked to our focus on the threshold of subjective interpretation, for, as Land and Meyer (2010) write, “[u]nderstanding threshold concepts is not just about conceptual transformation bounded by subject matter. It is also about a change in sense of self, a change in subjectivity on the part of the learner” (p. 72).

### **ARTS101 in the research project**

In ARTS101 the first phase of our research required curriculum and assessment planning. Through discussion, collaboration with colleagues, and reading the relevant literature we designed the ARTS101 paper to profile subjective interpretation. This involved introductory lectures which explicitly focused on subjective interpretation in the arts, lectures which experimented with teaching method to illustrate subjectivity in action, tutorial activities which reinforced and extended students’ understanding of subjectivity, and designing assessment tasks to reveal the extent of students’ grasp of our chosen TC. Throughout the research project we reflected on our own teaching practice through discussions with each other and our research team, and through our teaching diaries.

The two education researchers who led the team project facilitated the research conducted in ARTS101 in 2012 and 2013 by the two authors of this paper. Between 100–120 students were enrolled



each year. The aims of the research were explained at the start of the course and students gave their written consent to their participation, in line with our university's ethics guidelines.

## Design

The overall research design followed that of the team project outlined by Harlow and Peter (2014). As part of the collection of data on student perceptions, we compiled two surveys, one administered at the start and the other at the end of the course in both years. In the initial survey students were asked: What do you understand the term 'subjective interpretation' to mean? and Have you ever encountered any of the following ideas? [First Person Narrative; Third Person Narrative; Omniscient Narrator ('Eye of God'); Reliable Narrator; Unreliable Narrator; Limited Point of View; Perspective; Interpretation]. There were also questions about their learning: how they liked to be taught/learn, and what they had done to date when they got stuck while learning. The end of course survey again asked: What do you understand the term 'subjective interpretation' to mean? and: Why is 'subjective interpretation' an important idea? Students were also asked to rate their understanding of subjective interpretation, and related concepts (First Person Narrative; Third Person Narrative; Omniscient Narrator; Reliable Narrator; Unreliable Narrator; Limited Point of View; Perspective), using the categories: excellent understanding, very good understanding, good understanding, limited understanding, no understanding.

Data on student perceptions was also drawn from focus group discussions (facilitated, recorded and later transcribed by the education researchers) in which students were asked questions about their experience and the pedagogical merit of the course. Further data was provided from formal measures of achievement and evaluation of the outcomes, all of which informed curriculum and pedagogical changes implemented in the second cycle of this collaborative action research. Data analyses focused on identifying changes in students' understanding of TCs and their perceptions of TC-centred teaching.

In 2012 assessment tasks included: a first assignment on narrative point of view; a seminar assignment which required students to tap into their creativity; essay questions which probed students' knowledge of individual texts; and a compulsory exam question which tested students' mastery of subjective interpretation. We also asked students to self-assess their progress in an end of course survey, as noted above. In 2013 the course was slightly revised, with a greater teaching emphasis and specific assessment on the concept students had found particularly troublesome: the unreliable narrator. The findings from our research are presented as part of the overall findings of the team project earlier in this special issue (Harlow & Peter, 2014, p. 10).

Here we describe and discuss two key stages in our research: an assessment task that we designed to assist students master narrative point of view; and how we discovered, and responded to, students' grappling with another aspect of subjective interpretation, the troublesome concept of the unreliable narrator.

## Two Key Stages on the Journey

### Mastering Narrative Perspective

The first assignment, on *Avatar*, was designed to ascertain the extent to which students had mastered the TC of narrative voice and to help further our learning objective about developing a capacity "to identify subjective points of view, both within texts and in terms of [students'] own approaches to texts". This required students to describe a key location (Hometree) in James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2012) from three different perspectives and was specifically targeted at helping students to distinguish between different subjective viewpoints within the film (students were asked to write from the point of view of three of the following characters: Jake Sully, Colonel Miles Quaritch, Dr. Grace Augustine, Trudy Chacón, Parker Selfridge, Neytiri, Mo'at, Tsu'tey) and to move confidently between first person and third person narrative voice. Prior to students submitting this assignment, a lecture

was devoted to narrative points of view, with particular attention being paid to the distinction between omniscient and limited third person narrative voice (which some students were uncertain about).

Writing models were also presented in class and made available as an online resource to ensure that students were equipped to answer the question with understanding. These models described Hometree from the perspective of a character not included on the list given to students—the leonopteryx (flying king lion) Toruk. The first person model channelled an interior consciousness that was arrogant and untamed:

Only one can match my power and strength, the mighty tree which pierces the sky.  
Yet we are different, the tree and I. It is a sanctuary and home and its roots press deep  
into the earth. I do not seek such base bonds, such conventional community.

The limited third person model gave a glimpse of the bond the mighty creature felt for Torouk Makto, the legendary warrior and rider, while seeking to emphasise the slippery, partial nature of memory: “What is this tug, this sense of connection to the life force pulsing below? Dreams of a rider haunt. Is it a vision or a memory?” In contrast, the omniscient third person model contextualised and explained this intimation of a human-animal symbiosis: “Once before this fearsome creature had forged a bond with a Na’vi warrior. Once again his power was needed to bring hope and salvation.”

While the student work submitted for this assignment clearly demonstrated that students were able to distinguish between first person, limited third person, and omniscient narrative point of view—all of the students in both 2012 and 2013 passing this assignment—there were inevitably variations in student grades. Some of these, as in all arts and humanities assessments of this kind, are the product of varying degrees of writing and editing skills. Biggs’ (1996, pp. 351–352) five levels of understanding provides a useful framework for differentiating between the various learning leaps (or lack thereof) that students made. All the students reached his third, “multistructural” stage, demonstrating their mastery of narrative point of view, but some were able to move to the fourth “relational” stage, integrating the stylistic requirements of the assessment (an ability to write in first and third person) with the learning objectives embedded in the task (relating the task to the TC of subjective interpretation). These students deliberately selected three completely different perspectives, their assessment task allowing them to mediate on both the deeply felt needs, desires and beliefs of individuals and the clash of ideologies evident in different cultural attitudes towards Hometree. For example, students wrote of the self-interest and materialistic focus of Parker Selfridge for whom the tree is “an object ... an impediment to money”, the scientific detachment of Grace Augustine for whom the tree is “a source of knowledge” with the potential to “change our declining world’s future”, the gung-ho hunter mentality of Colonel Quaritch who “wanted to destroy the tree *because it was there*”, and the spiritual consciousness of Mo’at for whom the tree is “the home of the ancestors”.

Some students demonstrated that they had mastered point of view to the extent that they could move confidently between viewpoints within one paragraph, moving to the “extended abstract stage” (Biggs, 1996, 352). Thus one student began by vocalising Neytiri’s first person viewpoint—“... our *Kelutral* ... it is our home and saviour ... Each *vul* is precious, and every piece of it is needed. *Oe tsun hawnu fitsenge hu tirey. Kelutrel tsun rey ne tor vul* ...”—before shifting to third person: “The woman looks upon the tree with a soft smile, for it has, and will always be, her home ... No matter what she does, it will never be abandoned, for that is how she must live, and how she must act.” As these extracts exemplify, some students also exhibited a “relational” and “extended” ability to consider the relationship between voice and language, including untranslated Na’vi as a means of challenging English primacy and American imperialism. In thinking of the interconnectedness of identity and language, of who we are and what we say, one student included an explanatory footnote apologising for what she (legitimately) regarded as the necessary expletives peppering Colonel Quaritch’s first person narration and another included footnotes offering translations and explanations of scientific jargon employed by Grace Augustine.

The students who had reached a postliminal state of knowledge were also those most inclined to stretch the creative possibilities of the assignment. Rather than simply recording a succession of first and third person perspectives, some students thought carefully about the situations in which various points of view would be articulated. One chose to frame Quaritch’s first person narrative viewpoint as

a speech to his troops before the attack on Hometree, another picked up on the video journals Jake keeps in the film and articulated his point of view as a diary entry, another maintained a third person perspective by writing Grace's perspective as a segment of an academic journal article. One student felt compelled to include an additional perspective not on the designated list, that of Hometree itself: "My burden is everlasting! Curse these things who think they hear me. They do not understand".

McDrury and Alterio (2003) write that providing a learning environment in which students can tell their own stories is crucial to fostering individual creativity and understanding. This assessment exercise used creative writing as both an assessment and learning tool. It unlocked many of the students. One wrote in a class survey: "I was really struggling with what perspective and point of view were, and then I got writing about *Avatar* and suddenly I understood, because I had to get into the heads of the characters". Research by van Oostrum, Steadman-Jones, and Carson (2007, p. 565) suggests that creative writing can help to move students from a position of feeling "cold, abstract, and remote" to a state of involvement in which they "seem much more alive". Their teaching experiences were re-enacted in our course. As well as assisting with understanding, writing a story rather than an essay, led students to experience a sense of liberation. In the course appraisal one student wrote: "Somehow writing creatively was more free. I felt it had more to do with me. I think I learned the most from this because I had to understand first person and third person to be able to write. And I remembered them". Perhaps because this assignment required students to make an "imaginative leap" (van Oostrum et al., 2007, p. 566), they were also able to make a conceptual leap to a transformed, postliminal, relational point of understanding.

### Mastering the Unreliable Narrator

As noted earlier, we learned from students' self-assessments in the 2012 end of course survey that many students reported that they had not grasped the concept of the unreliable narrator. In fact, 45% of respondents found this concept the most troublesome: only 24% reported they considered they now had an excellent understanding and 31% a good understanding of this concept. We realised that insufficient time had been spent on this. It also struck us that students had identified yet another TC and this realisation informed the teaching and learning activities we introduced in 2013. A new assignment gave students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of reliability/unreliability in narration.

A lecture on *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad (1910 [1995]) specifically focussed on the unreliable narrator. This novella fitted well with the voyage theme of the course and the author's choice of first-person narrative offered an excellent opportunity to explore point of view further, and to examine the technique and implications of a limited point of view in particular, thus encouraging the integration of "increasingly complex combinations, ... a more advanced level of understanding" (Entwistle & Nisbet, 2013, p. 6, citing Meyer & Land, 2006). By focussing on the concept of the unreliable narrator students were encouraged to extend their developing conceptual frameworks, and to move further towards achieving the learning objectives of the course, including critical and independent thinking, and the ability to identify subjective points of view, both within texts and in terms of their own approaches to texts.

At the start of the interactive lecture designed to introduce the concept of the unreliable narrator—the second of two devoted to *The Secret Sharer*—the class was asked: how do we go about interpreting this story? We noted that readers are plunged straight into the story, which is gradually revealed to be an unnamed captain's retrospective account of his first experience as a ship commander. We considered how, in literature, the narrator is a fictional construct and the story is presented as his/her subjective interpretation. Since Conrad's story is presented entirely as a first-person narrative it offers an intrinsically limited point of view. The narrator's credibility or trustworthiness is an issue raised in interpreting the novella.

The lecturer then introduced students to Wayne Booth's (1961 [1983]) classic but cryptic definition of reliability and unreliability in relation to the concepts of the implied author and narrative distance, "A

narrator is ‘*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not’” (pp. 158–159).

Far more accessible, as class discussion illustrated, was Olson’s (2003) unpacking of Booth’s concentrated statement:

[A]ll fictional texts that employ the device of unreliability can best be considered along a spectrum of fallibility that begins with trustworthiness and ends with unreliability. This model allows for all shades of grey in between the poles of trustworthiness and unreliability. It is consequently up to each individual reader to determine the credibility of a narrator in a fictional text. (Olson, 2003, p. 96)

A lively class discussion followed as students offered examples of fictions, mainly citing films they knew, in which the credibility of the ‘narrator’ was questionable. These included *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Fight Club* (1999), *Memento* (2000) and *The Social Network* (2010). They recognised a common narrative device whereby a character describes events that may or may not be happening, and might be obscuring the ‘truth’ of the situation. In other words, students engaged in making their tacit knowledge explicit, and made an important step towards extending their conceptual framework to incorporate the TC of the unreliable narrator. Shortly after the classes on *The Secret Sharer* (including follow-up tutorials on the novella), students had to complete an assignment that was explicitly focussed on the unreliable narrator as a TC, one designed to “render visible sources of conceptual difficulty” (Land & Meyer, 2010, p. 61). This assessment was in the form of a test.

This fifty-minute test comprised a close reading and comprehension exercise. Students were presented with a passage from the novella and were asked: first to locate it in context, then to explain what the behaviour of the narrator-protagonist, as related in the passage, revealed about him, before answering the question about his trustworthiness. The test called for engagement in the interpretative process, requiring an appreciation of perspective, point of view, voice, and critical evaluation. Both the narrator’s subjective interpretation, as conveyed in the extract *and* the student’s interpretation based on their individual understanding of the passage (and the novella) were needed for a successful assignment.

While the exam question on *The Secret Sharer* actually focused on the character of Leggatt and asked students what he represented in the novella, a number of students took the opportunity to display their enhanced understanding of Conrad’s fiction by referring to subjective interpretation and some of the features of this concept:

The narrator, the unnamed captain ... feels like a stranger on his own ship. Leggatt represents the hidden side of the captain; he is a fugitive and although he has killed another man, the captain judges him to be a good character. This view is of course subjective and only one way of looking at the story. (Student 1)

Another recognised the interpretative challenges to the reader:

As [the novel] slips in and out of the captain’s thoughts and consciousness it is constantly challenging to understand and work out ... whether Leggatt the fugitive is even real or just a figure of the captain’s imagination. This is purposely created by Conrad to tap into the workings of the human mind ... this story of the ‘double self’ challenges the many different ways the reader can interpret the text. (Student 12)

Another wrote on the same question:

In this novel, we, as readers, see the story in a certain light, through the unnamed captain, ... Seeing only what the author intended readers to see is effective in presenting the story. (Student 15)

Interestingly, in answer to another question, on how artists appeal to the audience’s senses, one student used *The Secret Sharer* as an example:

The *Secret Sharer* uses the power of the written word to appeal to the senses, to make readers hear, feel, and see. He does this by focussing on the character of the unnamed

captain, aboard an unnamed ship.... We hear only his story, feel only his feelings, and see only what he sees. (Student 14)

### Integration of Concepts

Overall, exam scripts revealed sound application of concepts in repeated references to interpretation, including perspective, point of view, voice and the unreliable narrator, even when the question did not explicitly invite this. For example, answering a question on *The Tempest*, one student wrote:

Each time we read a novel, book or play, see a film, listen to music or enter into a game world, we voyage beyond our own world, new perspectives are opened up to us. We meet new people, experience life through their eyes. Our understanding of the world is expanded. (Student 3)

Another chose to focus on music in answer to a question on the way writers or other artists appeal to the senses of their audience:

The way the music of Queen appeals to the senses does however depend on the musical ‘worlds’ and styles we are familiar with and either like or dislike. Queen’s song ‘*Bohemian Rhapsody*’ may appeal to someone’s senses in an entirely different way to another.... Queen clearly appeals to many different people with different tastes in music because of their stylistic diversity. (Student 2)

Students had learned to express their awareness of subjective points of view, the value of creativity and the role of critical evaluation, and took opportunities to convey this.

### Transfer beyond ARTS101

Adler-Kassner et al. (2012) have explored how first year writing and history courses (in the general education programme at their college) might “facilitate students’ abilities to transfer something—knowledge, strategies, habits of mind—to other courses and contexts”. Student assessment in ARTS101 suggested that students were starting to make these kinds of relational connections and transfers. This was confirmed by focus group discussions. When asked if they could see connections between subjective interpretation and their studies beyond ARTS101 students made all kinds of links and connections:

In one or two papers, like anthropology, you can use subjective interpretation to interpret other things, like the cultural use of rituals.

I do languages, and in languages you can use it to look through other peoples’ point of view, it makes you think about others’ point of view.

I do creative papers, and I found I was more aware of how I was interpreting what I was asked to do. When I was given a question, I wanted to understand the question more so that I interpreted it well.

Helpful to formulate an argument in other papers, to argue how you viewed it, like for me it was in anthropology—*Lenore Divine* helped me with women’s’ rights.

All my papers and subjects—in English, history, politics—everything was included [in ARTS 101] even in politics—like writers on political point of view.

Such comments suggest that creating conditions that support student learning of a TC can indeed build a strong foundation of transformative understandings on which students continue to connect new knowledge, within and across disciplines.

## Conclusion

Our research responds to recent calls for arts and humanities researchers to bring their distinctive approaches and “sensibilities” to higher education research (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2011; Wisker & Robinson, 2009; Wuetherick & Loeffler, 2014). We found that TCs are of value in our foundation course, in line with other research in the arts (Kelly & Brailsford, 2013, p. 1). Grasping a TC—crossing the threshold—is transformative because it involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift. During these ‘aha’ moments, students acquire new ways of seeing the subject and their own work (Wisker et al., 2008). Through enabling students to make connections between the various components of their learning within the discipline, and to broaden and deepen their understanding of a range of ideas, TCs are integrative (Atherton, Hadfield, & Meyers, 2008; Entwistle, 2008). Subjective interpretation is a multifaceted TC that also functions as a gateway to understanding other key concepts needed for mastery of a discipline. Indeed, our research suggests that subjective interpretation is perhaps best understood as a meta-threshold that incorporates other thresholds, such as the concept of the unreliable narrator, the role and function of perspective and point of view, and the narrative distinctions and possibilities of first and third person narrative voice. Each of these thresholds has its own ‘aha’ moment of transformation. Cumulatively, crossing these thresholds progressively equips students with the ability to master the meta-threshold, in particular the capacity to situate their own voice within wider theoretical and critical discourses and interpretations.

Our research suggests that assessment can play a significant role in helping students reach these ‘aha’ moments of transformation and the ability to form connections between ideas and concepts. By designing surveys and assessments which were aligned with our learning objectives and teaching methods we were able to measure student progression, in particular identifying places where they were ‘stuck’, and tailor future teaching and assessment accordingly. Thus, the 2012 surveys revealed that students were struggling with the concept of the unreliable narrator. Targeted teaching and assessment strategies in 2013 helped students to better master this dimension of subjective interpretation. Our assessment tasks were also designed to help students learn through doing. The enacting of subjectivity through an assignment such as the *Avatar* point of view assignment seemed to help students understand individual components of subjective interpretation, in this case first and third person narrative, but also enabled students to make connections with other, related dimensions of subjective interpretation, in particular the placing of their viewpoint within a larger critical framework. In one of the 2012 end-of-semester focus groups one student declared: “I found in my assignments for this paper I was writing a lot more liberally about what I thought, rather than thinking of what was going to impress the lecturer.”

Our research also highlights the interconnectedness of thresholds. Students pass through a series of portals on their learning journeys. In the arts and humanities some of these thresholds are relatively easy to identify and measure. The concepts of narrative perspective and the unreliable narrator are concepts on which we could give specific lectures and set specific assignments. The assessment tasks outlined above became one means of ascertaining the degree to which students had mastered these concepts. While students passed over the threshold of differentiating between first and third person narrative voice relatively easily, with some students just making the leap and others moving to a postliminal, integrative understanding, many found the concept of the unreliable narrator more troublesome, although this too became a threshold that nearly all of our students were eventually able to cross. Other thresholds in the arts and humanities disciplines are harder to identify and measure. Our meta-threshold of subjective interpretation is such a threshold, involving as it does a complex set of interrelated abilities to situate one’s own voice within wider critical discourses. There is much more research to be done in relation to this, but our findings tentatively suggest that students need to grasp narrative voice and perspective before they can fully understand subjective interpretation. Transformation seems to begin with students discovering that written, visual and musical texts are complex constructs in which authors, artists, directors, and composers shift between voices, perspectives, and modes. Once these interlinked ‘aha’ moments have been achieved, students are able to progress to the meta level of exploring not only what happens *within* a written, visual or musical narrative but how these texts become sites of debate and critical discourse. Here students start to master the relationship between the *self* and the creative work, gradually discovering that their own

views and interpretations converge and diverge from the perspectives of other classmates and scholars. This meta-threshold is not nearly as definitive a portal as the thresholds explored above, but rather an ongoing journey of self-discovery and textual adventure. In his poem ‘Ulysses’ Tennyson (1846 [1910]) describes the protagonist’s journey through “an arch...whose margin fades / Forever and forever when I move”. Each traversed archway, each crossed threshold is both a moment of transformed understanding, but it is equally a moment of recognition that the horizons of interpretation are limitless and that each portal morphs into yet another arch or doorway. For us as teachers, as for our students, this is part of the enduring joy of the arts and humanities: that learning is never concluded, that there is an unending vista of “newer worlds” to be conquered and discovered.

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