

# What Music Industry Education Can Learn from Threshold Concept Theory

Julie Viscardi-Smalley  
Johnson & Wales University

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## Abstract

In this paper, threshold concept theory will be applied to music industry education and the current research in a dissertation-in-progress will be shared. Threshold concept theory emerged in the early 2000s in the United Kingdom largely due to the research of Jan Meyer and Ray Land (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005, 2006) as a means to detect specific educational content that sparks a change in students' ways of thinking about a discipline, and by extension their own identity, values, attitudes, and feelings, are fundamentally changed. The purpose of this dissertation research-in-progress, currently titled "Threshold Concepts and Disciplinary Acculturation in Music Industry Education" is to identify various threshold concepts as perceived by "expert music industry professionals" while reflecting on their careers. Additionally, the possibility of "disciplinary acculturation" as a potential characteristic of threshold concepts, in general, is posited. For university professors, the identification, prioritization, and utilization of bottlenecks and threshold concepts that apply to their individual disciplines could prove useful in postsecondary music industry education. The results of this research are applicable to curriculum planning to promote greater student achievement on both macro- (program creation, execution, and evaluation) and micro- (course creation, planning, instruction, and evaluation) levels in postsecondary music industry education in the United States and worldwide.

Keywords: Music industry, music business, threshold, threshold concept, education

## Introduction

This dissertation-in-progress was presented at the 2018 MEIEA Educators Summit in Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., with the aim of sharing current research and soliciting feedback from conference attendees.

In music industry education, like most academic disciplines, there exist concepts that may be "difficult" or "troublesome" for students to grasp. The music industry, "...can be described as a complex adaptive system in which legal, political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological subsystems converge, interact and coevolve" (Tussey 2005). Therefore, it is possible that music industry education might provide fertile ground for the identification of threshold concepts. Consideration of such content as threshold concepts might illuminate strategies for both teachers and students to attain greater understanding and forge pathways for teaching and learning.

In this paper, threshold concept theory will be applied to music industry education and the current research in a dissertation-in-progress will be shared. Threshold concept theory emerged in the early 2000s in the United Kingdom largely due to the research of Jan Meyer and Ray Land (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005, 2006)<sup>1</sup> as a means to detect specific educational content that sparks a change in students' ways of thinking about a discipline, and by extension their own identity, values, attitudes, and feelings, are fundamentally changed. The purpose of this dissertation research-in-progress, currently titled "Threshold Concepts and Disciplinary Acculturation in Music Industry Education" is to identify various threshold concepts as perceived by "expert music industry professionals" while reflecting on their careers. Additionally, the possibility of "disciplinary acculturation" as a potential characteristic of threshold concepts, in general, is posited. For university professors, the identification, prioritization, and utilization of bottlenecks and threshold concepts that apply to their individual disciplines could prove useful in postsecondary music industry education. The results of this research are applicable to curriculum planning to promote greater student achievement on both

macro- (program creation, execution, and evaluation) and micro- (course creation, planning, instruction, and evaluation) levels in postsecondary music industry education in the United States and worldwide.

### Threshold Concepts

In their seminal works on threshold concepts, Jan Meyer and Ray Land (Meyer and Land 2003) define a threshold concept as being,

...akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time, with the transition to understanding proving troublesome. Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people “think” in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally). Engagement with thresholds involves a “letting go of earlier, comfortable positions and encountering less familiar and sometimes disconcerting territory. (1)

Threshold concepts involve a transformation of the learner. The learner is often thought to get “stuck” while learning certain disciplinary content or concepts. In regards to this arguably troublesome disciplinary criteria,<sup>2</sup> “the analytic framework used in thresholds concepts research maintains that there are particular concepts in a given discipline which cannot easily be assimilated or accommodated within one’s existing meaning frame...To accommodate such new and troubling knowledge will require not only a difficult reconceptualization, but a reformulation of one’s meaning frame” (Land, Meyer, and Flanagan 2016, xi). It is plausible that such a transformation occurs in individuals who are trying to become professionals in the music industry given, in part, the unique nature of the industry, anecdotal accounts of particularly high stress situations and industry-standard terminology.

### Characteristics of Threshold Concepts

To date, there have been seven possible characteristics of threshold concepts posited in related research:

These characteristics portray threshold concepts as:  
(1) transformative (a significant shift in the learner’s perception of the content), (2) troublesome (a

concept that is alien, tacit, counterintuitive, subversive, or conceptually difficult) (Perkins 2006), (3) Irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten), (4) Integrative (awareness of the interrelatedness of concepts, beliefs, and theories), (5) bounded (constrains the boundaries of the subject), (6) constitutive (repositioning oneself in relation to the content), and (7) discursive (gaining language related to the content). (White, Olsen, and Schumann 2016, 53)

Inherent in the acquisition of threshold concepts is that the learner becomes suspended for an undetermined amount of time in (or perhaps oscillates in and out of) a state of “liminality.” According to Meyer and Land, the liminal state is “a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity” (Meyer and Land 2003, 10). Given the complex nature of the music industry, it is possible that in the process of transforming from novice to expert practitioner, a professional in the music industry might experience being “stuck” in a state of liminality.

### Professional Expertise

In this study, “expert music industry professionals” were asked to reflect upon their perspective of their learning experiences in rising from “novice” to “professional” in the music industry. In some ways, the transition from “novice” to “professional” hearkens to the threshold concepts analytical framework in that, “Becoming an expert in professional practice necessitates a transformational training process along with the willingness to adapt to change” (Welch 2005). The “transformation” implicit in this transition is what will be explored in this research.

### Methods

This research is reflective of a dissertation-in-progress, and the methodology is delimited to those employed in the pilot phase of the study. The data collection method in this qualitative study, at present, is semi-structured interviews with expert practitioners in the music industry. Participants have been drawn from the researcher’s professional network and through targeted solicitation of potential interviewees using email and social media. Participants must meet eligibility criteria defining them as an “expert music industry professional” to qualify for the study. In the music industry, there is no one designated title or criteria to identify an “expert practitioner.” Therefore, a researcher-designed unit was applied to participant selection in this study:

The attainment of a top level management or CEO position at a firm in the music industry that meets the following criteria: artist managers whose client achieved success on the *Billboard Hot 100* or *Top 200 Charts*, agents from one of the top ten booking agencies as determined by the *Pollstar*

*Top Ten Booking Agencies List*, concert promoters and concert promotion executives as determined by the *Pollstar Top Ten Concert Promotion Companies List*, music publishing executives working at a music publishing firm from which an artist or songwriter achieved success on the *Billboard Hot 100 or Top 200 Charts* and record label executives working at a record label from which an artist achieved success on the *Billboard Hot 100 or Top 200 Charts*. (Viscardi-Smalley 2018)

At this point in the research, two participants have been selected, received an “informed consent” document and have completed recorded interviews via Zoom video-conferencing software. Confidentiality will continue to be maintained throughout the study. Recorded interviews have been transcribed and coded for identification of emergent themes. Alignment with the threshold concept analytical framework was of primary importance when extracting information to report from interviews.

### Initial Findings

The findings presented here are reflective of the pilot phase of this research. Emergent themes so far include *content knowledge*, *processes/procedures*, *attitudes/behaviors*, and *assimilation into a culture*. Of course, it is not yet clear if these themes will match the findings presented at the conclusion of the study, or if this is only delimited to the information gathered at this phase of the research. Additionally, whether or not these findings may be uniquely applied to professional work in the music industry remains to be seen.

*Attitudes and Behaviors*. Initial conversations with participants reveal that overwhelmingly, becoming acquainted with ways of behaving in the music industry was a particularly memorable learning experience. Participants shared stories that infer both positive and negative remembrances of either observing or engaging in attitudes/behaviors that they deemed particular to working as a music industry professional. Additionally, and perhaps most compelling, was the transformations described by participants regarding changes they consciously made to their own behaviors in these instances.

*Processes and Procedures*. Participants also initiated conversation during which reflections on learning about or using various processes and procedures seemed counterintuitive, difficult, or troublesome. These reflections ranged from understanding the connection between the roles and responsibilities of various professional functions in the music industry to simple and transactional professional tasks.

*Content Knowledge*. To a lesser extent, professionals mentioned that learning the terminology or content knowledge required to participate in music industry conversations and related dealings has posed a challenge. Participants identi-

fied interactions with certain types of documents, negotiations, and business math/accounting tasks to be the most daunting. It was made very clear that being able to “talk the talk” in the music industry is absolutely essential for garnering the respect of colleagues. Therefore, it is possible that more information might be gathered in this thematic area or that interview questions be altered to query participants differently about their content knowledge acquisition during the transition to becoming an expert music industry professional.

*Assimilation into a Disciplinary Culture*. Finally, each participant shared information inferring that becoming a professional in the music industry required their assimilation into a specific, well-established culture. This is arguably reflective of the idea of “acculturation” or “assimilation” into a particular culture (Berry 1970, 1974, 1980). While this has most often been applied to immigrants assimilating into new cultural situations, the idea of “disciplinary acculturation” as a parallel to this is posited in this study.

### Discussion

As this research continues, it is possible that additional evidence will be found linking the four emergent themes to both the music industry and threshold concepts. It is also possible that additional thematic criteria will be illuminated in future interviews. Ideally, sufficient data will be collected to present valuable findings. At present, the results of this study might be useful for music industry educators/administrators at postsecondary institutions worldwide and novice music industry practitioners alike.

### Endnotes

1. For a comprehensive collection of most threshold concept research to date, see Mick Flanagan’s website at <http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>.
2. See Meyer and Land (2003) for a discussion of the connection between “ways of thinking and practicing” and threshold concepts.

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**Julie Viscardi-Smalley**, MS, CHE has over ten years' experience in higher education teaching about the music industry, entertainment management, event management, concert production, music theory, and music history. Her research is centered around the application of threshold concept theory to music industry education. Additional research interests include music education, the analysis of popular music, the music industry, online teaching and learning, and curriculum/program design in higher education. Viscardi-Smalley has worked in the music industry and as a performer for over fifteen years with experience in booking agencies, concert production, tour coordination, artist management, marketing for music, record labels, and copyright/publishing for musical works. She enjoys attending live music events, performing music, and spending time with family. Viscardi-Smalley is a candidate for the DMA (Doctor of Musical Arts) degree in the College of Fine Arts of Boston University. She earned a Bachelor of Music Education and a Master of Science in Music Education from Syracuse University. She is a member of the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association, The International Association of Exhibitions and Events, and The College Music Society. Follow Professor Viscardi-Smalley on Twitter @ProfJVS.



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