





# 'Something at stake'

Teaching students  
in troubled times



Ray Land  
Durham University, UK



## Pedagogies of uncertainty

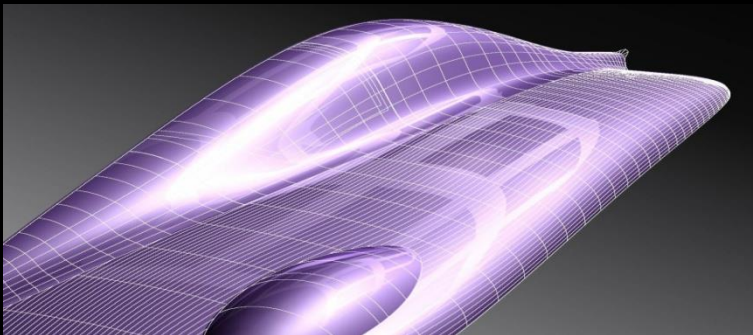


In these settings, the presence of emotion, even a modicum of passion, is quite striking--as is its absence in other settings. I would say that without a certain amount of anxiety and risk, there's a limit to how much learning occurs.

One must have something at stake. No emotional investment, no intellectual or formational yield.

(Shulman 2005:4)

- Uncertainty
- Speed and acceleration
- Complexity
- Multiculturalism
- Mobility of population(s)
- Conflict (social, military)
- Inter-generational tension
- Need for ethical citizenship
- Information saturation
- Proliferation of knowledge
- Globalisation
- Internationalisation
- Private /public sector tension
- Increasing panic



# ‘A dance with ambiguities’

Characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

(Anthony Appiah NYU 2016)

- Unpredictability
- Risk
- Displacement
- Need for flexibility and agility
- Entitlement v responsibility
- Scarcity of resources
- Austerity
- Sustainability
- Need for prudence
- Transparency & accountability
- Discontinuity and rupture
- Shifting paradigms
- Poverty v affluence
- Outsourcing of jobs
- Youthfulness



Sankofa (Adinkra symbol Ghana)

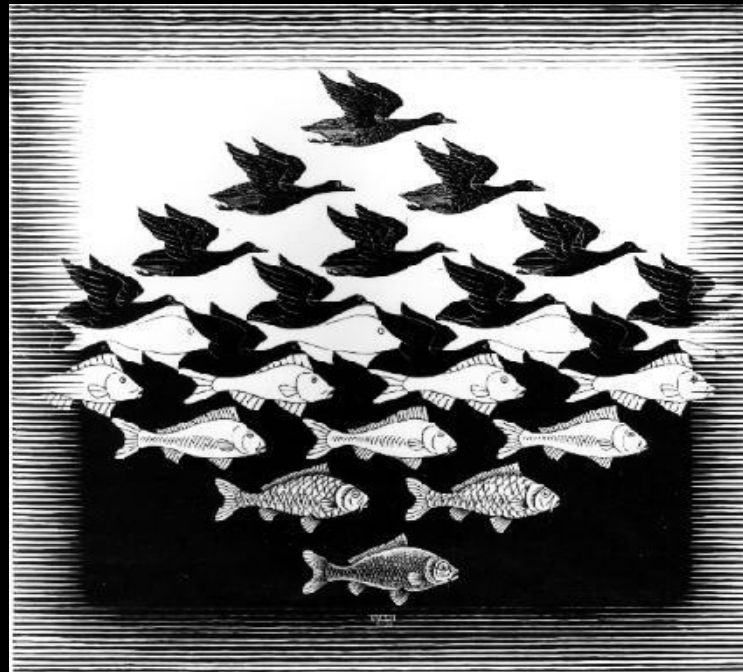
## Venturing into strange places

The student is perforce required to venture into new places, strange places, anxiety-provoking places . This is part of the point of higher education. If there was no anxiety, it is difficult to believe that we could be in the presence of a higher education.

(Barnett 2007: 147)



## Competing paradigms – consumption and transformation



# Troublesome knowledge

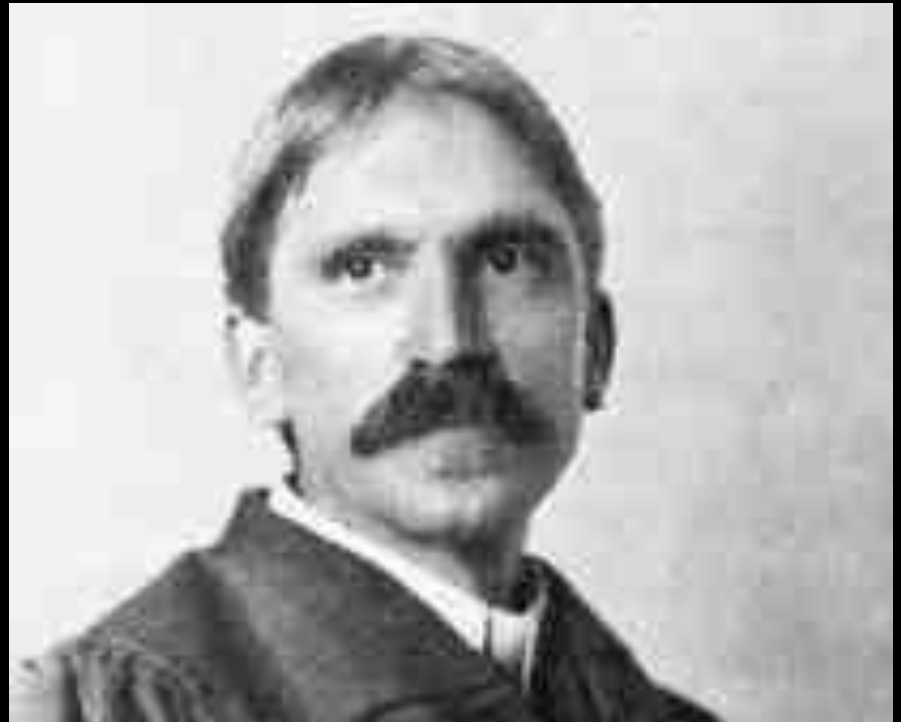


Perkins 1999



‘The path of least resistance and least trouble is a mental rut already made.

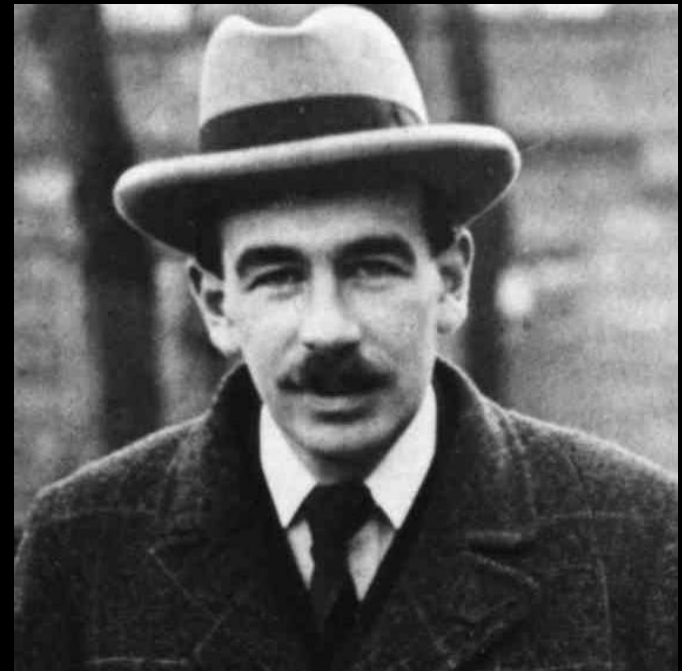
It requires troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs.’



John Dewey 1933

The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify ... into every corner of our minds.

John Maynard Keynes (1936)



Students do not always enjoy studying with me. Often they find my courses challenge them in ways that are deeply unsettling. This was particularly disturbing to me at the beginning of my teaching career because I wanted to be liked and admired. It took time and experience for me to understand that the rewards of engaged pedagogy might not emerge during a course.

bell hooks (1994 p. 206)



My models were the people who stepped outside of the conventional mind and who could actually stop my mind and completely open it up and free it, even for a moment, from a conventional, habitual way of looking at things ...

If you are really preparing for groundlessness, preparing for the reality of human existence, you are living on the razor's edge, and you must become used to the fact that things shift and change. Things are not certain and they do not last and you do not know what is going to happen. My teachers have always pushed me over the cliff ...

Pema Chodron 1994





## Safe spaces, trigger warnings, deplatforming

If you hold back from learning about deception and violence you won't understand why we have the laws we do, or any system of law at all. Equally you can't appreciate great works of literature if you resist depictions of the darker side of human life...The power of these works of art comes from their truthfulness, their unswerving fidelity to the enduring features of the human world. Anyone who shrinks from them is in effect refusing to explore what it means to be human. (Gray 2016)

John Gray *Against Safe Spaces* 2016



## ‘untrammelled enquiry’ (Gray 2016)

How can you decide which is worse if you recoil from any description of them? In order to make an intelligent judgement about any war, you have to be ready to examine closely the evils it's meant to prevent, and those it could unleash. Putting these evils in the balance is a sad business. But unless you're ready to do it, you can't make an informed judgment.

John Gray *Against Safe Spaces* 2016



# Difficulty

We are an entangled species. We are not to be unknotted easily. When we turn our backs on difficulty ... we turn our backs on who we are.

Howard Jacobson *In Praise of Difficulty* 2016

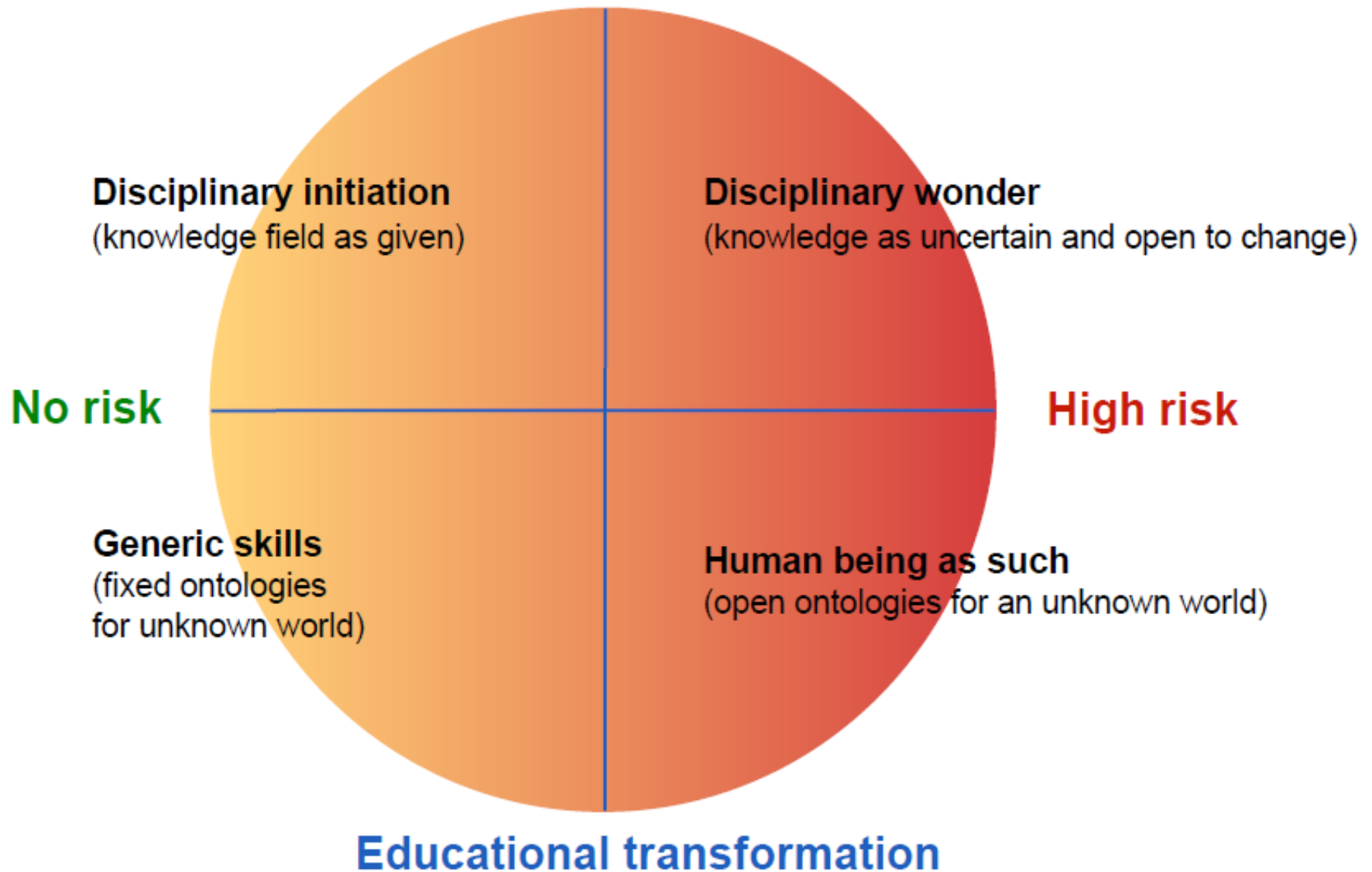


Barnett (2004) argues that it would be irrational and self-defeating to assume that we can prepare a new generation of students to cope with uncertainty by establishing a new kind of certainty in the curriculum.





## Educational development

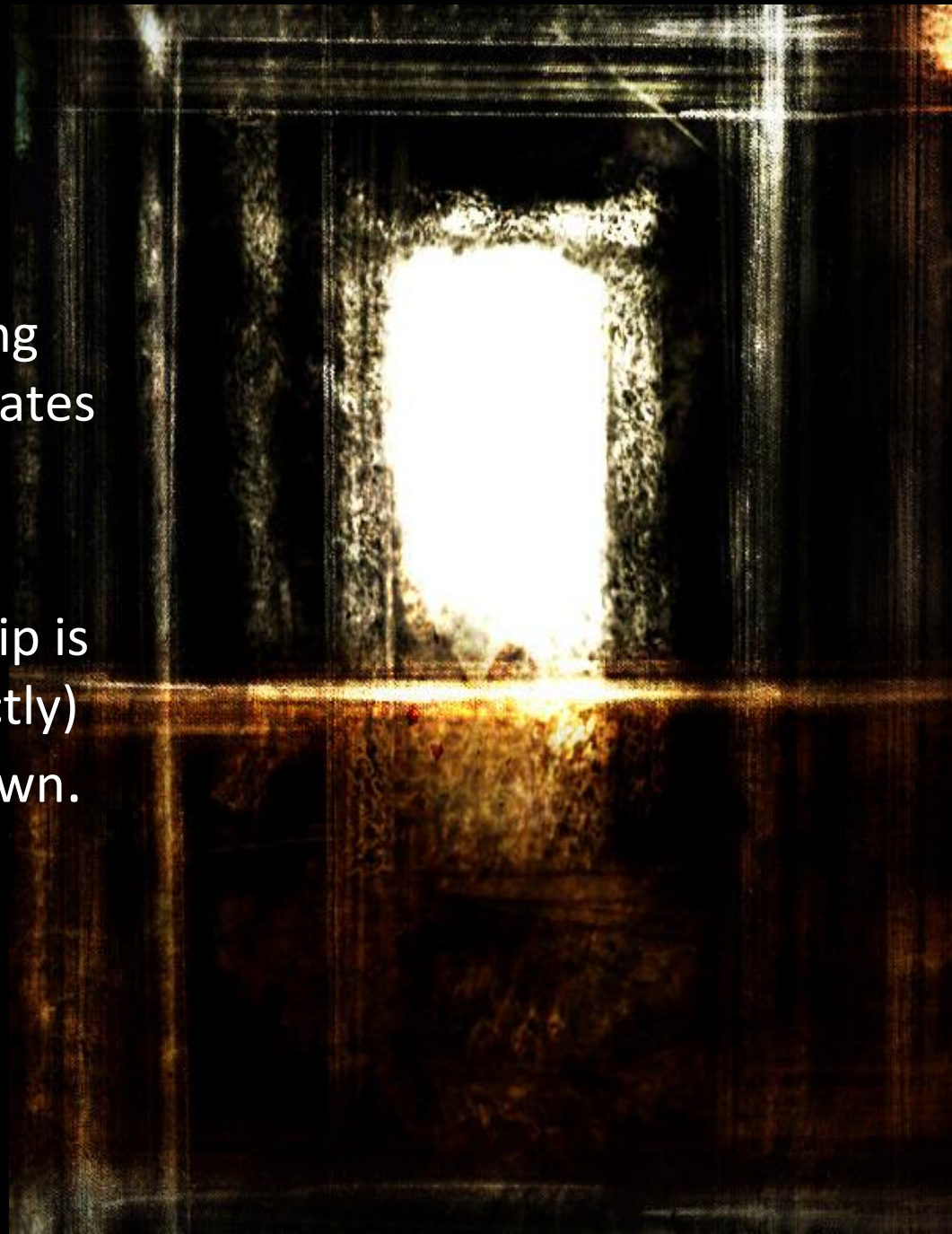


## Threshold Concepts

Real learning requires stepping into the unknown, which initiates a rupture in knowing...

By definition, all TC scholarship is concerned (directly or indirectly) with encountering the unknown.

Schwartzman 2010 p.38





pax intrantibus, salus exeuntibus (1609)



In public and marketing documentation our discourse of the student experience has become interwoven with narratives of graduate success, images of student happiness, a sense of student entitlement and the friendliness and helpfulness of (providing) staff.

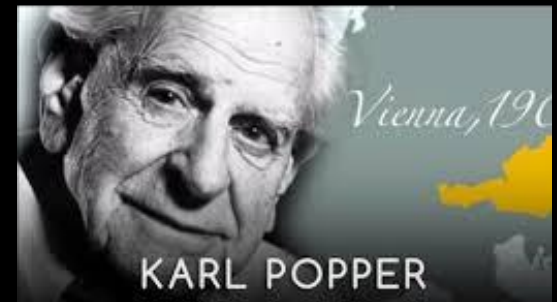


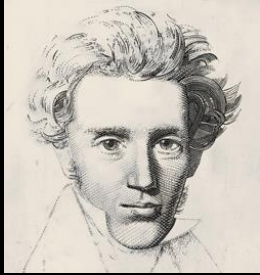




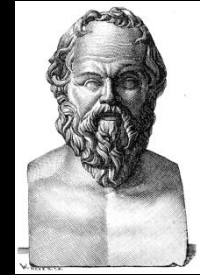
# Three worlds (Popper 1978)

- World 1 Physical (*matter and energy*)
- World 2 Experiential (*sensations and emotions*)
- World 3 Abstract (*knowledge, products of the mind*)





# Transcendence in teaching

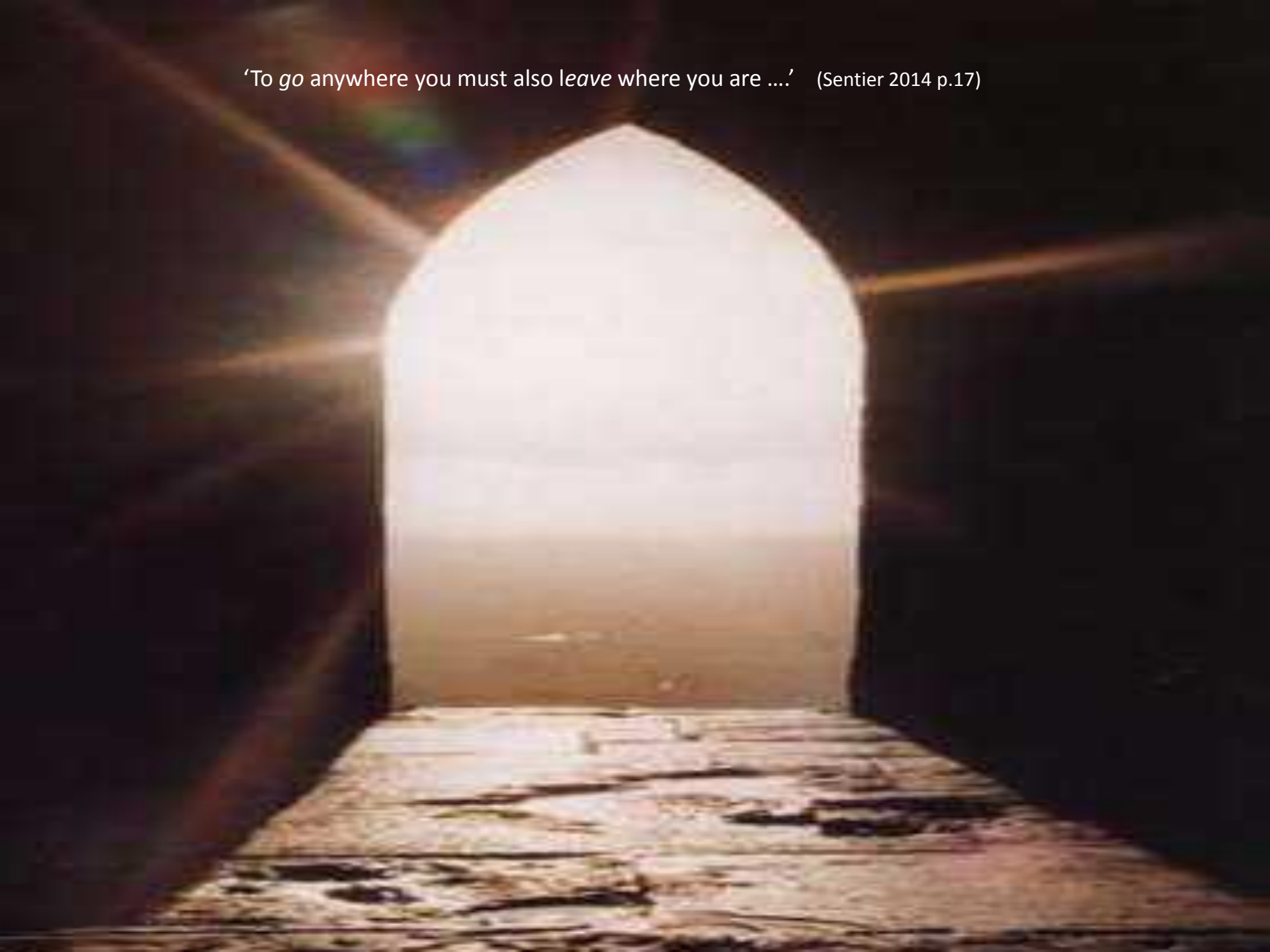


- transcendence (Kierkegaard) v maieutics (Socrates)
- ‘...teaching only has meaning if it carries with it a notion of ‘transcendence,’ that is, if it is understood as something that comes from the outside and *adds* rather than that it just confirms what is already there’. (Biesta 2013, p.453)

## Alterity in teaching

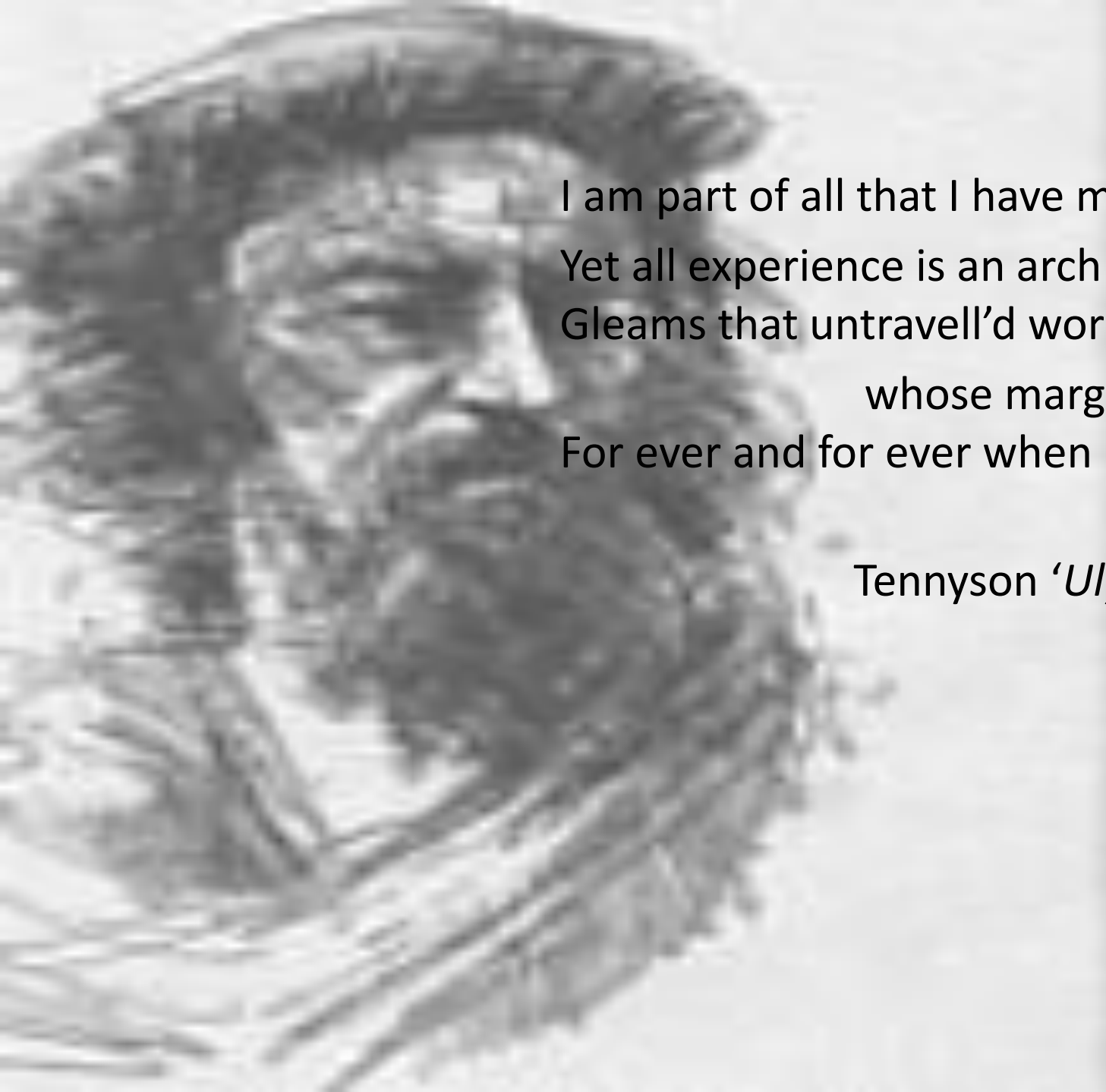
- ‘...the maieutic model erases the significance of the Other and claims that learning is a recovery contained within the I, rather than a disruption of the I provoked by the Other in a moment of sociality.’  
(Todd 2003, p. 30).
- **Double truth giving:** presenting students with something that ‘is neither derivable from nor validated by what [they] already know’ (Westphal 2008, p. 26)

'To *go* anywhere you must also leave where you are ....' (Sentier 2014 p.17)





thro' A  
S  
.

A black and white photograph of a person's face, heavily shadowed and looking down, with text overlaid on the right side.

I am part of all that I have m  
Yet all experience is an arch  
Gleams that untravell'd wor  
whose marg  
For ever and for ever when  
Tennyson 'U/

The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes, in seeing the universe with the eyes of another.



Marcel Proust, 1900



Notion that within specific disciplines there exist significant 'threshold concepts', leading to new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something.

Meyer and Land, 2003



# Threshold Concepts



Akin to a portal, a liminal space, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something.

Represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner finds it difficult to progress, within the curriculum as formulated.

# Threshold Concepts



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.

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.



James Joyce's 'epiphany'  
— the 'revelation of the whatness of a thing'.

But threshold concepts are both more constructed and re-  
constitutive than revelatory, and not necessarily sudden.  
(ευρηκα!)





However the engagement by the learner with an unfamiliar knowledge terrain and the ensuing reconceptualisation may involve a reconstitution of, or shift within, the learner's subjectivity, and perhaps identity.

Ontological implications. Learning as 'a change in subjectivity'. (Pelletier 2007).



# Liminality

Van Gennep 1960, Turner 1969

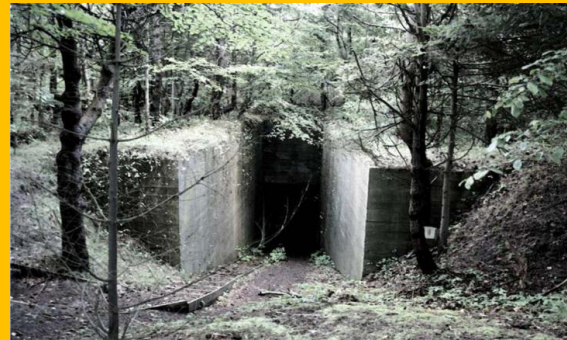
a transformative state that engages existing certainties and renders them problematic, and fluid

a suspended state in which understanding can approximate to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity

liminality as unsettling – sense of loss

## Student voice:

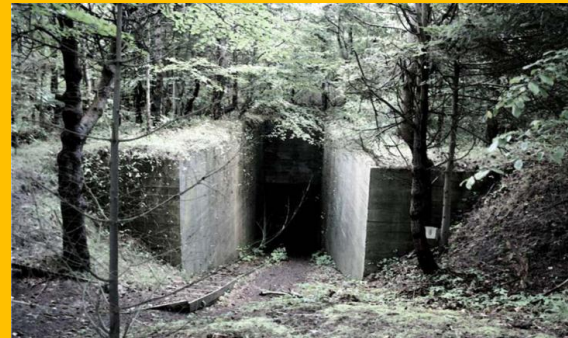
In the beginning we were thrown into something completely new and unknown that has been difficult to deal with. The feeling of not being clever enough, and not having control of what you are doing, have resulted in a lot of frustration and stress, and this has influenced the process to the extent that I have become exhausted and depressed, and I wanted to quit”





## Student voice:

“Eventually it became clear that the project was about examining the edge/ridge, the exciting state of mind where meaningful and many faceted places may emerge. ....The architecture here on the edge/ridge is rich on senses, a delicate point of balance. It *is* senses”.



## Progressive function of the liminal state

- Countenancing and integration of something new
- Recognition of shortcoming of existing view
- Letting go of the older prevailing view
- Letting go of an earlier mode of their subjectivity
- Envisaging (and accepting) an alternative version of self through the threshold space (as a practitioner) - 're authoring' of self. 'undoing the script' (Ross 2011)
- Acquiring and using new forms of written and spoken discourse and internalising these

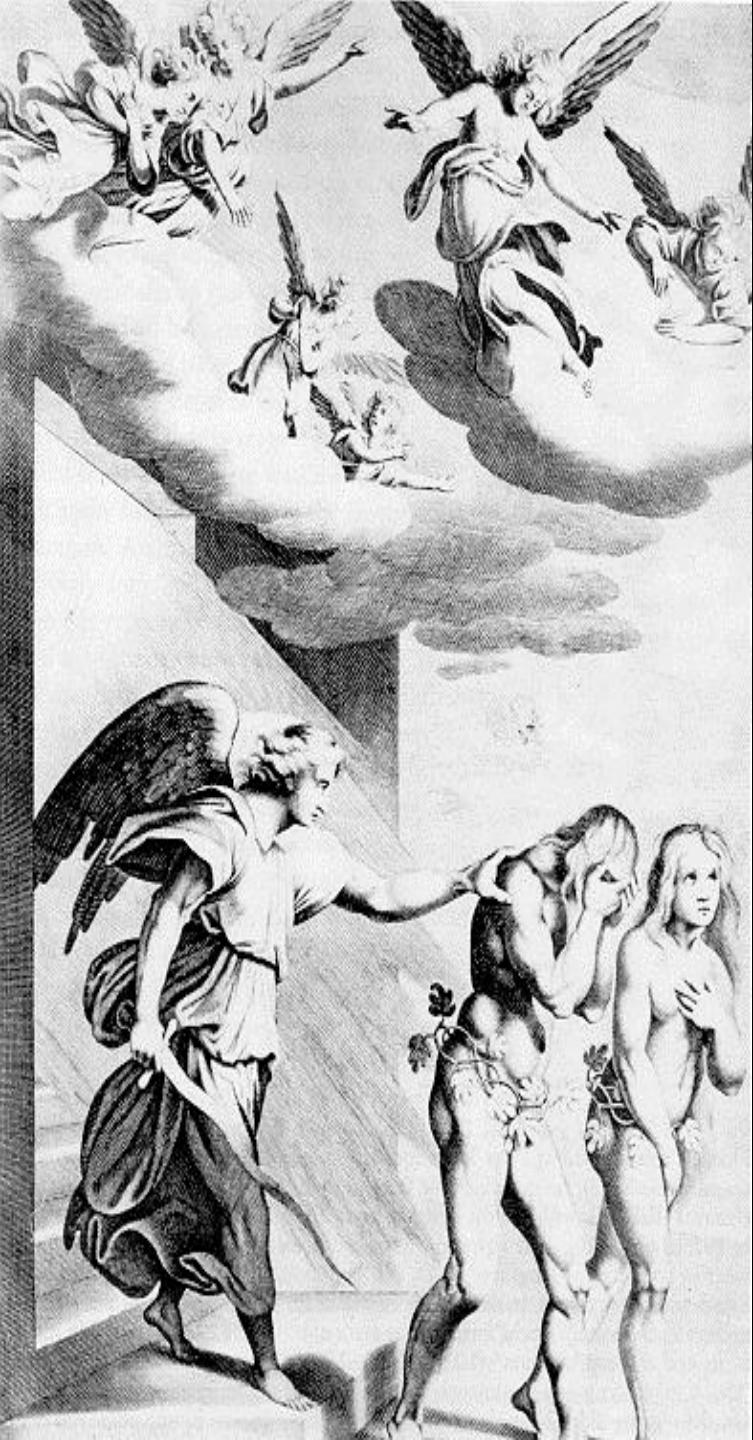
# Janus – divinity of the threshold

epistemological



ontological





## Characteristics of a threshold concept

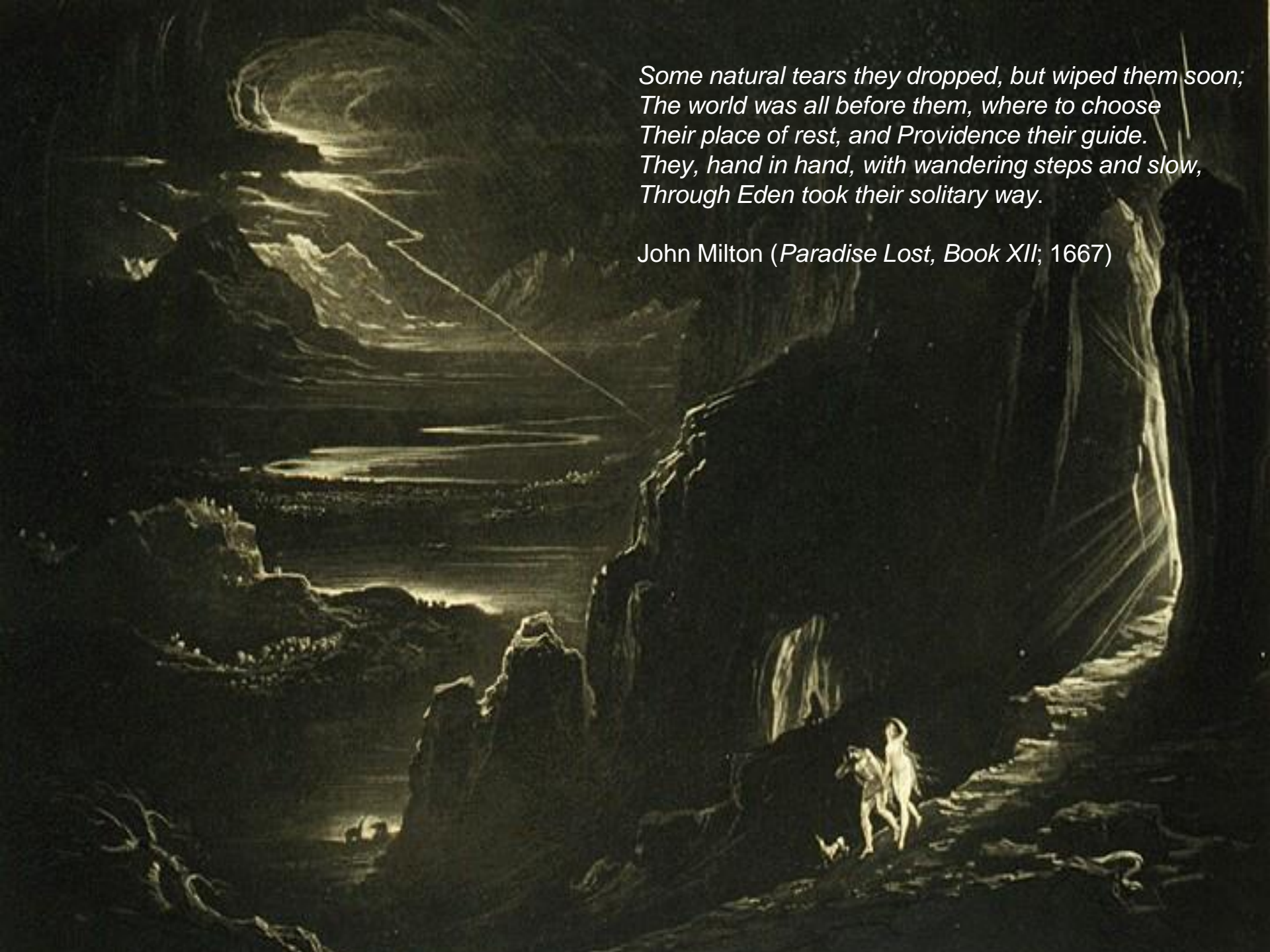
- integrative
- transformative
- irreversible
- bounded
- re-constitutive
- discursive
- troublesome

East of Eden

through the threshold





A dramatic, dark landscape painting. In the foreground, a lone figure stands on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a vast, dark expanse. The middle ground features a body of water, possibly a lake or a wide river, with a small, distant shoreline. The background is dominated by dark, jagged mountains and a sky filled with swirling, ethereal light patterns. The overall mood is somber and contemplative, with a strong sense of solitude and vastness.

*Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.  
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.*

John Milton (*Paradise Lost*, Book XII; 1667)





St. Mark's Anglican Church  
*"The Friendly Church"*

WORSHIP SAT 5PM SUN 8:30AM & 10:30AM

**ADAM & EVE  
THE FIRST PEOPLE  
TO NOT READ THE APPLE  
TERMS & CONDITIONS**

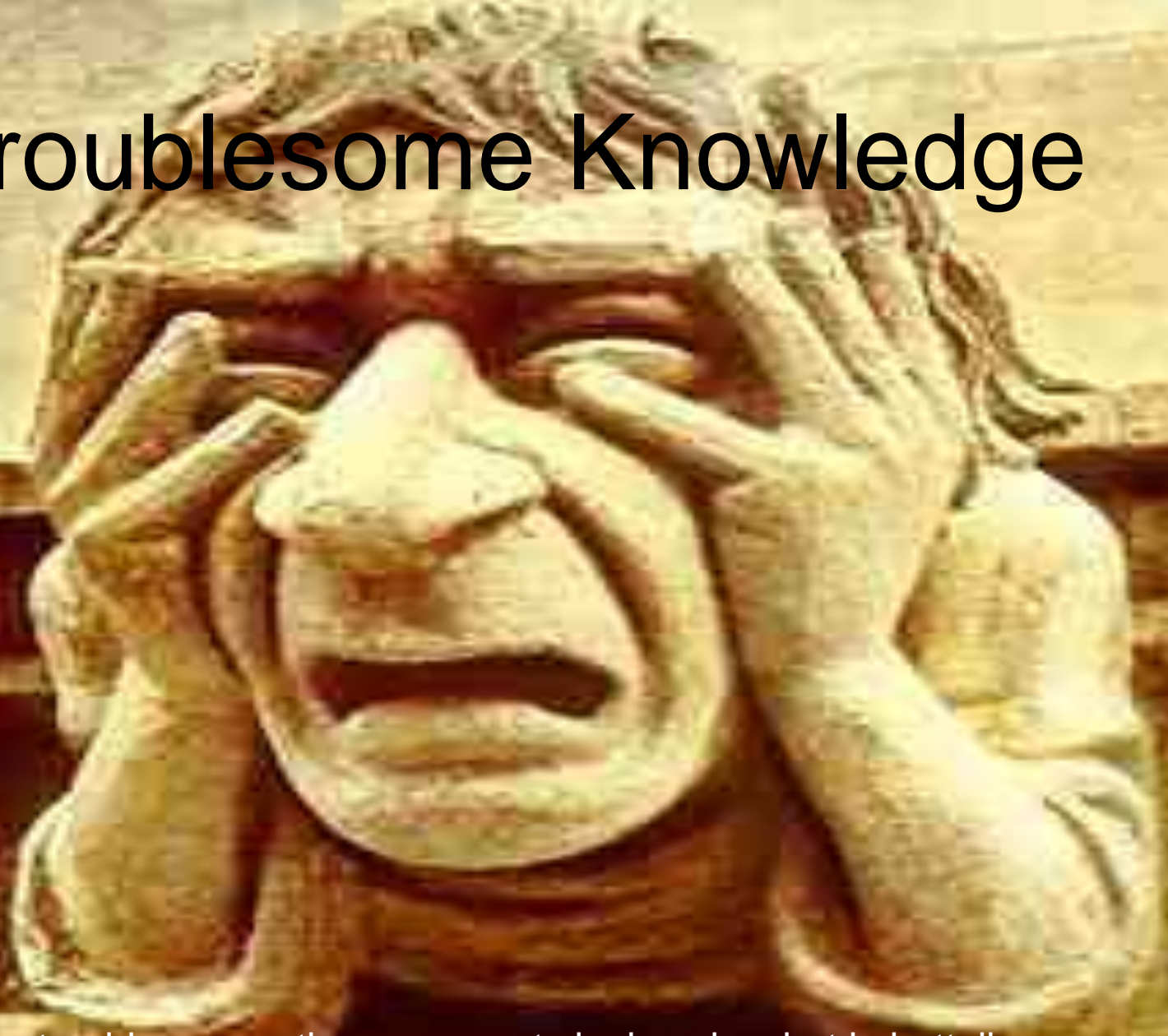


## TCs Candidate concepts

- Pure Maths – ‘complex number’, a ‘*limit*’, the Fourier transform’
- Literary Studies – ‘signification, deconstruction, ethical reading’
- Economics – ‘opportunity cost, price, elasticity’
- Design – ‘Confidence to challenge’
- Computer Science – ‘programming’, ‘Y and Recursion’
- Exercise Physiology – ‘metabolism’
- Law - ‘precedence’
- Accounting - ‘depreciation’
- Biology, Psychology - ‘evolution’
- Politics – ‘the state’
- Engineering – ‘reactive power’, ‘spin’
- Nursing ‘Evidence-based Practice’
- Mental Health Nursing ‘Recovery’
- Comparative Religion– ‘Biblical texts as Literary Texts’
- Plant Science ‘Photoprotection’
- Health Science – ‘Care’
- Physics – ‘Gravity’, ‘Measurement uncertainty’
- Geology - ‘Geologic Time’



# Troublesome Knowledge



When troubles come they come not single spies, but in battalions

*(Hamlet Act 4 Sc 5 ll 83-84)*



## Troublesome knowledge

- ritual knowledge
- inert knowledge
- conceptually difficult knowledge
- the defended learner
- alien knowledge
- tacit knowledge
- loaded knowledge
- troublesome language

# looking for trouble

- Knowledge is troublesome for a variety of reasons (Perkins 2006). It might be alien, inert, tacit, conceptually difficult, counter-intuitive, characterised by an inaccessible 'underlying game', or characterised by supercomplexity.
- such troublesomeness and disquietude is purposeful, as it is the provoker of change that cannot be assimilated, and hence is the instigator of new learning and new ontological possibility.

# Episteme: 'the underlying game'

'...a system of ideas or way of understanding that allows us to establish knowledge. ..the importance of students understanding the structure of the disciplines they are studying. 'Ways of knowing' is another phrase in the same spirit. As used here, epistemes are manners of justifying, explaining, solving problems, conducting enquiries, and designing and validating various kinds of products or outcomes.' (Perkins 2006 p.42)

'knowledge practices' (Strathearn 2008)



# Considerations for course (re)design

- Jewels in the Curriculum
- Importance of Engagement
- Listening for Understanding
- Reconstitution of Self
- Recursiveness
- Tolerating Uncertainty
- The Dynamics of Assessment
- The Underlying Game

# Tension

Security v autonomy

Satisfaction v transformation

‘the Holy Grail [is] “crystal clarity” not tolerance of ambiguity’ (Ecclestone 2012)

‘Liminality becomes a liability’ (Atherton 2014)

# Global Horizons for Universities

(Fielden 2007)



## Knowledge

- world geography, conditions, issues and events
- complexity and interdependence of world events & issues
- understanding of historical forces that have shaped the current world system
- knowledge of a foreign language, intercultural communication concepts, international business etiquette



## Attitudes

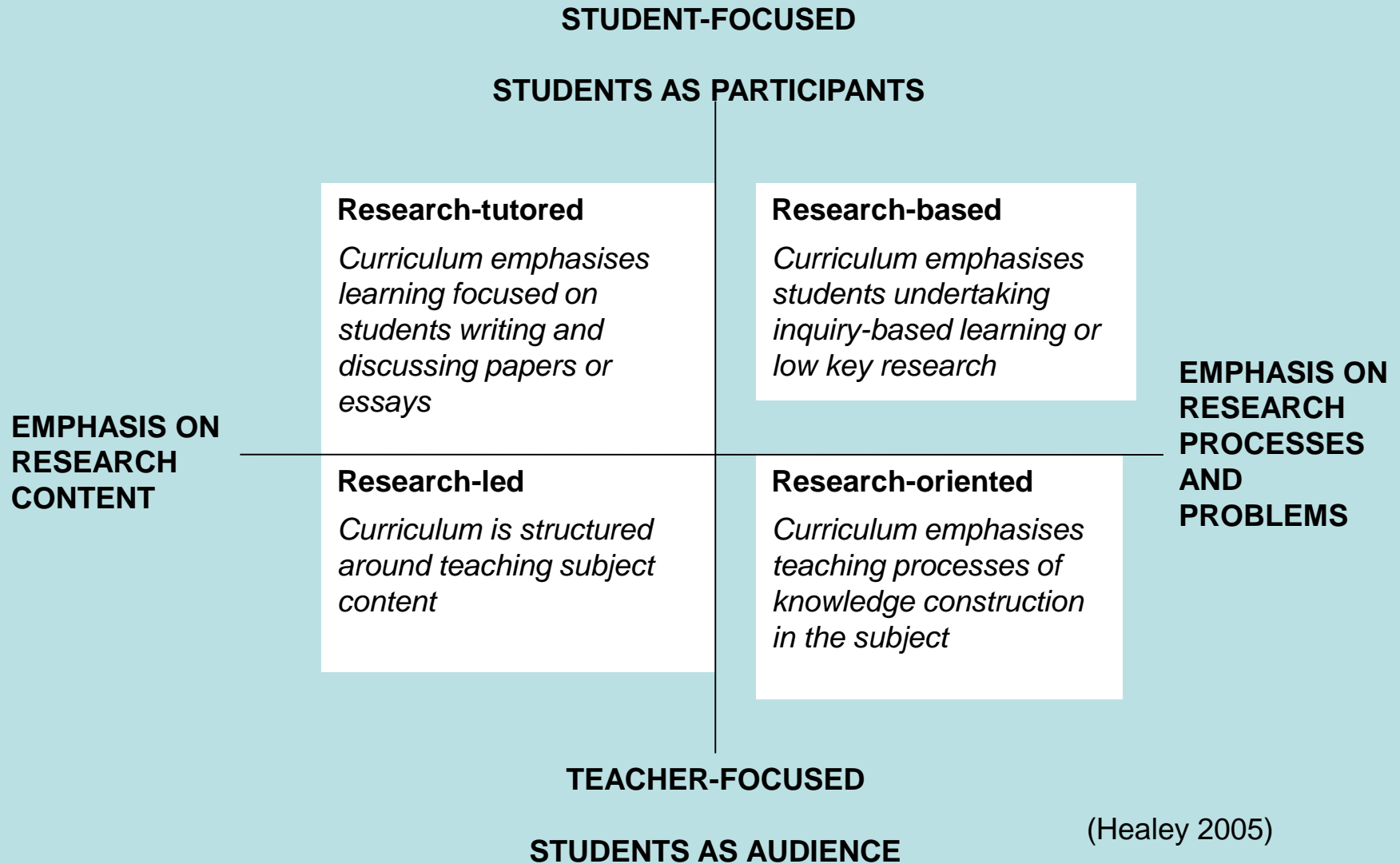
- openness to learning & positive orientation to new opportunities, ideas and ways of thinking.
- tolerance for ambiguity and unfamiliarity.
- sensitivity & respect for cultural differences.
- empathy or the ability to take multiple perspectives.
- self-awareness and self esteem about one's own identity & culture.



## Skills

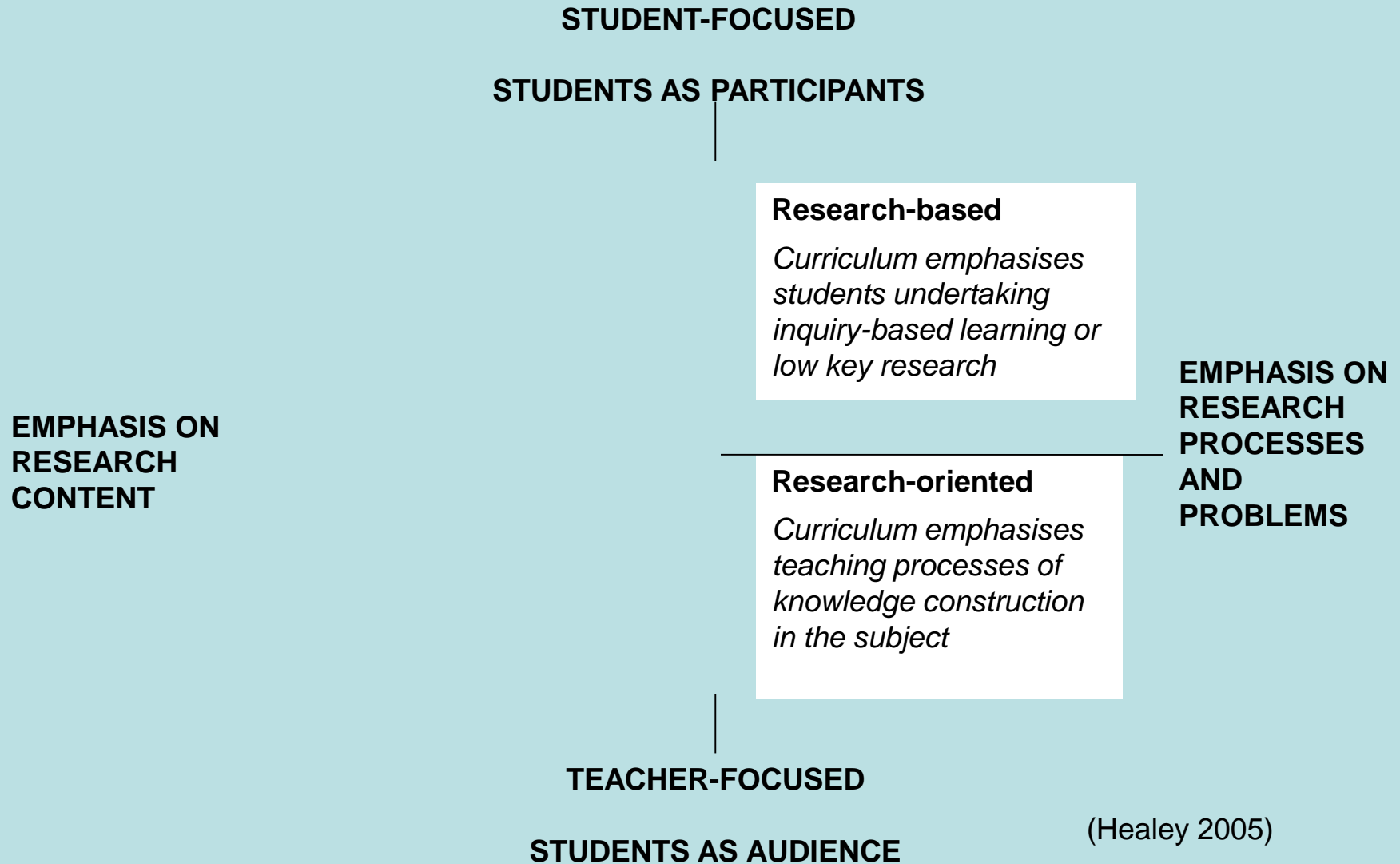
- research skills to learn about the world
- critical and comparative thinking skills
- ability to think creatively and integrate knowledge
- ability to use another language effectively and interact with people from other cultures
- coping and resiliency skills in unfamiliar and challenging situations

# Curriculum design and the research-teaching nexus





# Curriculum design and the research-teaching nexus



# Curriculum design and the research-teaching nexus

**STUDENT-FOCUSED**

**STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANTS**

**Research-based**

*Curriculum emphasises  
students undertaking  
inquiry-based learning or  
low key research*

**EMPHASIS ON  
RESEARCH  
PROCESSES  
AND  
PROBLEMS**

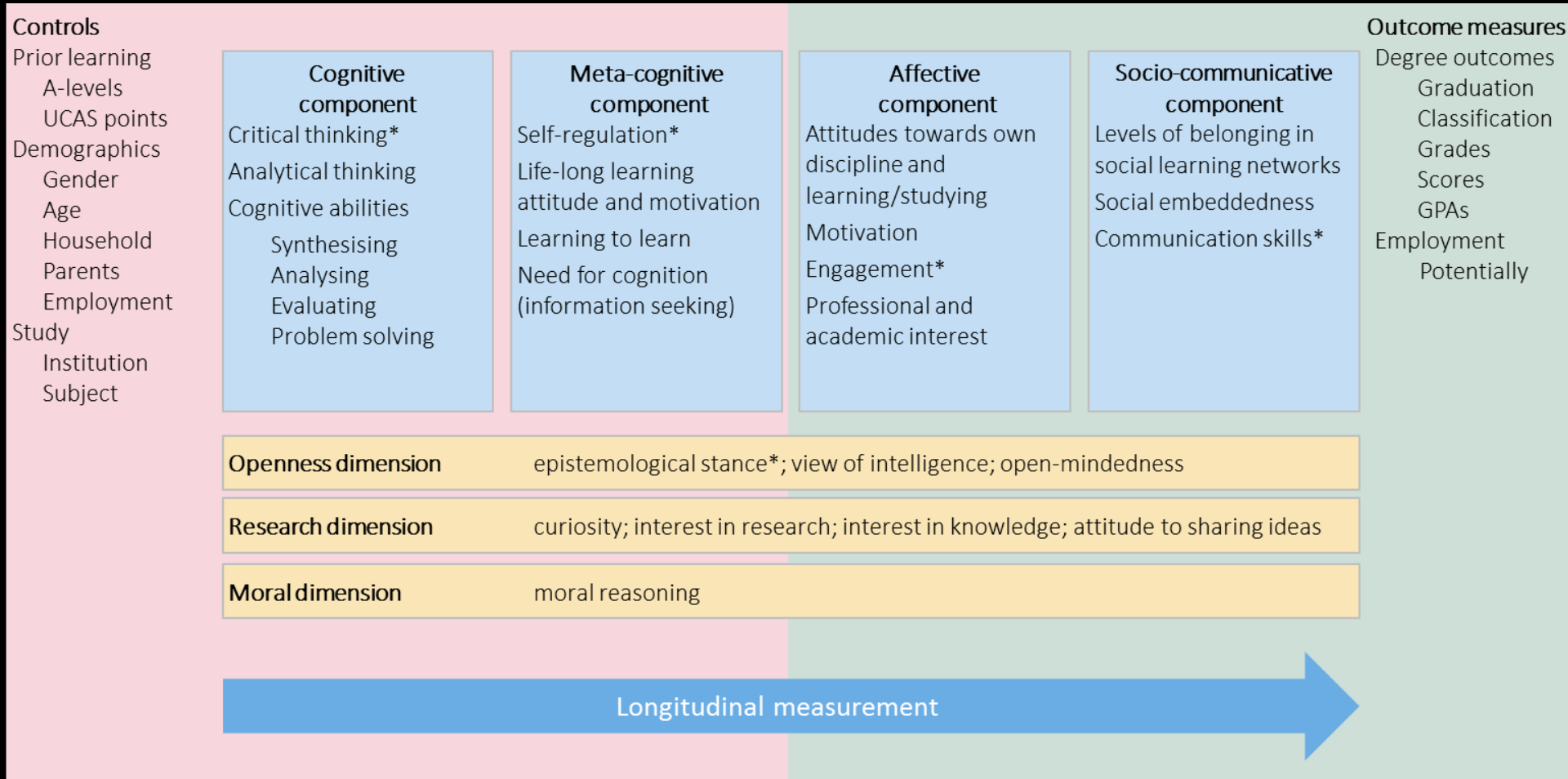
**EMPHASIS ON  
RESEARCH  
CONTENT**

**TEACHER-FOCUSED**

**STUDENTS AS AUDIENCE**

(Healey 2005)

# Learning Gain Conceptual Framework



<http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>



ray.land@durham.ac.uk