Learning ecologies: Liminal states and student transformation

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Introduction

At the heart of ecological learning are the concepts of liminality, transition, transformation, and fluency. However, for students to progress through an ecological learning journey, engagement with the liminal tunnel is necessary to shift through liminal learning zones and move into a state of learning fluency. This chapter presents the shift into the liminal tunnel, through liminal zones, the subsequent ecologies of transformation and the transitions into different forms of learning fluency. It draws on a range of studies and literature across higher education, including work on digital fluency, learner identity and disjunction.

Learning ecologies and liminality

The central argument of this chapter is that the experience of getting stuck in learning, and the subsequent liminality, is essential to the notion of learning ecologies. Liminality in learning is experienced as being ‘in-between’; in-between confusion and understanding. Learning ecologies captures the idea that processes, spaces, contexts and learner identities need to coalesce in an ecology for students to understand their own learning processes and the ways in which they learn best.

The concept of learning ecologies seems to draw on the work of Bateson (1972) who saw the mind not as just something cognitive but rather as a network of interactions between the individual, the society and the universe as a whole. It also relates to more recent work such as
Guattari (2000), Gibson (2003) and Reader (2017). Guattari argued that we have a narrow definition of ecology and this needs to broadened to include ‘ecosophy’ which are three interrelated ecologies of environmental, mental and social worlds. Gibson suggests an ecological approach to understanding perceptual learning and development in which the environment and the person mutually sustain each other across the life course. More recently this relationship between learning, ecology and the environment has been taken up by authors such as Reader (2017), who argues for the need to engage with New Materialism and explore both the issue of human agency and the central question of what it means to become human. Learning ecologies, whilst narrowly defined in some areas of higher education, can be said to draw on wider environmental, political and individual concerns about being human and what it means to learn. This is important in the context of models of learning that fail to recognize students’ experiences of becoming stuck in learning. This chapter will suggest that liminal ecologies of learning, the recognition of stuckness and the subsequent liminality is vital for students’ development and growth towards becoming flexible and fluent leaners.

Liminal ecologies of learning

The idea of an individual learning ecology overlaps with the idea of learner identity discussed later in this chapter. Learning ecology encompasses contexts, relationships and opportunities for engaging with people and resources through the learning process (Jackson, 2013). Liminal ecologies of learning comprise forms of learning in which the learner co-constructs meaning, deconstructs knowledge and locates their self within learning spaces that are both formal and informal. Forms of learning that enable this kind of liminal learning require the deconstruction of practices, frameworks and what constitutes human learning. Higher education it seems is a
liminal space, subject to Government demands for accountability characterized (in the UK at least) by the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, and Knowledge Exchange Framework, as well as more creeping covert forms such as ‘transferable open educational resources’ and ‘lecture-capture’. Staff need to have the capacity and autonomy to improvise, enquire and take intellectual risks to ensure higher education remains a place of creativity and experimentation. If higher education teachers record things or deliver the same lecture accurately in the same way repeatedly, they will be replaced. Fuller (2010, summarized from p15) questions what difference a university makes if everything produces knowledge or is in the business of knowledge production?

The university is not just about passing on knowledge. Lectures should raise problems and questions for students, not just pass on knowledge. There is often a sense that liminal spaces or tunnels, in which these liminal zones exist, are abandoned spaces or graveyards. Liminal ecologies of learning can be mapped in ways that help learners and teachers to view ‘the liminal' as (a) space(s) to examine both human learning relationships and as valuable suspended states where the past is held in transition while new moves toward learning fluency can be made. However, liminality, can be understood in a wide variety of ways.

Liminality

Liminality is a term that was first coined by van Gennep (1909), who described a psychological or metaphysical subjective state of being at the threshold of two existential planes. Although the term was originally applied to rites and rituals in small human groups, it was extended to whole societies by writers such as Jaspers (1953). Turner later described people in a liminal state as ‘a
realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise’ (1995:97). He suggested that those in liminal states were often ritually, symbolically, or metaphorically removed in order not to threaten the social order.

Liminality also describes a sense of in-betweenness, but seems to have a stronger sense of shifting identity than the concept of metaxis, since there appear to be different forms of liminality. Metaxis (or metaxy) is the word used by Plato (360 BCE) to describe the condition of ‘in-betweenness’ that is one of the characteristics of being human. Plato applied it to spirituality, describing its location as being between the human and the divine. Whelan (2008) expands the notion of metaxis, claiming that ‘we humans are suspended on a web of polarities – the one and the many, eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love and hate, to name but a few’. Liminality, however, is not a polarity, it is an all-encompassing overwhelming interruption, bringing with it a sense of being in a suspended state. Several authors provided helpful examples of this. Sibbett and Thompson (2008) suggest that in professional development, liminality is a moratorium status similar to adolescence, where different identity status might be experienced. A moratorium status is where delay occurs so that exploration can happen in order to develop, create and form an identity. This, the authors suggest, might be a form of liminality, since through undergoing this process, and committing to the newly formed identity, ‘identity achievement’ occurs. (p234). Identity achievement is the idea that the identity and commitment that developed in the moratorium state are consolidated. However, if identity work does not take place then mimicry may occur, leading to a sense of fragmentation. This fragmentation seems to happen in many curricula that are educating students
for the professions, and certainly there is evidence for this in the stories of student experience (Savin-Baden, 2007).

A different type of liminality is that delineated by Trafford (2008), who explored threshold concepts in PhD supervision and offers some fascinating insights into how PhD students encountered and managed threshold concepts. What is poignant is the consistent sense of conceptual lostness that students experience, as if they were slipping across diverse forms of liminality. This sense of being lost and looking for something is a response to how the liminal space is entered and negotiated. Students speak of the realisation of being lost and either needing to look for something that is present, or, having an expectation that this sense of lostness will disappear. Here students seem to almost value doubt as a means of moving away from a liminal space. Instead of trying to eliminate the lostness, they appear to believe it is better to value it as a central principle of learning.

Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) explored liminality as a threshold concept between established roles at which one can linger, from which one can depart, and to which one can return, such as when undergraduate students take up a liminal position between student and teacher. The study examined the students as consultants in a staff development programme. The findings demonstrated that students changed their relationships with their teachers and their responsibilities towards their own learning. The authors argue that there is a need to see student learning not as a transition from one state to another, but instead as an ‘unending process of dialogue and development in multiple indeterminate states, suspended between and among
established institutional roles and mindsets, always unfinished, always requiring revisiting, revisioning, and re-enacting.’ (p51).

Mandela described his own experience of the Xhosa rite of passage into manhood and speaks of the rituals, where after the circumcision ceremony in which he was declared a man, he returned to the hut: ‘We were now abakwetha, initiates into the world of manhood. We were looked after by an amakhankatha, or guardian, who explained the rules we had to follow if we were to enter manhood properly’ (Mandela, 1994: 33). The position in which Mandela found himself after circumcision was a liminal space; although declared a man, this was the space in which he was located before he would enter manhood properly.

Bosetti et al. (2008) discuss liminality in relation to female professors' efforts to reconstruct their professional identities in academe. The authors located four themes which were: 1) exploring the landscape; 2) professional competence and identities; 3) competition and isolation; and 4) seeking support and validation. These themes indicated that the women were seeking to reclaim both a sense of their competence and their professional identity. Through supporting one another and discussing their struggles, some women moved through liminality and made transitions into ‘post-heroic’ leadership. However, others going through this transition dealt with the tensions by withdrawal, working from home, or staying behind closed doors.

Kofoed (2008) examined transitions in which a school pupil questions and transgresses established rules and regulations. She argues that the professionally organized setting of a school required the necessity for unambiguity to be present, and that only one way will be correct,
which guides the way in which subjectifications are performed within schools. For example, there are rules for spelling, rules for mathematics, and an adherence to these rules is reflected in the pupils’ grades and subjectification. Pupil(s) who transgress the rules become marginalized. Kofoed poignantly remarks ‘Liminality is the space which stretches out between the various demands for unambiguity’ (p 209). Liminality then may offer a way of conceptualizing imperfect and inconclusive transitions.

In terms of the costs of liminal spaces in academic life, many academics verbalize stories about liminal identities in the context of the personal costs of both undertaking a PhD and role transition into and through academe. The transition through liminality brings with it not only new knowledge and understanding for the participating individual, but also often new status and identity within the community. However, to date, there is relatively little understanding of the disjunction that occurs either before the liminality or in the liminal tunnel. These studies and the impact of liminality on learning are presented in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1 Forms of liminality

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<tr>
<th>Form of liminality</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Impact on learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moratorium status</td>
<td>Delay occurs or is chosen so that exploration may happen in order to develop, create and form an identity.</td>
<td>Sibbett and Thompson (2008)</td>
<td>Forming a new sense of identity leading to identity achievement.</td>
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<td>Conceptual lostness</td>
<td>Slipping in and out of liminal variation and across diverse forms of liminality.</td>
<td>Trafford (2008)</td>
<td>A feeling of being stuck in a liminal tunnel</td>
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<td>Iterative liminality</td>
<td>A threshold between established roles from which one can linger, depart, and to which one can return</td>
<td>Cook-Sather and Alter (2011)</td>
<td>A sense of being threshold people</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-between identities</td>
<td>Xhosa rite of passage, post circumcision but before acceptance as a man</td>
<td>Mandela (1994)</td>
<td>Recognition that the importance of reflection on new role and future is vital for transition</td>
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<td>Identity reconstruction</td>
<td>Feeling incompetent and lacking in professional capability to undertake a new and challenging role</td>
<td>Bosetti et al (2008)</td>
<td>Realising the value of providing support and sharing stories and struggles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgression of norms</td>
<td>A means of conceptualizing imperfect and inconclusive transitions.</td>
<td>Kofoed (2008)</td>
<td>Accepting being othered whilst others are normalised and seeing imperfection in transitions made</td>
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Disjunction and the liminal tunnel

The liminal tunnel, as described by Land, Rattray and Vivian (2014), begins with a ‘portal or gateway triggered by the threshold concept or disjunction. Learners move through the tunnel through the liminal - space and emerge with a shift in learner subjectivity, a discursive shift, or a shift of a conceptual, ontological (such as identity shifts) or epistemological nature. Land et al (2014) depict this transformation as a cognitive tunnel where the liminal space within the tunnel is entered when triggered by a threshold concept, or a ‘disjunction’, that challenges previously held ideas about something. Disjunctions are ‘spaces’ or ‘positions’ which are reached through the realization that knowledge is troublesome. For instance, after encountering a threshold concept, the learner will move into a liminal space that can be transitional and transformational. Learning in the liminal space often entails oscillation between different states and emotions. The liminal space is characterized by a stripping away of old identities, oscillation between states and personal transformation (Savin-Baden, 2008).

Field (2012) argues for the idea of ‘liminal identity’, the notion that such an identity can be shaped through cultural and social processes that are formed and challenged through relationships with others. In terms of transitions it is not clear whether they are imposed from the outside or something over which people have control and choice. In a recent study (Fredholm, Henningsohn, Savin-Baden, & Silén, 2018 forthcoming) data were analysed using the theoretical representation of the cognitive tunnel (Land et al., 2014). Students’ narratives described their disjunction, their experience of the liminal spaces and their resulting shift over the thresholds. Instead of focusing on a cognitive tunnel as Land et al. (2014) suggest, this was related to a particular practical experience functioning as a trigger for moving into the tunnel, learning in the
tunnel and coming out ‘on the other side’ of the tunnel with a changed view. The driving forces for movement through the tunnel were the students’ inner motivations for learning, originating from the perceived meaning of the practical experience. The self-evident nature of the practical experience, and the need to master these situations created movement and transformational learning. Table 3.2 depicts movement into, through and out of the tunnel with triggers and consequences.

Table 3.2 Depiction of movement into, through and out of the tunnel (adapted from Fredholm et al, 2018 forthcoming)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage of Movement</th>
<th>Triggers to movement</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moving into the tunnel: experiencing disjunction</td>
<td>Disjunction in the form of an ontological experience</td>
<td>Feeling confused, stuck and frustrated. Experiencing challenge to previously held beliefs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning and developing within the tunnel while being in the liminal space</td>
<td>Movement triggered recognition of need to learn and shift</td>
<td>Transitional learning and sometimes transformational learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving toward the end of the tunnel and crossing the threshold: the shift</td>
<td>Movement triggered by a sudden or gradual understanding, a stripping away of old identity, and personal transformation</td>
<td>An ontological shift evident in change in any or all of personal, professional, and learner identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exiting the tunnel | Confidence gained through threshold shift | Seeing the world afresh and valuing the disjunction and subsequent shift

It is proposed here that the liminal tunnel is not merely cognitive as Land et al (2014) initially suggested, but ontological and rhizomatic. Ontological engagement with the liminal tunnel is concerned with shifts in identity and subjectivity, rather than just cognitive shifts; it is more than working through and solving a cognitive problem. It is also rhizomatic because the options for moving in, though and out of the tunnel are complex and multifaceted, and require an examination of one’s learner identity and learning ecology.

*Types of Tunnels*

Liminal spaces within the liminal tunnel are suspended states and serve a transformative function, as someone moves through the tunnel. Within the tunnel people begin to re-examine their position, and in doing so see the terrain that they then choose to move through towards the end of the tunnel. For most people, the concept of a tunnel is invariably imagined as a narrow one-directional space. In the context of liminal ecologies of learning, tunnels are rhizomatic. The rhizome, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, is a cultural model based on the botanical rhizome. It is positioned in opposition to a root-tree system which follows chronological lines, and which looks towards pinnacles or conclusions. By contrast, the rhizome is always interconnected, and ‘has no beginning or no end; it is always in the middle, between things’ (1988, p. 25). Some liminal tunnels can be one-directional; these tend to be either rites of passage or temporary disjunctions which result only in a series of transitions, rather than fundamental transformations.
Thus, these tunnels are temporary, in which the eventual end point or the crossing of a threshold concept boundary is the focus.

Rhizomatic tunnels are in a sense liminal states in which one lives, such as the priesthood, serial and long-term travellers, and politicians; and possibly serial students and authors. Rhizomatic tunnels are where transformations occur. A rhizomatic tunnel has multiple entrances and exits as in Figure 3.1 below:

![Rhizomatic tunnel](image)

**Figure 3.1 Rhizomatic tunnel**

The difference between transitional and transformational shifts through the tunnel are that in a transition there is a sense of shifting from one place to another, such as changing role,
employment or location. In a transformational there is a sense of an overwhelming life-shift resulting in knowing the world differently in living, working and learning contexts. Transformation results in a re-view of the world and one’s place within it. An example of this is the transformation that occurred for black and coloured communities in the early post-apartheid years.

Daignault's work is helpful here since he argues for performing ‘knowledge through a passageway’ through thinking aloud (1983, p. 7-13). The idea is that the gap is the curriculum and what creates the curriculum is a composition of thinking and wisdom, ‘thinking maybe’ (1992, p. 202). Daignault’s work is not about crossing thresholds, but walking in between, and in ways that enable students to learn critically and imaginatively and in spaces that enable disjunction to be valued and to flourish. Such flourishing can only really occur in flexible curricula where students are encouraged to think critically about what counts as knowledge. The ability to engage with critical thought (Barnett, 2000) results in students valuing flexible pedagogies and developing learning fluency.

**Prompts towards Learning fluency**

Learning fluency is defined here as the ability to use learning media, of whatever sort, to manage knowledge and learning across diverse spaces. It includes the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness and accuracy of information, and then to understand the subtext of knowledge presented, before finally placing it within a wider context. This is achieved through moving across learning landscapes, constantly sifting, exploring, and critiquing, as well as appropriating,
mashing up, and recirculating. Such learning fluency tends to be evident in areas where flexible pedagogies are adopted; an example of which is problem-based learning.

**Flexible pedagogies and contexts?**

Despite moves, in the UK at least, towards flexible pedagogies, considerable resistance does seem to remain. The question is then how teachers might create flexible pedagogies that enable students to develop their own learning ecologies. Barnett (2014) has argued for 15 conditions of flexibility, which he believes will promote flexible provision in higher education as well as ensuring educational integrity. He argues that programmes should lead to a qualification that contributes to major awards and offer all students access to suitable materials and with real-time interaction with tutors and other students. As well as other sound suggestions he argues, importantly, that programmes should contain sufficient challenges so that students are likely to be cognitively and experientially stretched and to be informed by a spirit of criticality appropriate to each stage of a programme of studies.

If flexible pedagogies are to be adopted that focus on human beings, as Barnett (2014) suggests, then the use of behavioural objectives needs to be dismissed in favour of Stenhouse’s (1975) learning intentions. The idea of conditions of flexibility is a challenge in the face of claims by staff that students remain entrenched and still want to be given lectures and write essays – despite little reflection from academics about how students may have become quite so entrenched in the first place. Some of the questions that need to be asked in the context of a desire for flexible pedagogies are:

- Why are objectives still useful?
• What are the boundaries and borders of a discipline and who decides?
• To what extent does credit transfer and modularity result in flexibility?
• What are the most effective ways of ensuring quality?
• How can shifts be made away from quality standards and professional bodies that are risk averse?
• To what extent are disciplinary norms and learning outcomes useful in the 21st Century?
• How can institutions become ‘unmanaged’ by bureaucratic administrators?

A curriculum should be a creation and a composition, a thinking space that is complex and multilayered. Perhaps learning and the development of fluency in learning demands the ability to live and learn liminally. Such gaps and thinking spaces are not narrow and linear, but complex, multidirectional and multilayered, similar to Corner's (1999) mapping practices which he names: drift, layering and rhizome. Such curricula will encourage rhizomatic travel since the curriculum itself is a liminal learning space and encourage the development of learner identity. There is a need to re-focus higher education learning on the learner and value difference in learner identity, since it is here that we see liminality writ large.

Learner identity

Learner identity moves beyond, but encapsulates the notion of learning approach, and encompasses positions which students take up in learning situations, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is not just a sense of how one has come to be a learner in a given context, but also the perceptions about when and how one actually learns. Learner identity is not to be seen as a stable entity but as something people use to make sense of themselves, and the ways in which
they learn best in relation to other people and the learning environments in which they are learning. A student whose learner identity is threatened by the idea that knowledge is not certain and that there are different ways of knowing, may experience conflict and disjunction. This occurs when the student’s concept of ‘valid knowledge’ is challenged. This can be a threat or benefit to the development of learner identity, such as when a student encounters a threshold concept.

Students encountering flexible pedagogies experience challenges to learner identity, often resulting in confused identities and a sense of outsider hood. The result is an obligation to struggle with disjunction as they find themselves in a liminal land. The difficulty is that few academics speak of this land to students, share their own tunnel experiences with them or explain to them how they can reconstitute their learner identities in these liminal spaces. Problem-based learning (PBL) is a learning approach which appears to prompt disjunction and shift students into liminal spaces. For these reasons it is an important approach to consider in the context of learning ecologies. PBL is an example of flexible learning that engages students with liminality, and therefore could be said to be a liminal ecology of learning.

Example of Liminal Ecologies of Learning: Constellations of PBL

Since its inception in the 1980s, PBL has developed in diverse ways worldwide, yet there has been relatively little mapping of its theories, practice, or disciplinary differences. Listing specific and narrowly defined characteristics does not, in fact, untangle the philosophical conundrums of PBL. For example, there are many constellations of PBL, each affecting the possibility for flexibility within the curriculum. This has led to confusion within the academic community about
which form of PBL would be the best fit for a given curriculum, since it is an approach to learning that is affected by the structural and pedagogical environment into which it is placed (that is, the discipline or subject, the instructors, and the organization). In some areas, possibly most notably in some medical curricula, there is a sense of performative rules about how PBL should be used, but instead it would seem that we need pedagogically informed guidelines. Performative rules define how learning should be and the ways that knowledge should be presented, whereas pedagogically informed guidelines do not adopt such a narrow stance but instead offer curriculum flexibility and a broad interpretation of professional body guidelines.

The growing number of constellations of problem-based learning illustrate the value placed on this approach to learning. The idea of locating different formulations of PBL as a series of constellations develops the idea that there is a broad range of PBL approaches. It helps us to see that there are patterns not just within the types of PBL but across the different fields of practice, as exemplified in Table 3.3 (Savin-Baden, 2014). The idea of grouping PBL approaches in this way is drawn from Bernstein (1992), who argued for the use of constellations as ‘a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential, core or generative first principle’.

With the growth of the use of digital technology and the development of online PBL, the notion of what counts as participation is becoming increasingly complex. For example, a study was undertaken to examine human interaction with sophisticated pedagogical agents and the passive and active detection of such pedagogical agents within online PBL. A pedagogical agent (or chatbot) is a software application which can provide a human like interaction using a natural
language interface. Examples of these are ‘Siri’, ‘Cortana’, ‘Alexa’ or the virtual online assistants found on some websites, such as ‘Anna’ on the Ikea website. The study used PBL online, so as to give a focus for discussions and participation, without creating too much artificiality. It was also used with a view to developing the possibility of virtual facilitators and virtual mentors in the future (Savin-Baden et al., 2016; Burden and Savin-Baden, forthcoming).
Table 3.3 Constellations of PBL (adapted from Savin-Baden, 2014)

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<td>Focus of assessment</td>
<td>Testing of knowledge</td>
<td>Competence for the world of work</td>
<td>Project management</td>
<td>Competence for the world of work</td>
<td>Design critique and professional capabilities</td>
<td>Use of capabilities across contexts</td>
<td>Integrate capabilities across disciplines</td>
<td>Self and team analysis</td>
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Conclusion: Liminal lands and Threshold people

Liminal lands are inhabited by individuals such as the court jester, carers of the dying, and those working with the recently bereaved, such as clergy and funeral directors. Students it seems then are threshold people:

\[\ldots\] the notion of liminality, in classical anthropology, presumes a given end-point, marking the stage at which the novice must stop experimenting with new identities, and get to grips with the identity position that corresponds to their new, adult role. Given that such linear and unidirectional transitions are less and less the norm, there are important questions for practice arising from the normative assumptions that are embedded in many institutional practices and structures – and arguably in the underlying cultural ethos that characterises many educational institutions.

(Field, 2012: 10)

Higher education would seem to be a liminal land, not necessarily a rite of passage except perhaps in professions such as medicine or the priesthood. It is a liminal land which, in the context of learning ecologies, enables students to learn how to live in the liminal; a beginning of engagement with risk, content transition and uncertainty. Learning ecologies are also important not only in the journeys through higher education but also in equipping people to manage liminality across the life course. Higher education is a place where the awareness, capability and capacity can be developed but only if flexible pedagogical practices are available.

Threshold people, whether students or later in life, recognise the loss of life structure and hierarchy due to the social and structural ambiguities that occur as a result of the need to
create new space and different structures. Higher education it seems then is a liminal land, a place of social and structural ambiguities. However, it is unclear how students are enabled to manage transition and transformation successfully, especially if learning ecologies are not embraced. Learning ecologies seems to be a vital concept that needs to be incorporated across higher education worldwide. It is a notion that recognises that structures, cultures and biographies affect effective engagement with learning. It is argued here that central to learning ecologies is the management of disjunction, movement through the liminal tunnel and the recognition that for many students, higher education is where and ‘when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance’ (Turner, 1982: 44).
References


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