Article type

Commentary, review by editor.

Publication history

Received: 13 August 2020. Revised: 13 August 2020.
Accepted: 14 August 2020. Published: 14 August 2020.

Cover image

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Special issue Debating the status of ‘theory’ in technology enhanced learning research | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.dc494046>

The legitimisation of uncertainty, risk and ambiguity for TEL researchers navigating theory: A comment on three papers in the inaugural issue

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Keywords

commentary

Citation

Moffitt, P. (2020). The legitimisation of uncertainty, risk and ambiguity for TEL researchers navigating theory: A comment on three papers in the inaugural issue. *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 1(1), 267-270.

<https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.8b602eb6>

The editors of this inaugural edition, with typical encouragement of their contributing authors, have invited elaboration of our views on selected papers. Through these additional commentaries, the editors seek to stimulate further discussions about theory in technology enhanced learning (TEL) research. For my contribution, I would like to tease out the impact on my own TEL research (both present and future) of the findings of three important papers in this edition: Al-Ali’s (2020) reflective and authentic account of navigating the allure and complexity of activity theory; Passey’s (2020) scrutiny of researchers’ conceptions and uses of models, frameworks and theories; and Sweeney’s (2020) examination of university teachers engaging with literature and the interdependence of theory and practice. To me, the most significant points of commonality amongst the three papers, and the reasons that I wished to comment on these in particular, are their legitimisation of risk, uncertainty and ambiguity for TEL researchers when we are navigating theory. The acknowledgement of risk, uncertainty and ambiguity seems to be shared by many TEL researchers, yet their normalisation and confrontation seem limited to conversations with good supervisors and mentors, for those of us lucky enough to have them. Authors of papers such as these, and this journal’s initiators and editors, do us a great service by exposing these themes for wider debate.

In the first of these papers, Al-Ali (2020), with refreshing honesty, describes uncertainties and tensions in her selection and use of theory; between the need

to provide assurances of methodological consistency and the impulse to “quickly grab one that worked for me”. The author shares authentic and sincere observations of being alternately drawn to activity theory and finding frustration in the theory’s complexity. As an activity theorist myself, I share many of Al-Ali’s reflections although I’ve lacked her conviction and courage to publish them. As I read these accounts, I wondered at what point – if ever – we can expect to stop harbouring such insecurities about theory, and it was heartening to reflect on these shared challenges with the author. I assess that many researchers will find comfort and empathy in the paper, which illustrates the progressive and cultivating nature of this new journal’s aims and scope; we can scrutinise matters which could otherwise be too politically charged, taboo or sacrosanct, including issues which “are important but often go unnoticed such as rules that are implicitly imposed” (Al-Ali, 2020). Fortunately, due to the boldness of fellow TEL researchers like Al-Ali and the intentions of this journal, we can benefit from such rare combinations of reflective candour and reach – we can now openly acknowledge, share and debate such experiences.

In the second paper that I’d like to comment on, Passey (2020) offers the voice of sage experience in a tone that is all at once challenging, nurturing and cautionary. Passey shares his experience and insight, in a piece that is likely to be useful for those of us less experienced at honing and wielding theory. I predict that many will thoroughly enjoy his helpful clarification of models, constructs, frameworks and theories, which he collectively terms underpinnings, and his untangling and exemplifying of each of them for an audience of TEL researchers. I found value in his advice against ascribing credibility to seductive theory-esque concepts and notions, many of which have been misappropriated or extrapolated far from the original authors’ intentions. Passey importantly encourages us to critique the work of other researchers whose texts we inevitably consult, highlighting limitations of us “taking models, frameworks and theories for granted” (ibid.). To me his analyses expose and legitimise the confusion that many of us seem to face, yet attempt to mask, when unravelling underpinnings. Passey’s analyses and advisory observations are likely to be of significant benefit to new TEL researchers and to doctoral students, as we negotiate our own proposals and designs whilst beginning to understand and manage our own epistemological and ontological positions. This legitimises being persistently tested by matters of theory, presented in a supportive and fostering way which to me suits the journal’s aims in its balance of capacity-building with criticality.

The third paper of my commentary is Sweeney’s (2020) examination of university teachers’ interactions with TEL

literature, as they design and teach in their own disciplines and associate theory with practice. What particularly appealed to me was Sweeney’s early acknowledgement that as TEL researchers we must “avoid any obfuscation or trivialisation of TEL theory nor resort to writing in ways that may sound impressive but are hard to understand for some readers” (ibid.). Sweeney analyses how colleagues of different disciplines have diverse approaches to sourcing and engaging with theory-oriented literature. She is encouraging of her participants’ diverse abilities to build and act on their personal theories of learning, which I believe many in the journal’s readership will welcome. Sweeney raises questions about how we can encourage colleagues to better engage with theory, commenting on participants entering TEL from other fields as they confront “the apparent lack of elegance and simplicity of the scientific method that they are so familiar with” (ibid.). This is likely to resonate with those of us who have branched into TEL research from other fields. Sweeney’s discussions of her participants’ problematic engagements with theory, and the descriptions of her own theoretical perspectives which underpin her approach, seem to align strongly with the journal’s aims of contextualisation and scholarship.

To summarise, from my own perspective as a senior lecturer in engineering, yet new to researching TEL, I have taken much from these papers and others in this edition. I am still discovering TEL’s exciting tapestry of theory, and I take great solace from Al-Ali’s refreshing honesty, Passey’s wise counsel and Sweeney’s association of theory with practice. All three authors have encouraged me to look forward, with some comfort in ambiguity and uncertainty. This helps to displace my ongoing and futile search for some elusive shibboleth or cypher, with which I might at last exhibit competence with theory: amongst peers who seem to understand it all; amongst the authors whose seminal works I cite; and with mentors who I respect and don’t want to let down. Papers such as these show the importance of exposing complexity and risk in theory, in order to avoid designing and undertaking research that is flawed, capricious or at the very least naïve. As an activity theorist my next step is to take these observations into the meaningful research of TEL; to enact change through a Marxist epistemology (from the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx & Engels, 1945/1998, p. 569). As I proceed, Al-Ali (2020) prompts the embracing of complexity to transform the social conditions of TEL; Passey (2020) illustrates how underpinnings ought to enhance, rather than limit, the potential of research; and Sweeney (2020) provides a reminder that theory cannot be disjointed from practice.

I very much look forward to subsequent editions and

I sincerely thank the initiators of this new journal and the editors, for undertaking what must have been the Herculean task of providing an accessible forum for us to expose and debate such matters.

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