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Pedagogical and theoretical mobilities in recent scholarship in digital education: a state of the art review in the age of Covid

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Abstract

Since 2020, there has been an increase in publications on research on online, blended and hybrid learning and teaching modalities in higher education, some of which has been by researchers new to the field. What are the implications of this diversification of the 'gene pool' of digital education scholarship? What kinds of criticality, theories and pedagogies are these scholars bringing, adopting or adapting? Furthermore, how is the field as a whole using theory, specifically critical and pedagogical theory, as a lens to examine the rapid reconfiguration of teaching and learning in universities?

This presentation will report on a work-in-progress systematic literature review of digital higher education publications since March 2020. It will examine whether the digital higher education research community needs to confront its sedentarist tendencies to recognise that the 'digital' is no longer a separate space but subsumed within aspects of education and transversing other bounded spaces.

Full paper

Since 2020, there has been an increase in publications on research on online, blended and hybrid learning and teaching modalities in

higher education. In addition to work by experienced researchers in the field, there is also scholarship emerging from voices in other disciplines. This represents the mobility of individuals, identities and ideas across disciplinary boundaries (Sheller & Urry, 2006), something which is in itself not new in this area, but is at a greater scale and pace. What are the implications of this diversification of the 'gene pool' of digital education scholarship? What kinds of criticality, theories and pedagogies are these scholars bringing, adopting or adapting? Furthermore, how is the field as a whole using theory, specifically critical and pedagogical theory, as a lens to examine the rapid reconfiguration of teaching and learning in universities? And what can this 'state of the art' tell us about future directions for scholarship?

This presentation will report on a work-in-progress systematic literature review of digital higher education publications since March 2020. This review aimed to answer the questions: a) what theories, particularly critical theories, are being put to use in recent scholarship? and b) how is current literature framing pedagogical understandings, whether theories or models of learning and teaching, or broader educational theories? The review explores the role of theory, pedagogy and criticality in the sampled scholarship.

Theory within the area of digital education research has been contested (Drumm, 2019), with long-standing arguments that it is under-theorised (Jones & Czerniewicz, 2011; Oliver, 2016). An expanding corpus of work in the field could present an opportunity or threat: either to expand and strengthen through cross-fertilisation from other disciplines, or to elide, simplify or ignore complex prior knowledges and theorisations. In mobilities theory parlance: is this a wake-up call for scholarly practice on the digital university to confront its own sedentrist tendancies to recognise that the 'digital' is no longer a separate place but subsumed within all aspects of education and now transverses other bounded spaces?

In recent years, digital higher education research has advanced knowledge through the theoretic lenses such as posthumanism (e.g. Gourlay, 2020), sociomateriality (e.g. Pischetola, de Miranda & Albuquerque) and postdigital (e.g. Fawns, 2019). Additional, critical lenses such as feminist pedagogies, pedagogies of care and equity (e.g. Bali & Zamora, 2022) have created spaces of praxis where

scholarship and practice interplay and converge.

The review was conducted using PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) systematically using inclusion and exclusion criteria, search strategy and data analysis processes. The research approach was to: a) identify papers in peer-reviewed publications since March 2020 on learning and teaching in universities which are in online, blended or hybrid modes; b) undertake a content analysis of this body of work to investigate the use of theories, pedagogies, critical lenses and methodologies; c) identify theoretical and pedagogical gaps; d) synthesise a state of the art analysis of current and future directions of digital higher education research. This presentation will include a 'heat map' of frequency of critical lenses will be presented, which will be contrasted with a 'cold map' of absent theoretical approaches. It will present the analysis of citations within the sample publications and explore whether these are converging or diverging towards or away from a 'canon'.

Just as the pandemic presented a moment where digital education practices stepped into the mainstream, but subsequently suffered from over-exposure and 'bad press', digital education scholarship may be facing similar disruption and fragmentation. This presentation will make recommendations for how the digital higher education community can accommodate new thinking, without losing or forgetting the decades of previous scholarship and knowledge.

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