

Freeing or controlling pedagogies? A rhizomatic view of theory underpinning teaching with technology (0116)

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This paper will present a selection of the findings from a doctoral research project which asked the question 'what role does theory play in university teaching with digital technologies?'. The undertheorised nature of the use of learning technologies has been debated (Tight 2012; Howard & Maton 2011) and much work remains to be done to address gaps and to mature the subject as a scholarly discipline. The advent of the read/write web and open, collaborative tools have been heralded as opportunities for educators to implement student-centred, socially constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. However, as Jackson (2001) and Conole et al. (2004) point out, practices are often closer to objectivist/behaviourist models of teaching with digital technologies.

This project was a qualitative study comprising interviews with 25 participants in two universities: one in Scotland and one in Ireland. Lecturers from multiple disciplines were interviewed in depth about their teaching approaches with digital technologies, the rationale behind their practices and the wider context of their teaching.

Rhizome theory (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) was employed as a theoretical framework for the research. Rhizome theory takes knowledge, amongst other things, to be dynamic, highly connected and non-hierarchical. The rhizome is placed in contrast with arborescent, or tree-like, thought which is binary, hierarchical and contained within strict boundaries. The research used this lens to view lecturers and their use of digital technologies in order to shed light on previously untheorised attitudes and practices. In particular, this paper will address whether technology has become a site of control or freedom for university teaching and learning.

Findings from the research indicate a leading role for folk pedagogies (Olson & Bruner. 1996), where orthodoxies about best practice with technology appeared to gain traction with lecturers without an evidence-base. Non-educational theory, such as usability and perceived usefulness, were also presented as major factors in adopting technology for teaching. Standard educational theories, either explicit or implicit, were underrepresented in the data, with some teaching practices displaying evidence of 'invisible pedagogies' where lecturers did not articulate what they were doing, despite displaying pedagogically sound practices. Lecturers' conceptions about technology displayed a tension between perceived benefits and risks, with some subgroups subscribing to contested myths such as 'digital natives'.

The aim of the presentation of this paper will be to discuss the relationship between theory and practice in teaching with digital technology, with a focus on whether purported opportunities for connectivity, openness and freedom have been realised.

Through forging links between theory and practice, this research aims to provide pragmatic recommendations to be taken forward, not just by other researchers, but also by lecturers, those who support lecturers and senior staff in higher education. Thus a positive impact on student learning will be attained through greater understanding and transparency of purpose when digital technologies are employed for teaching and learning in universities.

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