

Editorial

Wanted: new ideas for higher education

These are trying times for Higher Education. The student activism of the past year has alerted us to the many relics of our colonial past (and neo-liberal present) that need to fall: outdated curricula, deficit understandings of student learning and techno-rational notions of how higher education practices change. At a time when resources are crucial, the aftermath of #FeesMustFall has resulted in a time of austerity for South African universities, making teaching and learning in Higher Education ever more complex and ever more ‘entangled’ in what Hannon calls its ‘social and material arrangements’. To think through these new complexities we need new ideas and theories – and this is precisely what this edition of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* offers.

The articles in this edition cover the length and breadth of higher education theory and practice: the professional learning of academic staff, students’ acquisition of academic discourses, the transformative potential of peer tutors, the troubling concept of ‘affordance’ in educational technology, and the need for a ‘new generation’ of foundational provision. This rich and diverse assemblage of papers on professional learning, academic discourses, tutors, technologies, and curricula are held together by the different (and sometimes remarkably similar) ways in which their authors re-think and re-frame some of the more contested issues in higher education.

Hannon’s article sets the tone for the collection by drawing on a socio-materialist approach that enable a fresh perspective on the professional development of academic staff – an alternative to the more common institutional narrative of individual endeavour and success. In a study of university teachers across several institutions and disciplines deep understandings of the ‘obduracy’ of practice emerges. Against the techno-rational model of change, Hannon points to the need to pay attention to the agency of materials in the practice of university teaching and the effect of the relations between materials and humans in enabling or resisting change.

Both Hannon and Blewett and Hugo draw on sociomaterialism in the form of Latour’s (2005) Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005) and Barad’s (2007) Agential Realism. These

perspectives offer a means to confront the dominance of simple binaries and move towards appreciation of ‘entangled agencies’. Nowhere are these ‘entanglements’ more evident than in the complex relationships that university teachers and their students have with technology. The field of educational technology has been critiqued as lacking the theoretical frameworks that could enable its development of new concepts, research and practices (Howard & Maton 2011). Hugo and Blewett seek to address this limitation by offering an extended argument for the reframing of ‘affordance’ – one of the most disputed terms in educational technology.

Coleman and Clarence draw on the ontology of the Academic Literacies approaches (e.g., Lea 2004) to ‘re-frame’ student learning in ways that deliberately reject dominant (and damaging) discourses around student deficit. Coleman’s study offers a deeply contextualised exploration of students engaged in learning activities that result in creative artefacts. She argues that an Academic Literacies approach, such as the one developed in the Film and Video programme she researched, enables a learning environment that is able to nurture and support its students equitability.

Clarence draws on both Legitimation Code Theory (Maton 2016) and Academic Literacies (Lea & Street 1998) to argue the need for both discipline knowledge and the awareness of disciplinary discourses in the transformation of peer tutorials. While disciplinary specialism is clearly necessary for meaningful tutorials, Clarence proposes that the transformative potential of peer tutorials requires the creation of opportunities for students and tutors to question the ways in which they understand and engage with disciplinary knowledge. She proposes that an Academic Literacies approach could achieve the kind of participatory parity that would enable both students and their tutors to ‘become more conscious of what they know (and do not yet know), how they know it, and why it is important or useful in the context of their learning as a whole’.

Shay, Wolff and Clarence-Fincham offer a set of theoretical tools for conceptualising ‘new generation’ foundational provision. They explore the strengths and limitations of different forms of foundational or extended curricular provision at four different higher education sites. Their study identifies a number of underpinning principles for both developmental support and curricular enrichment. The authors argue the need for curriculum reform principles that underpin enabling knowledge structures for epistemic access and rich learning. This research makes an important contribution to the next phase of curriculum reform in South Africa, which the authors describe as the ‘new generation’ of extended curricula.

We are urgently in need of new practices to address the many challenges that higher education institutions are facing; these articles, and the fresh perspectives they offer, are important because the development of new practices has to be founded on new ideas. The collection of articles in this edition of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* continues to contribute to the theorisation of teaching and learning practice in higher education that has become the hallmark of the journal since its inaugural edition in 2013.

Chris Winberg

(On behalf of the editors)

References

- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. London: Duke University Press.
- Howard, S. & Maton, K. 2011. Theorising knowledge practices: a missing piece of the educational technology puzzle. *Research in Learning Technology*, 19(3), 191-206.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lea, M. R. 2004. Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(6): 739–756.
- Lea, M. and Street, B.V. 1998. Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2): 157-172.
- Maton, K. 2016. Legitimation Code Theory: building knowledge about knowledge-building. In Maton, K., Hood, S. and Shay, S. (eds). *Knowledge-building: Educational studies in Legitimation Code Theory*. London: Routledge, 1-24.



This publication is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. For further information please see: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.