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Reframing theory of, and for, practice in higher education

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Reframing theory of, and for, practice in higher education

When the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice — JUTLP as we have come to know it — was established in 2004, it was to fill a perceived gap in publications related to teaching and learning practice in higher education, with practice being the operative word (Carter, 2004). While other higher education journals existed, they were mainly the purview of academic developers and the most prodigious of disciplinary academics researching their teaching. In contrast, JUTLP was to be built as open-access and its readership as ‘practitioners looking for good ideas based soundly on a body of accessible theory and research’ (McInnes, 2004, n.p.). JUTLP was established in the Australian context at a time when promoting excellence in teaching and learning was regarded as an important government agenda to improve the student experience, and not accidentally, coincided with the creation of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (later the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, and later again the Office for Learning and Teaching). The Carrick Institute supported national cross-institutional grants and fellowship schemes, and promoted national networks of educational research into practice to support the mission of the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to ensure all ‘Australian higher education institutions provide high quality teaching and learning for all students’ (Carrick, 2009). How times have changed.

In this period in history, engaging, resourcing and supporting disciplinary academics in the scholarship of teaching and learning was seen as a primary means for capacity building and promoting evidence-based approaches to teaching practice (Elton, 1998; Felten et al., 2007; Fanghanel et al., 2017). The intention was to foster sector-wide innovation in teaching and learning to lead higher education out of the dark ages of its more didactic educational approaches and encourage educators to explore new ways, new modes, and new ideas in student learning through national networks of scholarship in educational practice. JUTLP, then, was established primarily as a publication outlet for educators of all disciplinary backgrounds to showcase their scholarly work in the educational space, share their reflections and insights about innovations in practice, and encourage others to engage in experimental evidence-based work to enhance their own teaching practices to improve the student learning experience.

In many ways, JUTLP has fulfilled this aim - in the fifteen years the Journal has been running, it has published 417 articles with 590,437 downloads, showcasing a wide range of teaching and learning practices in a broad range of disciplines from across the world. These papers offer valuable insights, from sector and organisational perspectives, from disciplinary and pedagogical perspectives, and from educator and student perspectives. Some of the most notable works from the Journal’s formative years include: Phillips’ (2005) ‘Challenging the primacy of lectures: The dissonance between theory and practice in university teaching’ with 201 citations; Massingham and Herrington’s (2006) ‘Does attendance matter? An examination of student attitudes, participation, performance and attendance’ with 284 citations; Crisp and colleagues’ (2009) ‘First year student expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey’ with 206 citations; and Thomas et al.’s (2011) paper ‘Using self and peer-assessment to enhance students’ future learning in higher education’ with 207 citations. These papers represent early and important contributions to conversations that will be familiar today: the value of lectures in higher education; the relationship

between student attendance and engagement; the seemingly persistent problem of the first year experience; and the need to transform thinking and practice in relation to assessment and feedback. Not surprisingly then, JUTLP has become an increasingly popular Journal, with a readership extending across the globe and a growing number of submissions annually.

In 2020, however, against the backdrop of our entry into the twenty first century and the information age, the digital transformation of education, the massive disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the changing nature of the higher education sector, a large financial restructuring of Australian government support for teaching and learning (largely a reduction or elimination of funds), and the plethora of discourses and agendas surrounding what higher education is and should be, we took the opportunity to renew our focus on what we hope to stand for as a Journal. We have sought to take stock of how we are contributing to the conversations that surround the past, present, and future of teaching and learning practice in higher education. We have expanded our Editorial Team and we have identified four major themes in higher education scholarship that we will use to frame and strengthen the conversations across our collection of works: Theory and Practice of Teaching and Learning, Student Experience, Developing Teaching Practice, and Educational Technology. These themes were introduced in the Editorial for Volume 17.5 for this Journal (Crawford et al., 2020), and in this Editorial, we would like to take the opportunity to expand on the first of these themes, the Theory and Practice of Teaching and Learning.

Theory and practice of teaching and learning

While our Journal is primarily concerned with university teaching and learning practice, we feel that as we enter the twenty first century in a highly challenging and uncertain time (Barnett, 2015, 2017), we wish to encourage a different type of engagement with the theory and practice of teaching and learning — one that moves from a reflective approach to evidence-based practice (as reflected in the works of Schon, 1987 and Brookfield, 2017), to one that is far more reflexive in its nature, as Door (2014) suggests:

The challenge for an educational practitioner who wants to be true to their moral creed, whether in the classroom, or in management and leadership, is to recognise any mismatch between creed and action. Reflection alone might help recognition, but I will suggest it is insufficient of itself. However, in critical reflexivity, our embodied transactions, as well as intelligent critique of the world, have to be taken into account (p. 89)

By advocating for a reflexive approach, we are suggesting that while experimentation, evaluation and reflection on evidence-based teaching practice remains a valuable process, we hope to further encourage educators to take a more deliberative and critical stance to their work. Drawing on insights from Trede and McEwen (2016), we agree:

The deliberate professional understands that their position, or type of membership, within a given field of practice - whether it is 'inherited', 'imposed', 'earned' or 'taken' - is indicative of their capacity to accumulate cultural, symbolic or economic capital. They understand they need to be conscious about their position and stance within their field of practice and to be cautious of unreflected appreciation of current practices, which cannot bring about a moral and just future' (p. 21).

We, therefore, invite a deeper engagement with the theory and assumptions that underpin our educational practices, and include in the scope a broader and critical perspective on why and how we make the educational decisions we do: in whose name, and at what cost?

In this sense, we wish to invite authors to submit papers to this section to consider how they are critiquing and extending our theoretical and practical understanding of educational praxis, including curriculum design, pedagogical choices, and critical engagements with the way student learning is imagined and enacted in university settings. We use the word praxis to mean “those forms of practice that are enacted by those that are conscious and self-aware that their actions are morally committed, and oriented and informed by tradition” (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4). Educational praxis, therefore, is educational action that involves something educational being done, and not just an intent to do something, or an inclination to act on something in a particular way to address educational tasks. This educational focus seizes opportunities to create new and transformative future practices through reflection, dialogue, creativity, and courage (Kemmis & Trede, 2010).

We recognise that the future of education is changing radically — with traditional institutions of higher education blurring their boundaries with professions and industry, private and public organisations, complemented by the affordances offered by multi-modal and increasingly unbundled and complex design and delivery (Ralston, 2020). There are many possibilities offered by this new frontier. And yet, as many universities have become more financially insecure in this past year, we see fewer staff in secure positions, with workloads that feel like they are growing exponentially and showing little sign of dissipating any time soon (Watermeyer et al., 2021). This is partly due to the massive loss of staff from the sector that we have seen in this past year. Perhaps also it is due to the extraordinary changes in teaching and learning practice as a result of the pandemic. A change that will see greater development needs as those educators who remain find themselves delivering their courses simultaneously in online, blended, and face to face modes, some on six week carousels, preferably with some work-integrated learning component, all the while being told that they must attend to their students’ belonging and wellbeing. We wonder to what extent any of this is sustainable, and where do we think we are going? What is this thing we call a higher education? And what does this mean for teaching and learning practice? This urges us to take a more critical stance towards the present demands on us as educators, to resist the urge to reduce education to a series of transactions, and to recuperate values of social justice in an increasingly unjust world. To do this, we invite submissions relevant to the theory and practice of teaching and learning to further our understanding of how, why and in what contexts, specific choices in educational praxis are made and to what effect.

To get this conversation started, our Editorial Team has proposed the Special Issue on Pedagogies of Belonging in an Anxious World. We recognise that belongingness is a challenging enterprise in the post-pandemic educational context, as Baumeister et al., (2021) comment in this Issue. While we continue to adapt to the increasingly complex learning spaces we inhabit (Barnett, 2012; Billett, 2010; Jackson, 2011), we find ourselves and our students grappling with how to be, become and belong in an environment that can only be characterised by what Barnett (2015) refers to as a “world of supercomplexity” (p. 31). In this environment, we need to learn how to thrive in spite of, or perhaps because of, the ever-present ambiguities, contradictions, paradoxes and uncertainties that seem to permeate all of our enterprises (Shulman, 2005). This requires new and different

pedagogical models that enable us to navigate competing values, diverging contingencies and unpredictability in the world in which we live, work and learn. As Barnett (2015) observed: “It implies an education in which a sense of an unknown future is evidently present, or at least serves as a major organizing principle in the design of the curriculum and in the enacting of pedagogy.” (p. 220). It can be discerned, then, that the challenges and ambiguities of being, becoming and belonging in higher education, and beyond, warrant a critical discourse of curricular and pedagogical importance. Our proposed Special Issue aims to begin this particular kind of discourse, and it is our hope that this marks the beginning of a much longer critical conversation about the Theory and Practice of Teaching and Learning in higher education, that we invite our community to contribute to.

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