EXPERT PRACTITIONERS, NOVICE RESEARCHERS

Developing new identities in learning technology scholarship

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AGENDA

The profession and the field
  - Learning technologists and TEL research

My background

Dilemmas of new TEL researchers
  - Finding solutions
  - Scholarly allegiance
  - Relating to other research
  - Technology fixation
  - Getting data
  - Timescales

Questions
The learning technology profession has many highly motivated and capable people.

- The career path can be unclear (though ALT may help!)
  - Not the same in different countries
- There are many institutional pressures
- Yet learning technologists develop skillful ways of working that serve them well in their projects
  - Out of which they form a strong sense of professional identity and accomplishment

The technology enhanced learning research field is frankly rather odd:

- Very interdisciplinary and interprofessional (a good thing)
- Highly fragmentary and struggling for a sense of identity (less good)
- Striving to become more ‘scholarly’

Relations between the profession and the field are fuzzy.
MY BACKGROUND

I have worked as a learning technologist

- Though I was employed in a department, not in central ISS
- 2006-2009 full-time technical contract
- 2009-2011 50-50 research-technical contract
- 2011-2013 research contract (fixed term)
- 2013-now as a full-time permanent academic (moved to Lancaster)

From 2006-2010 I worked for a CETL

- Did ‘institutional projects’ across all Faculties of the institution

In 2009 I worked on a funded project for JISC

- How do universities evaluate the learning spaces they invest in?
- Became aware of the fraught relationship between institutional and research projects

Since 2013 I have specialised in supervising part-time PhDs

- Mid-career professionals seeking to gain research skills
- Sometimes for a career change, but not always
- Specialising in ‘technology enhanced learning’ and ‘higher education’
- 3 part-time PhD programmes focus on those topics at Lancaster
NEW RESEARCHERS & DILEMMAS

Learning technologists are increasingly interested in research
- Personal interest and development
- Frustration with some practice problem
- Frustration with existing research
- Other people are asking for their expert opinions!

The extent to which learning technologists conduct research as part of their jobs varies widely
- Some institutions are more supportive than others
- Very different traditions across the globe

What happens when learning technologists undertake research as a ‘new’ interest?
- They do not start from a blank slate (a good thing!)
- Their existing expertise means they are used to certain ways of working
- That poses dilemmas when they undertake research

Dilemmas?
- Conflicted situations, frustration, annoyance, demotivation!
FINDING SOLUTIONS

Institutional projects are seeking a **positive outcome**
- ‘Positive’ can be defined in many ways
- But often there is an imperative to **justify** some outlay
- Someone else may initiate the project being evaluated, and expect a certain kind of report (via commissioning or line management)

Scholarly research projects are seeking to **generate new knowledge**
- ‘New’ in relation to existing literature (discussed later)
- ‘New knowledge’ and ‘positive outcome’ are **different goals**

New researchers often find research **uncomfortable**
- Reporting unfavourable outcomes (embarrassing someone?)
- Generating knowledge that doesn’t seem ‘practical’
- Shouldn’t I change the project part-way through?

New knowledge might not lead to ‘solutions’ that an institution can use
- At least in an ‘immediate’ sense
SCHOLARLY ALLEGIANCE

Institutional projects **address problems** of policy or practice, so it is okay
- If the solution applies something already done elsewhere
- If the findings are not ‘interesting’ to people elsewhere

Scholarly research projects **contribute new knowledge** to the literature
- Might address a ‘gap’ where research has not already been done
- Might address **shortcomings** in existing papers
- Might **reconceptualise** findings or arguments in existing literature

Literature might focus on very **specific issues** in a range of contexts
- Whereas an institutional project might focus on **several issues** in one context

Scholarly research is fundamentally interested in what is being written in the literature
- That needs to be **one** core driver for the project
- Though context is often very important, and needs to be thought through and discussed (case studies can be very useful!)
RELATING TO OTHER RESEARCH

Institutional projects seek to use other research as solutions
- Apply what is said (“Research has shown that…”)
- Disparage the research (“Its useless! There is nothing!”)
  - Seeking something very specific

Scholarly research seeks to locate the work in the literature
- How might this project contribute to wider debates that are occurring in existing papers?
- How might this work differ from what has been done before?
- How will I pose research questions and present findings that can say something new in those debates?

How you frame the research area you are contributing to is vitally important
- Scholarly research ‘builds on’, challenges, reconceptualizes, offers new perspectives … but on what topic exactly?
- There is always prior literature relevant to your work (always!)
Institutional projects are often technology oriented
- How can we use this new technology effectively?
- What support do people need to use this new technology?
- How happy are users with this new technology?
- How can institutional decision-makers choose between adopting different technologies?

Scholarly research focusses more widely and critically
- How is some technology used to support a particular practice?
- How is some technology used in a particular kind of context?
- How does some technology get adopted within a change process?
- What are the perceptions of some stakeholders about some technology initiative?

Technology does not ‘work the same’ everywhere
- Wood, Underwood and Avis (1999)
- Technology might not actually be the ‘solution’
GETTING DATA

(This one shouldn’t be that different, but it does tend to be!)

Institutional projects often have quite narrow parameters
• The focus, question, ideal answer and even format are given
• Often the aim is to ‘collect evidence’

Scholarly research is more open-ended

The ‘I’ve got loads of data’ illusion
• How does it relate to your research questions and how can you analyse it?
• Analyzing data often takes several times longer than generating it!

Research needs to be considered as a full lifecycle
• Conceptualising the research: where does it fit in the literature and what is the research question (some of the hardest bits!)
• How to design the overall project
• What kinds of data to get and how to analyse them
• Writing the research papers and having them reviewed

Never say “I did some research but I didn’t write it up”
• You started some research but never finished it!
TIMESCALES

Institutional projects often work to specific timescales
- The timescale constrains what can be done
- Time availability is used to justify what you did

Scholarly projects are judged on whether they contribute to the literature or not
- Timescale is not an excuse for doing less work or a quick job
- Yet scholarly research is not judged on the ‘amount of work’

Papers make a small number of key arguments and make them well
- What is the focus of your project and how can you make an argument?
- Don’t try to cover the lack of focus by doing ‘a lot of work’!
- Do one thing well, not many things half-baked!

The lifecycle of research can be lengthy
- Getting a publication out 1.5 years from the start of a project is fast
- 2-3 years is common
- Some aspects of research are dangerous to rush (conceptualisation, analysis)
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