# Theorising Learning to Teach: Insights, Absences and Future Possibilities

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In this concluding chapter of this book, I consider what the preceding contributions, as a collective whole, tell us about theorising learning to teach in higher education. This consideration is set within the context of this book’s practical aims of supporting those who are learning to teach and reframing research into learning to teach so that it highlights the importance of educational and social theory and aids the pursuit of social justice.

In doing this I want to move beyond the details of the three approaches of sociomaterialism, Social Practices, and critical and social realism and particular examples of mixed approaches, to consider what they collectively highlight about learning to teach in higher education. I then consider what they might leave unsaid and, finally, the possibilities for future work that are opened up by the contributions to this book. However, I first want to set out how I understand the meaning of theorising learning to teach in higher education, as this will underpin my argument and analysis. This involves unpacking the meaning of both ‘theorising’ and the meaning of ‘learning to teach’.

## The meaning of ‘theorising’ learning to teach

In theorising learning to teach, how one considers that nature and meaning of ‘theory’ is crucial. My position is that theories involve simplification. This is based on a realist view of a complex and emergent social world that exceeds our capacity to know it and can only be accessed through simplifying concepts and theories (Ashwin 2009). Thus theories simplify the social world we are engaging with and different theories simplify in different ways (see Sayer 1992, 2000; Law 2004; Mol and Law 2002). So in this sense, theorising ‘learning to teach’ involves seeing ‘learning to teach’ in a particular way and not in other ways. One implication of this view is that all particular ways of theorising ‘learning to teach’ are limited because they all involve a commitment to focus on particular aspects of the situation and not others. The conceptualisations that we use will be dependent on the types of questions that we are interested in asking.

A key distinction here is about how we engage with theories-as-simplifications in research and in our educational practices. In undertaking research we need to have a consistent way of simplifying ‘learning to teach’ in order to avoid contradictions within the research process. However, as practitioners we can move between different simplifications of ‘learning to teach’ in order to find the one that best suits the urgencies of our current situation. From this perspective, we need as many different ways of simplifying ‘learning to teach’ as possible, so that we have a range of choices about how we understand the challenges of practices. Thus in offering and further developing new ways of simplifying ‘learning to teach’ in higher education, this book offers important resources and alternatives for the development of practices.

## The meaning of ‘learning to teach’

In order to understand the meaning of ‘learning to teach’ in higher education, one first needs to be clear what is meant by ‘teaching’. This is tricky because, as I have argued before (Ashwin 2015; Ashwin et al. 2015), there are deeply entrenched, powerful and unhelpful myths about the nature of teaching. One of the most powerful and least helpful is that teaching is largely about inspirational individuals engaging in spontaneous performances. This is the view of teaching that is presented by most teaching awards: the vision of the dazzling individual who enchants their students with a brilliant display of erudition, which changes the students’ lives forever. This view of teaching supports a view of learning to teach that is simply about developing the performance of individual teachers. The starting point of this book is to challenge this dominant approach to understanding learning to teach. The contributions explore what new insights three particular approaches, sociomaterialism, practice-based approaches, and critical and social realism, can offer for research and practice in academic development.

These new ways of understanding learning to teach are important because the dominant view offers a deeply flawed view of teaching that presents teaching as an individual, personality-driven activity rather than a collective and carefully planned intellectual activity. Teaching is a collective activity in many ways: teachers draw on collective bodies of knowledge to design curricula in discussion with colleagues, professional bodies and students and different aspects of degree programmes are taught by different academics. In order to help students gain access to this knowledge, academics need to design programmes carefully so that students engage in a range of activities that help them to develop personal engagement with this knowledge.

The three approaches explored in this book, despite a number of differences, support such a view of teaching. First, they focus on the collective and material aspects of learning to teach. Whilst they tend to start with everyday interactions, this is with the intention of understanding how interactions are shaped by people, practices and technologies that are stretched way beyond the immediate setting of the interaction. They emphasise how teachers and academic developers are entwined in networks of material, human and conceptual actors. This undoubtedly offers a more complex view of the processes involved in learning to teach but it does not offer a sense of what is meant by teaching. One way of defining teaching that is compatible with this account of these processes is offered by Lee Shulman’s (1987) notion of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’. This describes the knowledge teachers have of how to make their subjects accessible to diverse groups of students and emphasises that university teachers need to both understand the disciplinary knowledge they teach and to understand how to design their teaching so that all of their students can develop their understanding of this knowledge. This highlights the need for teachers to have expertise of both their discipline or professional field, but also the teaching of that discipline or professional field. It also highlights that teaching is both knowledge and student centred: it is about making particular aspects of knowledge accessible to particular groups of students. This makes good teaching particular rather than generic: what is suitable for certain forms of knowledge and particular groups of students will vary.

So if we apply the notion of pedagogical content knowledge to those who support academics who are learning to teach, what do we see? We see a need for academic developers to have a clear sense of the knowledge that they are attempting to give academics access to and a clear sense of how to arrange a set of experiences that give academics the best chance to gain access to this knowledge. This raises three key questions about supporting academics who are learning to teach that the earlier contributions in this book help us to answer:

1. How do we maintain a focus on the collective aspects of learning to teach?
2. How do we understand the impacts of settings on learning to teach?
3. What is the nature of expertise of academic development?

I will consider how the contributions to this book provide answers to these questions before finally considering what is left unsaid about learning to teaching in higher education in this book.

## 1. How do we maintain a focus on the collective aspects of learning to teach?

The contributions to this book highlight the need for approaches to understanding learning to teach that take account of its collective aspects. In Chapter 10 Peter Kahn argues that such collective approaches are essential for developing creative responses to pressures for change. Given the huge amount of institutional change that teachers and academic developers face, they need to understand the basis on which they can act creatively together in pursuit of sustainable ways of developing effective teaching in higher education.

The challenge of developing collective approaches to understanding learning to teach is that, as I mentioned before, teaching is always particular. This is because changes to the either the knowledge that is being focused upon or the students that are engaging with it mean that there will be a need to reconsider whether previous approaches remain the most effective way of developing student understanding. However, the students and the knowledge are not the only factors that shape teaching. In Chapter 5 David Boud and Angela Brew show how local teaching practices are always positioned in relation to a number of particular contexts including the spatial, the temporal, the personal, the social and the professional. Similarly, Anne Edwards (Chapter 8) shows how institutional practices help to shape teaching. Edwards also highlights the ways in which teaching is nested within disciplinary and professional practices, which students need to learn to recognise and respond to in an agentic manner. Whilst Edwards foregrounds agency, Lesley Gourlay and Martin Oliver (Chapter 2) emphasise the ways in which students are entangled in networks of human and material actors. These entanglements help to actively create particular forms of agency for students.

In this way the contributions to this book highlight the importance of thinking beyond the individual when considering learning to teach in higher education. There is an urgent need to think about learning to teach in a collective manner that draws strength from our shared commitment to improving the effectiveness of our teaching. This needs to recognise the ways in which teaching is always particular because of the changing configurations of the networks that teachers are engaged with.

## 2. How do we understand the impacts of settings on learning to teach?

One of the elements that shapes teaching in particular ways is the setting in which teaching and learning to teach are located. The contributions to this book give a rich sense of the ways in which teaching settings actively shape the nature of teaching.

Marie Manidis and Keiko Yasukawa (Chapter 6) show how the material setting of the physical classroom is a key element of teaching. Rather than being something that teachers respond to passively, they show how the material and the non-material elements of the setting can be actively woven together in order to support students to develop their understanding of knowledge.

However, some elements of the settings may not be under the control of teachers or their impact may not even be fully understood. In Chapter 4 Richard Edwards and Tara Fenwick show how in online settings the algorithms that underpin learning analytics play an active role in shaping how students are positioned as particular kinds of ‘learners’. They show how these are more than neutral tools that apply the intentions of teachers. Instead algorithms shape these intentions in particular ways and not others. Unless teachers understand the ways in which these algorithms work then the danger is that they passively accept them rather than question the ways in which they shape the teaching and learning process.

The contributions in this book highlight that rather than simply acting as a container of teaching and learning interactions, the settings in which teaching and learning take place actively shape teachers and students engagement with each other and with knowledge. They show that knowledge of the ways in which these settings intertwine with teaching and learning is an essential element of the expertise of academic developers.

## 3. What is the nature of expertise of academic development?

Thinking about academic development from the perspective of pedagogical content knowledge, also raises questions about the aspects of knowledge that teachers in higher education are given access to by academic developers. In other words what is the nature of expertise that is claimed by academic developers?

In Chapter 9, Sue Clegg outlines how academic development emerged from the 1960s onwards, charged with supporting teacher learning and drawing greater attention to student learning. Clegg highlights how academic developers have been important supporters of research into student learning and the development of the knowledge base about the elements of effective teaching in higher education. She argues strongly that critical realism can provide a productive framework for theorising academic development and so contribute to the further development of expertise in learning to teach in higher education.

Chris Winberg (Chapter 11) emphasises the distributed nature of teaching expertise and shows how the apparent individual expertise of teachers is actually part of collaborative and collective networks. The participants in the interviews in Winberg’s chapter highlight the importance of dialogue with supportive peers that support teachers in making professional judgements that go against dominant discourses. The importance of dialogue is also highlighted in the two chapters that examine crossover perspectives. Brenda Leibowitz (Chapter 12) and John Hannon et al. (Chapter 13), both emphasise the power of dialogue between different ways of analysing the same situation. Being able to see the same situation from multiple perspectives can strengthen the agency of academics and support them in developing new practices. Tara Fenwick and Richard Edwards (Chapter 1) persuasively argue that the development of new practices is crucial, that we need to go beyond critique in order to experiment with alternative arrangements and to disrupt dominant practices.

The ways in which alternative ways of seeing can lead to new practices is powerfully illustrated by Vivienne Bozalek and Wendy McMillan (Chapter 3) in their consideration of senior managers’ entanglements with learning to teach. Through the analysis of a single interview in which the participant develops new categories in which to understand higher education institutions, they highlight how a critical aspect of the expertise of academic developers is to be able to provide contexts in which teachers can see alternative ways of understanding how to introduce students to powerful knowledge.

However, whilst these chapters give a rich sense of some of the elements of the expertise of academic developers, they do not focus on the sources of knowledge that underpin this expertise. In Chapter 7, Tai Peseta and Simon Barrie argue that the knowledge base we have about effective teaching in higher education needs to be distinguished from our knowledge of how to support teachers in developing their teaching. In other words they highlight the difference between knowledge about teaching and knowledge about how to support others to teach (academic development). They argue that there is far less an organised body of knowledge that underpins academic development, suggesting that it is distributed across a range of sources and contexts. This, added to the variety of paths to becoming an academic developer, leads newcomers to the field to have to learn on the job. They argue that newcomers to the field need to be inducted into an ethic of care for the field, which they argue is captured by the notion of ‘stewardship’.

Together the contributions to this book highlight the importance of collective dialogue as an aspect of the expertise of academic development. However, they also highlight the fragmented sense of the sources of knowledge that underpin academic development.

## What is left unsaid about learning to teach to in higher education?

Clearly any single text can only offer a partial view of learning to teach in higher education. This means that inevitably there are aspects of learning to teach that are not fully considered by the contributions to this book. In this section I consider what is left unsaid about learning to teach before concluding this chapter with a discussion of the possibilities the contributions to this book open up possibilities for future work.

 The first element that I want to consider is the nature of the underpinning knowledge of the expertise of academic development. As I discussed in the previous section, whilst there is a rich discussion of the knowledge that underpins our understanding of teaching in higher education, there is less discussion of the underpinning knowledge of learning to teach as well as academic development more generally. This is understandable because the focus in many chapters is on how what we know about teaching can inform how we support academics, who are learning to teach. Questions about the knowledge that underpins the expertise of academic developers are challenging because academic developers often work with academics, who are doubtful of the rigour and legitimacy of the knowledge that they have to offer. What is highlighted in this book is that this needs to be more than just knowledge about effective teaching and learning in higher education. It also needs to be knowledge about how to help academics to understand the nature of effective teaching. As Keith Trigwell and I have argued (Ashwin and Trigwell 2004), this is about the scholarship of academic development rather than simply the scholarship of teaching.

The second element is that whilst there is a rich consideration of the knowledge that underpins our understanding of teaching, there are interesting absences within the knowledge that is referred to. Particularly interesting is the way that previous approaches to understanding learning to teach in higher education are implicitly critiqued in their absence. It is important to be clear that I am referring to conceptualisations that informed previous research into teaching and learning in higher education rather than the dominant myths that I discussed earlier. Outside of the introductory chapter, there is little discussion of the previous research that chapters are contrasting their approaches with but my understanding is that it is largely the ‘approaches to teaching and learning’ literature (see for example Marton et al, 1997; Prosser and Trigwell 1999) that contributors have in mind. This approach seeks to understand the ways in which students’ and academics’ perceptions of their teaching and learning environment lead to particular ways of approaching their learning and teaching and particular kinds of learning outcome. However, this is not the only established approach that does not appear. For example, the academic literacies approach (for example, see Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2001), which is itself a social practice approach, is similarly absent. Whilst this approach was initially focused on students’ writing, it offers important insights about the ways in which students are taught and assessed in higher education. It is important to be clear that in many ways the absence of these literatures is to be expected. The purpose of this book is to explore what these new approaches offer to our understanding of learning to teach in higher education and to explore some of the challenges of how we draw on theories to support our work. Thus the book can be seen as mounting an argument for the relevance of these approaches and seeking to show what they can bring to debates around learning to teach in higher education. However, there are a number of issues that are raised by these absences.

First, as I argued earlier, all approaches simplify the social world in order to engage with it. Thus what these new simplifications offer are not more complex understandings of learning to teach in higher education but *different* understandings. If we are to understand what these new simplifications offer then we need to be able to compare them with the previous simplifications that have been developed, as, for example, Leibowitz (2016) does. Otherwise the danger is that rather than building knowledge we move between different kinds of simplifications without understanding the relations between them (Bernstein 2000).

Second, the danger is that in ignoring these previous approaches we can miss that they were trying to do something different from the approaches discussed in this book. For example, there is no point in criticising the approaches to learning approach for not taking greater account of non-human actors, when the purpose of this approach is to understand the relations between intentions, perceptions, approaches and outcomes of human actors. If we are to build knowledge about learning to teach in higher education, then we need to engage with what the previous research was attempting to do. Clearly if the previous research does not help us to ask the questions we are interested in then we need to find new approaches and the contributions to this book show how three approaches support the asking of such questions. However, we need to recognise that is driven by a new set of questions rather than because of the failures of previous approaches.

Third, the absence of previous approaches is also a problem because it means we can miss how apparently original insights of new ways of seeing are actually re-descriptions of implications that can equally be drawn from established approaches to learning to teach in higher education. Many, but certainly not all, of the new ways of approaching learning to teach in higher education that are outlined in the earlier contributions are reminiscent of approaches to academic development that were supported by the approaches to learning literature. This is, of course, not to deny that the approaches discussed in this book can help us to design important experiences for academics and can provide powerful insights into their academic practices. However, we do need to be careful not to overplay the apparent newness of what is offered. We can only do this if we establish a productive dialogue between established and new ways of theorising learning to teach in higher education.

The challenge of how we relate old and new ways of understanding learning to teach in higher education is not simply a challenge for this book. It is a challenge about how we build knowledge about learning to teach in higher education. This challenge raises questions about how we can build on what we already know about learning to teach in higher education in order to enrich our research and practices in this area. We need to recognise that this is not an easy thing to do. Yet it is an incredibly important thing to do if we are to develop a richer understanding of learning to teach in higher education.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I want to consider the possibilities for future work that are opened up by the contributions to this book. The power of relating different ways of seeing learning to teach in higher education is demonstrated by the crossover perspective chapters in this book. The discipline of moving between different ways of understanding learning to teach can provide greater choice about how to engage with the demanding situations that face academic developers. As is argued in a number of places in this book, the key is not just to see the world in a variety of ways but to use these ways of seeing to develop alternative ways of approaching our practices. It is not enough to simply critique existing practices, we need to use our collective understandings to work together to build alternative ways of learning to teach in higher education. The contributions to this book open up a number of possibilities for developing such alternatives. These will not always be successful and we need to reflect rigorously on our practices in order to understand the ways in which they have succeeded and failed. As the contributions to this book highlight, this will involve the careful consideration of evidence about our practices, a thoughtful examination of theoretical resources and previous research that enable us to make sense of this evidence, and the discussion of the relations between this evidence, theories and research with supportive and critical peers. This is difficult work but it is vital if we are to find ways of working with those who are learning to teach that can support the development of more effective and socially just teaching.

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