EXPERT PRACTITIONERS, NOVICE RESEARCHERS

Developing new identities in learning technology scholarship

Brett Bligh

Centre for
Technology Enhanced Learning

Department of Educational
Research, Lancaster University

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

PROFESSION AND FIELD

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!)

TECHNOLOGY FIXATION

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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