

Special Issue on Theory for Learning Technologies: Editorial

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The history of this issue can really be traced back to an annual internal conference of the Computers and Learning Research Group¹ at the Open University. I had been invited to attend as a discussant, and as I listened to the papers, I was struck by the diversity of theories that people were drawing upon, and the very different ways in which they were using them. For some, a theory was a touchstone, a guiding set of principles, the foundation on which their work built. For others, theories were tools, and the important thing was having the right one for the job. What, I wondered, was the right way to use theory here? Should we believe in them, live them, and risk being dogmatic — or should we be pluralistic, tied to none, and risk being superficial?

These ideas were soon developed by discussions with colleagues preparing submissions for ALT-C 99². The conference themes were policy, practice and partnership, with not a sign of foundational research work in sight — someone who shall remain nameless joked that theory had been replaced by alliteration. To remedy the situation, a workshop was proposed on the topic of theory and learning technology, and out of this grew what has now become the ALT³ Theory & Learning Technology Special Interest Group⁴.

From our meetings, it became clear that we wanted a rallying point, a forum in which to develop our ideas. The mailing list was all well and good, and the positional papers posted on the group's site were all very stimulating, but a more intensive, sustained discussion was desired. It was at this point that we approached Simon Buckingham Shum for permission to run a special issue of JIME on the topic — and he kindly agreed, perhaps little realising the work that would be needed before it was finished.

¹ <http://iet.open.ac.uk/research/calrg/home.cfm>

² <http://www.ilrt.bristol.ac.uk/alt-c99/>

³ <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uczamao/theory/>

The papers included in this issue are as varied and eclectic as the group that contributed them. Approaches vary considerably — from theory as tool, to theory as principle; from theory building, to theory using; from disciplines as diverse as film studies, psychology, sociology and education. So too do the topics — software tools, logic learning, metadata, multimedia; an array of mainstream issues, and other gems besides. To me, it is this diversity that makes this such an interesting area. It is constantly challenging; always impossible to tell quite what perspective might be brought to bear on your problem next. During the editing process, I received an irate email from one of the early readers of the pre-print material, complaining that no progress towards an overall theory for this area seemed to have been made. (I offered to let the questioner write such a piece, but they did not take me up on the offer.) This seems, to me, entirely appropriate. This is such a new landscape, so fast changing, that any attempt at this point to define it would surely be premature. Part of me suspects that attempts to define it will always be premature, and that what gives it its life, its vitality, is the mesmeric way in which it seems to shift and evolve, or the strange quality it has to seem utterly different when the same point is viewed from a new perspective. This, I think, is what these articles capture — the sense of change, challenge and above all exploration. I hope that you will enjoy reading and debating this collection as much as we writers and reviewers have.