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Holism, history and power in technology enhanced learning: A comment on Lee

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In your life as a researcher, there are times when you read a study whose argument and approach are so clear and obvious that you feel scales fall from your eyes and, simultaneously, enviously wish you had written the piece yourself. This is how I felt after reading Kyungmee Lee's contribution to the present special issue (Lee, 2020). Her article successfully presents the complexity of Michel Foucault's ideas without oversimplification, a tricky task. Her approach to review several studies that utilize a similar theoretical background is elegant and persuasive. And in reading her piece, I felt inchoate thoughts and perceptions I have had as a student on, and recent graduate of, the PhD programme in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning[1] (hereafter referred to as the 'TEL programme') that Lee teaches on and helps direct, crystallise and become more defined.

Like Lee, I too was introduced to the theories of Foucault as a graduate student, though in my case, it was as a PhD student in cultural anthropology in the 1990s (I did not complete the PhD at the time). I remember feeling a heady sense of revelation as I read passages from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. Though complicated, Foucault's approach to power and history made a lot of sense to me and helped explain a myriad of social phenomena in my studies. The points of Foucault that resonated most closely with my research interests at the time about how indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest of the United States interpreted, negotiated and resisted US governmental policies included:

- Holism, i.e., an ideological commitment to seeing the wider social context and untangling complicated social processes to tell more sophisticated narratives;
- History, i.e., an ideological commitment to exploring how social phenomena are conceptualised and experienced in different ages, locating present knowledge and truths in historical contexts and opening them up to scrutiny;
- Power, i.e., an ideological commitment to exploring how power subtly produces social effects, such as in how we discipline our bodies or prioritise systems of knowledge.

Like Lee, I felt that the theories of Foucault presented me with a toolkit for revealing and explaining the complexity of taken-for-granted societal assumptions and contexts. When I became a PhD student in TEL in 2015, I actively explored using Foucault in my doctoral work (Westbury, 2020a) and began collecting educational studies that utilised his theories. I ultimately did not select Foucault as the theoretical framework for my PhD thesis, as infrastructural theory, particularly knowledge infrastructures, inspired by the work of Bruno Latour seemed more immediately relevant (cf. my contribution in this special issue [Westbury, 2020b]) because of its concern with assemblages of people, technology and values and concomitant social effects, but nevertheless, Foucault's overall emphasis on holism, history and power profoundly shaped my TEL PhD's priorities and focus.

Similar to Lee, I was surprised at the lack of theory we as TEL students were asked to read, especially as the work of major social theorists underpins many other graduate programmes in education. The most obvious reason for this omission is the misperception, often held by professional practitioners of TEL – who by design made up the majority of students on my PhD programme (the programme caters specifically to mid-career professionals in education) – is that theory is not immediately relevant to practice. Many of the students on my course wanted tools and ideas that they could immediately apply to improve their professional contexts. This is naturally understandable, but, as Lee conveys, likely constitutes a misinterpretation of the power of theory. Not only can theory be personally liberating, as Lee poignantly relates, but can lead to better understanding of social phenomena and, therefore, progress.

For example, as I read Lee's article, two major ways that Foucault's ideas seem immediately applicable and relevant to TEL concerns during the current COVID crisis occurred to me. Firstly, we desperately need to unpack the rhetoric and assumptions in popular discourse about schools' and universities' 'pivot' to online learning. It would be very useful to practitioners, for example, to understand the historical roots of widespread perceptions that face-to-face learning is *prima facie* better than that mediated by digital technologies or, moreover, sweeping generalisations about the benefits of 'active learning' and the need to 'foster community' in online education. I am not necessarily criticizing these ideas, but I think that a Foucauldian genealogy of these popular models and normative constraints would be highly pertinent in this age. Secondly, in the rush to adopt new technologies of learning in the COVID crisis, critical perspectives on their widespread ability to observe, track and evaluate students' and teachers' work seems to be falling by the wayside. We in the TEL community could be well positioned to take up Foucault's concern with power and surveillance – for example from systems concerned with learning analytics or plagiarism detection – and discuss how such surveillance is both restrictive and constructive of our students' practices and identities.

As Lee's article adroitly demonstrates, Foucault's toolkit of ideas is useful for asking questions about the 'state of the actual' (Selwyn & Facer, 2013), i.e., questions that help us move beyond instrumentalist 'what works' discussions in TEL towards interrogation of how ideas and practices become normalised over time, to the point where we stop questioning them. Lee's piece gracefully challenges the pre-eminence of social constructivist approaches in TEL, which focus on students' interactions in learning environments, and offers relevant and constructive uses of social theory for educational researchers. I sincerely hope that Lee's article sparks discussions amongst TEL practitioners about how the use of social theory, Foucault's in particular, can be helpful for improving teaching and learning. I also hope that it spurs a larger interest in other relevant social theorists, such as Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Bruno Latour, Talcott Parsons and many others (Murphy, 2013).

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