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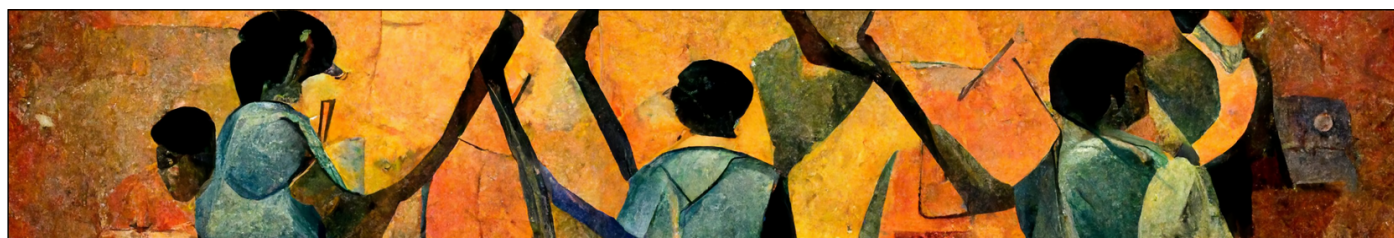
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Activity theory in technology enhanced learning research: An introduction to the special issue

Brett Bligh¹ and Phil Moffitt²

¹ Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

² MKC Training, Royal School of Military Engineering, Chatham, United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

Activity Theory (sometimes known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory, or CHAT) is an established theory widely used in Technology Enhanced Learning research, just as it is in a range of other fields of enquiry. A theory considered very mature yet still under active development, Activity Theory is often valued for its ability to grasp the dynamics of complex social situations and place phenomena in context (Bligh & Flood, 2017). Usefully for technology enhanced learning researchers, the theory also foregrounds the role of 'technologies' as being central to everything that humans do. Yet the theory is also often criticised, including for emphasising a dense terminology unforgiving on newcomers, leading to questions about whether the extra conceptual effort is worthwhile for researchers.

This Special Issue will consider the use of Activity Theory within Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) research. We invited papers describing research endeavours with Activity Theory, particularly those where the social and cultural contexts of technologies were important in enhancing learning. We were particularly keen to receive submissions that aimed to contribute to making the theory more accessible

and applicable to research in the field, that examined how the theory has been (and might be) used in the field, or that emphasised the mediating role of technologies for purposeful human activity.

Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning aims to provide a lively forum for debate and reflection on a wide range of issues connected with TEL in disparate settings, and this has, from the beginning, included the central issue of theory in TEL research (Bligh & Lee, 2020). In examining the use of activity theory, this Special Issue continues a conversation which has already commenced in earlier editions of the journal, as can be seen in contributions in earlier issues by Miles (2020), Al-Ali (2020), Minton and Bligh (2021), Moffitt (2022), and Gatrell (2022). We were delighted that several authors of those earlier pieces returned with a new contribution in the present issue.

2. Articles in the issue

We organise the papers in this issue into three clusters focussed, in turn, on the issues of exploring the technological mediation of teaching and learning, transforming practices in the context of TEL, and understanding how programmes, culture and policy situate TEL practices. We conclude with a commentary paper.

Our first cluster focusses on the technological mediation of teaching and learning:

- *Camilleri* presents a study of digital resources in a Maltese kindergarten, demonstrating concretely the important activity theoretical proposition that technology does not operate independently but instead mediates complex activity systems.
- *Barker* examines video as a mediating artefact for university law students, illustrating how what might appear to be individual skills are actually a collective, socially situated activity.
- *Gatrell* also addresses the issue of video-based tools, with a particular focus on how introducing new tools re-mediate existing activity systems.
- *Roxburgh* moves our focus away from specific technologies and towards a focus on use and non-use of institutional technologies, which is explored in the context of participation in institutional discussion boards.

Our second cluster of papers addresses the topic of transforming practices in the context of TEL, in each case drawing on the Change Laboratory approach:

- *Gorman* considers how attempts at transforming practices, in this case the move from face-to-face to online delivery, can be framed to allow participants to articulate their own experiences.
- *Miles* addresses the issue of practitioner-researchers using a Change Laboratory approach to reshape classroom practice in their institution where they work, drawing on an example of redesigning laptop-mediated English language education.
- *Moffitt* considers the collaborative redesign of TEL activities, documenting how mentors and mentees redesign their mentoring activity and emphasising the central role of addressing contradictions in such processes.

Our third cluster of papers explores how programmes, cultures and policy situate TEL practices, shifting attention from particular teaching and learning activities towards the broader institutional and cultural contexts within which they take place:

- *McDermott-Dalton* broadens the focus from a specific portfolio activity to the wider context of graphic design education, combining activity theory with the concept of Teaching and Learning Regimes to explore culturally and historically embedded practices.
- *Murphy* examines the development and delivery of blended learning programmes in higher education, using activity theory to explore tensions between collegial and managerial approaches and to consider what these reveal about the changing role of academics in TEL.
- *Clifford* extends the analysis to the institutional policy level, considering how activity theory and the Change Laboratory can support more collaborative approaches to educational technology policy and enable established institutional practices to be questioned and reshaped.

We conclude with a commentary paper:

- *Papageorgiou* considers how researchers can make use of activity theory in different ways in their research, building on the earlier work of Bligh and Flood (2017) to examine the potential and practices of using the theory in a *polyfunctional* way.

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About the authors



Brett Bligh

Brett Bligh is a Lecturer in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, and co-Director of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning. His research interrogates the nexus of technology mediation, physical environment, and institutional change in higher education. Brett's work prioritises Activity Theory conceptions of human practice, and interventionist methodologies.

✉ Email: b.bligh@lancaster.ac.uk

ORCID: [0000-0003-4591-8897](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4591-8897)

✉ Twitter: [@BrettBligh](https://twitter.com/BrettBligh)



Phil Moffitt

Phil Moffitt is a consultant and teaching-focused lecturer employed by MKC Training, a company specialising in innovative teaching, learning and assessment for clients in defence. A chartered engineer, facilities manager, and ergonomist, he specialises in technology enhanced learning for teams who design, build and operate critical national infrastructure. Phil's research interests include: culturally and historically embedded organisational practices; human-technology interaction and error reduction; and the redesign of learning activity by participants themselves. Phil is one of the Alumni Members of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University.

✉ Email: phil.moffitt@midkent.ac.uk

ORCID: [0000-0001-9469-8216](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9469-8216)

✉ Twitter: [@PhilMoffitt](https://twitter.com/PhilMoffitt)



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