

TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: WHERE HAS THE THEORY GONE?

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are responsible for imparting knowledge to the next generation of change-makers. While knowledge can be gleaned almost instantaneously from the Internet or an AI alternative, many students continue to choose HEIs to solidify and confirm their acquisition of specific skills and competencies. In the recent years, many HEIs have adapted their teaching and learning practices to embrace or at least accept technology in the classroom. With the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, more technology was hastily implemented and came without directions or, more appropriately, without pedagogical theory. While theories for using technology exist, the focus was on getting courses running rather than matching the theory or tool to the context. As HEIs have returned to campus, there is time for reflection on the choices that were made and the practices that should continue moving forward. This study focuses on the importance of linking theory to instructional practices in HEIs. We expand on teaching theories, learning theories, practical theories, dynamic theories, and even transformational theories. Our study is based on the development of a metro map of teaching and learning, that we created using the data of 4 surveys held at a Business School in Fribourg, Switzerland during the pandemic. This metro map was then used in a scholarly discussion at the SFDN conference (Swiss Faculty Development Network) in 2023, where we got first feedback of 12 faculty-members of HEI's. This survey will be reconducted with all users of faculty training of the HES-SO (University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland). Until now, we found that many traditional theories can be named and may be implemented but need to be better aligned with actual practice. In the rush called *emergency remote learning*, faculty members were more interested in tools to use and tasks to do online; theory took a backseat to the daily needs of animating online classes. Back on campus, we continue using tools and creating tasks that lack the theoretical underpinnings. In this paper, we attempt to convince faculty members of the importance of theory for their teaching, student learning, and inclusion of technology moving forward. We offer an interactive map of theories where faculty members of all disciplines and schools can find their route toward lifelong teaching and learning. We can create the classrooms of the future with a foundation of theory, walls of traditional knowledge, and ever-expansive ceilings of possibilities.

Keywords: *Teaching, learning, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), theory, practices.*

1. Introduction

For decades, educational experts have tried to introduce traditional pedagogical theories on untrained or unaware faculty in non-traditional contexts by oversimplifying or overcomplicating the teaching process, sometimes forcing them into this deeper understanding of education. Theory was seen as a necessary evil or a box to tick in preparing to be a teacher. During the pandemic, many pedagogical decisions taken were not based on any theoretical underpinning; instead, they were hastily set up in an emergency environment with a 'let's do our best' attitude. How many teachers looked up theories on teaching online? How many adapted their onsite courses to an online setting based on a sound theoretical framework? Few, if any. Teachers spent their preparation time on finding technology that worked, uploading videos and other learning resources, and getting the camera to function. The theory was nowhere in sight. Now, back on campus, we need to take the time to reflect on the choices we made and try to make sense out of a non-sensical period. Some faculty are working backward, that is, trying to fit a theory into their choices. For some experts, post-pandemic, it is time to come back to the roots and simplify teaching without losing its essential character (Hiebert & Stiegler, 2023). By creating an

interactive map with a choice of those theories, that were especially useful during the pandemic (Probst & Zizka, 2022), we try to choose appropriate theories and demonstrate their usefulness at all teaching stages and for as many teaching contexts as possible. Klauer (1985) claimed, “an all-encompassing theory of teaching can be conceived only as a hierarchy of interrelated theories.” (p. 5); thus, in this paper, we try to show here the links between the theories.

Using this map suggests there is a general understanding of and comfortability with pedagogical theory. However, currently, there has yet to be a consensus on what a teaching theory is and if it even exists (Praetorius et al., 2023). No theory applies to all courses; not one theory that trumps all others; no hierarchy of theory to follow. Hence, choosing and using theory is a complicated and daunting task. Further, teaching theory is even more complex as faculty have to integrate learning theories into their teaching while building on theories of learning (Praetorius et al., 2023). For Hiebert and Stigler (2023), nonetheless, “it is possible to build theories of teaching – practical theories – that are useful for teachers” (p. 24), which they refer to as sustained learning opportunities or SLOs. However, “the same teaching moves that work in one classroom might not work in another classroom” (Hiebert & Stiegler, 2023, p. 40); thus, faculty may be positively rewarded in one instance and incredibly disappointed in another when basing their teaching on the same theory. Thus, faculty need a safe haven for trial and error when accessing and applying theories.

2. Methodology

This research project was initially based on a figure we developed in 2022 and that was published as a book chapter entitled “Bridging the Gap: From Instruction to Co-construction in Higher Education” (Probst & Zizka, 2022). From our previous research of 4 surveys done during the pandemic and analysis of about 1,700 comments, we established a metro map of practical steps or ‘stops’ for teacher training. As a follow-up, we then tested the metro map with 12 participants in a presentation at the Swiss Faculty Development Network (SFDN) conference in 2023. During this interactive session, we could gauge if and how participants linked theory to practice. We conducted a live online poll of four questions during the conference session, the results can be seen in the next section. This year, we extended our questions to those who registered for teacher training at HES-SO, in total 1742 persons (=n), but as the survey is still ongoing, we will share the full results in a later study. Hence, this paper focuses on our initial results.

3. Results

The results of the SFDN-conference show that with an average of 13 years of practice in teaching (6.4% of participants answered this questions), most of the respondents prove a certain routine in teaching practice and also have a certain knowledge of the pedagogical theories. Thus, they were able to mention all these theories, when asked which ones they know.

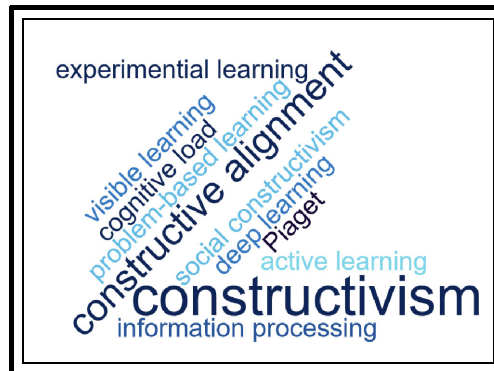
Figure 1. Pedagogical theories.



As seen in the results of the first question, 12 pedagogical theories were cited with *behaviorism* (7 times) and *constructivism* (4 times) being named most often. *Constructive alignment* as well as *connectivism* were the other theories that were mentioned several times. As the participants are faculty developers, we expected them to be quite knowledgeable about pedagogical theories.

Our second question focused on the utility of these theories for their courses: “If you want to base your course on pedagogical theories, which one is the most useful for you?”

Figure 2. Useful pedagogical theories.

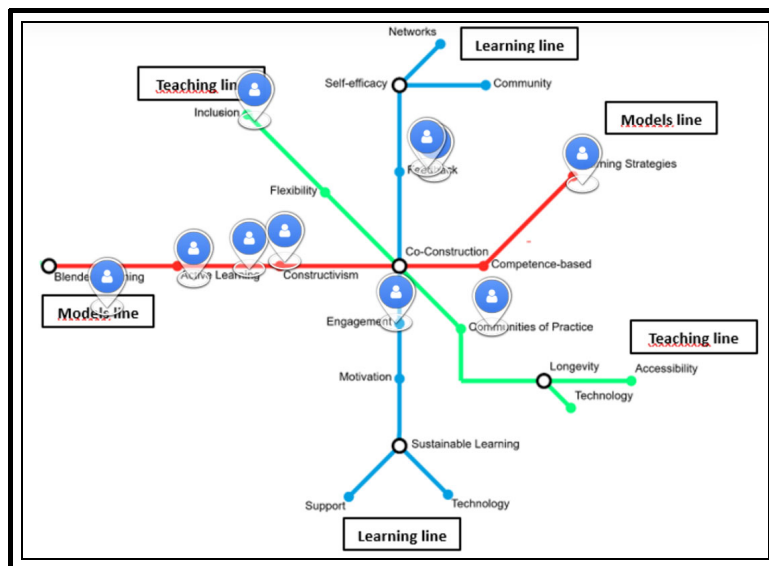


We can see here, that theories are perceived differently when asked about their usefulness, as *behaviorism* disappeared in the second answers, while the focus remains on learning theories.

As mentioned earlier, we developed an overview of important aspects or elements of teaching and learning theories, based on a series of surveys conducted during the pandemic with faculty members and students of a School of Management in Switzerland. The needs and challenges expressed in the open questions gave rise to this picture, when the online setting “obliged many faculty members to rethink their course methodology” (Probst & Zizka, 2022, p. 5) and translate their individual teaching ideas into online courses.

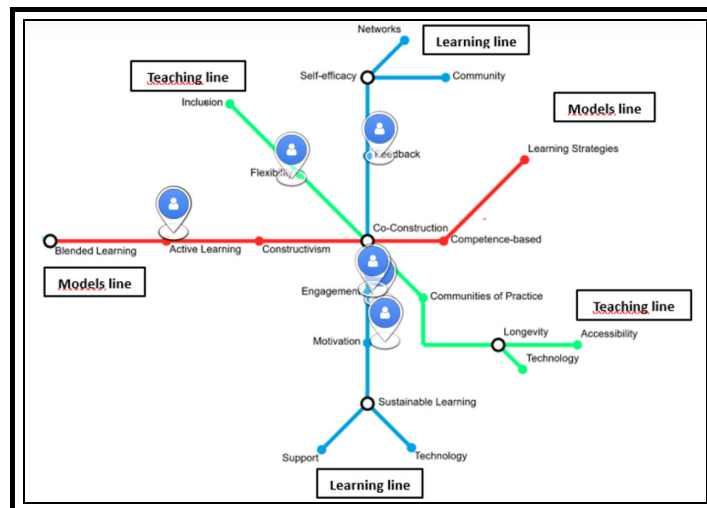
During the workshop, we then shared our metro map and asked participants to pinpoint the one element they felt was the most crucial for teaching (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Crucial element for teaching.



As seen in Figure 3, participants chose more ‘stops’ on the model’s line, perhaps as it aligned with the topic of our workshop. However, inclusion, feedback, and engagement were also chosen. When one considers the crucial elements of teaching, these are pertinent factors as well. To delve further, participants were asked to choose the ONE stop that is the most important to them as educators. This was our question: In your teaching practice, which stop of this metro map is the most important for you? Figure 4 summarizes their responses.

Figure 4. Important stop on metro map.



Compared to the models line that was predominantly chosen in the previous question, the responses focus here almost exclusively on the *learning line*. Even the two choices on the other lines, flexibility, and active learning, are also linked to learning. Thus, we can consider that all participants felt the most important aspect of teaching is LEARNING.

In these answers, we confirm there is some knowledge of theories and practice; however, we posit that the learning theories are more important for this public when it comes to their personal choice. “Teaching is guided by a personal theory of learning. The more complete this personal theory of learning is the more the teacher is able to help learners acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” (Bachmann, 2019, p. 7). Thus, it is essential for any faculty member, to be aware of their personal understanding of learning, to be able to translate knowledge into practice.

4. Discussion

We live in a society of knowledge, yet the simultaneity of knowing everything and understanding nothing is a great paradox of our time (Weiss, 2022). We know theories exist, yet we may not know how to apply them. We may want to improve our teaching but are overwhelmed by day-to-day pressures that prevent us from making sound pedagogical decisions grounded in theory.

Despite all of the discussion around theory or personal preferences of theories, for Hiebert and Stiegler (2023), a good theory is one “that teachers actually can use” (p. 46). Faculty members who can easily identify the practical potential of the theoretical ideas will undoubtedly be better teachers since their teaching can be reflected from more angles and thus allow for a better understanding of what has to be changed to improve students' learning. We must not forget that the role of teaching theories is “to identify the characteristics of high-quality teaching” (Praetorius et al., 2023, p. 1). Unfortunately, researchers, teachers, and teacher trainers pick the one theory that fits their concept (Cruess, 2006). If we want to strive for a reflected choice, we better teach more of the instrumental theory, focusing on concepts that can best be translated into our students' learning.

5. Conclusions/Next Steps

Based on our results, we are questioning the perception of theory and how to re-incorporate it into teaching practices. We need to rethink the roles of educators and to “keep pace with the needs of 21st century learners, especially in the realm of workforce preparedness and entrepreneurship” (Becker et al., 2017, p. 38) but also with all upcoming new technologies, especially IA which is resetting all challenges, when it comes to production of learning resources and to assessment. What is needed is a common effort among professionals (Zizka & Probst, 2020). That may come in framing, i.e., instead of focusing on theories, we should focus on reflection or theorized practice to show the concrete link between theory and practice and their usefulness for teaching and learning. We could form communities of practice that would work together to create a fresh, innovative method for learning, applying, and living theory in our teaching. Clearly, theory must be learned and, to ensure learning, applied to specific contexts. We go further, however, by positing the need to ‘live’ the theory, to work with the theory, and to adapt our teaching to the theory. It is about “Learning, unlearning, relearning – lifelong learning is a must today”

(Bachmann, 2019, p. 2) – but not only for students also for their teachers. This symbiosis between theory and practice, traditional and new ways of teaching must find a fruitful combination. However, simply introducing theory into teacher training is not enough. We need to inspire teachers to seek out theories and test them in their classrooms. The metro map is one starting point to open the dialogue. Moving forward is crucial to continue this line of research to develop our metro map further and offer comprehensive options to teachers.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the participants in our SFDN workshop as well as the respondents to our survey.

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