

Practice architectures and ecologies of practices: new ways of seeing into and making changes to teaching, learning and assessment practices

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Teaching, learning and assessment are complex

Adopting “best practice” and “evidence-based practice” are two ways we are encouraged to improve our teaching, learning and assessment practices. However, there are concerns that these approaches seek to simplify, standardise and formularise teaching, learning and assessment (Mockler, 2017), ignoring their complexity (Coffield, 2014) and the associated “human and contextual messiness” of the site (Mockler, 2017). Here, I am using the term site to represent either a further education college, a prison, a private training provider, or an adult and community provider.

The theories of practice architectures and ecologies of practices enable us to understand teaching, learning and assessment differently, and to study and work with their complexity so that we can transform these practices (Mahon, Kemmis, Francisco, and Lloyd, 2017).

Nineteen providers in the North East of England and Cumbria are currently employing these theories within an Outstanding Teaching and Learning Assessment (OTLA) managed by a consortium led by Success North, a Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training based at Newcastle College, and funded by the Education and Training Foundation. These providers include further education colleges, private training organisations, offender learning and adult and community learning providers.

The theories of practices architectures and ecologies of practices

Practice architectures are a lens for studying teaching, learning and assessment as site specific practices. They consist of “the sayings, doings and relatings” (Kemmis et al., 2014a, p.3) of a practice and the three arrangements that enable and constrain these practices. These arrangements include the language of the subject and ideas being taught, the resources available to the teacher or trainer in the classroom and at the site, and the relationships between teachers and managers and their students. These practice architectures “hang together” in a “project”, for example, an Education and Training Foundation funded project that seeks to improve teaching, learning and assessment practices at a site. The practice architectures of a site can evolve as the practices of the site change. For instance, the replacement of chalkboards with wipeboards and then interactive whiteboards has shaped the “sayings, doings and relatings” of the classroom. However, the practice architectures may not change because of “habit...ideology...rules...and compliance mechanisms” (Mahon et al., 2017, p.12). The theory of practice architectures is visually represented in figure 1.

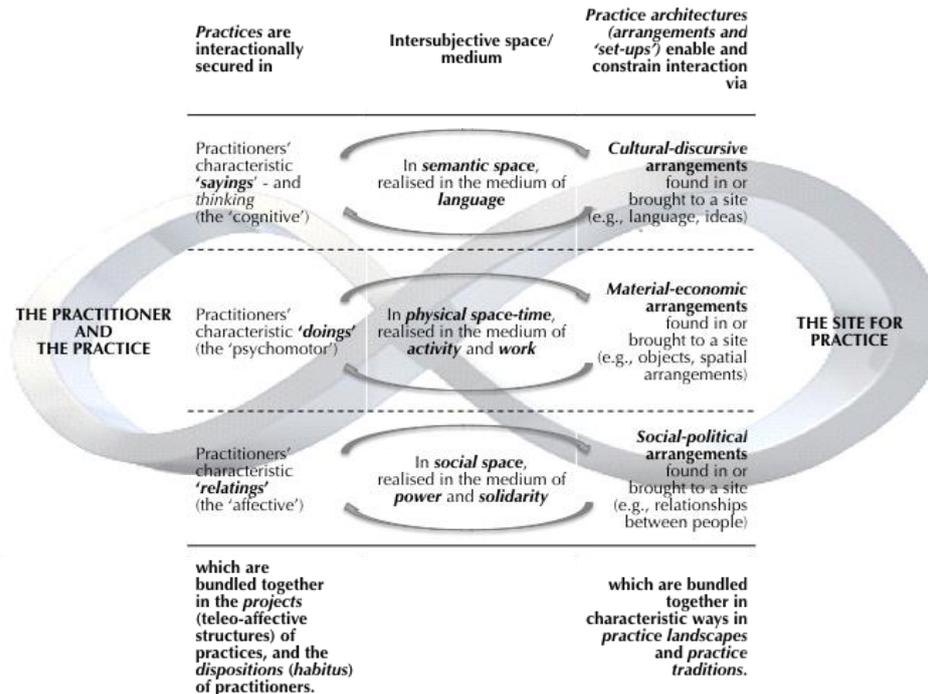


Figure 1: The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis, 2017, personal communication)

The theory of ecologies of practices is connected to practice architectures in the sense that it suggests how practices at a site might be related to one another (Mahon et al., 2017). Kemmis et al. (2014a) assert that sites normally consist of five interrelated practices: students and their learning; teachers and their teaching; leaders and administration; professional learning, which includes continuing professional development and/or teacher education; and research and evaluation. What Mahon et al. argue is that to understand and make changes to teaching, learning and assessment practices we need to understand all the practices of our site and appreciate how they are related. Figure 2 represents the theory of ecologies of practices.

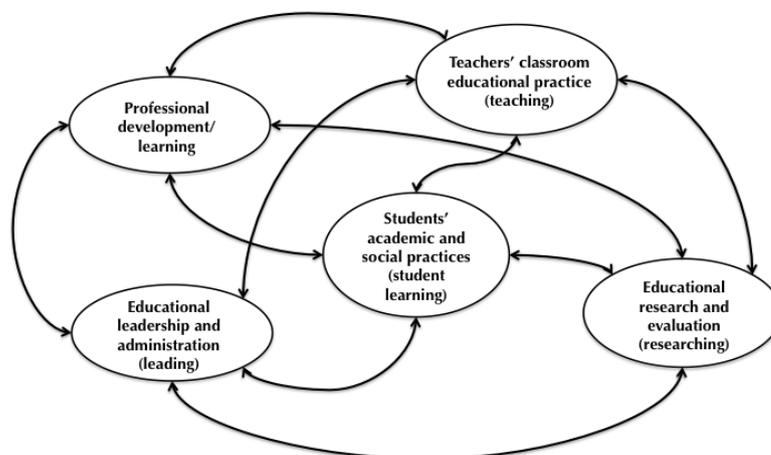


Figure 2: the theory of ecologies of practices (Kemmis, 2017, personal communication)

One example of ecologies of practices in action is how providers have responded to the government policy on GCSE maths and English re-sits. For instance, the significant number of students required to re-sit these GCSEs has meant that providers have had to recruit new teachers; other teachers have been re-deployed and undergone continuous professional development to teach groups of students; new administrative systems have had to be devised and introduced, and student timetables have had to be changed. During this “project” the site’s other practices will have enabled or constrained teachers’ classroom practice and students’ learning.

The theory of ecologies of practices encourages us to collaborate with colleagues from other practices at our site so that we collectively gain a better understanding of them, how they are related to each other and the nature of these relationships, i.e. do they enable or constrain the practice we are seeking to change, and how do the practice architectures of these practices enable and constrain the other practices? (Mahon et al., 2017). The nineteen providers involved in this OTLA project have been invited to adopt this collaborative approach as they seek to change the practices at their site.

What is different about employing practice architectures and ecologies of practices to make changes to teaching, learning and assessment practices?

Employing the practice architectures and ecologies of practices lenses to make changes to teaching, learning and assessment practices at our site requires us to perhaps work in different ways than we have in the past.

First, it invites project leaders to work as part of a cross-organisation project team that jointly agrees the “intention...actions... and the ends” for the “project” (Mahon et al., 2017, p.8).

Second, it encourages project leaders to invite all the interested parties to join a sincere and genuine “conversation” (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014b, p.150) about changing teaching, learning and assessment practices where they work. This is what we have asked the people leading the OTLA projects to do. Such an openly democratic approach to change is not what many of us are used to and may pose some logistical and cultural challenges for project teams. Nevertheless, we believe such an approach could be rewarding and provide useful insights into how to change practices at a site.

Third, it is about praxis/actions that are “ethical...sustainable, [and socially] just.” (Mahon et al., 2017, p.16). This is a very different way of working; it is all about our “sayings, doings and relatings” as we work with colleagues to change our practices and, in the process, change people’s lives for the better.

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