

## Reclaiming the field of educational technology: Seeds for discussion

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The purpose of this concise paper is to offer some observations and commentary on the current state of the field of educational technology – with the overarching premise that the field is currently stuck in a “techno-centric habitus” that is limiting the field’s evolution. This position is based on research work conducted in Ireland exploring the personal values and beliefs that motivate the staff working in the educational technology space within higher education institutions. In an era where Higher Education is facing many unrelenting issues – educational technologists continue to remain a silent voice in the ongoing debate – “*privately vociferous but publicly mute*”. This paper offers a critique of the field that appears as dynamic and innovative largely reflecting the investments in technology – but at its core is harnessed as an instrument that prioritises performance measures over transformative opportunities. This scenario is often compounded by the lived reality of educational technologists who often reside within the fractures of organisational structures – straddling various strategic priority pillars such as Digital Campus, Teaching and Learning and the Student Experience. This work adopted the “thinking tools” of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to examine this dilemma. The paper concludes by proposing four key questions for discussion that will contribute to informing and shaping the future direction of the field of educational technology.

Keywords: Values and beliefs, Bourdieu, field, capital, doxa, educational technology

### Introduction

This paper will describe a synthesis of relevant findings from a research project designed to explore the habitus of educational technologists in Irish higher education. Innovators who were described in the relevant literature predominately in terms of their technical prowess and achievements, with little scope for any account of who they are and why they do what they do. Among the motivations for this work was a realisation that investments in educational technology have not contributed to any real transformation of educational opportunity in Ireland. In fact, some critics would argue that educational technology has been colonised to support and drive a “new managerial agenda” in higher education (Lynch, 2006). Allied with this is a realisation that there is a lack of public discourse on these issues within the field. However, I have also been encouraged to investigate this area by the unexpected outcome of a request to a group of educational technologists to choose which video clip they would prefer to view. One segment described in detail the underlying architecture of an award-winning educational technology solution, a second video presented a narrative of a student’s experience – a student who because of a disability was unable to attend college, but access to the technology allowed her to attend online. The priority amongst the group was clearly to witness the impact on the student – this event still resonates with me to this day. A group that would be labelled as “techno-centric” displayed an emotional response that for me reflected values and beliefs that receive scant attention within the field of educational technology. This added to the view that within the field of educational technology there is ample anecdotal evidence of vociferous private conversations and discussions (McNutt, 2010).

At this time, I was also introduced to the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose concepts of habitus, field and capital resonated with me for reasons which I still struggle to explain. I do know that I had a “gut” instinct that these conceptual tools could explain the inherent contradictions and tensions within the educational technology domain. The concepts of habitus, field and capital provided a “lens” with which to re-evaluate the field and its actors (Maton, 2008).

I wanted to “excavate” beneath the surface of the emotional response described above, to illuminate the participant’s views, opinions, beliefs and accounts of their practice and present a more accurate picture of the field of educational technology and the habitus of the main players within the field. I was also influenced by the realisation that this required an approach that would encourage self-reflection to counteract the criticism that



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Bourdieu (2000) has levied at research activity which tends to take as given the values, questions and categories of the field and the society in which it operates.

The agent engaged in practice knows the world...too well, without objectifying distance, take it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it, bound up with it; he inhabits it like a garment...he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of the habitus. (p.142)

An important task in this endeavour was to encourage practitioners to reflect on their own beliefs, values and assumptions regarding the field of educational technology and it's dominated neighbour the higher education sector.

### The Journey

Amongst the many challenges encountered during this research study was how best to engage in the objective of capturing the values and beliefs of practitioners. An introduction to arts-based research and narrative enquiry offered a methodology that although a challenge to my scientific training, presented an appropriate and authentic approach to give “voice” to the project participants. The intent was to re-position the description of the role of educational technologists from the techno-centric to the personal; to shift the focus to their own values and beliefs and motivations. A methodology had emerged – a methodology that challenged the predominant positivist perspective in educational technology research. There was also an underlying assumption that percolated throughout this study – an assumption that educational technology was indeed a field that co-existed with many competing discourses within Higher Education.

The participants did not share a common view on all aspects of the role of the educational technologist but they did share a common dream – and as with all dreams it was not clearly articulated and visible. But at its core was a belief that technology has a central role to play in higher education and the promotion of a continuing discourse in relation to teaching and learning. This had to be balanced with the operational aspects of their roles which are primarily technology lead – but always trying to ensure that their suggestions are aligned with learning objectives and that the benefits to both students and academic staff are clearly articulated.

One of the conclusions from this study is captured in Figure 1 below a visual representation of the dominant views and beliefs within the field, an instance of the field of educational technology that is comprised only of the participants. If you could imagine that the “green spot” could be adjusted to reflect the common “temperature” of the field regarding a theme, taken at a point in time. The diagram is designed to reflect the constant struggle and interplay that characterises this field (McNutt, 2013).

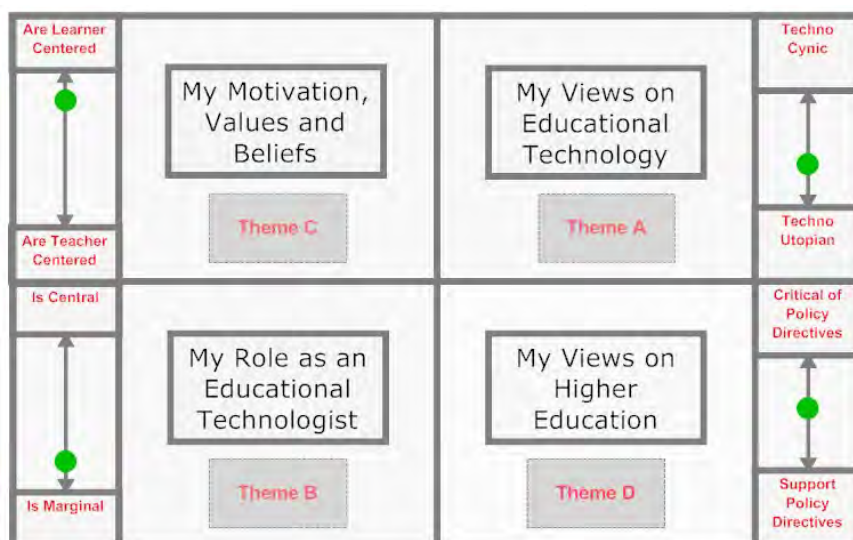


Figure 1: An Instance of the Field of Educational Technology

### Reclaiming the Field of Educational Technology

The research work undertaken as part of this study was based on a major assumption that the field of educational technology existed. This assumption was examined and tested when faced with the realisation that the existing

body of knowledge, pertaining to educational technology was unable to explain several key questions that emerged.

For example (i) why is the primary agenda within the field techno-centric yet educational technologists fundamentally believe that the needs and requirements of the learner are central? Or (ii) why are the values and beliefs of educational technologists undervalued within the field? (iii) who is dictating the current structures and roles within the field, which is leading to a sense of tension, frustration and isolation?

The adoption of Pierre Bourdieu's constructs of habitus, field and capital allowed an examination and explanation of these issues and provided a platform that allowed the field of educational technology to continue to develop and mature. The questions presented in the previous paragraph could be re-stated as: (i) does the field have a dominant doxa? (ii) what is the capital associated with the field? (iii) and what are there other adjacent fields and/or dominant fields?

Table 1 below presents an expansion of these key assertions as seeds for discussion that would lead to the ongoing cultivation and development of the field of educational technology.

**The field of educational technology exists and as such is a legitimate research arena worthy of study.**

The explorations and explanations afforded by Bourdieu's constructs are the foundations that allow us to theorise about the practice of an educational technologist, and on which a new doxa could be established. A doxa that will redefine the role of an educational technologist by releasing its current identity from the shackles of a techno-centric discourse to allow the field of educational technology and the role of educational technologist to evolve into a recognised professional discipline.

**Researchers in the field of educational technology should adopt alternative research methodologies drawn from arts-based and narrative enquiry methods**

The methodology adopted in this study was a response to the challenge of exploring the habitus of educational technologists. The influence of arts-based methods encouraged the use of visual media to stimulate and prompt discussion. The narrative that unfolded yielded insights into not only the practices but also to the personal values and beliefs of the participants. This study has illustrated the value and impact of alternative research methodologies that moved the research questions beyond the realm of "how" and "what" and gave pre-eminence to the question "why".

**The field of educational technology must encourage and embrace contributions that prioritise the personal narrative of the learner and the innovator.**

As an evolving field, educational technologists must be prepared to challenge and question old assumptions and inherited beliefs and discard the debris of three decades of following the mantra that the "next shiny new gadget" will solve all our problems. There is a real need for a new vision of change and equality within higher education underpinned by a realistic and independent critique of educational technology. What this study has shown is that while this vision is already in place, it remains unspoken and buried in the hearts and minds of the participants who contributed to this work. A key to unlock this "buried treasure" is to encourage their stories to be told, not using a narrow technical vocabulary but employing the same richness, variety and humanity demonstrated by the debate and discussion captured by this work.

**Professional development programmes within the field of educational technology should include sociological, epistemological and philosophical dimensions.**

A critical element in this endeavour will be to ensure that future professional development programmes within the education technology domain (and indeed the adjacent field of teaching and learning) prioritise and make the space for self-reflection. Such a programme would ground the role of an educational technologist as a focal point for an ongoing critique of the political, economic and social cultures that pervade higher education. A programme that seeks to hear their voice and challenges them to raise it in the debates and discussions addressing the core issues facing higher education today.

**Table 1: Reclaiming the Field: Seeds of Discussion**

## Conclusion

This concise paper is presented as a prompt for discussion and debate based on a research study carried out in the Irish higher education sector. The Irish and world landscapes have changed dramatically since the inception of this work in 2008 –it now seems an appropriate juncture for educational technologists to re-visit their role in shaping the future of higher education. It is of significance in an Irish context as we embark on the creation of a new type of university i.e. a Technological University<sup>1</sup>. As I write these final few words I am struck by Bond and Buntins' (2018) recent paper which concludes with an invitation to start a conversation about how AJET can further foster international collaboration, whilst continuing to champion Australasian-centred research. The purpose of the paper is to advocate that the field of educational technology should lead the debate on transforming higher education and foster within its community an alternative critique and assessment based on personal values and beliefs. Alternatively, the field will continue to be colonised and the original motivations and ambitions of the agents within the field will continue to be compromised in a “battle” for existence largely driven by a narrow neo-liberal higher education agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://hea.ie/policy/he-reform/technological-universities/>  
<https://www.tu4dublin.ie/>