

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 13

ADVANCING NEW PERSPECTIVES

Theoretical and Conceptual Articles

Under the umbrella of conceptual and theory manuscripts, we find a broad array of article types (e.g., taxonomy development, exploratory conceptual modeling, critique of theory). . . . In general, conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections. There is no argument being made that the broad scope of a body of literature has been explored and new findings are emerging from an analysis. Instead, authors are selectively choosing key pieces of literature that support a particular perspective that they are putting forth for consideration. (Callahan 2010, 302)

While we recognize that some scholars make a distinction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Adom, Hussein, and Agyem 2018; Kivunja 2018), the terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. Our main concern in this chapter is to tease out the similarities and differences between writing standalone theoretical and conceptual articles and writing in the other genres we discuss.

Instead of requiring you to present primary data, as we discussed in the chapter on empirical research articles, theoretical and conceptual articles allow you to play with concepts through deeper scholarly consideration with the goal of illuminating new possibilities, including theory building, as emphasized in the above quote from Jamie Callahan. Theoretical and conceptual articles also differ from empirical articles in how they look. The latter, as we noted in [chapter](#)

12, typically include an introduction, a literature review, sections on methods, findings, discussion, and implications, plus a conclusion. Theoretical and conceptual articles typically describe the method or approach guiding the writer's process, but otherwise do not follow a prescribed set of headings. They focus on exploring existing literature and established theories.

The argument of a theoretical or conceptual article is speculative, not empirical, hence you build your argument through noting connections, contradictions, gaps, complexities, or other patterns, putting ideas into dialogue with one another, highlighting previously un-noted phenomena. It is important to construct a logic that readers can follow: to move through a series of comprehensible steps that lead the reader to understand your conclusion, even if they might not agree with it. The argument you build in a theoretical or conceptual piece aims to provoke, deepen, or expand thinking in the abstract or hypothetical arena, not the concrete. Developing a logical argument takes practice. Ronald Barnett, acting as a critical friend for this book, agreed to share his framework, "[The Distinction between Thesis, Argument, and Argumentation](#)," as an online resource. We found this framework helpful and you might, too.

The distinction between theoretical and conceptual articles and literature reviews is not always clear (Callahan 2010). Freestanding literature reviews, as we argue in the next chapter, *present a systematic synthesis* of research. Theoretical and conceptual articles, on the other hand, *draw selectively* on literature that is relevant to the argument of the piece, and they deepen, expand, or provoke thinking about a particular concept or practice. In this chapter, we offer a flexible guide to the organization and composition of theoretical and conceptual articles, illustrated by a range of examples.

In Reflection 13.1, Kerri-Lee Krause ponders the experience of writing theoretical and conceptual articles.

Reflection 13.1**The experience of writing theoretical and conceptual articles**

Writing about higher education policy and strategic issues is a passion of mine. It is a process that enables me to reflect more deeply on issues that I encounter on a daily basis in my academic leadership role. Much of my writing has involved empirically based higher education research outputs, for example quantitative studies of the Australian first year student experience. However, as I developed further experience and expertise as a writer and a higher education leader, I found the recursive research, reflection, and writing process involved in composing theoretical and conceptual articles particularly liberating.

This genre of writing allows me to work through thorny theoretical and conceptual problems, to challenge myself to think about familiar concepts in new ways, and to invite readers to do likewise. The “wicked problem of quality” paper (Krause 2012) was prompted by my concern that the notion of “quality” in higher education is typically under-theorised and rarely problematised; yet, it is foundational to all that we do as educators, leaders, and policy makers. One of the important lessons I have learned is the fundamental importance of developing and communicating a robust theoretical framework to underpin one’s work. This practice goes some way towards negating the stereotypical view that educational research is somehow inferior to discipline-based research. I contend that writing about learning and teaching in higher education can and should be deemed as equally rigorous processes to those of conducting discipline-based research.

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Writing a Theoretical or Conceptual Paper for Publication

Drawing together existing theoretical and conceptual approaches before proposing new concepts and insights is vital to furthering learning and teaching conversations, whether you are writing in a refereed journal or a book chapter. It is not uncommon to explore particular theoretical and conceptual approaches in depth without utilizing data or testing hypotheses, though the development of ideas that will inform future empirical work is a common outcome. Perhaps most like literary analyses in the humanities, “[theoretical and] conceptual articles offer the exciting opportunity to productively disrupt the ongoing conversation or to change it completely through the creative analysis of existing works that shape something new” (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019, 37).

Theoretical and conceptual articles are described in various ways in different journals. For example:

International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education: “These papers will not be based on research but will develop hypotheses. The papers are likely to be discursive and will cover philosophical discussions and comparative studies of others’ work and thinking.” (*International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, “**Author Guidelines**”)

Journal of Counseling & Development: “Articles that provide new theoretical perspectives or integrate existing theoretical views, address innovative—new or adapted—procedures or techniques, discuss current professional issues or professional development (position papers), or offer well-reasoned reactions or responses to previously published articles.” (Watts 2011, 308)

Regardless of the outlet you choose, writing a theoretical or conceptual article requires a deep understanding of the relevant literature and hence can involve a long gestation period. It is easy, when exploring literature, to get lost in the detail, go off on tangents, and

diminish the strength of your argument. Therefore, theoretical and conceptual articles can be a challenging genre and one that authors, particularly those new to writing about learning and teaching, may find difficult to engage with. As Richard Watts (2011, 311), a writer in the field of counseling, suggests, “Authors often find it more difficult to develop conceptual articles than empirically based articles, which tend to have a more standard format.” Similarly, Paul Salomone (1993, 73), another writer in the field of counseling, argued earlier that “the conceptual article . . . is the most difficult to write because a creative leap beyond the mere association of similar ideas is required.” Despite—and sometimes because of—these challenges, writing theoretical and conceptual articles can be immensely satisfying (Our Perspectives 13.1).

Our Perspectives 13.1

What attracts you to writing theoretical and conceptual articles?

Kelly: The writing space to think and play instead of trying to prove something about learning and teaching is what draws me to theoretical and conceptual articles. Taking a deep dive into a topic to see how I understand it by drawing on the work of others is a fun intellectual process. The challenge is having time for preparing to write these pieces, and I find I rarely get it. This explains why I have limited experience with publishing in this genre, due to the depth of insight into the literature that is required (also dependent on time). When I see space in my schedule, I now hold that time for theoretical and conceptual articles because I get to read more on a topic, think deeply about it, and then share what I have learned. I enjoy this genre far more than empirical research articles at this stage in my writing life.

Alison: I appreciate the opportunity that theoretical and conceptual articles provide to bring ideas from different arenas of scholarship into dialogue. Like metaphors, which juxtapose two seemingly unrelated things, the conceptual pieces I have written draw on

disciplinary concepts outside of my primary field of scholarship and practice (education). I have used these theoretical and conceptual explorations to deepen my understanding of learning and teaching and to argue for particular ways of engaging in both. For instance, the concept of liminality from anthropology helped me and a student co-author to argue for learning and teaching as unfolding in suspended spaces that allow for role revision (Cook-Sather and Alter 2011), and the concept of translation from translation and literary studies let me and a student co-author argue for learning and teaching as literal and metaphorical processes of transformation (Cook-Sather and Abbot 2016).

Mick: I would not describe much of my writing as primarily theoretical or conceptual, and yet I am probably best known for two diagrams representing conceptual arguments that have been reproduced and cited more often than anything else I have written. Both diagrams attempted to summarize the main approaches identified in the literature. In one case, the diagram showed the different ways that students engage with research (Healey 2005; Healey and Jenkins 2009), and in the other, it portrayed the range of ways students may be involved in partnership with staff and other students in learning and teaching (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 2016). Readers' responses to these pieces taught me that if you can summarize your ideas visually, they have more impact than text alone.

Your perspective: What attracts or might attract you to writing theoretical and conceptual articles or chapters?

“Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Theoretical or Conceptual Article” outlines questions and offers examples to guide you in writing focused yet rich theoretical and conceptual articles that provoke new thought and debate within the learning and teaching discourse community. A version with just the questions, which you can use for planning your theoretical or conceptual article, is [available as an online resource](#).

Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Theoretical or Conceptual Article*

1. What is your overall aim and rationale for this article?

Clarify your aim and rationale. These help the reader understand what you are trying to achieve and provide justification for the study, as Kerri-Lee Krause clearly states in her exploration of quality in higher education:

This article explores the wicked problem of quality in higher education, arguing for a more robust theorising of the subject at national, institutional and local department level. The focus of the discussion rests on principles for theorising in more rigorous ways about the multidimensional issue of quality. (Krause 2012, 285)

2. What does your work contribute to the wider field of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) or higher education research?

It is critical to state clearly what you consider your contribution to be. This will help reviewers decide whether to recommend publication and readers to decide whether to continue reading.

The growing literature on undergraduate teaching and learning currently lacks an organising framework. This article sets out to provide one, distinguishing between hard pure, soft pure, hard applied and soft applied fields of study, and hence making it possible to highlight generally unremarked similarities and differences between the various research findings. (Neumann, Parry, and Becher 2002, 405)

3. What theories or concepts are you exploring in your article, and how do you define them for the purposes of your analysis?

Answering this question clarifies the subject matter of your conceptual or theoretical article.

The article outlines an “academic literacies” framework which can take account of the conflicting and contested nature of writing practices, and may therefore be more valuable for understanding student writing in today’s higher education than traditional models and approaches. (Lea and Street 1998, 157)

4. How was the analysis conducted?

Tell readers how you went about your analysis, as this will help them understand your argument.

Attempts to define SoTL flounder when faced with its diversity. In considering the confusion that can ensue, we see the problem to be one of focus, namely a focus on definition rather than on diversity. . . . In looking for the constitution of SoTL, we focused initially on the internal horizon of *disseminated* SoTL knowledge (i.e. published work). . . . Only when that analysis was felt to be complete did we consider the external horizon of contextual factors that have influence over the internal horizon. This is the theoretical framework for our analysis and result. (Booth and Woollacott 2018, 538–9)

5. Why, and to whom, do these theories or concepts matter in learning and teaching?

The answer to this question clarifies why your article may be important and to whom. As one of the leading philosophers of higher education states:

What is it to learn for an unknown future? It might be said that the future has always been unknown but our opening question surely takes on a new pedagogical challenge if not urgency in the contemporary age. Indeed, it could be said that our opening question has *never* been generally acknowledged to be a significant motivating curricular and pedagogical question in higher education. Be all this as it may, the question (What is it

to learn for an unknown future?) surely deserves more attention than it has so far received. After all, if the future is unknown, what kind of learning is appropriate *for it*? (Barnett 2004, 247)

6. How do scholars discuss and critique these theories or concepts?

Bring readers into previous conversations about the theories or concepts you address.

This article firstly reviews and critiques the four dominant research perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective, which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which clearly defines engagement as an individual psycho-social process; the socio-cultural perspective, which highlights the critical role of the socio-political context; and, finally, the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement. (Kahu 2013, 758)

7. What new insights or frameworks are you bringing to these theories or concepts?

Elaborating on the new insights that you bring to the conversation helps readers understand both your thinking and its contribution to, extension of, or branching out from the conversation.

In this article, we focus on questions that come into view when we look at educational development through the lenses of signature pedagogies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). We offer this as a thought experiment in which we consider if SoTL is a signature pedagogy of educational development, simultaneously enacting and revealing the practices, values, and assumptions that underpin the diverse work efforts of our field. (Felten and Chick 2018)

8. What are the implications of your analysis for researchers or practitioners?

Address the “So what?” question, as Randy Bass does in this classic SoTL article about “What’s the problem?”

Changing the status of the *problem* in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about. How might we make the problematization of teaching a matter of regular communal discourse? How might we think of teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated? (Bass 1999, 1)

9. What further research or actions are prompted by your analysis?

Identify where you think your argument goes next or how others might build on it.

Academic developers may advocate student–faculty partnership if they aspire to disrupt some of the neoliberal logics and practices in contemporary higher education, while being aware that it can still be re-appropriated by neoliberalism. (Wijaya Mulya 2018, 89)

**As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience. The questions are based on those in Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 37).*

Over to You

Writing theoretical and conceptual articles is a challenging, but potentially hugely rewarding, way of influencing conversations about learning and teaching in higher education. This genre allows you to explore and to learn and, in turn, to share nascent or deepened

understandings. Questions to ask about writing theoretical and conceptual articles include:

- What learning and teaching topics fascinate you and need, to your mind, deepening or reconceptualizing?
- Which topics intrigue, excite, disturb, concern, or worry you and therefore warrant addressing?
- Which of our Guiding Questions do you think you need to address to write your theoretical or conceptual article? What other questions are important for you to tackle?
- What outlets might be interested in publishing your theoretical or conceptual article?