

OE Global Conference 2023 – Abstract proposal for presentation
Track 4: Research and Open Education

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Possibilities and challenges of ‘Open Theory Building’ to address
technology-enabled organisational learning and improvement for
complex fragmented problems in HE and beyond

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This presentation will set the scene for a proposed path of OER innovation called ‘Open Theory Building’, developing from my recent interdisciplinary PhD based at the UK Open University (Boyd, 2022). The project has been accepted as one of the OER Innovation Case Studies for the EU ENCORE+ project.

The initial PhD was situated within a challenging and previously intractable learning design and delivery scenario in a Year 2 STEM module in the UK Open University, a dedicated distance learning HE context. The research both enacted and conceptualised an iterative technology-enabled action research process, integrating insights from the disparate and geographically separated practitioners involved. It combined insider action research (Coghlan, 2019) and Grounded Theory Method (Urquhart, 2013) to develop OU internal capabilities for *organisational learning*, defined as ‘a process of individual and shared thought and action’ (Rashman, Withers and Hartley, 2009, p.470).

An unfolding process approach understands the world as constantly evolving and ‘*becoming*’ rather than static or ‘*being*’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016). The unfolding Pragmatic action research process integrated insights, data and experience amongst remote participants to provide an enhanced and mutual understanding of teaching and learning design challenges, and to collaboratively design and evaluate intervention actions over three successive presentations of the module. A series of lasting and developmental impacts were achieved. Lessons from the project are currently being incorporated into ongoing module redesign work.

The new conceptual framework is entitled ULTIMATE: Using Learning Technology in Making Action-based Transformative Enhancements. ULTIMATE provides a framework for a structured and flexible collaborative action research process amongst geographically separated practitioners, connected by a learning technology infrastructure. The qualitative codes and categories within the framework can be rigorously verified and extended to other contexts, using the systematic procedures built into GTM. The intention is to support this activity by making ULTIMATE available as an OER, along with practical guidelines and the initial qualitative coding structure, so it may be understood and implemented by practitioners without specialist research methodology expertise.

A data sharing mechanism will be identified to support and disseminate ongoing projects and development of the framework. It could then underpin collaborative sharing of insights and improvement action amongst disparate and geographically separated practitioners in any complex fragmented problems. This could embrace Education, sustainability, and societal challenges.

References

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Rashman, L., Withers, E. and Hartley, J. (2009) 'Organizational learning and knowledge in public service organizations: A systematic review of the literature', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 11(4), pp. 463–494. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00257.x.

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Key Takeaways

The key takeaways from this presentation will be to gain insight into a hitherto unaddressed aspect of OER Innovation provisionally called 'Open Theory Building'. Attendees will learn about the conceptualisation of an open framework called 'ULTIMATE', and how they might contribute towards its ongoing development as non-specialists. ULTIMATE provides an unfolding collaborative, equitable and ethical action research mechanism using learning technology. It empowers disparate and geographically separated practitioners and stakeholders to share their experiences, mutually transform, and address complex fragmented problems or societal challenges. It has been initially used in the UK Open University to provide a series of developmental ongoing impacts within a challenging and previously intractable distance learning design and delivery scenario.