The Critical Theories We Need Now: a Perspective from the CLT Graduate Student Working Group

By: Rebecca Clark-Stallkamp & Kristin Herman & Paula Marcelle & Katherine Walters & Lili Yan & CLT Graduate Student Working Group.

Abstract:

Graduate students from the Culture, Learning, and Technology division recently hosted a webinar on critical theories and how they may be applied in learning design and research. This article presents an introduction to some of the challenges and opportunities in using critical perspectives in our work, and in our field, that emerged from the webinar discussions.

Article:

Recent publications by AECT members such as Young et al. (2020), Campbell (2015), Subramony (2018), Donaldson (2016), and Romero-Hall et al. (2018) demonstrate that our backgrounds (i.e., our positionality) impact the way we approach research and design. Specifically, positionality affects how we design, how we navigate our field, and how we access or are subsequently barred from participation. We are a small contingent of graduate students from the Culture, Learning, and Technology (CLT) division of AECT who came together in early 2021 to discuss our collective experiences engaging with critical perspectives in the field. Common to our experience was a hesitancy reflected in a range of reactions from reluctance (e.g. "You should choose a different thesis topic," or "How is that topic academically relevant or important?") to uncertainty about academic advisement and opportunity. Given our positionality, our experiences, and our current political and academic climates, we decided to organize a webinar as a conversation starter around the application of critical perspectives that our field needs, now.

Description of Webinar

We organized the webinar to reflect our various experiences and interests from our perspectives as a group of diverse female graduate students. Beginning with the idea that teaching and learning are cultural, historical, and political activities, we each selected theories

that critically engage with this assumption including: feminism, culturally-disruptive pedagogy, multimodality, critical whiteness, and intersectionality. Each 10-min presentation included an overview of the theory and related concepts including examples of application within the context of our field. Cognizant of the time constraints that limited in-depth engagement with these complex theories, we provided (1) a living resource document to all participants and (2) a 30-min self-selected breakout room discussion after the presentations.

The theories we selected challenge dominant, western paradigms that normalize privileged centers (e.g., whiteness, masculinity, able-bodiedness, etc.) which set the stage for meaningful critical discussion in the breakout rooms. These discussions included: the importance of continuously exploring our positionality and identifying cultural norms to navigate established sources of power indesign, the process of implementing critical approaches in daily design practice, and the effect of state bans in the US that restrict discussion of critical race theory.

Discussion Points

The design field cannot change if our design approaches, however critical, never move past the theoretical. Breakout discussions repeatedly brought forth ways the assumption of neutrality hinders implementation of critical perspectives. We would like to synthesize some of the ideas– in our mindsets, our design, and our field's contributions to society– that emerged.

Learning to Unlearn

As an essential first step in moving from the theoretical to the practical, we must reject neutrality. Individual awareness of power and privilege entails a constant learning process. It is important to create space to talk about tensions and awareness as we do this work. Wearenot always aware of cultural norms; therefore, reflexively embracing vulnerability and uncertainty facilitates identification of potential areas for growth. Bringing our positionality into design spaces exposes our vulnerability. While difficult, this is critical to explicitly identifying our preconceived notions and addressing their impact on design. Our designs, our design teams, and our design process all benefit from these critical reflections, which prevent a myopic approach where we fail to consider multiple perspectives. It remains challenging to navigate the power within a team. Creating a space of reflection allows us to practice articulating the question of how to identify and unlearn (Tiostanova & Mignolo, 2012) neutrality and blind acceptance of hegemonic cultural norms (San Pedro, 2018) with critical theories.

Shifting Approach to Design

A context-specific analysis is the next step on a path to action when considering opportunities for design. This analysis needs to include both the content and the audience. Content, that is to say information, is not neutral. We need to know what information does in a specific context instead of assuming that there is a universal understanding of what information is (Baaki & Tracey, 2019). If we acknowledge that information is context-specific, then we must consider the specific audience of use at all points of the design process– not just during an upfront needs analysis. Wherever possible, this analysis should be directly solicited from the users themselves, as opposed to imposing our own biased interpretations of how a design could be used. This approach would push back against the standardization of e-learning material across

districts in the US and instead consider specific learner needs. Ignoring the effects of culture and intersectionality risks alienating learners.

Responding to Legislation

Almost two decades ago, Thomas et al. (2002) were troubled by the "culturally neutral position" (p. 40) that so many in the field of instructional technology were willing to espouse. When faced with current legislation that aims to curtail the spread of the often misinterpreted "CRT", a culturally neutral position may seem attractive to many. Not taking a stance makes us complicit. It is incumbent upon those organizations and institutions that represent and rely on our field to protect individual designers by taking a non-neutral position on the intersection of culture, learning, and technology.

Conclusion: Small Steps Lead to Big Changes

Finding an entry point can be difficult when dealing with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but we must embrace the challenge. We can start to engage with these macro issues through micro-level approaches. For example, we can take the actionable steps brought forth from our discussion: learning to unlearn, shifting approach to design, and responding to legislation. As graduate students, we also want to promote more supportive and reflective spaces to discuss the tensions and challenges in this type of work. Protecting and supporting graduate students is critical– we are the future of the field and research. We move to embrace the difficulty of non-neutrality associated with the theories and research required to dismantle or unveil the biases in our field. We move with intention, first, through awareness and education.

If you are interested in joining our efforts, or presenting at a future webinar, please email us at CLTgraduategroup@gmail.com . Additionally, you may email us for an in-progress reference list of readings and resources. Last, this panel discussion will be a featured session at AECT 2021. Come join us as we discuss the theories we need now and embrace the difficult together!

References

Baaki, J., & Tracey, M. (2019). Weaving a localized context of use: What it means for instructional design. *Journal of Applied Instructional Design, 8*(1), 2–13.

Campbell, K. (2015). The feminist instructional designer: An autoethnography. In B. Hokanson, G. Clinton, & M. Tracey (Eds.), *The design of learning experience: Creating the future of educational technology* (pp. 231–249). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16504-2_16.

Donaldson, J. A. (2016). Women's voices in the field of educational technology: Our journeys. Springer International Publishing. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33452-3.

Romero-Hall, E., Aldemir, T., Colorado-Resa, J., Dickson-Deane, C., Watson, G. S., & Sadaf, A. (2018). Undisclosed stories of instructional design female scholars in academia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 71*,19–28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.09.004.

San Pedro, T. (2018). Abby as ally: An argument for culturally disruptive pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 55*(6), 11931232.

Subramony, D. P. (2018). Not in our journals– Digital media technologies and the LGBTQI community. *TechTrends, 62*(4), 354–363. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-018-0269-6.

Tiostanova, M. V., & Mignolo, W. (2012). *Learning to unlearn: Decolonial reflections from Eurasia and the Americas.* The Ohio State University Press.

Thomas, M., Mitchell, M., & Joseph, R. (2002). The third dimension of ADDIE: A cultural embrace. *Tech Trends, 46*,40–45.

Young, P. A., Serna, C., Peele-Eady, T., De La Vega, E., Charlton, L., & Casimir, M. (2020). Sojourners of truth: Six women's stories of triumph, tribulation, and teaching in academia. *Educational Studies, 56*(5), 537–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2020.