

## Getting lost in a layered labyrinth

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Paul Trowler (2019). *Accomplishing Change in Teaching and Learning Regimes: Higher Education and the Practice Sensibility*. Oxford University Press. 224 pp.

In Paul Trowler's book *Accomplishing Change in Teaching and Learning Regimes* the author wishes to develop the idea of Teaching and Learning Regimes (TLR) from a model to a more fully fledged theory. In the book, Trowler plays with the idea of developing a practical consciousness or awareness and leans on notions of practice sensibility and social practice theory. As with others who discuss social practice theory, Trowler has a conversation with, in alphabetical order, Giddens, Nicolini and Schatzi, among others. The reader is expected to be familiar with these theorists however, as Trowler offers little in the way of introduction or critical analysis of their work. Nicolini's book from 2012 offers an excellent introduction to social practice theory, if you are interested, and may be a good place to start.

As the book unfolds, Trowler presents the idea of TLR as it was originally conceptualised and presents eight original *moments* or critical components of a TLR. The eight *moments* are: **recurrent practices**, that is, the way practices are undertaken habitually; **tacit assumptions**, which are taken for granted practices and meanings that are taken for granted; **implicit theories of teaching and learning**, that is, how teaching and learning are conceptualised and subsequently practiced; **conventions of appropriateness**, that is, what constitutes normal or deviant behaviour in a context; **codes of signification**, which are socially constructed layers of meaning; **subjectivities in interaction**, that is, how academic identities may be adjusted to accommodate different practice contexts; **discursive repertoires**, that is, how language is employed to either enable or facilitate practices; and **power relations**, which are different patterns of power within a practice context. It is not clear if, or how, all the critical components of TLRs always coexist or whether this is a necessary condition for TLRs.

As the book continues, Trowler comments on how the original TLR idea has been understood, used and criticised in the literature. An interesting feature of how others have used TLR is the way in which they seem to cherry-pick from the TLR framework, choosing elements that stand out and harmonise with their own studies. Rarely, it seems, do people lean on or provide evidence for TLRs in a comprehensive and coherent manner. This way of picking and choosing from the TLR framework begs the question, is Trowler's idea of TLR a theory or a set of interesting ideas that are loosely connected? If we assume that a theory can be supported by data or by a vast body of research, then the more data that is presented to support the theory, the stronger that theory becomes. But what if Trowler and others only present elements of a TLR and never present a coherent body of knowledge to support the idea of a TLR? Is it really a theory then? It could be argued that TLR as a theory has both definitional and empirical shortcomings.

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The book introduces three new *moments* that Trowler argues are needed to form a more comprehensive understanding of TLRs: **materiality in interaction**, which is the significance of artefacts, such as the environment and physical layouts; **backstories in process**, that is, how historical and emergent properties form the basis for contemporary practices; and, finally, **regimes in interaction**, which are features of a practice context that interact with other TLRs. The final moment seems flawed as a critical component for defining the theory as it presupposes the existence of TLRs and cannot be said to be a meaningful way of explaining what they are. This appears to be a circular argument.

Chapter Three presents a number of ethnographic methods that researchers and practitioners could use as a way of exploring TLRs. Given the focus on situated practice, ethnography is presented as the most salient way to study TLRs. The downside of these methodological approaches is that they are time-consuming and often involve research methods that may not be readily accessible across academia. But perhaps this is a way of developing a communal approach to development and change, where the examination of TLRs would necessitate collaboration across disciplines. Chapter Four presents a few ideas on how the different *moments* may be understood in practice. Here, Trowler is reluctant to separate the moments as they are best understood as a coherent whole, but each of the moments are exemplified using different examples. The examples themselves are engaging, but, inevitably, this is a weakness, and somewhere in the book the author should have offered data or examples to strengthen the idea that all 11 moments of a TLR need to be understood as one coherent whole to really provide support for the idea that TLR is a robust theory and not just a set of interesting ideas.

The different moments may merely be used as a useful and analytical heuristic to understand situated practice. In fact, taken as different elements or dimensions of a social practice theory this makes sense. I can see how one might want to choose to focus on *discursive repertoires* or *codes of signification* for a meaningful study of higher education practice, but I fail to see how these 11 critical components or moments could be studied together in a naturalistic setting with many different stakeholders. It seems to be an insurmountable task. Chapter Five discusses a number of conceptual issues focused on the extent to which disciplines in academia determine the teaching and learning practices. It is an interesting chapter in itself, but I find the author gets lost in broad generalisations and potential straw-man arguments. Does anyone involved in academic development hold true the position of strong epistemological essentialism with a view on the impact of the disciplines? Perhaps Trowler means that such positions are to be found in institutional settings? TLR could offer an analytical lens to facilitate the work of changing practices, and one could use the moments of a TLR to consider the practice of change, but as a coherent theory I find it wanting.

Chapter Six describes how change might be accomplished in TLR. The chapter presents alternative ways to bring about change, such as nudging theory or individualism. It is not clear how they are alternative theories of change as opposed to, let's say, elements of a broader theory. It is not clear why nudging theory or individualism may not play a part in TLR. Nevertheless, the author argues that they are inadequate. Subsequently, some examples of change initiatives are presented and discussed. How TLRs are changed is not discussed per se, but the focus has fully shifted to how the practice sensibility is the best way to bring about change. At this stage, the reader is made aware of the shift away from defining and justifying TLRs to the emergence of the practice sensitivity. It is perhaps somewhat odd that social practice theory is so prominent here, as the reader might still be struggling to understand TLR and adding another theoretical approach does not help. It remains unclear why social practice theory is needed, or to which

extent TLR is conceptually related to social practice theory. Is one a grand theory while the other is a middle range theory? I find it more likely that the unit of analysis is subject to social practice theory, and some of the key elements in TLR may be used to understand practices and their origins.

As I put the book down, I found myself asking an uncomfortable question: for whom is this book written? Trowler's book is laden with heavy and metaphorical images that make for a difficult reading experience for those not well acquainted with TLR's *backstory*, and my concern is that many academics will not find answers in the book on how to change and develop their practice. This is illustrated in the following section: '*A teaching and learning regime (TLR) consists of a family of practices informed by a set of moments specific to each regime. These moments and the practices they constitute represent local instantiations, applied to teaching and learning, of proto-practice reservoirs which "feed" them. Within a TLR there will be tension both between and within the different moments because the streams from the reservoirs are drawn in an agentic and dynamic way. Contest as well as some elements of consensus characterize TLRs.*' The methods presented in the book also require specialist knowledge, which may not be readily available to many academics and administrators and, in many settings, universities are unlikely to pay for such exploratory reflection on current practices. As such, the book is less about accomplishing change and more about the emergence of TLRs. I would have eagerly read a book about how to bring about change in higher education. If anything, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has turned many ideas about change in higher education on their head, albeit for now. The idea that *brick and mortar* universities would be providing education solely using digital tools was almost unthinkable a little more than a year ago. This form of radical change is unprecedented and we have not seen the full impact of the sudden and dramatic change in higher education practices.

As such, it would be unfair to judge the book in hindsight of the coronavirus pandemic. But a in book with a focus on social practice and the importance of situated practice, that claims to have keys to accomplish change, should perhaps offer more tangible tools and practice-oriented advice.