**The Learning Framework:**

**Analysis of the theoretical basis of the framework**

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**Introduction**

The Leading Learning seminar held at the Institute of Education on February 29th, 2012, had as its stated purpose, the discussion and development of ideas and issues pertaining to the role of leaders and senior managers in relation to the improvement of teaching and learning in further education. Several key themes arose out the seminar that stand behind the analysis of the theoretical basis of the Learning Framework within this document (IfL, 2012, p.5):

1. The further education and skills system requires a cultural shift to enable it to improve further the quality of teaching and learning.
2. Leaders in further education should make the leading of learning for staff and learners their top strategic priority.
3. Good teaching is born of innovation, and this involves a degree of experimentation that is unlikely to happen if an organization is highly controlling or risk‐averse.
4. Expansive workplaces encourage teachers and trainers to work creatively as teams taking responsibility for their own professional development, and they facilitate and reward innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning.
5. Leadership support for research‐informed professional practice and development provides a strong basis for the type of step‐change required in teaching and learning.

The Learning Framework, although developed prior to the Leading Learning Seminar, draws on and supports many of the principles and pedagogic foundations embedded in the seminar’s themes, and aims to develop a coherent model of developmental skill and knowledge, as well as a shared language, that will scaffold the progression to excellent teaching and learning in colleges of further education.

The Learning Framework is based on two precepts – first, the holistic approach to improving teaching and learning that covers all college activity, from management, to teacher development to learner engagement; and second, the idea that every learner has the right to the best possible education and training. The Learning Framework’s vision is that through a multifaceted approach to teaching and learning, colleges of further education will be able to facilitate and maintain this ‘best possible’ and thus make the vision a reality.

This Evaluation examines a particular strand of the Learning Framework, the Theoretical Basis of the framework. The report’s a three strand approach, comprising literature review and analysis of the current research, data analysis and construction of a Learning Framework ecological map, and finally, a theory evaluation process. The report begins by presenting a literature review of the main elements that impact upon the theoretical understanding of the Learning Framework, giving an exposition of the literature in three fields: The Learning and Teaching Contexts of Further Education, Issues of Quality in Learning & Teaching in Further Education, and finally, The Nature of Learning Frameworks. The evaluation then sets out to examine and evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of the Framework from the evidence gathered (interviews and documentary material). As a result of this, it constructs Learning Framework Theory according to its practice. This practice model is then compared with the theoretical basis of the ‘ideal’ model, in order to assess the key theoretical concepts on which the Learning Framework proceeds as an intervention. The ‘practice’ Learning Framework is then assessed against standard ‘theory evaluation’ concepts, such as operationality, generativity etc, and as a result, the authority of the practice model is thus able to be ascertained, as the degree to which it addresses the theory evaluation concepts. As a result of this process, an ecological map of the Learning Framework Theory is constructed, where dissonances and discontinuities in interpretation and application are exposed, as a result of contextual factors at college level.

This evaluation addresses the following questions in relation to the Learning Framework:

1. What is the basis of the contextual literature for understanding the nature and purpose of learning frameworks?
2. What are the theoretical and practical bases of the Learning Framework as a model for improving teaching and learning?
3. Is the theory underpinning ‘The Learning Framework’ good theory?

**1. What is the basis of the contextual literature for understanding the nature and purpose of learning frameworks?**

**1.1 The Learning and Teaching Contexts of Further Education**

Learning and teaching are complex enough as it is, but in environments of shifting political, economic and social change, promotion and endorsement of them as key strategic priorities presents formidable challenges to any institution. Nevertheless, understanding the nature and pathways of learning begin with an understanding of how learning proceeds. And although learning is complex and multilayered and individual learner progress takes place within the contexts of relationships, cultures and learning communities, the trajectory of learning has anchors that transcend all these factors, and pave the way for successful learning experiences and achievements. Furthermore, the impact of particular teachers can outweigh or enhance particular approaches to teaching and learning that may be pursued at individual institutions or within particular circumstances.

Learning within further education has a superfluity of complex learner contexts and purposes. As an educational sector, it is almost without parallel in terms of its breadth of provision and its diversity of curriculum. According to Howard (2009), colleges of further education are by their very nature inclusive: every year, they educate over three million individuals and by every measure, contribute significantly to social and economic inclusion. For example, the majority of ESOL learners study in colleges; learners of minority ethnicity are much more likely to attend college; and over 90% of adults and learners accessing skills for life do so at colleges (ONS, 2014a). Furthermore, further education colleges are very responsive to the local community: many of its higher education learners are part time, and study within a further education environment due to the lack of part time provision at higher education institutions; in addition, FE colleges also contribute to the local community, providing a majority of training and qualifications (ONS, 2014b). In short, FE colleges offer an arguably bewildering array of programmes, levels and purposes that aim to provide education along two explicit curricula: from vocational to academic and from personal to professional, and everything in between.

However, this diversity offers an important insight into why there have been claims over the last decade that some further education colleges are letting their learners underperform (Foster, 2005; Laurence, 2008; NFER, 2014) and there have been assertions that the ‘pedagogic culture of teachers and trainers is often at odds with the “cold business logic” of the leaders and senior managers running organizations delivering FE and training’ (IfL, 2012, p.12). Despite this, in 2013-14, 73% of colleges at their last Ofsted inspections were judged to be good or outstanding (AoC, 2014). The participation profile of the further education sector as a whole has been diversifying since incorporation in 1993 (AoC, 2014) and various governmental policies and funding regimes have required colleges to respond with ambitious educational and curriculum strategies that both equip students with high level knowledge and skill and somehow facilitate the highest levels of learning and achievement in the most challenging and complex of learner circumstances (LSIS/NUS, 2012; TLRP, 2008; Wolf, 2011).

It is within this landscape that there exist several paradoxes however: much literature that speaks of a lack of aspiration of learners and for learners does so in relation to particular pedagogies adopted in colleges of further education and the necessity for a culture shift amongst practitioners and leadership in order to re-conceptualize and re-construct the learning process for all learners (TLRP, 2008). Standing behind these arguments are moral and economic imperatives that such learners deserve better since they are already somehow marginalized. Certainly the research basis of ‘what works’ in environments of inclusivity and diversity such as is the case with further education, often exposes pedagogic assumptions resting on beliefs about the social situatedness of learning (Jephcote et al, 2006) that are frequently interpreted as a unique, but necessary predicates of achievement in such inclusive and diverse contexts.

Literature on inclusive and high quality teaching and learning overlaps with such pedagogies however, and argues that the basis of excellence in teaching and learning exists at several levels concurrently: disciplinarily, dispositionally, relationally, and contingently (Baumert et al, 2010; Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Rice, 2003) and that such teaching and learning has a very significant impact on the achievement of all pupils and students (Sutton Trust, 2011). Basing specific approaches on particular learner populations in the absence of research literature and well articulated and theorized pedagogies is damaging both to institutions and the learners whom they serve (Chubbuck, 2004; Jephcote et al. 2006; TLRP, 2008; Tackey, Barnes, & Khambaita, 2011). As such, it is not the participatory profile of the learners that demands such high quality teaching and learning, but the very fact that all learners deserve the best possible education. It is in such a context that many learning interventions have been introduced into further education over the last two decades, with varying degrees of success. The Learning Framework is one such very recent intervention.

**1.2 Issues of Quality in Learning & Teaching in Further Education**

Quality matters and issues in learning and teaching are of course, complex and contextually-related. However, within this, there are overarching principles that govern the establishment and sustainability of high quality provision for all learners within further education. Based on literature, reports and research findings, these appear to be:

1. Leaders in further education should make the leading of learning for staff and learners the highest strategic priority.
2. Knowledgeable, responsive and responsible further education professionals are essential in the furtherance of learning and teaching.
3. Excellent teaching involves critical reflection, innovation and experimentation but this is only possible where organizations adopt a whole college approach to innovation and change.

However, there are two aspects of quality teaching and learning in further education that need to be elucidated before understanding the place of the Learning Framework within teaching and learning contexts, and they are the nature of what counts as quality in relation to statutory matters such as inspections and data collection, and colleges’ responses to such quality matters.

According to Foster (2005) the improvement of teaching and learning in further education at the beginning of the 21st century was a priority area, on the basis that ‘High quality teaching and learning has a major impact on the quality of the learner’s experience and on learner outcomes’ (p.25). Foster also identified three key elements to improve teaching and learning, namely the development of world class teaching, training in coaching skills for ‘subject champions’ and the formation of a subject coaching network to share good practice. Significantly, the impact of effective and purposeful leadership was not identified as a major antecedent to high quality teaching, but regarded as a separate, parallel issue, as a general ‘quality imperative’. Successive reports and inspection papers have established however, that almost a decade later, such a dichotomous approach to ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘quality’ is not only complicated and even possibly confounded by the research literature, but is frequently antithetical to the sustainable development of very high quality teaching and learning. Before examining such evidence, we need to ask what, related to teachers and their teaching, impacts most on learner achievement, and thus, what should good quality teaching and learning ‘look’ like, both generally, and in further education specifically?

There is agreement in much international literature that good teaching rests on a relatively small number of attributes that are quantifiable, at least in terms of how the literature privileges particular methodological approaches. Two of the most significant attributes are subject and pedagogical content knowledge, or knowing what to teach and how to teach it (Harris & Sass, 2009; Tyler et al, 2010). There is great agreement in the research that these two factors contribute to enhanced outcomes for learners, but that they are sustaining outcomes, that is, they make a significant impact on learner progress as a whole, and that there is evidence that the enhancement impacts on learner behaviours, such as motivation and self-regulation, especially if the pedagogical content element contains particular approaches and strategies, such as social learning and peer involvement, self-regulation and autonomy building, and active engagement in learning environments (Rockoff & Speroni, 2010).

There are however, other variables that appear with great frequency in the research, but in other methodological paradigms, most notably narrative, interpretive phenomenological and biographical studies. These studies expose myriad other factors of effective teaching to be equally significant, but more elusive in terms of their significance and impact, due to their inherent conceptual and structural difficulties. Such factors include caring teaching, culturally responsive teaching, and more general affective approaches to learning, encompassing efficacy, esteem and empathy. However, there is a scarce research base in these areas that models teacher practice with learning impact, and although meta studies of teaching impact appear to show that such teacher behaviours exert great influence over pedagogic practices and learning frameworks adopted within educational institutions, others have criticized some meta studies that aim to demonstrate ‘what works’ in relation to effectiveness and impact, both for their lack of acknowledgment of methodological omission, and their conflation of pedagogical variables in exposition of approach (Cornelius-White, 2007). It is within this context that the articulation of high quality teaching and learning therefore appears as intensely problematic, if no less than critically important. Aside from the previous discussion, this can be seen through the following trajectory on the improvement of teaching and learning in further education.

In 2006, Ofsted, after assessing the ITT of further education teachers, stated that:

Senior college managers give insufficient attention to the quality of the initial training at the institutions they manage. They rarely make the connection that improving the quality of ITT will improve the overall standards of teaching and learning (Ofsted, 2006, p.4). But successive inspections, development work by individual colleges, LSIS, and the new Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training, and the TLRP, arguably led to improvements, for example, according to Howard (2009):

*Colleges are improving the quality of teaching and learning year on year according to Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted inspection reports. When the FEFC inspection regime started in the early 1990s, bringing a renewed focus on curriculum, teaching, learning and achievement, the quality was at best variable. Now, the number of colleges seen to be poor overall is small and shrinking.* (p.25)

However, endorsement of improvements in teaching and learning has been variable and in 2012, Ofsted produced a report summary entitled ‘How Colleges Improve’, in which it was stated that:

*The reputation of the outstanding and improving colleges rested not only on inclusivity with a strong sense of belonging and respect – among staff, learners, stakeholders and the community – but also on the fact that their learners were successful. They benefited from effective teaching, learning and assessment, and a curriculum that was matched well to their needs and interests, as well as to those of employers and the community.* (2012, p.2)

On contrast, according to this report, the poorest colleges were characterized by lack of direction and urgency from leadership, and teaching and learning that was ineffective, and focused on process and information rather than people and the significance of individual outcomes.

The growth of the significance of research together with relentless market pressures and increasingly global movements that expose often disparate meanings of excellence and quality have increasingly moved the focus of college activity toward learning activity and outcomes. And although the underpinning motivation is not necessarily morally or humanistically driven, there is no doubt that a concatenation of powerful individual factors have paved the way for a re-examination of what is the most fundamental activity within all educational institutions – learning.

**1.3 The Nature of Learning Frameworks**

Learning frameworks are ubiquitous in educational contexts. The inherent complexity and uncertainty of learning, learners, teachers, classrooms and educational institutions lend themselves to seeking some kind of order and structure. Learning frameworks are maps that guide and illuminate our actions as educators, and provide a degree of sense-making to decisions and their consequences, without which learning environments would probably be haphazard at best and chaotic at worst. However, learning frameworks are not universal documents, having particular philosophical emphases, or being underpinned by specific teaching and learning principles.

As such, learning frameworks reflect a broad spectrum of approaches, and standing behind these lay traditions and philosophies that reflect cultures and beliefs about what learning is, what it is for, and what learners are, think and do. Many learning frameworks have emphases on socio-pedagogical practices, built on beliefs that teaching and learning are largely social processes. Other learning frameworks reflect philosophies of difference and diversity in learners, and are thus based on inclusive traditions. Others are based on the primacy of knowledge and so structure pedagogic processes around continua of constructivism and transmission. The most influential (and thus common) learning frameworks are shown below in Figure 1. The theoretical view or pedagogical tradition is typologized according to the model of learning design implications of theoretical strands outlined by Mayes & de Freitas (2005):

**Figure 1. Common Learning Frameworks**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Learning framework** | **Theoretical view and/or pedagogical tradition** |
| Bloom’s taxonomy | Associative |
| Concept mapping | Cognitive |
| Deep and surface learning | Cognitive |
| Emotional intelligence | Situative |
| Cooperative learning | Situative |
| Thinking skills | Associative |
| Problem-based learning | Cognitive |
| Learning styles | Attributional |
| Multiple intelligences | Attributional |
| Situated learning/communities of practice | Situative |

As significant though, are the reasons why such disparate learning frameworks exist: these too, reflect ways of working and thinking about learners. Some learning frameworks are written and adopted in order to adapt to changing social and cultural patterns of learning and studying; others are designed to facilitate particular economic and work-related needs and yet others are related to the emergence of particular research bases and the rise of preferred pedagogical strategies. Finally, learning frameworks may have existed for many years and become institutionalized structures with little ongoing critical reflection as to their purpose or efficacy. In short, learning frameworks range from being brief documents to acting as extensive guides to action, as consequently, require critical examination as to their intent.

The TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme), the UK’s largest ever initiative in education research, inquired into learning frameworks and the contexts in which further education colleges operated, and through a series of funded initiatives, found that the diversity and inclusiveness of further education acted in dynamic tension with many of the education and learning frameworks adopted in colleges nationwide. Diamond (2008) suggested for example, that two strengths of further education were its resilience and responsiveness. These qualities in turn rested upon the uniquely relational approaches taken by many staff to create the conditions in which institutions could respond to rapidly changing economic and social contexts, both hallmarks of further education provision. However, such responsiveness and flexibility has weaknesses as well as strengths, and research has recognized that highly situated and personalized approaches of teachers to their learners, however effective with some students, and however powerful with many students, also need to be opened to scrutiny in ways that transcend relational accommodation toward more ambitious interpretations of educational achievement (Struyven et al, 2010). In other words, acknowledgment that are general principles of effective teaching and learning lies in parallel with enhancing the very real strengths of the teachers in the unique further education context.

Learning framework theory, although difficult to define, sits at the heart of teaching and learning quality, since it overlaps with and complicates the very thing that it exists to uncomplicated, namely teaching and learning. Adoption of various learning frameworks over time has, by their implicit endorsement, purported to prioritize learner engagement whilst simultaneously undermining the individuality of practitioners, both practically and methodologically (Lawson, 2011). And in turn, according to O’Leary (2012), promotion of individual pedagogic approaches, has often sidestepped research evidence that questions particular practices and normalized others that are more performative than developmental. Such innovations as Learning Styles, Thinking Skills and others have demonstrated the difficulties and defeats of properly balancing the fundamental necessity of teacher learning with the active engagement of all learners.

Frost (2010) asserts that there is a complex cultural movement that is inherent in shifting personalized and localized knowledge and practices towards a more open and scrutinized model of practice, and its rests jointly on an acknowledgement of reflexivity and reflective innovation: the former in that further education tutors should themselves learn continuously and interrogate their own involvement and responsibility in the outcomes of learners, and the latter in that any change in practice should originate jointly in inquiring into their own and others’ research as to its significance for any particular context. In sum, a promotion of individual and social processes and outcomes, as well as the active engagement of the learner necessitates change at all institutional levels – a focus on individual teacher learning, a recognition of the significance of the widest institutional meaning of learner involvement, and a structural support for practices and processes that prioritize the first two factors.

**2. What are the theoretical and practical bases of the Learning Framework as a model for improving teaching and learning?**

In this section, interview questions and participant responses are used as focus points to answer the research question ‘What are the theoretical and practical bases of the Learning Framework as a model for improving teaching and learning?’ Interviews with 8 practitioners in further education colleges were conducted, the interviews ranging in length from 40 minutes to two and half hours. All practitioners were currently in further education, but in a variety of positions, from principal, to vice principal, learning and teaching development managers, regional teaching and learning coordinators and professional consultants.

**2.1 What is the Learning Framework?**

The Learning Framework is a guide to support and improve learning and teaching and pedagogical development in colleges of further education in England. Its original intention was to serve as a living document, a guide rather than a prescription, that would continue to evolve as further education professionals at all levels, practitioners, coaches, managers, principalship teams, working in diverse and divergent contexts, would use it over time. According to the evidence developed through this evaluation, the Learning Framework complements and re-focuses, rather than replaces, specific pedagogical and development approaches, and other multifaceted interventions and programmes that currently in place in further education colleges in England. In addition, the Learning Framework provides a map for colleges and provisions that do not have an explicit or consistent pedagogical and learning developmental approach.

According to P1, and P5, a vice principal and principal respectively, the Learning Framework features a model of coherent developmental skills and knowledge, and articulates a shared vocabulary that ultimately fosters a purposeful conversation about learning and teaching that supports colleges, practitioners and ultimately the learners, as they work together to strive for excellence in further education settings. Central to the Learning Framework is therefore the creation of a community of ‘expert’ practitioners who posses that expertise, those qualities and skills to support the improvement of practitioners’ teaching and learning practice. Furthermore, according to P1, the training is FE specific and predictive, in that if followed, then skills will follow and improvements in teaching and learning quality will occur.

The Learning Framework was first designed, trialled and implemented five years ago at City of Sunderland College, under the principalship of Angela O’Donohue, and the Directorship of Learning and Teaching, Graeme Blench. At the time of its introduction, it was termed ‘The Learning Framework Model’ and focused on two parallel concerns: the development of effective classroom practice and the provision of support for those practitioners that were judged to lack the requisite skills (The Learning Consortium, 2014). Since that time, the Learning Framework has evolved, as it has been replicated in other colleges, and adapted to meet the cultural contexts of each. There are currently several whole organizational approaches to improving teaching and learning, and they are all based on the fundamental theoretical principles that make up ‘The Learning Framework’, its current explicitly articulated definition being ‘a peer-led coaching approach based on a 5-stage learning cycle with the fundamental aim of improving teaching and learning’.

**2.2 How is the Learning Framework conceptually conceived in practice?**

Diagrammatically, according to interviewee P1, the Learning Framework operates on the concepts of ‘Dialogue’, ‘Vocabulary’, ‘Culture’, the culture providing the background situatedness of each college’s needs and ideals about the nature of desired improvements in teaching and learning, whilst ‘dialogue’ refers to an individual’s growth in terms of their own teaching and learning understanding, as well as the relationship with the coach. ‘Vocabulary’ too has dual meanings in P1’s explanation in that it refers to an articulation of what is possible about how teaching and learning may change at institutional level, as well as the language that facilitates a productive discussion about quality, at all levels. Furthermore, within the Learning Framework, specifically within the Action and Coaching domain, sits the Learning Cycle. This is a construct centred upon the CSPARR model of teaching and learning improvement:

**C – connect**

**S – share**

**P – present**

**A – apply**

**R – recall**

**R – review**

As such, the Learning Framework is predicated explicitly upon some of the major learning frameworks as outlined previously, yet at the same time, situating these within a cultural matrix, yet giving more responsibility for teacher and learner improvement in a dialogic mode, that is strategically divorced from the organizational structures of appraisal and monitoring.

In this way, it was the original intention of the Learning Framework to utilize a kind of pedagogical superposition, whereby reinforcement of particular pedagogic theory, namely socio-cultural principles, in order to improve teaching and learning, was designed to facilitate conversations ‘around learning’ that were intended to be characterized by ‘constructivity’ rather than ‘ accountability’ - the Quality assurance approach had to be congruent with the activities, it has to reflect the constructs: *“The Learning Walk is a ‘open’ model of observation, designed to generate a conversation about what is seen, rather than to judge per se”* (P1)

P2, a regional learning and development manager, reiterated the notion that the Learning Framework was not intended to be a judgmental model, rather to shift the discourse about learning and teaching: *“Managers are learner leaders rather than managers”,* a view supported by a college principal, P7:

*“The Learning Framework, and the Learning Cycle, are about leading learning, how they are lead and expressed by management and then transferred to all teachers so that there are frameworks for things such as lesson planning etc. It is important though that there are not stock answers for all colleges, no, colleges ask themselves, what does learning look like? What should learning look like? What do we want learning to look like?”*

P3, a head of teaching and learning development, and P6, a regional director of a centre for excellence in teacher training, repeated this notion, saying that the Learning Framework was, *“a whole college focused approach on the learner, a holistic approach that focused on the lesson, where everything happened.”*

*“It is an organizational quality improvement tool that focuses on Learning and teaching and the improvement of students’ learning”* (P6)

In addition, P1 emphasized the dialogic and conversational elements of the model:

*“The aim of the Learning Framework is to generate dialogue in as many ways as possible to demonstrate a teacher’s understanding of learning, and a manager’s understanding of exactly what is happening in the classrooms. This is why we have not graded in the observations. This immediately sets up an adversarial pattern of blame and misunderstanding. This (Learning Framework) is really a form of nudge psychology”*

P1 went on to say*, “The first stage, therefore, is an individual issue. The second stage is a team issue and the third stage is a cultural issue.”*

P2, P8, a head of professional development, and P4 echoed the cultural nature of improvements in learning and teaching: *“The purpose of the Learning Framework is to re-focus providers in terms of learning. It is a useful model to inform the way that learning sessions are organized with the potential to improve learning and the learner experience”.* (P2)

*“If the Learning Framework does anything useful it is to make it clear that learning is a matter of leadership and in terms of replicating that elsewhere, then it is a matter of critical leadership, where lots of different ideas are actively discussing and debating what is happening.”* (P4)

But P1 was careful to stress that the model was not zealous in its adoption. However, his experience of it was that once colleges and staff had used elements of it, their response was invariably *“Why wouldn’t you use this?”* Related to this was the fact that for him, the strength of the Learning Framework was its responsiveness and flexibility: *“the model starts to hybridize since it is heavily contextualized to each college”.*

P6 offset these claims to diversity and contextual flexibility however, by arguing that:

*“The Hawthorne effect comes into play here of course…any model, even a flawed model, one that is implemented with passion and flair, will show impact.”*

P1 also stressed that such ideas were critical to the success of the Learning Framework, since they were underpinned by research that used video as reflective tools, in such a way that ‘captured’ re-framing and conversations in action. P1 was also emphatic in saying that no activities in CSPARR or the Learning Framework as a whole were developed as a result of individual whim or preference: *“All the activities are derived from Marzano’s work with practices showing the highest effect sizes”.*

Significantly, P3 emphasized the ‘capture’ notion of the Learning Framework, not through necessarily using video, but by placing the idea of heavily located learning conversations centre stage in the exploration of a better language for what counted as important learning outcomes. P3 said for example: *“The critical thing about the Learning Framework is that gives power to the idea of glass windows, literally looking into people’s classrooms, a very basic but fundamental thing about seeing what is happening. There are two types of outcomes – visible outcomes, or scores I suppose, and ones that are invisible, but really the key ones, without which you wouldn’t get the others, such as retention, attendance, happiness. The Learning Framework gives authority to begin to really look to see if students are disengaged or engaged.”*

P3 likened this process to seeing through new eyes, and indeed, quoted Brookfield’s lenses as the theoretical basis for her pedagogic approach, the Learning Framework simply being an explicit endorsement of that model.

**2.3 What is the theoretical basis for the Learning Framework?**

The participants named several theorists and theories whom they felt were central to the Learning Framework and the Learning Cycle. P1 for example, asserted, *“Hattie’s work showed that effect sizes were important, you know, we had to know whether effect sizes mattered. Geoff Petty’s work on evidence-based practice – very under-rated, but critical. This had to inform our work. Actually, it’s evidence-informed practice that is key, rather than evidence-based practice. We wanted to get away from the punitive and imposed model of teacher improvement. Marzano’s work is fundamental here - intuition and micro-judgments, cultural knowledge and tacit and implicit judgments, they are what individuals can do and what is possible as a teacher, rather than what teachers should do, or what is regarded as desirable by others and therefore what we should all do But there is a very strong evidence base to all this.”*

P6 noted the multiplicity of theory, as it appeared to characterize the Learning Framework:

*“The Learning Cycle element is a version of a whole host of experiential cycles, action cycles, audit cycles, including Denning’s improvement cycle, Kolb, Honey & Mumford…it’s a ‘complicating’ vision of learning that has some core ideas, but is based on evidence that I haven’t personally seen.”*

P8, a head of professional development in a further education college, presented a view of the theory of the Learning Framework that was held by a few other participants and related to the nature of teaching and learning theory and whom it belonged to within individuals and colleges:

*“There was a view that it was only teacher educators who could access the theory and therefore improve teaching and learning. I think the Learning Framework has overturned that idea by this thing around a conversation, learning as a dialogue. Improvement belongs to everyone, not just a few people and opening up the theory has facilitated this.”*

Similarly, P4 suggested that, *“When any model has impact it’s because it is living, a critical mass of activity and thinking, just as good teaching practice is normally, with or without the Learning Framework.”*

A college principal, P5, agreed with this, but reiterated the transferability of theory did not necessarily imply outcomes in the areas where theories had claimed the greatest effect size:

*“It’s important to note that the Learning Framework is predictive, but in the sense that following what is basic learning development theory in schools, colleges, etc, works, because it is descriptive. It is really a core model, a minimum standard that if followed, not blindly, not slavishly, but engaging with it, then classroom practice improves. It observes what is happening and emphasizes what works, paying attention to what is contextual, that’s why the Learning Framework works in other colleges”.*

In terms of the distinct elements of the Learning Framework, theory was not always directly applicable, either because of cultural constraints, or simply because it was scarce. P1 for example stated*, “There is a paucity of theory for coaching. Many theorists, de Sa, Boyatzis, Dweck, Attribution Theory, Locus of Control Theory, all these have useful elements, but none jump out and present themselves as a self-contained theory of coaching.”*

P5 supported the conceptual and practical significance of the coach role, suggesting that there was a theory-practice gap between what such coaches did and how they were perceived and that if anything, presenting a theoretical justification of this was central to the success of the Learning Framework.

P1 viewed the Learning Framework as a shared framework that integrated theory where it was appropriate and where there was a rigorous evidence base that could support its claims. Other participants however, felt that at the heart of the Learning Framework were recognizable theories and theorists that had attained tradition status because they worked in an action-research capacity. For example, P2 said: *“The Learning Framework is reminiscent of Kolb’s cycle. It doesn’t necessarily seem to be particularly new or innovative, but is a reminder of what is important in learning…it gives you space to think”.*

P3 supported this idea strongly, suggesting that there were several theorists and theories who were clearly at the heart of the Learning Framework, but that seeking to construct a ‘new’ theoretical paradigm was possibly confusing or even counter-productive, a perspective echoed by P4, an independent learning consultant, and P6, a senior leader in teaching and learning:

*“I’m not overwhelmed with the buzz words and the sound bites…but the actual deeper practices based on well established theory are the ones that resonate anyway…Hattie, the traits of expert teachers, Marzano, Paul Martinez’s 9000 voices, very very powerful work…it seems actually intuitive, all of it stacks up and seems to me to be about personal cognition, making that leap between you as a teacher and what is happening in the learner’s head…their own journey…me helping them to change their world.”* (P3)

*“The Learning Framework is actually the application of Bloom’s Taxonomy…it has taken something and made it fit…reinvented the wheel…rebadged the learning and tried to make something that is quite fundamental, more theoretical than it really is.”* (P4)

P6 echoed this, asserting that the Learning Framework made use of:

*“Some low level activities that everyone can do and these will maintain individuals at a certain level of effectiveness…this is not to say that this is undesirable…cognitive dissonance may mean that once behaviours have changed, beliefs will follow…but that is a slow process and levels of improvement may not be easily programmed or understood, certainly not attributable wholly to a single framework.”*

Participant P6 suggested that the different theoretical strands reflected the diverse cultures and contexts in which further education operated, and as such, *“the Learning Framework appeared to be compartmentalizing beliefs about teachers. As such, it didn’t seem to be a very responsive model, or possibly to address the nuances in teacher behaviour and beliefs.”*

Another very important theoretical standpoint of the Learning Framework was the concept of ‘resilience’, based on the work of Carol Dweck. But P1 interpreted this research in two ways, that corresponded with the ‘Individual’ and ’Environment’ domains. In relation to the ‘Individual’, P1 stated:

*“Teachers need to be aware that their stated outcomes for students need to be congruent with the cultural basis of their prior experiences, and their hoped-for expectations, even though they probably haven’t articulated them in that way. So for example, ‘overnurture’, a real Dweck theory, that by us doing it for them, entity vs. incremental theory, their effort needs to be less and they need to assimilate the idea of resilience into the self-theories”.*

P3 supported this theoretical slant, arguing that if there were to be a theoretical basis of the Learning Framework, it should be centred upon teachers understanding of self-theory and the way in which teachers’ dispositions could be shaped to understand the impact of learners’ dispositions.

Equally, this resilience framework ‘framed’ P1’s ideas about the ‘Environment’ domain:

*“The idea of resilience as the educational character of the institution is very powerful”.*

P5 also raised the concept of institutional resilience, but in relation to the theoretical climate in which an initiative such as the Learning Framework, could flourish:

*“The Learning Framework is very much research-informed, it’s accessible, it’s there for people to read and think about and criticize for themselves, which is a lot more than many interventions that we’ve had in further education has been…I don’t think we’ve had a very good evidence base in the past, either from internal practitioners, professionals in colleges, or from external bodies, universities. We have seen action research become more policy and theory driven and overtaken by the concerns of funding or higher education researchers themselves…an awful lot of research has either not filtered down, or been distilled in inappropriate ways.”*

**2.4 What are the impediments to realizing the theory in practice?**

P1 stated clearly that existing models based on similar theory to the Learning Framework were often prevented in their aims to achieve change by “*the discourse that was prevalent in the ‘impediment to understanding’ cultures in many colleges*”.

P5, a college principal, reflected this in saying that, *“Many colleges are not very good at talking about what is going on in classrooms. People need a way of talking about their teaching but often colleges are focused on other things, broadly under the heading ‘quality’.”*

P2 also reinforced this in stating that, *“When managers become less focused on other issues, not related to learning is when the theory starts to break apart from the practice”.*

P3 likened the process of focusing less, to having a mirror, and the Learning Framework cultural theory was a process of continually holding up a mirror not for self-reflection, but for the institution to remind everyone of the significance of reflection and to purposefully break down blockages where individuals couldn’t, or wouldn’t see reflections, and then to act on new visions. P6, a senior leader in teaching and learning, felt that articulating what a new vision may actually be, was a major problem within colleges:

*“I think that the central problem is one of defining what is a whole organizational approach may be: the sector suffers from not understanding what that actually means. In terms of ‘innovations’, a briefing is not a whole college approach.”*

P3 suggested that Kurt Lewin’s ‘unfreeze, change, refreeze model’ was a good statement of how the Learning Framework could alter a college culture, since it privileged, in the service of the learner, a cultural understanding of how an institution could develop a language of learning and was explicitly aware of cultural impact. Such a language of learning was conceptually difficult to develop however, when there appeared to be conflicting philosophies and traditions that frequently seemed to undermine even the most basic of ideas about what learning in a college was for, and where it was ‘situated’, as P4 lamented:

*“Pedagogy has been lost in many colleges, too much teaching time, lack of emphasis on assessment, cuts in budgets, infrastructural changes: no one is saying that colleges want to be like this, and there is a huge amount of excellent work going on. As a result, many colleges are going back to original teacher training issues: this new material, the Learning Framework, is good for newcomers, but it’s really nothing new.”*

In a similar vein, P6 suggested that the Learning Framework “Tapped into a discourse of organizational performance and staff morale management”…and as such, *“there probably is an improvement in learning and teaching but that can’t be attributed solely to the Learning Framework…such emphases have probably helped to create conditions for communities of practice to come together to better situate learning…but there should be no assumption of causality”.*

And, as several other participants pointed out strongly, many institutions have such tenacious ‘structural’ issues that prevent teaching and learning improvement, that any other innovation could possibly lay claim to improvement. P3 for example, asserted: *“Larger organizations have many processes that act as impediments to learning because they act as blockages…good teachers are able to transcend blockages…the not-so-good teachers didn’t improve because often managers were sidetracked on other issues that seemed to be equally important but probably weren’t.”*

P5 emphasized that: *“Although poor teaching is not a unique problem, the contexts in further education that have led to its possible proliferation, probably are unique: complex funding, changes in the curriculum, process, structure, target driven activities, and as a consequence of all these, teaching and learning has suffered.”*

One of the several impediments that were identified by many of the respondents related to the conceptualization of the coach, a problem frequently stemming from its scarce characterization in theory. For example, in the re-framing - conversation elements, some interviewees felt that previous approaches to teaching improvement had failed because literature had stressed the transactional nature of the client-coach relationship. P1 suggested that the strength of the theorization of the Learning Framework was its dialogic shape, on the basis that *“If the client is dependent upon the mentor then this is not a sustainable change”.*

P5 and P8 viewed the coach-teacher relationship another, but no less profound way, resting on the individual-institutional nexus of the whole teaching improvement process:

*“Advanced Practitioners were in some ways a mistake. They were placed on a pedestal, and implicitly held a kind of ‘here I am, I’m officially the best, and you’ve told me I’m inadequate and now you are trying to help me’ dynamic.”* (P8)

*“When we introduced advanced practitioners previously, to improve teaching, there was an immediate problem. The role of advanced practitioner set up a divisive kind of language, this is who I am, you have to be like me. But without any means for individuals to do this. Coaches don’t do this, they have to get people on board with knowing what is possible for them. Initiative overload suggested that outside people coming in to impose things such as Learning Styles, simply didn’t work. People would follow orders blindly but with no personal meaning or investment, actions were meaningless.”* (P5)

P8 reiterated the importance of sustainability as a measure of whether the ‘theory’ behind the Learning Framework was the ‘correct’ theory:

*“The Learning Framework isn’t a predictive model: it can’t be an instant fix, if it were, it would be a form of legacy, leaving only a trail of good teachers. The aim of improvement is surely sustainability, a cycle of responding, reacting, proacting, innovating.”*

P7, a college principal, reflected on her experience of the Learning Framework, and on teacher improvement in general:

*“Is the Learning Framework truly predictive? Can any theory so well explain and account for every single thing that happens in every college? No. Ultimately, teaching and learning improvement is a human resources capability issue, but the Learning Framework’s strength is that it can uncover issues; its systematic nature can expose and diagnose very basic elements so that issues can be uncovered. Not necessarily fixable, but made transparent.”*

**3. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

**3.1 Is the theory underpinning ‘The Learning Framework’ good theory?**

From an analysis of documentary and empirical evidence, the Learning Framework is not underpinned by one theory, but by an eclectic mixture of theories, theorists, tradition and informal grounded theory. Furthermore, much of the theory relates to three separate (but clearly related) concepts: theories of teacher quality, theories of learning, and theories of development and change. The following theories and theorists emerge from analysis of the data (Figure 2):

**Figure 2. Teaching & Learning theorists mentioned in the empirical data**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Teaching/Learning theorist/theory** | **Cited reason for their significance in the Learning Framework & Learning Cycle** |
| John Hattie | What good teachers do; the significance of effect sizes |
| Robert Marzano | What teachers are capable of; Higher effect sizes |
| Geoffrey Petty | Evidence-informed practice |
| Carol Dweck | Entity-incremental theory, attribution theory, resilience theories |
| Donald Kolb | Learning Cycle theory |
| Stephen Brookfield | Critical Lenses approach |
| Paul Martinez | 9000 voices research |
| Kurt Lewin | Cultural contexts of action research |
| Peter Honey & Alan Mumford | Learning Styles |
| Charles Handy | Organization theory |
| Benjamin Bloom | Associative cognitive developmental theory |

It is evident from the empirical research that the most influential theorizations informing the Learning Framework are those of John Hattie and Robert Marzano, and individuals with responsibility for leading the Learning Framework in colleges articulate these repeatedly. However, it is noticeable that in interviews with other individuals perhaps with more proximity to the experience of students as a result of changing approaches to teaching, other theorists were more significant, notably Bloom, Kolb, Honey & Mumford and Brookfield. It is not clear whether these were important because they have a stronger tradition, or whether the evidence base is felt to be stronger, or because there is still some way to go in terms of operationalizing other theories and approaches, whether they are more efficacious are not.

But what is significant, is that both Hattie’s and Marzano’s work are based on teacher effect and theories of teaching, yet the most dominant theories in participants’ experiences and interviews, were theories of learning. This suggests that there is some work to be done within colleges as to how and why theories are appropriated and what processes in participants’ minds decide whether a particular theoretical approach is judicious within particular circumstances. Related to this, is the status of Dweck’s work on attribution, resilience, motivation and self-theories. Broadly characterized as literature in the field of learning and development, again, apart from emphasis by one college senior leader, Dweck’s work appears to be lesser known, despite the fact that out of all the literature and theory, it is the most well-scrutinized and peer-reviewed. It is perhaps paradoxical that although the Learning Framework’s ostensible aim as viewed by practitioners and leaders, is to place learning and the learner centre stage, it is teaching theory that appears to dominate its theoretical orientation, and learner development theory that is currently the least well operationalized.

As one participant asserted however, familiarity with research and the evidence base is hazardous: it is often unclear, it is frequently uncontextualized, and there is disagreement as to whether, even in the face of supposed theory validity, it is ‘good theory’. Marzano’s work for example, is an aggregation of a number of works that synthesize research and theory, and concatenates those factors that correlate well with learner outcomes (Marzano, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011), albeit the syntheses themselves are not peer-reviewed. However, criticism of Marzano’s work is equally prolific (Education Week, 2014; Edutopia, 2013) resting mainly on the atomization of pedagogic approaches to such a degree that it is difficult to argue that many basic constructs are not efficacious simply because they are workable without any degree of judgment, in itself a factor characterizing the highest levels of teacher quality. John Hattie’s seminal work of 1999 (Hattie, 1999) is similarly influential, and similarly controversial and criticized, on the basis variously of the lack of transferability of effect sizes to specific contexts and on use of Hattie’s seemingly flexible use of the term ‘effect size’ to mean both a comparative measure and an absolute measure (see Snook et al, 2009 for example).

Moving on to the exposition of theory evaluation, Lewin declared that 'there is nothing so useful as a good theory' (cited in Marrow 1969). In the case of the Learning Framework, it is evident that some of the theories on which it is based are evidently very well supported by empirical work and extensive metastudies attesting to the veracity of their claims in terms of impact and effect size. However, not all claims are equally valid. Using the framework of theory evaluation, I shall now address the main areas for assessing the utility of the theory standing behind the Learning Framework, based on the empirical data obtained in this research. This framework adopts Swenson’s 1999 standard Theory Evaluation Framework, based on the work of Chen & Rossi (1983 & 1987) in relation to theory-driven approaches to evaluation and is informed by Christie’s (2003) work on the complexities of practice-theory evaluations.

**Figure 3. Evaluating the Learning Framework Theory**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theory evaluation elements** | **Element sub-questions** | **Learning Framework**  **Exemplification** |
| **Parsimony** | Does the theory rest on unconventional assumptions? | No – many of the interpretations are intuitive and clear. |
| If unconventional assumptions are used, are these justified by reason or empirical evidence? | Yes |
| Does the theory clarify our understanding of a phenomenon, or is it just a restatement of an established theory? | It can extend our understanding of how coaching and institutional culture are contributory factors to improving teaching. |
| **Operationality** | Are the definitions congruent with what they purport to explain? | Yes |
| Are the definitions sufficiently clear so that processes are replicable? | Yes |
| Does it clearly identify the central variables and their relationships? | Yes |
| **Generativity** | Does the theory allow hypotheses to be formulated? | No – there are many complex contextual factors that colleges are acknowledging freely in their adoption and adaptation of the Learning Framework. |
| Do the assertions stimulate debate and discussion? | Yes |
| Is much research generated by this theory? | Yes |
| **Power** | Description: The theory provides a language to make discriminations in experience, label variables and their relationships. | Yes it does |
| Explanation: The theory emphasizes relationship among the variables in the theory, their direction, magnitude, and influence (causation) of outcomes. | Yes it does |
| Prediction: Understanding of the relationship among variables under different conditions and across time enables extrapolation of expected outcomes that have not yet been observed. | No, not convincingly. There is not enough evidence to suggest that the model is predictive or that individuals are using the Learning Framework in the same way. |
| Control/intervention: A thorough understanding of the variables, their relationships, and influences may permit intervention to change the outcome. | Yes that is true, providing much more evidence is obtained through case studies, action research and quantitative analysis of variables. |
| **Falsifiablity** | It is possible to test and to challenge the basic premises? | Yes |
| Are the criteria clear that would justify rejection of the premises? | Yes if the framework is adopted consistently and faithfully. |
| **Importance** | What difference does using this theory make? | If it works, a great deal of difference. |
| Does the explanation derived from its use make a tangible difference? | Again, yes, if adopted transparently. |
| **Internal consistency** | Do the concepts contradict each other?  If so, is there an acceptable explanation of the contradiction? | No |
| Do the concepts logically build on each other and form a rational explanation? | Yes |
| Are the premises on which the conclusions justifying the concepts are based, justified and logically consistent? | They appear to be |
| **Scope** | What does it purport to account for and NOT account for? | Changes in teaching quality; differences in learner experience and learner achievement; differences in external statutory assessment grades. |
| Do the propositions cover all relevant elements within the declared scope? | Yes |
| Does it operate within its range of convenience or is it inappropriately extended outside its scope? | Yes |
| **Organization** | What are the assumptions and value biases underlying the propositions of the theory?  Are they acceptable, consistent, and justifiable? | The assumptions are that changes to institutional culture, individual action and measurable outcome can be made and that these will be manifest through a range of measures, both internal and external ones. The value biases underlying these are complex and culturally dependent however, and although there are claims that these are congruent with theory, it is not clear to what extent very specific theoretical orientations will be attenuated as a result of such contextual flexibility. |
| Is previous knowledge used as a foundation for extending current theory? | Yes but there is arguably in places a superfluity of theory and as a result, it is not easy to ascertain which theory is the most desirable, influential or appropriate. |

**3.2 What are the theoretical and practical bases of the Learning Framework as a model for improving teaching and learning?**

In constructing an ‘ecological map’ of how the Learning Framework appears to be fundamentally conceived, it is clear that the Learning Framework appears to be a cyclic model, with clear and delineated domains that speak to the responsibilities and principles underpinning the improvement of teaching and learning within further education colleges. The structure begins as a ‘Re-framing’ process, or deconstructing existing views about learning, ‘Conversation’, or the development of a shared vocabulary about teaching and learning, ‘Action’, or the innovation and influencing of the learning environment, and ‘Coaching’, or the nurturing of a constructive relationship to facilitate the continual Learning Framework cycle, of re-visioning, pro-acting and continuous conversing.

Significant in this framework is the fact that successive elements of the framework are focused on ‘The Individual’ and ‘The Environment’ domains: rather than teaching improvement resting solely on, and taking sole responsibility of learning for, individual tutors, the improvement is predicated upon a melding of situative, associative and cognitive views of learning - partly socio-cultural, partly communities of practice, and also utilizing a systematic elaboration of knowledge and skill, that must be evidenced through action. The whole Learning Framework is conceived as being situated within an Organizational-Cultural Matrix that enables the emphasis - and therefore resources - to be placed on various factors, whether individual or environmental. This ecological map is shown in Figure 4.

An issue that arose repeatedly in the literature and interviews was the frequency with interventions and innovations were introduced into further education. Two perspectives were salient in this respect: first, whether innovations and interventions actually needed theory: there were disagreements on this, some participants arguing that like Lewin, there is nothing so practical as a good theory, on the basis that it may guide action and lead to better understanding in the ‘dark corners’ of where theory breaks down, leading to better theory. But others suggested that if traditional theory worked, then it was perhaps only ‘the data’ that mattered, no matter how an institution got there in the pursuit of ‘better data’.

**Figure 4. The Learning Framework Ecological Map**

cultural_matrix.tiff

What is clear from almost every participant however, is the fact that theory is important, not to say critical, in further education. The majority of participants were able to cite immediately and precisely, both which teaching and learning theory they themselves subscribed to, and which theories for them the Learning Framework appeared to be based upon. This is perhaps not so surprising, considering that all participants were long-standing professionals for whom the improvement of teaching and learning was a central feature of their professional lives. But the comments also indicate the implicit significance of theory, as an organizing tool for all pedagogic activity, and as an elucidating and illuminating tool for the inherently complex contexts in which further education professionals work.

In terms therefore of how individuals decide which of the Learning Framework’s theories to best support their work, perhaps the central issues are what constitute ‘good data’, and whether ‘good theory’ is the right theory in the context of institutional culture, where, as several participants alluded, if the culture amends the realization of theory so much, then is the theory really workable or indeed the same theory? This is not to argue that action research is the only paradigm suited to further education, or that grounded theoretical approaches are the only approaches that may contribute conceptual clarity to the issues of teacher and learner improvements in further education, but it does raise two fundamental questions: who is responsible for evaluating the teaching and learning improvement evidence base in relation to current pedagogical praxis in further education? And having evaluated this evidence base and established ‘appropriate theory’, does it matter if the espoused theory works?

In the search for appropriate theory, any theory, that can be galvanized precisely to ‘cause’ improvements in all manner of teaching and learning contexts, this evaluation suggests that professionals, principalship, leaders, practitioners alike want to make improvements and want to use theory to make informed improvements. However, there is a danger of utilizing theory only at a base level, where elements of theoretical approaches become prescriptions to practice rather than open-ended explorations of what might be possible. The Learning Framework does not appear to be a prescription to practice, but in the way that it is interpreted there are many opportunities for exploring the use of learner development theory better, by linking this more explicitly to teaching and teacher quality theorization, and enhancing the research vocabulary through a conversation that seeks not to separate teaching and learning, but to see it as a continuum of growth and expectation above the everyday. There is nothing wrong with addressing the every-day activity, the mundane, as long as we do not overlook something more elusive, something more sonorous and potent. As Coffield (2008, p.70) asserts: ’I learned from my father, as he learned from his, to hear the music, the excitement and the hope in the word ‘education’. I also learned that it is the job of teachers to help other people’s children to hear and respond to that music’.

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