

# LINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE



## WHY DO WE LINK THEORY AND PRACTICE?

At university, you might encounter several types of assignments that require you to draw both on your own experiences, observations, or creative artefacts *and* the work of others. This might be the case when writing a reflection, analysing a case study, or producing an exegesis.

- **Theories** are academic models or frameworks that are developed to help explain or predict certain phenomena. They are generally discipline specific and often build upon or even contradict one another.
- **Practice** describes the application of knowledge or skills in a given situation. It might involve describing experiences you've had, explaining the way you've created or designed something, or imagining what might happen in a real-life situation.



The connection between practice and theory is important as it demonstrates your ability to use evidence to increase your understanding of key concepts, justify your decision making, and inform future practice. The strength of this theory-practice connection also contributes to the evidence of your critical thinking and growth. Ultimately, linking theory and practice shows that you understand the connections between what you are learning at university and how that knowledge is applied in the real-world.

## HOW TO LINK THEORY AND PRACTICE



Theory and practice should be interwoven, and for this reason it is useful to think of the process as braiding a rope where the two aspects are continually connected together. As you write, your paragraph may transition from theory to practice, then back to theory, or vice versa. Here are some tips for doing this well:

- Use **concrete examples** from your experience, practice, or observations. These should be specific and easy for the reader to identify.
- Link theory and practice with clear **transition phrases** or **linking sentences**, whereby the significance of the connection is introduced.

[SEE THE GUIDES ON USING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE](#)

## THINKING ABOUT EVIDENCE

We often think about (and are taught to think about) evidence as being the facts, theories, and knowledge of others, and that good evidence comes from trustworthy academic sources. However, one thing students often neglect to consider is the fact that their own experience or practice *also* functions as evidence.

Discussing your actions, thinking, interpretations, or process is important for developing arguments and demonstrating your learning progress in assignments such as reflections, case studies, or creative exegeses. Below are some considerations for using your own experience or practice as evidence:

- **Be specific:** Focus on particular aspects of your experience rather than being vague or general.
- **Demonstrate relevance:** Consider and then articulate why the particular example you've chosen is best suited to demonstrating your skill, knowledge, or achievement.
- **Analyse:** Rather than just focusing on *what* you did, consider *why* you chose to do it, and *how* you achieved it.

When you combine strong academic evidence with specific and relevant experiential evidence, you will be able to make strong arguments and justifications for your decisions or interpretations of events. This is key to linking theory and practice!

# LINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE



## EXAMPLE: THEORY LINKED TO PRACTICE

In the example below, the theory is explained before it is linked to experience or practice. You may, of course, reverse this order depending on what you're writing. When creating a linking sentence, consider the ideas you have already introduced and how you might use this to introduce the new idea. Think about why the theory and practice are connected, and why this is important.

**Mezirow's (1991) theory of Transformational Learning**

(linked to)

**Helping students become self-directed learners**

Theory

Linking sentence

Practice

The Transformational Learning Theory developed by Jack Mezirow (1991) describes how critical reflection of assumptions and beliefs held enables adult learners to better understand their learning process. In the case of adult learners in the Flinders Learning Lounge, this process of critical reflection is particularly useful for the further development problem solving skills. For instance, prompting students to reflect on how they have tackled a problem in the past enables them to look forward, and use these experiences to tackle future challenges. In doing so, I have found that students become more self-directed in their approach to learning ...

## EXAMPLE: PRACTICE LINKED TO MULTIPLE THEORIES

If there are multiple, but differing theories required to understand the experience, multiple linking sentences can be used to create clear connections between theory and practice.

**Mezirow's (1991) theory of Transformational Learning**

(linked to)

**Helping students to become self-directed learners**

(linked to)

**Knapper's (2000) conclusions on lifelong learning in higher education**

Theory

Linking sentence

Practice

Linking sentence

Theory

The Transformational Learning Theory initially developed by Jack Mezirow (1991) describes how critical reflection on assumptions made and beliefs held enables adult learners to better understand their learning process. In the case of adult learners in the Flinders Learning Lounge, this process of critical reflection is particularly useful in the recognition and further development problem solving skills. For instance, prompting students to reflect on how they have tackled a problem in the past enables them to look forwards and use the experience to tackle future challenges. In doing so, I have found that students become more self-directed in their approach to learning. The ability to assess and plan future learning are also skills exhibited by self-directed, lifelong learners. Students who are active in this process both formally and informally, continue to develop their learning strategies and apply them to different situations (Knapper, 2000) ...

### References

Knapper, C. K. (2000). *Lifelong learning in higher education* (3rd ed. ed.). London: Kogan Page.  
Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass.