

Research in Networked Learning

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Editors

Mobility, Data and Learner Agency in Networked Learning

 Springer

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*Dedicated to the memory of Gale Parchoma,
a significant figure within the community of
Networked Learning. Your contributions to
the field and to the conference will be missed.*

Foreword

This latest book in the Springer *Research in Networked Learning* series edited by Nina Bonderup Dohn, Petar Jandrić, Thomas Ryberg and Maarten de Laat is an excellent reflection of the state-of-the-art studies on researching networked learning. As the book editors point out, it brings in several new perspectives and research approaches seldom if at all previously adopted in the field. In their final chapter, they provide a rich overview of each of the chapters and carry on to discuss trends in thinking about networked learning within the Networked Learning Conference community.

What we find interesting is that while taking on new perspectives and approaches, many of the chapter authors remain close to the original ethos and understanding of the importance given to collaboration, critical reflection, dialogue and participation within networked learning. These characteristics figured as a significant dimension for many participants of the networked learning conferences in their explorations of the practice and theory of networked learning.

In Chap. 12 the book editors rightly, at the same time, raise the question of characterising the field at the domain level in terms of academic focus, methods, research questions or theories. It is certainly the case that, unlike 20 years ago when the conference first took place, all learning is now taking place in a networked world. However, that does not mean that all learning opportunities and courses can be labelled as being Networked Learning! Bennett and Folley in Chap. 5 aptly comment that we need, across the many pedagogical and technological developments, to *foster and develop students as active agents in their own learning*. Across many of the chapters, we see a focus on how to ensure agency and voice of the students in a postdigital educational landscape where, as Swinnerton, Coop, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz, Morris, Swartz, Walji and Cliff in Chap. 2 point out, many online *solutions, and the networks created to provide them, may echo offline disparities*. Critical and reflective pedagogy remains an integral aspect of networked learning in such reflections, as is indicated by the authors of other chapters also.

Furthermore, Kehrwald and Bentley (Chap. 7) suggest that the cognitive load of the potential changing roles required of learners in networked learning needs to be considered. Similarly, Carmichael and Tracy (Chap. 8) comment that pedagogies of

excess that rely on inquiry-led approaches, as is common in networked learning, require that *teachers need to reposition themselves as creators of spaces for fruitful encounters and generative inquiries, and enablers of the kinds of projects and lines of inquiry that students wish to pursue.*

Conversely, the focus on the use and misuse of data and algorithms in Part 2 of the book must be important if we are to heed the warnings of Whitworth and Webster (Chap. 9) and avoid *(assessment) regimes—that instil into higher education regimes of power and surveillance.*

It is not our intention to review all the chapters in this Foreword as the book editors have already done an excellent job of that in Chap. 12. We simply want to conclude by reiterating a couple of points from our own chapter and that of Sinclair (Chap. 11). In our chapter, we comment that *while we are not claiming networked learning to be a discipline, quite the reverse, we are suggesting there are identifiable patterns in the knowledge forms associated with it as a knowledge community.* However, these patterns and characteristics according to Tight (2012) when examined in detail and over time usually turn out to be about the development of new disciplines, sub-disciplines or specialisms. Networked learning on these grounds and as reflected in the chapters in the current and previous volumes could be claimed to be an identifiable specialism in its own right developed over 20+ years in part at least through the networked learning conferences. However, as Sinclair suggests while the conference is not about authoritarianism, *well-established practices inevitably set up tensions, contradictions and constraints that people might want to challenge, especially if they are interested in doing something new.*

The conference and the Springer Book series on Research in Networked Learning have always sought to bridge that delicate balance between established practices and thinking and new ideas and perspectives—something we believe the current book achieves very well.

Lancaster, UK
Perth, Australia

Vivien Hodgson
David McConnell

Introduction

This book is the seventh book in the Networked Learning Series dedicated to presenting chapters emerging out of selected papers from the biennial Networked Learning Conference (NLC). It is thus a contribution to the biennial setting of milestones indicating the state of the art within networked learning research. At the same time, the conference from which the papers were selected marked 20 years since the first Networked Learning Conference. This spurred quite a lot of reflection at the conference on what characterises the Networked Learning community and what demarcates networked learning from other research fields (if anything). We have chosen to represent these reflections with two papers which—with very different foci and methodologies—provide characterisations of Networked Learning, both as a field and as a community. These two chapters serve, respectively, as ‘intro’ and ‘outro’ chapters for the body of the book. In this sense, the present book also provides a status of networked learning research at this moment in time.

As editors, it is always a challenge to select 10–12 papers out of the many high-quality contributions that are presented at the conference. We have tried previously to include the views of the conference participants to get a wider opinion on topics and themes that might be interesting. In the past processes of choosing papers, we have for instance provided online forms for participants to suggest papers they thought were particularly interesting and thought provoking. These forms have always provided us with good suggestions and indications of what conference delegates found to be memorable papers and have provided good inputs for the editorial team’s ultimate selection. The challenge of putting together a book with selected papers, however, is not only an issue of the quality of the individual papers. In that case we could just return to look at the review comments and scores that were provided for each paper (which is something we do take into account in the selection process). The task for us as editors, we believe, goes beyond merely selecting ‘good papers’. It extends to drawing out wider themes and interests that cut across the papers and which emerge during the debates at the conference. In an effort to involve the conference participants more actively into the process of debating what were important topics emerging from the papers, workshops, posters and discussions during conference presentations, we organised a final event where we asked

participants to discuss in groups what they thought had been the most interesting debates and most pressing issues. Each group, apart from presenting their thoughts to others, then added their reflections to an online board (a padlet) highlighting themes and issues they found of particular interest. These reflections and discussions that participants entered have subsequently become very important, as the editors have looked closely at the inputs to choose the themes that structure this book.

The conference from which the chapters emerge was held in Zagreb, Croatia, in May 2018, as the 11th International Networked Learning Conference. We were very pleased to have Zagreb as our conference location in connection with the work on critical pedagogy that is at the core of research focus of the critical education group based at our host institution. Networked Learning has a longstanding tradition of critical reflection and engagement with the underpinning values and principles of networked learning pedagogy, and it seemed natural to bring this to the fore as a more central theme for this year's conference.

We want to thank the Department of Informatics and Computing at Zagreb University of Applied Sciences for organising NLC 2018. Locally organised by Petar Jandrić and Milan Bajić and supported by Dean Slavica Čosović Bajić, the conference owes a debt of gratitude to many colleagues and students who volunteered their time and work to ensure its smooth operation. We are also thankful to Springer publishers, and our editor Melissa James, for publishing support through the *Research in Networked Learning* book series edited by Vivien Hodgson and David McConnell. We especially appreciate continuous sponsorship of the traditional Springer reception, at which we launched new books on networked learning and the new journal *Postdigital Science and Education* edited by Petar Jandrić. Most importantly, the heart of the networked learning community is its amazing group of researchers, partners and friends, who continuously invest their own time in activities such as peer review and who maintain networked learning at the highest quality of educational research. With this note, we need to acknowledge two very important people who have left the community after Networked Learning Conference 2018. Gale Parchoma, who made significant contributions to networked learning research and participated in many networked learning conferences, has recently lost her battle to mortal disease. We will miss you Gale! Alice Jesmont, conference administrator for the Networked Learning Conference for many years, has now handed over the position to Charlotte Hyldgaard and Morten Kattenhøj. We thank Alice for her contributions and incredible dedication to the networked learning community over the decades and wish a warm welcome to Charlotte and Morten!

The body of the book is structured into three main thematic sections, Parts I, II and III, 'flanked' (as indicated) by intro and outro chapters, which combine to characterise the field and community of Networked Learning. In our concluding Chap. 12, we present each chapter in more detail as the outset for reflecting on current and emerging issues. Here, we restrict ourselves to introducing the themes of the three parts, pointing also to how they connect to issues identified as emerging issues in the previous book of selected, revised conference papers (Dohn et al., 2018).

Part I is entitled *Aspects of Mobility for Networked Learning in a Global World*. It takes up the issue of *mobility, new forms of openness and learning in the public arena*, identified in Dohn et al. (2018) as an emerging trend concerned with the tensions and opportunities which boundary crossing leads to, given the somewhat counteracting significance of learners' anchorage in socio-material place. This is done through two chapters which investigate how aspects of mobility play out in Networked Learning on a global scale, as viewed from, respectively, a macro perspective of political economy and a micro perspective of individual negotiation of identity. The former focuses on (non-acknowledged) issues of inequality which ensue when university courses are provided as unbundled, independent modules in online education in order to allow learners increased flexibility and mobility. The latter analyses the case of a Nepalese woman studying in Europe and shows how her mobility across the diverse practices of her life requires her to negotiate a composite cosmopolitanism.

Part II is entitled *Use and Misuse of Algorithms and Learning Analytics*. Its three chapters work to remedy the somewhat surprising lack of focus on *learning analytics* which Dohn et al. (2018) point to as characteristic of Networked Learning research (at the time) in distinction to research and practice within higher education more broadly. The chapters included in Part II between them, on the one hand, illustrate research and learning potentials of algorithmic analysis and, on the other hand, discuss the risk involved in handing over too much power to such analyses. One chapter thus focuses on informal networked learning, in that it reports on a study where the analytical tools of social network analysis were employed to reveal ties and learning processes in a social media space. Two chapters centre on formal education and investigate, respectively, students' perception of data on their learning and the feedback practices that evolve as automatically generated feedback is instigated in higher education.

Part III, *Understanding and Empowering Learners*, provides further contributions to the issue of *differences between participants and in participant experiences—and the implications for the practice of online educators*—characterised by Dohn et al. (2018) as, deservedly, a recurrent and overarching theme within NLC. This part consists of four chapters. Two of them focus on learning opportunities (or lack of them), as afforded by technical aspects and their use in the networked learning environments. The first of these chapters investigates the cognitive load which key sources in networked learning place on the learner with a view to empowering students by reducing unnecessary load. The other chapter explores the empowerment of students resulting from their engagement as co-researchers in analysing and displaying a multitude of data with semantic web and linked data technologies. The last two chapters take a Communities of Practice approach. They investigate, respectively, issues of power and authority in developing student communities of practice and the role of boundary objects in students' transfer and transformation of knowledge between learning practices.

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