

Research in Networked Learning

Vivien Hodgson  
Maarten de Laat  
David McConnell  
Thomas Ryberg *Editors*

# The Design, Experience and Practice of Networked Learning

 Springer

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Editors

# The Design, Experience and Practice of Networked Learning

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# Chapter 1

## Researching Design, Experience and Practice of Networked Learning: An Overview

Vivien Hodgson, Maarten de Laat, David McConnell, and Thomas Ryberg

### Introduction

The chapters in this book are a selection of reworked and peer-reviewed papers presented at the 2012 Networked Learning Conference held in Maastricht, The Netherlands. Each chapter brings a particular perspective to the themes of “design”, “experience” and “practice” of networked learning, which we have chosen as the focus of the book. In this introductory chapter, we explore how networked learning has developed in recent years followed by a summary of the research presented across the book’s chapters.

We conclude by discussing four main themes that have emerged from our reading of the chapters and which we believe are important in taking forward the theory of networked learning. They are as follows: practice as epistemology; the coupling of learning contexts (that is, the relationship and connection of learning contexts and spaces); the agency and active role of technology within networked learning; and the messy, often chaotic and always political nature of the design, experience and practice of networked learning.

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Since its inception in 1998, the Networked Learning Conference has placed a high value on research that focuses on both the practice of learning and teaching in networked environments and on theoretical issues that have relevance to our understanding of these practices. Papers presented at the conference have covered a wide spectrum of theoretical and practice issues and concerns and have made a substantive contribution to our understanding of how learning and teaching take place in these environments. In the early conferences, the focus was initially on higher education, with some contributions from the field of continuing education. Today, some 15 years on, the conference embraces a wide field of educational areas including those of informal learning, work-based learning, continuing professional development (CPD), academic staff development, and management learning—as well as higher education (both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels).

Since the first Networked Learning Conference, we have also seen an exponential growth in the use of information and communication technologies in learning and teaching. The popularisation of Web 2.0 and the plethora of social networking tools and environments have in some ways shaped the face of networked learning, strongly influencing the pedagogical and socio-technical design of learning and teaching practices. Consequently in this book many authors have revisited central tenets, beliefs and pedagogies such as the oft quoted definition of networked learning as being “learning in which information and communication technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2004, p. 1). We are energised by the prospect that Web 2.0 and social networking technologies have the potential to lead to innovative designs in learning and teaching, which in turn leads many of the contributors to this book to reconsider, redefine and broaden their interpretation of networked learning. However, within networked learning learners have always been seen as proactive, engaging agents: they bring agency to what they do, and many chapters in this volume show that they are acknowledged producers rather than consumers of knowledge.

Although the way in which we think about the nature of networked learning and its underpinning pedagogical values and beliefs has broadened in the past years, it is fair to say that there is still a shared view on this, which is that networked learning can be seen to be derived from critical and humanistic traditions (e.g. those of Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Mead, 1934) and that learning is social, takes place in communities and networks, is a shared practice, involves negotiation and requires collaborative dialogue (Hodgson, McConnell, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012). Many of the chapters in this volume and in the previous volume in the Research in Networked Learning Book Series (Dirckinck Holmfeld, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2012) testify to this shared view. The chapters in this volume explore new and innovative ways of thinking about the nature of networked learning and its pedagogical values and beliefs. They pose a challenge to us to reflect on what we thought networked learning was 15 years ago, where it is today and where it is likely to be headed.

The emergence of social practice theories together with sociomaterial perspectives challenges previously held views of learning and knowledge and how we think about networked learning. In the previous volume of the Networked Learning Book Series, some consideration was given to this in the final chapter (Hodgson et al., 2012) where networked learning was described as striving to transcend the dualism between abstract mind and concrete material social practice. The issue of separating theory from practice was noted. Practice is seen as epistemic—a way of seeing or acting—and it was claimed that networked learning exists within practice.

We return to this theme of epistemology and “practice” in the current volume of the Networked Learning Book Series. The authors of the selection of papers from the 2012 conference discuss the notion and role of practice within their networked learning research. In this introductory chapter we have brought together the papers in three sections, each highlighting a particular aspect of practice. The first of the sections focuses on the relationship between design and its influence on how networked learning practices are implemented. The second section extends this discussion by raising the notion of experiencing networked learning practices. Here the expected and unexpected effects of design and its implementation are scrutinised. These chapters elegantly indicate the lessons we can learn from the discrepancies between the intended and actual practices. The third and final section draws attention to a growing topic of interest within networked learning: that of networked learning in informal practices. It raises the question of how networked learning practices emerge and what we can learn from this for improving design and experience of networked learning. Additionally, we provide a reflection on the theories, methods and settings featured in the networked learning research of the chapters before concluding with a discussion of the four themes that emerged from our reading of the chapters.

## **Section 1: Networked Learning Spaces and Context: Design and Practice**

The four chapters in this section each contribute to, and seek to extend, existing understanding and ideas about networked learning. More specifically they examine and discuss the way we think about, create and design networked learning spaces. The four chapters each add to the question of design, ranging from the perspective of the teacher’s experience and prior exposure to the use of learning technology to the role and social materiality of a learning environment and other nonhuman network objects. Also considered is the significance of the learner’s primary context and the importance of coupling practice contexts of where they live and work to the learning context of the education institution where they study.

In addition the chapters by both Nina Bonderup Dohn and by Janne Glerup, Simon Heilesen, Niels Henrik Helms and Kevin Mogensen question the limitations

of the existing definition of networked learning. They suggest that, as currently defined, networked learning does not address the importance of connecting learning contexts or, to use the term adopted by Gleerup et al., the coupling of learning contexts. Dohn argues much of the existing literature, while talking about and claiming to take a social practice theory perspective to learning design, rarely offers activities or designs that actually engage with practice as experienced by the learner in their primary (lived) context. More often than not, she suggests, learners are invited to participate in standalone activities that have no direct relation to their everyday practice or primary context. Consequently such activities always have the potential to be experienced at worst as meaningless or at best only of academic relevance.

The separation of study or learning context from the work or practice context that is often experienced by students is addressed directly in the chapter by Gleerup et al. They propose adopting a user-driven innovation model for the design of networked learning spaces to overcome this. They adopt the user-centred design approach developed by Halonen (2010) to demonstrate how involvement of the end users in the design of the spaces of a networked learning environment can enhance the coupling of the two diverse contexts of a vocational college and the organisations in which students do their work placements.

However, no matter how much we reflect on and aim to bring new ideas into the way we design networked learning spaces, other factors are also at play. John Hannon's chapter is a salutary reminder that the implementation of networked learning, particularly within the context of higher education, is often undermined by more dominant and persuasive networks to that of educators and pedagogical practitioners. As Hannon comments in his chapter, arrangements for learning are a central concern for universities and thus often a site of contention and difference.

If networked learning is to become seen as a pedagogy that is central to the arrangements for learning, we clearly need to understand more about how learning environments come to be assembled as well as the everyday and prior experiences and concerns of those who use and occupy them. In their different ways the four chapters in this section each contribute to a process of either opening up or revealing more—in actor-network terms—of the black box effects upon implementing and designing networked learning spaces that support both reflective practice and situated learning in a learner's primary context.

The final chapter in this section, by Uzair Shah, brings the focus back onto the teacher and their lived previous and current experiences of using learning technology. Teachers' qualitative experience of using learning technology in their learning and teaching practice has surprisingly often been overlooked in networked learning research. As Shah points out, quoting Boon and Sinclair (2012), most lecturers and teachers still have one foot in the real and one foot in the virtual and consequently are having to come to terms with both the difference and disquiet this creates for them. Shah's study is all the more interesting in that it is situated in the experience of teachers working in a Southern Asian University in Pakistan and thus giving us insights, not previously available, into the way teachers in that part of the world experience, think about and use learning technology in their everyday teaching and

learning practice. Understanding teachers' experiences of learning technology, Shah argues, will help us to better understand the oft-noted resistance from university staff to the greater adoption and use of technology and networked learning spaces specifically in their own teaching and learning practice. Some of the other main points made in each of the four chapters are further described below.

Dohn in her chapter, "Implications for Networked Learning of the 'Practice' Side of Social Practice Theories—a Tacit-knowledge Perspective", makes the point that we should not be putting in place arrangements that offer networked learning as if it is a primary context (and space) for learning unless this is a clear intention of the pedagogical design that is worked with during the course. She argues: "networked learning will in general be most successful if it is designed as 'mediator' activities' to facilitate the resituating of content between the 'primary contexts' of the learners, rather than to act as a 'primary context' itself".

Primary contexts, she explains, are contexts that carry significance for an individual's learning, in which they involve themselves as persons and which they consider important for whom they are. This view of primary contexts aligns with a view of learning that complements that which was discussed in Hodgson et al. (2012), who stated that the ontology of networked learning includes a belief "in the importance of focusing on making sense from one's own personal experiences and view of the world—or indeed one's own practice".

However, as already mentioned, Dohn argues most examples of networked learning found in the literature seldom engage with practice as experienced by the learner in their primary context. Instead, in her view, the "doing" of learning activities in networked learning is biased in the direction of verbal activity or doing and "practice" that favours "linguistic practice" with an over emphasis on reflection on practice. She would prefer to see a greater recognition of the importance of mediator activities where meaning is embedded in activities people undertake in given contexts and are understood in terms of the meaning they embody in those contexts. Meaning, Dohn claims from a social practice theory perspective, is created and negotiated in activity rather than in linguistic practice or through reflecting on practice. The latter two being aspects that she believes currently dominate the design of most networked learning courses and programmes at the expense of a context dependent and embodied material understanding of practice.

Dohn, not unlike Glerup et al. in their chapter, also talks about the usefulness of coupling of contexts. In their chapter "Designing for Learning in Coupled Contexts", Glerup et al. give a detailed example of an experiment in designing for net-based vocational learning where the aim was to provide a coupling between the widely different learning contexts that, in their case, electrician apprentices were exposed to during their vocational education. Previously the apprentices had reported disconnect between what they learnt in college and what they had to do and what they learnt during their in-service training during work placements.

Also, similar in some respects to Dohn in the previous chapter, they point out that the existing main definitions of networked learning do not encompass learning across intra and inter-organisational boundaries. Networked learning, they suggest, not only offers the opportunity to connect with resources and others within an