Research in Networked Learning

Thomas Ryberg
Christine Sinclair
Sian Bayne
Maarten de Laat *Editors*

Research, Boundaries, and Policy in Networked Learning

Research in Networked Learning

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Thomas Ryberg • Christine Sinclair
Sian Bayne • Maarten de Laat
Editors

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Editors
Thomas Ryberg
Aalborg University
Aalborg, Denmark

Christine Sinclair
Edinburgh University
Edinburgh, UK

Sian Bayne
Edinburgh University
Edinburgh, UK

Maarten de Laat
Open University of the Netherlands
Heerlen, The Netherlands

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Dedicated to the memory of Sheena Banks,
a significant figure in the establishment of
the Networked Learning Conference in 1998,
and in its development since, and whose
contribution to the field will be missed

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Chapter 1
The Relationships Between Policy, Boundaries and Research in Networked Learning

Thomas Ryberg and Christine Sinclair

The biennial Networked Learning Conference is an established locus for work on practice, research and epistemology in the field of networked learning. That work continues between the conferences through the researchers' own networks, 'hot seat' debates, and through publications, especially the books that include a selection of reworked and peer-reviewed papers from the conference. The 2014 Networked Learning Conference which was held in Edinburgh was characterised by animated dialogue on emergent influences affecting networked teaching and learning building on work established in earlier conferences, such as the inclusion of sociomaterial perspectives and recognition of informal networked learning. The chapters here each bring a particular perspective to the themes of Policy, Boundaries and Research in Networked Learning which we have chosen as the focus of the book. The selection of the papers has been a combined editorial and collaborative process based on our own initial review of the conference papers and notes from the conference, as well as an informal survey where we asked conference participants to recommend three papers they found particularly interesting. The papers for the Networked Learning Conference are all peer-reviewed, and as they have turned into chapters for this book, each has been re-reviewed by the editors and

T. Ryberg (✉)
Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark
e-mail: ryberg@hum.aau.dk

C. Sinclair
Institute for Education, Community and Society, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
e-mail: csincla5@exseed.ed.ac.uk

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other authors. The result is a genuinely collegial distillation of themes from a stimulating conference; a snapshot of a time when national and international policies and boundaries have been changing.

Policy issues seemed more dominant in this conference than in previous ones though they had always been present, along with questions of power and agency. Indeed, the current emphasis on policy and politics was anticipated in the previous conference held in Maastricht 2012. As Hodgson, De Laat, McConnell, and Ryberg (2014a) wrote in the introduction to the book resulting from that event:

> implementing pedagogical changes and institutional learning environments is always a political process first and only secondly pedagogical (Hodgson et al., 2014a: 7).

Our authors are alerting us to some of the less visible effects of policy and also to the impacts on boundaries. In turn, what happens at the boundaries of practice will inevitably feed back into policy. Again, boundary work has always been prevalent in networked learning discussions: it seems, however, that the time has come to re-cognise the implications and scrutinise what may be obscured through complexity and busy-ness. And while exchange of research is what networked learning conferences are all about, this time there is a sense that it is appropriate to pay attention to how the nature of research is itself changing and needs to change to respond critically to an increasingly neoliberal agenda in educational institutions.

As the contexts change, so do opportunities and methodologies for research and networked learning. We return to discuss this further in our concluding remarks after our discussion of the three central themes that each have their own section: Policy, Boundaries and Research in Networked Learning.

Part 1: Policy in Networked Learning

This part consists of three chapters that all concern different aspects of policy and politics within networked learning. As Jones argues this is an area that has been addressed previously, though not extensively, within networked learning. He notes that while policy is not always explicitly highlighted in definitions of networked learning (such as McConnell, Hodgson, and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (2012)) notions of critical pedagogy and ethical considerations have always been central. However, what stands out as a strong message from the three chapters here is that policy and politics deserve more attention and recognition within the field. We will briefly summarise the three chapters by Sarah Hayes, Ben Williamson and Chris Jones and then draw out some wider themes we think part: are particularly interesting across the contributions.

Sarah Hayes takes a transdisciplinary look at 'rational' (or common sense) policy discourse about use of technology. She examines a corpus of UK policy texts through the lenses of critical discourse analysis and critical social theory. The chapter demonstrates how policy statements frequently remove or obscure human agency from the notion of 'the (effective) use of technology', privileging a narrative

of economic gain over higher education labour. Hayes calls for academics to restore the visibility of human labour by writing specifically about how they themselves work with technology.

Williamson's chapter is perhaps the place where the three broad themes of the title of this book are most strongly linked, through a process of policy network analysis bringing together the notion of the boundary broker organisation and the theoretical construct of the sociotechnical imaginary. Boundary brokers work as intermediaries across public, private and third sector organisations and individuals—helping to create a decentralised politics based on networks. Sociotechnical imaginaries are shared visions of future life made possible through technology. Williamson illustrates through contemporary examples how boundary brokers are using sociotechnical imaginaries to envision the governance of education systems through data analytics and database pedagogies, and the concomitant governing of individuals to participate in personalised lifelong learning. These networked technologies can accelerate changes in spatial and temporal aspects of educational governance and signal a move away from more bureaucratic forms of government.

Chris Jones calls for researchers in networked learning to engage with the broader political landscape. The issues at stake can be illustrated through the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) where, Jones argues, utopian aims have been superseded by more neoliberal ones as austerity policies began to affect higher education. Jones draws attention to rhetorical moves—especially the technological determinism argument—that create an impetus for forms of education that are regarded as necessarily dominated by a neoliberal perspective. This necessity is an illusion fostered through newer forms of long-standing positions that ignore or drown out alternative arguments and values in higher education. Jones demonstrates that we need to be alert to moves towards neoliberal and technological determinism in order to mount a resistance.

Discussion

The chapters all concern how political actors and policy networks conjure or mobilise 'sociotechnical imaginaries' to use the term Williamson introduces in his chapter (referring to Jasanoff (2015)). A socio-technical imaginary is a shared vision of a future life made possible through particular technologies or as Williamson puts it:

> a collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed vision of a desirable future […] Sociotechnical imaginaries are the result of relations between technology and society, are also temporally situated and culturally particular, and simultaneously descriptive of attainable futures and prescriptive of the kinds of futures that ought to be attained. (Chap. 3).

Although not all three chapters employ the particular term they all in our view concern different socio-technical imaginaries. Ben Williamson discusses data-base pedagogies and learning analytics as contemporary imaginaries; Sarah Hayes

scrutinises UK policy text to analyse how 'technology', 'technology enhanced learning', or 'effective use of technology' are used as broad labels of assumed good in future classroom practices; Chris Jones tackles the concept of MOOCs and looks critically at how such an imaginary (or perhaps a constellation of imaginaries) has shifted its form over the years at it has been co-opted from a pedagogical network to being adopted and circulated in commercial and administrative-managerial networks instead. Common to the social imaginaries are that they linger between an accomplishable now and a close-enough future. They live somewhere between present reality and a dawning brave new world.

The examples drawn out in the chapters are already-existing technologies, services or ideas, but they draw their persuasiveness not out of their current status but out of their imagined potential, in the things to come. As the authors point out, education has always been on the brink of major breakthroughs: all the way back to Sidney Pressey's early 'teaching machine' developed in the 1920s that Williamson is referring to, and to the recently predicted disruptive avalanche of the MOOC Jones refers to. Most researchers within educational technology, and networked learning in particular, probably recognise there is a recurrent narrative of imminent and/or necessary change with the advent of 'new' technologies. In general new technologies are often imagined to bring about immense changes to society in the near future (Jones, 2015). While many researchers and practitioners are probably somewhat resistant and sceptical about many of the claims made by pundits and techno-optimists it could be, as suggested by Selwyn (2014), that the educational technology community has a blind spot for the politics of educational technology. As said, policy, and more widely critical theory and ethics, have been ongoing issues of debate within networked learning. In fact the early 'networked learning manifesto' (Beaty, Hodgson, Mann, & McConnell, 2002) was specifically written to inform policy and to realise an alternative future for educational technology. A future emphasising diversity, inclusion, democratic dialogue and learners' participation in knowledge creation over transmission of knowledge. While these blind spots might be less pronounced within the area of networked learning the chapters certainly provoke us to collectively revisit our thinking of the politics of educational technology.

What the chapters in our view help us see is the extent to which these narratives are not exclusively put in circulation from within the educational technology community, but how they are formed by wider policy networks and how cross-sectoral organizational networks spanning public, private and third sector actors increasingly are driving learning agendas. This is the specific object of Williamson's inquiry where he explores the role of cross-sector boundary brokers in the education political landscape and trace how policy making and governance is performed in mobile networks rather than exclusively in the traditional, hierarchical bureaucracies of the ministries. However, this is equally visible in Jones' critical discussion of MOOCs, where he cites a report from the think tank "Institute for Public Policy Research" written by authors employed by Pearson (which is an example of such a cross-sectoral policy network). Here Jones traces how an original intention of opening up education, born and bred within a public university and envisioned to act with the free, public, university as the backbone was co-opted and superseded by a

network of private universities and spin-off companies who transformed also the very pedagogical idea of the MOOC; from a view emphasising learning as connections towards a more traditional instructionalist model copying what several open universities had done for decades, but managing to rebrand it as both a pedagogical and educational 'disruptive innovation'.

This is what is often referred to as the difference between cMOOCs and xMOOCs, although, as Jones points out, this distinction is too crude and overlooks that also the Edx and Coursera MOOCs come in great variety and certainly also with pedagogical innovation (see also Conole (2013)). What overshadows this, however, and should provoke reflection within academia is the speed, veracity and reach with which sociotechnical imaginaries associated with the MOOC have spread within both the administrative-managerial networks within Higher Education, as well as the general public. While it has been propelled from within the academic edtech circuit, there are certainly also other forces in play, and as all the authors suggest there is a strong pressure from several sides to open up education—not to the public—but to more actors such as multinational companies.

This provokes us to reflect on our practices within academia. Do we, as a community, too uncritically embrace technologies or designs without proper reflection? Do we perhaps too uncritically follow the funding streams, shrug our shoulders at hyped concepts and believe we can do as we have always done—just appropriating new words for the same? In case of the latter, do we need to think about whether we just appropriate a new vocabulary, or whether concepts as MOOCs, Web 2.0, 21st century skills, and social media appropriate us and enroll us in particular sociotechnical imaginaries that we have little control over? Should we snowboard down on top of the avalanche or should we be working on caving in the snow? Should we as a research community contribute to applications and reproduce the linguistic constructs of 'effective uses of technology' and nominalisations that Hayes unfolds and critique in her chapter? Do we need, as Jones suggests, to pay greater attention to formal or 'high' politics within Networked Learning? To help us answer these questions the most recent books in the Networked Learning Research series by Jandric and Boras (2015) and Jones (2015) are welcome contributions and can hopefully assist in leveraging the awareness of policy and politics in Networked Learning.

Another theme emerging from the three chapters on policy in networked learning is the gradual disappearance of humans in technology enhanced learning—and not in a critical, considered way to do with actor-network theory or critical posthumanist approaches. Rather, humans seem to disappear or become backgrounded in different ways in the three chapters. In Hayes' chapter she eloquently shows how this erasure is accomplished through linguistic nominalisation where it becomes hazy as to who the acting subjects are. In contrast, constructs such as 'the strategy will aim to' gloss over the actual human work that needs to be done to realise such strategies. As Hayes puts it: "The discourse promises much but is in fact deceptively spacious, because both staff and students are missing from it." While such nominalisations perhaps often occur within legalese, Hayes suggests that these acts of rendering human work invisible are particularly problematic within areas where there are already hidden workloads acting as silent barriers to the implementation of technology in higher

education. Hayes highlights a particular citation in her chapter: "The use of technology to create digital archives to improve documentation of practice and to support curricular developments as well as more effective use of technology" (Chap. 2). As Hayes comments herself this seems to generate a curious circular outcome where 'the use of technology' becomes a means to ensure 'more effective uses of technology'. This might, however, not be so far-fetched if we direct our attention to the database pedagogies discussed by Williamson. In fact this seems to be the very rationale of algorithmic governance e.g. that traces and activities of humans are aggregated, ordered and analysed by machines and then used to improve the algorithms and machines which can then provide a better service or perhaps help humans to understand better their own learning or skill development. For example this is imagined in the following way by Beluga Learning (as cited in Williamsons chapter):

> The data is allowing the software to make a real-time prediction about the learner and changes the environment, … the pedagogy and the social experience. … This process occurs continually and in realtime, so that with every new piece of data collected on the student, their profile changes and the analytical software re-searches the population to compare once more. … The content and environment then adapt continually to meet the needs of the learner. (Beluga Learning 5–6) (Chap. 3)

Thus the software is imagined as making (better?) sense of the learner's learning and surroundings to foresee and adapt in real-time to the learner's needs. Much is said about the role of the algorithms, less is said about the learner's or human agency. More importantly, however, what is also rendered invisible is the human labour lying behind the algorithms. Similarly to the erasure of human agency in the policy texts it seems that 'data', 'software', 'algorithms' act almost autonomously (and inherently rational) rather than being designed by particular people (or companies) with particular professional skills, worldviews, pedagogical understandings, and commercial or political agendas. Rather than foregrounding political or commercial actors this erasure surgically removes intent and agendas and place accountability with assumed (rational) machines who seem to autonomously learn through mere (objective) observation and collection of human behaviour.

In the final chapter by Jones, human erasure is seen in a more indirect way. Namely in the sense that some versions or imaginaries of MOOCs are viewed as a solution to what Wiley (2003) termed the 'bottleneck' problem i.e. that 'the teacher' is a bottleneck which some educational technologists view as replaceable with reusable educational resources and intelligent tutoring systems. Obviously, a model of massive courses with few teachers and with automatic or peer-graded assessments seems a new way of solving the bottleneck problem and delivering education to a massive audience.

While in many ways the idea of replacing teachers with technology seems a way of eradicating human agency in learning, we should not forget that some saw (and see) this as a move to empower other people—namely the disadvantaged learner or the learners who cannot attend an 'ordinary' education (Jones, 2015). Access for the disadvantaged learner and to those with no access to educational provision has been a prominent discourse within the MOOC circuit; although the reality of these ideals has been questioned (Jones, 2015).