

Applying Research Syntheses to Networked Learning Research – Help or Hinderance for Collective Knowledge Creation?

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Roundtable

The suggested roundtable aligns with the thematic focus of the conference on **research designs/ research methods** and **responsible research**, and is envisaged to foster critical dialogue amongst participants who want to engage or are engaged with the approach of research syntheses in networked learning research.

Within educational technology research, research syntheses as a **topic** have surged in popularity in the field over the past years (Allman et al., 2023), being considered as indicator of “an interest in the field in identifying what works and synthesising findings across contexts in a sea of articles that continues to grow” (Kimmons & Rosenberg, 2022, p. 134). With their ascribed intention to capture the existing knowledge related to a topic, research field and specific research question in a transparent and accountable manner (Newman & Gough, 2020), research syntheses are also supposed to minimize bias and provide an objective overview of the state of research. This notion is challenged for the field of educational technology, however, due to the fact that research syntheses are shown to favor inclusion of studies published in the English language (Bedenlier et al., 2025), face self-referentiality in database searches in certain world regions (Buntins et al., 2025) and overall need to grapple with a situation in which influential studies originate primarily from so-called Western countries (Mertala et al., 2022). Furthermore, research syntheses are very much in line with the frequently advocated, and equally controversial, focus on evidence-based decision making and practices in education and educational policy (Parra et al., 2025).

Thus, the understanding of research syntheses as a neutral and objective approach to collate evidence, only holds true on the surface. Less obvious but deeply entangled inequalities, blind spots and subsequently the need to reconsider the way that research syntheses in education are carried out, only emerge upon closer scrutiny as they relate to structures, practices and perceptions that *precede* the actual conduct of a synthesis.

Having worked on the methodological and methodical adaptation of research syntheses to accommodate educational research and its specific characteristics more closely (Berliner, 2002), as hosts of the suggested roundtable, we have published extensively on different angles related to the topic, e.g. rigour and transparency of syntheses in educational technology (Buntins et al., 2023), localization markers in studies on educational technology (Buntins & Bedenlier, in review), choice of included publication languages in syntheses (Bedenlier et al., 2025), or (in)visibility of research communities (Marín et al., 2023). Currently, we have widened our scope to include questions related to the WEIRDness (Henrich et al., 2010) of studies on Artificial Intelligence in Education and have intensified our focus on the perceptions and rationalities of synthesis authors regarding the assumed validity of their synthesis results and choices regarding included publication languages.

We are aware of the fact that networked learning conceives of educational technology as only one of the three interrelated phenomena *human relationships*, *technology* and *collaborate engagement* (NLEC, 2021, p. 314). However, we posit that underlying structures that shape research in educational technology and networked learning face similar challenges – an imbalance in published research from the Global North and South, and the visibility of established themes over more critical and socially conscious ones (Heath et al., 2024; NLEC, 2021). As networked learning as a field has evolved and solidified (Ryberg et al., 2025), research syntheses have also garnered interest over the past years (e.g. NLEC, 2021; Persaud, 2025; Soleymani et al., 2024). Thus, applying existing reflection and empirical findings from research syntheses in educational technology to networked learning seems promising and worthwhile in methodological perspective.

Following from the above delineated point of view that research syntheses in the broader realm of education are controversial in their prerequisites and their ascribed neutrality is misleading, we would like to pose **three leading questions** for discussion:

- Whose evidence are we talking about in research syntheses?

- What underlying mechanisms can we discern that shape research syntheses even before the synthesis is carried out?
- What are the consequences of the current prominence of research synthesis for local educational practices?

As researchers on the method of research syntheses, as well as authors of numerous research syntheses, we pursue the following overarching goals with the Roundtable – explicitly and intentionally focusing on a critical stance towards research syntheses:

- Discuss the merits of research syntheses, while equally address their pitfalls and the need to adapt them to educational research, including networked learning (Question 1).
- Create awareness for the underlying and less obvious structures and practices that emerge as highly influential on the conduct and subsequent results of a research synthesis, e.g. choice of databases and consistency of search strings (Question 2).
- Delineate approaches to the research synthesis process, that translate awareness into concrete and applicable steps in order to fit the synthesis with the specific area of educational research and practice (Question 3).

The roundtable is envisaged as follows, emphasizing the **engagement and involvement of participants**: With the format spanning 90 minutes in total, we shortly introduce the topic of research syntheses in educational technology, delineate the potentials and pitfalls attached to it and point to central findings of our research in the realm outlined above. Participants are invited to reflect upon own experiences with research syntheses, before we delve into the discussion of the three questions.

Each question is introduced with a short contextualization, followed by the opportunity for first direct reactions, reflections and remarks by the participants. For each question, we have printed **materials** to illustrate the scope with examples and provide a structured approach to taking notes. Digital versions of the materials will be made available via QR codes. Central discussion results will be collected and made available online to the participants via TaskCards. Thus, the jointly established results from this roundtable are tangible for each participant and can be employed further in individual works on the topic.

Against the background of the continued and current prominence of research syntheses in the field of education and educational technology research, we assume that participants are roughly familiar with their basic principles, either from reading syntheses or from own experiences in the conduct of syntheses. In-depth knowledge is not required, however, and absolute beginners are more than welcome to join and then start on research syntheses being aware of its underlying structures.

In order to tailor the discussion to the participants' level of experience and expectations, and also plan for the printed materials in advance of the roundtable, it would be helpful to establish a registration system, if possible.

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