Tracing the social project of Networked Learning

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Abstract

This paper provides an outline of Networked Learning as a social project. Using a theoretical framework derived from activity theory, the paper reconstructs the existing narratives in key texts on a principled basis and traces the project through three phases whose core concepts, in turn, are educational openness, connections between network elements, and connections for particular purposes. Against the backdrop of an ongoing discussion of the meaning and nature of Networked Learning, the aim is to show how concepts of networked learning respond to social predicaments and are used as the basis for institution building, and to illustrate the kind of dynamics that have led to change in the past—as a potential guide to addressing upcoming challenges.

Keywords

activity theory, concepts, research community, social project.

Introduction

There is an ongoing discussion about the nature and meaning of Networked Learning (NL). The Networked Learning Editorial Collective, for example, note that the Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated the need to distinguish between different visions of future education; offering, as a resource for doing so, a new definition of Networked Learning (NLEC, 2021) which has attracted significant commentary (e.g., NLEC et al., 2021). As scholars of expansive learning have documented (Bligh & Flood, 2017), efforts to reconceptualise and expand fields of enquiry are often strengthened by examining the historical trajectory that has led to the present moment. This paper aims to contribute a distinct historical analysis for that purpose. The paper briefly outlines an analysis of NL as a social project, where 'social project' is taken to mean an ongoing range of actions, within a wider social formation, oriented around a developing concept. The aim is to understand NL as a dynamic, unfolding social construct with its own priorities and logic of development. The analysis deliberately foregrounds previous and ongoing attempts to define and contest NL's central concept. We notice how such attempts, which build on a prior history of development and engagement with other projects and which serve to foreground the subjectivity of different kinds of people, respond to the predicaments being posed at different times in the wider social formation.

Scholarly discussions about aspects of NL have been occurring for many years. Contributions, for example, have debated whether it is a theory, practice or pedagogy (Hodgson, McConnell & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2010); explored its relations to other scholarship on 'networks' (Goodyear & Carvalho, 2014); emphasised its distinctiveness from alternatives like 'e-learning' (Jones, 2015); and traced the associated theories, methods and educational sites of research (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018). The distinctiveness of the present work arises from an underlying conceptualisation of Network Learning as an unfolding succession of actions—particular people pursuing concrete goals via the use of tools—whose motivation and meaning arise from their position in a wider formation. Following recent discussion in activity theory, discussed further below, we characterise that wider formation as a 'social project'. Prior works have focussed on NL as a concept (Dohn et al., 2018; Öztok, 2020) or community (Hodgson & McConnell, 2018) in ways that emphasise continuity and essence, while others have provided historical overviews (Goodyear, 2014) or research syntheses (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018) that document considerable change without proffering an explanatory principle for that change. By analysing NL as a social project, we hope to highlight an unfolding dynamism, thereby shedding light on contested concepts and practices and the logic of their reciprocal change and development over time.

In what follows, we provide a condensed overview of three key phases of conceptual innovation or contestation in the social project of Networked Learning. We analyse the context, contours of practice and dilemmas confronted by the social project at those phases. Firstly, however, we describe how the account was produced, placing a particular emphasis on our theoretical framework.

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Analysing Networked Learning as a 'social project'

Our approach to this task involved a critical reading of selected Networked Learning texts, whose arguments were disaggregated and reassembled using a definite framework. To begin with, we consulted several key texts from the Networked Learning corpus: looking especially for papers which focus on defining the concept of Networked Learning, whether by putting forward a definition or offering a related critique. We also sought texts that provide a historical perspective. By examining texts with these three characters (definition, critique, historical overview) we hoped to construct a narrative attentive to change and development in conceptions over time. Starting from those initial texts, we used a snowball strategy to follow up appropriate further references. We were aware that this approach carried the risk of partial coverage, but we wished to focus on an emergent, critical analysis of key texts rather than systematic analysis.

The framework we used was that of the 'social project', which we derive from the activity theory tradition and especially the work of Blunden (2010; 2014; 2019). Activity theory is a mature theory with a strong emphasis on understanding how human relationships are influenced by technology (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2018). It has also been used extensively to study educational practices, with researchers valuing its grasp of sociocultural context, complexity and dynamics, and change and development (Bligh & Flood, 2017). Blunden's work reinterprets activity theory through a Hegelian-Marxist lens, for the purpose of reinvigorating it as a social theory that can support interdisciplinary debate about institutions and social formations (Blunden, 2010).

From a reading of Blunden's œuvre, we can understand a 'social project' as an "on-going, interconnected aggregate of actions" (2010, p. 256), whose implicit aims participants attempt to infer into a concept (2019, p. 45). The term actions, within activity theory, means people pursuing concrete goals in a time-bound way (Leontyev, 1977/2009). Actions derive meaning from their wider context: being enacted in social projects oriented around concepts. Social projects exist at very different scales: Blunden's examples include 'fundraising initiatives', 'Christianity', and 'activity theory' (cf. 2010, p. 257), with the latter an academic project closest to our own starting point in this paper. For present purposes we frame social projects as having seven core characteristics, which we summarise below in a necessarily abbreviated way. An expanded summary of the underlying notions is provided by Blunden (2014), while an earlier version of this framework is used by Bligh (2021) to analyse a different social project (one based around the OECD concept of 'Innovative Learning Environments'). The seven characteristics we focus on are as follows:

- *Predicaments*: constraints on the freedom of some people within a given social structure, taken as motivating the pursuit of the social project at a given stage;
- *Subjects*: people, driven to emancipate themselves from their predicaments, who come together to transform social life;
- *Concept*: the underlying purpose the social project is attempting to realise—its grounding principle;
- *Ethos*: the set of ethics mediating between the social project's concept and the actions undertaken, whose purpose is to regulate 'correct' conduct;
- *Sedimented artefacts*: those artefacts which 'objectify' particular aspects of the concept and/or ethos and which are used within the project to pursue action;
- *Engagement with institutions*: relations with other social projects (taken as 'institutions' from the vantage point of this social project), via which subjects seek to 'project' their concept into the social formation;
- *Lived experience*: subjects' encounters and confrontations with crises as the social project is enacted.

This framework aims to provide a concise basis for a dynamic view of social projects as they change and pass through stages of development. Predicaments impel some people to take action, becoming subjects as they differentiate themselves in the social formation. Subjects generate concepts which orient—however inadequately—their pursuit of emancipation. In pursuing the concept, an ethos is constructed and artefacts sedimented into the project that help disaggregate work into discrete actions. As subjects take action to 'project' (a verb) their concept through other institutions, into the wider social formation, they generate a succession of crises that expose to them the project's inadequacies. Those crises lead them to reframe the predicaments and concept, remediate the ethos and artefacts, recruit more subjects (and/or suffer personnel losses), and/or abandon the project. Social projects with sufficient success and longevity pass through 'institutionalising' phases of development, thereby taking their place alongside the other institutions that comprise the wider social formation. We attempt to retain this sense of ongoing dynamics in the account we present below, notwithstanding that concision compels us to 'focus in' on particular moments in the development of Networked Learning.

Overview

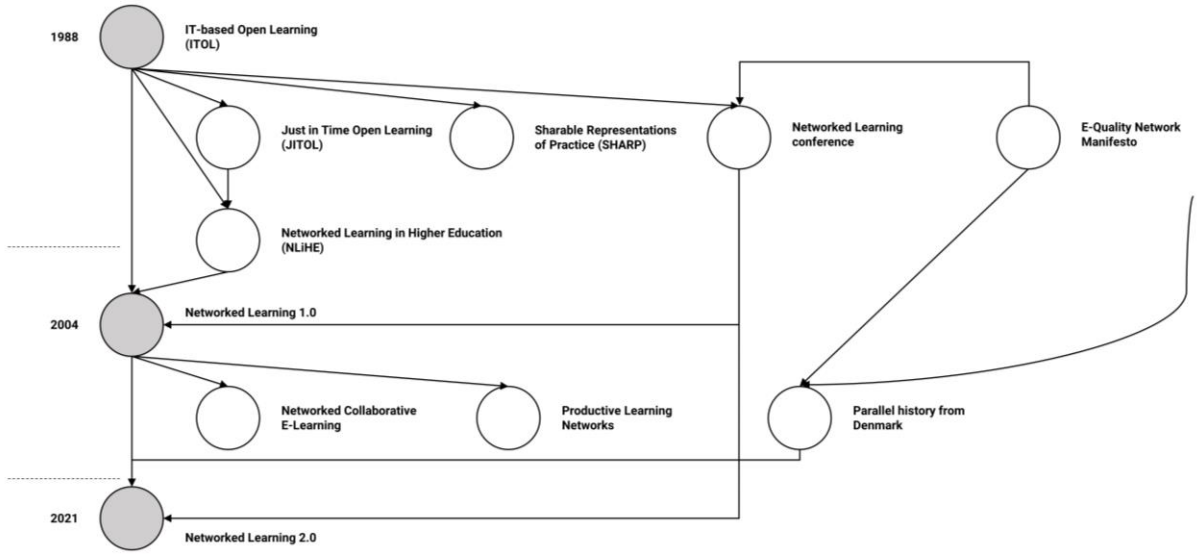

Figure 1: Schematic overview of the phases of the social movement and key actions

Our source texts present NL as a series of definitions, concrete research projects (some of which have a particularly 'canonical' status) and historical trajectories. We provide a schematic overview of the most prominent aspects of these narratives in Figure 1, with circles representing actions influential within the history of the project. We demarcate three distinct phases of development for the project, based on changes in the central concept, wose approximate boundaries are represented by horizontal dotted lines. Those phases are concerned, respectively, with educational openness; connections 'between' particular elements; and connections 'for' particular purposes. We analyse what it means for NL to constitute a social project oriented towards each of these concepts, in turn, below.

A social project for 'educational openness'

The first phase of the social project we consider is oriented around the concept of 'educational openness'. That concept is associated with the IT-based Open Learning (ITOL) project and its successors, which many source accounts locate at the origin of Networked Learning in the late 1980s (McConnell et al., 2012; Goodyear, 2014). Figure 2 provides a graphical overview of the social project at this stage of development, and introduces a format that we shall reprise again in subsequent sections: a set of social predicaments leads some people to express a specific kind of subjectivity; their conception of the problem is expressed in an ethos and through a set of gradually sedimenting artefacts; and their attempts to engage with other institutions leads to a lived experience of dilemmas and crises that motivate them to develop and change the project.

The *predicaments* that framed the ITOL work arose from confronting a set of ardent claims for ICT in higher education which seemed belied by the reality of the existing technological tools. The actual ICTs of the time were, as Goodyear (2014) puts it, "primitive, slow, unreliable and not widely available" (p. 23). Yet pioneers of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) were nonetheless conducting what McConnell et al. (2012) call a series of "experiments and initiatives", to support learning using "innovatory ICTs" (pp. 4-6). Such activities were visible in the UK (McConnell et al., 2012) and the USA (Goodyear, 2014). Given the "frustrating limitations of working with slow, unreliable connections, having to learn obscure sets of commands and managing the constraints of display technologies" (p. 30), such work had a considerable focus on technology itself (i.e., how to get educators and students to learn to use it). There were concerns that such testbed settings failed to provide a sufficiently "rich experience", especially by comparison with familiar face-to-face modes of education, yet it was demonstrated that a variety of tasks and outcomes could be achieved successfully, and many students perceived the possible benefits of the new technologies (McConnell et al., 2012). Widespread claims that education was on the cusp of being rendered "open" by technology arose from this mixed milieu of atypical testbed settings, specific and somewhat narrowly bounded instances of success and perceptions of future possibility.

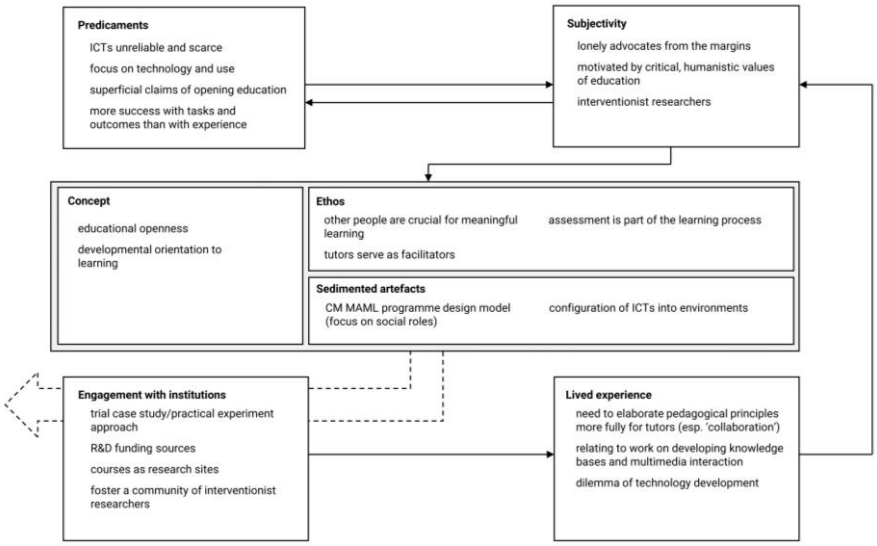

Figure 2: Networked Learning as a social project for educational openness

Such predicaments frame a social project to the extent that they stimulate a specific *subjectivity*, where those experiencing the predicament come to identify themselves as separate from the mainstream and commit to act with a new concept in mind (Blunden, 2019). In this instance, such subjectification arose from critical analysis of the above claims for rendering education "open". Boot and Hodgson (1987), for example, examined contemporary ODL initiatives critically and concluded that, in the main, they offered an orientation based on dissemination that provided an inadequate basis for future openness. They suggested that this merely "administrative openness" should be supplanted by a more "developmental" orientation if the claims of pioneers were to be rendered more meaningful. This was a minority stance, and was taken up by scholars who viewed themselves as "weird and lonely advocates" undertaking "work from the margins" (Goodyear, 2014, p. 34). They believed that that the validity of their views could only be demonstrated by practical demonstration, and thereby adopted what the present authors would call an interventionist stance.

The *concept* pursued by these lonely, interventionist advocates was "educational openness", named in opposition to the aforementioned "administrative openness". McConnell et al. (2012) describe this concept as an attempt to problematise uses of educational technology in ways responsive to "thinking stemming from the traditions of open learning and other radical pedagogies and humanistic educational ideas from the likes of Dewey, Freire, Giroux and Rogers" (p. 4). Educational openness deliberately implied a developmental orientation, in which learners define their own needs for learning and professional development (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 8). The social project thus set out "to optimise and research the growing potential and possibilities of rapid developments in ICT to offer greater degrees of educational openness" (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 6).

This work spawned (seemingly fairly quickly) an *ethos*: attempts to stipulate 'correct' practice. Specific ethics were that "other people [are] an inherent part of the learning venture, providing challenge and collaboration in the construction of personal meaning" (Boot and Hodgson, 1987); that assessment is "part of the learning process, based on collaborative assessment against mutually agreed criteria" (McConnell et al., 2012); and that "the tutor role within a development orientation was one of facilitator" (McConnell et al., 2012), with the implication that "[m]eanings he/she attributes to events [are] no more valid than anyone else's" (Boot and Hodgson, 1987). This ethos deliberately challenged conventional pedagogical power dynamics.

The *artefacts sedimented* into the fabric of the social project at this stage certainly included particular ICTs. Yet the most important artefacts were underpinning models that related different technologies within concrete designs. Both asynchronous and synchronous communication technologies were, in these models, integrated into environments which McConnell et al. (2012) describe as "an early variation of a VLE" (p. 8). As McConnell et al. (2012) assert, "it was not the technology itself that made the [work] more educationally open but the way it was able to contribute to implementing the learning design and processes". One influential model for this "electronic environment" was called "CM MAML". The model, reproduced in McConnell et al. (2012), focusses mainly on framing relations between learning sets, chat and discussion areas, bibliography and library services, shared project working spaces and notice boards (p. 7). As Goodyear (2014) notes, "the ITOL model foregrounded social design – focusing on roles for learner, tutor, counsellor and manager of the resources – and

placing the community of learners (rather than tutors or resources) at the center of things. […] Given the high value placed on students' choice of learning goals and methods, the ITOL model was relatively silent about task design" (p. 36).

The work of ITOL and its close successors also developed a particular strategy for *engaging with institutions*. Funding was seen as important, but was obtained from bodies with "R&D" and innovation remits, such as the UK's Training Agency and Joint Information Systems Committee, rather than scholarly research *per se*. Partly as a consequence, the work adopted an approach, which McConnell et al. (2012) call "trial case study" (p. 6) and Goodyear (2014) calls "practical experiments", that sought to bind together theoretical advance with the practical development of courses relevant to strategic funding remits, such as a Masters programme at Lancaster University. A sequence of such practical experiments was conducted, which, as McConnell et al. report, "helped create a community of researchers, albeit mainly within Europe, who were interested in networked, vocationally-oriented collaborative learning for adults" (p. 35).

In terms of *lived experience*, central dilemmas concerned how to guide practice (and, therefore, practitioners) in ways consonant with the project's concept and ethos. One response was the ongoing development of new models, a key example being McConnell's design for pedagogy and process developed around 1994 (McConnell et al., 2012). These new models sought to identify and address oversights highlighted by experience, such as the centrality of 'collaboration' to the developmental orientation of educational openness. Conversely, several projects (see Figure 1) explored new possibilities of incorporating novel media. The JITOL project, for example, focussed on knowledge sharing tools, while the SHARP project explored non-textual, multimedia interaction (Goodyear, 2014, pp. 36-37). The issue of exploring the opportunities arising from new media has remained core to the social project, but attendant attempts at developing new technologies have not remained so prominent. While such development was understandable—as Goodyear (2014) notes, "SHARP preceded YouTube just as JITOL preceded the World Wide Web" (p. 38)—from the vantage point of the social project's subsequent history it can be regarded as a misconception.

One core outcome of this unfolding social project was the formation of the Networked Learning conference. The conference put forward a particular perspective on the above dilemmas, being "founded in 1998 by David McConnell with the specific purpose of offering an international conference that focused primarily on the educational aspects of learning that is supported by new information technologies, rather than a focus on the technology itself, as was the case with many other conferences at that time" (McConnell et al. (2012, pp. 9-10).

A social project for connection (connection between)

The next phase we consider was oriented around the concept of 'connection'. We emphasise 'connection between' in the section heading to indicate a contrast with a later concept in which purpose (cf. 'connection for') becomes central. This stage of development becomes evident in the source material somewhere around 1998 (the first Networked Learning conference) or 1999 (the start of the particularly crucial Networked Learning in Higher Education [NLinHE] project which was, as McConnell et al. [2012, p. 6] emphasise, initially "based on the original ITOL model"). The present exposition and graphical representation (Figure 3) is deliberately structured to allow comparison with the preceding section.

Prominent *predicaments* confronting this stage of development were partly concerned with what Jones and Steeples (2002) frame as two 'convergences': between digital computing and telecommunications; and between distance learning and more conventional HE provision. With regard to the former, Jones and Steeples argue that "the emergence and growth of the Web in the 1990s has had a profound impact, making networks the center and focus of developments in the way in which computers themselves had provided a focus previously" (p. 1). Both convergences, in turn, were often positioned as part of a wider rhetoric about how the networked society would enable the "breaking down of barriers" (p. 2). Such barrier-breaking was seen as both opportunity and challenge for society, and as placing particular demands on education systems (Jones & Steeples, 2002, p. 3; Jones, 2015, Ch. 2). Dominant research emphasised 'learners' (individuals) gaining 'access' to rich 'resources' via technology networks seen as global and undifferentiated (Goodyear & Carvalho, 2014, pp. 12-13).

The *subjectivity* stimulated by these predicaments was driven by a sense that dominant discussion obscured the nature and reality of networks thesmelves. Goodyear and Carvalho (2014), for example, reinforce how a focus on individuals and resources makes unwarranted assumptions about how networks operate across different scales (such as the institutional or the global) (pp. 12-13). As for the previous stage of development, therefore, this sense of subjectivity involves an outsider challenge to mainstream conceptions. Yet by this stage the

preceding history had brought together groups of "practitioners already involved in networked learning" (Jones & Steeples, 2002, p. 6; McConnell et al., 2012). Furthermore, these people came together to challenge these concepts practically, by demonstrating the utility of alternative concepts, not merely rhetorically. It is noteworthy that the source texts emphasise this historically aggregating group (or community) without much reference to the motivations of those joining later. The main sense in the texts is of continuity and building on earlier project infrastructures. The formation of the NLinHE funded project, for example, had as its main aim to extend existing work "to help the UK HE sector come to a better understanding of the potential and problems of networked learning, particularly by attending to the student experience and to learning and teaching issues" (Goodyear et al., 2000, p. 3).

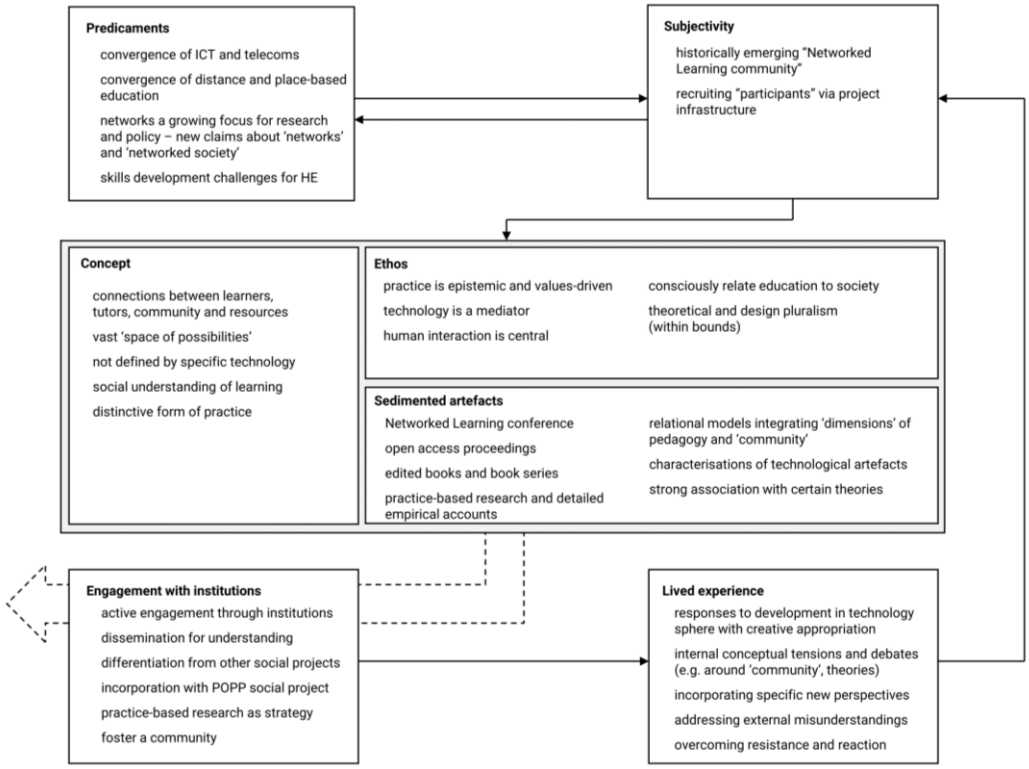

Figure 3: Networked Learning as a social movement for connection 'between'

The *concept* orienting the project at this stage is expressed in a widely cited definition arising from the NLinHE work (c.f., Goodyear et al., 2000, p. 5). The concept is one of connections (Jones, 2015); specifically, as the definition famously states, "between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources" (Goodyear et al., 2000, p. 5). The concept acknowledges the role of technology in promoting connections, but does not position it as primary; it is the interactions supported by connections, rather than technologies *per se*, that are seen as promising a vast "space of possibilities". Jones and Steeples (2002), writing in the book where the definition was first published widely, argue that the definition "points towards a social understanding of learning", where 'network' labels "the way in which different aspects of the process were linked together" (p. 2). The concept appears, therefore, as a development of the earlier concept ("educational openness") which uses 'network' to takes a more explicit stance on what were previously thought of as 'configuration' issues. The concept, moreover, was meant to support action in creating a "distinctive version" of mainstream approaches (then labelled "e-learning") (Goodyear et al., 2004, p.1).

The *ethos* regulating 'correct' practice stipulates explicit commitments to values and theory. Practice is viewed as epistemic, in the sense of being guided by knowledge and also producing it; 'correct' practice should address societal challenges, especially concerned with the nature of society and how learners might contribute to it (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 293). Technology, meanwhile, is viewed as a mediator sitting within connections. How this 'mediation' is conceived is not uniform within the project, and indeed it is another ethic that there is no one single canonical 'learning theory' for the social project (Jones, 2015). But there is a commitment that technology "does not and cannot determine learning, learning design or the learning process" (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 293; also Jones & Steeples, 2002 pp. 4-5). Instead, human interaction is central. As Goodyear et al.

(2004) state: “The centrality of human interaction, in our conception of networked learning, carries with it some pedagogical commitments and beliefs about learning. In short, there is no point to networked learning if you do not value learning through co-operation, collaboration, dialog, and/or participation in a community” (p. 2).

A wide range of *artefacts* are *sedimented* into the project throughout this stage. The project establishes a core conference, whose aim is “to bring networked learning research and praxis together” (de Laat and Ryberg, 2018, pp. 3-4). That conference makes a specific point of publishing online, open-access proceedings. Furthermore, a range of edited books eventually incorporated into a specific series, is established; these are viewed both as academic outputs, whose process of production accentuates “relationships and common understandings” within the project (Goodyear et al., 2004), and as a means of “dialog between the needs of higher education staff […] and the research community” (Jones & Steeples, 2002, p. 8). In a clear point of continuity with the prior history, these artefacts serve to convey (a) practice-based research and detailed accounts, which, as Levy (2004) notes, convey methodologically the politics and purposes of the project, and (b) “relational models” which aim to support design initiative in various ways (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 303). As noted above, it is part of the ethos of the project that no specific learning theory is prescribed (and, indeed, regular debates are ongoing that mirror the theoretical ‘canon disputes’ described by Bligh [2020]). Yet, as de Laat and Ryberg’s analysis (2018) concludes, “it seems clear that networked learning is strongly associated with theories [plural] that emphasise social, relational and cultural aspects of learning, be they ANT, activity theory, communities of practice, socio-material, social constructionist or constructivist perspectives” (pp. 17-18).

The project seeks actively to *engage through* (established) *institutions*, primarily universities and other organisations within the HE sector. Jones (2015), for example, discusses how NL recognises that “[i]nstitutions are sites for action in which people acting collectively and recursively can alter the conditions in which they find themselves” (p. 131); Jones argues that this view differentiates it from those research traditions that view networks as “personal and de-institutionalised” (p. 132). The NLinHE project explicitly adopted a strategy of “dissemination for understanding”, which involved workshops, conferences, seminar series, and producing a free, online, book-length resource for staff development (Goodyear et al., 2000, p. 3). Another mode of engaging with institutions has involved rhetorically positioning NL as separate from other social projects such as e-learning and CSCL (Steeples et al., 2004, p. 323; Jones, 2015, Ch. 1; de Laat & Ryberg, 2018, p. 6). Steeples et al. (2004), for example, disparage “e-learning” as a pragmatic project of quick-fixes and the translation of existing courses online (p. 323). Yet the project has also formed collaborative relations with other movements; in a particularly notable instance actually merging with another project of networked learning from Denmark and subsequently seeking to discover a “parallel history” based on project-based learning (McConnell et al., 2012). Throughout, practice-based research has remained a core strategy of the project (elaborately advocated by Levy, 2004), with the sedimented artefacts and institutional engagement strategies of the project serving as vehicles for further recruitment of subjects.

With regard to *lived experience*, one central dilemma has been how to respond to technological developments, such as the WWW and Web2.0, which have not been developed with the concept and ethos of this project in mind. That problem has been accentuated since the project, by this stage, seems settled against any focus on technology development—leaving it as a ‘taker’ of technology artefacts used by institutions and throughout wider society. McConnell et al. (2012) paint a picture of creative appropriation built on seeing networks as a useful metaphor rather than a fixed reality. On this view, the emergence of new technologies does not “cause” NL practices to be enacted or abandoned; but, instead, sets ongoing challenges of how to critically engage with what are often fairly mainstreamed technologies (p. 15). In parallel with the discussion about engagement with other scholarly projects, above, there has been a history of internalising conceptual tensions (e.g., debates on ‘community’ in Hodgson et al. [2012, p. 297] or ‘collaboration’ in Jones [2015]) and the incorporation of new perspectives, such as those on problem-based learning from the Danish social project. There has also been a necessity for dealing with encounters with practice situations in which entrenched values and expectations challenge the values of the social project. In some cases, the issue is one of addressing misunderstandings (such as determinism about technology or networks), but in other it is a matter of competing ethoi—for example, where students state a preference for instructional teaching or assessment regulations in a given organisation are closed or restrictive (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 298).

A social project for purposive connection (connection for)

The most recent phase of development we consider is oriented around the concept of ‘purposive connection’, i.e., one in which the purpose and character of network connections is viewed as paramount. This is an emerging phase of development and (as a reviewer reminded us) is far from uncontested. Yet the Networked Learning

Editorial Collective (NLEC, 2021) has suggested that the present conjuncture requires redefining (reconceptualising?) Networked Learning, and their suggestions for doing so have attracted significant commentary and response (e.g., NLEC et al., 2021). We explore the potential implications below, once again using a format (e.g., Figure 4) deliberately structured to allow comparison with the preceding analysis.

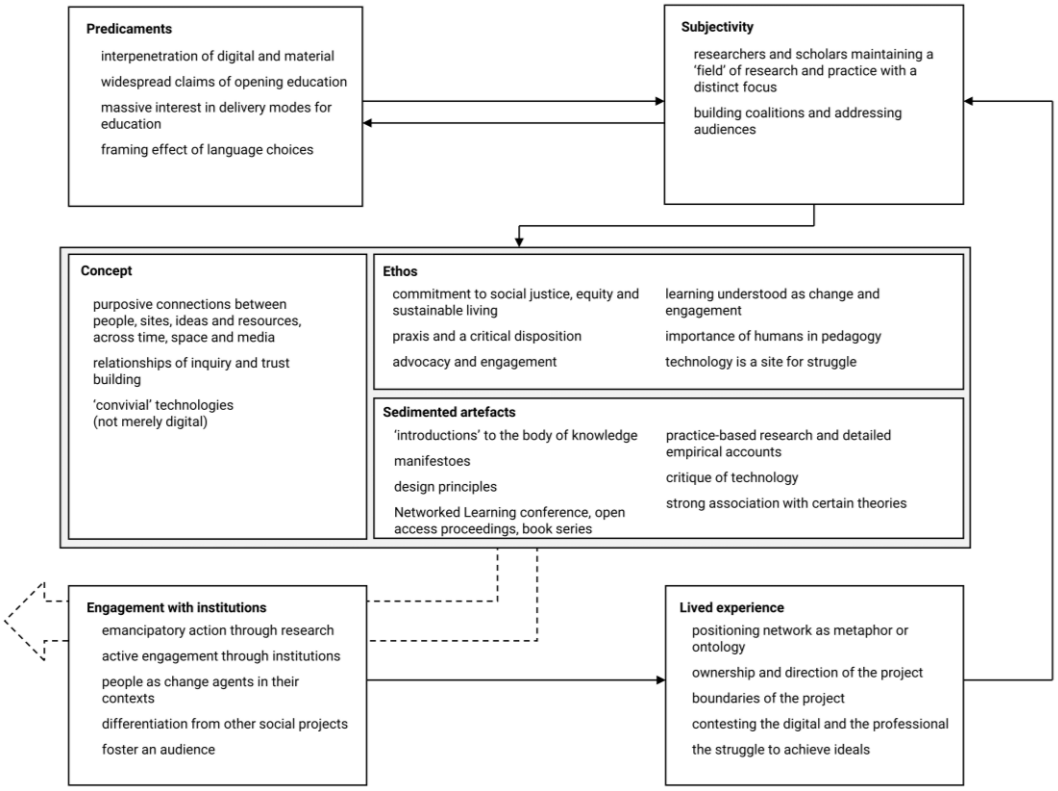

Figure 4: Figure 3: Networked Learning as a social movement for connection 'for'

The *predicaments* discussed at present seem, at first glance, to be straightforward 'successors' to earlier ones. For example, there is an ongoing interpenetration of digital and material that echoes the earlier 'convergences'. As NLEC (2021) put it, "spaces have become hybrid and digital infrastructures are taken for granted […] It is now rare to find real learning situations that can be described as 'purely face-to-face' or 'wholly online'. Rather, they involve complex entanglements of students, teachers, ideas, tasks, activities, tools, artefacts, places and spaces" (p. 313). There are also, as in the 1980s, rambunctious claims to be opening education (discussed in relation to MOOCs by de Laat & Ryberg, 2018, p. 18); and a widespread interest in education delivery modes, whether because of an increased emphasis on 'place' and 'mobility' (de Laat & Ryberg (2018, p. 18) or the Covid-19 pandemic (NLEC, 2021). Contrary to those earlier eras, however. technology is now more widely—albeit not universally—available, and NL itself has a more established character. Thus NLEC (2012) position the key challenges in terms of language contestation, especially in institutions: "As universities plan their ways forward, *how* they describe past, current and future arrangements may have significant consequences" (p. 313, emphasis in original).

The sense of *subjectivity* in response to these predicaments, however, is remarkably muted. NLEC's new definition seems aimed more at researchers—it "to be used" in systematic reviews and calls for contributions (NLEC, 2021, p. 319)—and less at practitioners, who might be "alert" to it (*ibid.*). Jones' (2015) alternative reflection more explicitly addresses a differentiated set of "audiences", including designers, para-academics and policymakers (p. 4), but how these people might act *through* the project is not explored (the word 'audiences' is telling). Who is to own and enact the project, rather than receive its knowledge, seems underspecified overall.

As for the previous phase, the project expresses its *concept* as a definition whose central axis is 'purposive connection'. NLEC (2021) state explicit aims: that networked learning's "roots in critical and emancipatory educational traditions" (p. 314) will be re-centred, that the connections comprising the networks will be recognised as *not* neutral, and that the concept will address society rather than merely formal education (p. 316). Other constructs used to concretise the concept are those of inquiry (an object for being purposive?) and trust (a

prerequisite). The concept responds to the interpenetration of digital and material, positioned above as a predicament, by appropriating Illich's notion of 'tools for conviviality', by which is meant artefacts that "lend themselves to creative use by networks of people who are joined in one or more shared social or political projects" (p. 318). Artefacts thus get centred, but defined more widely than 'digital tools'.

The *ethos* of the social project is proudly political: 'correct' practice is that which commits to a critical disposition, positions technology as a site for struggle, and prioritises issues of social justice, equity and sustainable living. The common thread seems to be a conviction that, as Jones (2015) argues, "Networked learning is not about futures determined by technology, nor is it about sudden and inevitable change. Fundamentally, [it is] about choices, and more specifically about choices made in complex historical contexts. Technology itself is a site of struggle" (pp. 235-236). A commitment to praxis (NLEC [2021] "require both inquiry and action", p. 322) is bolstered by calls for advocacy: "there is the matter of advocacy in the broader fields of educational policy and practice. A working description or definition of networked learning cannot do much on its own." (p. 320). A subtle shift from the previous ethos involves viewing 'correct' learning as being about engagement with, and change of, the world, within which new knowledge is produced (p. 321). Points of commonality with work in other traditions, such as 'expansive learning', are acknowledged by NLEC.

In this phase, the range of *artefacts* being sedimented into the project constitutes augmenting rather than supplanting earlier resources. Critical positions on technology will have continuing resonance, as will the construction of design principles, an association with a certain range of theories—and, naturally, the conference, proceedings, and book series. There is an intention to elevate the existing tradition of practice-based research and detailed empirical accounts to the status of "emancipatory" research (discussed below), while what seems more newly emphasised are introductions' to the already-established body of knowledge, presumably as a way of recruiting new researchers to the cause. A particularly strong argument is made for the role of 'manifestos', which, it is suggested, can serve "both to galvanize thinking and discussion (in their creation) and to represent the purposes and values of the field to others" (p. 320).

Mechanisms for *engagement with institutions* are not set out extensively, but a strategy of using research for emancipatory action is foregrounded: NLEC suggest that an "interest in forms of emancipatory action research, underpinned by a commitment to social justice and empowerment, needs to find a place. […] we should situate a revised definition within larger action-oriented projects and/or promote its application in broader educational, social and political movements (Jones 2019)" (NLEC, 2021, p. 317). One core aspiration seems to be to position students and teachers as change agents who can "help transform the character of […] educational institutions" (p. 318). As the responses to the definition make clear, this will continue to differentiate NL from some other social projects (NLEC et al., 2021). Reinforcing the points made above about subjectivity, one core aspiration is to foster both collective development and an 'audience' for the work of the social project; since networked learning should aim to be a "bazaar" not a "cathedral" (Hansen, in NLEC et al., 2021, p. 334). Yet mechanisms for relating subjects to audiences, or recruiting the former from the latter, are so far left unspecified.

The *lived experience* of this new phase of the project has, of course, yet to emerge. Yet the responses published in NLEC et al. (2021) offer pointers to the dilemmas that project members expect (or wish to raise). Some respondents critique the ownership of the definition (and, by implication, the project) (Bayne) and ask who is excluded (Bali et al.), reflecting our critique, above, about the present vagueness of the project's subjectivity. Others question the naïve view of connections in a world of online performativity where silence may be desired (Gourlay; Scott), and against a backdrop where a "dark side" of networks is becoming increasingly recognised (Cutajar; Lee & Bligh; Knox). Others engage in contesting specific constructs, whether by contrasting networks, connections and ecologies (Bozkurt; Carvalho); questioning the 'merely' metaphorical status of networks (Pischetola & Dirckinck-Holmfeld; Fawns & Ross; Schnaider); or seeking to recover the centrality of the 'digital' (Jones). The struggle to achieve networked learning is highlighted (Lee & Bligh; Knox), as is the ongoing requirement for professionals and professionalism in nurturing that struggle (Koole). Most commonly, there is a concern with the boundaries of the movement (Bayne; Hansen; Lee & Bligh; Thibault; Czerniewicz), with one area of debate about the desirability of expanding those boundaries or, indeed, seeking to purposefully exclude on grounds of ethos.

Concluding comments

In reviewing the collective responses offered in NLEC et al. (2021), Knox highlights the need to understand how the concepts of networked learning might be developed through practice—"by putting NL 'to work'" (p. 359). In this account, we have sought to demonstrate that such a relationship between concept and practice has

been developing within a social project for some decades, even if the standard accounts provided within the field do not adequately draw attention to that fact.

Against the backdrop of an ongoing discussion of the meaning and nature of Networked Learning, we have aimed to show how concepts of networked learning have always responded to social predicaments and been used as the basis for institution building, and to illustrate the kind of dynamics that have led to change in the past. Appreciating the history of this process of change and development can, we hope, better equip us for addressing upcoming challenges, whether by opening up the conceptual history to debate by a wider range of stakeholders, allowing newcomers to understand the reasons behind current formulations in the field, or by allowing those involved in researching NL to understand that for this field, as in all social endeavours, change is the only constant.

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