

# The ties that bind us as a community: a qualitative reflection on the networked learning research

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## Abstract

This manuscript was concerned with the extent to which the definition of the networked learning is manifest in the networked learning research. To this end, it explored how the definition is utilised in the design and application of the research. Technology (mediation and/or facilitation), connections (interactions), and network (community and/or context) were the three categories I explored the networked learning research. While the definition of the networked learning is open-ended in nature, the findings show that the networked learning researchers have enough commonality in their approach to the networked learning.

## Introduction

The first Networked Learning Conference took place in Sheffield in 1998 and the conference in Kolding in 2020 will be the 12th addition to the biennial conference series. As Heraclitus once said, change is the only constant in life; and indeed, much has changed in the world during that 21 years (by the time of this manuscript being written) and much has changed in the networked learning community. This manuscript is interested in documenting whether research in the networked learning community changed or whether it remains in line with its roots since the term networked learning is defined. In specific, it explores how the application of the concept of “networked learning” has utilised in the papers presented at the Networked Learning Conference series. I believe this is important for the networked learning community for at least two reasons.

First, practical reasons. The definition of networked learning is necessarily open-ended; thus, the variety of theories we apply, methodologies we employ, contexts we explore, technologies we use hinder us from defining our identity and communicating it to the outside world. We need to understand *what we do* as scholars and researchers interested in the theory and practice of networked learning. So far, attempts that analyses the research trends in the Networked Learning Conference series are scarce (see, for example, de Laat & Ryberg, 2018). The findings presented in that paper are invaluable and provide a great insight to the research within this community. However, those findings are based on the quantitative measures of word counts and, as the authors rightly acknowledge, what can be meaningfully drawn from that analysis is limited. This manuscript builds on the findings presented in de Laat and Ryberg (2018)’s work and qualitatively explores the ways in which the concept of networked learning is utilised.

Second, theoretical reasons. Practice is always epistemic (Hodgson & McConnell, 2018); therefore, we need to define the epistemology of our research practices if we are to define ourselves as a research community. We need to understand *what we do* to understand the epistemic practice of networked learning community. The work described in Hodgson and McConnell (2018) is the first ever attempt for defining and understanding the networked learning community as the knowledge community. While the findings presented in that paper provide a great insight to the characteristics of this community, data are collected from selected participants of the previous conferences. This manuscript builds on the findings

presented in that work, but it shifts the focus participants' attitudes to the papers presented in the conferences.

I acknowledge the strengths of the aforementioned studies; yet, I take a different approach in this work. In this manuscript, I qualitatively analyse how the application of the concept of “networked learning” was utilised in the proceedings published at the Networked Learning Conference series. In specific, I analyse the discourse in the papers presented semantically (Fairclough, 2001) and explore the theories, technologies, networks, and contexts in relation to the definition of the concept of the networked learning coined by Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, and McConnell (2004).

In what follows, I discuss the definition of the networked learning as it is the anchoring point by which the proceedings are analysed. Then, I reflect on the technologies (means by which such connections are facilitated and mediated), connections (interactions between a learning community and its resources), and the network (the space or community in which networked learning is conceptualised).

### **The Gold Standard: The definition of networked learning**

“Networked learning is learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (Goodyear et al., 2004, p. 1). While the authors did not claim (or intended) their definition to define the epistemology of the networked learning community, by and large, it is the most widely accepted explanation; and thus, it has been subject to scrutiny (Sinclair, 2018). It is worth to discuss when the concept is coined and why it is coined in that particular way. Online learning was just emerging both as a research discipline and a research space when 90s were closing and 2000s were starting. With the exponential growth of online technologies came the opportunities to think of educational practices in formats and ways that was not possible before (Harasim, 2000). The terms e-learning, web-based learning, and online learning were widely used to label any sort of teaching or learning activity that employs online technologies. The alluring impact of using technology for the sake of technology itself enforced researchers to define a distinctive theory of learning that necessarily values cooperation, collaboration, and dialog. The concept of networked learning is one answer for such an attempt. It differentiates itself from other applications of e-learning by stressing the importance of connections: interactions with others or online materials in isolation are not sufficient enough to constitute networked learning (Goodyear et al., 2004). Fundamental to this perspective is that learning is a matter of engagement with others in a community (Oztok, 2019).

The definition of networked learning implies certain theoretical beliefs about what networked learning is. The definition can be breakdown to three meaningful components: Technology, connections, and network. Below, I will explain how I conducted the analysis and then will present my findings in relation to these three components.

### **Method**

I downloaded 412 papers presented in the Networked Learning Conference series between 2004 and 2018; a timeframe between the definition was coined and the latest conference. I catalogued these papers using NVivo and, then, I searched the term “networked learning” in order to narrow my focus down on papers that makes explicit references to networked

learning. About one third of the papers were eliminated during this process. Then, I searched the remaining 266 papers using the terms “technology”, “connections”, and “network” in three separate searches per the reasons explained above. For each category of analysis (technology, connections, and network), I employed the descriptive and critical discourse analysis in order to construct meanings across different papers (Fairclough, 2003). Several meanings emerged through this process and I combined, compared, and contrasted them in order to create more comprehensive yet more distinct meanings. The findings presented in this manuscript does not report each and every single paper that deals with technology, connections, or network; rather, the findings summarise what these terms mean and how they are utilised in research. In this sense, the papers that are cited in this manuscript typically represent the general approach rather than they stand out because offer a counterargument or an unorthodox approach.

Needless to say, findings in this manuscript should be considered in relation to the limitations and biases in my analysis. First, I only analysed the papers that specifically uses the term/concept “networked learning”. This was purely a logistic decision. Second, I only explored how the concept of networked learning shaped the design and delivery of the research without really making any judgements on the research itself. Third, I based my judgements on Goodyear et al. (2004)’s definition of the networked learning without considering whether the author(s) in those papers I analysed subscribe to that definition or not.

Although not necessarily a limitation, it is also worth acknowledging that I am a relatively new member of this community. My peripheral membership, surely, means that I cannot know the previous discussions and debates among the participants, which had an impact on my capacity to understand the spirit of the past conferences. On the other hand, I aimed to use my “fresh look” into the networked learning community as an opportunity to question the established practices and agreed-upon meanings. In other words, I tried exploiting the advantages of being both an insider and outsider in my analysis. Lastly, I can only reiterate the words of others whom I use their work as a point of guidance for my sense-making (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018; Hodgson & McConnell, 2018): this is not an authoritarian analysis; but a step towards for better understanding ourselves as a knowledge community.

## Technology

The definition of the concept of the networked learning does not specify certain technology or favour one over the other. Nevertheless, it tailors a certain role for technology: it should be used to promote connections.

The analysis of the proceedings revealed that networked learning researchers rely on *online learning* to promote connections. However, I concur with (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018) that online, distance, and blended learning are often used synonymously. The interchangeable use of these concepts surely blurs the distinction among these different forms of mediation. To be fair, I acknowledge that these modes of delivery are inherently very close to each other. Yet, the implication is that the networked learning research does not clearly tease out which practices best optimise the connections that serves as the social fabric for the networked learning to occur. Despite the confusion with the terminology, it was evident that the members of the networked learning community continue to conceptualise and utilise the technology in line with the original definition; that is, technology is tailored for mediating connections among participants and resources (for example, Creanor & Walker, 2010; Zenios & Steeples, 2004).

Another important finding was that the networked learning researchers are quick to experiment with the affordances of emerging technologies. In specific, when a new form of technology emerges (for example, mobile learning) or a new platform gains world-wide popularity (for example, MOOCs), that particular technology is scrutinised for its capacity to utilise connections within a learning community (see, for example, Czerniewicz, Glover, Deacon, & Walji, 2016; G. Jones, Edwards, & Reid, 2008; Mackness & Pauschenwein, 2016). The findings showed that researchers discussed the ways which such technologies can best support networked learning activities.

Interestingly, in other times, technology remains mostly invisible. That is, a discussion on the role of technology is less prominent when the technology or the platform being utilised is already known in the community. The analysis did not yield an immediate conclusion, but one suggestion is that the interest in that particular technology does not wane, but it becomes normalised enough, whereby a great deal of discourse focuses on actual teaching or learning practices using that particular technology rather than studying the technology itself.

As discussed above, the definition of networked learning was born out of attempts that goes beyond using technology for the sake of it. It might be concluded that after two decades, the networked learning community continues with this stance towards the use of technology.

## Connections

It is beyond doubt for the networked learning community that the connections between community members and its learning resources are the key for networked learning occur. The analysis suggested that orchestrating connections to form a learning community has always been the interest for the researchers in the networked learning community.

The results concurred that the networked learning is closely aligned with other sociocultural theories of learning (C. Jones, Ryberg, & de Laat, 2015), including social constructionism, activity theory, constructivism, and actor-network theory just to name a few. This was evident in the papers I analysed. While the variety of perspectives both enriches and blurs the conversation on conceptualisations of connections, these theories are fundamental for understanding *what we do* as the community of networked learning researchers. The results showed that the networked learning research studies how knowledge is cultivated (Gerdes, 2008), utilised (Dohn, 2012), and distributed (Carmichael & Tracy, 2018) within a community of learners (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014). The point of which these theories part ways from one another is how they operate and configured. Below, I will summarise some of the most commonly used theories.

In constructivism, knowledge is believed to be constructed individually and resided in people's head; thus, those networked learning researchers who adopted constructivism probe how knowledge can be mobilised and shared (Brown, Smyth, & Mainka, 2006). Actor-network theory puts more emphasis on social ties. It argues that nothing exists outside constantly shifting networks of relationships. How people interact within these networks of relationships carry the utmost importance. Those networked learning researchers who adopted the actor-network theory describe how objects, ideas, and processes create the social fabric for networked learning (Roberts, 2004). Activity theory recognise human activities as a systemic and socially situated phenomenon. This theoretical framework aims to address the sociocultural factors by bridging the gap between the individual subject and complexity of real-life activities. Networked learning researchers who adopt this framework regard

connections as culturally mediated human activity or collective system (Czerniewicz et al., 2016). They discover patterns of interactions (Guldberg, 2010) and explore the nature of them (Karasawidis, 2008) with a particular focus on the use of tools (Kaulback, 2012). By and large, other theories can be studied under the umbrella term of sociocultural perspectives. In those studies, the focus is on the social learning activities within a community – albeit *sociocultural* is used loosely as a unit of analysis. That is, theoretical discussions are relatively invisible or largely implied. It is important to note that these studies are not necessarily weak but rather they are not determined (and thus limited) by what theories dictate.

It is possible to conclude that the networked learning researchers study connections in line with the original definition. Interactions with resources in isolation are not sufficient to constitute networked learning; interactions should connect learning community and its learning resources (Goodyear et al., 2004). This remains to be the guideline for the networked learning researchers. Regardless of the learning theory that is being used, the networked learning community tackles with the ways in which connections are created, sustained, and utilised for sharing knowledge and experience in order to form a learning network. How this should happen and what impact it has on learning is rather a matter of theoretical standpoint. While I appreciate the richness of perspectives, arguably, the variety of approaches blurs the boundaries of the networked learning community. Perhaps, this is where the networked learning community should concentrate its focus. The original definition does not make any reference to what learning is but rather speaks about what network is. How to design networked learning should not be an open-ended endeavour but a careful pedagogical design, distilled through a clear understanding of what learning is.

## Network

The original definition regards network as the connections between a community and its learning resources. In broader terms, the network is the context in which learning occurs (Goodyear et al., 2004). The findings suggest that community is the concept by which *networked* is overwhelmingly associated with and studied through. This is not entirely surprising given the concept of community resonate well with the concept of network. The question, then, is whether network and community are the same concepts or whether every community can represent networked learning.

Etymologically, community is derived from the Latin word “*communis*”, which means common. The idea of commonality is inherent in the meaning of community. According to the Oxford Online Dictionary, community is a group of people with common values, attitudes, and interests. What are the common values, attitudes, and interests the networked learning researchers study? The findings suggest the ties that binds a community is conceptualised in three different ways: sense of community, pedagogical activities (e.g., collaboration or cooperation), and socialisation. These three categories should not be understood in opposition with each other or as mutually exclusive.

By and large, sense of community attracted the most attention from the networked learning researchers. It refers to the degree of one’s sense of belonging to a community (Oztok, 2016). The pedagogical value of the sense of community has long been established within the community of the networked learning. It allows people to perceive the networked environment as a space, wherein the members can develop relationships among one another (Carson, 2014). Since the definition of the networked learning strongly argues for establishing healthy connections among participants, the concept of the sense of community

provides means by which the networked learning researchers can study the quality of those connections. Dialogue, sense of isolation, consensus, trust, and identity are among the directions that the networked learning researchers explored in relation to the sense of community (see, for example, Brouns & Hsiao, 2012; Davis, Cronin, & Seitzinger, 2014; Tremblay, 2018).

The networked learning research links the concept of community with cooperative and collaborative forms of learning (Goodyear et al., 2004). This is reasonable since the pedagogical principles underlying these learning activities are inherently concerned with how people engage with and react to each other in group-based work. The networked learning researchers, then, study dialogue (Crosta & Gray, 2014), knowledge construction (L. H. J. Lee, Rahmat, Lim, Lin, & Tan, 2018), cognition (Parchoma, 2016), high-level thinking (Ramanau, Sharpe, & Benfield, 2008), and critical thinking (Corich, 2006). The findings suggest that for the networked learning researchers, “network” meant approaches to teaching and learning that involve a group of people working together towards a common goal, whether this common goal is learning a subject, solving a problem, or creating an artefact.

Socialisation refers to the process of learning to enact in a way that is acceptable to society; a process of internalising the norms of a community (Oztok, Lee, & Brett, 2018). Although the term socialisation is not widely used in the networked learning community, research concerning how people create and sustain social relationships (Simmons, Parchoma, & Koole, 2018), whether these relationships are strong or weak (K. Lee, 2018), and whether there is a sense of coherency and membership within a learning community (Allan, 2006) can be grouped under socialisation. I believe it is an important term as socialisation can provide means to discuss whether the connections between community members and its learning resources are meaningful enough to form a network.

Of course, it is erroneous if we only focus on the benefits associated with the concept of network (Oztok, 2019). While the research concerned with the exclusive nature of group work is not new to the community of the networked learning, it is thin in volume and nature. The findings suggest that the negative impact of normalisation is only studied under sense of community (Johnson, 2012). What impact does social hierarchy have on pedagogical practices (and outcomes) and how to address these problems remains to be largely understudied. It is possible to summarise that the networked learning research can be more attentive to the questions concerning social justice in group work.

Lastly, as I have argued above, the findings suggest that community is the concept by which *networked* is overwhelmingly associated with and studied through. However, there can be other forms of network. What are the alternative frameworks for and approaches to the networked learning? How can the networked learning research can go beyond the concept of community in its understanding of what networked is? Perhaps, these are the questions that the networked learning community can pay more attention to.

## Conclusion

This manuscript was concerned with the extent to which the definition of the networked learning is manifest in the networked learning research. To this end, it explored how the definition is utilised in the design and application of the research. Technology (mediation and/or facilitation), connections (interactions), and network (community and/or context) were the three categories I explored the networked learning research. While the definition of the

networked learning is open-ended in nature, the findings show that the networked learning researchers have arguably enough commonality in their approach to the networked learning.

In my approach the definition of the networked learning, I wanted to explore who we are and what we do as the networked learning researchers. The intention was to better understand ourselves both as a knowledge and a research community. I never aimed to draw lines on what we do and set boundaries on who we are as a community. I do not see the membership in binary terms of being in or out, but I wanted to use *who we are* and *what we do* as pockets of interests by which to negotiate our membership with the community. In this sense, the findings in this manuscript concur with the perspectives from one of the previous attempts of studying the networked learning research, that is worth citing in detail (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018, p. 30):

from a theoretical perspective it seems clear and that network learning is strongly associated with theories that emphasise social relational and cultural aspects of learning ... it's a field interested in community oriented and collaborative forms of learning ... it's a field that been interested in digital technologies also reroutes its interest or object of study is the technological landscapes and trends change.

To a great extent, the findings in this manuscript provide further qualitative explanation to these claims.

The notion of “network” is more prominent than “learning” in the definition of the networked learning, and this was evident in the approaches to the networked learning. Learning is studied under various theories; and in accordance, the networked learning researchers adopted numerous ways of studying learning. The findings in this research concur that “networked learning is not a unison theoretical perspective, but rather is a theoretical perspective that is composed by or underpinned by a range of other theoretical outlooks” (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018, p. 9). There are two important implications of this.

First, despite the variety of perspectives available, the networked learning community inclines towards the learning theories that support relational perspectives within sociocultural settings. Yet, there is a need for more discussion on learning. What do the members of the networked learning community mean when they study learning? This is an important point of further conversation since designing networked learning should not be an open-ended endeavour but a careful pedagogical design, distilled through a clear understanding of what learning is.

Second, despite the prominence of the notion of network, the findings suggest that community is the concept by which *networked* is overwhelmingly associated with and studied through. There is a need for a discussion and debate on other forms of network. What are the alternative frameworks for and approaches to the networked learning? This is an important question if the networked learning research is going to adapt itself to the changing nature of the educational uses of technologies.

I should, perhaps, end this manuscript with some provocative thoughts to catch some attention. This is not to satisfy a narcissistic urge but to start a discussion that is long due. I will not reiterate questions whether networked learning is a unified field of study or whether it is an unbounded dialogic space (Sinclair, 2018). I will instead try to strengthen the ties that bind us. The findings of this manuscript warrant for two agenda items for the society of the

networked learning. First, we need a more nuanced definition of networked learning, one which accounts for the current practices where we are almost always “connected” to each other due to the ubiquitous nature of digital technologies. Second, we need to put the concept of learning to the centre of our attention and debate, discuss, and hopefully agree upon what it means and how we can research it. The current definition, perhaps, served its term and deserve a well-earned retirement?

I hope this manuscript will spark curiosity and encourage others join the debate and discussion.

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