

# ***Networked learning & the challenges for Higher Education: Linking today with the future***

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## **Introduction**

The possibility of connectivity that digital technologies and the Internet have brought for students and their peers, and for faculty and their colleagues, is analysed in this paper from 3 perspectives: Impact on knowledge access, impact on instructional design, impact on teaching and learning. Papers presented in this symposium suggest that digital technologies have contributed to the radical transformation of these areas, particularly in the last decade. An emphasis is made by the authors in this panel with regard to the importance of focusing on the role that networked learning plays when defining content, design, and learner-faculty interactions inside and outside the classroom.

Participants in the symposium will be invited to reflect on the research and policy analysis presented by the authors in the symposium and will be then invited to participate in the discussion by sharing their experiences on the topic. Paths for further examination will be discussed and a panorama for future exploration will be determined.

## ***Virtual networks and the new definition of Knowledge: Towards a policy analysis***

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The radical transformation of knowledge access and knowledge production for teaching and learning that higher education institutions around the world are currently experimenting due to the use of technologies and virtual networks, constitutes a platform from which to build new networked learning and new academic interactions. The possibility of instant access to multiple resources of information is transforming the way users around the world access, produce and learn knowledge. However, this significant transformation has not always been echoed by a formal policy agenda at the institutional level. There is still a big gap between technology applications in higher education, and the creation and application of policy strategies to enhance and to regulate these interactions. This paper explores the impact of the Internet in teaching and learning processes at the start of the 21st century and examines the opportunities to stimulate discussion towards policy creation. A discussion about Internet access and differences between Universities in Europe and Africa is introduced. The authors examine the connectivity between users, contents and technologies, and provide a platform for reflection from which to examine the role of the Internet and the creation of virtual environments as important participants of this transformation. Complex processes of knowledge access and knowledge transformation are explored in the framework of policy analysis within higher education institutions around the world.

## ***Applying Universal Design for Learning guidelines to a blended learning course for prospective teachers***

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Universal Design has been studied and applied in Education for some decades now, yet it seems still far from becoming a standard in instructional design practices. Teaching educators and prospective teachers how to make a curriculum accessible to students with different needs seems to be a priority for making instruction more and more accessible and inclusive is relevant in a Networked Learning perspective. The redesign of a blended learning course about Educational Technology to incorporate Universal Design principles is presented here. The participants, who were prospective teachers attending the fourth of a five-year graduate programme, were taught how to introduce Educational Technology in their lesson plans according to some basic principles of Universal Design, while the same principles were actually being used with them. Pre- and post-course survey data show an increase in various aspects, but mainly in the perceived self-efficacy in using Educational Technology, and in performance outcome expectations. The vast majority of participants also stated that the difficulty level of the course was not too distant from their confidence level. Some considerations are finally exposed, about the design challenges that are involved in universally designing a blended learning course.

## ***The role of teachers in professional studies and perspectives on networked learning***

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This paper examines the roles of teachers in higher education with regard to networked learning. Based on the assumption that learning is a social endeavour that incorporates both individual learning and learning with and from others, learning requires a relation between the learner and the subject, a relation between the learner and others, and last but not least a relation between the learner and the teacher. While lots of attention has been put on learning not least from a social constructive view on how to establish a learning environment in order to support learning processes, the central role of teachers in this process has often been neglected. Starting from this perspective the paper presents findings from an explorative qualitative study on the roles of teachers in learning processes in the context of higher education, more precisely in professional studies in Germany. Based on the study's findings future perspectives for the roles of teachers in higher education with regard to networked learning are outlined.