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# Dark Sides, Tyranny, and Dragons
## Attending to the Shadows of PBL

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## Abstract

This article introduces work originating from the area of Networked Learning that seeks to problematise and critically discuss notions such as 'collaboration', 'community', and 'participation'. It argues that there is a dark and shadowy side to these ideals, which we need to attend to in a reflexive manner. To this end, it introduces ideas of heteropian spaces and emphasizes the value of working with difference, and consent over consensus.

**Keywords**: Tyranny of Participation; Networked Learning; PBL; Heterotopian Spaces; Collaboration

## Introduction

While the title could suggest this paper to be a review of the latest season of 'House of Dragons', this is not the case, and if this is your reason for reading the paper you are probably going to be somewhat disappointed with the actual level of dragons and tyrants.

In this paper, I highlight work stemming from the area of Networked Learning that seeks to problematise and critically discuss notions such as 'collaboration', 'community', and 'participation'. It is not work specifically from within the area of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), but from a neighbouring field which I believe

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can contribute to our PBL thinking and practice, as there are many overlaps in the educational philosophies (McConnell et al., 2012; Ryberg, 2019).

## A bit of background

The work I discuss was something that personally made me think differently about 'collaboration' and 'participation'. I came across it early in my research career (as a PhD student (2004-2007)), but it has since stayed with me as a reminder to reflect critically on taken-for-granted assumptions (although, as many others, I do not excel at this). I encountered the work as we were preparing for a symposium for the Networked Learning Conference 2008. In this context, symposium means "a meeting or conference for discussion of a topic" rather than "a convivial meeting for drinking, music, and intellectual discussion among the ancient Greeks" (though, as it happens, the conference was held in Greece). In preparing for the symposium, two authors (Debra Ferreday and Vivien Hodgson) shared their ideas around the paper, that came to be titled "The Tyranny of Participation and Collaboration in Networked Learning" (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). I was initially baffled about this. How could 'participation' and 'collaboration' be tyrannical? Coming from Aalborg University where collaboration amongst students is a prominent feature this seemed to call into question the very fabric of PBL. Adding to this, the idea also seemed to run counter to the strong focus on collaboration within Networked Learning.

To give a quick introduction to Networked Learning, it is an area of research specifically interested in how digital technologies can support and expand education and learning. The term networked on the one hand suggests technological mediation, but simultaneously stresses networks as connections between people. An early definition of Networked Learning read:

> "[...] learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) 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)

The idea of Networked Learning was formulated as an alternative to prevailing practices within 'online learning' where there was a strong focus on enabling individuals' access to learning resources and assessment, but less attention to collaboration and community as vehicles for learning. Networked Learning is rooted in ideals of participation, dialogue, collaboration, as well as promoting emancipatory and democratic values in education (Networked Learning

Editorial Collective (NLEC), 2021). So how could participation and collaboration be tyrannical?

## Tyranny of Participation

The idea of 'tyranny of participation'[1] is explored in two papers by Ferreday and Hodgson. The first being 'The Tyranny of Participation and Collaboration in Networked Learning' (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008) the second 'Heterotopia in Networked Learning: Beyond the Shadow Side of Participation in Learning Communities' (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010). The latter being a revised and expanded version of the first (a director's cut one might say). The authors initially state that the idea of collaboration has become entrenched within Networked Learning:

> "The importance assumed for collaboration within NL [Networked Learning] has almost become ubiquitous and is frequently seen as unquestionably desirable. This can result in a view of participation that sees it as an utopian ideal and which does not acknowledge what some authors have referred to as the 'dark side' of critical pedagogy and participation." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008, p. 640)

It seems relevant to draw a parallel to PBL research and practice, where the notion of collaboration is also prevalent (Kolmos & Graaff, 2003; Ryberg, 2019; Savery, 2006). Though PBL can be orchestrated in many ways, it often includes collaboration between students. Likewise, the idea of participation is integral to PBL, and students are expected to be actively participating and take ownership of the learning process. This with a basis in democratic and emancipatory ideals from critical pedagogy where students engage in and are envisioned to be empowered through addressing relevant societal problems (this at least is a strong undercurrent in the problem-oriented project pedagogy developed in Roskilde and Aalborg University).

In exemplifying the dark or shadow sides of participation or participative pedagogies, Ferreday and Hodgson (2008, 2010) turn their eyes onto the educational programme MA in Management Learning and Leadership (MAMLL) – a programme built on networked learning principles, participation and collaboration:

> "MAMLL participants work together in a self-managed learning community committed to engaging with process as well as content. Within this learning community you are expected to be responsible for your own learning and also to share responsibility for other people's

learning. The differing experiences and knowledge of all members of the community are seen as an important asset for the whole community and for the learning that takes place within it. […] You are expected to participate in this learning environment throughout the two years." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p. 5)

As in many orchestrations of PBL, students in MAMLL were expected to support each other, collaborate, and take responsibility for not only their own learning, but also for others (referred to as 'the spirit of MAMLL'). However, some students were not quite comfortable within this frame, and it was not uncommon that some students were labelled as unsupportive:

"Experience of MAMLL suggests that in most cohorts there are a few students who are regarded as in some way different and/or unsupportive by other members of the group. […] it is not uncommon, towards the end of the programme when participants choose dissertation learning sets, for other participants on the programme to try to avoid these individuals. This minority of students come to be seen over a period of time by the majority as different or unsupportive, largely as a result of low or perceived weak participation in their previous learning sets." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, pp. 5–6)

This citation might also ring familiar to PBL researchers and practitioners. For those who have organised group formation processes in Aalborg University, this might be a painfully well-known scenario. Some students become alienated and excluded from the wider community, due to their participation not being aligned with other's expectations of what constitutes 'good participation'. In this way, ideals of participation become problematic, and while it might be valuable to have an 'esprit de corps' such an ideal can also hold a dark or shadowy side. For example, in Aalborg University international students not well acquainted with project-based group work have been known to struggle in making sense of the demands and/or implicit expectation posed to them by other students or supervisors – sometimes leading to exclusion (Chen et al., 2020). There can be many reasons why a student does not participate in the circumscribed ways; perhaps they are single-parents not able to 'grind' in the late afternoon or evenings, they may have experienced loss in the family, suffer from anxiety, coming from a different educational tradition etc. Such students may not experience the 'esprit de corps' as valuable, healthy, and helpful norms, but rather as a tyranny of participation.

"Ironically then, this vision of the perfect community can become a means of reinforcing a dominant discourse, albeit one based on ethics of mutuality and participation, which can become rather unreflexive about its own lack of engagement with 'difficult' intercultural or other

idiosyncratic issues, and which may be avoiding understanding and/or acknowledging other styles of learning or expecting ambivalence and contradictions to be present." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p. 8)

The purpose of Ferreday & Hodgson highlighting participation as potentially tyrannical and problematising notions of collaboration and community is not do discourage or to dismiss either collaboration or participation as valuable pedagogical approaches. Rather, the intention is to draw attention to the dark or shadow sides of what we might unreflexively accept as 'unquestionably desirable' and caution that we may be guiding students into difficult waters.

## Here be dragons

For the readers eagerly awaiting dragons they now enter the scene through the work of Linda Perriton & Michael Reynolds (2014) and the chapter titled: 'Here Be Dragons': Approaching Difficult Group Issues in Networked Learning. They explain the title in a note:

"The phrase 'Here be dragons' is associated with warnings written, or mythical creatures presented in pictorial form, on mediaeval maps where the cartographer wanted to denote unexplored or dangerous territories. Group dynamics are often experienced as unexplored or dangerous territory." (Perriton & Reynolds, 2014, p. 109)

As Perriton and Reynolds discuss, group dynamics may be uncharted waters for many students. But equally for tutors/supervisors, who also find it difficult to navigate these waters. In Aalborg University this is an issue that often surfaces from the murky waters, when discussing how to supervise students' project work. Supervisors hold different views on how much (or even if) the supervisor should engage with group dynamics (e.g. conflicts). Some supervisors focus mainly on the subject and discipline related matters, whereas others feel they should engage more in the group dynamics. Common for both groups, however, is that they often feel ill-equipped to engage with this. An issue that has and will become more pronounced, as students are becoming more diverse e.g. including more neuro-divergent students and students with other needs. While there may be different opinions among supervisors about their individual responsibilities in relation to social dynamics in groups, I believe, much like Perriton and Reynolds, we do have an institutional responsibility:

"Our premise is that if we make use of collaborative pedagogies we have a responsibility for contributing some way of making sense of these dynamics and for making this available to the students involved where appropriate and practical to do so." (Perriton & Reynolds, 2014, p. 124)

We need to support students in taming or riding the wild dragons group work can be (whether they are more benevolent dragons of 'taming your dragon' or the fearsome Game of Thrones-type dragons). In the following, I discuss some ways to attend to the dark or shadow sides of PBL.

## Heterotopian spaces

In their papers, Ferreday & Hodgson (2008, 2010) discuss the idea of heterotopian learning spaces adopted from Foucault (yes, not only dragons and tyrants, now I am also dragging Foucault into this). Heterotopian spaces are:

> "[…] spaces which can be defined and described by the network of relations within them but remain open-ended ambivalent and contradictory places where disruption and discomfort can be expected." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p. 4)

They stand in contrast to (utopian) spaces where there is an assumed or aspirational 'esprit de corps', community-feeling, mutuality, equality etc. which as illustrated by Ferreday and Hodgson can turn into a tyranny of participation. The idea of heterotopian spaces sounds quite abstract, but to exemplify the idea, Ferreday & Hodgson refer to a thread one of the MAMLL students initiated in the online discussion forum, basically just stating 'Can we take 5 minutes out of academia for a social thread?'. This garnered multiple responses, and became a space for sharing exhaustion, concerns, casual joking, and the difficulties reconciling family, work and MAMLL-life.

In a similar fashion, I have encountered groups in Aalborg University that practice 'Well-being Wednesday' ('Trivels-Torsdag' in Danish). This is a space carved out during the week to talk about social aspects, group dynamics, and raise issues concerning the collaboration. This can potentially be a space to explore tensions and discomfort in a group, as heterotopian spaces are not necessarily comfortable or easy:

> "Whilst heterotopian spaces might feel safe, participation in such a space is always going to be disturbing and ambiguous – 'they offer no resolution or consolation, but disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves – they hold no promise … of liberation' (2006: 87). There is no right way to act and behave in such spaces but they offer a space which is not separate from dominant structures and ideology but rather go against the grain and offer lines of flight." (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p. 11)

Thus, heterotopian spaces are places where different voices may emerge, without necessarily tuning into the same melody, which is another point to be raised.

## Consensus, Difference, Consent

In an earlier paper Hodgson & Reynolds (2005) explore similar issues through discussing the problematic aspects of 'community', and how this can be associated with consensus and a pressure to conform (what Hodgson later explore as the 'Tyranny of Participation'). Much as participation, community, and collaboration, consensus is often seen as unquestionably desirable; groups need to achieve consensus on their problem formulation, agree how to collaborate, how to manage and resolve conflicts etc. However, consensus often glosses over and buries differences. A group may have achieved 'consensus' that they meet later and work until evening. However, such apparent consensus may conceal that two out of five group members are not very happy with this arrangement, but realise they are outnumbered and choose to conform. In contrast, one could imagine how a stronger focus on exploring differences among the students could result in two of the students meeting earlier and working together, being joined by the three others, who then work until evening (with the two early-birds leaving in the afternoon). While a banal or mundane example, it illustrates that non-reflexive consensus can come with the shadow side of conformity. Many of us have probably experienced situations where a: 'we have now agreed on…' or 'there is consensus in the group that…' gloss over widely differing views lurking below the tranquil surface. One way to work with differences could be to think about consent over consensus, as for instance explored in the notion of 'co-leadership' (medledelse) (Aagard, 2023), and which can be found in other business-oriented sources:

> "Consensus means that everyone agrees on the decision; consent means that people agree to move forward, even if they don't necessarily like the solution. Consent considers people's range of tolerance – will they accept and support a decision, even if it's not their preferred choice? Simply put, people might not love the decision, but they can live with it." (Razzetti, 2020)

In this type of decision-making there is less focus on what one prefers, and instead on a zone of tolerance. For example, a student might prefer that they all meet late and work in the evening, but do not have objections to the solution that some meet earlier, and some work later. Perhaps a shift from focusing on individual's preferences to a zone of tolerance, can enable greater acceptance of 'difference'.

## Comfortable Being Uncomfortable – Riding the Dragon of Group Work

As a concluding comment, we need to work very consciously and openly with the dark and shadowy sides of PBL. Both supervisors and students need to be aware that social dynamics of group work are difficult and demanding, and we are entering dangerous water where dragons lurk. Collaborative or participative processes may not be safe, utopian havens, but equally spaces for repression, conformity, and tyranny of participation (though the underlying ideals may indicate otherwise). Rather than assuming a utopian ideal will unfold in group work, it might be advisable to work more consciously with exploring heterotopian spaces that are: *"open-ended ambivalent and contradictory places where disruption and discomfort can be expected"* (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2010, p. 4), and to work with understandings of social dynamics that go beyond consensus and take account of how to work with difference as an inherent value. For both students and supervisors, this entails being comfortable being uncomfortable when riding the dragon of group work.

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[1] The term 'Tyranny of participation' they adopt from the book Participation: The New Tyranny, Cooke and Kotharis (2001)