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Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning: A project of scholarly conversation

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1. Introduction

Starting a new academic journal is, at any time and in any academic field, a serious venture: some might say audacious. How will the journal recruit and persuade those with the time and inclination to write for it? Will it find any kind of readership among its target audience? What mechanisms will it use for production, and what effect will those have on how authors publish, and readers access, its content? How will it differentiate itself from other titles in the area?

In this editorial, we seek to address questions of that nature in respect of the new journal *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*. Clearly, it would be both premature and presumptuous to suggest, within an editorial appearing in the inaugural issue, that we have attained any kind of success in relation to the challenges attendant upon establishing a new title. Yet we do contend that the concept behind the journal is novel for the field of technology enhanced learning (TEL). On the basis of that concept—a 'scholarly conversation' with the particular characteristics of critical integration, self-awareness and connectedness, all terms that we elaborate below—we aspire to mobilise and nurture a community of researchers around the journal. By doing so, we wish, in turn, to intervene to challenge the existing body of knowledge on TEL, and to develop the field into a more recognisably 'scholarly' area of enquiry.

In what follows, we first discuss some of the broader problems we diagnose within the TEL field. We characterise those problems using the notion of 'tailism', a term borrowed from political debates about how particular social movements relate themselves to the wider formations they seek to influence. We subsequently set out a vision, necessarily somewhat abstract at this stage, of 'scholarly conversation': positing that such conversation could serve, were it to have certain characteristics, to challenge those tendencies towards 'tailism' evident in TEL research. We then introduce the present journal, *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, as a project that aims, over time, to render that concept of scholarly conversation more concrete. In doing so, we discuss how the project arose out of the experiences of a particular group of scholars; refer to several antecedent efforts to foster scholarly conversation, on the basis of which the present initiative builds; and set out some particular mechanisms for fostering such conversation that we wish to deploy within the journal—namely, an open access platform, an emphasis on Special Issues, and an invitation for ongoing commentary.

2. The problems of 'tailism'

The particular question of how a new journal will differentiate itself from other titles in the area, posed at the outset, seems particularly pertinent when the "area" in question is that of TEL. The past two decades have seen, if the reader will excuse the clichéd expression, an *explosion* in both research and publishing venues concerned with that arena of investigation. Indeed, simply keeping track of the number of journal titles is a gargantuan exercise; while Tony Bates[1] and, separately, Ross Perkins and Patrick Lowenthal[2] maintain useful online lists, neither makes any claim for completeness and, indeed, discrepancies are easily discernible between the two catalogues. The current status of the scholarship is such that the best answer to the question of *roughly how many journals are publishing work on TEL?* is probably *I would not like to venture a guess*. The more recent proliferation of open access journals has only exacerbated this existing trend (cf. Perkins & Lowenthal, 2016), while, moreover, even some long established venues have, in recent times, massively expanded the number of issues and articles they publish annually. By any measure, TEL is a fast-growing research endeavour.

To understand our stance in relation to the inevitable question of motivation (*okay, so why another one, then?*), it is necessary, however, to step back from this apparent maelstrom. For an academic field is, in an important sense, not merely an agglomeration of the individual papers being produced, something which can be judged quantitatively, but, instead, constitutes an unfolding *body* of knowledge, which has a particular quality and nature. Rather than a quantitative listing of journals, and their article conveyor belts, then, our own starting point contemplates the essence of what is being produced by this vast quantity of output. For some time now, the present writers, and many of those around them—for example, in the research group *Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning*[3], but also in their wider networks—have felt, and expressed, a degree of disquiet about that 'essence'.

In simple terms, it seems that, while there is a lot of "stuff happening", it is difficult to discern clear themes from within the morass; to understand what is actually going on in the research, where it is coming from, and where it is leading. Where particular research "themes" *are* evident, moreover, those often seem concerned with jockeying to highlight a degree of relevance to technology development or policy priorities arising outside the field; too often, doing so in such a way that lacks criticality about the nature of the scholarly engagement being pursued. Whether such jockeying emanates from a desire to *anticipate*, or a perceived need to quickly *react*, the overarching effect is a sense that TEL research inelegantly 'tails' exterior developments.

That formulation of 'tailism', meaning being dragged along with the latest trends, as a tail behind a dog, is a term more commonly used in politics than education. What, precisely, is being 'tailed' seems to vary between contexts: the priorities of technology companies, professional evangelists, policymakers and institutional management are obvious candidates, though there are doubtless others. Should clarification be required, for those of an anatomical rather than political bent, we invoke the image of a tail more in the sense of *wagging enthusiastically* than *providing balance*. While the term, at least in this context, is probably idiosyncratic to us, we are hardly alone in our general feeling of disquiet. On the contrary, dissenting voices are

1 **https://www.tonybates.ca/2008/07/07/e-learning-journals/** (Last accessed 11 October 2020).

2 **http://www.edtechjournals.org/** (Last accessed 11 October 2020).

3 At the time of writing the two editors jointly direct this research centre, which, while based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, UK, has an interdisciplinary membership and associate members from a number of other institutions. See: **https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/research/centre-for-technology-enhanced-learning/** (Last accessed 11 October 2020).

increasingly audible within the field. Before considering our own position, then, it is worth thinking about how others express dissent about the research scholarship.

It may be useful, for present purposes, to momentarily bifurcate the foci of critique—before later attempting to reintegrate the two. One point of focus is ostensibly more granular, and involves seeking to express scepticism about the particular qualities of those papers being published. Gunn and Steel's (2012) content analysis of the papers appearing in two prominent journals, for example, furnishes one account of the recurrent weaknesses found when the field's articles are dissected. As they put it:

> […] our analysis of articles published in two leading journals found the same situation as earlier studies of a similar nature; well-grounded designs and systematic evaluation approaches reported side by side with poorly conceived or poorly applied methodologies, limited reference to theory, weak results, incomplete descriptions, uneven presentation of data and overblown and unsupported claims of impact and importance. While this is an extreme statement in relation to most of the articles we reviewed, the incidence remains unacceptably high and is, therefore, detrimental to advancing the field of research in learning technology. (p. 11)

This narrative, as the quotation makes clear, extends an initial focus—on papers, methodologies, reportage of results, and so on—upwards; reaching an eventual concern with "advancing" the field. That is not an uncommon pattern of critique. Hew et al. (2019), for example, also take a content analysis of papers as a basis for reaching the conclusion that "educational technology research does not appear to be a 'mature discipline'" (p. 966).

Another set of narratives, conversely, position the field as their object of critique from the beginning. Such critiques, which have, fundamentally, a less granular focus, are becoming increasingly audible: with a layer of writers reflecting, in particular, on the current state of knowledge in the domain, and positing their own visions of a better future. Prominent among the latter is Neil Selwyn (2010), whose vision is one of the 'critical study of educational technology'. Selwyn indicates the content of the latter in the following way:

> The study of educational technology should therefore be seen in profoundly social scientific terms—moving beyond making sense of the 'science' of learning, and pursuing what can be termed the *critical* study of technology-based social action and social life within the social world of education. (p. 68)

What the two critical foci outlined above highlight, in different ways, are problems of scholarly knowledge production: problems which, at heart, concern the quality and nature of knowledge. The more obvious developments currently evident in the field, whereby a rapid increase in publication venues is accompanied by an even more rapid escalation in the number of papers produced, seem unlikely, in themselves, to respond adequately to these problems.

Yet it is worth noticing that the two foci, as they are usually discussed, are also in tension with each other—for present purposes, in at least two ways. Most immediately, that the two critiques operate at very different degrees of granularity gestures towards a chasm that seems difficult to bridge. Translating between appeals for 'better applied methodologies' and more 'complete descriptions', on the one hand, and imperatives for the 'critical study of technology' within 'an elaborated social world', on the other, will present significant dilemmas for those engaging in the practices of research. More fundamentally, it is far from clear that the two critiques are entirely aligned in their visions. A call for "advancing the field", on the one hand, seems to invite stepwise and cumulative amendments to knowledge production, whereas the advocacy of moves towards the "profoundly social scientific", on the other, invokes a starkly ruptural concept of change, notwithstanding that the formulation "moving beyond" seems calculated to downplay that implication[4].

Thus far, we have established, then, that there are two forms of critique, of increasing prominence within the field, which each focus at a different level of granularity and whose visions seem only partially aligned. That situation is, of course, hardly unique in the history of human endeavour; indeed, it reflects many others in which people have increasingly noticed and drawn attention to accumulating tensions within practice, yet have, so far, been unable to resolve them. A need for change is increasingly felt; arguments against the status quo are formulated with increasing sophistication, and accepted by a gradually widening audience; yet the different critiques being proffered highlight different aspects of some overarching problem, whose systemic nature has yet to be fully grasped; and future conceptions of what the field might look like, were it to overcome its current crisis, remain nascent.

Those scholars engaged in advocating such criticality can derive at least *some* satisfaction from the fact that progress in the field has been discernible, yet must always

4 An alternative formulation, for example, would have been "moving away from…".

remain aware that such progress remains modest. We say 'discernible', because a richer seam of critical thinking has certainly emerged within the field in recent years: nascent in journal articles and conference discussions, and evident, increasingly stridently, in critical conversations at seminars and research group meetings. Yet we invoke that progress is 'modest', because that seam of critical scholarship remains a small proportion of the work being published; indeed, given the sheer scale of the explosion of research production mentioned earlier, perhaps the expression of such sentiment represents, in purely quantitative terms, a progressively smaller proportion of the field. The challenge of re-constructing the field remains difficult in the extreme, and it would seem fair to say that there is no end in sight to that phenomenon we have, above, labelled tailism.

3. The idea of scholarly conversation

The above overview of the state of the field, while, inevitably, truncated and simplified, illustrates the backdrop against which we conceived the present journal.

Notwithstanding the fairly grim picture we have painted, our starting point does embrace a positive contention: that the recently increased visibility of a critical seam of scholarship on TEL, as discussed above, is a desirable phenomenon, on which we should seek to build. We welcome the existence of several publication venues in the field which explicitly call, in their Aims and Scope statements, for criticality (a good example being *Learning, Media and Technology*[5]). We also recognise that there exist several 'critical' journals which, while not explicitly aligned with the field, do increasingly present opportunities for more reflective writing on the part of TEL scholars (witness, for instance, the meteoric rise of *Postdigital Science and Education*[6]). Yet we still feel that there is something missing, and which we might seek to contribute: something we might refer to as *a critically integrated, self-aware and connected scholarly conversation*. That is, of course, a compound and somewhat complex notion. Let us try to convey what we mean, in the first instance, by unpacking, in turn, each of its components.

3.1 A 'critically integrated' conversation

By using the formulation *critically integrated*, we mean to invoke a vision wherein critical thinking becomes more closely entwined with the standard scholarly practices of the field: and, thereby, democratised. We locate part of the problem with knowledge production in the field in its separation of 'critical' from more 'typical' writing. While the latter, of course, continues to manifest those predominant characteristics problematised in the preceding section, the former also exhibits tendencies which are, from our vantage point, undesirable.

Most immediately, the critical scholarship in TEL is mainly produced by a small number of specialised commentators: recognisably the same people who, on a repeated basis, produce elite thought pieces. In turn, the scholarship they produce has, in the main, something of an intimidating character: it too often conveys the impression that only someone with an extraordinary degree of insight, and probably with a particular intellectual background (one not shared by many others working in the field), might readily participate in the conversation. Moreover, this separation seems incentivised within the field's publishing ecosystem, in which the majority of journals enforce increasingly rigid publication guidelines: here, underpinned by scientistic assumptions about what a paper 'ought' to look like; there, motivated by a determination not to publish, as *Learning, Media and Technology* put it, "generic 'Ed Tech'"[7]. (Even where, just occasionally, a given scholar, who conceives of their work in relatively 'typical' terms, might be induced to write a piece of critical reflection, the effect is to convey the impression that such reflection somehow inhabits a different 'sphere' from their regular research programme). The cumulative effect is to discourage most members of the field, by and large, from seeing themselves as part of the critical landscape: their lot, instead, is to remain engaged, as outlined above, in producing more mundane forms of research reportage. Yet it is far from clear that most TEL researchers do not wish to express their own voices in critical and reflective ways, were the products of such expression to be welcomed and nurtured.

We wish to construct, therefore, a venue that might enable examples of critical thinking and empirical reportage to become *intertwined*; and, in doing so, to encourage all scholars within the field to consider critical reflection a part of their purview. We want, in other words, to work towards the greater *generalisation* of critical reflection, throughout the field, and conceive the present project as a vehicle for doing so. Serving as a 'vehicle' for a critically integrated scholarly conversation might mean, among other things,

5 **https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cjem20** (Last accessed 15 October 2020).

6 **https://www.springer.com/journal/42438** (Last accessed 15 October 2020).

7 **https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cjem20** (Last accessed 15 October 2020).

encouraging scholars who usually perceive themselves as 'empirical researchers', or 'techy people'[8], to reflect on their own assumptions and trajectories of work; providing a relatively generous set of publication guidelines, which allow for empirical and critical reflection to be reported together; and, above all, encouraging writers to see critical thinking and empirical research as aspects of the same entity, within which each constitutes oscillating poles of consideration.

3.2 A 'self-aware' conversation

Next, let us unpack the term *self-aware*, by which we intend to convey, in this context, a desire for scholars in the field to regard *research and scholarship* as a legitimate object of enquiry: as something that it is okay to spend time thinking and talking about.

Much critical reflection on the field, to date, has focussed on getting those working within it to view *technology* more sceptically. That is, to be clear, an understandable and entirely necessary corrective. Selwyn (2011), for example, discusses that TEL research has often been, in large part, a "'positive project'" (p. 713), motivated by an "unswerving faith" (p. 714). That faith is placed in the potential of technology (whether in general, or of some particular type) to reshape education (most often, learning and teaching) in desirable ways. Given that situation, it is hardly surprising that the key priorities, for those wishing to critique the field, have involved imploring those concerned to view the very concept of 'technology' more critically; to avoid branding sceptics as technophobes (and educational practitioners who do not share researchers' visions as lazy or outdated); and, rather than invoking visions of some imagined better future, to consider what Selwyn calls the "'state-of-the-actual'" (p. 715).

Yet there does also exist, in our view, another evident problem, which has a rather different complexion: one inspired by the notion that the field should be relentlessly engaged, instead, in either devising solutions for local practice problems, or working out how policy initiatives can be 'implemented'. That notion projects, in essence, the role of TEL scholars as *research technicians*: people devoted to solving problems *as they have been handed down* by others, rather than critically situating those problems in their wider contexts, or critiquing the attendant intentions. It also, importantly, involves a different form of tailism: albeit one derived from a less evangelical view of technological change. Overcoming tailism within the field will necessarily include, in our view, striving to navigate between the Scylla of unswerving technological positivity and the Charybdis of everyday bug fixing. One way of approaching that task of navigation, perhaps, will involve researchers in thinking carefully and consciously about their scholarship—both their own, and that of others—*as a research endeavour*.

In *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, therefore, we wish to construct a platform for viewing TEL in scholarly terms, and for drawing attention directly towards the research production of the field. Doing so does not, we should emphasise, mean abrogating our existing concerns with those wider landscapes, of practice and policy, with which our research intersects; but it does mean viewing scholarship as a legitimate such landscape of concern in its own right. Its also means viewing the relationships between scholarship, policy, and practice as mediated and problematic.

In some cases, viewing TEL in scholarly terms might involve problematising those very relationships: unpacking the underpinning agendas, tacit assumptions and incentive structures being proffered; reflecting critically on the extent to which a given agenda can be reformulated and accommodated within the purview of the research field (or whether it might be actively contested); considering the forms of knowledge that are really required, and that can actually be produced; and reflecting on how pursuing a given research agenda or project can support (or problematise) the attendant change initiatives. On other occasions, researchers might choose to focus on research practices as an object of enquiry; whether their own, or those of others. Doing so might involve engaging with issues of theory, methodology, scholarly communication, or research training. In turn, at a broader level of granularity, treating TEL as a research endeavour might involve reflecting on the field, whether in whole or in part: its knowledge trajectories and research agendas, its subdivisions and relationships with neighbouring academic fields and disciplines, its funding structures and career paths, the nature of its responses to policy and practice imperatives, and so on. We aim to provide an outlet for precisely such forms of writing—not least, as elaborated below, by emphasising the central role of themed Special Issues.

3.3 A 'connected' conversation

Finally, let us unpack the term *connected*, by which we intend to convey, in this context, a desire for a scholarship in which researchers directly and explicitly engage with the arguments of their peers.

8 Or 'novice researchers', or 'practical people', or any one of those other labels that are so readily expressed by those working in the field to describe themselves and, typically, to express their reluctance to engage in highfalutin debate.

At some level, scholarly knowledge production in the field does, of course, already acknowledge the desirability of contributing to the existing knowledge base; increasingly, for example, attempts are made to demonstrate such a contribution within the Literature Review and Discussion sections of empirical papers[9]. Yet, in large part, when doing so, that existing knowledge base is usually considered collectively, and from a considerable analytical distance: as an aggregated mass of known outcomes, rather than a contested nexus of arguments. Furthermore, the work of contributing to the field is largely conceived 'additively'. Researchers in the field often seem motivated to investigate *what has not been researched before*, which typically gets instantiated as *slight variations from what has been done before*—for example, research in settings that are slightly distinct, emphasising technologies that are slightly newer, considering learner demographics that are slightly different, or examining task designs that are slightly varied. The effect is to regard previous work as a closed book of unimpeachable 'results'; and then to discern the novelty of new work by (1) highlighting any differences from those prior results, and (2) viewing those differences through the prism of those modest 'variations' originally used to frame the study. Such practices constitute, to adopt a vocabulary utilised elsewhere in the social sciences, a "gap-spotting" approach to research (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013); one leading, in turn, to a body of knowledge that reinforces, whether by intention or omission, similar sets of narratives and assumptions—across widely differing settings and, sometimes, lengthy periods of time.

In *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, by contrast, we wish to encourage an alternative view of research in TEL: one wherein the aim is to examine the assumptions underpinning prior work and the explanations offered, and to offer alternative views and interpretations that both challenge and advance that prior work. More akin to what Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) call a "problematisation" approach, such a view of research might include offering different interpretations of what are, *prima facie*, similar phenomena in similar settings to those studied by earlier publications; or putting forward, more directly, extended critiques of earlier publications. In advocating, and seeking to nurture, such an approach, our aim is to promote the view that those existing bodies of knowledge that exist, on particular topics, are prompts for reflection, debate, new thinking, and reconceptualisation.

Given that this approach will be unfamiliar to many people working in the field, it is perhaps important to emphasise that the word 'critique' should in no way be read as a synonym of 'attack'. On the contrary, as Blunden (2010) makes clear, "the best critique is one which speaks to the writer under critique and benefits them" (p. 4 n. 4). We see critique, in this sense, as fundamentally about becoming *intellectually involved with* the work of others. By mechanisms such as offering new perspectives to others, and by considering how the perspectives of others can inform our own thinking, we might seek to overcome scholarly isolation and the sense of interpretively 'tunnelling alone', thereby fostering a more genuinely interactive and engaging community. Our attempt to bring such practices under the aegis of *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* will involve, among other things, the prioritisation of Special Issues on particular topics, the publication of commentaries on previous articles (with at least the hope of promoting extended discussion, in print, between different writers), and by inviting the journal's peer reviewers to publish commentaries on those papers they review—so as to document their views on their arguments and how they engaged with them during the review process.

4. The project of *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*

We have referred several times, above, to *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* as a *project*. Now, having set out, in the preceding sections, some of the relevant background information, we wish to clarify what we mean by that term.

The concept of 'project', as a unit of analysis for social life, has been the object of considerable study, notably by Andy Blunden (e.g., 2014). Arising from within the tradition of Hegelian and Marxist philosophy, the term is given a particular content, in Blunden's work, as a unit of analysis for human *activity*: i.e., as a division of collective and sustained human effort.

Blunden suggests that human social life can be understood as comprised of projects, which are formed when people come together to address a given problem

9 The formulation "increasingly" denotes that such practices, while relatively common in many areas of scholarship, have not always been routine practice in TEL research. Indeed, some of the more traditionalist journals in the field still downplay such scholarly engagement. See, for example, the 'Guide for Authors' for *Computers & Education*, which encourages authors to "Avoid extensive citations and discussion of published literature". See: **https://www.elsevier.com/journals/computers-and-education/0360-1315/guide-for-authors** (Last accessed 15 October 2020).

they experience in a given social formation[10]. While some projects, having been formed, come to quickly falter, others reach maturity and become part of the social formation. Those projects that reach maturity pass through a series of stages in their development; stages which, Blunden (2014) suggests, can be categorised using the following ideal-types:

> Taking a cue from Hegel, projects can be seen as passing through four stages in their development. (1) Firstly there will be some group of people who by virtue of their social position are subject to some taken-for-granted or impending problem or constraint on their freedom. These are the conditions for a project to exist, but the project has not yet come into being. (2) On becoming aware of the problem there will be a series of failed projects arising from misconceptions of the situation, until, at a certain point: (3) An adequate concept of the situation is formulated and named and a social movement is launched to change social practices so as to resolve the problem or injustice. As the project unfolds and interacts with the social environment, its object becomes clearer and more concrete. (4) Eventually, the new form of practice becomes 'mainstreamed' as part of the social practices of the wider community. That is, it is institutionalized and its concept enters into the language and culture of the community. These stages are to be seen as ideal-typical, not proscriptive. (p. 8)

We refer to *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* as a project in precisely this sense: as an attempt to bring together, within a given context, a group of people who experience dilemmas; the purpose being to reconceptualise and reshape practice in the social formation within which those dilemmas have arisen.

Let us consider the stages of development through which the project has, at the time of writing, already passed.

4.1 Posing the problem

Blunden suggests that an (ideal-typical) early stage takes the following form:

> (1) Firstly there will be some group of people who by virtue of their social position are subject to some taken-for-granted or impending problem or constraint on their freedom. These are the conditions for a project to exist, but the project has not yet come into being. (*ibid.*)

In section 2, above, we recounted, in abstract terms, some of the 'problems' that the project is concerned with. While research in the area of TEL is, in quantitative terms, a fast-growing endeavour, we feel that there are significant shortcomings with the quality and nature of the body of knowledge being produced. Others, as we have discussed, have also discerned such problems: via the critical examination of particular papers (identifying, for example, the attenuated use of theory, and a tendency to overclaim the importance or implications of findings); and via calls for the field to abandon a narrow sense of scientism and operate, instead, along more staunchly 'social scientific' lines. We have suggested that the common thread can be labelled 'tailism': a tendency for those working within the field to seek to 'attach' themselves, in ways that seem motivated by enthusiasm and a desire to remain 'relevant', to exterior developments, usually in the realms of technology and policy. Such tailism, while understandable, leads to an inadequate conception of TEL as a *scholarly* endeavour.

In the more concrete terms expressed by Blunden, the initial "group of people" involved in the present project comprise a subset of those staff and students organised around a particular research centre (the *Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning*[11]) and doctoral education programme (the *Doctoral Programme in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning*[12]) at Lancaster University. While the campus of Lancaster University is located in northwest England—as the name implies, near the small city of Lancaster—since the doctoral programme is a distance education programme, conducted mostly online, and the Centre also makes much of its proceedings available to remote participants, the project itself has a membership widely distributed in geographic terms.

The group is "subject to" the problems outlined above due, among other things, to its engagement in capacity-building for the TEL field: since both programme and centre nurture PhD students and early-career researchers. Such capacity-building involves an ongoing need to engage with the nature of the field and explain it to others. Indeed,

10 Blunden (2014) sometimes uses the term *collaborative project*, though they emphasise that all projects are collaborative and that all forms of human collaboration involve projects (p. 1). Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the 'social formation' within which a project arises is the product of many other projects that have been previously initiated.

11 **https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/research/centre-for-technology-enhanced-learning/** (Last accessed 16 October 2020).

12 **https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/study/phd/phd-in-e-research-and-technology-enhanced-learning/#** (Last accessed 16 October 2020).

as each new cohort of PhD students enters the programme, and as members join the research centre, from a variety of backgrounds, conversation regularly turns to consider issues of what the field *is* (or is *really about*)—leading to regular conversations that are challenging but which, importantly, often stimulate fresh thinking (even among the more 'established' participants).

The attendant "constraints" on freedom are often felt where conversations turn towards topics concerned with what we are *allowed* to study within the field (or whether our interests somehow fall partly 'outside' of it). Those conversations do, of course, engage with a diffuse range of topics, but two indicative examples are worth highlighting. One is where participants invoke, as their entry route into TEL topics, their background in some particular disciplinary pedagogy (such as "law education"); typically wondering, as a consequence, about the extent to which their interests really dovetail with those of the wider TEL community. Another is where participants discuss a sense that certain kinds of papers are 'easier' to get published, in the field's journals, than others—thereby incentivising the production of certain *kinds* of knowledge. There often arises a sense that what we are allowed to say, as researchers, does not quite accord with what we wish to say. As Blunden indicates, these "are the conditions for a project to exist, but the project has not yet come into being".

4.2 Antecedent projects

The next stage in the project corresponded, in some ways, with the ideal-type described, by Blunden, in the following way:

> (2) On becoming aware of the problem there will be a series of failed projects arising from misconceptions of the situation […] (*ibid.*)

The *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* journal, it should be acknowledged, was not our first attempt to address the problems we have discussed above. Indeed, the journal has arisen out of several antecedents, though the extent to which we regard those as 'failed' varies considerably.

One initiative that also responds to the problems we identified, for example, is the *Meet & Eat* hybrid seminar series[13]; in which, for some time now, we have used the aegis of the Centre to invite the authors of particular publications to discuss the ideas behind them. The motivation for this series of events—which also has some characteristics of a reading group, in that we ask attendees to read the presenter's paper beforehand—is, in line with the conceptions discussed above, to promote scholarly conversation within the TEL field. Such conversations not infrequently involve an acknowledgement by the author that the initial motivation for the paper is not fully conveyed in the published version; or that certain important aspects of the underlying work (whether conceptual or empirical) had to be omitted due to format constraints. They nearly always involve members of the wider group understanding the work in ways that differ—sometimes starkly so—from the impression they had formed when reading the work as published. And it is fairly common for the author to acknowledge that the interaction has sparked new ideas that they would like to take forward in their subsequent scholarship (or to "think more about"). Sometimes the particular benefits that participants feel they have accrued are seen as deriving, of course, from the verbal and synchronous nature of the interaction, and it should be emphasised that the *Meet & Eat* initiative will continue alongside the current journal[14] rather than being supplanted by it. In that sense, we do not regard it as a 'misconception' in the sense intended by Blunden.

Yet the event series *is* an antecedent project for *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, in the sense that our experiences of scholarly conversation there have informed our approach to the current project. In one sense, the journal builds on the event series: in particular, we wish to recognise that attempts to foster scholarly conversation in a written format might complement those interactions, inevitably more ephemeral, that occur within the bounded discussions of seminars and meetings. We do regard it as a separate project, however, rather than as a simple continuation; the reason being that our concept for the journal invokes an attempt to reshape scholarly conversation across the field (rather than, as for the events, mostly within the Centre). We anticipate that the differences between the two projects—differences we unpack further below—will result in a gradual conceptual divergence between the two, and do not intend to regard any such divergence as undesirable.

Another previous project that certainly did not reach fruition—and which thus might be regarded as more obviously 'failed', in Blunden's terms—was a proposal,

13 See the Youtube playlist at **https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXCrAAcFUbPEyChtG_QvNRz3UbMwWCDGz** for several recordings of sessions from this seminar series (Last accessed 16 October 2020).

14 Upcoming events in the series are advertised online, including at: **https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/research/centre-for-technology-enhanced-learning/events/** (Last accessed 16 October 2020).

initiated by BB, to produce a 'series of reports', which would be released via the research centre and branded accordingly. Those reports were intended to summarise the variety of thinking evident within the research centre; to encompass attractive production values; and, importantly, to serve as 'introductions' to some given issue for PhD students and early-career researchers.

It was certainly perceived that other research centres were releasing, within initiatives we viewed as successful, chains of reports on TEL topics (an example being the *Innovating Pedagogy* series[15] initiated by the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University). Yet it was also recognised that our idea differed from those existing reports in important ways. For example, we wanted to provide, among other things, a range of different vantage points on the same topics, rather than a series of 'snappy' overviews of different topics. We also wanted to consider issues that were viewed as more 'perennial' than fast-moving. While counter-examples were offered that did attempt to support the kind of scholarly conversation we were aiming for (e.g., the report edited by Dillenbourg, 2011), we eventually reached the conclusion that the report format was better suited to providing a 'snapshot', and did not typically or easily allow for a conversation to unfold over time. We also realised the danger that reports might be seen, by many members of those audiences we would be trying to reach, as attempting to present a 'cutting edge' picture in relation to some given issue; which, in turn, implied reaching some sort of consensus as well as running the risk of being seen as quickly going out-of-date. The idea for a 'series of reports' was, for such reasons, eventually not taken forward, though discussing it did help to significantly clarify our thinking. While some of the ways in which discussing the 'series of reports' influenced the present journal were conceptual and relatively indirect, others were fairly immediate. For example, the first report in the proposed series would have focussed on the issue of "Criticality, theory and research", the same topic we address in the Inaugural Special Issue of the journal (cf. Bligh & Lee, 2020).

4.3 Launching the project

The present stage of the journal is—we hope—an instantiation of the ideal-type described, by Blunden (2014), in the following way:

> (3) An adequate concept of the situation is formulated and named and a social movement is launched to change social practices so as to resolve the problem or injustice. (p. 8)

Section 3 has already outlined how we conceive the concept of 'scholarly conversation' as central to the present project. As elaborated more extensively above, we wish for the present project to foster a form of scholarly conversation that is:

- *Critically integrated*: in the sense that offering 'critique' is seen as entwined into everyday discussion of work in TEL, rather than as a specialised endeavour separated from empirical reporting;
- *Self-aware*: in the sense that TEL *research* is conceived as being worthy of attention in its own right, with relationships between research, practice and policy problematised rather than taken-for-granted;
- *Connected*: in the sense that participants seek to engage with and re-conceptualise the arguments of others, rather than positioning their work as 'findings' to be 'built on'.

Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning is, then, a project that aims to resolve a set of problems in TEL scholarship, which have been experienced by those within the project in a particular set of ways, by attempting to foster *a critically integrated, self-aware and connected scholarly conversation*. The extent to which the core concept, and the project itself, will prove 'adequate' in changing social practices in the medium term is, of course, unknown at the time of writing. Yet the underlying concepts, developed throughout the prior stages of work described above, have certainly proved adequate to *launch* the project, as the existence of the Inaugural Special Issue makes clear.

Several other decisions have also been taken at this stage which will serve to structure and give meaning to the practices that are fostered within the project. In what follows, we shall briefly consider four of those in turn: the name of the project, the open access nature of the platform on which the journal is hosted, the focus on Special Issues, and our intention to invite commentaries.

4.3.1 Naming the project

While Blunden's discussion of 'launching' a social movement places some emphasis on the act of naming, most of Blunden's account focusses on the naming of the project's *core concept*. In fact, however, we found naming the journal that we intended to serve as the *vehicle* for the project (*Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*) considerably

15 **http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/innovating/** (Last accessed 16 October 2020).

more challenging than naming that core concept (*scholarly conversation*).

Part of the challenge has been alluded to above (see section 4.1). Where problems in the social formation are being experienced by members of the project, one substantial issue concerns a desire to problematise what the social formation *is* (encouraging us to question the remit of that scholarly knowledge production with which we are engaged) or is *about* (furnishing questions about the priorities for that knowledge production). Additionally, like most projects, *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* seeks to recruit new people to its banner, who were not involved in its original formation; and naming the formation will likely influence the social formation with which the project is seen as engaging. Thus, we perceived the choice of such a formulation as particularly challenging and problematic.

It is worth acknowledging immediately that scholarship working at the intersection of 'technology' and 'learning' (even those terms require scare quotes) has no universally accepted name; which signals something, in itself, about the exceedingly contested and fractured state of the research area. Indeed, where terms have been proposed that purport to circumscribe the topic, they have historically tended, fairly quickly, to attract opprobrium. As the title *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* denotes, we describe the social formation within which we position the project using the term 'technology enhanced learning', though we certainly mean to invoke that label in its broadest possible sense. That 'technology enhanced learning' is a compound term of three words, each with existing histories, however, has allowed critics of the term multiple angles of problematisation, and such critics have not been slow to put forward their views.

One notable example of critique that problematises the term is a paper by Kirkwood and Price (2014). The latter starts out by noticing that the "technology" of TEL is usually conceived of in terms of "equipment and infrastructure" (p. 6); before going on to unpack how the attendant "enhancement" usually refers to some intended outcome, determined *a priori* and circumscribed from within a relatively constrained range of conceptions that can be readily 'measured': operational improvements in efficiency, improved student retention, more time on task, increased participant satisfaction, better assessment scores, and the like (p. 15). Similar problematisation can certainly be proffered for the term 'learning', for example by counterposing its meaning against alternatives such as 'education'. It is worth stating from the outset that we share some of the attendant concerns about how the term 'TEL' is understood and used in a variety of contexts, though alternative terms—indeed, *every alternative conception we can think of*—can also be problematised in a variety of ways that we also find convincing.

Yet if we consider TEL as a term that demarcates a *scholarly community*, rather than as describing a particular object of enquiry, then the term has more to recommend it. That is because the term was originally coined precisely with the intention of fostering a research community, and to demarcate a 'research' focus against a backdrop where previous terms, such as "e-learning", had been captured by those primarily interested in the institutional adoption and evaluation of online (and usually commercial) learning platforms.

One description of how the concept of "TEL" was formed, and imbued with content, is provided by Balacheff et al. (2009). That account is deeply influenced by its authors' membership of the *Kaleidoscope* project, an EU initiative which has exerted considerable influence over how TEL has come to be understood, particularly within Europe. The remit of *Kaleidoscope* was explicitly concerned with forging links between research centres, identifying research themes, and forging Special Interest Groups, which rendered it a productive site of gestation for thinking about how the field might be conceptualised.

Balacheff et al.'s (2009) stance has several components—conceptualised as 'scientific' and 'strategic' priorities—that fairly readily echo how we would wish to conceptualise the social formation in which *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* seeks to intervene. One is concerned with *interdisciplinarity*, with the TEL community striving to bring together those researchers whose interests had previously seen them separated into the knowledge silos of design, computation, cognition, sociocultural theory and epistemology (p. vii). Another is a recognition of the importance of *knowledge and knowledge systems*: recognising, in other words, that learning is not a singular phenomenon, but is instead highly specific to particular "knowledge domains" (pp. x-xi). The implication is that TEL should seek explicitly to incorporate contributions from those who have expertise in those particular areas: formal learning in domains such as mathematics, medicine and languages being particularly emphasised in Balacheff et al.'s account, though expertise in lifelong and informal learning is acknowledged in passing. A third is formulated as an *environmental* focus: emphasising that technologies should not be viewed in isolation, but instead as components within wider 'learning environments' in which different people and forms of content are situated and interact. Canonical examples provided by Balacheff et al. of studying technology-environment interactions include understanding technologies 'representationally' (the

related term 'multimodality' having perhaps become more established in the intervening decade); investigating how technology can 'script' or 'orchestrate' interactions, particularly within collaborative learning; understanding how technology might 'adapt' to user actions; and exploring how technology might represent learners to themselves as part of an imperative towards 'reflection' (pp. xii-xiii). The fourth component, in turn, considers how technology design might take account of developments in the wider socio-economic context, such as via the exploitation of game-like structures for motivation or in accounting for the increasing mobility of learners.

It is in *this* sense, of describing the social formation in which we wish to intervene, that we invoke the term 'technology enhanced learning' in the title of the journal. Specifically, we aim to place an emphasis, within that formation, on the centrality of interdisciplinarity; relations between learning and knowledge; positioning technology within the wider environment of learning; and maintaining vigilance in relation to socio-economic and technological developments. We acknowledge, however, that whether such a conception will prove 'adequate' over the medium term, or whether it will need to be supplanted, is an issue that we will need to periodically revisit over the coming period.

4.3.2 Open access platform

In many ways, the choice to make the journal open access was fairly straightforward. The notion of supporting a scholarly conversation seems, to us, to sit naturally alongside a desire to make that conversation open to as many people as possible, on an ongoing basis. We were particularly influenced, in this regard, by the institutional form of the Networked Learning conference[16], which has, over a considerable period of time, made its conference proceedings freely available online. One of the present writers had also previously edited a Special Issue of an online, open access journal (cf. Bligh, Wiesemes & Murphy, 2010), an experience which underlined the potentially productive nature of such an endeavour.

Creating an online, open-access journal does, of course, pose a number of challenges. We made the decision early on that articles in the journal would undergo peer review on a double-blind basis. In part, that decision arose out of a desire to assuage concerns about quality control, especially given that the explosion of new journals in the field has already raised a number of concerns, within the scholarly community, about the provenance of the many papers that appear in new and relatively unknown venues. Yet we also wished to encourage authors and reviewers—as part of a desire for, in the terms discussed above, a *connected* scholarly conversation—to mutually engage with each other's ideas. The norms of a double-blind peer-review process, to some extent, challenge aspirations for a 'connected' conversation, since reviewers and authors are purposefully separated during the process.

From a consideration of the attendant tensions, we reached the decision that peer-reviewers might still be encouraged to submit commentaries for a given paper, so long as that was done after the paper had been accepted for inclusion. Doing so, of course, would quite likely serve to 'reveal' the identity of a given reviewer to the author of the paper, but we considered that this was a decision that ought to be made by each reviewer, on an informed basis. That such a revelation would only occur after the peer-review process had been completed would mean, in our view, that the publication of commentaries would not meaningfully invalidate the dictums of double-blind peer-review. Furthermore, we believed that this degree of openness between the participants in the scholarly conversation, enacted upon the basis of informed agreement, might serve to foster both a sense of community and an appreciation of others' engagement and critical contribution to authors' developing thoughts—an appreciation of critique in a constructive sense.

Another challenge concerned the decision about the platform on which to host the journal, and a range of attendant technical considerations. It would be fair to say that the process of scoping the various available alternatives, and evaluating their relative merits and limitations, was a long and drawn out process that occurred, in fits and starts, over several months. While many open-access journals use the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform[17], doing so requires either institutional hosting (which we learned would not be available to us) or a dedicated server (which has attendant costs, both of financial outlay and in terms of the required labour of maintenance). We explored a range of options, eventually settling on the PubPub platform of the Knowledge Futures Group[18], which combines a relatively straightforward publishing workflow, an attractive user interface, and even—an unexpected bonus which we valued very highly—the ability to generate DOI numbers within the site rather than needing to engage directly with CrossRef.

16 **https://www.networkedlearning.aau.dk/** (Last accessed 17 October 2020).

17 **https://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs/** (Last accessed 17 October 2020).

18 **https://www.knowledgefutures.org/** (Last accessed 17 October 2020).

Conversely, the platform does not readily support double-blind peer review workflows in the traditional sense that predominates within academic publishing, necessitating us to handle such review processes manually. Moreover, while the platform offers the option to generate PDF versions of articles automatically, those printable versions do not aim to meet traditional academic publishing standards (particularly with regard to continuous page numbers across volumes, suitable for citation purposes), and nor does the platform offer customisable formatting options for them.

The latter points hint, of course, at one of the main difficulties of publishing an open-access journal: that of resourcing. We did not so much reject the idea of author publishing charges (APCs) as never even consider it. The journal, in turn, is not so much low-budget as *zero*-budget, and thus has had to rely on a significant amount of voluntary work to bring it to fruition.

For the inaugural issue, one of the present editors (BB) put in a significant amount of that voluntary work, particularly in managing the administration of most peer-reviewing, setting up the website, and crafting an early version of the PDF template (a process which involved learning to use Adobe InDesign). The editors were also extremely fortunate, since one of the project members volunteered to act as an editorial assistant (see Acknowledgements); the latter, in particular, has put in a considerable amount of effort in realising the final PDF versions of the articles and in contributing graphics to the website. We would also like to thank the authors of the various pieces that appear, for working to format their articles so as to require minimal modification, and thus, to some extent, distributing the labour required to bring the issue to fruition.

For subsequent issues, at least in the short term, we do not imagine that this project will suddenly become better resourced than it is at present. We shall always be on the lookout, therefore, for mechanisms to automate or distribute those unavoidable administrative and technical tasks that journal production necessitates. Perhaps, over time, the journal will become a vehicle for collegiate knowledge production in a literal sense, as well as in terms of its core ethic.

4.3.3 Special Issues

Given the aspiration, stated on many occasions in the preceding account, that the present journal will support a particular kind of scholarly conversation, it will be unsurprising to most readers that we would choose to foreground the provision of Special Issues in its production schedule. Indeed, since Special Issues are a longstanding and widely accepted way for journals to allow a range of authors to explore a particular 'theme' in the literature, it would perhaps have been more surprising had we *not* chosen to foreground such collections.

Over the coming period, for these reasons, we anticipate that the majority of our numbers will be Special Issues. We do not rule out the production of open, general issues as a point of principle, but, for the foreseeable future, our production schedule will be dominated by special themed collections. Indeed, at the time of writing, there are six special editions in that schedule, edited by different members of the project, with more to be added on an ongoing basis[19].

It is perhaps worth elaborating that our conception of Special Issues for the journal is intended to give the editors of those issues a very significant degree of leeway. While the editors of such volumes are typically permitted to define the topic of the issue and the scope of articles they consider to fall under that topic, here we also wish to provide the freedom to vary the publication format (including the style and length of articles allowed), the number of articles that appear in the issue (so some issues might be very greatly longer than others), the medium of the papers (multimedia publications, for example, might be encouraged in particular issues), the process for eliciting and producing commentary articles, and so on. One way of dealing with those issues is discussed in our own editorial, which introduces the Inaugural Special Issue (Bligh & Lee, 2020), though, of course, other Special Issues might not adopt the same approach. While we hope that Special Issue editors will bear in mind the overall concept of the journal, it is our firm conviction that scholarly communication need not take the same form at all times, and in relation to all topics covered by that conversation. The only stipulation about which we intend to remain inflexible is the requirement that all full papers be peer-reviewed, and that any contributions that vary from that requirement be clearly labelled.

4.3.4 Commentaries

Inviting scholars of TEL to contribute critical commentaries, on the other hand, is relatively unusual for the field. Indeed, that most critical scholarship in TEL takes the form either of full-length articles or editorials (the latter, by their very nature, tend to be written by those regarded as 'established', at least in the context of some particular venue) is

19 We shall endeavour to keep the list at **https://stel.pubpub.org/calls-for-papers** updated (Last accessed 18 October 2020). Authors may wish to consult that list to see the upcoming Calls for Papers.

perhaps partly to blame for the separation of 'critical' from more 'typical' writing that we have alluded to already. While short commentaries are common in some other disciplines, they have not typically proliferated in most TEL contexts; and, indeed, even where particular instantiations of critical commentary have, in earlier eras, been invited, via formats such as book reviews and extended review articles, the tendency has been for those avenues to progressively vanish over time[20].

A number of possible explanations might be considered for such a state of affairs. Where explanations have been offered, usually in 'off the record' conversations, that publishers now discourage editors from accepting such works because—on the basis that short contributions typically get cited fewer times than full papers— they might have a negative effect on the metrics of the publication venue, we can state categorically that no such calculus will discourage us for the present project.

Other explanations, however, are, for present purposes, more challenging. For example, if authors perceive the writing of such commentaries as less valuable, in relative terms, than other uses of their time, within the context of those neoliberal incentive systems increasingly operating within higher education, then we will likely struggle to elicit such pieces; probably with detrimental implications for those wider scholarly conversations we wish to foster. We regard this as a matter that can only be settled empirically—by trying to do it—and hope that the promise of contributing to a collaborative scholarly conversation is perceived as sufficiently motivating in itself to overcome such obstacles.

Where contributors do find the commentary *format* unfamiliar, however, we hope they will bear in mind those comments we offered, above, in relation to critique. The purpose of offering a commentary should be to 'move forward' some given aspect of the TEL field—a principle that should remain true whether the object of commentary is a single paper, an empirical project, a wider research agenda, a theory (or concept within it), or the field as a whole.

In a practical sense, of course, it would be implausible to subject commentaries themselves to a process of peer-review: both for practical reasons of time delay and also because this would, in logical terms, pose an issue of infinite regress. Instead, our stance is that commentaries will be subject to editorial oversight, and that productive disagreement should be addressed via the invitation of subsequent commentary, as part of the connected conversation. From this, however, it follows that there is a need to clearly *label* the process of review undergone by each publication appearing within the journal—since full articles will have undergone rigorous peer-review, while commentaries will *not* have done so.

4.4 Unfolding and interacting

The reader may recall that the latter stages of Blunden's (2014) terse summary, of how projects progress through development in stages, is stated in the following way:

> As the project unfolds and interacts with the social environment, its object becomes clearer and more concrete. (4) Eventually, the new form of practice becomes 'mainstreamed' as part of the social practices of the wider community. That is, it is institutionalized and its concept enters into the language and culture of the community. These stages are to be seen as ideal-typical, not proscriptive. (p. 8)

What Blunden's account usefully highlights is that 'institutionalisation' and 'conceptual change' are intertwined processes. From our current vantage point, writing at a particular moment in the development of the project, it would be premature to make ambitious predictions about the future development of the project. The most that we can do is to offer an open account of the motivation behind it, and the present stage that the project has reached. We have been encouraged by the enthusiasm with which the project has been greeted in our own networks; and, in particular, by the number of people who have volunteered to curate future Special Issues. We realise, however, that many of those constraints encountered by TEL scholars are persistent and express widespread and deeply-rooted power structures that will be difficult to challenge and displace. Doubtless, we will encounter future obstacles we have been unable to foresee here; and, equally doubtlessly, the project and its core concepts will develop as a consequence of trying to overcome them.

But we believe that the project of scholarly conversation in TEL is one worth pursuing, and, if you have read this far, we hope you will consider joining in!

20 A search in the archives of *Computers & Education*, for example, indicates that 114 book reviews were published in the decade 1990-1999, 20 in 2000-2009, and 0 (zero) in 2010-2019. That is a stark decrease even in its own terms, and is perhaps even more so given that *Computers & Education* is one of those journals that has exhibited, over the recent period, an explosion in the number of issues and articles published each year.

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