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Revisiting the E-Quality in Networked Learning Manifesto

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to re-introduce the E-quality in Networked Learning Manifesto that was presented at the Networked Learning 2002 conference by the E-Quality Network and to reflect on its current applicability and meaning for networked learning. The paper will focus specifically on two of the five themes of the Manifesto; the working definition of networked (e)-learning and the need for a networked (e) - learning policy. In the paper we argue that the time is right to simply use the term networked learning and drop the 'e' in networked e-learning. This is because we think it is more important to foreground connectivity as a specific and important pedagogical feature of networked learning. We claim that an updated definition of networked learning should not only refer to being a pedagogy based on connectivity and the co-production of knowledge but also one that aspires to support e-quality of opportunity and include reference to the importance of relational dialogue and critical reflexivity in all of this.

Following on from the definition of networked learning we reaffirm the point made in the original Manifesto that policy for networked learning should be based on explicit educational values and research. And further, that it should be reiterated by reference to research findings. We identify a number of policy areas that have been identified as important to consider at both the Government and Institutional level. We then argue for policy, when introducing Networked Learning into the curriculum and institutional educational practice, to be informed by the educational values and theory underpinning networked learning and not to be developed in isolation to these.

The paper concludes by asking people to respond and draw on their research to comment on and hopefully develop the E-Quality Networked Learning manifesto and draw out issues for networked learning for the coming years

Keywords

Networked Learning, connectivity, identity, dialogue, networked learning policy

Introduction

Since 2002 there has been a great deal of development both in technological and pedagogical innovation and ideas and in the integration between the two. We feel it is timely to review the Manifesto to look at what might be missing and to consider what new issues have emerged and how the field of Networked Learning has developed.

One of the intentions of the Manifesto was to claim a space for radical pedagogies within technology supported and on-line learning. The Manifesto's focus on learning communities, the social and interactive aspects of learning and the significance of technology in the co-construction of knowledge was an initial attempt to do this. It succeeded in capturing some of the emergent ideas of the pedagogical potential now considered of critical importance today.

The Manifesto covered five key themes :-

1. a working definition of networked e-learning;
2. learning, teaching and assessment;
3. changing the relationship between teachers and learners;
4. supporting democratic processes, diversity and inclusion;
5. the need for a networked e-learning policy.

In this paper we want to focus on themes 1 and 5. The other papers in the symposium will each focus on themes 2 – 4. The paper is in three sections, section 1 is the Manifesto itself, section 2 a review and examination of the definition of networked (e)-learning and finally in section 3 we address the need for a networked e-learning policy. The paper concludes by inviting others to discuss and comment on the issues discussed in this paper and the other three papers included in the symposium.

Section 1 – The Manifesto

In this section of the paper we simply restate the Manifesto as published in 2002:

Working Towards E-Quality in Networked E-Learning in Higher Education: A Manifesto. - E-Quality Network (2002)

1. A working definition of Networked E-Learning:

Networked e-learning refers to those learning situations and contexts which, through the use of ICT, allow learners to be connected with other people (for example, learners, teachers/tutors, mentors, librarians, technical assistants) and with shared, information rich resources. Networked e-learning also views learners as contributing to the development of these learning resources and information of various kinds and types.

2. Learning, teaching and assessment

Networked e-learning as envisaged in this manifesto requires models of learning that are based on participation and not ones that are based on transmission.

This requires as much emphasis on learning processes and learning to learn as on subject knowledge.

Educational values which contribute to quality in learning and teaching environments are those that seek to encourage dialogue, exchange of ideas, intrinsic approaches to study and engagement. It is this that we need to support through networked e-learning.

Networked e-learning provides the opportunity for developing innovative assessment practices in which teachers and learners collaborate in the assessment process.

Networked e-learning is not a depersonalising experience. The careful integration of course design and innovative assessment can create as intimate an educational experience as a face-to-face encounter.

3. Changing the relationship between teachers and learners

In our view of networked e-learning, the relationship between teachers and learners is based on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge rather than on that of expert and acolyte. Such a view of the relationship between learners and teachers is one that is supported by the idea of the learning community. Networked e-learning can contribute to the establishment of virtual learning communities and enhance existing face-to-face learning communities.

The implementation of rich forms of networked e-learning also requires support for and the legitimisation of work done by academics towards the sharing of practice through both case study accounts and networks of practice.

If networked e-learning is to become a rich and robust educational practice providing quality learning environments, practitioners need to engage in critical and reflexive evaluation of their own practice. Any shift in tutor role as proposed here needs to be supported through professional development. Such professional development should mirror and be consistent with the principles underlying networked e-learning.

4. Supporting democratic processes, diversity and inclusion

Networked e-learning has significant potential for widening access and participation in higher education and for promoting social inclusion.

Networked e-learning allows for the possibility of new forms of communication, language and discourse. Such new forms of communication have the potential to be more open and supportive of inclusive educational practices. It promotes use of a wider range of resources, both material and human, directly relevant to learners' own intentions and interests. It offers the potential for dialogue with a broader range of people and in a form which allows different styles and preferences to be supported.

Potentially peer learning can be supported in a way which fosters inclusion and democracy in a learning community.

It offers opportunities of wider collaboration between academics, between academics and professionals, between people across cultures, between learners, and between learning and those who can support their learning.

Networked e-learning enables the vision of non-gate-keeping universities and the facilitation of synergy between disciplines. It offers a glimpse of a world in which intellectual property rights with respect to teaching and learning materials become irrelevant and open to all.

A culture neutral curriculum or design is impossible. If teachers are to mediate learning they must find common ground with the learner. Globalisation has the potential to facilitate movements and dialogues between cultures and shifts in notions of fixed identity or communities. Networked e-learning provides the opportunity to examine such issues of difference at the same time as providing a space in which to engage in the networked learning culture per se.

5. The need for a networked e-learning policy.

We believe that policy for networked e-learning should be based on explicit educational values and research.

Networked e-learning needs a policy that recognises changing roles and thus different costing and resourcing structures. Networked e-learning does not require less resources – it requires a different blend of resources. It requires both full technical support as well as curriculum design support.

Policy for network e-learning should be based on explicit educational values and constantly reiterated by reference to research findings, particularly from the various strategies and methods that have been gathered together under the rubrics of evaluation and practitioner research. Learners and tutors should feel free to engage openly with each other in a collaborative and supportive environment. This raises issues of privacy, surveillance, individual rights and data protection, which need to be addressed explicitly by institutional policy, and agreed locally by all parties.

E-Quality Network (2002) 'E-quality in e-learning Manifesto' presented at the Networked Learning 2002 conference, Sheffield, available at <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/esrc/>

Section 2

The Definition of Networked Learning

In the 2002 Manifesto the working definition offered was;

Networked e-learning refers to those learning situations and contexts which, through the use of ICT, allow learners to be connected with other people (for example, learners, teachers/tutors, mentors, librarians, technical assistants) and with shared information rich resources. Networked e-learning also views learners as contributing to the development of these learning resources and information of various kinds and types.

Key principles that were captured in this definition and further developed in the Manifesto were;

- The use of ICT to connect people and resources
- Learners contributing to the development of learning resources and information of various kinds.

In current discourse both principles have become prevalent and are generally discussed in terms of connectivity and co-construction/production of knowledge. The Networked Learning conference 'hot seat' speakers George Siemens and Stephen Downes are well known, for example, for their focus on issues of Connectivism and Connective Knowledge while Yrjö Engeström and Etienne Wenger are key contributors to the field of socio-cultural/situated learning and co-construction of knowledge.

Another principle captured not so much in the working definition but in the manifesto title was that of e-quality. We would suggest that the ideas of connectivity, co-construction of knowledge and e-quality remain key defining features of networked learning.

With respect to connectivity we think the time is right to simply use the term networked learning and drop the e in networked e-learning. This is because we think it is more important to foreground connectivity as a specific and important pedagogical feature of networked learning. Also we agree with Conrad (2003) who argued against 'the rampant use of those terms whose meanings have been recast by the addition of the letter 'e' to the front of them, 'e' meaning electronic'. As she explains;

Rendering our practice apparently instantly and easily accessible through 'e-talk' jargon is a reductionist activity that diminishes both its importance and the integrity that must accompany new ways of learning. It allows the solidity of viable pedagogy to become lost in a marketing jumble of promotional hype. It mimics the tendency of the training field to embrace 'one minute' solutions. E-talk permits the exploitation of the learning process by confusing the enterprise with derivative cultures when, in fact, despite new delivery tools, the intent of education that resides behind the introduction of new technologies has not changed. (Conrad, 2003)

In addition, while e-learning remains in use as a term it has more recently been acknowledged that learning of all types is now frequently and seamlessly integrating technology such that almost all formal learning includes a blend of face to face with technologically supported connection between learners and between learners and teachers/expertise as well as learning resources and materials. The importance of connecting people or as more commonly referred to social networks has been further underlined by the growth and popularity of social networking technology such as facebook, myspace, linkedin and more recently twitter. The rise of mobile devices/phones as a ubiquitous accessory has created a society, particularly amongst the younger members but equally across all generations, where connection is rarely lost and easily regained. Going to university no longer cuts the undergraduate off from family and friends as technology of various kinds embellishes and mediates frequent communications. Connectivity facilitated by new technology has elevated networking as the key concept and an important and valuable aspect of everyday life for most people. To see such technologies and connectivity as an integral and essentially undifferentiated aspect of networked learning is an obvious choice, increasing the range of connectivity for both the learner and the teaching institution.

It makes networked learning a fact for many and increasingly an aspiration for all. There are few disadvantages from having extra support from online materials and communications and potentially many advantages. Indeed the extent to which students in distance education and/or on online courses feel socially connected frequently gets cited as a key factor in online course success (see Brower, 2003 DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Swan, 2002)

It is the potential advantages or possibilities offered through networked learning that we will discuss next and which are developed in the other symposium papers.

Evidence from a meta-analysis of research studies (Means et al 2009) gives clear indication that learning systems that take advantage of ICT improve learning primarily by increasing the time spent on learning activities. Variety, perhaps, is providing the requisite spice for learning.

The co-construction/production of knowledge through dialogue is not a new idea or aspiration and has a long history in within both distance education and critical pedagogy for example. It is easy to lose sight of the importance given to dialogue in both these traditions. As Thompson recently reminded us the distance in Distance Education always referred to physical and psychological distance – and emphasised the importance of finding dialogic ways to close that distance. (Thompson, 2007)

Critical pedagogy, influenced and following on from the traditions of Paulo Freire equally puts great emphasis on dialogue; that is dialogue which not only engages with the other but also with ones position in the world. Freire even more than Dewey (arguably the arch advocate of education for democracy), believed in democracy in education itself and in the educator/teaching and learning relationship. Freire recognized the social relations in education were not equal but believed they could still aspire to being democratic and not authoritarian.

Networked learning implicitly has grown out of both of these traditions while at the same time embracing one of social constructionism that emphasizes relational dialogue in both the construction and the development of knowledge, meaning and worldviews within society(s). A view that demands and requires critical reflexivity to examine both the nature of knowledge being developed and identities constructed. Which in turn involves taking responsibility as a learner for both ones own learning and for others within learning networks.

An updated definition of networked learning should we feel, consequently, not only refer to being a pedagogy based on connectivity and the co-production of knowledge but also one that aspires to support e-quality of opportunity and include reference to the importance of relational dialogue and critical reflexivity in all of this.

Section 3

The Need for a Networked Learning policy

Following on from the definition of networked learning the Manifesto stated that we believed that a policy for networked (e)-learning should be based on explicit educational values and research. And further that it should be evaluated by reference to research findings.

Eight years on the need for a networked learning policy is not self-evident however, there has been growing interest in establishing frameworks and strategies to support ‘e-learning’ at national level. Part of the reason for this interest has been the high costs of ICT and the need to invest in the infrastructure to support the growing interdependence of classroom and online resources.

At the school level a large programme of Schools for the future has allowed investment in ICT infrastructure alongside buildings. Governments have also been concerned about the international competitiveness of their higher education systems, wishing to have Universities in the forefront of the technological revolution. They have also been concerned to encourage e-literacy as a graduate skill in order to keep industry competitive.

In the UK, for example, the costs of the infrastructure to support online learning and the number of individual institutions taking expensive initiatives to design their own systems have combined with increased interest in how technology can support Government policies such as “personalised learning” and widening access. In the late 1990’s the UK Government policy was aimed at large infrastructure projects and innovation such as the UKeU. The lack of success in such ventures as the UKeU seems to have supported a change of approach to one of sharing good practice at institutional level and supporting enhancement strategies such as E-learning Benchmarking programme and the support for ICT through Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

programme.

Again, in the UK, The Higher Education E-learning strategy first published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in March 2005 was updated in 2009. The strategy was a joint approach between several organisations, HEFCE, JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Its aim was to support institutions in benchmarking their progress and initiating projects at institutional level with dissemination across the system. Alongside this higher education focused work was the Government's wider educational ICT strategy, Harnessing New Technology (2009) developed by the British Education Communication and Technology Agency (BECTA).

As these examples from the UK demonstrate since the networked e-learning manifesto was published there has been a great deal of focus on the importance of ICT for learning. Some of the aims of which have been consistent with the democratic ethos at the heart of networked learning. However the increased interest on the individual focus of personalisation does little to explore the idea of networks and groups, and the overriding focus on infrastructure and resources can again be seen relatively to down play the importance of communication. For example, VLEs have become a ubiquitous support to learning and can be enormously useful to enable connectivity across an institution. But if all they are used for is to upload lecture notes, then one might feel the technology has simply reinforced the poorest type of learning tools and/or devices. A policy for networked learning would draw attention, as previously stated in the Manifesto, to the importance of design in learning and the pre-eminence of the nature of communication being supported and facilitated.

The exciting opportunities of technology for networked learning do not simplify the nature of the teaching enterprise. New knowledge and ideas about how people learn, differences in learning, the diversity of learning motivations and the combinations of theoretical and experiential learning modes point to the need for a greater professionalism in teaching and support for learning. Grafting on technological advances does nothing to mitigate this need for maturity in formal learning environments. Indeed, the addition of more people within the learning environment such as learning technologists, learning resource staff etc. makes the professional development for teaching an altogether more complex affair.

But here networked learning itself offers opportunities as well as challenges. Teaching and learning theory and practice is becoming easier to share. Dissemination across a network allows for good practice ideas and experiences to be widely available and perhaps there is less excuse to believe that one cannot learn how to teach in a networked world.

At the heart of our interest in a policy was the felt importance of the nature of the learning and teaching that we were trying to support and the purpose of using ICT for learning. In some ways the Manifesto was a reaction to the over importance vested in technology rather than on pedagogy and the reason to re-examine the Manifesto may be exactly the same. A focus on technology and what it can do should be subservient to a focus on pedagogy and the learning we are aiming to foster.

Equally important and as identified in the Manifesto are learning and teaching policies at the institutional level. Researchers in the USA, Varvel et al (2007) for example discusses importance of policies at institutional level when most institutional policies and requirements are based on student present, on campus. They identify several areas that need to be considered at the institutional policy and practice level;

- Face to face registration is in traditional Universities a requirement but can lead to all sorts of problems for students who are studying away from the University
- Need to change and address modes of assessment. They suggest this is a key area to consider and change to modes of assessment that are more related to project papers and postings made by students
- Counselling services for 'distant' students, an area seldom considered and resources in away that is easily available to students studying away from a University
- Library support – which they suggest is an area that has most adapted to the off campus student.
- Workload allocation issues – how does the changing nature of the work of staff get accounted for in workload allocation processes

- Issues of CR and IP – there is a potential myriad of issues around copyright and intellectual property related to course materials and resources

- Privacy issues – both legally and ethically. This is a complicated area and receiving increased attention particularly in the States where any exchange in text is considered an educational record with accompanying CR and privacy issues.

There has over the years been several attempts to identify frameworks to consider policy issues in the context of distance education provision. Again in work in the USA King et al (1999) looking at a number of these generated a Policy Analysis Framework comprising seven elements which they suggest institutional policy needs to address if distance provision is to succeed, they are;

Academic
Governance/Administration/Fiscal
Faculty
Legal
Student Support Services
Technical
Cultural

Research informing both government and institutional policy should arguably examine all of these areas when considering the greater and extended use of technology in the curriculum and, more specifically, when introducing Networked Learning into the curriculum and institutional educational practice. This needs to happen not in isolation of the educational values and theory underpinning networked learning but rather alongside and informed by them.

Final comment

We welcome comments on this paper and the other papers in the symposium. We want to encourage people to respond and draw on their research to comment on and hopefully develop the E-quality networked learning manifesto and draw out issues for networked learning for the coming years. By doing this we would like to work towards developing a framework for learning in the 21st century.

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