

# Chapter 1

## Becoming a Knowledge Community: The Epistemic Practice of Networked Learning



Vivien Hodgson and David McConnell

### 1.1 Introduction

It has been over 20 years since the first networked learning conference took place in Sheffield in 1998, and much has changed in that time. Not least, as many commentators have stated, digitalisation and the accompanying globalisation have dramatically impacted on the nature of work, society and education. Stiegler (2017) comments: ‘Thinking is thoroughly conditioned by a technical milieu.’ And Fenwick (2018) points out that there has been huge change as a result of social media and the emerging digital transformations of professional relations and knowledge; she goes on to comment:

....for me, a particularly compelling issue is the consequences of new digital technologies for professional practice and therefore for education (Fenwick 2018).

Alongside these changes, networked learning as an area of research and practice has developed. It could be suggested that networked learning ‘reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it’ (Sinclair 2020 quoting Bakhtin 1981). Texts about and within networked learning are themselves carriers of its development.

An important aspect in the making or development of networked learning as a field of research and practice has been the networked learning conference. The purpose of the study reported here is consequently to consider the contribution that the networked learning conference has had to the development of or in the making of networked learning as an area of scholarship and research over the last 20 years.

---

V. Hodgson (✉)  
Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK  
e-mail: [v.hodgson@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:v.hodgson@lancaster.ac.uk)

D. McConnell  
Curtin University, Perth, Australia

The study is based on a survey of contributors to the networked learning conference (NLC). In our analysis, we draw on two key concepts of ‘epistemic practice’ and the related concept of ‘knowledge communities’.

We have already discussed elsewhere (Hodgson et al. 2012, 2014) the idea of networked learning as epistemic practice. Drawing on the work of Gherardi and Strati (2012) on practice based studies (PBS), we explained that it was important to recognise that practice is always epistemic. The designs we implement and the way we go about and do network learning are a performative accomplishment. As Gherardi and Strati (2012 p. ix) state, ‘knowledge (therefore) does not reside in people’s minds nor is it a commodity; rather it is an activity situated in social, working and organisational practice.’ The shift is from seeing knowledge as an object to seeing knowing and indeed learning as a situated activity and something people ‘do’ together, collectively and socially.

Based on the replies we received in our survey, we argue that the responses suggest that the way participants interact and engage in dialogue about the theory and the practice of networked learning at the conference is in effect ‘doing’ networked learning in practice. As one regular attender to the conference explained:

*I would probably try to get to the conference each time, almost irrespective of what participants ended up talking about. In a sense, networked learning is constructed and reproduced through their decisions about what to talk about, so it’s also a way of moving along with a (loose) community (r21).*

While another more recent participant to the conference commented:

*I guess what is different about the NLC is that it is not only an event that happens for three days biannually, but instead it is part of the way this community engages in conversations. As a relative novice to this field, I believe that these conferences enact the values of NL—bringing together people that are genuinely interested in connecting, participating, collaborating, and engaging in knowledge building processes—as such, the conference setting and the event itself becomes an opportunity to realise networked learning practices (r15).*

In both of the above responses, there is also the idea of a (NL) knowledge community being created at the conferences. In a not dissimilar way to what Tight (2015) explains with regard to different disciplines, quoting Becher’s work on disciplinary difference and cultures, Becher claimed that ‘there are identifiable patterns to be found within the relationship between knowledge forms and their associated knowledge communities’ (1989, 150).

While we are not claiming networked learning to be a discipline, quite the reverse, we are suggesting that there are identifiable patterns in the knowledge forms associated with it as a knowledge community. NL is quite ecumenical in its allegiances and, if anything, probably interdisciplinary. Tight (op. cit.), however, also comments on the ideas of interdisciplinarity, saying:

*Interdisciplinarity, however, when examined in detail and over time, usually turns out to be about the development of new disciplines, sub-disciplines or specialisms, rather than some more fundamental and comprehensive change, and its proponents and their practices are similarly capable of characterisation (Tight 2015).*

The idea of networked learning being capable of characterisation as a knowledge community through its epistemic practice(s) at the networked learning conference did have a certain resonance with the responses we received to our survey. Consequently, we believe that they offer us a view of networked learning as it stands in 2018.

This said, networked learning has come to be associated with certain concepts and underpinning values, including a broad definition that has become the standard definition used by the NL conference, as it appeared in the first book of papers based on the 2004 NLC (Goodyear et al. 2004):

We define ‘networked learning’ as 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).

What was emphasised or stressed in the definition and other early work presented at the conference, e.g. the *E-Quality in e-Learning Manifesto*, presented at NLC 2002, available at <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/esrc/>, were key ideas such as the following:

- Learning community
- Connections
- Reflexivity
- Criticality
- Collaboration
- Relational dialogue

## 1.2 Methodology

In the study, we used a short questionnaire to collect the views from regular attenders of the NL conference in order to understand the role that the conference has played in the development of their thinking and ideas over time. We e-mailed the questionnaire to 30 people who had participated in NL conferences and had attended and presented papers at a minimum of three conferences. In inviting this group of participants, we acknowledge that the people identified to participate were in a privileged position that enabled them to participate so fully over many years in some cases.

In addition, we included two more recent conference participants who had contributed a chapter based on their NLC paper to the Research in Networked Learning Springer book series. The lead institutional organisers from all the NLC conferences between 1998 and 2018 were also included. Thus, all survey respondents had a close, often-longstanding association with the networked learning conference and its ‘knowledge community’ and were therefore in our view able to comment on how they had experienced its contribution in developing the theory and practice of networked learning.

With the questionnaire, we sent a participant information sheet that explained that we were conducting this survey as the past co-chairs of the networked learning conference between 1998 and 2012 and co-editors of the Springer book series on researching networked learning. In addition, we explained that the focus of the study was on the purpose the conference has played for different people and how their thinking and ideas have developed and/or changed over time. Finally, we explained that we were inviting each of them to take part in the study as someone who has had either a long or an intermittent association or, in some cases, a significant more recent association with the conference.

We decided to ask several basic questions about their experience of the conference, plus one about their conference attendance. We piloted the questions with a couple of colleagues who were familiar with the conference and our work in networked learning, and they suggested that a key missing aspect of the conference was its sense of community. One of them commented: ‘Seems ok as far as it goes but a significant aspect I don’t see a question about has to do (ironically) with the sense of a community which I valued more than anything else. Meeting with kindred spirits, from different disciplines but likely to have common ground in terms of educational (centre-left to left) values.’

Consequently, they encouraged us to include a question that considered the conference as a forum or a community rather than one that was about respondents’ purpose in presenting at the NLC. In addition to the survey questions, respondents were given a reminder list of the conferences they had attended and their themes and the papers they had presented. The five questions were as follows:

1. What attracts you to NLC as a forum/community in which to present your work?
2. Have you developed your thinking and ideas as a direct result of your attendance at NLC? If so, please describe how your thinking has developed.
3. In what ways—if any—have you seen a change in focus and key ideas/theories presented in the time you have been attending the Networked Learning Conference?
4. In what ways—if any—is Networked Learning contributing to the context of higher education learning and teaching practice in which you work and research?
5. Finally—and if you can remember—can you indicate when you first attended the NLC and how many conferences you have attended?




Twenty-one responses were received, and we included our own responses to the questions, making the total 23. Countries respondents were from or were currently working in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands, Croatia, South Africa and Canada. Fourteen respondents were female, and nine were male.

As well as showing how many conferences that the respondents had presented papers at, the first column of Table 1.1 in addition indicates how many of the respondents had edited a Research in Networked Learning (RNL) book series and/or written a chapter in the RNL book series. In summary, as indicated by the colour coding in column 1:

**Table 1.1** Summarises the range of experiences of presenting papers at the conference of the all-23 respondents

Year	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
M	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	0	X
M	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
M	x	0	x	x	x	x	0	0	0	x	0
F	0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
F	0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
F	0	0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	0	0
M	0	0	x	0	0	x	x	x	x	x	X
F	0	0	x	0	0	x	x	0	x	x	X
M	0	0	0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
M	0	0	0	x	x	x	0	0	x	x	0
F	0	0	0	x	x	0	0	0	x	0	0
F	0	0	0	x	0	0	x	0	0	X	0
F	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	x	x	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	x	x	x	0
M	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	0	x	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	0	0	x	0
F	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	0	0	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	0	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	x	x	0
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	x	0	X
M	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	X
M	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	X
F	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	X
M	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	x	X

Responses and networked learning presentations

-  Seventeen had edited an RNL series book and/or written a chapter in the RNL book series.
-  Two considered themselves as relative outsiders to the NL community/network but had attended three conferences over a period of years between 2004 and 2014/2016.
-  The remaining four had attended between three and seven conferences and indicated through their responses that they felt part of the NL community/network.

We each carried out an individual analysis of the respondents’ returns, looking for patterns and themes in order to identify some areas to examine closer, in accord with qualitative data analysis approaches suggested by, for example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman (1994). We shared our individual analysis and between us identified four main themes that had emerged across the responses received. In our description and analysis of the themes below, all quotes referred to from respondents have a numerical code to maintain their anonymity, and each respondent is referred to as r1 through to r23 throughout the paper. In using the quotes, we are trying not to include the full spread of respondents’ replies but rather to use individual responses to illustrate recurring comments and the themes emerging from across the analysis of all responses. There were no clear differences in responses from participants based on how long they had been attending the conference.

In our role as researcher, we followed the tradition in qualitative research of locating ourselves as situated in the community of networked learning conference

respondents. We were trying not to be ‘anonymous’ researchers but rather to be participants in the research, which we wanted to be quite open about in our communications with respondents. In doing this, we cannot claim to be value free. As Denzin and Lincoln put it:

Researching the native, the indigenous Other, while claiming to engage in value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

### 1.3 Themes in the Responses

Every respondent had her or his own experience and story to tell about his/her participation in the NL conferences, and each experience varied. Nonetheless, we identified the following four recurring themes:

- Critical space in networked learning
- Community in networked learning
- Scholarship in networked learning
- Developing practice in networked learning

These four themes appeared to be consistent in respondents’ understanding and experience of the core ideas of networked learning. To put it another way, many people felt that networked learning itself gives a frame of reference for how the conference enacts the values of networked learning as a knowledge community. Consequently, we believe that a closer examination of the experience and practice of the networked learning conference offers an interesting opportunity to re-evaluate key characteristics and values associated with networked learning. It offers an example of the ‘doing’ of networked learning as a social epistemic practice. Further, it allows us to consider what practices are produced and re-produced in the responses to our survey, which assist us to see how the characteristics of NL are institutionalised in the NL conference as taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs.

Through the following descriptions of the four themes identified in our survey, we will consider the way these ideas were reflected and developed through respondents’ comments and experiences of the NL conference.

### 1.4 Critical Space in Networked Learning

The editors in the final chapter of the most recent Research in Networked Learning book (Dohn et al. 2018), while reflecting on the NLC2016 papers, point out that there is a growing interest in the examination of learning spaces, particularly with respect to the way they are configured and produced within digital networks. They explain, however, that space often plays an important, if sometimes implicit, role for the issues discussed in the NLC book chapters. They comment:

The focus on learning spaces further reflects at least two trends in the Networked Learning community and the field of learning and education in general. The first of these trends is the growing awareness of the significance of the socio-material place of learning in determining activities, interactions, and learning outcomes (Carvalho et al. 2017). The second trend concerns what might be viewed as the dialectical opposite of this focus, i.e. the significance of boundary crossing (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Wenger 1998) for initiating and inspiring new cognitions and practices. These trends combine also in the first theme which we see emerging from the chapters of this book as an area of focus deserving further investigation in the future: mobility, new forms of openness and learning in the public arena (Dohn et al. 2018).

In raising this growing interest in the ideas of space at the NLC and for networked learning more widely, they infer but do not directly discuss the idea of ‘critical spaces’ that emerged in our analysis of responses to our survey. Criticality and more specifically, the importance of a critical space for dialogue and learning seemed to be an important aspect for respondents.

Reference to the strength of papers presented at the conference itself, supporting criticality and critical reflection was a recurring theme in many of the responses. However, a closer examination of the responses revealed that it was not just about criticality and reflection, as one respondent commented. Or as another wrote: *I think it has supported a more critical take on claims that might be made about technology* (r5).

It was as much about how this had been possible as a result of creating or making a space, from the very early conferences, where criticality and critical reflection could happen and were acceptable or, as one person commented, ‘even required’.

While the idea of critical examination has always been clearly stated in the NLC calls for papers, what is not stated is what this means or how criticality is reflected in practice in the NL conference. However, some of the survey respondents revealed how and in what ways the conference provided a ‘critical space’, stating, for example, that from the beginning

*Networked Learning seemed in those early days to open up the possibility of a more interesting, critical space where it was possible to take some risks in thinking* (r1),

a space that allowed the development of discussions and a ‘critical’ examination where

*The NLC’s critical, social justice-oriented approach to networked learning brought me ‘home’* (r9).

*I have always felt that NLC was interesting in that it invited more critical, theoretical, politically and social aware* (r7).

And also

*It feels quite important to have a community beyond my immediate colleagues and students that I can claim as my own—and the NLC has been that for me over the years. Spaces for critical thought about interesting issues in relation to digital education, networked learning, and so on, are really vital for us in this field* (r4).

In these comments, we start to see that the NLC as a ‘critical space’ allows participants to

- Take risks
- Examine social justice and ethical and political concerns
- Consider and examine power relations from a critical perspective

What is more, according to comments under other themes, the work done in this critical space is (mostly) to a high academic and scholarly level and represents a range of different theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary thinking. Importantly from a networked learning perspective, it is nourished by a supportive and interesting ongoing community/network of NL researchers. As one respondent aptly commented, the conference

*Practices what it preaches—provides a supportive and critical on-going international learning network (r6).*

It is equally important to put a critical lens on the NLC as a critical space. As one respondent (r20) alluded, it does present potential social and economic barriers through being in a fixed physical location and the relative high cost of attending. In addition, as in any social situation (and as we will discuss shortly, in any community), hierarchies of authority and power have to be acknowledged. To this extent, control over what is deemed to be networked learning is maintained through mechanisms that operate both consciously and unconsciously through the conference organisers, the paper reviewers, the hot seat presenters, the keynotes, the participants themselves and the book series editors and publishers. While striving to operate in a flexible and open manner, all involved have a certain investment and contribution in retaining the above characteristics while still seeking to develop and extend the theory pedagogy and practice of networked learning. As Bayne and Ross (2013) point out, referencing Peters and Hume (2003), openness does not mean freedom.

There was a sense in the comments made by some of the respondents that this control is shared with and among the conference participants as we change/develop what NL is every time we come together. This was something commented on by Clara O'Shea in her NLC 2018 paper (O'Shea 2018). Respondents' experience of the networked learning conference community and its significance to our understanding of networked learning are discussed in more detail in the next section.

## 1.5 Community in Networked Learning

In their analysis, which forms the introductory chapter of the Research in Networked Learning book from NLC 2016, de Laat and Ryberg (2018) identify 'community' or 'community of practice' as one of the dominant perspectives discussed at NL conferences. They comment:

The interest in community oriented and collaborative forms of learning has always been strong within networked learning; in fact, it is probably because the notion of Communities of Practice resonates well with the foundational ideas of Networked Learning that it has become so pervasive (de Laat and Ryberg 2018).



If then, as we have stated, we see the NL conference itself enacting the values of networked learning, what do we learn about the idea of community in networked learning from the responses to our questions? Many respondents talked positively about their sense of being part of a community and indicated that this was a major attraction to them in attending the conferences over the years. First, following on from the above comments by de Laat and Ryberg, it appeared that participation in the conference encouraged thinking critically about the notion of community itself:

*I think that my first attendance at NLC 2004 was especially useful to make me think in critical terms about the notion of community—so influential in higher education at that time, also because of the wide popularity of Wenger’s notion of community of practice. I started to think that using the term communities in higher education means privileging a certain kind of relationships, closely knit, while networked learning does not privilege a certain kind of relationships, for example those reflecting a notion of collaboration, and makes it possible to appreciate different forms of participation for learning. I think this notion has become much more relevant—and useful—than that of community to understand forms of experimentation and collaborative learning that have emerged with digital networks (r16).*

In addition, as discussed further in the next sections, while the idea of an ongoing NLC community was considered important, it was not considered by particularly more recent attendees of the conference to be a closed or unwelcoming community. Our analysis of the respondents’ comments suggests several different but mutually supporting views of the NLC community.

So, for example, respondents talk about the community as a place where members can develop attachments, friendships and ties. The concept of weak and strong/close ties is a familiar one from the literature on social networking and networked learning (Jones et al. 2008). All but two of the respondents to our survey indicated that they felt part of the NLC community of researchers. They talked about the strong ties that they have made or experienced within the NLC community. Some talked of the importance to them of being part of an ongoing and continuing series of conferences where a core of the community was relatively stable, thus allowing them to build relationships, stating, for example, that the community was *a manageable size so one does not get lost. It is consistent from conference to conference so one can build relationships over time* (r13).

The roots of the conference community are, however, Anglo-Saxon in culture and thinking. And the language, in common with many other international conferences, is English. All of these can potentially present barriers to being part of the NLC community for those from other cultures and other ways of thinking and speaking, as one respondent says:

*I found that language but also culture is still a barrier for my colleagues to take part in the debates of the NLC. However, I appreciated the fact that many researchers within the NLC adopted French and German critical and post-modern theories to develop their own reflections. While the NLC’s language was English, the community’s culture was open and well beyond the Anglo-Saxon perspective of research and practice (r12).*

What this respondent says indicates that for them, despite the real barriers, she seems to value the openness of the networked learning community.

Another theme in some respondents' replies was the way in which the conference community provides participants with affirmation of their professional practice and helps them consider their practice in the light of collegial discussion:

*There are new ideas. There are works in progress. There are some 'old' ideas which are still bearing fruit in terms of practical implications for my work in higher education. I find this mix quite supportive of some aspects of my practice, but also quite stimulating in terms of framing and reframing my ideas and my practices ... and so refining them. This is important, particularly for researchers and practitioners like me who may not have ready access to a group of peers that is co-located (r17).*

And for some, the opportunity for sharing and critiquing ideas in the community was a key feature:

*with each new conference the NL community critiques the political/ethical implications of reliance on [technology] tools to theorise relationships among tutors, learners, resources, and mediating technologies (including inscribed designs for learning) (r9).*

The way in which the NLC community puts into practice the values of connection, collaboration and knowledge building associated with networked learning and the way in which the community provides a space in which members can grasp, understand and enact networked learning practices were all seen as important: As one respondent aptly commented:

*NLC sure lives up to that side of its label (i.e. networking) (r19).*

To summarise, the analysis of respondents' comments on community indicates that the conference provides a space for enacting the following values and practice of networked learning:

- A communal spirit of encouragement and support
- Informally sharing and critiquing ideas in a supportive way
- Affirming professional practice in networked learning
- Openness to other ways of thinking and speaking
- Connection, collaboration and knowledge building

It appears to be the case that the networked learning conference community has developed a culture where participants place high value in supporting each other and in working towards a collective and shared process of participation and understanding. In noting this, we should not be complacent about the conference being a space that supports everyone. As one respondent also commented, there might be a 'canon' in the networked learning community (r20). To this extent, as mentioned by respondent r16 above, the idea of community may itself be problematic. Ideas on community can be nostalgic and seen as some kind of utopian ideal. They can be used to try to foster conformity and consensus, which can have a normative effect, which may lead to the setting of norms that exclude certain kinds of behaviour and ways of being (Hodgson and Reynolds 2005, McConnell 2006, Roberts 2006, Ferreday and Hodgson 2008). Our NLC survey respondents seldom talked of the NLC community in this way. However, we should remain alert to the possibility that for others, who do not clearly identify or see themselves as part of the NLC com-

munity, their experience of community may be very different from the one described above.

## 1.6 Scholarship in Networked Learning

Another characteristic of the conference that respondents identify is the way in which scholarship is developed through the conference. Our analysis indicates that scholarship is evident in two broad areas: the conference processes, i.e. the quality of participants' relations and the sharing of ideas, and the way in which networked learning is defined and re-shaped during the conferences.

The patterns and processes of the conference community can lead to new forms of knowledge and scholarship concerning the theory, pedagogy and practice of networked learning. From our analysis of the responses, it is evident that the conference is a place where participants share a common sense of identity as scholars of networked learning and where participants 'exchange information, build alliances, dispute ideas and work together' (Tight 2015):

*NLC is also a place where one can hear/talk about ideas. That's important. Other conferences in the 'Ed Tech' area tend to be dominated by show-and-tell accounts of recent educational innovations or (more rarely) by empirical studies that value method over substance. I don't mean that the perfect conference is a philosophical talk-fest—far from it—but NLC seems to welcome people who have interesting ideas to share, without requiring the supporting props of shiny new gadgets or tight data (r21).*

Hodgson et al. (2012) consider the ontology of networked learning and the assumptions it makes about the nature of being and existence. Making sense from one's own personal experiences and view of the world is a key feature of networked learning. Our analysis of the survey responses indicates that many conference participants experience the NLC as a scholarly setting in which they can make sense of their own personal and professional experiences and where they can engage in scholarly discussion of issues that are instrumental in driving their scholarly activities. Respondents reported that attending the conference exposes them to new ideas and engaging discussions that helped them make sense of networked learning and their own personal dilemmas and concerns through processes where, for example:

*I found myself in an ideal mix of exposure to new ideas, active discussion of both theory and practice, and a truly welcoming group of strong thinkers. This experience has repeated itself at each of the NLC's I have attended (r17).*

*My research-theory-practice 'home' will always include a complex combination of my Canadian and UK experiences. I have nowhere outside the NLC to sort this complexity and highly value the opportunity to continue working toward that goal (r9).*

*Within these discussions, there was the recognition of a distinction between seeing networked learning in terms of it being online or offline was disappearing:*

*... the field of networked learning has moved from a focus on 'online learning' towards including how networked technologies are affecting on-campus, full-time students ... new modes and mixes of online/offline and digital/analogue are emerging and call for reconceptualization of distinctions such as online/offline (r7).*

As the educational landscape experiences such changes, participants' quest to discover is striking in many of the responses, which capture an enduring characteristic and spirit of scholarship, which is a wish to solve problems, discover alternative viewpoints and transform practice. It is also evident in the way in which the conference over time has contributed to shaping and defining understandings of networked learning and in the way in which it offers other and new theoretical perspectives, as suggested in the following responses:

*The conference has always engaged with the idea of how we define networked learning: the definition of this that emerged from the work of Vivien and David, (i.e. the authors of the survey) and other colleagues, who established it has continued to shape it, but has also adapted and moved on as other theoretical frameworks have emerged (r1).*

*I go to NLC because speakers are not continuing to figure out how to put courses online or how to develop 'best practices' for instructors. Presenters and attendees tend to be in the forefront of new thinking about how networked learning can be used, where it applies, and how to take the best advantage of it, whether for exploring new theories or new practices (r10).*

*NLC has helped to engage with an audience of researchers and practitioners to explore and design for social learning relationships, appreciate human agency in networked learning and develop my work over the years to include non-technological social (f2f) networked structures for learning and professional development (r6).*

These and other comments made by the respondents help us understand the place of scholarship in the networked learning conference and the central role it plays in its development of networked learning ideas. Participants are seeking a place in which they can engage in high-level discussion, debate current ideas and theories and explore the way in which networked learning is developing, as well as being challenged in their thinking. For some, the conference provides an important and, as already discussed, critical and supportive space for them to clarify their thinking in ways that is not possible elsewhere.

## 1.7 Developing Practice in Networked Learning

The final significantly recurring theme in participants' responses relates to the development of practice from a networked learning perspective. This is a theme that epitomises the idea of epistemic practice where the theory of networked learning is captured in the practical accomplishment not only of one's learning designs but also in our situated performative actions/work and social practices.

There was the recognition of how the conference had for many of the respondents a direct impact on informing their approach to their own professional and academic practices. Not only in terms of developing their theoretical ideas but also for sharing and getting feedback on their practice. Finding the community as a place to share and provide feedback in a supportive but still challenging manner:

*There is still room for a joyful sharing of things that have been tried out and might provide some inspiration for teaching—I love the mix of challenge and stimulation (r5).*

*I have been inspired by studies of specific NL designs for planning my own teaching, and I often use texts from the NL community in my syllabuses (r2).*

It was not, however, only a case of taking on or developing ideas to implement in one's own teaching and learning practice and also to be able to share these with others either when designing new programmes or advising other institutions etc.:

*Networked learning has challenged my thinking about groups and communities as the locus or main pedagogical constellation and this has also meant a lot for how I have tried to work with networked learning locally. I.e. working with networked technologies to increase transparency between student groups; thinking in ways of how students can develop and utilise their personal learning networks as a way to strengthen and challenge collaborative knowledge building (r7).*

*Ideas from NL fed into the last major program I helped design (the Masters in Learning Sciences & Technology at (name of University) and they also inform some of the work I do as a consultant to other universities wrt (with respect to) design approaches, professional development programs, network/community-oriented learning, etc (r21).*

*I discuss NL with research students and this gives them a point of reference and a way of looking at technology and higher education, which often they have not really thought about. It gives me a point of reference in discussing technology internally too for example it is interesting to see people use different frames for the use of technology (they often become quite 'transmissionist' when it comes to distance learning in ways they would critique if teaching face to face) and I like NL for giving another way of looking at it (r14).*

In addition, as one respondent commented, in the examination of practice at the conference, there has been an ongoing extension or focus of the domains of practice considered:

*... first towards informal education and then towards activist perspectives. There has perhaps been a shift from technologies for teaching to technologies for coding—and what happens to the data from these. These are probably natural responses to some of the perceived threats to our institutions and values that have also featured strongly in recent years (r5).*

This said, respondents felt that there remains a degree of difficulty in engaging others in their institutions in the ideas and practice of networked learning. This was despite a perceived increased potential relevance of networked learning in relation to the above-mentioned threats faced by HE institutions. As r5 also commented:

*Highly relevant to my own practice, though I feel that the conference itself is an opportunity to stand back and review this practice. There is still a nebulous aspect to Networked Learning—its reach is extending but it is some way off being meaningful to those outside it (r5).*

Another respondent explained:

*In many ways, I see the position in the UK the position of NL is even more precarious than previously due to a) the integration of new technologies into the mainstream of HE b) the marketization and consumer focus of HE c) the limited room to experiment. To some degree this seems to affect many other HE systems but the UK and US seem to be the most affected (r3).*

Further, as already touched on, the difficulties of bringing in others from non-Anglo Saxon or English-speaking traditions are complex but, it would appear, certainly not impossible:

*I proposed a debate within a project in Latin America on the terms 'Distance Education', frequently used and emphasizing the logistic dimension of technology enhanced learning and 'Networked Learning', emphasising the pedagogical and socio-cultural dimension of TEL. Happily, it was possible to translate and discuss these two terms in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (r12).*

It thus seems that for many of the respondents, they felt that they were not only developing their networked learning practice through their participation in the conference and its knowledge community but also taking this experience back to their home institutions and into their own situated practice and doing of networked learning.

## 1.8 Conclusions

In our analysis of the responses to our five survey questions, we have attempted to tease out and look afresh at characteristics of networked learning as they are enacted in and through the networked learning conference. The four themes that we have focused on (critical space, community, scholarship and developing practice), we suggest, are all characteristics of the epistemic practice of the networked learning knowledge community. Further, in our analysis of these themes, we found that there were degrees of overlap and interaction and that together they constituted key aspects to the way the NL conference 'institutionalises' and is a practical accomplishment of networked learning. It has arguably achieved this through its own attempts to work with the NL definition and early ideas of networked learning, as described earlier in the paper, of

- Learning community
- Connections
- Reflexivity
- Criticality
- Collaboration
- Relational dialogue

As we have discussed elsewhere (Hodgson and McConnell 2019), over the years these NL ideas and values have been translated into learning principles and key features for designing and implementing networked learning programme and modules. What has not previously been explored is how these figure in participants' experience of the networked learning conference or how the conference itself is an example of networked learning in practice. As respondent r15, quoted earlier put it, *the conference setting and the event itself becomes an opportunity to realise networked learning practices.*

What do the above ideas and comments reveal about the position of networked learning in the current highly politicised, globalised and increasingly digitalised higher education sector? If nothing else, they show that the conference provides a community to examine and discuss the practical difficulties faced within HE in a postdigital world. Arguably, they also demonstrate that the networked learning community of researchers reveal their epistemic beliefs not only in what they write but also in what they attempt to do in their practice—both as participants at the conference and in their own situated teaching and learning practices. It is a reiterative process of developing one’s own networked learning practice through the affordance of the NL conference and the conference’s own practical accomplishment of networked learning.

## References

- S.F. Akkerman, A. Bakker, Boundary crossing and boundary objects. *Rev. Educ. Res.* **81**(2), 132–169 (2011)
- M.M. Bakhtin, Epic and novel (C. Emerson, & M. Holquist, Trans.), in *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981)
- S. Bayne, J. Ross, Posthuman literacy in heterotopic space, in *Literacy in the Digital University: Critical Perspectives on Learning, Scholarship and Technology*, (Routledge, Abington, 2013), p. 95
- T. Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1989)
- L. Carvalho, P. Goodyear, M.F. de Laat, *Place-based Spaces for Networked Learning* (Taylor & Francis, Abington, 2017)
- M. de Laat, T. Ryberg, Looking back and moving forward, in *Networked Learning—Reflections and Challenges. Advances in Research on Networked Learning*, ed. by N. Dohn, S. Cranmer, J. A. Sime, T. Ryberg, M. de Laat, (Springer, Dordrecht, 2018)
- N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 2 (Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2008)
- N. Dohn, S. Cranmer, J.-A. Sime, T. Ryberg, M. de Laat (eds.), *Networked Learning—Reflections and Challenges. Advances in Research on Networked Learning* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2018)
- E-Quality Network, ‘E-quality in e-learning Manifesto’ presented at the Networked Learning 2002 conference, Sheffield, 2002. Available at <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/esrc/>
- T. Fenwick, Pondering purposes, propelling forwards. *Stud. Contin. Educ.*, 1–14 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1425205>
- D. Ferreday, V. Hodgson, The Tyranny of Participation and Collaboration in Networked Learning, ed. by V. Hodgson, C. Jones, T. Kargidis, D. McConnell, S. Retalis, D. Stamatis, M. Zenios, *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning*, 2008 ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1
- S. Gherardi, A. Strati, *Learning and Knowing In practice-based Studies* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2012)
- P. Goodyear, S. Banks, V. Hodgson, D. McConnell, Research on networked learning: an overview, in *Advances in Research on Networked Learning*, ed. by P. Goodyear, S. Banks, V. Hodgson, D. McConnell, (Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht, 2004)
- V. Hodgson, D. McConnell, Postdigital Science and Education, in *Networked Learning and Postdigital Education*, (Springer, New York, 2019)
- V.E. Hodgson, M. Reynolds, Consensus, difference and ‘multiple communities’ in network learning. *Stud. High. Educ.* **30**(1), 9–22 (2005)



- V. Hodgson, D. McConnell, L. Dirckinck-Holmfeld, The theory, pedagogy and practice of networked learning, in *Exploring the Theory, Pedagogy and Practice of Networked Learning*, ed. by L. Dirckinck-Holmfeld, V. Hodgson, D. McConnell, (Springer, New York, 2012), p. 318. ISBN: 978-1-4614-0495-8
- V. Hodgson, M. de Laat, D. McConnell, T. Ryberg, *The Design, Experience and Practice of Networked Learning* (Springer, New York, 2014)
- C. Jones, D. Ferreday, V. Hodgson, Networked Learning a relational approach—weak and strong ties. *J. Comput. Assist. Learn.* **24**(2), 90–102 (2008)
- Y.S. Lincoln, E.G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, vol 75 (Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1985)
- D. McConnell, *E-Learning Groups and Communities* (SRHE/OU Press, Maidenhead, 2006), p. 209. ISBN 0 335 21280 8
- M.B. Miles, A.M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd edn. (Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994)
- C. O’Shea, Learning how kinds matter: a posthuman rethinking of Ian Hacking’s concepts of kinds, dynamic nominalism and the looping effect. *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Networked Learning 2018*, ed. by M. Bajić, N.B. Dohn, M. de Laat, P. Jandrić, T. Ryberg, 2018. ISBN 978-1-86220-337-2
- M.A. Peters, W. Hume, Education in the knowledge economy. *Policy Futures Educ.* **1**(1), 1–19 (2003). Retrieved September 12, 2003 from <http://www.triangle.co.uk/PFIE/NetworkedLearning>; Book Series: <http://www.springer.com/series/11810>
- J. Roberts, Limits to communities of practice. *J. Manag. Stud.* **43**(3), 623–639 (2006)
- C. Sinclair, Laugh with us, not at us: parody and networked learning. Chapter 11, this volume (Springer, New York, 2020)
- B. Stiegler, What is called caring? Beyond the anthropocene. *Technē Res. Philos. Technol.* (2017). <https://doi.org/10.5840/techne201712479>. Online first Accessed December 2017
- M. Tight, Theory development and application in higher education research: tribes and territories. *High Educ. Pol.* **28**, 277–293 (2015)
- E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998). ISBN 052143017 8hbk;0521663636pbk