Postdigital Research, Networked Learning, and Covid-19

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Introduction

Writing an editorial in the early months of 2021, with the Covid-19 pandemic still lingering over our heads, it feels timely to mentally rewind to approximately a year ago. Last February, I was co-organising the biennial Networked Learning Conference[1] to be held in Kolding, Denmark, in May. The Danish members of the scientific committee (Nina Bonderup Dohn, Stig Børsen Hansen, Jens Jørgen Hansen and myself) were still quite optimistic that we would be able to host the conference onsite. One month later, I found myself working from home in a national lockdown. My lap topped with two children and a cat, while striving to contribute to an emerging collective article 'Teaching in the age of Covid-19' (Jandrić et al. 2020) and planning for a fully online conference. 'That escalated quickly', said a popular Internet meme, and for many people, the idiom 'There is no place like home' was suddenly transformed into 'There is no place but home'.

For many people, the following period has been characterized by online work, education, and socializing, while being physically localized and place-bound. Amidst discussions of the pivot to 'online' or 'virtual', my left shoulder has sent constant reminders that my body has been seated in spaces that are ergonomically significantly less suited for work than my regular office. Kennedy and Littlejohn (2020) blogged about forthcoming research on teachers' experiences of working and teaching from home. They showed that people's experiences vary considerably depending on the actual physical room they inhabit; the more available physical space, the more positive people are towards working and teaching from home. How

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[1] See https://www.networkedlearning.aau.dk/nlc2020/. Accessed 19 February 2021.

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the pandemic has evolved (or erupted) has greatly varied depending on political leadership, yet lockdowns have clearly exacerbated existing inequalities both across and within countries or regions.

The period has marked with a strange mix of local and global engagements. Although we have been meeting 'online', I have never been invited into so many different living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, or seen so many cats, children and partners of my academic colleagues. In this way, the online meeting spaces have been strangely local, homely and firmly physically anchored. While I have not left my home, I simultaneously felt that my interactions and activities have included a larger and more diverse network of people across the globe. For some of us, being collectively tied to our individual places somehow seemed to have widened access and diversified interactions with others. The Covid-19 lockdown experience has put in practice many ideas and principles developed in the field of networked learning (NL).

Reflections on Networked Learning

In the 1990s and early 2000s, educational technology was more often associated with online programmes than with the regular on-campus experience, and NL used to be an area of research focusing to online and distance education. Over the years, Wi-Fi, laptops, mobiles and learning management systems (in some parts of the world) have become ubiquitous parts of the educational infrastructure, and NL has embraced the adoption of educational technologies as part of the on-campus experience (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020). In line with postdigital theorizing, many NL authors have explored the blurring boundaries between online and onsite, digital and analogue experiences and activities (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020, Cutajar, Thestrup and Gislev, Jaldemark, Bali, and others in Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al. 2021).

This issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* builds on and continues with these considerations. Ryberg et al. (2021) explore how we can problematise, conceptualise and analyse such distinctions through the concept of ecotones adopted from biology/ecology. Koole et al. (2021) explore 'cyberbullying' as a complex phenomenon that escapes binaries such as online (cyber) and onsite and suggest an understanding of cyberbullying as postdigital enactments 'that linger through time and spread across contexts'. Indeed, the boundaries between online and onsite are blurring in both everyday life and in higher education.

However, with the eruption of Covid-19 and the shift to online emergency teaching (Hodges et al. 2020), many teachers and students have been tossed into an unusual situation. While higher education institutions in some parts of the world have well-developed digital infrastructure (learning management systems, video-meeting facilities etc.), the pedagogical transformation from onsite teaching in digitally saturated environments to online teaching was far from straightforward. Concerns with students' well-being and fear of isolation have surfaced. Although some students have been more resilient than anyone could hope for (Lee et al. 2021), this has been a demanding time for students and teachers. Colleagues across the educational

sector have highlighted ways in which social aspects of teaching and learning have been hampered in the sudden switch to online education. We started to understand the importance of on-campus infrastructures and the extent to which we used to take them for granted. As phrased by Johnson, Maitland and Torday:

> The campus has been a critical and largely uninspected ingredient in the transactionalising of education: the epigenetic environment of the coffee bar, shared housing and the pub provide opportunities for individuals to establish deep relationships which recognise their common biological heritage. (Johnson, Maitland, and Torday 2020)

Students attend classes, sit together in lecture halls, cantinas and libraries, work together in group spaces and meet their lecturers. Somewhat provocatively, we could say that we took this environment for granted, and that its importance has become visible only in its sudden absence. The need to cater to the social and collaborative aspects of teaching and learning is a well-known issue in NL and distance education (Annand 2011; Rourke et al. 1999). Online communities of practice have been a recurrent theme in NL literature (Laat and Ryberg 2018). In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Green et al. (2020) suggested NL and the Activity-Centred Analysis and Design framework (ACAD) as a means to cope with emergency remote education. Similarly, Calder and Otrell Cass (2020) 'argue that online environments allow for opportunities to play and personalize, to be creative, and that these forms of expressions are an interplay of social and technical elements'.

'Networked Learning in 2021: a Community Definition'

Last year, Networked Learning Editorial Collective (2020) published the article 'Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition'. Few days before the publication of this issue, the collectively authored response paper, 'Networked Learning in 2021: A Community Definition' (Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al. 2021) followed. As a member of the Networked Learning Editorial Collective, I extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed their thoughtful and interesting responses.

Some of the responses concern the usefulness and purpose of definitions. Bayne, for example, concurs that definitions have a scholarly value, but also raises the issue that definitions often create an 'inside' and 'outside' and suggests caution. Hrastinski proposes that 'the core goal of the commentary is maybe not so much about redefinition, as it is "to open up discussion about the place of critical and emancipatory dispositions within current descriptions of networked learning"'. Similarly, Hansen argues that the definition could perhaps be understood in terms of function, rather than theory. 'Functional definitions understand a thing broadly in terms of what it does, and while some fields may seek a high-level theoretical understanding of natural phenomena, NL has a purpose in wider society.' According to Hansen, NL 'performs an important function in arranging conferences and offering outlets for publications' and 'is much more a bazaar, with a multitude of theoretical voices, than it

is a cathedral'. I really like the image of NL as a bazaar and agree with Hansen and Hrastinski that the wider purpose of the definition paper is to open up a debate about future visions of NL. It is worth to discuss how definitions help us in that regard, and how they might, as Bayne suggests, be counterproductive to the intentions. This is an open question that will surely be debated in times to come.

Responses put a lot of stress on 'Big Agendas' such as equity, social justice and more sustainable forms of living. Yet how do we move from good intentions, such as 'greater attention needs to be paid to collective social projects that require both inquiry and action' (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020), to their realization? Matthews suggests 'tracing structure and agency in complex networks', Lee and Bligh argue for more attention to 'lived experiences and the dynamics of struggle in daily practice', and Gulson argues that 'aiming to do emancipatory action research requires a theory of power that is congruent with networks'. This sits well with NL's recurrent interest in Cultural Historical Activity Theory and more recent work on formative interventions and change laboratories as a means to stimulate expansive learning and transformative agency (Sannino et al. 2016; Virkkunen and Newnham 2013).

Other 'Big Agendas' include automation, artificial intelligence, ethics, surveillance capitalism, the platform society and digital educational governance. In 'Postdigital living and algorithms of desire', Lacković (2020) discusses the notion of 'algorithms of desire' using the example of the online celebrity Miquela Sousa aka Lil Miquela. In 'Dupery by Design: The Epistemology of Deceit in a Postdigital Era', MacKenzie et al. (2020) highlight the dark sides of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation being spread online. These themes also featured heavily in the final collective discussions at the Networked Learning Conference 2020, yet they are—with few notable exceptions—rather absent in the actual conference proceedings (De Laat et al. 2020).

According to de Laat and Ryberg (2018), the NL community often engages with these themes at a conceptual rather than practical level. Interesting exceptions arrive from Edinburgh University's Centre for Research in Digital Education[2] and projects such as Teacherbot: Interventions in automated teaching (Bayne 2015; Ross 2016). In this issue, Gallagher et al. (2020) share insights from the group's research project that speculatively explores potentials for automation in teaching through a series of design events with teachers. This type of work shows a lot of promise, as it combines critical-theoretical inquiry with playful experimentation involving digital technologies.

'Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition' (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020), 'Networked Learning in 2021: A Community Definition' (Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al. 2021), and papers in *Postdigital Science and Education*, including but not limited to this issue, offer a lot of opportunity for deep thinking about the present and future of NL and postdigital research. It is with these thoughts, that we welcome further developments in NL and postdigital research beyond the Covid-19 pandemic and into the 'new normal'.

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[2] See https://www.de.ed.ac.uk/. Accessed 22 February 2021.

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