

# The elephant in the (class)room. How can an international learning network assist in finding adequate answers for teaching and learning in the digital age?

Luk Bouters<sup>1</sup>, Jörg Westbomke<sup>2</sup>, Blane Savage<sup>3</sup>, Christel De Maeyer<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Ghent, Belgium

<sup>2</sup>Stuttgart Media University, Stuttgart, Germany

<sup>3</sup>School Of Business & Creative Industries, University Of The West Of Scotland, Ayr, Scotland

An opinion paper on teaching and learning in a digital age, April 2020

Keywords: Learning Network, Special Interest group, Digital Learning, Digital Transformation, Digital Media Education

*A "Learning Network" is a community of people who help each other to better understand and handle certain events and concepts in work or life. As a result – and sometimes also as an aim – participating in learning networks stimulates personal development, a better understanding of concepts and events, career development, and employability." [7]*

Education professionals face many hurdles in their attempts to come to grips with the challenges posed by the changing education paradigms, the evolving learning culture of today's student generation and the developments in their technical field. Today, many learning networks exist worldwide. Focusing on specific areas of practice within various sectors of our society, these networks of experts, as well as laymen, meet regularly throughout the year to exchange knowledge and expertise. All have different backgrounds and contexts that account for their existence. They feature numerous specific approaches that characterize them, make them unique or recurrent.

A literature review of research utilizing as-

sociated terms for these learning networks includes descriptions such as Special Interest Groups 'SIGs' (121 papers published), Communities of Practice 'CoPs' (19 papers published), Professional Learning Networks Inc. Learning communities (5 papers) Peer learning (5 papers), Learning community of practice Inc. Communities of practice (4 papers), Productive Learning Networks (1 paper), Professional Learning Communities (1 paper), International learning network (0 papers), Learning networks (0), Learning group (0), Learning management systems 'LMS' (0) and Networks of Practice (0).

As the literature shows a host of differing titles are existing around these differing learning networks. Looking in more detail at the top two researched groups like the 'Special Interest Groups' are mainly communities promoting and advancing areas of technology, knowledge and education. They often group around conferences and some active lobby governments on behalf of these industries. A large number of SIG papers identified in the review are written to support those in the medical profession

offering subject-based expertise and innovative practice. There are also professional societies utilizing these types of special interest groups, coalescing around areas such as in engineering, through bodies like the IEEE and in computing science (ACM). They have a vast range of focus from Accounting History and Antiracism Activism to groupings around Coaching Psychology.

Another, Communities of Practice 'COPs' were first academically defined in concept by Brown and Duguid [3] 1991 and Lave & Wenger, 1991 [8] as groups of people who learn together through the act of practice and shared social identity often within an organizational context. These could be grown around professions such as legal, medical, information technology, librarianship and the teaching professions. They propose a specific idea around social theories of learning focussing on deviant practices of narration, collaboration and social construction between members of organizational communities which are fundamental to its development and these sit out with formal practice dictated by those organizations. CoP's practitioners come together informally to think about real-life issues and share common problems. They draw added value and tacit learnings from their sharing of their mutual practice-based experiences and work-related knowledge.

*"A history of mutual engagement around a joint enterprise is an ideal context for this kind of leading-edge learning, which requires a strong bond of communal competence along with a deep respect for the particularity of experience. When these conditions are in place, communities of practice are a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge". [5]*

However, all can inspire other nascent learning networks on how to tackle issues of common

interest. As education is in digital transformation for a while now, the idea rose to look at these learning networks to organize professionals around a common topic, namely 'Education in digital transformation'. Within this area, several questions can be tackled but the main goal is to learn from our educational partners and exchange best practices, more specifically in the field of media education.

### **Why should one go for a learning network?**

The world of communication and information technology is undergoing some profound, sometimes even disruptive, structural changes. This is knocking on open doors. It is equally beyond the obvious, that this drastic evolution, with far-reaching consequences, will not meet a sudden death tomorrow but that it will continue to flourish and change for years to come. Volatility has become the new norm.

Educators in media and information technology have the mandate to provide insight and clarity in these capricious and complex advancements. Educators have the responsibility to train students for a future career in the communication and media business, which is currently undergoing a major change. The rapid and intrusive developments in the sector require education professionals to look ahead, to understand these developments and to incorporate the relevant information into their courses and practice to ensure the education and graduation of futureproof students. This is a very challenging and demanding responsibility, requiring good analytical skills to make the right choices promptly. Concurrently, not only the media business is changing, but academic education is also facing a tremendous change as a con-

sequence of the progressive digitalization and the reality of the life of young people. These time-consuming processes of adaptation run the risk of taking place to the detriment of scientific research, individual feedback and coaching, the study of new pedagogical and didactic tools, etc. At the same time, as a teacher, one better makes sure that one is in tune with the learning preferences and the communication culture of its target audience to capture their attention and ensure that teachings bear fruit. This is not an easy task as it comes with high expectations from the learners, the recruiting companies, the parents, review commissions... in other words: our society.

New technologies, a continuously changing lifestyle, new jobs and disciplines and especially the speed at which this change is taking place present serious challenges in the field of education and media education in particular [6], [2]. This context constitutes some sound and solid reasons for educational professionals to meet regularly to put their brains together, to exchange views and experiences to cope with the high expectations and complex working environment described above. Especially when former education methods and skills are challenged in a society where personalization, collaboration, social media and e-learning are taking over. With the maturity of the internet, teachers move to forms of flipped, blended, hybrid and online learning, which asks for much more structure and for advanced levels of faculty training to establish sound learning systems. However, one must recognize that technological progress has evolved much faster than the new technical possibilities can be reflected in the teaching concepts and pedagogics. Not all the teaching staff is ready or proficient enough to develop one's own MOOC or blended learning solutions on their own. Professionals

have to upskill and re-educate themselves and schools need new tools and solutions to be able to innovate and make these changes manageable. It also must be considered that many academic lecturers have profound expertise in their specialist field, which is not necessarily pedagogy. Professional training could be an option to get everybody on the same page, including buddy systems for those who are not so digitally literate to do so. As any academic world is a microcosm consisting of employees with different disciplines and different age groups, then peer learning could be a big help for those who are lagging behind compared to their colleagues who might be early adopters. Recognizing that the most powerful knowledge about education resides within the sector itself, the initiative to work in bringing to the surface and share the expertise and experience should come from the education professionals themselves. To this end, learning networks have expanded rapidly across many academic and professional domains. They aim to create a safe learning environment for their members to share their knowledge and learn from their peers through tailored peer-learning communities and workshops. Various publications have come to the rescue of these peer-learning aspirations offering insight on how to initiate such a venture [9]. They provide a coherent set of arrangements and suggestions to establish a structure which facilitates the learning and shapes the learning activities and outcomes.

### **How one builds a learning network ...**

In her article "3 Steps for Building a Professional Learning Network" [5], Brianna Crowley puts forward a straightforward and uncomplicated definition of a professional learning network (PLN) before embarking on outlining the steps

for establishing one: *A professional learning network is a vibrant, ever-changing group of connections to which teachers go to both share and learn. These groups reflect our values, passions, and areas of expertise.*

In this description, a few words stick out and draw particular attention: ever-changing and shared passion. A PLN is a dynamic and enthusiastic group of colleagues. It is an open group thriving on common ground, fueled by a shared zeal. A PLN is about personal relationships growing within a context of learning being set within a social, collective activity [4]. Take away the enthusiasm of the people involved and the structure will collapse. In a nutshell, a PLN framework is there to enhance interpersonal interactions and co-creation. Some authors, therefore, prefer the term 'Productive Learning Networks' [8], [9] because "it foregrounds acts of creation rather than consumption and because of connotations of self-realization and/or identity formation (...)" to emphasize the "shared enterprise of knowledge creation".

Brianna Crowley then continues with setting out the three steps for starting up a PLN:

- Find the professionals:

A PLN starts with identifying an educational organization with an appealing mission and values. Join that organization and follow their activities online and offline.

- Find your niche groups:

An organization may house various PLN's. Don't go for the mass, the silent majority. Quality before quantity. Find a group of like-minded colleagues with shared passions or experiences.

- Find your PLN buddies and mentors:

The network is only a platform, a medium to connect people. It will help to find buddies or mentors. "They expand one's natural tunnel vision, transform one's perspective, and encourage when rock bottom seems near" [7].

A PLN, therefore, is a very dynamic, self-motivating organism. One knows when it started but not when it will end. People join or branch off; start a new PLN based on a change in vision or passion... or just drop out due to lack of motivation, challenge, focus. The users of this framework exercise a great level of autonomy regarding their participation, commitment and interaction. A good working PLN takes this into account and allows flexibility and considerable autonomy in its practice.

### Let's start...

In 2014 the Erasmus+-funded CIGN-project<sup>1</sup> took off. This project successfully combined the expertise of 5 universities (University of Linköping (Sweden), Stuttgart Media University (Germany), the University of the West of Scotland (UK), Ryerson University (Canada) and Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), specialized in media design, technology and management to produce a set of online learning materials. On the occasion of a wrap-up session of the project, the participating institutions met at the University of the West of Scotland (Ayr) in 2019. At that time, it was felt that the consortium should continue its collaboration beyond the project period and framework. The ongoing value of peer-consultation and the professional exchange was

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cign-education.eu/>

pinpointed as important to maintain and urged for this collective decision. Step one of Brianna 'Crowley's outline was a fact.

It was agreed that the annual organization of the International Week at the Stuttgart Media University (October 2019) provided a good opportunity to host the first meeting of a new PLN. During this week, more than 70 representatives of 40 higher education institutions specialized in media gathered to exchange information on their international mobility programs. Step two was achieved. The initiators decided to grant the PLN a proper name: Special Interest Group (SIG) to underscore the shared passion and focus on an overall embracing theme "learning in the digital age". Participants from the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Croatia, Belgium, Finland, UK ... joined the maiden meeting of the SIG. After an introduction round, participants were asked to indicate the topics of their interest and based on this information, discussion groups were formed.

The following focus areas were discussed: "We are not working for the rules; the rules are working for us"

At present, the organizational and institutional framework conditions for teaching at the higher education institutions are mainly oriented at classical teaching settings. Modern teaching concepts and approaches do not often conform to these regulations and demand additional efforts from the teacher in addition to the efforts necessary to tackle the pedagogical and technical challenges. Successful examples from other universities can be of great help in talking to the responsible people and alter these rules and regulations.

## **The human factor in eLearning**

In the enthusiasm for the various possibilities offered by learning management systems (LMS), such as time and place of independent learning, multimodal learning materials or individualized learning opportunities, the human factor is often forgotten. All these scenarios require students who have a high degree of independence, time management and self-organization abilities. But initial experiences show that not all students have these skills and as a result, stress and mental overburdening are side-effects of e-learning that must be taken seriously.

## **Organizational aspects of e-learning**

The introduction of e-learning has consequences, not only at the pedagogical level but also at the administrative level. While universities currently predominantly offer attendance studies and see this as their Unique Selling Point (USP), they are potentially exposed to the worldwide competition when increasing their level of digital education. This raises completely new questions for the universities and especially to their heads of administration, e.g. whether the same numbers of teaching staff are needed or whether the same numbers of rooms are still needed. No matter what the answer to these questions are, it is certain that different types of equipment and rooms are needed for e-learning.

Participants reacted very positively to this format and approach and agreed on its continuation. The initiators of the first SIG meeting then contacted the presidium of the International Circle of Educational Institutes for Graphic Arts, Technology and Management (IC)<sup>2</sup>. This inter-

national organization is a free association of institutions with educational and research aims in the field of visual media. The IC has a good track record in providing a platform for the exchange of knowledge and expertise between educational institutions and companies specialized in media. Together, these 80 some member institutions employ several thousands of media education professionals specialized in various disciplines. They constitute a considerable critical mass of passionate professionals looking for peers to share experiences and thoughts. The IC presidium reacted positively to the request of the SIG to patronize and support its activities within the IC institutional framework. Step three of Brianna' Crowley's outline: check!

### Future areas of discussion:

From a student perspective, topics might include: how to assess large student groups and identify individual contributions? How to assess attitudes in an online learning environment? How to maintain students their attention in a blended world and the pitfalls and successes of the use of social media in the classroom?

Furthermore, how do we keep students healthy and sane in a digital age? One other worry today is that students are getting to a saturation point or even suffering an overload of information through a variety of channels, and experience a lot of peer pressure to be in the social media cycle or space. The opportunity to learn anytime, anywhere seems to give them more stress than calmness. They need to structure their lives better and learn to have off-line calmness in their lives. How can professional educators help here?

Online teaching resources such as recorded lectures and links to source material can free up specialists teaching time. This can be utilized in supporting students in other more valuable ways than just the presentation of lectures, such as one-to-one engagement and embedding of concepts through tutorials, simulations and activities which can be in groups or individually driven. This builds confidence in the learners as they can work with the material more fully.

There is also the potential for staff to act as mentors in support of the students' needs, future plans and objectives. All of this is predicated on the understanding of each subject having its own learning structure and requirements; art, design, journalism and physics are all taught differently.

With the increasing digitalization of teaching, there is also an increased possibility of using artificial intelligence (AI) techniques and thus relieving both the learner and the teacher of routine tasks. The freedom gained in this way can then be used for the core learning processes. When one thinks about AI, one immediately thinks predictive analysis, forecasting models based on gathered data, leading towards personalized education in this case. The challenges, however, are giving meaning to the abundance of data. One could say that personalized learning seems to hold a lot of promise in an AI world. However, with these new evolutions in AI, we need to consider the different objections that rise today in an AI world as well. One of the most problematic features is empathy, AI has no empathy, it cannot feel pain or joy, it cannot feel love or be loved<sup>3</sup>. Other objections

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.internationalcircle.net>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cursor.tue.nl/en/news/2020/maart/week-1/artificially-intelligent-education/>

that live today in the AI world are the ethics around AI. AI systems could lead towards social sorting, discrimination and leading towards more exclusion as supposed to inclusion. In this perspective The European Commission set out AI guidelines to be considered in developing AI systems [1], we also see these guidelines defined in Singapore and the US. So how does one go about with all the data that is generated in these systems by students and teachers? What can one learn from it? Can organizations do predictive analysis on their students, what are their chances to graduate, how long will it take them to do so. Today we are not yet using these systems in an optimal matter.

From a teacher perspective: setting up learning experiences in a digital age is quite challenging as mentioned before. What kind of scenarios would be most useful and engaging for the students? How can one keeps the content flexible and up to date in an ever-changing world? Previously, one only needed to update textbooks, but today in a multimedia environment, we need to work cross over and on different media channels simultaneously, a 360° world where one publishes its educational content on a learning platform offered by the university or university college, one needs to prepare video material that might be accessible on 'YouTube' or/and the organization's learning platform. Besides, more and more teachers and lecturers organize themselves on 'Facebook' to engage with students. At the end of the day, teachers/lecturers deliver print media (printed courseware), online content on different channels such Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo and learning platforms within one's organization as a central entry point towards the student and the content a teacher/lecturer prepared for his or her students.

To put it in a nutshell, the digitization of education means far more than just the continuous advancement of current education approaches. It is a disruptive paradigm shift: from teaching to learning, where we must switch from teacher-centred teaching to student-centred learning.

### **What brings the future?**

Not an easy question in VUCA-times (VUCA refers to Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. The acronym was first used by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus but was quickly adopted by the American military to describe the global military situation after the Cold War).

As mentioned earlier, PLN's such as the SIG "learning in the digital age" can be very whimsical and capricious due to their nature and informal structure. Having said this, the weaknesses of a PLN also constitutes its strengths. Looking across our history and cultures, informal learning through networks such as extended families and friends has always complemented, matched if not outdone formal learning pathways, including those organized by universities. Although digital communications technology comes to the assistance of PLNs and social media interaction is definitely a strong mediator, physical presence at meetings has its proven advantages too. Therefore, a blend of various communication and participation techniques will be deployed to organize customized webinars, workshops and meetings based on member interests and needs to maintain and feed the SIG-network. For every meeting, a host will be appointed and it will be predominantly up to the hosting partner to decide on the mode of the meeting and the topics set within the agenda. For the year 2020, the SIG

already arranged several meetings. Firstly, the workshop in June jointly held with the annual conference of the IC in Dusseldorf on the occasion of DRUPA and a second workshop held throughout the International Week at Stuttgart Media University in November. The physical meetings will be complemented by quarterly online meetings. The first webinar hosted by Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in February 2020 will focus on the changing role of teachers/students in the digital age. Further webinars are appointed for April hosted by Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, in September hosted by the University of the West of Scotland and in January 2021 hosted by Linköping University (due to COVID-19 we need to reschedule everything, none of these webinars took place). Further communication channels such as website, newsletter or blogs are envisaged in the course of the further establishment of the SIG.

It is hoped that this network will provide a trusted and safe space for media education professionals to strengthen existing relationships with peers and to build new ones. Sharing knowledge and practices and co-develop solutions on issues of common interest is not the learning of the future. It has started already.

For further information, please contact Prof. Dr. Jörg Westbomke via [westbomke@hdm-stuttgart.de](mailto:westbomke@hdm-stuttgart.de)

## References:

1. AI HLEG. (2019). Ethics Guidelines For Trustworthy AI. Brussels: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/ethics-guidelines-trustworthy-ai>
2. Bates, T. (. (2016). Teaching in a Digital Age.
3. Brown, J. S. (1991). Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation. Organization Science.
4. Carvalho, L. G. (2014). The Architecture of Productive Learning Networks. Routledge; 1 edition (March 4, 2014).
5. Crowley, B. (2014, December 31). Edweek. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/12/31/3-steps-for-building-a-professional-learning.html>
6. EU Business School. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.euruni.edu/blog/future-prof-online-learning/>.
7. Koper, R. (2009). Learning Network Services for Professional Development. Berlin, London: Springer.
8. Lave, J. W. (1991). Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Nicolajsen, H. &. (2014). Creating a peer-driven learning network in higher education – using Web 2.0 tools to facilitate online dialogue and collaboration. The Architecture of Productive Learning Networks, 94-108.
10. Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.





Luk Bouters

Luk Bouter  
Dean  
Artevelde University of Applied  
Sciences, Department of Graphi-  
cal and Digital Media

Ghent, Belgium

[luk.bouters@arteveldehs.be](mailto:luk.bouters@arteveldehs.be)



Jörg Westbomke

Prof. Dr. Jörg Westbomke  
Senior Lecturer  
Stuttgart Media University

Stuttgart, Germany

[westbomke@hdm-stuttgart.de](mailto:westbomke@hdm-stuttgart.de)



Blane Savage

Blane Savage BA(Hons), SFHEA  
Lecturer  
University of the West of  
Scotland, School of Business &  
Creative Industries

Ayr, Scotland

[blane.savage@uws.ac.uk](mailto:blane.savage@uws.ac.uk)



Christel De Maeyer

Christel De Maeyer  
Lecturer  
Artevelde University of Applied  
Sciences, Department of Graphi-  
cal and Digital Media

Ghent, Belgium

[christel.demaeyer@arteveldehs.be](mailto:christel.demaeyer@arteveldehs.be)