

Introduction to the special issue 'Learning through Networks'

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This special issue examines the role of networks in professionals' learning. By networks, we specifically mean personal professional networks, which may or may not be mediated by digital technology such as social media. The special issue is based on a symposium 'Learning through Networks' held at the 2013 Conference of the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI) in Munich, Germany.

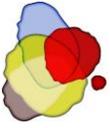
A special issue capturing current empirical and conceptual research in this area is timely. The importance of the social dimension of learning, in particular of learning from the experience of others, is firmly established in the literature. There are many different types of social formations that have been studied within the learning sciences— groups, teams, communities, collectives and increasingly also networks (Dron and Anderson, 2007; McCormick, Fox, Carmichael and Procter, 2011). Recently, the concept of 'networked expertise' (Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2008) has been put forward to characterise learning and development in professional contexts. Yet, despite the growing recognition of the importance of networks in learning, it is not well understood what precisely is learned through networks, how it is learned, and what environmental factors - organisational, social, structural or technological - enable or constrain learning through networks (Littlejohn and Margaryan, 2013). Identifying and analysing the mechanisms and factors of learning through networks are vital to our understanding of the contemporary professional learning.

Comprising contributions from researchers in four European countries (Germany, Netherlands, Finland and the UK), this special issue brings together examples of emergent empirical and conceptual research in learning through networks and proposes recommendations to stimulate future research and development in this area. Contextualized in different settings and using complementary approaches, the contributions collectively address the following overarching questions:

1. What is learned through networks and how it is learned?
2. What is the potential of applying a social network perspective to understanding the nature of learning through networks?

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3. What key factors – individual, structural, organisational, technological – impact professional's learning through networks and how they impact it?

There are five contributions in this special issue. Three of these contributions are reports of new empirical data. These papers draw on social network analysis (SNA) and/or semi-structured interviews to examine the structure of networks of professionals and to identify what professionals learn through these networks. Pataraiia, Falconer, Margaryan, Littlejohn and Fincher examine personal networks of academics teaching in universities, analyzing the types of interactions that academics engage in and the implications of these interactions for their professional learning and improvement of their teaching practice. Hytonen, Palonen and Hakkarainen on one hand, and Rehm, Gijsselaers and Segers on the other hand examine the impact of individuals' hierarchical positions within networks upon their opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing.

These three empirical contributions are supplemented by a conceptual review paper by Vaessen, van den Beemt and de Laat which draws on a synthesis of workplace learning, HRD, organisational and management science and learning science literatures to analyse key organisational factors impacting upon learning through networks and to propose how informal networked learning practices of professionals can be integrated within the formal organisational structures.

The special issue concludes with a commentary, in which de Laat and Strijbos abstract and synthesize the key themes arising from the special issue contributions and outline a range of recommendations and directions for future research and development in the field.

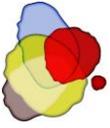
In his opening editorial in the first issue of *Frontline Learning Research* Lehtinen (2013) outlined the rationale: "...to develop a journal which would explicitly support innovative theoretical and methodological thinking and increase dynamics in the field." (p.1). This special issue offers a number of innovative methodological and theoretical insights and ideas discussed in detail in de Laat and Strijbos (this issue). First, it contributes much needed empirical evidence about individual's networked learning practices at a range of levels from ego-networks and sub-networks to whole networks, elucidating the configurations and contents of these networks and their value for learning, development and improvement of professional practice. Second, the special issue provides examples of application of Social Network Analysis to study learning ties within a network rather than only the structure and dynamics of the network, generating new directions for future research. We hope you benefit from the contributions assembled here.

Acknowledgments

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