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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?

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

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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." [1]

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 the 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 utilising associated 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 you can see there are a host of differing titles for research 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 actively lobby governments on behalf of these industries. A large number of SIG papers identified in the revue are written to support those in the medical profession offering subject based expertise and innovative practice. There are also professional societies utilising 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 [2] 1991 and Lave & Wenger, 1991 [3] as groups of people who learn together through the act of practice and shared social identity often within an organisational 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 organisational communities which are fundamental to its development and these sit out with formal practice dictated by those organisations. 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”[4]

However, all can inspire other infant learning networks on how to tackle issues of common interest. Can they play a decisive and pertinent role in dealing with today’s teaching questions? What results and impact could they bring about? Is there a specific need for the creation of a learning network for media education professionals on learning in the digital age? These are just a few of the intriguing questions this article aims to explain.

Why should we 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. They 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 in order 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 in a timely manner. Concurrently, not only the media business is changing, but academic education is also facing a tremendous change as consequence of the progressive digitalization and the reality of life of young people. It goes without saying that these time-consuming processes of adaption run the risk of taking place to the detriment of scientific research, individual feedback and coaching, study of new pedagogical and didactic tools, etc. At the same time, as a teacher, you better make sure that you are in tune with the learning preferences and the communication culture of your target audience in order to capture their attention and ensure that your 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. This context constitutes some sound and solid reasons for educational professionals to meet on a regular basis to put their brains together, to exchange views and experiences in order 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 we move to forms of flipped, blended, hybrid and on-line learning, which asks for much more structure and for faculty higher training to establish sound learning systems. However, we must recognize that technological progress has evolved much faster than the new technical possibilities can be reflected in the teaching concepts and pedagogics. It is clear that not all the teaching staff are ready or proficient enough to develop their 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 a 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 emerged everywhere and in various professional disciplines. 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 [5]. 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 do we build a learning network

In her article “3 Steps for Building a Professional Learning Network” [6] , 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 our 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, fuelled by a shared zeal. A PLN is about personal relationships growing within a context of learning being set within a social, collective activity. 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’ [7] 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 you to find buddies or mentors. “They expand your natural tunnel vision, transform your perspective, and encourage you when rock bottom seems near” [8].

A PLN therefore is a very dynamic, self-motivating organism. You know 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 allow flexibility and considerable autonomy in its practice.

Let’s start....

In 2014 the Erasmus+-funded CIGN-project [9] took off. This project successfully combined the expertise of 5 universities [10] 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 professional exchange was 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 with 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 USP, they are potentially exposed to 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) [11]. This international 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 experience and thoughts. The IC presidium reacted positively on 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' attention in a blended world and the pitfalls and successes of the use of social media in the classroom? Furthermore, how do we keep our 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 are able to 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 increasing 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.

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? And how can we keep it flexible and up to date in an ever-changing world? Previously, we only needed to update our textbooks, but today in a multimedia environment, we need to work cross over and on different media channels simultaneously.

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.

Another aspect that is not yet used a lot today in academic worlds is, how do we go about with all the data that is generated in these systems by students and teachers? What can we learn from it? Can we go to personalized learning and so forth? Can we do predictive analysis on our students, what are their chances to graduate, how long will it take them to do so. Also, these are data resources we don't use in an optimized matter.

What brings the future?

Not an easy question in VUCA-times [12].

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 in order 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 teacher/students in the digital age. Further webinars are appointed for April hosted by Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, in September hosted by University of the West of Scotland and in January 2021 hosted by Linköping University. 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.

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7. *Introduction: Networked Learning and Learning Networks in The Architecture of Productive Learning Networks*, edited by Lucila Carvalho and Peter Goodyear, p. 15, New York /London, 2014
8. *ibidem*
9. *Creative Industries Global Network*
10. *University of Linköping (Sweden), Stuttgart Media University (Germany), University of the West of Scotland (UK), Ryerson University (Canada) and Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (Belgium)*
11. <https://www.internationalcircle.net/>
12. 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.
13. <https://www.euruni.edu/blog/future-prof-online-learning/>
14. https://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/teaching-in-a-digital-age_2016.pdf