Chapter 7
Networked Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the idea of networked learning environments and argues that these environments provide the totality of surrounding conditions for learning in digital networks. It provides illustrative vignettes of the ways that students appropriate networked environments for learning. The chapter then examines the notion of networked learning environments in relation to the idea of infrastructure and infrastructures for learning and sets out some issues arising from this perspective. The chapter suggests that students and teachers selectively constitute their own contexts and that design can only have an indirect effect on learning. The chapter goes on to argue that design needs to be located at the meso level of the institution and that a solution to the problem of indirect design lies in refocusing design at the meso level and on the design of infrastructures for learning.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the idea of a learning environment from the perspective of networked learning. The term has been developed and defined in a number of publications and a series of international conferences and the definition of networked learning arising out of this tradition is that networked learning is:

> *learning in which information and communication technology ... is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson & McConnell, 2004, p. 1).*

The central terms in this definition are *connections* and *information and communication technologies* because the interactions the defini-

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tion points towards are human interactions but they include human interactions with materials and resources and interactions that are mediated through digital networks. In this definition interactions with materials and resources alone are insufficient and networked learning requires aspects of human-human interaction even when they are mediated through digital technologies. This definition of networked learning takes a relational stance in which learning takes place in relation to others and in relation to artifacts in the form of both communications media and learning resources.

The chapter argues that networked learning *environments* are critical for networked learning but that the environment is always selectively appropriated by students and tutors participating in it to make their own learning contexts. Environments are understood from this perspective in a straightforward way as the totality of surrounding conditions. The term learning environment points to the human, social, physical and virtual aspects of a setting, and the characteristics or arrangements of those elements of that setting, within which learning can take place. This definition is not restricted to the social environment and includes technological artifacts and the physical arrangements of things. Of course learning can take place anywhere and at any time and the idea of a learning environment implies that such settings are intentionally designed and arranged to allow learning to take place. Recently the debate about design has focused on the term Learning Design (Koper & Tattersall, 2005) which has at least two distinct meanings. The first more technical approach is often distinguished by the use of capital letters, Learning Design (LD), and the second usage in lower case refers to learning design in a more general sense. In this chapter I argue for the use of the idea of indirect design for learning and by implication I dismiss the idea that learning design in either sense is an appropriate approach. Learning Design in the stronger sense of Learning Design (LD) arose out of the experience of the Open University in the Netherlands and its desire to reduce institutional complexity by developing a "pedagogical meta-language" (Koper & Tattersall, 2005, p. vii). Other approaches compete with Learning Design for attention as researchers search for ways to abstract general design principles, such as pedagogical design patterns (McAndrew, Goodyear & Dalziel, 2006) and scripts (Tchounikine, 2008). Beyond design the term learning environment is explored further in relation to recent usages within educational research literature. For example one use of the term learning environment would include the totality of resources on which the learner can draw. This view is found widely in educational literature and is particularly strongly associated with the relational or phenomenographic approach to learning (see for example Laurillard, 2002). Laurillard comments that:

The epistemological position ... requires a relational view of knowledge and of learning, and emphasizes the situated character of all learning. (Laurillard, 2002, p. 62)

To a large extent this is the position taken in this chapter with a small variation which is that I would separate the environment, the totality of surrounding conditions, from the context which I understand as being constituted in an active process by participants in the environment. For example, two students in an identical learning environment may make quite different contexts from the same set of resources according to their orientation and intentional engagement with the learning environment and consequently we regularly find students studying the same course interpreting, even well designed, assessment criteria in divergent ways (see for example Jones & Asensio, 2001).