Understanding participation in online learning communities: an editorial introduction

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Biographical notes: Jimmy Jaldemark is a Lecturer and researcher at the Department of Education, Mid Sweden University, Härnösand, Sweden. His research interest concerns issues of participation in online learning communities in higher education. In particular, he focuses on aspects of computer-mediated communication. Since being awarded the doctoral degree with a thesis entitled 'Participation in a boundless activity: computer-mediated communication in Swedish higher education', he has published articles and book chapters that apply transactional ideas on how to understand participation in online learning communities. This research is influenced by ideas developed by scholars from the eco-psychological, pragmatist, and socio-cultural communities.

1 Conceptualisation of participation in online learning communities

Since the shift of the 1980s participation has been a metaphor for learning (e.g., Lave and Wenger, 1991) that since then has met an increasing interest in scholarly publications. In the mid-90s, the use of this metaphor occurred in a debate that criticised the prevailing acquisition metaphor (Anderson et al., 1996; Greeno, 1997; Sfard, 1998). Simultaneously as this theoretical discussions within the field of learning, a technological development within the field of information and communication technology occurred. Internet grew from being an internal affair within the US sectors of military and higher education to evolve into a network that nowadays is an important and influential world-wide social phenomenon in all sectors of the society.

Scholarly discussions of participation and internet often link human actions to communities. Such discussion comprises that human action links to terms such as online communities, web-based communities, or virtual communities. Within the field of learning scholars discuss the link between human action, learning, internet, and communities in various terms, for example, distributed communities of inquiry (Mcloughlin and Oliver, 2000), knowledge-building communities (Swan et al., 2001) online learning communities (Hiltz, 1998), virtual communities in the service of learning (Barab et al., 2004), virtual learning communities (Kowch and Schwier, 1997), and web-based learning communities (Lavooy and Newlin, 2003). This special issue focuses on this link in terms of participation in online learning communities.

Overall, the ambition of this special issue is to describe the complexity of participation in online learning communities. This special issue underwrites that this

complexity embraces both offline aspects as well as online aspects. In the provision of such analyses the articles applies a specific conceptualisation. This conceptualisation includes the application of concepts with an intersectional character.

Moreover, the concept of 'online learning communities' embraces an intersection between technological aspects (online), aspects of learning, and cultural and social aspect (communities) (Nolan and Weiss, 2002; Seufert et al., 2002; Wenger et al., 2009). In other words, it embraces human beings performing actions together online with the purpose of learning. This makes online learning communities to a complex intersectional concept in itself that seem particularly suitable to be investigated with the help of other concepts with such character.

While this special issue deals with intersections of participation in online learning communities this editorial introduction provides a few guidelines that could help the reader to understand the application of concepts in the articles. Intersectional analysis of participation suits well with discussing participation in terms of being a transactional process of human action. This means that the articles in this special issue discuss participation in online learning communities from an ontological departure that underwrites that actions of human beings is inseparable from both the surrounding environment as well as the features involved in their actions (Jaldemark, 2010). As a consequence, the included articles take a non-dualistic point of departure in their analyses and discussions. For an extended discussion on dualistic and non-dualistic conceptualisations of participation, see the article by Jaldemark (2012) in the preceding issue of this journal.

Conceptually, the non-dualistic departure means that a few common concepts used by scholars in discussion of computer-supported participation are deemphasised or excluded in the following articles. While participation is discussed as being inseparable from the surrounding environment the concept environment have a specific meaning in this special issue The environment is discussed in non-dualistic terms; meaning that the articles exclude discussion of the environment in plural. In other words, the articles avoid analyses of participation in terms of various environments, for example, geographical environment, social environment or learning environment.

Learning environment, a commonly used concept in scientific reports, is a dualistic concept. However, as discussed elsewhere by the guest editor the meaning and use of this concept is unclear (for an extended discussion, see Jaldemark, 2010, 2012). It includes the idea of separating the environment into different environments. Such world-view results in a fragmentised understanding of participation in online learning communities. The idea of this special issue is to give a more dynamic understanding of participation than is possible within a dualistic world-view. In this special issue, the concept learning environment has been replaced and instead the authors used other concepts to discuss participation and its link to online learning communities; for example, when relating participation to technological aspects they use learning management systems, technology or tool; in discussions of environmental aspects of participation they use concepts such as context or settings.

Another common concept that scholars use in at least two different ways in scientific reports is the concept of 'activity'. On the one hand, it is used to analyse and describe participation in a short timeframe. Application in such analyses and descriptions embrace brief events that have the character of having distinct beginnings and end points, for example, participating in an online seminar or sending e-mails. On the other hand, the concept of activity is applied in a wider time-frame meaning an evolving complex

structure of human agency (Roth and Lee, 2007), for example, participating in an online course. This meaning with a wider time-frame is also how the concept of activity is applied in this special issue. Analyses and descriptions of participation in a short timeframe apply concepts such as actions, events, or tasks.

Interaction is an important and very common concept in scientific reports of online participation. However, the meaning of it is often taken for granted in such reports. Therefore, in that respect, readers are left to create their own understanding of what authors refer to. Here, the analyses and descriptions of participation in online learning communities have the ambition to be specific about the meaning of participation. Therefore, the concept of interaction is rarely applied. Instead of using an interactional description, the articles apply concepts such as collaboration, communication, exchange of utterances and so on.

The last conceptual notion concerns the concept of technology. This concept is not an intersectional concept. However, to perform an intersectional analysis and description of participation in online learning communities it is necessary to link technology to human action. This link is accomplished in concepts such as tool, means, or artefacts. These concepts underwrite human beings use of technology and that human action such as participation in online learning communities is mediated by them.

2 The articles

In this issue, 17 authors working in 13 different institutes, located in Australia, Italy, Sweden, New Zealand, Norway, USA and the UK discuss various aspects of participation in online learning communities. To bring this editorial introduction to a close follows brief summarising overviews of the included articles. As a guest editor I hope you enjoy the reading of the articles and find them valuable.

Carlén and Lindström discuss the interplay between participants. In terms of moderation they investigate various aspects of leadership in online learning communities. Their concept co-moderation implies that moderation is an intersection of performed actions of participants. In their article, they generate implications for organising co-moderation within online learning communities.

The work of Annese and Traetta emphasise distributed participation in what they call blended learning communities. Embracing an intersection of both offline and online aspects they analyses and describes such participation in terms of actions, context, and groups. Overall, their article relates to the question 'what does it mean to participate in learning communities'?

The case-study of Luckin and Weatherby address how participation in learning communities link to context. By applying an ecological resource model of context, they discuss how the intersection of online learning communities and the surrounding context impacts participation.

Johnsson analyses and describes power structure in online learning communities. She focus on how group composition influenced students contribution in online dialogues. The article includes analyses and discussion on how intersections of age, gender, educational attainments, and ethnicity relate to patterns of dominance/subordination.

The article by Dysthe and Lillejord emphasises aspects of peer feedback and how such feedback foster productive writing practices in online educational settings. They

compare theories of communities of practice with the Humboldtian idea of 'Bildung' and writing. Their study investigates the intersection between meso level aspects, such as design, leadership, and tools, and micro level aspects such as students and teachers participation in online communities, and their dialogical collaboration on texts.

Mackey and Evans explore the relation between learning and intersecting communities of practice. Their study focuses on participation in online courses at higher educational institutions while being a member in professional communities of practice. They analyse and describe the intersection of online and offline aspects of participation in these communities.

Keller and Stevenson focus on participation in blended learning in higher education. Their study emphasises participation in various settings in terms of being dialogical intersections between agents, physical locations, time, and tools.

The article by Kazmer explores the process of disengaging from online learning communities. Her study analyses and describes the lifecycle of participation in such communities, particularly the intersection that occur at the final phases when students shift their focus away from online aspects of participation to emphasise offline aspects of participation.

Nilsson and Svensson investigate how awareness information relates to participation in online learning communities. The study emphasises reasons why social systems should support creation, recreation, and reinforcement of social norms to better facilitate participation. They suggest that social norms emerge at the intersection between participants.

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