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## Editorial

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**Biographical notes:** José W.I.M. van den Akker has over 15 years of experience facilitating individuals and groups of people in their personal and professional development. Committed to transformative education, her doctoral work focused on the dynamics in cross-cultural education and identified the need to consider the human condition and rehabilitate the self-in-relationship. Her current work has shifted into the area of art therapy and working with migrants and international health practitioners and students, who manage to create a sense of home in an increasingly complex, global world by continuing to remember and appreciate the intimate connection between human and non-human worlds.

Piet Kommers is Associate Professor at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. His specialty is social media for communication and organisation. As conference co-chair of the IADIS multi-conference he initiated the conferences of Web-Based Communities and Social Media, E-Society, Mobile Learning and International Higher Education. He is Professor at the UNESCO Institute for Eastern European Studies in Educational Technology and he is Adjunct Professor at Curtin University in Perth, Australia.

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We, guest editors, José van den Akker and Piet Kommers, explored the idea of creating a special issue on the topic of discussion boards. Though the label ‘Discussion boards’ suggests only a technological aspect rather than the socially-rich flavour of ‘community’ it soon became clear that both can have a similar deep level of cooperation and human affinity. In this journal, the potential of discussion boards have been topic of reflection several times before. For instance, in the article ‘Every group carries the flavour of the admins: leadership on Flickr’ by Paul Holmes and Andrew M. Cox – *IJWBC*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp.376–391. Discussion boards have evolved from early ‘bulletin’ boards that carried the mission to keep a large group informed with low costs. This special issue will convince you that for the sake of life-long learning, discussion boards have the full

potential to bring together minds and even open sensitive awareness on identity, the value of cultural diversity, etc.

The idea of this special issue emerged after José had been talking about her work in Indigenous communities and the ways in which people living in those communities communicate: more as a cooperative working together to create a product of lived essence. José suggested it was hard for her to translate that way of communicating into higher education contexts including e-learning activities. She found that online activities in higher education contexts – much the same as traditional offline learning events – are controlled, managed and as such limited by the neoliberal paradigm and associated learning structure/s. In higher education contexts for example, lecturers are pushed to design online learning activities and guide students' learning processes in constructivist ways, but there is lack of clarity in terms of design and intention linked with unexpressed expectations of the role of instructors and learning outcomes. This makes it easy to continue using the carrot and stick principle.

The vision that developed and culminated in the final formulation of the call took two stages, both of which took shape via email-exchanges.

The first stage revolved around the idea of a special issue that would focus on various types of online discussion groups. José suggested that some discussion groups appear to be based on idealistic themes and/or chase ideals that have no relationship to the real world. They are more about marketing a particular product or boosting one's ego. Other groups appear to be based more on practical matters in an attempt to build 'community', but these communities are very short lived. In general, most discussion groups contribute little to what we could call 'the greater good'. They are intellectual in nature. Someone throws up a line or an idea, and people respond like bees to honey. Next, people ideas are opposed, defended, protected and we end up with a conversation going nowhere. Meanwhile, the intention that sparked the conversation off remains hidden, which keeps the 'colour' of communication political, that is, contrasting and polarising.

In this first stage, José also spoke of her experiences working with one of her PhD supervisors, Dr. Vladimir Dimitrov, who developed 'fuzziology' as a 'new social science'. Dimitrov used discussion boards as a part of his teaching, but in a manner José had never since seen reciprocated: a manner that created a sense of place and a sense of community *online*. It was Dimitrov's *approach* and personal philosophy that influenced his role as a moderator and created a sense of place and community among students in the process. Students exchanged their viewpoints, perspectives or philosophies on issues such as 'leadership' and 'dialogue', and Dimitrov made sure that the discussion went in an 'upwards spiralling' direction. Self-directedness and self-organisation were principles not only discussed but also employed in the process of discussion, facilitation and moderation. Not one viewpoint was ever dismissed, criticised, analysed or otherwise invalidated. Dimitrov's approach ensured that participants in the discussion groups engaged in *deep dialogue*.

Having been inspired by Dimitrov's ways of working, José considered inviting authors to discuss their work as moderators in higher education contexts from a social ecology, futurist or integral theory kind of perspective. But it soon became clear she would be drawing from a very small pool of people. Moreover, many within this small pool appeared to have left academia and were no longer interested in contributing a paper. It soon became clear that the special issue needed another focus.

The second stage culminated into the idea of inviting authors to talk about on-line discussion boards that are used widely and for a range of purposes, and especially

educational. José was determined however to hone in on the bigger questions usually left unanswered in discussions around online communication and online teaching and learning. These questions are of an ethical nature, such as whether online discussion boards always benefit the greater good and build community, and indeed whether they should.

The theme of the current special issue was born, considering ethical and/or moral issues around the use of online discussion boards, with a special focus on the aspect of community building by way of computer-mediated communication. Suggested topics were:

- The standpoint of the moderator (in education the teacher) who manages and facilitates the online environment.
- The moderator's motivation/s to erect an online discussion board.
- The moderator's context and how that affects what participants write and do not write.
- The moderator's timing of intervention.
- The moderator's communication-style and related interaction between the moderator and the participants.
- The intention behind participation (e.g., to generate knowledge, as a form of self-study, to partake of a learning community, to broadcast one's own viewpoints, to improve one's writing skills, to have a sounding board).
- The variation in 'colour', and/or the emotional 'tone' of the online discussion board.
- Futurist perspectives on the use of online discussion boards.
- The purpose (role) of online discussion boards in the context of globalisation and a fluid modernity.

Invitations to contribute to the special issue were sent out to about 250 authors living across the globe. Most of these invitees were people who had previously published academic materials dealing with the online learning and teaching phenomenon. But it proved hard to find people who were both engaged with this phenomenon *and* critical of its dominant, globalising and as some argue, neo-colonial promises (see e.g., Philip Altbach in the Chronicle of Higher Education).

As the literature review demonstrated, there are very few people including educators who find an issue with the global push for knowledge control, including MOOCs. Not surprisingly then, and perhaps because of the focus on 'ethics', the authors who responded to the invitation were few, and mostly university lecturers who had previously published materials on online learning and teaching. Most admitted they had not had considered ethical issues before, let alone the position of the moderator, so they had no data on the topic. This lack of attention for the moderator's position is confirmed in the article written by Tangi Steen. She points out that online discussion board instructors rarely know what exactly is expected from them in terms of learning activities, their design and their outcomes. Neither do they necessarily know what criteria to use when they do know what learning outcomes they are expected to achieve.

From this perspective of uncertainty, it is not surprising that teacher retention and quality are problematic, as Diane Hui's article suggests. Hui points out that some education reformists advocate the use of professional e-communities (e-communities of practice and networked communities) in the hope of providing and maintaining quality teachers, but the question is whether these communities are sustainable and, if so, what mechanisms ensure communities' sustainability. Referring to her study and related findings on teachers' discussions on what characterises community sustainability resonates with the key concept of dialogicality and the use of texts as thinking tools that help create new meanings. Computer-mediated engagement, Hui argues, can assist education reform and innovation, and professional development, hardly possible without sustainability as it concerns the 'life' of a system. This idea of the life of a system is consistent with that of 'communities of practice' where people are intrinsically motivated to participate.

This issue of sustainability, though not explicitly, is also explored in David Geelan's article on closed and open forums and in Victor Friedlander's article titled 'Social relations of cyber-mediated learning platforms: symmetry, relation, and evolution'. Friedlander addresses the quality of social relations and the impact of the growth of importance of expert knowledge on the social organisation of these programs. Central question is if evolution of the quality of social relations of cyber-enhanced learning programs is represented as a function of symmetry breaking and building and their impact on the evolution of the learning community from a state of heterogeneous simplicity to that of homogeneous complexity. Victor's conclusion is that the great theoretical achievements of the future will someday come. Victor expects they will come slowly and develop out of existing traditions, from Hegel to the evolutionary doctrines of the late 19th century.

Other contributors to this special issue are university lecturers whose viewpoints and reflections do not focus on teachers' e-communities, but relate to their experiences in using information technology work to enhance the student experience. Many adopt a constructivist and connectivist perspective and make recommendations for using the discussion board as a learning tool to enhance online teaching and learning, and more importantly communication and collaboration between students and staff. Except for José van den Akker, all authors accept the idea that online learning and teaching is 'good' because it promotes student centred learning principles and, as Sue Greener argues in her article, is a way to take both teacher and learner to new places in learning. Greener is the only author who offers some insight into why some of her university colleagues resist the uptake of new technologies in their teachings.

Sue Gregory's article offers a clear explanation of what discussion boards are and what their function is in university contexts. It also talks about the outcomes of a study that took place between 2008 and 2011 at the University of New England in Australia. This study focused on the use of discussion boards, especially as a tool for interaction, collaboration and communication between students and students, and students and academics. It proved that students generally find the use of discussion boards to be of assistance in their learning. They were not only useful for assessment purposes and feeding information, but also helped students to collaborate with peers and create communities both formal and informal. But students needed to know what the purpose was of using the discussion boards, and information on netiquette needed to be provided.

Tangikina Moimoi Steen talks about a study done at the University of South Australia. This study was meant to identify the factors that encourage and discourage

students to use discussion boards as a tool for online participation, and how to improve learning activities that include discussion boards as a learning tool. Among a range of things, Steen found that almost half of all students use discussion boards, not because they are assessed for their attendance rate, but because they want to socialise or interact with their peers and staff. Especially when studying externally, communication is pertinent to students' sense of belonging and academic success. Interestingly, at the same time many students also appear to fear being ridiculed for poor grammar, spelling, using SMS texting style, making supposedly wrong statements or for being seen as sucking up to the teacher. The fear of being made wrong is perhaps why students suggested that expectations for both students and staff should be more clearly articulated. Since it is the formal but also the informal and hidden curricula that influence the quality of online learning and teaching, Steen suggests that aspects of online *communities* of learning should be taken into consideration when designing online learning activities, such as ensuring a safe learning environment, promoting independent learning, using contemporary topics and using discussion boards to explore real issues, and a focus less on attendance and more on the quality of students' contributions. Especially indigenous students would benefit from synchronous communications with peers and staff that emphasise the importance of building relationships and taking note of people's diverse backgrounds.

On a similar note, Eva Dobozy talks about the need to focus not only on learning content and cognitive capacity development but also on students' qualities, dispositions, social skills, attitudes and self-reflective skills that contribute to students' effortful engagement, increasingly demanded from participants in collaborative or networked environments and those working in diverse communities. She explores the dialectical relationship between learner and the learning environment' structure, which places a lot of responsibility on those in charge of system design, or the architecture of the system. They need to create a space that defines how teachers teach and helps build cohesive communities but also stimulates cognitive and psychosocial diversity. Dobozy's discussion focuses on the design of learning management systems (LMS), and in particular Blackboard. She emphasises the need for encouraging students to develop a group culture or learning community, by making them 'mingle' not only on-campus but also off-campus and using the discussion board as a means to link the expression of personal opinions with unit learning outcomes. Dobozy also highlights the importance of bringing 'lurkers' – invisible participants – to the forefront stressing the idea that it is not okay for them to remain invisible and passive consumers of information. Building new learning communities requires offering students communal learning spaces but also shaping these in ways that encourage students to take the opportunity to engage in those. She proposes three interlocking design decisions:

- 1 provide gated and communal spaces
- 2 build awareness of this design
- 3 demand self-enrolment to discussion board activities.

Also David Geelan discusses the importance of the learning context that accentuates the use of discussion boards as an integral part of the course(s). He emphasises the need to deepen and broaden students' engagement with and understanding of the conceptual content of the course(s) through the use of textual posts and discussions. But he also

stresses the need to differentiate LMS from open discussion forums. LMS such as Blackboard are usually closed, that is, only accessible to a particular group of people and for a particular period of time. In other words, though valuable as they promote student engagement in a safe – because controlled – learning environment, their discussion boards are also temporal and exclusive. Geelan also mentions massively open online learning courses (MOOCs) that use discussion forums as part of their approach to delivering online learning experiences, but also their forums are only open for a limited time-period and exclusive. Though costly in terms of personal finances and being open to security threats so in need of carefully monitoring, open forums are also open to the world and timeless. Moreover, they are not controlled or owned by universities and not intended to assess student participation. This, Geelan argues, makes them more consistent with the idea of ‘communities of practice’ where people are intrinsically motivated to participate. Geelan explores why and how he uses both closed and open forums as part of science teaching, and the ethical and moral issues that need to be considered when using online forums in teaching. His discussion concludes with the idea that online discussion board instructors need to carefully consider when and where to use closed or open discussion forums, and as such consider and reflect on their intentions and the effects of the designs they use, but also the ways in which they steer online conversations.

Also Sue Greener’s article explores teachers’ intentions and especially their power-relationships as online instructors and moderators, suggesting they consider the different dimensions of online communication practice. Though Greener takes the reader’s focus ‘back’ into the area of ‘closed’ university controlled learning spaces, her discussion also offers a refreshingly wide yet in-depth perspective on the five different computer mediated communication tools available to higher education institutions and therefore lecturers, and the different values of each of these tools in terms of offering opportunities for assessment, collaboration and community building. Her discussion offers insight into the possibility for university teachers to use these different tools to offer students avenues for safe and structured communications but also creative ways of communicating that stimulate and challenge people’s roles.

Finally, the article of José van den Akker offers the reader the opportunity to take a few steps back from what the previous authors had talked about, and reflect on the bigger picture behind the operant field of online teaching and learning. From her perspective as a holistically oriented cross-cultural educator, Van den Akker explores the wider context of online discussion boards and the types of options that online discussion board moderators have in positioning themselves whilst negotiating LMS that many universities use to benefit work performance management and educational optimisation. She talks about the power/knowledge/control machine that propelled into being and continues to promote and finance the online teaching and learning environment. She suggests this machine operates on ‘old’ first tier meme templates that sees people as less capable than machines and the knowledge economy as the aim, second to those in power whose ultimate aim is to gain ultimate control of people’s lives. E-learning is a ‘clever’ means to draw in people’s attention, and gain control of their resources. Her argument opposes the idea that community can be created online in ignorance of the larger educational push to promote the market citizen and the neoliberal, rationalist and consumerist model. Online teaching and learning only brings about shallow thinking and does not support constructivism in the act of teaching and learning, if not also existential questions are asked. Van den Akker’s argument offers food for thought, for online discussion board instructors and moderators to reflect on their own theory and practice, and as such their

meme-system. It offers some interesting ideas on how to moderate online discussions, and consider for example an existential/spiritual and self-aware disposition. In the words of this author, “as such it may be possible to ultimately shape futures not to be replaced by a robot-society but as a *Gemeinschaft* of self-aware agents who work together to create and live in confidence of a new algorithm for communication practice”.

Having read these articles’ summary, we are sure you will appreciate the full texts. Please feel welcome to react on it in your next contribution.