EDITORIAL

Personal Learning Environments:
PLE Conference 2015 Special Issue Guest Editorial

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Since the emergence of the term Personal Learning Environments (PLE) in the academic literature around 2004 in Oxford, PLE have become a field of research that has opened up great opportunities for reflection on many important aspects of education and learning with technology at all levels (Buchem, Attwell & Torres-Kompen, 2011; Gallego & Chavez, 2014). This research includes the study and development of tools, interaction processes among participants, cognitive mechanisms of individual learning, learning in groups, networked learning, lifelong learning, personal learning networks, and organizational learning environments (García-Peñalvo & Conde, 2015). In these years, the discussion also has transcended the traditional boundaries of academia and has been amplified in both the forms and contexts in which it takes place (Attwell, 2007; Attwell, Castañeda & Buchem, 2013). The communities and networks created by the concept and practices of PLE have challenged the norms of formal education in many ways, not only in the reflections on learning, but also in the way in which these reflections are made (Fernandez, 2016).

In this special issue supported by the broad-based PLE Conference community during 2015, we have compiled a picture of the current state of the field. The objective, beyond publication and increasing the academic literature, is to present a collection of papers that allows readers to explore the most interesting topics and practices regarding PLE today, but also to suggest where and how research in the field might progress.

As a result, inside this volume you can find five selected articles presenting current research on Personal Learning Environments, from Primary through Higher Education, three of them representing larger research and publicly funded projects. The principal topics include: involvement strategies at schools, emotions and conceptions of learners, relationship with Open Educational Resources (OER), habits for learning of Spanish university students, networks created based on the techno-pedagogical design of the teaching and learning process, and development of methods for analysing the impact of PLE.

The first paper entitled "Introducing a personal learning environment in higher education. An analysis of connectivity" by Alexandra Saz (University of Andorra), Anna Engel and César Coll (from the University of Barcelona - Spain), focuses on the relationships established by the participants (students and teachers) in two higher education instructional sequences using institutionally powered PLE (iPLE) based on an Elgg platform, which allows users to build their own personal work and learning

environment. The results of the study show that teachers have a high degree of centrality and influence in networks; main student interactions occurred in small groups; pedagogical design, including assessment, affected interaction, and student-created PLE enabled students to link formal and informal learning practices.

The second paper, "Still far from personal learning: Key aspects and emergent topics about how future professionals' PLE are", by Paz Prendes, Linda Castañeda, Isabel Gutiérrez and Maria del Mar Roman, from the University of Murcia (Spain), describes the process of analysis of data of a survey of 2054 university students within the CAPPLE project, with the aim of analysing the PLE of future Spanish professionals. Although some difficulties with the rate of survey completion are mentioned, the study found that students tend not to organise or integrate their tools for learning, nor to reflect on their learning tools and the information that they obtain from their teachers. The authors concluded that universities are not preparing students well to be independent learners, i.e. lifelong-learning professionals.

The third paper entitled "The Role of Institutional Leaderships in the SAPO Campus' Adoption Process" by Fátima Pais, Luís Pedro and Carlos Santos from the University of Aveiro (Portugal) describes the results of a study carried out in a group of primary schools that adopted the SAPO Campus platform, which is a web 2.0 service platform for collaboration, communication and sharing practices in institutional settings, especially in educational contexts. Interviews with principals and schools leaders were designed and implemented to understand the strategies that supported successful adoption of SAPO Campus, their effectiveness, and their continuous and sustainable use. The results show that, contrary to expectations, hierarchies persist, and the support of key innovators, along with training in the platform, is key for its adoption.

The fourth paper, "PLEs in primary School: The Learners' Experience in the PIPLEP Project", by Esther Nieto Moreno de Diezmas from the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain), presents the results of the initial phase of the PIPLEP project, aimed at promoting digital literacy and independent learning with the creation of personal learning environments as the final product in primary education. Using the interpretative phenomenological approach, learners' voices and narratives about their emotions and conceptions regarding learning in digital environments form the central focus of the study. The initial results of the study show that students perceived a dichotomy between social use of technology and 'real ' learning, which tended to be exacerbated by parents, and had mixed feelings about using technology for learning.

Finally, the fifth paper entitled "Analysis of PLEs' implementation under OER design as a productive teaching-learning strategy in Higher Education: A case study at Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia", by Esteban Vázquez-Cano and Elena Martín-Monje from the UNED (Spain), deals with the didactic functionality of PLE and OER created by students from a Master's Degree in Information and Communication Technologies applied to language teaching and processing in a higher education institution. Through an analysis carried out based on a virtual ethnography methodological framework, the study concluded that joint use of PLE and OER designed by students improves their digital competence in capabilities such as accessing and searching for online information finding relevant information, selecting resources effectively, and creating personal information strategies.

Collectively, these five articles identify the challenges that PLE enable us to address, especially in relation to formal education. They expose the prevalence of teacher-centric and institutional-centric systems, lack of reflection and agency on the part of students in integrating their learning tools and networks, and a widespread failure on the part of educational institutions to prepare students to be independent learners. Learners who are comfortable users of digital and social media are not always able to transfer those skills to using technology for learning. The use and development of PLE addresses each of these problem areas.

Furthermore, the articles in this volume show that there is a fine line between teacher-centred and student-centered learning and teachers and students in specific contexts can only navigate this. Students rely on teachers for structure and support; yet if teachers yield to this role entirely, students will not develop independent learning practices. Learning design and pedagogy are vitally important in this respect, as is teacher education regarding student-centred learning and PLE.

PLE discussions are alive but evolving. As noted recently by Attwell, et al. (2013), we have moved on from discussing the theoretical nature of PLE; we can now research not only the creation of PLE, but also examples of mature PLE in use.

What is now required is research that analyses PLE more deeply, particularly the practices for using and improving PLE in education, the impact of PLE in other knowledge management processes across the different human contexts, the development of other concepts and approaches that could enrich this vision (e.g. Organizational Learning Environments, OLE), and the opening of the research lens to the entire networked learning process in its widest open meaning (Jones, 2015).

There are many cultural issues related to PLE that have not yet been explored. The goal of PLE research should continue to move beyond a techno-determinist or socio-determinist perspective and to look critically at the wider context (Oliver, 2011). This requires linking research on the reality of the PLE with a range of other paradigms such as actor-network theory, sociomaterial approaches, social construction of technology, situated learning and Communities of Practice, self-regulated learning, learner agency, and the very nature of digital identity in the Knowledge Age.

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