

## Guest Editors' Introduction

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This special edition of DER contains selected papers from the International PLE conference held at the University of Southampton UK, July 11-13, 2011.

The conference brought together over 100 researchers from different countries, featuring different levels of expertise, affiliations and interests. This variety was reflected in the papers submitted to the conference. The selection of papers featured in this special edition showcases the richness of the debates developed during and after the event. They also reflect the current discussions around the transformation of an educational system that fails to achieve its prime goal, that of empowering our present and future workforce to cope and succeed in a society in change; a society that aims to tackle a competitive knowledge economy.

The beginning of the 21st century is better described by its evolving technological transformation. The digital innovations of the last decades have altered society in rather dramatic ways. The emergence of the Web as a channel for communication and distribution of knowledge, a space for interaction and congregation of collective intelligence, and a tool for participation and engagement has enabled learning in brand new ways. It has also enabled novel forms of presentation and representation of individuals' capabilities and interests. In other words, it has ignited new potential. At the heart of this empowering Web lie the ideals and actions of responsible freedom, autonomous enterprise, and self and collective expression. The web is a tool of re-invention. It contrasts with tradition. It begs to be, and do things, different.

In the last decades Education has been questioned about its current structure and underpinning practices. Tradition in Educational institutions is a strong opponent of innovation. It seems to shy away from the movements and tendencies presented in the current society. The Web has a major impact on the way the world has become. The disconnect between the 'real world' and 'the educational sector' is therefore in many cases apparent. How we bridge that gap in light of the current developments is the main question The PLE Conference has aimed to address.

The purpose of The PLE conference is to showcase a current picture of learning in a globally connected society. It is also the purpose of the conference to support research on the topics of personal learning and the use of the web to support such personalised ventures. Ultimately, it is also our goal to provoke debates about educational contemporaneous issues, promote related discussion, and create a space where individuals can communicate their passion, question their assumptions, and critically discuss their practices.

Personal Learning Environments as the title of the conference and its main research topic is left as a broad concept, in order to provide conference delegates with a creative space to develop research with personal meaning. This is also evident in the collection of papers published in this edition. The different approaches to PLEs let us disclose the richness and multiple meaning of the PLE both as a concept and a practice.

Building on the lessons learnt from the first conference, the 2nd edition of the PLE conference was again based on the ideals of peer participation and open discussion. The ethos of the event is in putting the individual at the centre of their learning. In doing so, the event organisers put their efforts in creating spaces for informal debates and sharing of ideas through communication formats that invite the contribution of peers. The PLE conference is different from the majority of other educational research events for that same reason. It aims to practice what it preaches by fostering an environment for discussion of research rather than for the plain presentation of it. Although we do not fully discard the need for more classic research presentations, we leave the full research narrative to the printed publication. The duty of the conference is to extend the dialog beyond the written piece; it is about 'thinking together'.

This special edition aims to be the result of that joint activity. It is also a reflection of thinking, questioning and documenting practice in the current age.

This special issue contains four selected articles from The PLE Conference.

In first one, entitled "May I Suggest? Comparing Three PLE Recommender Strategies", Felix Mödritscher, Barbara Krumay, Sandy El Helou, Denis Gillet, Alexander Nussbaumer, Dietrich Albert, Ingo Dahn and Carsten Ullrich examine the utilization of recommender technology for PLEs, and three specific strategies, taking into account the diversity of educational contexts. A comparison of these strategies is also drawn, including a discussion of their strengths and weaknesses.

Joseph Corneli and Alexander Mikroyannidis discuss "The Peer-to-Peer Learning Environment (P2PLE)" as a proposed approach to helping learners co-construct their learning environment using recommendations about people, content, and tools, together with their peers. The role of tools and technologies that allow learners to communicate with one another and provide feedback is examined, as well as its influence on the learning process.

The third paper, by Mar Camacho and Sònia Guilana "From personal to social: learning environments that work" explores the role of teachers as guides in the process by which students acquire and enhance skills in order to promote effective and meaningful learning. The article provides data about the strategies followed for the implementation of successful PLEs and gives evidence of PLEs as constructions, in both secondary and higher education.

The last paper, by Luis Torres, Jordi Ojeda, Josep Monguet and Hugo Gonzalez presents an exploratory research based on the virtual ethnography from an environment of research and learning that includes new technologies, exploring Web 2.0 and some of its associated tools. They followed a participant observation approach by means of a blog, other tools and virtual communities, and the result is a descriptive model of Web 2.0 based on a Personal Learning Environment developed during the ethnographic experience.

The four papers show a variety of approaches to building Personal Learning Environments, in a range of contexts and levels. This diversity is perhaps what makes PLEs such an important concept: the fact that is the learners who decide how and when to build a PLE, and what is its purpose. The themes of communication, sharing, collaboration are common to all these papers, and reflect the spirit of Web 2.0, and its increasing role on the ways we learn, teach and communicate.

We would like to thank once again everyone involved in the edition of this journal: our colleagues at DER, the authors and the reviewers; and, of course, all the people that helped create The PLE Conference and participated in its -so far- two editions.