

Relative harmony, experience, and digital tools in networked learning (Audio transcript)

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I'm Greta Goetz. This audio recording was prompted by the NLC2022 symposium topic, Phenomenology and networked learning – a found chord. The recording is inspired by design theorist Christopher Alexander's quote about how 'we are called upon constantly—every moment of the working day—to make judgments about relative harmony. We are constantly trying to make decisions about what is better and what is worse...' To better understand this recording, try to visualize the network in networked learning as 'focus[ing] on node-link structures' that bring dimension to connectivity and spatial relations (cf. Goodyear et al. 2016). In this talk, spatial relations refer to the space between ourselves and other people and things around us and the trajectory we engage in to try to understand these others in our learning experience. The purpose of the recording is to reflect on the question of *How we can conscientiously assemble technical things, people, activities, and outcomes in networked learning such that we do not deny the world of feeling and experience - which is expressed in time and space - nor deny the world of objects* (cf. Goodyear et al. 2016, Whitehead [1929] 1978). We will begin by asking:

Where are we? I ask this question with respect to *where we are* in terms of the spatialization of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

This is the space where our horizons can be fused if we greet that which is external to ourselves with open questions that relinquish false presuppositions and instead ask meaningful questions to arrive at correct meaning.

Where are we in terms of our similarities and our uniqueness? Where are we in terms of our cultural contexts, respective knowledge domains, and willingness to grow, together?

To ask open questions such as those illustrates how to enter what Ricoeur, after Heidegger, calls the time of care.

The time of care is not ordinary time. It is not the time it takes to play this audio file. Rather, it is the time we take to understand something external to ourselves, to try to figure it out. For example, when we follow the traces left in space by the passage of our passing by, we become interpreters who work in and out of time, tracing our present relation to traces from the past.

We can arrive at a meaning, but we can never possess the entirety of meaning - if for no other reason than because the vantage point we have of the meaning today will not necessarily be the same tomorrow.

We have forgotten this dimension of the present and this dimension of where we are.

The algorithmic governmentality of 24/7 capitalism (Stiegler 2018) leaves us no time to see that we belong to a continuum of time.

But sensitivity towards time is important to education, as noted in the field of networked learning. Tim Fawns has noted the importance of helping students learn how to learn so that they are prepared for life after graduation. He observes that life even before graduation has changed and that students engage differently with information during class. Technological advancement has restructured our relation to what can be known, when, and by whom, thereby issuing a call to think deeply about what Stiegler calls the future of knowledge (also in 2018).

We need to think care-fully about where we want to be (cf. Stiegler's notion of *panser*, also in 2018) and how we relate to the digital objects that can inscribe where we find ourselves. Education, now, needs to explicitly raise the question, within courses, of which digital tools are being used, towards what kind of future.

When is digital technology? To follow Ricoeur (1988), we have always left traces through our passing-by in life. Today, many of these traces are digital and are recorded by data banks that are not accountable to people in the flesh, not caring about the particulars of the contexts of who left them and why. Big data does not care about where we are in the spatialization of the time of care that takes the time to listen to and learn from us. It does not care 'to follow a trace, to retrace it, to decipher, in space the 'stretching along' of time (Ricoeur 1988).

Because big data does not care, it threatens to exercise a monopoly over our common memory. The exercise of monopoly is nothing new; rather, it points to the continued need to rectify our common memory (Ricoeur 1988).

Stiegler (2018) suggests that if technology operates in a restricted spatialization of knowing that is shaped by algorithms and mechanisms that mine and process the data we produce at a speed that is four million times faster than individual nervous systems, our own ability to know, decide, and even dream about what is possible can be short-circuited.

If we live only 'now', in the present, we can forget the time of care which *cares* about where we are and our 'emergent form' (cf. Alexander 2002).

To 'Be Here Now' to cite the title of Ram Dass' (1971) book that became a Silicon Valley hit, can be to misunderstand where the present lies. Where the present *lies*.

We, as humanity, are building digital networks but forgetting the possibility of what we can mean as individual nodes that have the potential for creative ex-pression (cf. Stiegler in Goetz 2021).

Stiegler (2018) considers technology to be a *pharmakon*: with the potential to act as both poison, causing us to forget ourselves, and a cure, helping us help realize each other to realize ourselves. As Tim Fawns, citing Kranzberg (1986), notes: 'technology is neither good or bad, nor is it neutral' (in Fawns 2019, p. 136).

Technological overdetermination is not harmonious design. It threatens to overtake and automatize our ability to dream and decide where we are going, threatening the inner experience of being a person (Alexander 2002). To remember this is to reckon with the spatialization involved in knowing that takes place in the present while extending beyond it through the experience of the time of care.

Vector feeling Alfred North Whitehead writes of 'vector feeling', which is a 'feeling from a beyond which is determinate and pointing to a beyond which is to be determined'. Vector feeling brings to this conversation a poetic directionality.

It could be compared with Alexander's (2002) notion of sequence and unfolding.

I am bringing Whitehead up because his philosophy, like Alexander's design, does not deny the world of feeling and experience, nor does it deny the world of objects - and we are trying to think through these interrelations in networked learning.

Whitehead further considers not just the spatialization of reality but its temporal processes. Temporal processes reveal how the self-creation and inter-relatedness of entities is manifested through how they respond or react to their immediate past in synthesis with their environment - through what he calls their subjective feeling, or sense-reception. This can be transmuted into spatialized sense-perception through occasions of adequate complexity.

I want to think about the meaning of a directional feeling in the context of designing learning environments that involve a complex assemblage of tools, people, activities, and outcomes that focus on transmutation towards what is worth caring for and doing (Goodyear et al. 2016, Goodyear & Retalis 2010).

For example, on days when it appears that students are disinterested and unserious, instead of responding through declarative imperatives, like 'You must improve!', I can instead ask meaningful questions to arrive at meaningful answers. I can ask, 'What do you recommend we do to improve this? How are we going to move on?'

This would be to embark on Gadamerian dialogue, where I ask open questions and am prepared to be changed by the answer. This new answer prepares the way for new action: not the disinterested action of before, but a new trajectory. This trajectory, or passage, is an example of the phenomena of phenomenology manifesting in terms of investigation, to cite James Magrini (2012). This trajectory takes place in the time of care.

If where I am is in the time of care, I know, with Stiegler, that 'the problem is not the automated abstraction . . . that den[ies] a focus on the uniqueness of human experience. The problem is *us*, insofar as we are incapable . . . of thinking these processes' (2018, p. 101). It can be hard to imagine the possibility of 'novel togetherness', which Whitehead calls 'conrescence' (1978 [1929]: 21).

For example, just because we think we are thinking does not mean that we are learning how to assemble digital tools in such a way as to return value and meaning to us. People do what other people do and use the technology that other people use; people "imprint on" the first technical system they learn and dislike alternative systems even if they are better, to cite work by Cory Doctorow (2021) and Jeff Atwood (2007).

Where are we going? To think deeply about where we are going first requires deep questioning into where we are. We are stuck in use-patterns in a present that functions four million times faster than our nervous systems. Some of us are stuck in outmoded learning design.

But we have a model of conrescent pattern design thinking in free software, which values the value of the human place and emphasizes learning by sharing access to and collectively improving knowledge - as opposed to locking software users into pre-fabricated proprietary experiences plagued with dark patterns and data mining (Zuboff 2019).

I give a few examples of alternative relational design that seeks co-participatory growth in my NLC2022 symposium paper. Here, I will add, at a time when UX designers are now talking about decolonializing UX and trauma informed design, we can begin to see ways to more directly engage our students with the

design of the digital tool regardless of what our students are studying, to find ways to promote not mutism in the face of technology but what Freire calls generative themes (2005) that more directly engages students in the design of the world around them.

New 'passages to the act', to cite Stiegler (2018), are needed - passages because 'understanding is participation in the ongoing event of tradition', to quote Gadamer (2004). How did we used to learn how to learn and how can those models be augmented and shared, digitally? This decades-old question (e.g. Engelbart 1962) remains unanswered as does the promise of general computing.

The trajectory of networked learning, starting from its inspired beginning, indicates important design considerations for constructive passages to the act involving the digital tool. From its inception, networked learning has sought actionable design for learning environments that value e-quality, which is the opportunity to co-create knowledge (Beaty et al. 2001). Vivian Hodgson and David McConnell's recent review of networked learning (2018) note that the field seriously considers: values, context, co-creation, critical reflexivity, responsibility - and time. Networked learning can be considered an Alexandrian harmonious "center" of pattern design, valuing the value of the human place in networks by 'focus[ing] on node-link structures' that bring dimension to connectivity and spatial relations (Goodyear et al. 2016). These can be as generative and harmonious as we dare to imagine them in our learning design.

So, to return to the problem of the present, which threatens to fragment through a range of tensions, what if we stopped looking at what is happening and instead asked: Where are we with respect to our experience of what is around us? How are we responding or reacting? To design for a time of care is to design for 'vector feeling' through passages to the act capable of relinquishing false presuppositions. To be here now in networked learning is to answer the call, 'every moment of the working day-to make judgments about relative harmony' (Alexander 2002): making decisions about where we are going, together, with which digital tools and how, and what is worth remembering in the practice (cf. Alexander 2002, Gadamer 2004, Schön 1983).

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