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Learning ecologies in the digital era

Ecologías de aprendizaje en la era digital

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Scope

Educational contexts in the digital age are constantly evolving and becoming more widespread. Nowadays, learning does not occur solely in physical and virtual environments, but also far removed from formal settings, where there is a constant need for access to knowledge and information with informal and non-formal possibilities of access to information and knowledge becoming increasingly relevant.

Currently, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in face-to-face educational settings, and in particular online education, has provided us with the ability to expand learning spaces both qualitatively and quantitatively ergo laying the foundations for a more personal and modern approach to both personal and professional development, thus contributing to improvements not only in the learning experience itself, but in learning across the lifespan.

The widespread use of mobile devices has played a key role in enabling a more detailed analysis of learning from different perspectives and the ways in which it can be addressed in a network society.

Metaphors such as ubiquitous learning, invisible learning or expanded learning appear to account for new learning approaches and possibilities. Furthermore, concepts such as Personal Learning Environment (PLE), Personal Learning Networks (PLN) and MOOCS highlight the variety of options available to get access to any kind of training or learning. In short, each person, each professional, has a wide range of learning opportunities; and can decide when, where, what, why and how to activate these opportunities, depending on a series of variables that condition their decisions.

The concept of learning ecology is directly linked to the idea of lifelong learning and calls for a longitudinal overview of the factors, elements and components that contribute to the personal and professional development of people at different times in their lives. It allows us to construct an analytical framework that identifies the different ways in which people learn, also considering non-formal or informal practices, whether traditional or ICT-mediated.

Whilst research on learning ecologies is still in its initial stages, it has thus far provided very fruitful and relevant in identifying the components and processes that contribute to individual learning, which will facilitate the design of more robust and tested models for personalising training and increasing awareness among learners of their own possibilities. Moreover, this will allow for increasing awareness among learners of their own possibilities. Additionally, it is helping to reveal and value the contributions of informal and non-formal opportunities for learning, encouraging institutions to adapt in how they provide and manage them to further serve individuals who make their own decisions about what, how and when to learn.

This special issue will focus on the progress of this research topic through the empirical contributions of researchers from different countries.

Descriptors

- Ecological approaches to learning. Components of the learning ecologies of individuals.
- Conceptualization of learning ecologies. Differentiation from learning ecosystems. Distinction with respect to Personal Learning Environments (PLE).
- Learning across the lifespan (long and wide).
- Formal, non-formal and informal learning.
- Trajectories, schemes and learning patterns throughout life.
- Expanded learning and invisible learning.
- Learning in analogical environments and their coexistence with digital environments.
- Flexibility, scope and ubiquity in learning.
- Opportunities for learning and decision making in the digital age.
- Institutionalization of lifelong learning. Attempts to formalize the informal.
- The role of teachers and educators in relation to the concept of learning ecologies.
- Appropriate methodologies in the research of digital learning ecologies.
- Differences in the way of approaching emerging phenomena in formal, non-formal or informal training contexts, depending on the characteristics that make up collectives of different nature, from which both the same or diverse behavior can be expected.
- Potential benefits of rising awareness of the one's own learning ecology.
- Macro and meso-level lessons: lifelong educational policies and actions of an institutional nature.
- Micro-level lessons: the conscious organization of one's own learning going from tacit to explicit.
- Learning processes of diverse professional groups and their impact on the organization of their training and professional development.

Questions

- What role do lifelong learning ecologies play in the learning and self-actualization processes of individuals?
- What are the elements that shape learning ecologies across the lifespan? What role does each of these components play?
- What benefits do individuals find in the different components that make up learning ecologies beyond the more classical self-actualization formulae?
- How do different professional groups shape their learning ecologies and use them for the benefit of their professional development?
- What is the contribution of ICT in the development of learning ecologies in current formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts?
- Can we extract, through the study of learning ecologies, a set of patterns that reveal professional development itineraries?
- How do learning ecologies influence the improvement of professional practice and its impact on the quality of performance?
- Can recommendations be finalized in the form of actions and formulation of guidelines that enrich the learning ecologies to facilitate professional improvement and performance quality?
- Are there habitual patterns of learning that are increasingly carried out in non-institutionalized settings (informal and online)?
- Which research methodologies are the most adequate to study this phenomenon?
- How are all the resources and learning opportunities available to individuals utilized in an increasingly diffuse social context as a result of the influence of ICT?
- What differences are found between the learning ecologies of different groups, and of different branches of specialization within the same group?
- How are self-directed and informal learning processes of self-actualization growing compared to formal and institutional resources?
- What role do emerging elements such as PLEs and MOOCs play in professional learning ecologies?
- How does the use of ICT facilitate the expansion, scope and flexibility of learning ecologies and, consequently, opportunities for professional self-actualization?

About the Thematic Editors

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Mercedes González-Sanmamed is full professor at the University of A Coruña (UDC), Spain. She obtained Extraordinary Awards both at the Ph.D. and the B.A levels. She served as director of the Center for Teacher Training and Educational Innovation (CUFIE) at UDC (2000-2004). She has been awarded 4 tranches of research by the CNEAI. She leads the EIRA research group. Her research interests are focused on teacher training, integration of ICT in Education as well as innovation and educational improvement. In these fields she has participated in 40 competitive projects and research contracts at the international, national and regional levels, for which she has served as PI in 9 of them and as coordinator in 7. She served as doctoral advisor for 13 PhD dissertation projects. She authored of more than 200 publications (77 articles in indexed journals and 22 books), and has participated in a number of national and international conferences and scientific meetings. She served in several evaluation committees in national and regional agencies (ANECA, ACSUG, ANEP and AGAUR). She also serves in the editorial board of several academic journals.
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