

June – 2016

## Book Review – Networked Learning

Jones, C. R. (2015). *Networked Learning*. New York: Springer. (249 pp.)  
<http://www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319019338>, £72.



**Review by:** Mike Johnson, Cardiff University, UK. [johnsonmr@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:johnsonmr@cardiff.ac.uk)

Chris Jones book uniquely and thoroughly explores networked learning as a relational perspective between society, the individual learner, and most of the salient points in between. Everyone involved in *higher* education, should read and digest this book, not just students of the field. Though dense at times, this book offers an insightful view through a complex field!

I was excited to see that Professor Chris Jones had published a substantial contribution to this topic. He was my personal tutor in Lancaster from 2002-2008 and I have since followed his published work with interest. He is one of the only scholars I would trust or expect to take this project on and carry it off. As soon as possible, I asked the library to make the electronic book available and made time to begin reading. However, a deep sigh of relief and a mild thrill combined when the hardcover book arrived since I found this is a challenging read. For me, with any work requiring similar levels of concentration, e-books fall short, but Springer's platform is better than some. I strongly recommend getting a paper copy for the library (which seems to be what over-priced, hard-backs are for these days!). Alternatively, if your library subscribes to "SpringerLink," the paperback can be ordered through the "MyCopy" service at a substantial discount.

Chris Jones' depth of analysis and breadth of perspective are rare, and when he writes, in my opinion, anyone with a role in learning technology policy, practice or scholarship, particularly within higher education, should pay close attention. He does not shy away from teasing apart the contributions of some big names in educational technology. Nor does he become lost in the morass of complexity that characterises such a multi-faceted area. As networked learning researchers have found, it is difficult to circumscribe networks in order to isolate a unit of analysis, but limiting the scope of enquiry to where Information Technology (IT) is used does not stymie the field but rather attunes its focus, thus allowing research to coalesce. Networked learning's values are at the heart of sustaining its vision, meaning that while social theories of learning are preferred, it has avoided collapsing into privileging a particular version of that. Nor has it obsessed over the latest ed-tech fads, such as MOOCs. Yet it does have an informed view on all these things and, indeed, most aspects of the entire learning landscape, underpinned by critical and humanistic values. Some pages make networked learning more "movement" than "paradigm." For example,

Good learning involves discourse, mediation and interaction between people and their learning resources. As a consequence networked learning has a view about the university as a public institution. This view of networked learning supports strong institutional public provision... [which] separates [this view of networked learning]... from those who see institutions as barriers

to good learning and technology as a means to undermined current institutional provision. (p. 132)

Dr. Jones argues for a clear distinction between networked learning and e-learning, reiterating claims dating back to at least 2001, for a definition of networked learning that deliberately homes in on networks mediated by IT (see <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/>). In spite of seismic technological change since the late 1990's, this definition has proved remarkably robust and fruitful as the basis for a field of research spanning 20 years. Dr. Jones' writing is typical of the best that the networked learning field has to offer. He ably keeps his balance when discussing technologies as agentic without falling into technological determinism. Set against the rise of Actor Network Theory (ANT), the Learning Technology field needs his perspective. Networked learning is also a gentle field; it never lapses into tirade at the many shortcomings and fault-lines in learning technology's history and literature. Instead the networked learning tradition has picked out a careful line of positive scrutiny. Dr. Jones own recent research demonstrates the importance of empirical work to counter wooly theories like *Net Generation* and *digital natives/immigrants*, yet the persistence of these educational memes is like a microcosm of networked learning's ongoing battle for a stake in learning technology conversations at all levels. I was reminded of the 2001 Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) *Effective Networked Learning in Higher Education: Notes and Guidelines* (see <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/guidelines.htm>); a brilliant contribution but one that was hard to translate. Similarly, I hope this book's strength and message will not be its weakness.

