Editorial for the ECEL 2011 Special Issue of EJEL

The Brighton ECEL conference in November 2011 was a vibrant and exciting experience, not least for ourselves as its local organisers, the Business eLearning research group at Brighton Business School. With 200 delegates visiting, three great keynotes and a large range of parallel sessions, not to mention our murder mystery game and conference dinner at the Brighton Corn Exchange, we welcomed the variety and volatility of ideas, applications, pedagogies and technologies on offer.

This special issue of EJEL is an attempt to tell the story of the conference, at the same time offering you, the reader, a taste of that variety of ideas and contexts we experienced there. We had a choice of three major stories at the conference as papers clustered around the themes of e assessment, teaching role change and social and informal learning and its relationship to formal planned learning. We have chosen the last theme for this special issue, as the other two gain much exposure elsewhere. Our chosen papers take you on a journey through transitions to Higher Education (HE), moving on to explore Web 2.0 in HE learning and teaching and specific applications put to the test. The story concludes with papers conceptualising the ethics debates relating to Technology Enhanced Learning and Web 2.0, closing with a paper on dignity in this context.

These papers are mostly case studies of innovation and change but each takes a different perspective of social and informal learning – for academic but also social purposes – for example supporting the social and emotional difficulties of entering HE. Many tools are used in these papers to explore learning and teaching such as Facebook, wiki, blog, lifeworlds, VLEs, e portfolios. There are tiny sample studies and large ones, such as the 600 students in the Bournemouth study. If you read from start to finish, you will also experience a range of qualitative research methods from phenomenography and phenomenology to action research.

Looking at the papers more closely, Knight and Rochon in "Starting online: exploring the use of a social networking site to facilitate transition into Higher Education" offer a case study of Startonline, a social networking environment designed to support students' transition into HE. This is an urgent focus for Higher Education institutions as they experiment with Facebook and other social media sites to build bridges for students to cross before they turn up to study. This study used Ning as a platform and found strong acceptance from students for social and informational dimensions of the environment, but much less for the academic elements offered. It is easy to suggest from an academic perspective that the latter would have proved more useful to the students in transition, but exciting interest in academic skills among students is an ongoing battle.

Similarly in "Getting the Message: supporting students' transition from Higher National to degree level study and the role of mobile technologies", Fotheringham and Alder study student transitions but in this case focus on a later transition from HNC or HND into second or third year university study. This action research study tracked the progress of a project designed to use voices and experience of existing students to reassure new students and staff through timely podcasts, DVD and SMS. This study used mobile technologies whereas in "Fostering a web 2.0 ethos in a traditional e learning environment", Martin and Noakesoffer a case study of the Web 2.0 learning ethos firmly located within a Learning Management System (LMS). Here the emphasis is not on transition but on "learning by wandering", which combines both the security and simple navigation afforded by an LMS and multiple options in terms of how the students wish to study and share learning using Web 2.0 tools with the aim to provide transformative e learning. This study offers hope to all teachers who want to leave behind the role of didactic fount of knowledge and move towards the offer of expertise as and when learners seek it. That is not a simple facilitator of learning, but as the paper puts it, a "sage on the side".

We stay with social media in the next paper, but this time focus on Twitter and its role in HE. "Cognitive communication 2.0 in Higher Education: to tweet or not to tweet?" is offered by Andrade, Castro and Ferreira and evaluates the use of Twitter to drive polling and interaction within a lecture format. The authors discuss this as an impact on cognitive communication. There is much potential impact of social media on learning which affects both learner and teacher behaviour; this is one further example of the

way technology may be used to enhance teaching as well as learning, moving the teacher away from the straitjacket of the large volume passive lecture towards a more meaningful engagement with learners.

Nerantzi then takes us further on the journey of education with a focus on working with multiple institutions in "A case of problem based learning for cross institutional collaboration". Again we are looking at a move away from standardised passive learning in formal settings to "break out of silos" with open online problem based learning. This phenomenographic study analyses an example of social media used to foster collaborative learning across institutional barriers. The extreme version of such collaborative learning is likely to be a MOOC (massive online open course) which is discussed in Esposito's paper "Research ethics in emerging forms of online learning: issues arising from a hypothetical study on a MOOC". In this self styled "hypothetical virtual ethnography study", the author tests the usual research ethics framework against the emerging context of public open online courses, facing up to questions of informed consent and overt/covert observation in a virtual less controlled environment than traditional research studies.

In the final stages of our educational journey we explore beyond practical content and delivery issues in technology enhanced learning and focus on duty of care for children who learn in a virtual environment, the need for personalised and personal approaches in blended learning and issues of empathy and dignity in virtual worlds. Lorenz, Kikkas and Laanpereoffer "Comparing Children's E safety Strategies with Guidelines Offered by Adults" whichreviews fictional and non fictional stories around e safety and maps behaviour patterns and beliefs about privacy among schoolchildren. The paper raises some considerable concerns about contemporary legislation in this area which merits urgent attention for e learning in schools.

"Mediating Diversity and Affection in Blended Learning: a Story With a Happy Ending" sounds as if it should have come last in this selection but this paper offered by Soeiro, de Figueiredo and Ferreira discusses a different kind of ending, one which builds emotional bridges not between students and teachers but among diverse groups of students. Students with hearing difficulties face more than just the usual culture barriers when attending new courses and this participatory action research project details the affection which can be built online for these students through a blended learning environment supported by Moodle.

Our last paper in this selection, "Empathy and Dignity through technology: using lifeworld led multimedia to enhance learning about the head, heart and hand" by a strong author team from Bournemouth University led by Andy Pulman, explores human dignity in a transprofessional curriculum for health and social work disciplines. This ambitious project not only pulled related disciplines together but aimed to integrate undergraduate teaching with research and exposed students to evidence not just from traditional academic and clinical contexts but also qualitative personal and creative accounts of social and clinical human experience. Again we meet problem based learning, a pedagogy designed to engage learners in real world complexity rather than fragmented academic blocks. Again we meet technology as an ennabler of such learning, and again we find students encouraged to share and collaborate in learning.

So to try to summarise this pick of ECEL 201 1's papers on social and informal learning we can already see our journey's current destination. Many of these papers discuss case studies of innovation using social media for learning and seek to make connections among learners, between existing and new learners, and between learners and teachers. With social media and Web 2.0 as a whole we are moving towards a new perspective of mainstream education; one which values collaboration and no longer reifies "teaching" but rather prioritises learning; one which uses learning technologies both to create safe spaces and to reach out beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries. That's a destination we are keen to reach.

Sue Greener and Asher Rospigliosi

S.L.Greener@brighton.ac.uk
A.Rospigliosi@brighton.ac.uk