Section I: Front matter

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Section I Social Interaction in Learning Networks

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Much of current research into learning is focused on learners who are members of a cohort, have submitted themselves to a curricular translation of their learning needs, and let their learning activities be organised by an educational institution. This kind of formal learning is particularly relevant for the initial education of young people and, in much smaller numbers, for the traditional target groups of the open and distance education institutions, which cater for people who seek a formal degree at an advanced age. However, much if not most learning is carried out by individuals, in non-curricular settings, professionally, in the context of the corporation or institution they happen to work with, or privately, as a result of a wish to re-educate themselves or out of pure interests. The advent of the knowledge society in many parts of the world, with its emphasis on continuous development and self-responsibility, will only lead to a further shift of this balance, away from formal learning towards what is usually called *non-formal learning* (Communities 2000; Edwards and Usher 2001; Griffin 1983; Longworth and Davies 1996; Sloep and Jochems 2007). Non-formal learning is as much intentional as is formal learning, however, it does not rely on the kind of one-stop solutions that present-day schools and universities provide, nor does it necessarily rely on fixed curricula, classroom instruction, and cohort-based pacing. Non-formal learning takes the desires of ‘students’ as its starting point rather than institutional of-

ferings (Colley et al. 2003; Schugurensky 2000). It thus is pull-based rather than push-based, if you like (Sloep et al. 2008).

Thus far, we have characterised non-formal learning by exclusion, by describing what it is not and does not assume. This prompts the question of how non-formal learning may become a reality. If institutions such as schools and universities with their lecture rooms and curricula are not the answer, what is? It is our claim that Learning Networks are the devices that should come in their place. This section discusses the social aspects of Learning Networks will be discussed. First, the question will be addressed *why* non-formal learners would bother to act socially (Chapter 2). What is in it for them? Given their busy lives, perhaps having to fit learning into a schedule filled with work, family, and leisure obligations, this is a valid question. And if indeed it is useful for them to engage socially in a Learning Network, how then can they be convinced of this? Second, the question of *how* sociability in Learning Networks best could emerge and be maintained will be taken up (Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Chapter 3 looks at guidelines for the maintenance of the patchwork of communities that will arise within the boundaries of a specific Learning Network, Chapter 4 discusses in detail guidelines that should guarantee the emergence of such communities. For this a new notion is introduced, that of ad-hoc transient communities. Such communities provide the mechanism for community emergence, the argument is. Chapter 5 describes a case in which they can be seen in action.

At this juncture, a word of caution is in order. The above characterisation of non-formal learning may seem to indicate that thinking in terms of Learning Networks has no bearing on formal learning at all, perhaps even seeks to ban it entirely from the landscape of education. That would be a grave mistake for at least two reasons. First, in all likelihood the initial education of children and adolescents will be best served by a formal approach to it, even if reforms may be in order. Indeed, in formal education, particularly in vocational formal learning, attempts are being made to adapt the traditional push model and make it adopt features of the kind of pull model we advocate here (Anonymous 2007).

Second, there is no reason why, in the context of Learning Network, bouts of formal learning could not be incorporated if those happen to be the most efficient and effective way for particular learners to cater for their competence needs. The reason why formal learning is downplayed in this section is because much of our current expertise in schools and universities is with the push model. So promoting a pull model requires a rethinking of much conventional wisdom. This pertains to many of our traditional educational assumptions, but also to the organisational aspects of the educational universe that is needed, and to the business models that underpin the economic viability of such a universe. Thinking in terms of Learning Networks allows us to break away from conventional wisdom, precisely because several of the traditional assumptions that one surreptitiously makes, are abandoned or at least questioned. Indeed, it the unconventional attitude which thinking in terms of Learning Networks requires that may teach us valuable lessons for formal learning as well.

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