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Networked Learning: The centrality of human-to-human networks in online learning environments.

A book review of: Themelis, C. (2023) *Pedagogy of Tele-Proximity for eLearning: Bridging the Distance with Social Physics* (Routledge: New York).

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Chryssa Themelis' monograph, "Pedagogy of Tele-Proximity for eLearning: Bridging the Distance with Social Physics" is a significant contribution to the field of e-learning and learning development within higher education. The book aims to integrate information technology, multimedia competency, and pedagogical theories of e-learning to foster human-to-human contact within online learning contexts. This review will provide an overview of the book, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and outline its relevance to learning developers.

The title and chapter titles of the book use technical and conceptual language, which may be challenging for some readers, particularly those who have a more practical or professional, rather than academic, relationship with the field of e-learning. However, Themelis' preface clearly articulates the relevance and importance of these ideas to all who work within the field of e-learning. She argues that tele-proximity (a state in which individuals are brought into human-to-human proximity despite geographic distance) is a necessary response to the social alienation that is sometimes concomitant with e-learning, and that social physics (the mathematical modelling of groups of individuals' behaviour) can provide the 'knowledgeable actions and actionable knowledge' and the necessary finesse, and develop communications and networks within e-learning spaces in order to facilitate this proximity (p. x). This is a compelling and persuasive argument of

the importance of this book to both generalist learning developers and academic specialists in the field.

The book's first section lays the foundation by outlining the theories of networked learning and social physics, the transformative nature of technology within online contexts, and the meaning of pedagogy from an e-learning perspective. The subsequent four chapters are the core of the monograph, where Themelis outlines the theories and practices of tele-proximity pedagogy, breaking it down into its component parts of tele-teacher presence, tele-cognitive presence, and tele-social presence before articulating how these combine to construct her concept of tele-proximity as pedagogy. Themelis builds on almost a decade of research in this field (Themelis, 2013; Themelis & Bougia, 2016; Sime & Themelis, 2020) to deliver a comprehensive exposition of the theories, principles, and practice underlying tele-proximity in e-learning settings. The final section of the book looks beyond the academy and explores e-learning's growing capacity to positively alter the world outside of higher education.

The book provides a valuable contribution to the field of e-learning, and its ideas are relevant for those interested in exploring new ways to approach e-learning and, in doing so, enhance student engagement and performance in both their programme of study and their relationship with wider society. The book's focus on tele-proximity as a pedagogical approach is particularly valuable, as it recognises the importance of human-to-human contact in online learning contexts. By prioritising this interaction, tele-proximity pedagogy as an approach can help to create a more supportive and engaging online learning environment that supports students' holistic development.

One of the strengths of the book is the wide breadth of literature outside the traditional boundaries of education research with which it engages. Integrating research in the fields of social networks, connectedness, and psychology, Themelis emphasises the extent to which e-learning can be envisioned as a network of social interactions between students and educators. Linking this to online educational practice, she convincingly argues the benefits of situating human-to-human interactions within the centre of e-learning pedagogy. As a result of this, the book transcends being simply an exposition on effective

e-learning practice. Instead, it serves as a manifesto for an innovative and novel way of approaching digital and online pedagogy.

This is not to say that Themelis' book is wholly conceptual though. Another valuable aspect of the book is that it links these principles into lived reality, providing practical insight for e-learning practitioners on how to implement tele-proximity pedagogy in their teaching. For instance, in her discussion of the impact of teacher presence within videoconferencing contexts, Themelis builds on her earlier research in the field (Themelis, 2013) to present some of the key qualities demonstrated by charismatic and effective tele-teachers (p. 70), as well as explaining the techniques that might be used to embody those qualities. This regular linking of principle to practice ensures that her conceptual discussions never become so abstract as to become disconnected from learning development practice.

In addition, the book highlights the potential of e-learning to transform education beyond the academy by creating opportunities for lifelong learning and community engagement. For example, she discusses how, by mirroring democratic ideals within the praxis of e-learning communities, academic institutions can provide a democratic apprenticeship to their students that can help prepare them for the new threats and challenges of an increasingly connected world. In this, she again draws on literature not only from the world of e-learning, but from the broader world of social network and social influence analysis (pp. 157-9).

One potential limitation of the book is that it may appear too abstract and conceptual for some readers, particularly those who are looking for more practical guidance on how to implement tele-proximity pedagogy in their teaching. The author acknowledges this issue and provides examples and case studies throughout the book to illustrate how tele-proximity can be applied in different contexts. This is arguably the greatest challenge of a monograph of this sort. By ensuring that her conceptual and abstract discussion is firmly linked to a foundation of authentic, e-learning practice, Themelis ensures that her monograph will hold broad relevance. Nonetheless, some readers who are more narrowly interested in immediate techniques for improving e-learning practice may find the book's

focus on theoretical concepts and academic literature overwhelming and be deterred from investigating it further.

Overall, Themelis' monograph provides a valuable contribution to the field of e-learning and learning development. She proposes a novel approach to online learning that emphasizes role of networked social interactions within e-learning and provides a robust theoretical framework for tele-proximity pedagogy. The book is recommended for anyone who is interested in exploring new ways of approaching online learning contexts and who is willing to engage with the theoretical and conceptual principles underpinning e-learning pedagogy.

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