

Pedagogy of presence and democracy

Book review: Themelis, C. (2022) *Pedagogy of tele-proximity for eLearning: bridging the distance with Social Physics* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge)

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In addition to Chryssa Themelis' contributions to the field of e-learning and learning development within higher education as discussed in a previous review of her monograph, 'Networked Learning: the centrality of human-to-human networks in online learning environments' (Fisher, 2023), *Pedagogy of tele-proximity for eLearning: bridging the distance with Social Physics* also raises several important questions. This review will provide an overview of the book, and outline some of the key questions raised.

Key themes running throughout the text are connection and learner agency as it is facilitated via social connection, presence, and equity of participation. Themelis' text advocates for the shift away from teacher-centred learning (pedagogy) to self-determined learning (heutagogy) through formal and informal pathways with the aim of developing and strengthening collective intelligence and defending democracy. Central to this transition is the concept of the pedagogy of tele-proximity.

The pedagogy of tele-proximity for eLearning incorporates the theories of Network Learning and Social Physics with transmedia presence and pedagogy. The opening chapters one–four introduce some key concepts and the theoretical approach taken. The key theories underpinning tele-proximity pedagogy, tele-teacher presence, tele-cognitive presence, and tele-social presence are introduced and explored in chapters five–seven. At times these chapters can feel a little jargon heavy. The remaining chapters focus on tele-proximity pedagogy with the text concluding with a 'Manifesto for humane teachnology: the eLearning renaissance'.

The application of Social Physics, the identification of mathematical patterns that are characteristic of how social interactions spread and converge (Wikipedia, 2023), to the field of education is a novel approach that raises several questions. It is reliant on the analysis of data collected predominantly through face-to-face interactions. Analytics are mentioned several times throughout as a means of collecting the data, but there is no discussion of how this could be undertaken nor the implications of doing so.

In the field of learning analytics there are related established areas of research such as Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) (Chen and Teasley, 2022) that could be used to analyse how students collaborate in digital spaces and how democratic or not that participation is. In addition, modelling of educational discourse can aid in the understanding of how students are developing knowledge in shared spaces (Dowell and Kovanović, 2022).

In the learning analytics space a lot of work has been undertaken to explore the ethical implications and practicalities of big data analytics in learning populations. However, as there are limited examples of how Social Physics has and can be applied to learning environments a limitation of this text is the lack of discussion of the practicalities or ethical implications of undertaking these analyses.

At key points throughout the text Themelis references the Covid-19 pandemic. As a response to the disruption to learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated social distancing requirements education providers pivoted to online provision, with varying degrees of success. A central problem for many students was a lack of connection between themselves and other students, their instructors, and their institutions, leaving them feeling isolated. In addition to this, there was much debate about the Zoom gaze (Caines, 2021), the focus of attention on a small group of students, and the potential further disconnection of those who were unable to utilise cameras during synchronous online sessions.

The pedagogic approach outlined by Themelis has the potential to democratise participation in online spaces and foster connections. As we are recovering from the pandemic and exploring how we can facilitate access to higher education and lifelong learning opportunities this is a timely and important text both for those new to digital

pedagogy and learning design and as a theoretical underpinning to work already undertaken by those more experienced in the field.

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