

Foreword

Thinking back to the first time I experienced a large international learning analytics conference, my reactions were a mixture of, “That has some interesting possibilities, but where are they going?” and, “Why are they re-inventing the wheel?” The lack of instructional design presence in the research process needed to be addressed, so I did what any good conference attendee does these days: I Tweeted my concerns to the digital void, not really expecting much reaction. To my surprise, there was a considerable positive reaction, letting me know I might have struck on something important. The most common response was that I should design some studies focused on instructional design myself and present it in the future.

While I do agree with the sentiment, this response missed my point entirely. Instructional design does not (solely) need to create its own research studies. It also needs to be a part of every single research study in education from the very beginning stages. Instructional design is what is needed to avoid re-inventing the wheels of education in analytics while also taking original analytics research from “interesting possibility” to “practical application in real courses.” That is why I am glad that this book is looking to mix the instructional design world (through the Community of Inquiry [CoI] framework) together with the learning analytics world.

No doubt, everyone reading this volume will have their own pre-conceived notions about data analytics in education, just like I did when I went to my first learning analytics conference. These preconceived notions have been filtered through our many sociocultural influences and lenses (Lantolf, 2000). Whether one is supportive of learning analytics, highly concerned about the ethical issues, or still undecided because you just can’t really determine if it is really a “thing” yet, we all need to recognize there are other perspectives that need consideration in this space in addition to our own. Too often, those that are supportive of learning analytics tend to skip over reporting about the ethical discussions they participated in (sometimes extensively) because

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they are focused on the results. On the other hand, those skeptical of learning analytics tend to assume that the ethical considerations were ignored or violated just because they don't read about them online somewhere. We all need to be careful of making assumptions of others, effectively silencing their voice in the process.

Then there are those in America that assume their American perspective on the concerns or benefits of learning analytics are the only right or wrong side of the issue to be on. My view of these issues has changed drastically since moving from an outsider-critic to an insider-participant (currently working on several learning analytics research projects involving new programs that utilize analytics). But it is not that I disagree with the criticism now – I just realize the view from the inside is much, much more complex than the view from the outside. Take all that criticism, and add several layers of complexity, and that is just the beginning.

So all of that to say, I know the authors of this book and I know they have had the ethical considerations and challenges up front in their minds at every point. They struggle with the complexity like many of us do. They don't list their caveats about this book as an afterthought, but as an extension of a long, complex conversation that they know is just starting.

For me, I am glad to see that the CoI framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) is becoming a major viewpoint for examining learning analytics. After spending two semesters teaching CoI as an instructor for the Humanizing Online Learning MOOC (aka the "HumanMOOC"), I welcome the idea that we need to "humanize" learning analytics as well. My interest in the HumanMOOC was as a test bed for self-mapped learning pathways (Crosslin, 2016a). This design methodology is one that aims to encourage learners to create their own learning pathway through course content and activities, mixing instructor-suggested activities with their own contextualized activities in an individualized learning map. This structure is accomplished by offering two course modalities: one modality that is an instructor-led pathway, and one modality that allows learners to create their own pathways. By choosing either modality or a mixture of both at any point in the course (and then switching as needed), learners can move closer to taking more ownership of their own self-determined learning (Blaschke, 2012; Hase & Kenyon, 2007).

Self-mapped learning pathways would be an ideal structure for learning analytics, if humanized adequately and balanced with a good dose of learning theory (Crosslin, 2016b) – hence my interest in this book. But why should you be interested? The CoI framework has already proven to be a robust test

bed of learning theory and practical application (Kilgore, 2016). Learning analytics, as a field, has already proven to be a far-reaching “test kitchen” (of sorts) for all types of educational ideas (see the *Handbook of Learning Analytics* by Lang, Siemens, Wise, & Gašević, 2017). Bringing the two together serves as a very logical next step.

The road ahead for learning analytics is a complex one. Many ethical questions remain unanswered. Many exciting possibilities remain unexplored. Many interesting ideas are still in the early stages. And, of course, many of us are unsure of where this is all heading. Certainly, there is danger lurking around any corner if we are not careful. This is not just *data* after all – these are factoids about what learners did or thought or learned or lived. Sometimes they are just a series of clicks that don’t tell us much, but at other times they are personal reflections on deep concepts in the form of forum posts. They can’t give us a complete picture of learning, or answer every question about learners. But this data is a part of the lives of our learners. If we do our duty with IRB, educated informed consent, and permission, then they will have placed their trust with their sensitive data in our hands. We owe it to our learners to do the right thing and continue these conversations.

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