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Decentring the human in online spaces: moving beyond analysis to Merleau-Ponty's wild Being

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Abstract

Purpose – Increasingly our lives are being mediated through online tools and spaces that shape our experiences of living and learning in ways that are only recently being examined. Developing suitable methodologies to examine these online spaces has proven challenging, while there is validity to the use of network analytics and statistical interpretations of networks and more recently, digital ethnographies and "netnographies", these approaches are limited.

Design/methodology/approach – This article offers an alternative by looking closely at a particular online space, which is first analysed via social network theory, connectivism, and social learning spaces. We then work with Merleau–Ponty's notion of "wild Being" to decentre the human and move beyond analysis – bringing to light how online spaces are lived as a collective unfolding in which our embodied selves, other selves, things and non-things are involved in a complex and fluid interplay.

Findings – We see this account as demonstrating the value of analytical approaches whilst also highlighting the importance of remaining mindful of their limitations. Doing so can create inroads and open possibilities for more complex understandings of online spaces and associated technologies in generative and innovative ways.

Originality/value – This article fulfils an identified need to explore the challenges and opportunities of decentring the human in qualitative research methodologies in educational research.

Keywords Decentring the human, Merleau–Ponty, Wild Being, Zoom, Qualitative research

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

As our world, and our participation and engagement with it, becomes increasingly mediated through and by online tools and spaces, researchers must question how they might research these spaces. Traditionally, this has proven challenging. While there is a growing body of literature that explores online learning within social media spaces and elsewhere (e.g. Callaghan and Bower, 2012; Goodyear *et al*., 2019), either through approaches such as network analytics, or methodologies such as digital ethnographies or "netnographies" (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018), these approaches are limited, either to statistical interpretations or to the examination of individuals operating within those spaces. For example, Saqr and Alamro (2019) note that social network analysis is valuable for identifying the scale of interactions between class members, but it lacks the ability to examine the content of these interactions. In a similar fashion, Jensen *et al*. (2022) recognise that there are challenges inherent in focusing on the individuals within communities that limit the generalisability of any findings.

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In this article, we take a different approach by asking the question, "If we look at online spaces through the lens of decentring the human, what do we notice?" To help answer this question, we draw mainly on the *Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research Methodologies* seminar series conducted by the *Qualitative Research Methodologies* Special Interest Group of the *Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)* during 2024 [1], as well as work in social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020), studies about learning and social media (e.g. Carpenter and Harvey, 2019), connectivism-inspired approaches to learning (e.g. Siemens and Conole, 2011) and Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of "*wild Being"* (p. 165). By doing so, we start to bring into focus some of the nuances of online spaces that can be overlooked by other methodological approaches.

The article is presented in four sections: first, we outline the *Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research Methodologies* seminar series and describe how the series might be described as an online learning network. We then dig deeper into the nuances of that network by introducing several unanticipated developments that emerged as the series progressed, and the questions they raise about how best to research such developments. Second, we analyse the seminar series from three theoretical perspectives that are marked by humanist values and foci: (1) social network theory as described by Carolan (2013) (2) connectivism, as described by Siemens (2017) and Downes (2022) and (3) social learning spaces as described by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020). We then shift our focus, in the third section, towards the notion of decentring the human and introduce Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of "wild Being" (p. 165). We see this as directly related to other key concepts of his, namely his notions *écart* (p. 123) and reversibility (p. 133), which we have worked with elsewhere (e.g. Elwick *et al*., 2014). Importantly, such a perspective offers an alternative to perspectives that position the human as the centre of analysis, by acknowledging that humans are already threaded through with all kinds of more/non/other-than-human bodies, including being situated in time and space. This shift enables us to move beyond analysis to bring to light the overlapping and dynamic character of online spaces that "emerges full-blown at the nexus of its participants" (Hass, 2008, p. 49), including technologies and more. In the fourth and concluding section, we draw together the key points from across the article, and consider the question "if we look at an online spaces through the lens of decentring the human, what do we notice?"

The seminar series and its nuances

When viewed in its entirety, the seminar series that is the focus of this article might be described as an online learning network: it was online and it aimed to create a learning community that provided opportunities for participants to learn from one another about decentring the human in qualitative research methodologies concerning educational research. Each month, different guest speakers from various locations around the globe drew on their scholarly research and writing to share their thoughts and research on the topic, and engaged in discussion with seminar participants. Each seminar was then followed, one week later, by a debriefing workshop that provided those who attended the seminar with opportunities to learn from one another through discussion of the thoughts and questions stimulated by the seminar presentation. Attendance at each seminar was high and included participants from around the globe. The debriefing workshops also attracted a smaller subset of regular participants.

Described like this, there is little that is particularly new or innovative about the seminar series and, in and of itself, it might be of only limited research value. There have certainly been studies of the use of webinars of a similar form before, in a variety of different fields and industries. Gegenfurtner *et al*. (2020) identified that the instructional design, webinar content and the level of interaction were important components in a successful webinar, as was the possibility of a follow-up session or recording. In an earlier study, Gegenfurtner and Ebner (2019) determined that webinars could be more effective than both asynchronous online instruction and face-to-face classroom instruction, but the value of the webinar was moderated

by the interactions of both the participant and the presenter. More broadly speaking, there have been numerous examinations of online learning networks, usually through the vehicle of various social media sites, such as Facebook, X or Instagram. Haythornthwaite and De Laat (2010) applied social network analysis to conceptualise learning as a networked endeavour. Manca and Ranieri (2017) proposed a number of ways that education as a whole might need to change in order to make use of social networks. And, in perhaps the best-known studies, scholars like Fox and Bird (2017), Kolber *et al*. (2021) and Kolber and Heggart (2025) theorised about the learning undertaken for and by teachers on social media sites.

However, our contention in this article is that describing the seminar series as an online learning network is simplistic: it misses the nuances that emerged during the series and their implications, including the differing levels of engagement and commitment that individuals brought to the series and that led to at least four unanticipated developments: (1) a network that emerged between the Convenors, Sheena and Keith, who designed and implemented the seminar series; (2) a network that emerged between the Convenors and the individuals who attended all seminars and debriefing workshops throughout the series; (3) a network that emerged between the Convenors and the individuals who attended more than one seminar and debriefing workshop throughout the series and (4) a network that emerged between the Convenors and the individuals who attended one seminar throughout the series. Two further nuances worth considering are what are referred to commonly as lurkers within social media research (e.g. Goodyear *et al*., 2019); in this instance, those people who attended the seminar series in some form or another but in a non-contributing manner. Finally, there were those people who engaged asynchronously (after the live event) by watching the recordings provided on the AARE website [1].

Analysing the seminar series

Social network theory and connectivism

Two perspectives that provide an insightful analysis of the seminar series are social network theory and connectivism. Social network theory (Carolan, 2013) has been applied, in both digital and physical settings, in an effort to understand how organisations and groups work. It has been used to track the flow of information across networks. Similarly, connectivism, as described by Siemens (2017) and Downes (2022), argues that learning takes place through the construction and movement across networks. In both of these cases, networks control the flow of knowledge, the role of connections or ties is vital, networks can, and often do, become autonomous over time, and diversity is seen as an asset, rather than a risk.

Applied to the seminar series, such an approach might begin by identifying the most active participants and characterising them as nodes. In this case, that would be Sheena and Keith, in their role as convenors. Other nodes would comprise participants in each of the sessions. The next step would be to map the network structure and how it changed over time by identifying the connections between these nodes. These connections might be measured by the number of times the individuals interacted with each other–or perhaps, in this case, the number of times individuals were present at the seminar session. In the latter case, the ties could be shown to strengthen or weaken over time. Interestingly, this network mapping could be done for the seminar series and the workshop series separately.

In either case, there would be a strong connection between Sheena and Keith, as they attended all of the seminars and follow-up workshops. Additionally, they would each be classified as the central nodes or hubs within the network, as they were responsible for the flow of information about the seminar series. It is likely that the network itself would also be highly centralised around the nodes that represent Sheena and Keith, with other attendees arranged around these two hubs. It is also likely that there would be some clustering or homophily evident: this could be in relation to particular topics within the seminar series, or, perhaps more likely, related to attendance at the follow-up workshops.

There would be similarly strong connections between the regular attendees and Sheena and Keith; for example, participants like Elena and Karin, who were present for all of the sessions would be strongly connected, but they would also have ties between each other.

As shown in Figure 1, a social network analysis shows connections between participants, but it lacks the contextual factors outlined above; for example, the lurkers (Kolber and Heggart, 2025; Goodyear *et al*., 2019) remain largely invisible and we have no sense of the time spent by any group or indeed the type of participation.

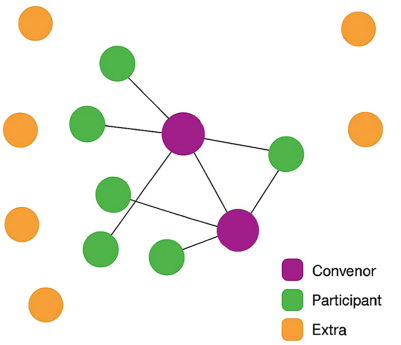

Figure 1. Network chart of convenors and participants; Source: Authors' own work

Possibly, other theories, such as those that examine learning specifically, may offer deeper understandings. For instance, connectivism offers insights into how learning might have occurred during the seminar and workshop sessions. Connectivism posits that knowledge is distributed across networks, and learning is related to the ability to traverse those networks (Alam, 2023). This applies to the above example in that the seminar series was an effort to promote learning through the construction of a network (and indeed, networks within networks, as described above). Crucially, however, the network was an open one and there were no limitations on who could participate, meaning that it had the potential to extend to a global dimension. Indeed, that was the case and, over the course of the seminars, participants joined in from the United Kingdom, from countries in South America, and all over Australia.

With this in mind, from a connectivist perspective, Sheena and Keith served as the primary sources of knowledge and coordination within the network: they enabled – and controlled – the flow of information, as well as serving as the points of integration for diverse inputs from participants (the other nodes). However, some of the more connected participants (green in Figure 1 above) were also strongly connected to Sheena and Keith, suggesting they were key contributors and learners. From the perspective of connectivism, the connections between the participants themselves (and not between them and Sheena or Keith) highlight the importance of peer-to-peer learning and collaboration.

The more distant nodes shown in Figure 1 are peripheral to the network; however, they still have value in terms of learning. These weaker connections could be considered as points of novelty or diversity, but also suggest that perhaps a greater effort needed to be made by the Convenors to include those nodes throughout the series.

Social learning spaces

We can continue to focus on the learning that might have taken place during the seminar series and the workshop sessions through the lens of social learning space, a concept offered by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020). Notably, this concept focuses explicitly on the human, and particularly the engagement that occurs amongst individuals engaged in the

pursuit of "learning to make a difference" (p. 13), and the value created through that pursuit. For Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, the terms "social", "learning" and "space" (p. 13) have specific functions within the concept. The term "social" highlights that a social learning space is created by the interactions and relationships that unfold between individuals, including power relations. Without those relationships and interactions, the space would not exist. Nevertheless, even when individuals interact and develop relationships, they may not necessarily do so in an effort to create a social learning space. Instead, for a social learning space to develop, according to Wenger–Trayner and Wenger–Trayner, it is essential that interactions and relationships are structured by a focus on mutual "learning": a "joint inquiry" (p. 13) so to speak. The "space" itself is the milieu wherein those interactions and relationships take place. It is a space that "lives in the experiences of the participants" (p. 14) and regardless of whether that location is in-person or online, being present does not imply participation in the space.

When considered from this perspective, the seminar series can be understood as a "social learning space" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 13) in that there were numerous interactions and relationships that unfolded between the Convenors and attendees, many of which are outlined above, and that were related to power and control in complex and dynamic ways. Those interactions and relationships were also all structured by the "joint inquiry" (p. 13) into the topic of decentring the human in qualitative research, and the "space" itself included multiple, shared, online locations that provided a series of specific "enclosure[s] of engagement" (p. 13) where learning could take place.

However, keeping this in mind, and returning for a moment to the two nuances of the seminar series mentioned above: the non-contributing attendees and those who engaged with the series asynchronously by watching the recordings, we can deepen our analysis of the seminar series in interesting ways. Superficially, it would be easy to assume that, in both of these examples, the individuals concerned were simply non-participants in the social learning space (and quite literally non-attendees in the second example). That being the case, there is no need to consider their involvement at all. Nonetheless, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) suggest that "the experience of agency and meaningfulness" (p. 42) is central to the process of learning in a social learning space, and learning can be understood in terms of the value it creates for individuals, especially in regards to its contribution to their capacity to affect their world in a way they care about. From that perspective, it is possible that the seminar series created value for non-contributors and non-attendees in some form or another. It also suggests that the social learning space (and other online spaces, social or not) generated by the seminar series extended well beyond the one-hour seminar "live" event itself. While it is not possible in this article to explore what this means for researchers interested in researching online spaces, it does suggest that focussing on an individual's *live* participation and contribution is a somewhat limited analytical stance.

With the above-mentioned limitations in mind, in the following section of the article, we endeavour to move beyond analysis by engaging with the notion of decentring the human. Until now, we have explored the seminar series and workshops from various analytical perspectives, including social network theory (Carolan, 2013), connectivism (Downes, 2022; Siemens, 2017) and social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). These perspectives enabled us to track the flow of information across networks that comprised the seminar series and associated workshops, and to consider the resultant learning that may have emerged. They also enabled us to identify the most active participants in the series and characterise them as nodes or categories, as well as develop a map of the network in Figure 1. While this focus has been insightful, for example, it highlighted the strong connection between Sheena and Keith, who organised the series and the networks that emerged from that connection (or nodes), it seems fair to say that a great deal has gone missing in the process. Bluntly speaking, people do not experience online spaces as nodes, or as other research categories or schemata labelled this or that. Instead, people experience online spaces as people – as humans, that is, "who are always already immersed in relationships with others in a single,

present, actual locale" (Elwick, 2020, p. 153). From this perspective, online spaces are inextricable from human experience. And, although statements such as these might make it seem as if we are positioning the human firmly back in the centre of things, as we will illustrate in the following section, that is simply not the case.

Moving beyond analysis – Decentring the human

One thing that became apparent during the seminar series is that decentring the human in educational research means different things to different people, exposing a lack of conformity to this approach. Each seminar presenter explored decentring the human from a different perspective, for example, Bennett (2024) suggested that we needed to try to *Think like a brick*, while Blades and Rodrigues (2024) argued for a more environmentally conscious focus. Other scholars, such as Sakr (2024), emphasised a deeper engagement with objects such as chairs as part of the research environment. This variance was diversified even further as attendees asked questions and introduced new foci.

This diversity is not a weakness; rather, it demonstrates the variety of different ideas that are present within this research space and the exploration that is currently happening. This is part of a broader movement in academic research and the nonhuman turn is well underway, especially within the field of education (Snaza and Weaver, 2014) as we look to make sense of global warming and the complexities of living and making sense whilst living within the Anthropocene (Haraway, 2016). We see for example, bodies of water as first authors (Martuwarra RiverOfLife *et al*., 2022) and considerations of First Law (Poelina *et al*., 2024), emerging from both posthumanist perspectives and Indigenous methodologies.

Even so, during the workshops that followed each seminar presentation, questions were raised about how it was possible to decentre the human in educational research when the human is the researcher and, often, the researched. It was suggested that rather than decentring the human, perhaps we need to acknowledge that humans are always already threaded through with all kinds of more/non/other-than-human bodies, including being situated in time and space. This is not a new idea and it relates to much larger philosophical debates about what it is to be human and to exist in the world, some of which were referred to by seminar presenters and attendees alike. Whilst those debates are too rich to be explored here, they suggest that bringing the notion of decentring the human to research concerning online spaces is not about removing the human entirely; rather, it is about exploring the many other threads that are just as much a part of what unfolds as the people/participants who have captured our attention thus far.

One way of generating such a methodological shift is to view the seminar series through a collective lens, rather than an individualistic lens that is based on the dichotomous logic of self/other, technology/human, participant/non-participant, and so on. The first author of this article made a similar shift in Elwick (2020), where she drew on Merleau-Ponty's (1968, p. 165) notion of "*wild Being*" to illuminate some of the threads that constituted the "collective relational landscape" (Elwick, 2020, p. 152) of a specific research encounter that occurred in an early childhood setting. It is not our intention to re-tell what was revealed through that approach here. However, adopting a similar approach in this article is likely to be productive; not only in terms of illuminating the all kinds of more/non/other-than-human bodies that pervaded the seminar series (the threads so to speak), but also in terms of producing something new, which is a key issue for all qualitative research (Elwick, 2020; St. Pierre, 2019) whether focussed on the human or not.

Revisiting the seminar series

Vignette: the seminar series over time

> 21st March 2024: It is the start of the first seminar presentation; Sheena looks at the camera, positioned at the top of the screen on her laptop, and smiles. She can see the images of several people in attendance at the top of her screen, but not all. As Sheena "hands over" control to the presenter, Luke

Bennett, she simultaneously positions her mouse pointer on the Zoom screen and scrolls through attendees' names and images to see who is present. Concurrently, Luke shares his PowerPoint presentation and his title slide appears on the screen, "thank you very much Sheena and Keith, and lovely to be here". Luke looks down towards the bottom of the screen, and asks "can I just check because I've lost my little screen that shows me people's faces, can somebody say if they can see my slides on screen? [quiet voice replies yes] Luke continues, "Yes, lovely thank you very much. Right well . . . here we go. . ."

27th March 2024: One week after Luke's seminar, seven people have gathered from different countries around the world, via Zoom, to reflect on Luke's presentation and to explore connections with their own work, and with each other. Keith shares a pre-prepared Google shared writing Doc so that we can each write, in a pre-designated and individual font colour, what the seminar produced for ourselves and our research. Almost immediately, someone asks, "Why am I a wombat?" "What do you mean?" "Look, at the top of the screen, there's a row of animals, I wonder which one I am. . . ?" "Me too, which one am I?" After much discussion and "figuring it out" we return to our writing, in silence. . . Sheena notices connections between her writing and another person's and starts writing a response in her colour (and animal . . .); and others join in. . .

24th February 2025: Almost one-year after the start of the seminar series, and more than four-months after the last seminar and workshop, four people from different countries around the world have come together via Zoom. All four attended most seminar presentations and workshops, and developed connections with one another during those events. Negotiations have been underway via email to organise a time that works for everyone: "I looked at Google, and I think the time calculation is right. . . 8a.m. works fine for me. . . but I guess I could stay up until 10–11p.m. if you would like to meet at 8a.m. your time (that would be different dates then . . ...!)"

Merleau–Ponty's wild Being

In his later and final work, Merleau-Ponty (1968) brings forward an ontology of the visible and invisible that, for him, is an attempt to deepen his early ontology that portrayed living experience – from the perspective of the embodied subject – as a symbiosis of worldly things, embodied subjectivity and other selves. While this early ontology is often associated with a focus on the human, and particularly the human body (e.g. Engdahl, 2011), his later ontology reformulates this symbiosis in terms of "wild Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 165); which, put simply, refers to the primordial fabric of existence that precedes dichotomous categories such as self/other, technology/human, participant/non participant. Merleau–Ponty bases his argument for the logic of "wild Being", on his master concepts of *écart* (p. 123) and reversibility (p. 133), which he initially [2] illustrates through the phenomenon of one hand touching the other hand:

> . . . where the "touching subject" passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as if it were in the things. (p. 134)

In this example, there are at least two experiences happening simultaneously (touching and being touched) and yet the two experiences are not the same. Instead, according to Merleau-Ponty (1968), there is a constitutive difference (*écart*) between the two experiences that brings with it a "coiling over" (p. 140) or a reversible relation that confounds usual categories such as self and thing. He explains this further by intertwining *écart* and reversibility together with his notion of "wild Being" to express a "connective tissue" (p. 135) in which our embodied selves, other selves, things and non-things are commingled in a dynamic interworld or "intermundane space" (p. 48); a "wild Being" that Hass (2008, p. 144) describes as a "weird collocation of forms, fissures, overlappings, and dissolutions".

Certainly, Merleau-Ponty's (1968) later ontology is complex and lends itself to deep philosophical discussions that are beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, "wild Being" (p. 165) provides a powerful "expressive device" (Hass, 2008, p. 129) that lends itself, rather

well we think, for developing a collective sense of the practical situation that those involved in the seminar series found themselves as they came together, via an online platform, to explore the notion of decentring the human in qualitative research methodologies.

Let us return for a moment to the seminar series over time, depicted in the above vignette. With regard to Sheena, she has thus far been considered a primary contributor to the series – a central node or hub within the network. Indeed, that seems to be the case as she sits in her office and "*looks at the camera, positioned at the top of the screen on her laptop, and smiles*". As she does so, she projects herself into the world (quite literally, considering the various global geographical locations of attendees) whilst experiencing shifting views of others who are present as she "*positions her mouse pointer on the Zoom screen and scrolls through attendees' names and images*". Yet, simultaneously, Sheena knows that she can be seen and heard by those who are present, but in differing and shifting perspectives that are animated by the things in each individuals' surroundings, and beyond. Sheena also knows that no one can see the pre-written notes that she has open on her laptop screen, providing her with the words that she speaks for the next five minutes or so. It is here that we start to get closer to an understanding of the seminar series as a collective unfolding in "wild Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 165): a "connective tissue" (p. 135) in which our embodied selves, other selves, things and non-things are involved in a complex and fluid interplay – a commingling in a dynamic "intermundane space" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 48); with each flowing into (and out of – through) one another over a certain period of time, in a particular place.

Nonetheless, even that time and place is hard to think about when technology, and particularly Zoom, is brought into focus. Literature concerning Zoom technologies, and other video-conferencing software, has grown exponentially since the Covid-19 pandemic, including Special Issues such as *The Zoom Function* (Ball *et al*., 2020). Typically, in educational contexts, research discussions concerning Zoom focus on issues such as how it impacts learning, teacher mastery of Zoom, students' attitudes and perceptions, and Zoom fatigue (e.g. Ferng, 2020; Joia and Lorenzo, 2021; Serhan, 2020; Williams, 2021). In each of these examples, Zoom is categorised as an object, a thing-in-itself: a thing that one must learn the necessary skills to operate, a thing that can impede or enhance learning, a thing that can cause fatigue. This "thingness" is also evident in our earlier analysis of the seminar series where Zoom technologies were not considered to be participating in proceedings and yet, no doubt, they provided the means for human participants to create the connections that we mapped and shared in Figure 1.

Whilst all of the above foci are important, there are examples where the "thingness" of Zoom has been challenged, bringing forth considerations such as Zoom's:

> . . . kinetic dimensions, temporality and the way it modulates space and scale. Our body loses its privileged position as the reference point by which all other scales are judged as our perception becomes determined and defined by technologies that aid and extend it. (Ball *et al*., 2020, p. 221)

Examples include how Zoom extends experience by opening possibilities for people to come together regardless of their geographical or temporal location; and, how it extends experience of the world by shifting experience to the "intimacy of house and neighbourhood" (Ball *et al*., 2020, p. 222). Nevertheless, these are not new ideas and the ways in which technology transforms human experience have long been philosophised (e.g. Ihde, 1979). Notably, that transformation contains possibilities of extending and amplifying experience AND reducing it in the process (Elwick, 2015; Ihde, 1979). This simultaneous extension and reduction of experience is evident in the seminar series, for example, in viewers' asynchronous engagement with the recordings of the presentations after the event. Here, the Zoom recordings and related technologies offer possibilities for extending viewers' experience by enabling them to see and hear people in times and spaces no longer present. Simultaneously, they offer possibilities for a reduced experience compared to what viewers might have experienced if they attended synchronously – for instance, they cannot ask questions or contribute to events that unfolded at that time.

At first glance, the idea that Zoom technologies and other online tools and spaces can transform human experience seems akin to our earlier call to view the seminar series through a collective lens, rather than an individualistic lens. Certainly, it is an idea that brings technology and the human into a relationship where they both belong to a collective unfolding across time and space. However, it is also an idea that breaks up that collective unfolding by focussing on only two elements of what Merleau-Ponty's (1968, p. 165) "wild Being" reminds us, comprises much more. For instance, let us return again to the seminar series over time, depicted in the above vignette, and consider Luke, who finds himself suddenly navigating the unexpected workings of Zoom when he asks, "*Can I just check because I've lost my little screen that shows me people's faces, can somebody say if they can see my slides on screen?*" A person quietly "*replies yes*" and they become part of the action as Luke responds to them, "*Yes, lovely thank you very much. Right well . . . here we go . . .*" In this one small, unfolding moment there are already various shifting relationships in motion, comprising laptops, cameras, screens, Zoom technologies, software, Internet speeds, embodied selves, other selves and invisible dimensionalities (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) such as the play of light, reflections, textures and colour that are inseparable from what takes shape.

While this is going on, Sheena is using her mouse to "*scroll through attendees' names and images to see who is present*", This movement brings with it a weird "coiling over" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 140) or reversible relation between Sheena and the mouse (and other technologies and so forth) where she experiences the mouse as an object that must be mastered (taking care not to scroll too quickly, not to click on the wrong part of the screen and close the meeting, and to click the left button and not the right) whilst simultaneously experiencing it as an extension of her hand as she points her finger towards the screen and clicks. This interweaving of subject and object in the same moment of action is what confounds understandings of Zoom technologies as a "thing", and it is what has been missing in the discussion thus far. It is further illustrated, quite nicely we think, one-week after Luke's seminar when attendees edited the "Google shared writing Doc" and someone asks:

> "Why am I a wombat?" "What do you mean?" "Look, at the top of the screen, there's a row of animals, I wonder which one I am . . . ?" "Me too, which one am I?" After much discussion and "figuring it out" we return to our writing, in silence, and some with cameras off. . . .

Within these unfolding moments, there are a plethora of human, technological, temporal and virtual relationships, criss-crossing and textured with invisible dimensionalities, including the "*pre-designated and individual font colours*" assigned to each attendee before the event. There are times when technology comes into sight as an object – a thing within itself that must be understood in order to proceed (why am I a wombat?) – but then withdrawing and becoming part of the experience itself. Interactions unfold as "*Sheena notices connections between her writing and another person's and starts writing a response in her colour (and animal . . .); and others join in . . .*" Far from being unimportant, these unexpected connections are a "coiling over" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 140) of similarities and differences that unwittingly weave a temporal and "connective tissue" (p. 135) bearing "the immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere" (p. 114). In doing so, they acquire a "collective history" which, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 503), can then be taken up and carried forward in individual and collective ways.

It is this "collective history" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 503) that is taken up "*almost one-year after the start of the seminar series, and more than four-months after the last seminar and workshop by four people from different countries around the world [who] have come together via Zoom*"; and following negotiations of a time that was suitable for all. Described as such, it would be easy to think of time as one time amongst other times; for example, "*8am works fine for me*". Indeed, from this perspective, it would be easy to describe networks, such as those established during the seminar series, as having a life cycle that follows a recognizable pattern, evolving through distinct phases and time periods: birth, growth, maturity, and conclusion. And while it is possible to consider time as an objective and measurable thing, we have already

hinted above that in "wild Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 165), time is inseparable from the "connective tissue" (p. 135), where the present is always connected to the past and anticipates the future. What we have here, then, is a "collective history" that is best understood as a temporal-relational web that is crisscrossed by trajectories and invisible vectors in which individuals are tied to one another by the threads of their actions, whether deliberate or not. This is a "collective history" through which connections emerge, knowledge is shared, and that can be carried forward in individual and collective ways. This highlights that even short lifespan networks – such as the #educattentats hashtag that came and went within 28 days (Greenhalgh and Koehler, 2017) – are part of a larger story of network ecosystems, where the end of one network may serve as the foundation for others. It also highlights that involving oneself in one network is likely to open possibilities for involvement in others, with the outcome being a strengthening of one's professional learning community (Kolber and Salazar, 2024).

Conclusion

In this article, we asked the question, "If we look at online spaces through the lens of decentring the human, what do we notice?" To help answer this question, we drew mainly on the *Decentring the Human in Qualitative Research Methodologies* seminar series conducted by the *Qualitative Research Methodologies* Special Interest Group of the *Australian A. for Research in Education (AARE)* during 2024, as well as work in social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020), studies about learning and social media (e.g. Carpenter and Harvey, 2019) and connectivism-inspired approaches to learning (e.g. Siemens and Conole, 2011). In the last part of the article, we drew on Merleau-Ponty's (1968, p. 165) notion of "wild Being" to illuminate all kinds of more/non/other-than-human bodies that pervaded the seminar series and online spaces more broadly.

So, what did we notice when we considered online spaces through the lens of decentring the human? It seems to us that what is significant about our approach is that it allowed us to show the powerful contribution that particular analytical stances can afford, but also their limitations. In the first part of the article, the more commonly applied analytical approaches (social network theory, connectivism and social learning spaces) allowed us to highlight some aspects of a particular online space and its related spaces: for example, we highlighted the key people involved, the interactions and connections taking place, and the motivations and practices of some participants. We were also able to articulate a more nuanced portrayal of the seminar series that included four unanticipated developments (networks developing within networks), and two nuances involving individuals that we originally positioned as non-contributors.

However, while each analytical approach helped develop important understandings regarding online spaces and their workings, it became clear in the latter parts of the article that each approach precluded another equally important kind of understanding: an understanding of how online spaces are lived as a collective unfolding in which our embodied selves, other selves, things and non-things are involved in a complex and fluid interplay – a commingling in a dynamic "intermundane space" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 48). Indeed, what is strikingly obvious to us now that we have worked with Merleau–Ponty's notion of "wild Being" (p. 165), is how incredibly naïve our initial extended portrayal of the seminar series actually was. Yes, the seminar series and workshops led to at least four unanticipated developments and two nuances; and, yes, those developments enabled us to challenge our first simplistic understanding of the seminar series as an online learning network. Nonetheless, even though we extended our understanding of the seminar series to include those unanticipated networks and nuances, our early analysis of those inclusions continued to position the human squarely in the centre of proceedings. It is our work in the latter parts of the article that illustrates how flawed that positioning actually is.

But, more than that, if we bring this realisation back to the topic of qualitative research methodology in educational contexts, Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of "wild Being" (p. 165)

highlights the value in trying, at times, to decentre the human in ways that help bring to light what is obscured by different forms of analysis. This is not because analytical explanations are unhelpful, but because there is always more going on than any analysis can reveal. As we have discovered here, it is by learning to see some of what is obscured by different forms of analysis that our own naivety and the limits of our own preferred analytical approaches are revealed. This revelation, in turn, can create inroads and open possibilities for more complex understandings of online spaces and their associated technologies in generative and innovative ways. As such, it is clearly an approach worthy of further inquiry.

Notes

1. https://www.aare.edu.au/sigs/qualitative-research-methodologies/decentring-the-human-in-qualitative-research-methodologies-seminar-series/
2. This is a simplistic rendering of *écart* and reversibility and they are illustrated in many ways throughout Merleau-Ponty's writing as he works to show the many, multi-faceted, and complex, differential relations that proliferate wild Being.

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