# Reflections on the characteristics of a successful online women's network

Jutta Pauschenwein (FH JOANNEUM, ZML – Innovative Lernszenarien)

Abstract

This paper deals with the women's network "#dienetzwerkerinnen", a publicly funded project, which started in 2019. The author initiated the project and is active in the project as project lead, team member, facilitator and moderator, developer of workshops and network activities. The activities in the network are manifold. Using the footprints of emergence with their 25 perspectives she reflects her perception of "#dienetzwerkerinnen", which also serves well to generate ideas about the network after the project ends in November 2022.

Keywords: online, networking, moderation, diversity, women
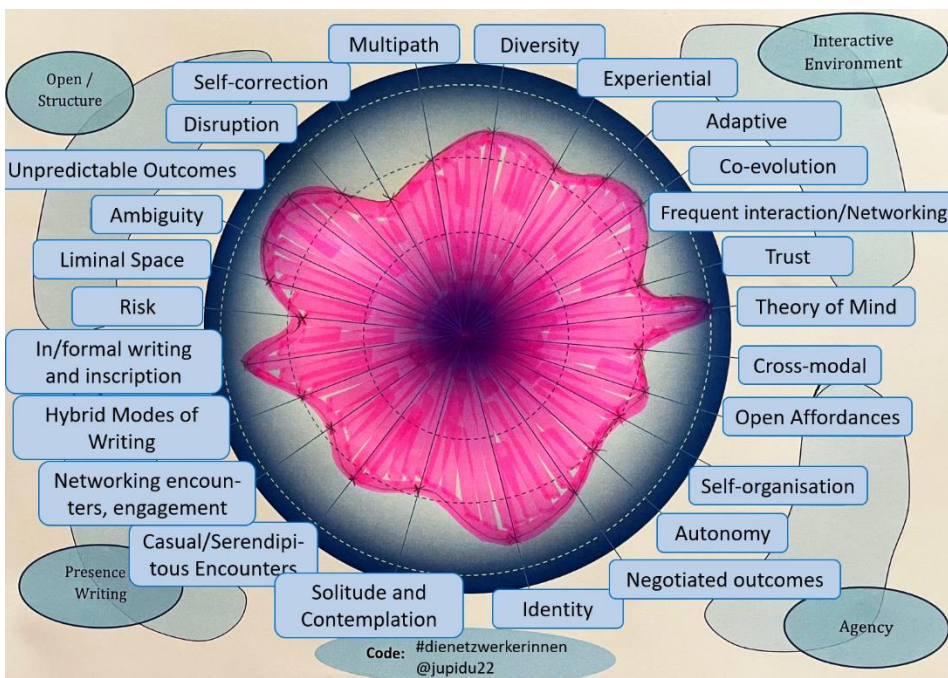
1. Introduction

"The 1st call for proposals of the Laura Bassi 4.0 program was aimed specifically at women who want to shape the digital transformation"[1] stated the website of the Austrian Research Promotion Agency FFG in 2018. The author could not resist this call, as she has been an "a gender sensitive online person" from the very beginning, continuously taking care of online groups of various kinds since 1999. Working at the ZML – Innovative Learning Scenarios (FH JOANNEUM) it's her job to deal with the web, with online-tools and experiment to foster innovation.

She is interested in how people learn (online). In her trainings and courses, she creates spaces/environments for the participants to learn from within themselves. She believes that women can shape the digital transformation if they know how to use the tools and if they develop approaches and concepts of using the tools in their own way.

In the proposal for an online women's network with the name *#dienetzwerkerinnen* (*the female networkers*) she defined three objectives for women who join the network and for the network itself.

1. In the online women's network, women support each other in their everyday professional lives and explore ways to shape the digital transformation.

2. In the online women's network, women address current problems of work or life in a moderated exchange, whereby creative, visual approaches are an essential part of the process. Visual collaboration in a platform as Miro[2] for example, support the women in the process of problem solving. By communicating and collaborating online the women improve their technical skills and adapt tools to their needs.

3. Materials developed in the online women's network are available as open educational resources under an open license. In this way what was learned is available for other women – and everybody who is interested – as well.

---

[1] Available at https://www.ffg.at/laura-bassi-4.0 [19.04.2022] - Die 1. Ausschreibung des Programms Laura Bassi 4.0 richtete sich gezielt an Frauen, die Digitalisierung gestalten wollen.
[2] Available at https://miro.com/app/dashboard/ [16.05.2022]

1.2. Who are the women in the network?

The network was mainly built by word of mouth. This is true for the project partners who were informed in business groups and networks or who were known to colleagues of the university. And it is true for women who joined the network later; in this case an online version of word by mouth was especially important. Their professions and fields of work are diverse, many of them come from a university or a small company. They joined the network out of curiosity, they wanted to develop their digital skills and to network with women[3].

The project focusses mainly on building the network in the first year and expanding the network in the following two years. Further work packages aim at problem solving and the creation of open resources of what was learned. In the work package dissemination, a (massive) open online course (MOOC) was planned to share what was learned.

The proposal was very open using the *Research through Design* method with the approach of "online first" in the centre (Frayling, 1993; Baytaş, 2021; Zimmerman et al., 2010). When the project started in November 2019 the partners could easily bring their interests and challenges into project work. The Corona Pandemic accelerated the joint online learning processes in the network. During the first year the project team experimented with tools, developed rules and processes for collaboration, and created a broad range of online workshops. The project's website plays an important role in sharing what was learned.

From the beginning of the second year until now, further women were joining the network. The author learned that it is not possible to plan the expansion of the network in detail but that it happens rather chaotically. The intensity of engagement into group learning processes differs from woman to woman and from day to day. The author provides content regularly. For example, in the series *#didaktischekleinigkeiten (didactical trivia)* she writes about tools, concepts, evaluation, visualization, …used in online learning, teaching, and training. The readers can experiment with approaches shared by *#dienetzwerkerinnen* in their own context. Regular readers feel connected to the author (from time to time they tell her so), whereas she has rather unclear feelings about the network members and how the network is proceeding. Choosing the reflection method with the footprints of emergence, she aims to understand better what's happening in the network.

---

[3] Portraits of some of the women, who joined the network, in German. Available at
https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/blog/category/frauenvordenvorhang/ [16.05.2022]

1.3. What are the criteria for a successful network?

The author measures success in hard facts (how many workshops were developed and offered, how many women were active in the network?) and soft facts (did we learn something new; did we enjoy networking?). During the first project year the women of the partner team enhanced their online competences and learned from each other. Reflecting this phase, they wrote "We benefit from mutual exchange about online tools", "As a farmer and a mother an online-project is the only way for me to be part of a project", "[…] how research and practice work together to create new concepts which benefit all women"[4]. In second year, the phase of the network expansion, the women who joined the network like "the diversity of the group, the different professions", "the positive vibrations in the network and that all of them love to learn[5]", that the network is "straightforward and open[6]", "The mutual appreciation, respect, and enthusiasm[7]". In the third year in the feedback to the open online course named *#onlinelernvergnügen* (*enjoyable online learning*) the participants wrote "Keep going! The intention that learning can be fun was fulfilled in every respect", "Keep it up! It was a great series of events. I have always been able to take something with me and try out new things", "Should be offered again and again, because diversity in learning opportunities is important".[8]

2. Some facts about the network *#dienetzwerkerinnen*

– Research project to enhance women's competences in the online world

– Website https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/

– 6 partner organisations, 10 members in the project team https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/das-projekt/ueber-uns/

– More than 80 online workshops open for every woman, sometimes also for men https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/kalenderseite/

– Presentation of the project at about 10 conferences, network meetings etc.

---

[4] Zwischenbericht *#dienetzwerkerinnen*, FFG-Programm: Laura Bassi 4.0, 1. Ausschreibung (Nov. 2020), internes Dokument, S. 3-4, translation by the author
[5] https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/blog/2022/04/01/yvonne-wittmann-fauler/ translation by the author
[6] https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/blog/2022/03/18/sabine-ilger translation by the author
[7] https://www.dienetzwerkerinnen.at/blog/2022/02/16/doris-kiendl/ translation by the author
[8] Online-Evaluation of *#onlinelernvergnügen* (enjoyable online learning) [20.05.2022, 05.06.2022]

- About 50 women have registered for the protected exchange

- About 500 people, mostly women, encountered *#dienetzwerkerinnen*

- About 140 people attended the open online course in year 3.

3. Footprints of emergence as method of reflection

In the abstract of the paper *Footprints of Emergence* Williams et al (2012, p. 50) wrote that "we need to develop practical tools to help us describe these new forms of learning which are multivariate, self-organised, complex, adaptive, and unpredictable". New forms of learning are happening in the women's network and therefore the *footprints of emergence* are very well suited to shed new light on the network. The author is familiar with this method and has been using it continuously since 2012 (Pauschenwein et al., 2013, 2014; Mackness & Pauschenwein, 2016).

The *footprints of emergence* enables designers and learners to visualize the course design and their learning experience in any course. They explore the relationship between prescribed (controlled) and emergent learning processes. 25 factors organized in four clusters help to reflect a learning scenario starting from slightly different perspectives.

- "Open/Structure cluster (the extent to which the overall structure of the learning scape is open or predetermined

- Interactive Environment cluster (the way openness and structure are realised in an actual event)

- Agency cluster (the overall extent to which agency, initiative and identity are active elements of the learning process)

Presence/Writing cluster (the way in which people present and articulate themselves and their thoughts and feelings across a wide range of media, from the immediate presence of conversation and interaction to studied, formal modes of writing)" (Mackness & Pauschenwein, 2016, p. 279)

It is beyond the scope of this article to explain every factor in detail. These can be found in Williams et al (2012) and on the WIKI of the *footprints of emergence*[9]. In the discussion of the *footprint* of *#dienetzwerkerinnen* some of the factors are

---

[9] Available at http://footprintsofemergence.pbworks.com/w/page/125481272/Critical%20Factors [10.05.2022]

explained in more detail. To create a *footprint of emergence* the author refers to the individual factors which are described in *table 2* (Williams et al., 2012, p. 85).
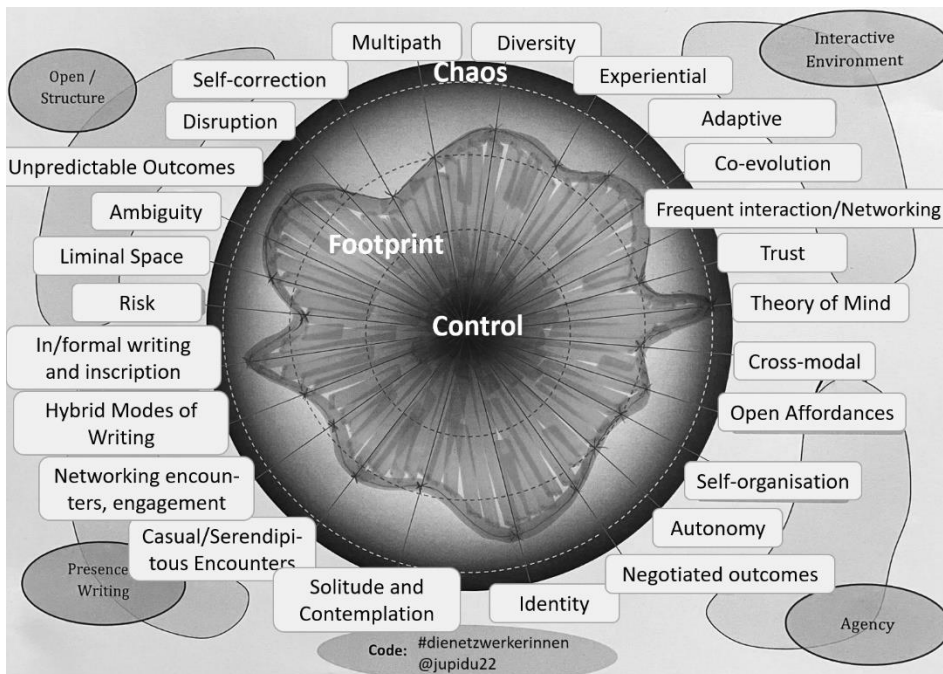

Figure 1: Footprint of *#dienetzwerkerinnen*, May 2022

The author reflects the women`s network from 25 perspectives. The result is illustrated in Figure 1. The amoeba-like shape form in the middle is the "*footprint*" itself.

How to draw a footprint? A point is placed on the lines relating to each factor which extends from the centre of the circle to the circumference. A point placed at or near the centre indicates a controlled, prescribed experience. A point placed at or near the circumference indicates a chaotic experience, in relation to the factor being considered. Joining the points creates the footprint. Would the footprint describe a very prescribed, controlled learning scenario it would be a rather small area in the middle of figure 1 around the word "Control". In the case of a chaotic scenario, it would cover the whole circle. This specific footprint tells us that there are challenges for the person who reflects the network but all together there's a possibility for deep learning as well. The values of many factors lie in the zone of "sweet emergence", between prescribed and chaotic learning.

Furthermore Figure 1 shows the different clusters of a footprint and the factors which belong to them. In the next section the footprint will be discussed in detail.

4. Discussion of the footprint about *#dienetzwerkerinnen*

Drawing and interpreting a footprint depend very much on the individual person and the actual situation. This means that repeating the creation of a footprint would produce a slightly different figure as well as the interpretation of the footprint changes from day to day. Therefore, the author took notes of her thoughts immediately on a piece of paper during the creation of the footprint. She is struggling with different perspectives in drawing a footprint all the time. Her footprint reflects the network design per se, her feelings and experiences when dealing with the network and hypothesis how the network members experience the network as well. Why is she choosing such an open approach? In her experience and in exchange with her colleagues she perceives that all perspectives are valuable. She believes that it is not possible (at least for her) to reflect a learning scenario only from one point of view. The reflection in Figure 1 includes the person, who reflects (the author), and her hypotheses about the women in the network as well.

4.1. The cluster open/structure

She always starts with questions of the cluster *open/structure*. In doing so she reflects the women's network from a certain distance. Let's focus on factors with large value. As the project was planned to foster very open scenarios for learning and communicating the factors *Ambiguity* and *Unpredictable Outcomes* are rather prominent in this cluster – marked by white arrows in Figure 2. To think about *Ambiguity,* one reflects "How tightly defined, or open is the meaning and application of the learning?" In the case of *Unpredictable Outcomes,* one asks: "How fixed or unpredictable are the learning outcomes?" (Mackness, 2019).

> **Reflective personal insight into the network**
>
> *Ambiguity*: In the third project year the women are using very different tools for their online activities. Throughout the project it was not possible to use just one single video conference system. This was due to personal preferences on one hand and shortcomings of technology on the other hand. Some of the women were already using one of the platforms at their workplace and wanted to use that same platform for *#dienetzwerkerinnen* with a

private account, but the continuous identification issues of the platform complicated matters.

Unpredictable Outcomes: Triggered by the Corona Pandemic and the lockdowns an extraordinary online workshop was created and conducted many times. The competences of the bio farmer and online expert were brought together to enable women to produce different types of cheese in their own kitchen, together with the online group and supported by an online coach.
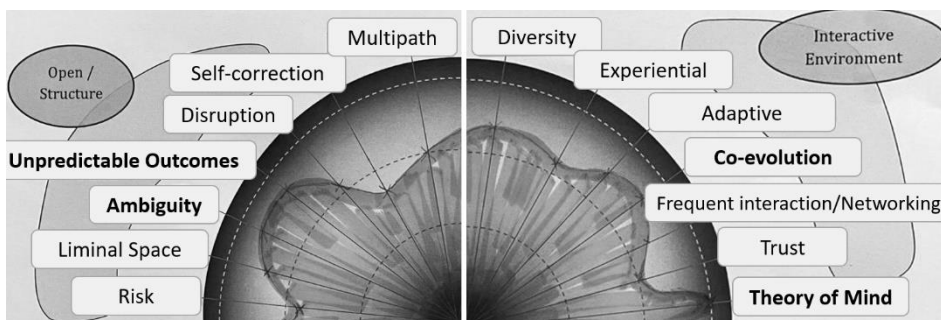

Figure 2: Factors of the clusters open/structure and interactive environment

4.2. The cluster interactive environment

In drawing the footprint, the author proceeds with the cluster *interactive environment*. This means that she reflects what's happening in the women's network. The distance between reflection and reflected object diminishes. The factors *co-evolution* and *theory of mind* are the most prominent in this area. The related questions are "Is the course independent of learner initiative, or does it grow and adapt with the learners?" (co-evolution)[10] and "Is it critical for learners to anticipate what other people (or interfaces) are 'thinking', or not?" (Theory of mind)[11] (Mackness, 2019).

They question how much the network adapts and grows mutually and if there are many people with many minds in the network which activities and approaches should be anticipated somehow.

---

[10] See as well http://footprintsofemergence.pbworks.com/w/page/125401073/Co-evolution [13.05.2022]
[11] See as well http://footprintsofemergence.pbworks.com/w/page/125401130/Theory%20of%20Mind [13.05.2022]

Reflective personal insight into the network

Co-evolution: In the third project year *#dienetzwerkerinnen* offer an open online course named *#onlinelernvergnügen* (*enjoyable online learning*) where everybody can join, independent of gender. Months before the start this open course was discussed with the project team, and they agreed upon structure, content, and responsibilities. Production of content, update of the website and advertising took place in continuation until the course started on 25. April 2022. The purpose of the course was to share what was learned in the network so far. Especially in the last weeks before the start the *co-evolution* of the content was intense, and weeks changed with respect to the initial concept. This made the advertising activities partly inconsistent.

Theory of Mind: There's not one story but many stories about challenges to moderate different groups of women from different backgrounds, ages, preferences. What do they want, need, search and how could the moderators support group learning processes?

For example: in the project team workshops were developed and offered. As "mastermind" of the project the author felt obliged to understand what will happen in the workshop and if the concept of the workshop includes a learner centred approach, inclusion of tasks and only short inputs. The female trainers didn't always agree with this attitude. the author had to learn that sometimes the trainer and the participants prefer a professional presentation over a learning task. Therefore, in the open course *#onlinelernvergnügen* there were some talks as well.

4.3. The cluster *agency*

As next step the author reflects the factors in the cluster *agency*. The meaning of "*agency*" is not easy to understand. In German the author uses the term "Persönliche Entwicklung" but there are some shortcomings in this translation. Mackness (2019) explains *agency* as "Developing your capability, on your own terms". In open learning scenarios the trainer or moderator takes on the role of a facilitator and the participants are self-reliant learners. Therefore, in any case the identity is multifaceted. In the case of the women's network there are many different roles involved.

Reflective personal insight into the network

Identity: Thinking about her role in the network the author becomes aware of the many jobs she has. She's the leader, a member of the project team, a member of the network, an expert and trainer, a participant in the workshops, a journalist and social media manager, a web editor, a learner, a reflector, an analyser, a researcher … And all the other women in the network inhabit different identities as well.

For example: To encourage the development of identity, *#dienetzwerkerinnen* created the concept *#voneinandererfahren* (*learning from each other*). The *#voneinandererfahren* session takes place in a videoconference between women of the network. A woman, who joined the network recently, speaks about herself, her life, how they grew and developed, what her challenges were – for about 20 minutes. Then the other participants (normally between 3 and 9) ask questions, brainstorm, talk about related experiences, their associations – and together something new arises. The idea for the above-mentioned cheese production workshops was created in this way.
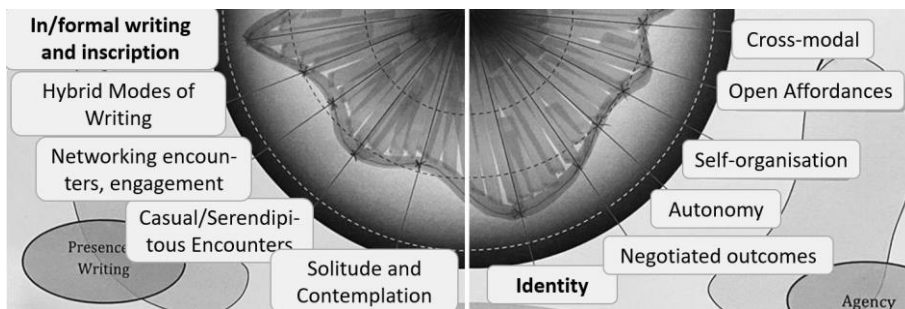

Figure 3: The clusters agency and presence/writing

4.4. The cluster presence/writing

Finally, the author reflects her being and interacting in the network. This is the "sweetest emergent" area of the footprint. The high value for the factor *in/formal writing and inscription* relates to the broad range of interacting and creating artefacts and practices. In reflecting, the author asks: "Is a range of forms of interaction, to develop ideas and perspectives, integral to the learning?" (Mackness, 2019)

Reflective personal insight into the network

In/formal writing and inscription: During the project period (Nov. 2019-Oct.2022) we invented some formal, ritualized interactions but mostly interaction simple happens, somehow controlled in our workshops, less controlled and often totally uncontrolled in the closed network platform, where extensive discussion threads emerged.

For example: in the channel *What is on our minds right now?* one of the women started a discussion about money. And this discussion became the thread with the most contributions. Furthermore, the discussion, the useful links, and the support encouraged some of the women to deal with their money, to invest it for retirement.

5. Conclusion and outlook

In this article the women´s network *#dienetzwerkerinnen* and some of the activities in the network are described. The method of the *footprint of emergence* was used to reflect the perception of the author. She wanted to understand the network better. She is familiar with the *footprint of emergence* method of reflection and uses it continuously. In the article she discussed the results of her footprint with respect to one or two factors in each of the four cluster Open/Structure, Interactive Environment, Agency and Presence/Writing. This way, she gives insights into the network.

5.1. Is the footprints a useful method for reflecting on the success of an online learning network?

For the author creating a footprint is always helpful. To think about a learning space/environment from 25 perspectives has impact on the reflecting person. New thoughts and relations emerge. Applying the method gave the author a clearer understanding of the network. Her reflection is her very personal view of the network. It was reassuring for her that the footprint wasn't too chaotic.

The author was most impressed with the type of interaction in the women's network. Women continuously switch from personal gossip to professional conversation, from challenges in their personal world to challenges at work. This

result is contrary to the proposal where the focus was on professional challenges for women.

One can criticize that the author included many different aspects into the footprint: the network design per se, her feelings and experiences, and her hypothesis of how the network members experience the network as well. In her experience of using the footprints they are a very subjective reflection method. The shape of the footprint depends on the person who creates it and her values and believes. Furthermore, it changes over time. If the footprint, which was drawn before the start of this article, would be drawn now, at the end of writing this paper, it would look different.

The *footprints of emergence* work perfectly well if they are used for discussion. This is the experience of the group of three online moderators of the Higher Education program of FH JOANNEUM - one of whom is the author -, which meet every month, draw a footprint and speak about their groups. Therefore, the author will discuss her footprint of *#dienetzwerkerinnen* with members of the network and invite them to create a footprint as well.

In the author's opinion there's one serious drawback of this method. It is very complex and difficult to understand. And it needs to be applied continuously to get used to it.

5.2.   How will the network proceed?

The project *#dienetzwerkerinnen* will end at the end of October 2022. The women's network will continue! There are many ideas already on how to keep it running. In June, the project partners will discuss the issue and plan the future of *#dienetzwerkerinnen.*

6. References

Baytaş, Mehmet Aydın (2021). *The Three Faces of Design Research.* Available at: https://www.designdisciplin.com/the-three-faces-of-design-research/ [04.05.2022]

Frayling, Christopher (1993). *Research in art and design.* Royal College of Art Research Papers series, 1(1). Available at: https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/384/3/frayling_research_in_art_and_design_1993.pdf [04.05.2022]

Mackness, Jenny [2019]. *Critical Factors*. WIKI in ccoperation with Williams, Roy. Available at:
http://footprintsofemergence.pbworks.com/w/page/125481272/Critical%20Factors [13.05.2022]

Mackness, Jenny & Pauschenwein, Jutta (2016). *Visualising structure and agency in a MOOC using the Footprints of Emergence framework.* Tenth International Conference on Networked Learning. Lancaster. Available at:
https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/organisations/netlc/abstracts/mackness.htm [09.05.2022]

Pauschenwein Jutta, Gudrun Reimerth, Erika Pernold (2013). *Footprints of Emergence. Eine aussagekräftige Evaluierungsmethode für moderne Lernszenarien.* In Claudia Bremer, Detlef Krömke (Hrgs) *„E-Learning zwischen Vision und Alltag"*, S 318-325. Münster, New York, München, Berlin, Waxmann. Available at:
http://www.waxmann.com/?eID=texte&pdf=2953Volltext.pdf&typ=zusatztext [29.04.22]

Pauschenwein, Jutta (2014): *All my footprints.* Tagungsband 13. E-learning Tag der FH JOANNEUM am 17. September 2014, p. 22-34. Avaliable at:
https://zmldidaktik.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/pauschenwein-all-my-footprints.pdf

Williams, Roy/Mackness, Jenny/Gumtau, Simone (2012): *Footprints of Emergence. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(4), 49-90. Available at:
http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1267 [29.04.22]

Zimmerman, John, Stolterman, Erik, & Forlizzi, Jodi (2010). *An analysis and critique of Research through Design: towards a formalization of a research approach.* In proceedings of the 8th ACM conference on designing interactive systems (pp. 310-319). ACM.

Author:

Pauschenwein, Jutta, Mag., Dr.: She is head of the ZML – Innovative Learning Scenarios at FH JOANNEUM and leads the project *#dienetzwerkerinnen*. She deals with different aspects of online learning processes in research, projects and trainings.