CONNECTED LEARNING

an agenda for

RESEARCH AND DESIGN

A research synthesis
report of the
Connected Learning
Research Network

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Young learners today have the world at their fingertips in ways that were unimaginable just a generation ago. World-renowned lectures, a symphony of voices and opinions, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities are all a click away. Youth can not only access a wealth of knowledge online, they can also be makers, creators, participants and doers engaged in active and self-directed inquiry.

Connected learning is an approach to addressing inequity in education in ways geared to a networked society. It seeks to leverage the potential of digital media to expand access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement. This model is based on evidence that the most resilient, adaptive, and effective learning involves individual interest as well as social support to overcome adversity and provide recognition.

Activated and well-supported learners are using today's social, interactive, and online media to magnify their learning and opportunity, but they are a privileged minority. Too many young people use new media primarily for social and recreational uses that do not connect to their academic achievement or future opportunity. Further, there is also a widening chasm between the progressive use of digital media outside of the classroom, and the no-frills offerings of most public schools that educate our most vulnerable populations. This gap aggravates a widespread alienation from educational institutions, particularly among non-dominant youth. With more support, invitations, and infrastructure for connection and inclusion, however, we believe many more young people can, and should, experience the advantages of connected learning.

An Agenda for Educational Reform and Social Change

The connected learning agenda is a response to three broad trends reshaping the landscape of learning in the U.S. and other countries in the Global North:

> **Broken pathways from education to opportunity:** In an era of globalization, economic contraction, and a growing gap between rich and poor, education is no longer a sure pathway to opportunity. Young people are competing for a scarcer number of good jobs, and we are witnessing an arms race in educational attainment where a college degree is no longer a guarantee of future success.

A growing learning divide: The achievement gap disproportionately affects African American and Latino youth, intensifying concerns about equity and social justice. These forms of inequity are exacerbated by the growing gap in family investments in out-of-school enrichment and learning activities.

A commercialized and fragmented media ecology: Young people are immersed in a media ecology that is increasingly commercialized and that elevates the importance of informed, individual choice. Established institutions, norms, and practices for guiding young people's access to information and learning are being confronted by always-on social communication and abundant media and information.

Connected learning addresses these challenging social conditions through an educational reform agenda that centers on diversifying entry points and pathways to opportunity. We see school as one node in a broader network of learning available to young people, and believe we can call on the untapped capacity in more informal and interest-driven arenas to build more learning supports and opportunities. In an era when our existing educational pathways serve fewer young people, it is critical that we build capacity, opportunity, and new models of success, rather than orient our efforts solely on optimizing the playing field of existing opportunities.

We target adolescents in their transition to adulthood as a key life stage in the development of interests, orientation to future opportunity, and development of social identity, and we look to digital and networked media for potent new ways of building connections and access to knowledge and information. Digital and networked media provide new possibilities in the following areas:

Fostering engagement and self-expression: Interactive, immersive, and personalized technologies provide responsive feedback, support a diversity of learning styles and literacy, and pace learning according to individual needs.

Increasing accessibility to knowledge and learning experiences: Through online search, educational resources, and communities of expertise and interest, young people can easily access information and find relationships that support self-directed and interest-driven learning.

Expanding social supports for interests: Through social media, young people can form relationships with peers and caring adults that are centered on interests, expertise, and future opportunity in areas of interest.

Expanding diversity and building capacity: New media networks empower marginalized and non-institutionalized groups and cultures to have voice, mobilize, organize, and build economic capacity.

"It's something I can do in my spare time, be creative and write and not have to be graded... You know how in school you're creative, but you're doing it for a grade so it doesn't really count?"

CLARISSA, ONLINE FICTION WRITER

Our Approach to Learning

Our approach to learning is guided by our approach to educational reform and research that has shown that the most effective and meaningful forms of learning happen when learners possess rich social supports, and where the subject matter is relevant and interactive. This approach also ties to our core values:

Equity: Educational opportunity should be available to all.

Full participation: Everyone should be engaged and have their contributions valued.

Social connection: Learning becomes meaningful through relationships.

Connected learning focuses attention on the spaces of integration and translation between divergent domains of knowledge, culture, and social practice. Bringing together and integrating the motivations, content, and abilities from social, interest-driven, and formal educational spheres promises to expand the reach of meaningful and sustained learning. Connected learning seeks to integrate three spheres of learning that are often disconnected and at war with each other in young people's lives: peer culture, interests, and academic content.

Peer-supported: In their everyday exchanges with peers and friends, young people are contributing, sharing and giving feedback in inclusive social experiences that are fluid and highly engaging.

Interest-powered: When a subject is personally interesting and relevant, learners achieve much higher-order learning outcomes.

Academically oriented: Learners flourish and realize their potential when they can connect their interests and social engagement to academic studies, civic engagement, and career opportunity.

"School's more valuable for me to have basically a time frame where I could learn on my own and practice."

SNAFU-DAVE, ON LEARNING TO BECOME A WEB COMICS ARTIST

INTERESTS

ACADEMIC

PEER CULTURE

CONNECTED LEARNING
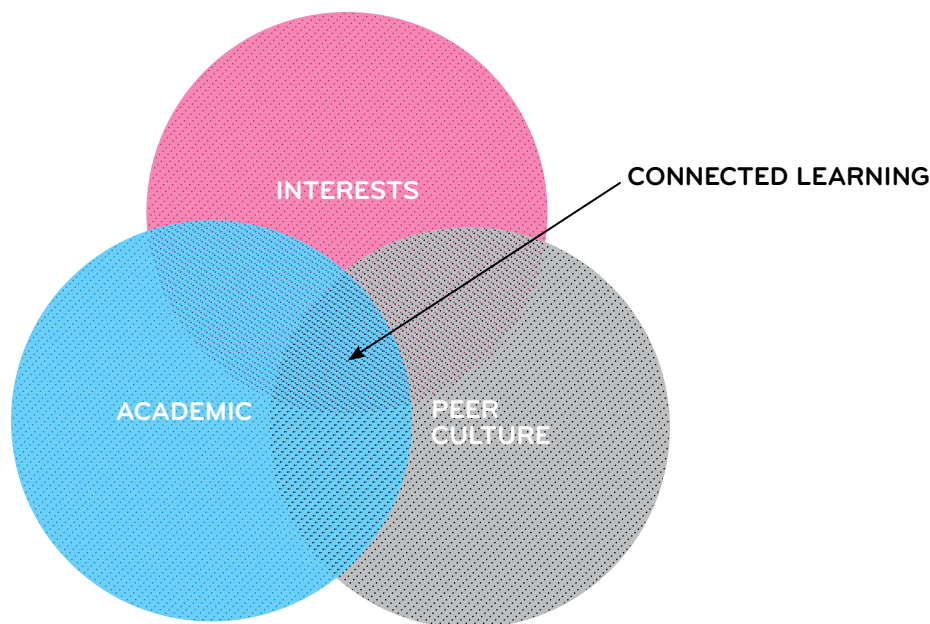
Young people can experience connected learning through diverse pathways. Schools, homes, after-school clubs, religious and cultural institutions, community centers and the parents, teachers, friends, mentors and coaches young people find at these diverse locales, all potentially have a role to play in guiding young people to connected learning.

Designing Connected Learning Environments

Examples of learning environments that are currently integrating the spheres of peers, interests, and academic pursuits include athletics programs that are tied to in-school recognition, certain arts and civic learning programs, and interest-driven academic programs such as math, chess, or robotics competitions. These connected learning environments ideally embody values of equity, social belonging, and participation. These environments, when leveraging new media, generally have the following characteristics:

Production-centered: Digital tools provide opportunities for producing and creating a wide variety of media, knowledge, and cultural content in experimental and active ways.

Shared purpose: Social media and web-based communities provide unprecedented opportunities for cross-generational and cross-cultural learning and connection to unfold and thrive around common goals and interests.

Openly networked: Online platforms and digital tools can make learning resources abundant, accessible, and visible across all learner settings.

To expand and support the growth of more connected learning environments, we look to the following design principles for guidance:

Everyone can participate: Experiences invite participation and provide many different ways for individuals and groups to contribute.

Learning happens by doing: Learning is experiential and part of the pursuit of meaningful activities and projects.

Challenge is constant: Interest or cultivation of an interest creates both a "need to know" and a "need to share."

Everything is interconnected: Young people are provided with multiple learning contexts for engaging in connected learning—contexts in which they receive immediate feedback on progress, have access to tools for planning and reflection, and are given opportunities for mastery of specialist language and practices.

Outcomes

Connected learning is oriented to outcomes that are both individual and collective in nature. These include 21st Century skills, dispositions, and literacies such as systems thinking, information literacy, creativity, adaptability, conscientiousness, persistence, global awareness and self-regulation as well as the cultivation of interests, building of social capital, and a positive orientation to academic subjects. Because the connected learning model takes an ecological and networked approach, these individual outcomes are tied to societal outcomes that are collective in nature. These include building high quality forms of culture and knowledge, civically activated collectives, and diverse pathways for learning and recognition. In this way, the support and cultivation of individual capacity is part and parcel of a broader vision of an educational system that is vastly more effective, equitable and essential.