Book Review: Cases for Connected Learning in Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design

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Abstract

Review of Ito, Mizuko; Gutierrez, Kris; Livingstone, Sonia; Penuel, Bill; Rhodes, Jean; Salen, Katie; Schor, Juliet; Sefton-Green, Julian; Watkins, S. Craig (2013-01-14). *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design* (Kindle Locations 11-13). Digital Media and Learning Research Hub. Kindle Edition.

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As an educator, you may be in search of ways to close the achievement gap. You may also find that students are not connecting with the prescribed content of their lessons. Oftentimes the challenge is being able to effectively engage students by connecting learning objectives and standards to their varied personal interests. Many educators recognize that learning involves incorporating individual interests and social supports to overcome gaps in academic achievement. Furthermore, we are familiar with an education system where dropout rates for vulnerable populations continue to be high and where newer labor-saving technologies favor skilled over unskilled workers. As a result, traditional middle-class jobs will not be available to Americans with modest or limited education. So how do educators address these issues? I selected this work as the authors piqued my interest by contending that our current educational practices may actually be doing more to perpetuate and expand inequality than reduce it.

This collection of nine case studies and supporting evidence was funded by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur foundation. Each case provides examples of children using connected learning to explore their personal interests. Connected learning utilizes the online world to unite students with experiences and resources they may not find in traditional classroom settings. More broadly, connected learning becomes effective when a student pursues a personal interest and is able to improve their academic achievement based on that personal interest. The authors contend that for connected learning to be successful it must be socially embedded and interest driven. Connected learning is centered on an equity agenda that enables students to utilize diverse-online pathways to explore their interests. As educators, we can be helpful in guiding and facilitating students toward their connected-learning interest. Most importantly, it is the teacher's role to ensure that the connected learning is relevant to the student's academic pursuit.

The authors draw from John Dewey's (1916) theoretical perspective and research that children learn from experience. Throughout the reading, the authors make cases for doing, trying, and making connections between themselves and their world. For example, case study 4 examines how students learn by doing at a public school named Quest to Learn. Each trimester the students compete in boss level competitions. Students participate in challenges ranging from constructing Rube Goldberg machines, to performing short plays based on fairy tales, to constructing travel websites featuring local

neighborhoods. Each of these boss levels seek to intertwine learning objectives, standards, and connected learning principles. This case study also aligns with Vygotsky's social development theory: Vygotsky (1978) states: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." (p57). Furthermore, the game like challenges have a molar framework that fosters what Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes as learning and development that is facilitated by individuals participating together in reciprocal activities and that when one individual undergoes a developmental change the other one will also.

The case studies present practical considerations for connected learning in the classroom. Connected learning aligns with 21st century skills in problem solving, critical thinking, systems thinking, flexibility, self-direction, and persistence. More pointedly, the authors state that Americans do creative work and less developed countries do routine work: Much of the better paying jobs that rely on research, design, marketing and sales, and global supply chain management require critical thinking, innovation, and creativity. More generally, connected learning in education is a means of building capacity and meaningful participation in society.

While the authors focus primarily on children of color, the benefits of connected learning are transferable to any student with specialized or unique interests. The underlying theme of this literature is that many educational practices focus too much on social and cultural deficiencies as a means of explaining achievement gaps: This deficit focus tends to ignore the structure of schools and the need for curricular innovation. Furthermore, African American and Latino/a students are often subjected to a devaluing of their linguistic practices, their distinct learning styles, and their modes of self-presentation.

The authors' recommendations are timely in that unequal academic achievement is at the forefront of many educational administrators and teacher's agendas. The recommendations articulated by the authors are both feasible and desirable, but how are these recommendations implemented in the classroom? This is an important question posed by teachers in their daily practice. I often hear teachers state that all of this research is great, but I need examples of how to implement this in my classroom. For teachers, feasibility is tied to how the concept can be applied in practice and is there a model for implementing this framework. In my personal experience, academic achievement gaps are difficult to overcome with traditional curriculum and instruction methods. Too often, instructional design and delivery methods are dominated by deficit thinking. It is essential for educators to recognize cultural assets and provide diverse pathways to explore varying interests. In a classroom of thirty students, there may be limited opportunities for children of color to identify with their dominant group peers: Connected learning provides an online pathway for these children to interact with others with similar interests. In my classroom teaching experience, technology is a leverage point for differentiated instruction, and having connected computers is as valuable has having a co-teacher in the classroom.

I would have found the reading more worthwhile had it provided samples of what connected learning looks like in a standards-driven classroom: Teachers are responsible for connecting learning to standards and objectives. With the extensive amount of time that it takes for teachers to design and develop lessons, a few sample standards-based lessons would be beneficial for classroom teachers. In addition, the authors focus on equity-reform efforts as being driven by progressive educators, however,

in my personal experience the search for methods to equalize academic outcomes is a goal shared by most all in the educational community.

On the whole, the case studies and recommendations were an easy read and the collection of case studies provide relevant information to facilitate a teacher's reflection on how connected learning may be used to create more equitable learning outcomes in their classroom. The authors provided easy to understand cases that illustrate the disengagement that many children of color experience in traditional classrooms. Furthermore, the readings bring to the forefront the isolation that can come from the lack of content and instructional connections.

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