

Developing Appreciative College Experience with Personal Learning Networks

Kam Hou Vat

University of Macau, Macau

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted today the future of the Internet is the social Web, and innovations in social computing is unlocking new opportunities for flexible and efficient learning with the support of electronic media (Hay, 2009; Neto & Brasileiro, 2007; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007), resulting in high expectations for different electronic learning (e-learning) initiatives (Ertl, Winkler, & Mandl, 2007; Alexander, 2006). The term *e-learning*, nonetheless, should make sense only when its use reflects a new culture of learning, whose focus lies mainly on the learner rather than merely on technology itself. To this end, this article is to explore the generative potential of the emergent personal learning networks (PLNs) in college education (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). It starts by describing the PLN background of connectivism, providing as much student-centered experience as deemed possible. Next, it elaborates on the context of a learning university in the Internet age, deliberating on how PLNs could empower student learning. Our third item of concerns lies in the educational potential of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), a change management philosophy as a lever for organization transformation through PLNs. The article concludes with some remarks of future development of PLNs, into which the integration of related Web 2.0 technologies should realize the essence of an appreciative college experience.

BACKGROUND

One of the 21st Century teaching and learning enhancements in higher education is the use of personal learning networks (PLNs) (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011; Weisgerber, 2009; Nielsen, 2008). By a personal

learning network (PLN) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_learning_network) we mean an informal learning network of people a learner interacts with and derives knowledge from, in a personalized manner (Digenti, 1999; Tobin, 1998). In a PLN, a person presumably makes a connection with another person with the specific intent that some type of learning will occur because of that connection (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_learning_network). An important learning theory in support of PLN comes from George Siemens (2004) in his now famous article *Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age*, where it is argued that learners create connections and develop a network that contributes to their professional development and knowledge. Indeed, PLNs share a close association with the concept of personal learning environments (PLEs), which as described by Martindale and Dowdy (2010), is a manifestation of a learner's informal learning processes via the Web. Moreover, it has been observed by Ivanova (2009) that different learners contribute and derive knowledge in a PLN, through individual choices of peculiar PLEs, VLEs (virtual learning environments), and relevant social media. In particular, the PLN learner chooses who to interact with in such media, and how much to participate. Oftentimes, the learner enters the PLE with certain goals, needs, interests, motivations and problems that are often presented to the people they include in their PLNs. Increasingly, PLNs are becoming an important part of professional development in various fields with different businesses creating their own e-learning content and PLEs for their employees' individual and organizational learning.

The PLN Theory of Learning

George Siemens (2004) provides an interesting exploration of a theory to learn that could be aligned

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with the form of informal learning embedded in the PLN initiative (<http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>). In the article, Siemens argued that over the past three decades, technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn. Identifying with Vaill (1996), who believes learning must be a way of being to keep abreast of the messy and recurring events (p.42), Siemens renders some significant trends in “connectivist” learning:

- Many learners will move into a variety of possibly unrelated fields over the course of their lifetime.
- Informal learning is a significant aspect of our experience that occurs in a variety of ways, say, through communities of practice, personal networks, and completion of work-related tasks.
- Learning is a continual process, and the tools we use define and shape our thinking.
- Many of the processes previously handled by traditional learning theories (cognitive information processing) can now be off-loaded to, or supported by technology, which is rewiring our brains.
- Know-how and know-what is being supplemented with know-where (understanding where to find the needed knowledge).

Indeed, the PLN theory of learning is concerned with our meta-skill in a networked world, to develop our ability to synthesize and recognize connections and patterns, in order to acquire the expected knowledge that is often characterized by chaos (complex patterns recognition processes).

The Ideas of Connectivism

In articulating his theory of connectivism, Siemens (2004) focuses on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more, are more important than our current state of knowing. New information is continually being acquired – the ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital; the ability to recognize when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made before is also critical (<http://www.connectivism.ca/>). In Siemens’ words, the starting point

of connectivism is the individual. Personal knowledge is embedded in the network of people, which is fed into their organizations, which in turn feed back into the network, and then continue to provide learning to individual. This cycle of knowledge development allows learners to remain current in their field through the connections they have formed. Subsequently, as knowledge continues to grow and to evolve, access to what is needed is more important than what the learner currently possesses. One working definition to make sense of PLNs is attributed to Weisgerber (2009): *PLNs are deliberately formed networks of people and resources capable of guiding our independent learning goals and professional development needs.* Accordingly, we need to take a look at the fundamental shifts that are fueling our capacity to connect, interact, and learn with others in these new and different ways (<http://spacesforlearning.wordpress.com>).

THE CONTEXT OF LEARNING UNIVERSITY 2.0

Today, higher education institutions seeking to understand how the next generation of Internet technologies will make an impact on their students are presumably aware of the following trends (Wilén-Daugenti, 2009; Garrison & Archer, 2007): College students are rapid adopters of new technologies, devices, and applications; Web 2.0 technologies enable easier access to increasingly credible education content and online expertise, rendering a venue for contributing and sharing knowledge regardless of location; Internet videos have increasingly high adoption rates and become a key medium in education; mobile learning and gaming is rising, with students taking more responsibility for their own learning; information and technical literacy are critical to remain relevant in the working world, with more students who are ready to bring in newer technology and learning expectations, already evolving into the generation characterized by being visual, versatile and virtual. Undeniably, our learning environments are a way for higher education institutions to address the ever-growing number of technology trends (Garrison, 2004) that are rapidly becoming available to and used by students. More importantly, a facilitative learning environment should give students a range of educational resources from which to choose, while

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