


Chapter 17

Connections–Based Learning: A Model for Learning Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Connectedness is essential to human growth and learning. This chapter presents an analysis on connections-based learning from four distinct frameworks: intrapersonal, interpersonal, interdisciplinary, and media-based. It includes a model that shows different levels of interactions in adult learning. Adults can learn anything and everything about any subject through the connections they establish with the world in a lifelong process based on the way we connect with ourselves, with others with different domains, and through different media. Learning is attained as in the weaving process of a seamless web that changes the way people see themselves and the world. Everything becomes interconnected, resembling a mesh.

INTRODUCTION

Mankind is intrinsically relational: We are social creatures that can rarely live in isolation (Alloca, 2011), especially in an increasingly interconnected world. Human beings are hardwired to connect, because connections create the experience of social support (Stallard, 2015). People require bonding to survive and to thrive. Working together harmoniously is a basic human drive, a survival need as essential to subsist as food and water (Lublin, 2014).

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Connections-Based Learning

In a context of constant changes and complex challenges, New Ways of Working (NWW) have emerged and influenced an important transformation of Higher Education (HE), based on significant learning experiences. The new learning environments and the changing roles of professors present new opportunities for students to learn in global networked classrooms (Downes & Zammit, 2001). The new conditions have resulted in an important shift towards interdisciplinary teamwork, co-creation, and knowledge generation. Novel teaching methods have been introduced as a response to particular skills-demands. Connections have become essential because learning is no longer a self-oriented process, rather a collective effort that helps develop a sense of community based on mutual engagement and responsibility.

Meaningful learning is based on significant experiences (Comer, 1995; Ponce, 2004) that are not achieved in isolation, but through interaction with the physical and social environment creating complex relationships. They are based on personal and community life events that generate value and have an impact on commitment and satisfaction, generating change, which is an essential component of learning. Interactive and connected cultures make people feel they are part of a group, and it is through connections that we get what we need (Alloca 2011). People connect to form bonds and share interests; connections further our society and shape who we are and who we become.

Connections-based learning (CBL) (Robinson, 2017), also called Connected Learning (CL) or Relations-based learning (RBL), is probably one of the oldest techniques used to promote effective learning. It has evolved substantially by incorporating new technologies, especially IT. CBL has been considered a relevant teaching and learning method. It creates a major shift in position from expert to learner, one that is based on openness and the acceptance of new ideas and willingness to receive constructive criticism. Its foundation is rooted in the human need to forge connections in a physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and work-related manner (Sturtevant, 2014), and, in the development of value relationships based on trust. It is not just about seeking a personal advantage; on the contrary, it is about going to the encounter of the other through dialogue.

CBL is quite probably the most used learning methodology, yet it is the less studied. It is based on learning interactions that have been conceptualized as dynamic processes that are woven into the fabric of teaching (Cazden, 2006; Kwek, 2012; Park-Rogers & Abell, 2007). The term *weaving* is used to explain moments in lessons when explicit connections are made by teachers or students, among peers, across one of more dimensions of knowledge, and even connections made through a variety of digital media. Weaving can also connect something that is already familiar with new curriculum content (Cazdem, 2006). During the weaving process, all stakeholders shift positions (teacher-learner) establishing connections between different kinds and levels of knowledge, within, and across lessons, facilitating long term buildup of specific kinds of knowledge (Kwek, 2012). By weaving ideas, relevant skills, different disciplines and media, learning moments can expand while reinforcing learning outcomes to help learners construct stronger knowledge plans (Park-Rogers & Abell, 2007).

CBL is founded on the fact that we learn from our connections to the world, specifically from the links that we make. It is based on integrative learning, in which knowledge is gained by connecting with other people, things, and ideas. Connections often surface in reflective work, self-assessment or creative endeavors of all kinds. Integrative assignments foster learning between courses or connect courses to experientially-based work, which results in the development of critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving skills.

According to the AAC&U (2017), in integrative learning students connect learning obtained in the classroom with that from real situations which can be a linked to other learning experiences, extracurricular activities, and even work. It is through integrative and applied learning that students are able to

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