A Harkness Moment for the 21st Century: Connected Courses

By Justin Reich on April 6, 2016 9:31 AM

One of my great pleasures is serving as an evangelist for connected courses and Connectivist-inspired models of online learning. These are learning environments where the explicit goal of the course is to help people not only learn skills and content, but to develop a network of learning resources and partners in a given subject that persists beyond the end of the course. (My own connected courses in recent years are t509massive.org and mitmassive.org.)

These connected courses require a different technology infrastructure than what typically is used in higher education or secondary schools. In any course, we want students to be able to see all of the stuff—syllabi, assignments, peer comments, submitted work, etc. We usually solve this problem with a learning management systems--Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, Coursera, edX, Schooology, Edmodo, etc.--which is a place for everyone to dump all the stuff as a way of solving the coordination problem. In connected courses, we solve the coordination problem with a different approach: we give everyone their own spaces online to produce learning materials--blogs, Twitter feeds, websites, web domains, etc.--and then we use technology to make a copy of everything that students do and aggregate those copies. Students own their own means of production, and the purpose of technology is to aggregate what students choose to share.

To me, this kind of networked learning, where students are contributing to a learning commons from their own spaces, looks much more like the online learning that goes on throughout our lives than generically-stamped LMS pages with their single sequence of assigned learning activities. Students learn as much from the spaces we design and practices we model as from anything we say, and these connected models have some wonderful qualities for modeling networked learning.

This past week, I had the good fortune to address the faculty meeting of Philips Andover Academy (slides) in order to introduce and advocate for these ideas. While preparing the talk, I stumbled across what I thought might be a potent analogy for educators in independent schools, and perhaps elsewhere.

In the 1930s, Phillips Exeter Academy introduced a new technology into their classrooms: the Harkness table. These are enormous oval conference-style tables, so large they need to be constructed in situ because they don’t fit through doors. They are meant to replace rows of desk and chairs, and create an environment better design to both foster Socratic dialogue and to communicate, through design, institutional commitment to Socratic dialogue and student voice. The reconfiguration of classrooms across Exeter, and later many other independent and public schools, represented an architectural change designed to reconfigure pedagogical practice.

Today, in 2016, the LMS has become our rows of desks and chairs. It is undeniably efficient for the dissemination of content, but the design of these online spaces doesn’t align with our aspirations for students as lifelong learners. Online learning needs a Harkness moment, where we have an institutional embrace—from administrators, faculty, and students--of a new kind of architecture for online learning that better
here an institutional embrace – from administrators, faculty, and students – of a new kind of architecture for online learning that better facilitates ambitious networked learning and better communicates an institutional commitment to dialogue, student voice, student ownership of learning, and the value of building learning networks that extend beyond our classroom walls. I'm not sure that we've solved all of the technology challenges of connected courses, but I think student ownership of online learning environments and school technologies that focus more on aggregation than control represent a better future of blended and online networked learning. I'm not saying we should throw out all the LMS, any more than we should necessarily throw out every desk and table, but I do believe that connected courses and syndication technologies can do for education in the 21st century what the Harkness table accomplished in the 20th –– provide a tangible manifestation of a new direction for learning.

For those who are interested in learning more about Connected Courses, Alan Levine and I are running a workshop as part of Geek Out Day at Digital Media and Learning 2016 in sunny Irvine, California on October 5 (only $100!). You can learn more about the workshop here and here, and Alan, Howard Rheingold, and I discuss the workshop in the video below. Come join us, and get started creating your own Connected Course!

GeekOut Interview - Crafting Connected Courses from Connected Learning Alliance on Vimeo.

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