

Connecting and disconnecting learning between home and school

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In what ways is growing up today different for young people than it was for their parents' generation? Do social and digital networks offer students new routes to learning and friendship? How do they navigate the meaning of education in a digitally connected but fiercely competitive, highly individualised world? In our ethnographic year-long study of a London class of 13- to 14-year-olds, called "The Class", we examined the day-to-day nature of young people's social relationships with family and peers. We explored how these factors shaped their daily routines of learning in and out of school, in the context of a hyper-connected media ecology, a highly competitive education system, and an often risky yet risk-averse society (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

This article describes our work and a few of the young people's experiences, showing how forms of digital communication do not necessarily increase connectivity either between school and home, or between peers. We argue that a highly competitive education system actually ends up reinforcing social boundaries that young people, their families and their teachers often prefer to preserve as a way of maintaining privacy and demarcating spheres of responsibility.

Our studies show that many of the aspirations for using digital technology to connect the domains of home and school remain unfulfilled, and need to engage with deeper social inequalities if they are to bring about any change.

The context and our research

In embarking on the fieldwork, we had some key principles of Connected Learning (Ito et al., 2013) firmly in mind. These principles aim to relate the development of out-of-school interests to the possibilities of new educational routes being formed by emerging digital connectivities. As Ito and colleagues explain:

Connected learning addresses the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning, intergenerational disconnects, and new equity gaps arising from the privati[s]ation of learning ... connected learning taps the opportunities provided by digital media to more easily link home, school, community and peer contexts of learning; support peer and intergenerational connections based on shared interests; and create more connections with non-dominant youth, drawing from capacities of diverse communities. (2013, p. 4)

We wanted to discover whether and how far these principles were relevant to a relatively ordinary, rather than extraordinary, group of young people for whom the exciting potential of digital media might or might not yet be realised. In a British urban classroom of 30 young people, students from rich and poor homes mixed together, encompassing multiple ethnicities and family backgrounds. While a measure of civility marked the social relations within the class, through allowing all to participate in the school learning environment despite their considerable differences in home life, we found both digital and non-digital means were used to construct social relationships more strongly differentiated by gender, social class and ethnicity.

Our main focus during the fieldwork year was to explore how young people moved within and between the key institutional sites that shaped and constrained their learning: home, school, non-formal learning settings, peer-group interactions, and the online context. Ito et al. (2013, p. 30) warned that “many schools are confronting narrowing curricula and a push towards accountability in the form of standardised testing” (as discussed in the critical literature on education and educational technology; for example, Selwyn [2014]). Thus, we began in the classroom by observing when, whether, and how digital media were deployed by students and teachers. A few months later, we began visiting the class at home, looking for learning pathways between home and school as mediated by the students themselves, and/or between teachers and parents or home and community, in ways that might or might not be digitally networked. Later still, we accompanied the young people in some of their peer networks, online spaces, community learning and enrichment sites before inviting them to reflect with us on their “learning lives” (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2016) over the previous year.

Working within the Connected Learning framework, we sought to identify how young people’s interests are initially sparked, and then supported, scaffolded, and extended over time and across sites. We found that young people’s daily lives are cross-cut by disconnections of several kinds. These are, most notably, between sites of learning: interests at home were unsupported at school just as school learning went unrecognised at home; peer-based and online sites were constituted as disconnected even when potential connections existed. Significantly, we uncovered the interests at stake in ensuring that these sites often remained disconnected, as young people, and indeed their parents and teachers, variously sought to protect their autonomy, identity and privacy along with specific subcultural forms of knowledge from the intrusive, calculating, or judging gaze of others.

Connection and disconnection

As an example of connectedness formed through digital media, we found that Max, a white middle-class child of divorced parents, who steadfastly refused to engage in formal reading activities at the school and often gazed aggressively out the window to signal his boredom, had formed an extraordinary friendship with a young woman of East African origin, Jenna, and another Caucasian girl because of their common interest in Harry Potter. In terms of social class and ethnicity, this common interest transcended the conventional structures of friendship. Yet, this bond was kept out of sight to avoid teacher, peer, and parental surveillance. Similarly, Sedat, a rather attention-seeking and disruptive student at school, turned out to be an avid and disciplined player of the Saz, a lute-like musical instrument, at home, and was heavily involved in performances in his native Alevi culture. The school’s promotion of classical music and the structure of music education on offer made it difficult for him to convert both his commitment and discipline as well as his musical

knowledge and experience into forms of performance that were valued by the school. In a third case, Giselle’s father was happy for her to take an active role as a Minecraft moderator and engage in digital communities in order to prepare her for his vision of possible future employment. However, the teachers typically ignored forms of online participation. This even extended to an acceptance of the difficulties in doing homework on the school’s virtual learning environment when it was not available.

In each of these cases, the potential to support connected learning between home and school went unrealised. The young people sometimes deliberately sought out desirable disconnections from the adults who structured their learning experiences, with digital media often proving a particularly helpful means of doing this. On the other hand, digital media were also used by parents and teachers as ways of tracking, evaluating and monitoring young people’s activities. The young people evaded this supervisory gaze by seeking alternative digital spaces or even non-digital alternatives. In some ways we were surprised to see digital media being rejected or resisted by young people. It seems a counter-intuitive approach by both school and parents that leads to an ambivalence towards technology and a range of tactics of disconnection.

Unsurprising to the literature on social reproduction but disappointing for efforts to construct social justice alternatives, we found that social class and cultural capital continued to differentiate life opportunities for young people (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2017). Uses of digital media tended to support rather than undermine social reproduction. First, by facilitating the formation of similar friendship groups despite the enforced civility of the whole-class experience; and second, by powering a school information management system in which middle-class enrichment was more readily recognised and valued than the home-based learning of poorer or ethnic minority children.

For instance, we found some families to be conservative in the sense of seeking to preserve their own class or cultural values and practices. We located this tendency in a wider account of the risk society, as advanced by Ulrich Beck (1992), to explain why parents tend to prefer the tried-and-tested (even if individualistically competitive) to the exciting-but-unproven (even if more social-justice-oriented) approach of most schools. On occasion, we also witnessed ways in which interest-driven uses of digital media provided alternative, “under the radar” learning experiences and pathways for less privileged young people. But, for most of the class, irrespective of socioeconomic status or digital media use, the repeated occurrence of frustrating disconnections, due to missed opportunities, insensitive adults, unconfident young people or insufficient resources characterised the fieldwork year, resulting in more broken than productive learning pathways (Livingstone, 2015).

We argue, therefore, that despite the possibilities for connecting homes, schools, peer groups, young people and families in different kinds of learning relationships, social class, and institutional interests, the highly regulated social lives of young people combine to sustain boundaries and disconnections among these potentially permeable domains. Given the appeal and power of *positive disconnections* in ensuring the various interests at stake, including those of young people themselves, we argue that the Connected Learning model needs to be flexible so as to anticipate and accommodate people’s responses to new demands, especially when the outcomes on offer are somewhat experimental, uncertain or unequal.

Thus, while acknowledging that *disconnected learning* is often problematic, one contribution of “The Class” has been to foreground questions of how much connection is desirable, why and for whom,

whether there are costs to increasing connection (in terms of young people's autonomy and adults' authority), and how families and schools reach their own compromises in relation to both connection and disconnection. Another contribution is to reveal the ways in which the normative and official narratives of education, promulgated by a school curriculum devoted to measurable outcomes, threaten the more diverse ecologies of learning that can be found in homes from different social classes and from different ethnic minority communities. Here the dominance of an instrumental view of education makes it very difficult for the diversity of practices and interests celebrated by connected learning to flourish. More diverse entry points and pathways to opportunity may be best fostered by recognising and addressing the above motivations to disconnect, thereby building a more constructive and, perhaps paradoxically, less instrumental relationship between home and school learning.

Conclusions

In our book we concluded in terms of 3Cs. One dominant theme was that of *competition* – the competitive individualism of the aspiring middle classes, now spread to include many poorer families. Competitive motivations led families to equip their homes with a range of digital goods and to express a sometimes bemused pride in their children's acquisition of digital skills. For the most part, such competitive individualism is antithetical to the social justice vision behind connected learning. The results did, on occasion, enable collaborative digital activities for some young people, and for some it scaffolded a pathway towards the possible future.

Undercutting this widely felt pressure to compete (or, at least, to “keep up” and not to “fall behind”), we also saw various forms of *conservativism*. Parents sought reflexively (and children more instinctively) to evade or resist the perceived rapid pace of uncertain social change by reinforcing cultural traditions, limiting the pressures of commercialism, supporting and valuing face-to-face and mediated forms of conversation within interpersonal relationships, and finding tactics to resist the reach of the digital, including from the school.

The third C is for *connections*. Since we observed many more missed opportunities and deliberate or undesired occasions of disconnection than we did positive connections, we conclude by asking what would be required for families and schools to support further and better connections? One answer might emphasise the importance of sustaining learning opportunities over time, building in resources for recovery when interests lapse or connections break. Also important is finding ways to recognise and anticipate families' conservative desires to protect their traditional interests, both cultural and personal, especially when the benefits of alternative approaches to learning and achievement are uncertain. For young people, the practices and values of both home and school can strongly shape their possibilities for learning in informal and peer settings (Sefton-Green, 2013), potentially undermining rather than, as might have been hoped, supporting such learning. Identifying adverse influences and addressing them can only be valuable.

Most important, as connected learning research and practice is fully aware, is the value of supporting young people's agency as they seek to pursue their interests and goals. In a fair few cases, such interests originate in the home and, therefore, both home and school need to find better ways to support bi-directional communication between both spaces.

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