The Future of Faculty Development in a Networked World

Let’s start with a question: What if approaches to faculty development within higher education have been overly focused on “teaching to the middle”? Much like the continued prevalence of the generic, one-size-fits-all that still informs the stand-and-deliver mode in too many lecture halls across colleges and universities, long-standing efforts to garner widespread adoption of innovative technologies for teaching and learning via workshops and faculty development institutes may have run their course (so to speak). As higher education moves toward anytime/anywhere, self-paced learning, personalized learning may be an important focus not just for students but also for faculty who are learning about emerging technologies.

At most institutions, however, learning technology units are far too understaffed to provide one-to-one, on-call “Geek Squad” support for faculty. As a result, faculty depend on IT organizations as technology service providers rather than as interrelated and collaborative partners with whom they can work to improve teaching and learning. Although personalized learning is not a new idea, ramping up personalized learning in educational technology for faculty development may indeed be a new idea—particularly if we think about putting personalized learning into the framework of connected learning, with faculty becoming networked learners within and across institutions.

Recent investments in education from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Mark Zuckerberg have reignited interest in personalized learning for students in various educational environments. Personalized learning emphasizes pedagogies and strategies that enhance student success by moving from the generic to the specific and the individualized. Currently, systems for personalized and adaptive learning most often use student data to inform which strategies or interventions are required for an individual student to reach a learning goal or objective. In addition to individual assessments, data analytics allows content to be populated from a wide variety of data points. Learner profiles can be created based on behaviors tracked during interaction with the system and with course content. Predictive modeling has enhanced the ability of technology to foretell student learning and behaviors.

Instead of normative, one-size-fits-all curricular delivery where content for an entire class is designed toward and aimed at “the middle”—based on the assumption that some students will lag behind while others will be able to achieve content mastery more quickly—personalized learning aims to provide interventions and accelerations that are catered for the individual student. Off-the-shelf products are prepopulated with content integrated with specific textbooks. Other products serve as authoring tools that allow instructors to create their content within a structured system. Currently, some authoring programs allow instructors to provide content and guidance for the learning path, but such options should be more routinely available and should become essential design tools that enable faculty to customize their courses. Although not yet as robust or as prevalent, open-content generators have exciting implications for the future of personalized learning.

We are most excited by what is on the horizon, by the potential for personalized learning to go even further in recognizing and fostering learner “agency.” Students are more likely to thrive in learning environments that ask them to participate as active contributors. Becoming a reflective and critically engaged learner could begin with an awareness and analysis of the successful learning behaviors that most systems track. In other words, understanding what kind of data is collected and analyzed and having the learner provide interactive feedback is still an untapped opportunity for developing learner agency and self-efficacy via current analytics. This feedback information loop could potentially impact how data analytics informs the ways current systems communicate with learners, shifting away from the predictive in loco parentis notifications that may inadvertently perpetuate less proactive learner behavior.

Of more importance, personalized learning that routinely provides opportunities for students to become co-creators and curators of content as part of the learning process should become a normative learning objective and expectation. Assessments that not only allow but expect learners to demonstrate curricular mastery through knowledge application, rather than knowledge consumption, are likely to become increasingly important over the horizon. As Seth Godin has recently suggested, the “industrial-education process” has relied on (and teaches students to rely on) the traditional “visible metrics” of “doing well on the assignments.” Graduating seniors dutifully list majors and grade point averages on resumes, but those metrics, according to Godin, actually tell employers far too little about what they really want to know. He argues that all students ought to be demonstrating what they can do and showcasing their abilities in the open and on the web (beyond the confines of a class assignment) because their potential future employer will be asking: “Where online can I see the trail of magic you regularly create?”

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This continued evolution in personalized learning with coursework that challenges students to create in addition to complete content will require a shift in how faculty view and interact with students. Connected learning is a useful model that can guide this transformation. Although many faculty have always seen themselves as interactive “guides on the side,” and model curiosity and other essential lifelong learning behaviors as part of their teaching, much modularized content is still based on the “sage on the stage” paradigm. Learning systems need to become less static and more dynamic. The tenets of connected learning are changing student learning, and they can also help move faculty development in ed tech from the closed setting of a course-redesign workshop to an open and networked community of peer-to-peer learners within and across institutions of higher education. Rebuilding faculty development experiences to better align with connected learning would highlight technology-enhanced active and problem-based learning course (re)design across disciplines and content areas. Connected learning for faculty development would emphasize the same engagement and outcomes expected of students. As stated on the CLA and DML Research Hub's Connected Learning website, these qualities can be grouped into three primary learning principles:

- **Shared purpose.** Connected learning environments are populated with adults and peers who share interests and are contributing to a common purpose. Today’s social media and web-based communities provide exceptional opportunities for learners, parents, caring adults, teachers, and peers in diverse and specialized areas of interest to engage in shared projects and inquiry. Cross-generational learning and connection thrives when centered on common interests and goals.

- **Production-centered.** Connected learning environments are designed around production, providing tools and opportunities for learners to produce, circulate, curate, and comment on media. Learning that comes from actively creating, making, producing, experimenting, remixing, decoding, and designing, fosters skills and dispositions for lifelong learning and productive contributions to today’s rapidly changing work and political conditions.

- **Openly networked.** Connected learning environments are designed around networks that link together institutions and groups across various sectors, including popular culture, educational institutions, home, and interest communities. Learning resources, tools, and materials are abundant, accessible and visible across these settings and available through open, networked platforms and public-interest policies that protect our collective rights to circulate and access knowledge and culture. Learning is most resilient when it is linked and reinforced across settings of home, school, peer culture and community.

As all of us in higher education move closer to what’s on the horizon, let’s explore the power of connected learning, which brings individualized work into the open and into the networked learning communities that our technology and social media tools so easily engender. With students and faculty so closely connected in today’s networked world, perhaps we should begin asking faculty: “Where online can I see the trail of magic you regularly create?” It’s time to move faculty development away from the idea of teaching to the middle and toward a connected learning framework that embraces personalized learning.

### Notes


6. Connected Learning: Reimagining the Experience of Education in the Information Age,” http://connectedlearning.tv/connected-learning-principles. The Connected Learning website is a partnership of the Connected Learning Alliance (CLA) and the Digital Media & Learning (DML) Research Hub. Much important work is emerging in connected learning for K-16 education via the collective and community-building work of Howard Rheingold, Mimi Ito, and others via the DML Research Hub (http://dmlhub.net/), based at UC Irvine as part of the University of California Humanities Research Institute. See also https://www.youtube.com/user/thecalliancevideos.

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