

Warm Nodes, Cold Connections?

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Leah D. Hackleman-Good
leah@editpartners.com
leahgrrl.wordpress.com

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On my way home from work yesterday, a film review on National Public Radio (NPR) caught my ear; John Powers commented that the movie's "characters...go from being trapped in chilly isolation to forging human connections that promise some warmth" (Powers, 2011). I don't interpret events in the world around me as signs from Mount Olympus: "The black crow landed on the white fence. Must be gonna rain." Clues weirdly vie for my attention, though. The phrase "chilly isolation" stayed with me on my hour-long drive.

Central to connectivism is the primacy of the network; from my reading, I sometimes get the sense that individual person-nodes are equivalent to the machine nodes. But people are messier than that. For example, machines don't get hurt feelings if we unplug them. People, however, do. As a theory of learning, connectivism is not very interested in murky emotional relationships. In fact, Downes (2006) argues,

Groups meet our need to belong and to survive, while networks meet our need to connect and learn and to know. In a group, passion drowns out reason, in a network, reason drowns out passion. In places where passion and emotion should not prevail—when building bridges, say, or launching space shuttles—groups should not prevail. In places where passion should prevail and is even an asset—in team sports, in family bonding—groups should prevail.

The thesis of connectivism is that "knowledge is distributed across a network of connections and...learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (Downes, 2007).

Knowledge is not a "thing" to be handed over, duplicated, or acquired; rather, knowledge is "literally the set of connections formed by actions and experience" (Downes, 2007; emphasis in original). George Siemens emphasizes in one article the principle of self-organization: "The capacity to form connections between sources of information, and thereby create useful information patterns, is required to learn in

Comment [LDHG1]: I've started the paper several times. I have so many questions and queries that I'm stuck. I feel this is the one moment I have your attention as a reader, and I want to get the most out of it.

Comment [LDHG2]: Actually, I'm probably a little weirder than I think about this. If I hear something three times—say, a word I don't hear often, like "perspicacious," I'm likely to actually do something about it. At least look it up.

Comment [LDHG3]: As far as connections, I had to stop during this paragraph and consult the NPR website for the details. That also made part of my mind start mulling on the idea about the interruptions one gets online and how that affects one's thinking. I'm reading *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (Carr, 2010). Although I'm not liking the doomsday predictions of rampant ADD, I do appreciate the symptomology. I thought maybe I was just aging rapidly into a short attention span.

Comment [LDHG4]: After four starts on this paper (see leahgrl.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/cck11-help-procrastination-and-frustration/), I think I'm finally connecting all the little bits that have been bothering me.

Comment [LDHG5]: In a longer paper, I would likely point out that the duality of reason/emotion has been pretty thoroughly challenged by poststructuralism as well as by new medicine. I recently read an article about meditation increasing gray matter, especially in the hippocampus.

Comment [LDH-G6]: Here I really wanted to talk more about Sugata Mitra (<http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/>) and his study of the self-organizing systems created by Indian children in response to hole-in-the-wall computers. I'm thinking that his "granny clouds" function as emotional node connections that at the very least foster and support children's desire. I started to talk about this at leahgrl.wordpress.com/2011/02/14/cck11-room-for-benign-mentors-in-connectivism/. The grannies are nodes, but what are they firing?

our knowledge economy” (Siemens, 2005). All of these descriptions correlate with my experience; I understand them and believe they could be “proven” empirically with ease.

But so far, I’m not discovering how connectivism deals with longing for connection, desire for learning, and joy of discovery—the role of **emotion** in learning and **knowledge**.

Peter (2010), a learner participating in a blog, comments that “I write comments all the time [on blogs] and yet, I rarely get replies and often I never go back to see if there is a reply. It feels very lonely even though I am engaging in a hypothetical audience. This feels a bit alienating to **me**.” Node Peter feels alienated: Can connectivism as a theory take on the task of describing/identifying how that affects his connections with other nodes (and thus knowledge)? Twitter co-founder Biz Stone (2011) answered a question on NPR about Twitter’s supporting technological role in the Egypt revolution: “What I like to think of services like Twitter and other services is that it’s kind of a supporting role. We’re there to facilitate and to foster and to accelerate those folks’ missions.” In other words, he positions Twitter as in service to people’s desire for change (at least in this context).

A more embodied learning: not just in the sense of learning geometry as a tool one needs during the real activity of building a house rather than as a school subject. I mean embodied in the sense of actually accounting for the feeling of joy in knowledge and discovery. A focus on reason exclusively seems to shut down two important, particularly human responses:

- **Desire**
- **Agency**

I would like to learn more about what connectivism as a learning theory has to say about them in connection to learning (and to be practical, for both “student” and “teacher” roles in more traditional senses). Can evaluate these as properties of a node as we try to empirically examine how learning happens?

Comment [LDH-G7]: Stephen Downes (2008) starts to head in this direction a bit when he writes “The only way to enable people to understand you is to allow them to sympathize with you, to get to know you, to feel empathy for you. Comprehension has as much to do with feeling as it does with cognition.” But I can’t locate anywhere he’s picked up on that thought and fleshed it out a bit.

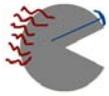
Comment [LDH-G8]: I don’t think this is too outlandish. Our brains are neural networks, which can be affected by the networks (say, social) around us. In a recent study I found, in the service of another project, an eight-week mindfulness meditation course resulted in measurable growth in participants’ gray matter, especially the hippocampus (Hölzel et al., 2011). Immediately I wondered whether the effect also had something to do with the fact that they meditated and learned the techniques *as a group*, versus the control group of nonparticipants that did not do group work.

Comment [LDH-G9]: A recent study (Hampton et al., 2011) concluded that although our “core” social networks are smaller than they were 20 years ago (suggesting social isolation), specific tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr increase our ability to form strong ties with other human beings.

Comment [LDH-G10]: I thought a lot about desire on my commute to work this morning, so when I came back to this point after giving up last night in exhaustion, I did some searches. I found Simone Weil’s quote that I thought was beautiful but in the context of what she’s writing about would cast a wonky religious note (which would be weird for me, as I am a die-hard anti-religion person). Here’s the quote: **The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running.** To find the citation for this, I got involved in a long learning leap because Weil’s essay was available as a DAISY book, and I had to figure out what that was and how I could see it. In sum, I learned a new bit of software, although I was ultimately unable to open the password-protected book files.

Comment [LDH-G11]: Downes (2011) remarks that “The word ‘construct’ implies an agency that I think is not there” [2011]. I’m having a lot of trouble with this one.

One's personal feelings do not substitute for rigorous analysis, as professors told me for a decade or more. And I believe that to a large extent. Still...I don't *feel* like just an activated node. I don't *feel* like a dispassionate conduit of connections. I *feel* like Pac-Man: I'm so enthralled with the process of learning that I gobble up the connective breadcrumbs and look for more.



Comment [LDH-G12]: In addition, I think there's another layer, one that is sparked by quantum physics: how does our "seeing" these networks affect them? That kind of question sometimes makes my head hurt. In a good way.

Comment [LDH-G13]: Did you notice that I skillfully managed to upend the word limit by including this running commentary of my personal struggle and joy in writing this paper? It wasn't a subject I thought I was going to write about, until a bunch of things converged: Egypt and the Middle East and people's desire for freedom, Ohio public employees converging on the statehouse this week, and a sort of upsetting discussion thread between Stephen Downs and Ken Anderson.

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