Social Interaction and Peer Mentorship at Universities in a Post-Course Future

Matt Crosslin, M. Ed.

University of Texas Arlington | University of North Texas

United States

mcrosslin@gmail.com

**Abstract:** While the predictions of the death of the University are premature and mostly unfounded, one of the foundational units of learning at universities – the course – may be changing. As learning becomes more student-centered, multimedia and interaction are being leveraged in deconstructed open courses to form peer mentorship networks, also known as personal learning networks. This paper will examine how these networks could be an important foundational step in moving towards a thriving student-centered, post-course future at universities. Emerging college systems that leverage personal learning networks based on interaction and multimedia will be examined.

# Introduction

By now, the narrative predicting the death of the university is well known in higher education circles (See, for example, Evans, 2004). Behind these prophecies lies the idea that the world is changing and the university is not. But is this really the case? Are university classrooms still peddling pedagogy that has been stale for centuries? Or are there inventive ideas out there that point to a new future of post-secondary scholarship? This paper will briefly examine some of the inventive ideas that are being explored in secondary education, as well as the concepts that support these ideas and one factor that is often lacking or missing.

# Examples of Innovation

Several schools and programs are experimenting with non-traditional class structures in ways that would seem to indicate that universities are not really dying, but rather going through a metamorphosis of sorts. Whether it is Western Governor’s University allowing students to test out of material they already know (http://www.wgu.edu/about\_WGU/WGU\_different) or the social and community engagement of Antioch College (http://antiochcollege.org/about), many innovative ideas are being explored. The main example to be examined in this paper is a Digital Storytelling (DS106) course offered through the University of Mary Washington at http://ds106.us.

DS106 has been described as everything from a syndicated learning environment to a deconstructed course to a true open learning experience. The basic structure is based on the idea that students create their own online multimedia space and then use syndication technology such as RSS to interact with other students as well as send course assignments in to the class hub. These assignments are often created by other students in the course. Students choose assignments that are worth a certain amount of stars (which are this course’s version of “points”), and then are rated by other students as far as how well they accomplished the assignment. Most of the assignments deal with various aspects of digital storytelling, such as creating animated gifs or moving movie posters. Each semester takes on a theme that may or may not be loosely guided by the instructor (for example, the Summer 2013 version was nick-named “The DS106 Zone” based on the popular television series *The Twilight Zone*). Overall, the basic structure of this course could be thought of as matching up with the basic idea of a Personal Learning Network (PLN), often also called a Personal Learning Environment.

# Personal Learning Network

According to Martindale and Dowdy (2010), there is no one agreed upon definition for the term “Personal Learning Environment” (PLE). For the purpose of this discussion, a PLE will be a “tool collection used by a learner to organize his or her own learning processes” (Martindale & Dowdy, 2010, p.179). This is most often connected to informal learning, but in the example of DS106 the line between formal and informal learning has been blurred significantly.

The central theory supporting PLEs is connectivism, an idea developed by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. Connectivism is based on the concept of learners creating connections through interacting with each other and using these connections to foster learning (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2007). When this concept occurs in a more formal multimedia learning environment, it may even bleed over into sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky and looks at how socially mediated communication and interactions will lead to the development and construction of meaning. (Mann, 1999). In a formal learning class, the class itself (such as DS106) would serve as the culture that brings together learners in an effort to foster socialization and learning through interaction. One look at the web page for DS106 shows that a very specific culture has arisen around the course, with Twitter hash tags such as “#4life” indicating a desire to continue learning this topic in this method for the rest of the learner’s life.

# Student Reactions to DS106

Overall, student reactions to the non-traditional structure of DS106 were fairly positive. Groom (2012) published a detailed report containing results from the Spring 2012 DS106 student evaluations. Groom felt that his overall ratings on “clear criteria for grading” and “timely return of graded materials” were lower than he would have liked, as well as being lower than the 2011 evaluation results. However, when examining course experience in general, Groom was pleased to report that “across the board the experience of the course ranked higher than last year, and it also had a 4.82 overall score which is significantly higher than the UMW average of 4.38” (Groom, 2012). Students also echoed this sentiment in their course evaluation comments (all quotes were published anonymously by Groom in the original blog post):

“This has been the most work intensive and the most rewarding course I’ve taken at UMW. It is unlike anything else I’ve taken before, and I’ve gained so much valuable knowledge about Web2.0 and online presence, not to mention the increased confidence in my creative and technical abilities.”

“The work was tedious most weeks, but the hard work was well worth it. I learned so many useful skills in this class.”

“Overall I really enjoyed this class. At times I thought the work load was a little bit much for a 100 level class, but Jim was very understanding of our busy schedules.”

Groom noted that this course was offered as a hybrid option, so distinguishing between the comments given by students in the face-to-face version (estimated around 60%) and the online version (estimated around 40%) is difficult.

Based on the evaluation results presented by Groom (2012), a few recommendations for instructors wishing to implement a course structure similar to DS106 are offered here. First, if the course assignments are to be graded, instructors should create a specific plan for how assignments will be graded and then clearly communicate these standards from the beginning of the course. Groom reported his own personal confusion over grading strategies, which he felt resulted in decreased student satisfaction in that area. Next, be certain that the various forms of media and content to be used in the course are well organized and easy to access – Groom reported that the organized framework of the assignments helped increase student satisfaction. Additionally, when creating a student-centered course, instructors or designers should try to make every effort to create as much separation of the instructor from the course experience as possible. Groom reported that one of his goals was “separation of course experience from the instructor,” which he felt he was a part of the success of the course. This separation is a key component of creating a non-traditional student-centered course experience. Finally, interaction between the students and the instructor as well as between students was reported as a key component of student satisfaction by Groom, so a peer mentorship program is highly recommended. The concept of peer mentorship will be examined further in the next section.

Another facet of student satisfaction can be gleaned from the continued work of some students after they have completed DS106. Former students continue to create multimedia assignments as well as interact with other current and former students through multimedia websites such as Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube. Searching any of those websites for the tag “#ds106” usually returns results that are made in conjunction with the tag “#4life,” an indication of the authors’ commitment to participate in the course community “for life.”

# Peer Mentoring

One of the most common complaints about open courses such as DS106 is that learners often feel lost and unable to figure out where to start or how to succeed (Mackness, Mak, & Williams, 2010). One possible way to deal with this issue is to create a peer mentorship network based on multimedia and interaction that creates an environment that allows for students to guide each other through a program. Mullen, Fish, and Hutinger (2010) found that mentoring “can foster viable relationships between faculty and students, increase engagement with research and scholarship, [and] facilitate peer support” (p. 180). Several researchers, including Boyle Single (2010), Columbaro (2009), Dearnley (2003), and Kwan (2009) have noted the importance of mentoring and guiding students.

One such peer mentorship program called the *Connections Program* has been started to address the need for peer mentorship. Based on connectivism and sociocultural theory, this program will be designed to utilize interactive technology and multiple forms of media in an effort to help students in a specific doctoral program connect with each other and learn from more experienced mentors. New students will utilize social networks (such as Facebook) as well as a formal structured Blackboard Organization to create or expand their PLN. They will then complete a series of web quests, blog posts, degree plans, and personal portfolio pieces designed to help them move towards successful degree completion. This program is currently in development in an informal fashion, with the hope that it will someday become an official part of a degree program.

# Future Considerations

While the stereotypical model of a “course” is based on the traditional structure of a university (the idea that most students live on campus and create community in dormitories, libraries, clubs, and other location-based constructs), emerging models of “courses” are often online or hybrid. This means that some or many of the students may not live in the same physical location and therefore cannot participate in location-based community. Peer mentoring in face-to-face environments often happens on an informal basis as students participate in campus activities. With these face to face opportunities missing in newer paradigms of course structure, universities should consider how to formally create these opportunities by leveraging sociocultural theory to create a peer mentorship program for non-traditional students (Crosslin, Wakefield, Bennette, & Black, 2013).

Certainly a peer mentorship program designed to support personal learning networks by utilizing multiple forms of media and interaction will not be a “one size fits all” model. Utilizing socialcultural theory will mean identifying and targeting various cultures for each individual mentorship program. While many universities do possess an identifiable campus-wide “culture,” specific sub-cultures also exist that are based around various colleges, programs, and degrees. These sub-cultures may be specific enough to warrant individual peer mentorship programs. Research and experimentation will be needed to strike the right balance between finding a “culture” that is large enough to sustain a peer network, but specific enough to meet the needs of learners in each specific sub-culture at each university.

Even after targeted peer mentorship programs are created, constant evaluation and modification will be needed to keep the program current as the concept of “course” evolves with technology. Just ten years ago, very few would have thought an online “social network” would ever be an integral part of society, much less formal learning in any fashion. If the world can change that quickly based on a handful of websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, then peer mentorship programs will need to be entities that constantly evolve rather than static groups that are just created once and revisited every 5-10 years. By the time that “re-visit” happens, the whole network could be obsolete.

# Conclusion

In order for innovative courses such as DS106 to become more accepted in higher education, issues of student support and connection need to be addressed. One such way to address this issue is with a peer mentorship program. The hope of the creators of the *Connections Program* is that this informal PLN will grow to become a system that can support deconstructed courses, open learning, syndicated content, or whatever other post-course student-centered systems crop up in the future. In many ways, some of the new ideas being explored in open education suffer from the proverbial “cart before the horse” syndrome since they relied on student-centered learning before creating a sociocultural system to support the students in the first place. Once this foundational issue is addressed, universities will be more prepared to move into a thriving future of student-centered post-course open learning.

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