Chapter 10

Let’s Riff Off RIFS ( Relevant, Interesting, Fun, and Social): Best Practices for Engaging the Online Mind

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ABSTRACT

Online learning allows one to escape traditional constraints and to create learning experiences that allow interactions, and support learning, that would be difficult or impossible in brick and mortar contexts. In this chapter, the authors present a new RIFS taxonomy (Relevance, Interestingness, Fun, and Sociality) to highlight the factors that can make a learning experience especially engaging. They then discuss what they want students to learn when they are engaged in support of 21st century learning. With this context, they describe an initiative called The Global Teenager Project as a concrete example of how, with heavy support from online technologies, these factors can be combined to produce deep learning that students truly find meaningful.

INTRODUCTION

Consider how animation has changed movies in today’s world. In an animated world there is little in the way of limits. If a creative mind imagines something, it can be brought to life without regard for the laws of physics, or constraints of time, space, or really anything else. It is that same liberated and aspirational approach we hope to highlight here, though in the context of public education. Online learning has the
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potential to transform public education similar to the way in which animations have transformed movies. It is no longer necessary to constrain educational thoughts to contexts in which a small group of students are located within the same geographic space, mostly sitting quietly and passively as they receive information being broadcast by their teacher, intermixed with some in-class activities and homework. Instead, one can imagine the characteristics of an optimal education system, which can be brought to life with creativity and determination.

For context, see Jenkins’s (2012) graph depicting students’ enthusiasm for learning. It shows student enthusiasm for school begins high in the first two to four years of schooling, but beyond that, enthusiasm steadily drops, only to increase slightly at the end of high school. Despite the best of intentions there is something about the traditional approach to education that does not sustain joy in learning for most students. As the ultimate educational system is imagined, a good first step is to highlight some of the characteristics that system would have—especially those that would differ from current approaches.

In this chapter, we specifically focus on the potential of technology-enabled learning as a means for K–12 educators to not just modernize the educational experiences students receive (Fullan, 2012), but also create rich learning opportunities that lead to deeper student engagement and learning1. To this end, the chapter will first separately discuss factors related to engagement, then shift to the generally agreed upon ideas of what sorts of learning is most valuable to students in the modern world. With these discussions as context, we will describe a learning initiative called the Global Teenager Project

Figure 1. Students’ are less enthusiastic about school the longer they are in the school system (Jenkins, 2012)
Source: Jenkins, 2012

Jenkins, 2012