Connected Learning Guide

A Field-Tested Resource for Practitioners

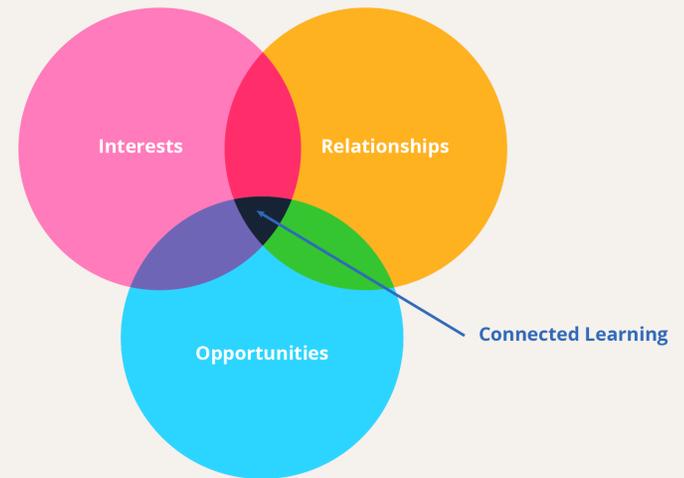## Why Connected Learning?

Connected learning is a model for understanding and designing youth learning experiences.

Enhanced by technology, connected learning gives youth the resilience and resources they need to make learning more relevant and impactful.[1] It meets youth where they are by activating their **interests**, cultivating supportive **relationships**, and connecting young people to **opportunities**.

In a five-year study, connected learning experiences improved student educational mindsets, attitudes towards persistence, openness to iteration, and growth in critical thinking, and it was positively associated with increased test scores.[2] The model includes a set of powerful design principles informed by research and has benefited young people regardless of their social or economic backgrounds.[3]

Among the many benefits of this approach is its potential to help narrow *learning equity gaps* that limit youth awareness, access, attendance, engagement, learning pathways, and opportunities. See this review of literature to learn more. These gaps represent barriers in the learning ecosystem, not deficits of the learners themselves. Working together, we can reduce these sources of inequity. And as digital and social media create a new era of connectedness, this model is equipping educators to be increasingly connected learners themselves.

Purpose and Audience for This Guide

Connected learning is focused on the learner and the conditions that lead to youth agency and engagement. It encourages educators to be creative designers, harnessing the principles of connected learning in their planning, action, and reflection. This guide provides in-school and out-of-school practitioners with recommendations, examples, and resources for how to design, implement, and reflect on the connected learning experiences they create. Organized around the three spheres of connected learning—interests, relationships, and opportunities—the guide will be useful for those new to connected learning as well as those who wish to delve deeper. For each of the three connected learning spheres the guide provides:

- **Design guidelines** for planning connected learning experiences;
- **Action guidelines** for implementing those plans; and
- **Reflection guidelines** for program evaluation, professional growth, and continuous improvement.

https://chicagolx.org/resources/connected-learning-guide

Guiding Questions

I. Interests

Design	**How might we design experiences that allow interests to ignite youth motivations to learn?**
Action	How do you encourage curiosity and exploration of new interests? What does it look like to be led by learners? How can youth use technology for creative production and expression?
Reflection	**How will you know if youth are motivated to continue learning?**

II. Relationships

Design	**How might we design environments that build supportive relationships with peers and adults?**
Action	How do you cultivate peer-to-peer relationships among youth based on shared interests? What can adults do to create a safe space for connected learning? How can you create an open environment with shared purpose?
Reflection	**How will you know that youth feel supported on their path to continued learning?**

III. Opportunity

Design	**How might we connect youth learning to future opportunities that have tangible payoffs?**
Action	How can youth recognize and translate the skills they've learned into new contexts where those skills carry value? What can you do to broaden contexts for learning, creating greater relevance and significance? How can you build your own connections to broker civic, academic, and career opportunities for youth?
Reflection	**How will you know that youth are having connected learning experiences of real value?**

Recommendations for Action

I. Interests

Learner interests are the source of their motivation to learn and can be discovered, explored, and extended.

- Encourage curiosity and exploration of new interests
- Be led by learners
- Use technology for creative production and expression

II. Relationships

Build supportive relationships with peers and adults.

- Cultivate peer relationships
- Create a safe space supported by caring adults
- Work openly and with shared purpose

III. Opportunity

Connect to future opportunities with academic, civic, or career payoffs.

- Translate learned skills
- Broaden contexts for learning
- Broker opportunities for civic, academic, and career payoffs

I. Interests

Learner interests are the source of their motivation to learn and can be discovered, explored, and extended.

DESIGN
❖ Start with "Why?" as you design your learning experiences. Be clear in your planning about what inspires learners to care and what the "hooks" and engaging questions are that connect to an existing passion they have or awaken a new interest. See *Understanding by Design*.
❖ Youth care about and want to get better at their interests. Consider those interests to be the spark that can ignite a young person's own goal-oriented motivation to learn.[4] As you plan, note that interests are also those things that are *in the interest* of youth and of their community, such as positive social causes. In this sense, learners' interests can help align a learner's passions with their purpose.
❖ Human-centered design helps you focus on the learner. Consider IDEO's educator toolkit or Stanford's K12 Lab.
❖ Whenever possible, codevelop learning goals with youth participants or engage them in peer assessments. Host youth focus groups to invite early input into the planning and design phases of program development.

ACTION		
Connected Learning Approach	What This Might Look Like	Resources
→ *Encourage Curiosity and Exploration of New Interests* [5]		
❖ Stay curious about what your students are interested in and be willing to learn with them.[6]	❖ Take active initiative to learn about and support diverse student interests to better understand youth priorities and values without pandering to trends in youth popular culture.	❖ Project-based learning (PBL) is one way to support learner interests. Ensure that PBL isn't a prescribed, recipe-style approach with predetermined outputs. See Buck Institute's resources or Edutopia's *5 Keys to Rigorous Project-Based Learning*.
❖ Connect learners to experiences that deepen current interests, spark new interests, or that enable civic contribution.[7] *Also see "Broker Opportunities" under Opportunities below.*	❖ Make a conscious effort to connect youth to other organizations that might help youth go deeper into an interest they have. Consider your own social networks. How can you activate your networks in service of your youth?	❖ See several of the Brokering Youth Pathways practice briefs, including "Finding 'Fit' When Connecting Youth to Future Learning Opportunities."
❖ Enable youth to enter at any level while challenging them to "level up" to greater complexity.[8]	❖ Within your organization or school, you can support "progressive complexity" for youth to continually increase their skills through a learning pathway, course sequence, internships, peer mentoring, or other youth leadership opportunities.	❖ Challenges that have levels of increasing complexity can clarify pathways to greater competency, especially when learners can progress at their own pace. See for example FUSE Studios challenges.

→ Be Led by Learners [9]

- ❖ Maintain flexible processes and be willing to change direction if you see that participants are becoming disengaged.[10]

- ❖ Actively demonstrate respect for youth perspectives about what is important.[11]

- ❖ Employ activities that genuinely have no right answer. Activities in making (whether making a story, a photo, or a lyric inspired by the topic) can allow youth to express themselves in the creation of an artifact.
- ❖ Establish a youth council and incorporate their input in programmatic and strategic decisions to show a commitment to youth input. Actively look for places to compromise and explain the decisions you make when they differ from youth input.

- ❖ Challenges on DiscoverDesign.org—such as redesigning a space in your school—are helpful examples of activities that have no right answer.

- ❖ LEAP's learner-led framework offers guidance for those implementing personalized learning approaches in formal education spaces. Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) equips youth to conduct issue-driven research in their communities.

→ Use Technology for Creative Production and Expression [12]

- ❖ Maintain a mix of high-tech and low-tech approaches, modeling for learners how to select the appropriate tool for their desired use and skill level.[13]

- ❖ Encourage and guide exploration of interests via online collaboration, sharing, and showcasing.[14] *See Relationships below for positive norms.*
- ❖ Leverage technology to help amplify and disseminate youth voice.[15]

- ❖ Bridge analog to digital, from the familiar to the unknown. Architecture interns new to 3D modeling software can start with pencil and paper sketches to invite creativity. Then, with a solid concept in mind, they can learn the digital tool to bring their concept to life.
- ❖ Use digital technologies to create projects that can be worked on in person and online, individually or collaboratively.

- ❖ Youth value authentic audiences for their creative production. Online tools and forums enable low-barrier ways to produce or share original outputs, such as graphic designs, audio tracks, written words, multimedia art, or live-streamed performances.

- ❖ Free open-source tools from Mozilla enable production of web content in experimental and active ways. Read CLX's landscape report on how organizations and educators are using digital media tools and technology in out-of-school youth programs.
- ❖ Mozilla's Web Literacy Map contains guidelines and activities for online participation.

- ❖ To ensure higher-level uses of technology for creative production, not just consumption, consider the SAMR model. Learn from organizations such as the Chicago Youth Voices Network who are expert at using digital media to encourage the unique voices of youth.

REFLECTION

- ❖ Promote youth voice by enabling feedback and self-reflection. Model how to offer constructive feedback and create opportunities for practice. Be willing to redesign programs based on youth feedback.
- ❖ Learn about what other interests youth participants have and consider how to redesign programs to engage those interests and create more entry points for future learners.
- ❖ Trying and failing can lead to learning for everyone. Encourage youth reflection to support development of growth mindsets. Students often associate "dislike" with things that are challenging. Through reflection, you can associate challenges with opportunities to learn rather than being defined by challenges. It can be useful to restate that learning means you don't already know how to do something.
- ❖ The following statements are good indicators that youth are having a connected learning experience.[16] Ideally, youth in your programs would agree with the following statements:
    - ➢ I am going to explore a new interest based on things I learned.
    - ➢ I learned things that will help me go deeper into an interest I already have.
    - ➢ I learned things that made me more interested in continuing my education past high school than I was before.
    - ➢ At this program it is cool to be excited about your interests.

II. Relationships

Build supportive relationships with peers and adults.

DESIGN
❖ Collaboratively create community or program guidelines that set expectations for your space. These might include ways to be kind, inclusive, constructive, and welcoming. See below for how to evolve these guidelines in order to develop shared purpose.
❖ Be prepared to connect youth to the appropriate social service professionals for issues where their mental or physical safety is at risk, and provide confidential ways to reach out for support from caring adults. Among the many channels for teens to receive confidential support are SMS-based hotlines like https://www.crisistextline.org/ (text HOME to 741741 in the US). NowPow and NAMI support mental health.
❖ When planning to use social media for building collaborative working relationships, see Ana Homayoun's Social Media Wellness or Clay Shirky's *Promise, Tool, Bargain* framework in chapter 11 of *Here Comes Everybody*. Also see this post's description of that framework: ➢ Promise–what promise is offered by the kind of engagement you're asking the group to have?   ➢ Tool–what tools will be used to realize the promise of that kind of engagement?   ➢ Bargain–what mutual expectations and agreements support the use of those tools to achieve that promise?

ACTION		
Connected Learning Approach	**What This Might Look Like**	**Resources**
→ *Cultivate Peer Relationships* [17]		
❖ Support peer-to-peer sharing of expertise.[18] ❖ Nurture ongoing partnership and collaboration in person and online.[19] ❖ Affirm the role of adult mentors to help youth value learning together,[20] and support these adults with their own peer professional learning.	❖ Encourage collaboration based on shared interests and skills instead of established social circles. When receiving a participant's request for help, give their peers a chance to volunteer their own knowledge and expertise. ❖ When assigning group projects or friendly competitions, provide support for online collaboration where youth can share code, art, music, or writing. ❖ Talking openly about the things that you geek out over is one way to cultivate trust and build a relationship. Dedicating time to learn from your adult colleagues can also model the importance of peer-to-peer learning.	❖ Social media has become a powerful tool for supporting social connection. Google's Be Internet Awesome / Sé genial en Internet is a multilingual campaign for establishing positive norms for online interactions. ❖ Openly networked platforms support collaborative goals and outputs. Consider tools that allow real-time collaboration, such as Google's G Suite for Education. ❖ Peer professional learning communities can support connected learning adoption. CLX's learning community in Chicago and the National Writing Project's online professional journal, *The Current*, are examples.
→ *Create a Safe Space Supported by Caring Adults* [21]		
❖ Model empathy and listening with respect as well as candid but	❖ Treating youth with respect, giving them space to express their emotions without judgment, and really listening to them are	❖ The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) assesses the safety and supportiveness of your

age-appropriate discussions with youth about their life experiences.[22]

❖ Set the inclusive expectation that everyone is welcome to participate, especially marginalized youth.[23]

❖ Create clear pathways and roles for participation while maintaining flexibility.[24]

most likely to help them feel safe and supported.[25]

❖ Ask youth what they need from you to feel more comfortable and be willing to make those changes. It's easier to broker an entry point for them if you know what they like and how they learn best.

❖ Enable multiple ways to contribute, yet be willing to let youth observe while they get more comfortable. Balancing the tension between wanting a young person to participate and wanting to give them space to join in is challenging but can build trust.

program environment (see sample assessment items here).

❖ Effective mentoring creates a strong foundation for inclusive practices that demonstrate the value that each participant brings to your program. See this video of a legendary mentor, the late Brother Mike Hawkins.

❖ Additional educator resources for building these skills are the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring from the National Mentoring Partnership, as well as The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring.
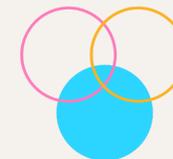
→ Work Openly and with Shared Purpose [26]

❖ Cultivate inclusive networks of youth and adults who love to share their work and enable them to learn from and share with others.[27]

❖ Create opportunities for youth to see how their passions relate to shared issues, enabling meaningful contribution to real communities.[28]

❖ Allow shared purpose to develop over time rather than assuming it from the outset. Support it by revisiting and upholding clearly articulated values.[29]

❖ Online communities are important parts of openly networked infrastructures, even if accessible only to the participants in your program. Allow some external sharing (e.g. the posting of digital badges to LinkedIn).

❖ An end-of-program showcase can be held for an authentic audience of friends, family, policy makers, and the community, inspiring lifelong civic engagement.

❖ When cultivating shared purpose it can be helpful to have a collaborative project or event—like producing a zine—to encourage learners to work toward a shared goal, allowing them to set and revise group goals.

❖ The internet is a powerful tool for working in the open. Knowing how to read, write, and participate online– web literacy–is an important part of digital literacy. See Mozilla's Web Literacy Map, aligned to 21st C skills.

❖ See the Brokering Youth Pathways practice brief: "Capstone as Stepping Stone: Leveraging End-of-Program Events for Pathway-Building."

❖ See this Inpoints video on developing shared purpose through art at the National Veterans Art Museum, or chapter 6 of *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom*.[30]

REFLECTION

❖ Create time for learners to reflect on their experiences, especially around collaborative activities. Model self-reflection and how to identify what you would do differently next time as an educator and as a learner.

❖ Acknowledge and reflect on the power that adults have for dictating what's right and wrong. Provide a supportive space for adults to reflect on their encounters with youth.

❖ The following statements are good indicators that youth are having a connected learning experience.[31] Ideally, youth in your programs would agree with the following statements:
  ➢ I know how to accept meaningful critique from others.
  ➢ I know how to meaningfully critique other people's work.
  ➢ I learned a lot from the adults at this program.
  ➢ I learned a lot from other youth.
  ➢ Adults at this program made sure everyone had a chance to participate and contribute.
  ➢ I worked with other youth to create something.
  ➢ I feel safe in this space.

III. Opportunity

Connect to future opportunities with academic, civic, or career payoffs.

DESIGN
❖ Connecting youth to future *learning experiences* expands existing interests (see Interests above). Connecting them to actual *opportunities* goes a step further by intentionally planning how your program can lead to *a payoff of tangible value* in academics, civic life, or careers.
❖ While planning your program, do some legwork to discover other community resources, including organizations who offer similar but perhaps more advanced learning experiences, local colleges who award credit for out-of-school learning, or employers who offer youth internship opportunities.
❖ As you plan, consider youth to be not only learners of a subject but practitioners or apprentices of that subject. For example, encourage educators to think of their work as "mentoring coders" rather than "teaching coding."

ACTION		
Connected Learning Approach	**What This Might Look Like**	**Resources**
→ *Translate Learned Skills* [32]		
❖ Visibly name the skills youth are learning, taking time to make those skills completely transparent to learners.[33]	❖ Often youth don't have the language they need to translate what they have learned into other settings. Give them the language they can use on a resume or when talking about their skills with others.	❖ Help learners reflect on what they've learned with skill-related words like this list of action verbs from Michigan State University. MHA Labs' *Power Skills and Attitudes* list and *Skill Building Blocks* are great for this, found on their website.
❖ Help youth discover which of their skills and interests might connect to related academic or career paths.[34]	❖ If a young person is particularly taken by a topic or skill, invite professionals or plan job shadow days to illustrate how an interest might translate into a potential academic or career pathway.	❖ See the Brokering Youth Pathways practice brief: "Linking Youth to Professional Worlds through Informal Digital Learning Programs"
❖ Enable young people to learn from your unique skills, interests, and professional path.[35]	❖ Be transparent about your own career journey, struggles, and successes. Be sure to consider the ways in which your privilege might have reduced barriers for you.	❖ Blogging about your experiences and inviting youth to do the same can illuminate the process of skill development. Medium.com is one site to read and write blogs on a wide range of topics.
→ *Broaden Contexts for Learning* [36]		
❖ Illuminate learning pathways that connect activities to the next learning experience, whether within your organization or beyond.[37]	❖ Within your organization, award digital badges to recognize individual skills. They can also be used to communicate a connected pathway of learning experiences.	❖ See the Brokering Youth Pathways practice brief: "Internal Pathways: 'Leveling Up' Youth within an Informal Learning Organization."

❖ Foster civic awareness, dialogue, and participation as a context for learning.[38] ❖ Coordinate learning experiences across settings, dedicating time to partnership development.[39]	❖ Support youth civic engagement through online communities and digital activism, helping youth use their voices to affect issues they care about. ❖ Service learning or independent study projects are ways to allow youth to earn in-school credit for self-directed learning happening out of school or in the workplace.	❖ These LRNG playlists provide learning pathways specific to civic engagement: Engaging Communities Playlist; From Protest to Proposal; Turn Passion into Poetry. ❖ Here are CLX resources to help you in your professional networking and partnership development.

→ Broker Opportunities for Civic, Academic, and Career Payoffs [40]

❖ Equip youth to make their progress and achievements visible across settings.[41] ❖ Equip educators and mentors to broker connections to new opportunities.[42] ❖ Be intentional in connecting teens to future opportunities and encouraging them to pursue them.[43]	❖ Schools and colleges can award academic credit for out-of-school program participation and learning portfolio. Digital badges can support this kind of cross-sector recognition of skills. ❖ Foster collaboration among educators, organizations and parents/guardians to better connect youth to existing opportunities. ❖ Cultivate relationships and warm handoffs to other youth-serving professionals in interest areas beyond your program or expertise. Invite an educator from the other organization to co-lead a session with you or come to meet your participants as a way to help them make a new connection.	❖ Digital badges are micro-credentials that contain data about the specific skills gained when earning the badge. Explore this growing list of badge issuers. See lessons learned here. ❖ See the framework, briefs, and reports at the Hive Research Lab's Brokering Youth Pathways toolkit. CLX's innovation grants and other incentives provide tangible resources for developing cross-org learning pathways. ❖ In Chicago, the Chicago City of Learning provides access to a variety of youth programs. CLX's Remake Learning Days Chi makes visible the city's abundant learning resources while making them more accessible.

REFLECTION

❖ Successfully connecting to opportunities often involves challenges for learners and educators alike. We encourage including those struggles in the reflection process for youth and adults.

❖ Pre- and post-surveys can help you assess whether youth can identify the skills developed in your program or course. Feedback and self-reflection can be supported with free online tools like mentimeter.com for real-time, anonymous feedback.

❖ The following statements are good indicators that youth are having a connected learning experience.[44] Ideally, youth in your programs would agree with the following statements:
  - ➢ I learned things that I could use in a job one day.
  - ➢ I learned things that will help me with school.
  - ➢ I learned things that I could use in college one day, if I go.
  - ➢ I understand how the activities we did here can be used in other parts of my life.
  - ➢ I learned things that made me more interested in continuing my education past high school than I was before.
  - ➢ I discovered a new potential self or career pathway through this experience.
  - ➢ Adults at this program helped me understand how the activities we did here can be used in other parts of my life.

Citations

See bibliography on next page.

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Connected Learning Sites and Communities

- ❖ [Connected Learning Alliance](#), a go-to site for news and information relevant to researchers and practitioners.
- ❖ [Connected Learning Research Network](#), a valuable repository of research publications.
- ❖ [Connected Learning Summit](#), an annual convening of researchers and practitioners alternating between MIT and UC Irvine.
- ❖ [The Current](#), an open publishing site by the National Writing Project for connected learning professionals.

Acknowledgments

This guide is a resource developed for practitioners locally and nationally by the [Chicago Learning Exchange](#) (CLX), whose mission is to inspire and support innovation that equips digital-age learners and leaders to close Chicago's opportunity gap. The development of the guide has been informed by the many contributors listed below, and has been co-written by CLX consultant and cofounder, **Sam Dyson**, and connected learning researcher, **Dr. Kiley Larson**.

To join the CLX community, visit https://chicagolx.org/community. For more information about CLX, contact info@chicagolx.org.

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