

Connected Cosplay: Fan Work as Pathways Toward Opportunity

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Abstract: Connected learning explains how people can build learning pathways that connect their interests, relationships with others, and formal learning to lead toward future opportunities. However, most learning systems are not set up ideally for connected learning. This paper analyzes two case studies of cosplayers—hobbyists who make their own costumes of media characters to wear at fan conventions—who benefited from a well-developed connected learning ecology. Cases were drawn from a larger interview study and further analyzed as compelling examples of connected learning. Important themes that emerged included sponsorship by family, friends, and adult mentors; unique pathways that start with a difficult challenge; and comparisons with formal school experiences. This has implications for how we can design connected learning ecologies that support all learners on unique pathways toward fulfilling futures.

Introduction

Connected learning (Ito et al., 2013; Ito, Salen, & Sefton-Green, in preparation) is a framework that helps us to conceptualize learning related to youths' interests and relationships with others in a way that connects to future-oriented opportunities like school, higher education, careers, and political clout. However, we know very little about how learners navigate these pathways in ways that could inform the future design of educational learning environments. One way to do this is to turn to retrospective case studies (e.g., Maltese & Tai, 2010) to gather histories of how adults have successfully built on their passions toward meaningful future career opportunity.

Cosplay (Bender, 2017)—the depiction of characters from media properties through costumes and roleplay (thus the portmanteau, “cosplay”), usually at fan events like conventions—provides an interesting case study of how learning can be connected to future opportunity. As part of this hobby, cosplayers are motivated to pursue their interests, learn numerous skills, connect with mentors and networks, and enrich their experience of life. Sometimes they are fortunate enough that their hobby leads them down pathways toward career opportunities. In these cases, cosplayers have benefited from a successful connected learning ecology. But the system is not always set up to legitimize the skills they are learning in their hobby, connect their school learning to it, or broker career opportunities related to their skills. By looking at differences between positive connected learning in cosplay and examples of disconnected learning, we may glean insights into how we can redesign learning ecologies at all levels to support unique pathways toward future opportunity for all learners.

In investigating the perspectives of cosplayers on their practice, we ask: What sorts of learning pathways exist in cosplay? How can it connect cosplayers to future opportunities? How can we make it—and learning ecologies in general—work better for those who do not experience connections between their extracurricular interests and future opportunities?

Methodological approach

The lead author was situated as an embedded ethnographer in the cosplay community as part of a research project on the math inherent in textile crafts funded by the National Science Foundation. Ten cosplayers participating in regional fan conventions were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview protocol that asked how the participants had learned the skills needed for cosplay, what drove them to participate in this hobby, stories about particular projects, the role communities played in their practice, and their experiences with their current occupation and with school. Interviews were transcribed and coded according to the connected learning spheres and theoretical principles. Two cosplayers were selected as cases illustrating the positive potential of cosplay as a connected learning practice that can lead toward future-facing opportunities. They also had similar negative experiences with math classes, which they both viewed as *disconnected* from their lives. While not representative of *all* cosplayers, these two are models of “positive deviance” (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010) that provide suggestions for how a well-developed connected learning model could be scaled to address wider-reaching systemic problems with traditional schooling inequities.

Results

Lexi (all names are pseudonyms) had been cosplaying for 9 years and was 31 at the time of the interview. With her artist mother as a sponsor of learning new craft skills and her friends encouraging her to join their cosplay group, Lexi dove right in to the hobby with a costume that was a big challenge to sew. Now, she uses the knowledge she gained about clothing from cosplay in her job for a large intimate-wear company. She continues to seek opportunities to express fashion creatively through designing for local fashion shows and freelance fashion consulting work. In contrast, she said her math classes “had no basis in reality,” unlike math in cosplay that is applied directly to a real, tangible project.

Tim’s interest in entertainment design was supported early by his enrollment in a performing arts school that he now, at 33 during the interview, works for as a sculpture teacher. Like Lexi, he began to cosplay in order to join friends at fan conventions and to express his love for particular characters. He also took on a big challenge early: making a costume for which there were few existing online resources. Now he is paying forward the sponsorship he received and is encouraging others’ interests in art and cosplay; he lets students bring cosplay projects into his class, sometimes even brings his own to class, and allows friends to use his studio at home to work on cosplay and learn techniques from him. He too lamented about how math classes are irrelevant to students’ interests.

Discussion and implications

Tim and Lexi’s experiences with learning how to cosplay were positive primarily because they connected to important aspects of their lives, as the connected learning framework would suggest. Relationships with peers motivated their initial engagement, and adult sponsors provided access to materials and skills, whether in person or online. They both began their cosplay journeys with a challenge that “should” have been beyond their current skill levels, but they managed it and continued to challenge themselves. This contrasts with conventional views of learning as following a step-by-step trajectory from easier to more difficult, suggesting that when appropriately motivated, learners will surmount challenges “beyond their level.” Both cosplayers were also fortunate to be able to apply their cosplay experiences to their careers, but they also felt a sense of fulfillment from opportunities beyond their careers in which they could sponsor others’ interests in cosplay and clothing. Finally, they both recognized how disconnected their math classes has been from their lives, and contrasted that with the way math in cosplay did connect to their interests and goals, suggesting that school should do the same.

To create a more equitable learning system that values all learners’ interests and skills and orients them toward economic and political opportunities, these cosplayers show us that we need to legitimize learners’ interests rather than dismiss them as frivolous, support their relationships with peers as positive motivators, act as sponsors who provide access to skills and resources, support youths’ goals even if they seem beyond their current skill level, and recognize opportunities outside of careers as ways to enhance creative expression and meaningful relationships with others. Considering how disconnected most traditional schooling is from the rest of youths’ lives, these cosplayers also suggest that school learning should be applied to contexts that matter to students’ interests and future plans. Only when we create supports for unique pathways both in and out of school, throughout the lifespan, will equitable connected learning be accessible to all.

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