**Community Connections as a Problem of Practice**

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Schooling is often thought of as a transaction. That’s part of the founding philosophy at [ACE Leadership High School](http://leadershiphsn.org/schools-in-action/ace-leadership-high-school/) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had the good fortune to attend the Second Annual Capstone Networking Event at ACE last week, and it was proof that at ACE, transactions are much more than a deposit into the minds of learners.

Educators at ACE believe that education needs to meet the workforce demands of today, and of possible futures we can’t imagine. They also know that the workforce of today needs to meet the education demands of those who need it most, not just those who thrive in school. To do both, education and workforce professionals must be in a constant state of negotiation, and that raises a common problem of practice. *How can we help young learners negotiate these transactions for themselves in a way that allows them to leave the safety of school and pursue their own unique life goals as independent individuals?*

Bringing learners and workforce professionals together can be difficult and time-consuming. It can also be intimidating for the students, and for teachers. As a result, most schools -- traditional or project-based -- tend to scaffold such transactions with a model that commonly involves the following steps:

1. Design and deliver lessons that prepare students with background knowledge;
2. invite guest speaker experts to share insights that reinforce those lessons, or answer student questions;
3. design and deliver further lessons that allow students to practice what they have learned;
4. last, and sometimes optional, invite experts back to serve as judges of whether or not the students have learned their lessons.

When implemented successfully, this model produces student work judged proficient by both educators and experts, allowing it to serve as evidence that students are prepared for career, or college in their chosen career field.

So what’s the problem?

We hear a lot of criticism of out-dated industrial models for education, and this is an example of one model we should be critiquing. Sure, if you follow the steps, the model produces what you were looking for. Have you ever asked how this model helps young learners begin to negotiate real world transactions for themselves? Have you noticed that the teacher does most of the negotiations, which means teachers are working harder than students? What if you wanted to shift that responsibility away from preparing the students for career and college, allowing the students to participate as negotiators themselves?

The Capstone program at ACE (and the other [Leadership Network](http://leadershiphsn.org/) schools, [Health](http://leadershiphsn.org/schools-in-action/health-leadership-high-school/), and [Tech](http://leadershiphsn.org/tech/) Leadership) is an attempt to solve this problem of practice. It allows learners to participate as learners, rather than to wait to be certified as proficient before they connect with a world that is real and relevant to them. Three weeks into the trimester, students new to ACE’s Capstone program are looking to find a role in the annual project, which is undertaken by the school in collaboration with an industry partner. Students must find a role in this Capstone in order to graduate, just as they’ll need to find a job after they graduate. A Community Engagement Coordinator worked school, teacher, and student connections to bring professionals to the building for one night, especially those from the local Young Professionals Association in Albuquerque. Capstone faculty and existing students supported her to make sure the school was ready to receive their guests. It was a big undertaking, with a lot at stake for the school, and for the 55 new Capstone students. The hour before the industry partners arrived, everyone was participating in resetting the school’s common room for the event.

In spite of the high stakes of meeting the 50 different industry professionals committed to attend the event, the new Capstone students weren’t being primed all day. Instead, as the Director of Student Support described: “today was a strange day, even for me. We were playing dodge ball in advisory this-morning. The kids were feeling the vibe! It’s all about teamwork, but then a couple got sensitive, emotional. Everyone’s really passionate. They want to win, but they came together and the kids mediated it. They had a chance to be kids. Then we came back from the park and it was busy on campus getting ready for tonight. That caused concern about the overall picture of the day. You see students who are kind of struggling through the day-- three hours ago almost mixing it up-- and here they are in suit in tie, and one actually landed a job – they offered one of those same kids a job!”

Were these learners prepared for the Networking event? It depends on who you ask. Most students spent the morning playing dodge ball rather than preparing. It was health and advisory day, after all. According to another teacher, students had spent some time earlier in the week reading “a couple of articles about making first impressions, acting interested and being interesting by asking specific questions.” He then went on add “really its sink or swim at this point. Nobody is getting feedback, they’re just hooking up with people.” Students also confirmed this, with one jumping into a conversation to say: “It’s really cool, because it’s a person you don’t even know. You start talking to them and you learn he’s a doctor, or a Marine, and you learn from them. I didn’t even know what was going to happen, I just dove in because I wanted to do something like this.” That spirit tended to give the event a life of its own. As another teacher noted, “we tried to be very deliberate in our pairings initially, but some are making awesome connections on their own and that’s great! It’s electric in here!”

It wasn’t just students and teachers who felt the electricity in the room. One industry partner noted, “I’m happy to see students with an increased focus, asking questions about what we do in order to develop their interests. What’s impressed me the most is that they all have an end goal, and they ask me questions about that. It’s inherent for me to ask them questions back, but what impresses me is that they all have their next step in place.” When I asked yet another teacher to comment on that, he said: “This is about students talking with professionals at a professional level. They have the eye contact, the professional behavior, even if they don’t quite know the language of architecture, yet. Getting them out there and talking to people is huge. They’re developing the soft skills they need, and there’s no other way to do that. They never cease to amaze me.”

Laurence Steinberg has argued that adolescence is an [Age of Opportunity](http://www.laurencesteinberg.com/books/age-of-opportunity). There are indeed many learning opportunities for learners in ACE Leadership High School’s approach to the problem of practice inherent in community connections. But how, exactly, are they doing it? As you reflect on what you’ve learned by reading this, consider your own answers to the following problems of practice:

* How did ACE teachers and leadership conceptualize collaboration? Was it a skill to be taught, and mastered prior to participation, or a participatory learning experience in its own right?
* How did and they set the boundaries that made the conditions for growth ideal for their students? The Community Engagement Coordinator led the effort to select industry partners, but how was that networking event imagined and limited so students wouldn’t be overwhelmed?
* Finally, in what ways did allowing students to participate in developing relationships actually allow them to develop relationships with these industry professionals? How did participation support their preparation, and whose judgment was used to answer that question?

These are problems of best practice related to community connections that you’ll want to explore if you’re considering tying something like this at your own school. It’s not a model to be implemented, but a challenge that requires you, and your students, to participate in conversations that lead them to preparation. After all, some students may see these same professionals when fulfilling their role in a Capstone Project, or perhaps when they apply for their first job, or to college. For one student in this story, participation even turned into demonstration of preparation when this first networking event of his Capstone learning experience landed him a job offer! That’s a very different kind of transaction. Is it one you’d be willing to let your learners make?