Connecting Fields, Connecting Scholars: Breaking Down the Walls between Learning and Information Sciences

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Abstract
The ways in which people interact with information are evolving rapidly. Yet, the academic disciplines of information science and learning science—seen by some to be orthogonal domains (Bates, 1999)—often approach related issues of sociotechnical culture, context, and computation from highly proximate yet vastly “silied” perspectives. In the spirit of the conference’s ‘breaking down walls’ theme, we seek to begin breaking down some of the barriers that separate information and education studies. We have three direct goals in organizing this session: 1) To identify and reinforce the nascent community of scholars within the iSchool community that have interests in the intersection of information and learning; 2) To discuss and sharpen key ideas at the intersection of information and learning science that participants could leverage for future scholarship; 3) To identify and develop a set of concrete takeaways related to our theme such as ideas for future research proposals, journal articles, and/or applications. Our primary method for achieving these goals will be via a set of brainstorming activities that focus on identifying and understanding points of synergy between information and learning science.

Keywords: learning science, information science, collaboration, synergy, synthesis


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1 Introduction

“Conversations lead to ideas, ideas to projects, and projects to positive change.”

~Designer John Bielenberg, Thinking Wrong

The ways in which people interact with information are evolving rapidly. We are fast moving away from clearly demarcated technologies and arenas for information sharing or learning, and instead moving toward blended realms of public, peer-oriented interaction made possible by new social norms and technological affordances. Despite this rapid activity in the real world, the academic disciplines of information science and learning science—seen by some to be orthogonal domains (Bates, 1999)—often approach related issues of sociotechnical culture, context, and computation from highly proximate yet vastly “silied” perspectives. In the spirit of the conference’s ‘breaking down walls’ theme, we seek to begin breaking down some of the barriers that separate information and education studies. We feel that the time is now to reinforce how these complementary domains can strengthen existing synergies and mutual topics of concern, such as the role of social media in human cognition and development, learning analytics, open education systems, and technology-mediated informal learning.

This interactive session seeks to start this ball rolling by means of conversation and collaboration. We have three direct goals in organizing this session:

1) To identify and reinforce the nascent community of scholars within the iSchool community that have interests in the intersection of information and learning:
2) To discuss and sharpen key ideas at the intersection of information and learning science that participants could leverage for future scholarship such as articles for the special issue of *The Information Society* that Ahn and Erickson are co-editing or other scholarly work;

3) To identify and develop a set of concrete takeaways related to our theme such as ideas for future research proposals, journal articles, and/or applications. Our primary method for achieving these goals will be via a set of brainstorming activities that focus on identifying and understanding points of synergy between information and learning science. The organizers all work at the intersection of these areas and are known for their cross-disciplinary collaborations and research contributions.

2 Activity Plan

2.1 Part 1: Opening [30 minutes]

The session will begin with a short introduction, followed by a brief talk by Caroline Haythornthwaite, Professor and Director of the iSchool at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Haythornthwaite has an international reputation in research on information and knowledge sharing through social networks, and the impact of computer media and the Internet on learning and social interaction. Her research includes empirical and theoretical work on the development and nature of networks, crowds and communities online, the transformative effects of the Internet on how, where and with whom we learn, analytics of networks and learning, and distributed knowledge processes. Current initiatives address the role of social media for promotion of health and well-being (http://socialweb4health.pwi.as.ubc.ca/), development of the Society for Learning Analytics Research (http://www.solarresearch.org/), and examination of new media and literacy (http://blogs.ubc.ca/newliteracies/). Major publications include *The Internet in Everyday Life* (2002, with Barry Wellman); *Learning, Culture and Community in Online Education: Research and Practice* (2004, with Michelle M. Kazmer), the *Handbook of E-learning Research* (2007, with Richard Andrews), and *E-learning Theory and Practice* (2011, with Richard Andrews). Further information can be found on her website http://haythorn.wordpress.com/.

2.2 Part 2: Interactive Engagement [45 minutes]

We have organized three breakout sessions, each moderated by one of the organizers, that will engage participants in meeting one another, prompting conversations, and finding areas of common interest. To keep participants moving and ideas flowing, these activities are meant to be conducted in a circuit by everyone in the session; small groups will shift from one activity to the next in 15-minute intervals. The goal of each activity is to activate different ways of thinking, and leverage different strengths and levels of experience among participants.

- **Activity One: Card Sort** – Small groups will arrange a series of concept cards to form a unique organization scheme, relating the supplied terms to their own collective research. Concept cards will include terms drawn from information science, the learning sciences, and other terms that might be employed by several scholarly domains. This activity will surface preconceptions and assumptions about the applicability of theories, methods, and concepts to individual scholars’ work. Each individual participant will have 3 blank cards on which they can contribute their own terms. Images of each group’s ordering scheme will be captured and used as part of the session debrief.

- **Activity Two: Rapid Brainstorm** – Small group participants will brainstorm using different colored sticky notes and markers to 1) develop novel ideas along the intersection between information and learning domains, and 2) note issues that may affect the practicalities of this hypothetical interdisciplinary research. Brainstorm topics will be wide open to participants’ imaginations, though we will offer prompts to aid ideation such as funding, theory, method, and publication. As each
break-out group completes their brainstorm, they will be combined with artifacts from previous
groups to create a “heat map” or density graph of popular ideas and issues.

- **Activity Three: Sketching and Mapping** – The organizers will supply participants with several topics
  that reside at the intersection of information and learning science, such as analyzing learning in
  massive open courseware systems. Participants will be provided with a short intro to concept
  mapping, and then will spend 10 minutes developing a concept map or sketch of this topic area.
  Completed concept maps will be shared back with the large group during the closing synthesis
  session.

2.3 Part 3: Synthesis [15 minutes]

Each of the three activity leaders will synthesize the activity sessions and draw upon participant
contributions to give an overall picture of the session, emerging themes, and areas of common interest and
concern.

3 Relevance to the Field

The iConference community is by definition, and with pride, a highly interdisciplinary group of people. We
are in an advantageous position to identify and reinforce emergent trends and issues that more discipline-
identified communities tend to overlook. This session presents an opportunity to be scholarly entrepreneurs,
namely to showcase synergies and build bridges among theoretical and empirical areas relating to the
intersection of information and learning science that have both great research as well as applied potential.
It also ties directly to a future publication (i.e., special issue of *The Information Society*,
http://www.indiana.edu/~tisj/connecting_fields.pdf) that will have direct impact in broadening this
discourse among our community as well as others.

3.1 Participants

This session will attract scholars at all levels, from students beginning a program of study to established
researchers looking to explore new areas of interdisciplinary thinking. Based on the format of the session,
the maximum number of participants should be set at 30.

3.2 Session Length

90 minutes

3.3 Special Equipment

Sticky notes, markers, large pieces of paper for concept mapping, masking tape

4 References

Information Science, 50*(12), 1043-1050.


Press.