**Transcript: Designing Connected Learning Programs via School Libraries with Mega Subramaniam**

Hello everybody. Good afternoon. Good morning to all of you. So, I’m Mega Subramaniam and I’m associate professor at the College of information Studies at the University of Maryland. I am delighted to be here today.

So, I think you have little less than two hours with me today. And I hope this will be a worthwhile experience and worthwhile time spent. I will do my best in trying to convey the concept of Connected Learning. So, the topic of my session today is Designing Connected Learning Programs via School Libraries.

So, I want to tell you a little bit about myself—very, very little, so that we can spend most of the time today talking about Connected Learning. So, as Christie had mentioned, I teach at the iSchool at the University of Maryland, and I specifically teach in the Master’s in Library and Information Science Program. So, my broad research agenda is to investigate how non-dominant young adults use libraries—so both school and public libraries, for the development of emerging digital literacy skills and how libraries can play a role in developing and sustaining young adults’ digital literacy development. Also, the young adults that I typically work with are middle schoolers and high schoolers. And by non-dominant youth, I mean those young adults that are disenfranchised because of their race, because of their ethnicity, because of where they are located, because of their socioeconomic status, because of their gender, because of their sexual orientation. And these factors go on. So, that’s what I mean by non-dominant youth.

So, to achieve this broad research goal, my research breaks into two threads. One is, I work directly in libraries with young adults to leverage their strengths in the library by creating learning environments that help them develop digital literacy skills. So, Christie actually has worked with me on this project. One of the logos that you see on your left side here is the Hack Health Project, where we designed learning environment in school libraries to develop interest in health-related careers, but as well as in digital health-information seeking, which is one type of digital literacy. But what I do in my second thread is I work directly with library staff like you, where I help library staff to develop digital literacy programs at their libraries. So, I have a brainstorm with them how to do that, how to facilitate digital literacy. So, as you can probably tell, what I learned from working directly with youth on my first thread really feeds into the second thread, where I share with library staff about what we have learned from working with youth. So, essentially, I’m bringing research and practice together to enhance the skills of in-service and pre-service youth and school librarians.

So, these questions were simply to prompt us to think about, to reflect on our own experiences. One of the things that I always tell library staff, and also informal educators like you, is that the interest-driven piece is really, really important. But it’s not what *you* are interested in, but what your students are interested in, and you know, I always have this debate with my students in my class, is that you know, the students in the class who are pre-service librarians will tell me, “But we, we have been youth before, we know what youth want.” No. Times have changed, you know. A lot of things have changed. Interests have also evolved right? So, that’s one thing that we all have to keep in mind.

Okay, so let’s carry on to the concept of Connected Learning, and I will bring back this interest-driven piece in the next slide. But I want to start by bringing in the concept of HOMAGO. But before we get to the concept of HOMAGO, so the past ten years, the bar of creating digital content and being engaged in creating anything actually has significantly lowered. Right? So, the pivot was really the emergence of cell phones, where we were able to get, like, self-takes, cell-phone videos, which is a low bar to creating content. And then, of course, then social media came—a lower bar to share the content that you have created. Right? Because it used to be, like, you have to, like, you know, create a website and put things on the website, but now sharing has become such a low bar.

So, many researchers, at that point when that trend was coming up, started to think about how we can leverage this development for learning and expression. So, this notion of, it’s called participatory culture, emerged at this time. So, the person who came up with this term is a media scholar called Henry Jenkins. So, this was like in 2009, that he identified five major criteria of what participatory culture is. First: relatively low barriers for expression and civic engagement, which I just shared with you. Second: strong support for creating and sharing one’s project, which I also just shared with you from that example. And third: opportunities for informal mentorship, which we’ll get to in a minute. And the fourth one, the fourth criteria is what I think is really important: it’s a belief that contributions that you’re making, the content that we are creating, truly matters. And then the last piece is social connection to other participants, which is also really, really important, the social piece. So, when Henry Jenkins started introducing this participatory culture, many informal learning environments really caught on to it. They started developing programs. They started developing learning environments using this notion of participatory culture. So, using this participatory culture, the concept and the criteria, educators started to engage young adults in self-directed learning. And this is when the concept of HOMAGO came about, so, which I, again the Chicago Public Library folks have already shared with you, but I wanted to give you the background where and how HOMAGO came from.

So, the concept of HOMAGO, which is: HO is hanging out, MA—messing around, and GO—geeking out. Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out are three types of informal behaviors that often occur in informal learning environments, also online, but increasingly people, educators, are aspiring to bring this into formal learning environments like schools, where most of you are from or are working at. And basically, what they’re trying to do is bring these experiences to lead, so that it will lead to new media literacy development, and also learning of any types in youth communities.

So, hanging out refers to, largely, like, friendship-driven activities. Hanging out, right? So, hang out, such as like, you know, just having a presence at a specific location or even having a presence online, also browsing information posted by peers online—that’s considered hanging out. Messing around is when youth actively seek information on a topic that interests them and then find the space and time to experiment with different types of media. And then geeking out describes an intense commitment or engagement with media and technology, and it’s driven primarily by individuals’ interest before. So, in the case of Angelica earlier, you know, she had that interest with the content that she was engaging in and that kind of state, right, for her to continue geeking out with that topic.

So, this HOMAGO concept eventually became Connected Learning. So, Connected Learning is an educational framework created by scholars of learning and youth cultures. It’s an approach to creating learning experiences for young people: be it space, be it programs, be it services—it’s experiences, we sort of put all of them together as experiences. So, at the heart of the Connected Learning is what Mimi Ito calls an Equity Agenda. The main reason they created this Connected Learning framework is to help close the cultural and economic gaps that youth from a low socioeconomic status face. And they do this by connecting youth interests and relationships with the real-life opportunities. And it's specifically more targeted for middle school and high schoolers. But increasingly Connected Learning is being used for younger ages as well. And it is said that Connected Learning helps prepare youth for life after high school with 21st-century skills and all types of digital literacies and new media literacy. It seems like these literacies are just popping up every time, you know, every now and then, right, so it’s like really sort of helping them with this.

So, if you look at this diagram that I have on this slide. Youth learning primarily or primarily happens in what we call as three different contexts or spheres: one is the relationships, the red one that you see; and then we have the interests, the yellow one that you see; and we have the opportunities, which I think it's like blueish green on my screen. And it is said that when all the spheres connect, so you see the intersection here in the middle. This is when the quality of learning and also engagement with learning increases among young people. So, the sweet spot is when the three sort of connect, and that is what Connected Learning is about. So, I’m gonna very briefly explain to you each of these spheres. And then I’m going to go to the examples.

So, the first part that you see here, the yellow one—interest, and the reflection question really touched on this interest. So research has shown, it seems like we all have experienced it, that learners who are interested in what they learn, they attain higher learning outcomes. But in Connected Learning, the scholars have said not only inherent interest of the individual learners in the young people is leveraged, but they view learners, they view interests and passions as something that could be actively developed as well. So, learning programs and environment that we create need to be aligned with teens’ or young adults’ goals and motivation. So, even the ones that they don’t quite know how to actually articulate yet, right? So, you see young people interested in games. There are some goals, some motivation that they have to play in games. But how playing games leads to the development of game development skills is not something that they see of yet.

But that’s where the next piece comes along, the relationship where teens learning from each other, from other teams, from other young people, and then building on what they learn from each other. So, research has shown that among friends, and among peers, young people contribute, share, give feedback from one another, and this produces powerful learning. As well as adults, community partners, this type of mentorship that they get from adults are very much welcomed by young people. So, in, in environments like the ones that we deal with, typically the adult can be other young people who are older than them, and also us, right, who are library staff, who are librarians, in this environment, and our mentorship share really helps them to further get to know their interest and align the motivations and goals with their interests.

The last space here, which is equally important, is that all these things that we do—the interest development, the relationship development—all needs to be directed towards academic, civic, or economic engagement. So, it could be academic, could be civic, could be economic achievement. And I’m going to give you a few examples that will bring this point home later. But I want to say that learning that engages all these three spheres is no longer the learning that young people *have* to do, but it’s something that they *want* to do, because it’s aligned with their goals and motivations, and this is really, really important. It benefits them in the long run.

So, the Utopia example, and I say Utopia in a very, you know, really sort of positive way, the Utopia example of Connected Learning is of course Chicago Public Library, who you know, you met people there, you probably heard about the YOUmedia space, which is one of the first examples of Connected Learning environments in libraries that caught a lot of attention. And in fact, some of the recent refinement, so this model that I’m showing you here is the most recent refinement of Connected Learning model itself; the framework has gone through some changes. But a lot of the changes happened because they learned from the Chicago Public Library example. But one thing I want to mention is that Chicago Public Library, when they first started this application of Connected Learning, they also had a lot of funding in order for them to go with this. And I know you do have some funding, but maybe not millions of dollars like the ones that they had, right, so we have learned from these grand examples like that, libraries are able to do Connected Learning without actually having tons of support. So, I’m going to share with you a few examples of Connected Learning, and some of these projects are the ones that I have worked with as well as some of the ones that I have observed throughout these past few years, they’re very recent years actually.

So, let’s look at this first one. So, here’s a Connected Learning program that I actually observed at the Seattle Public Library. So, this is a four-week program on Finch Robots. If you want to know what Finch Robots is, this is the white robot that you see on the left side of the screen. And it’s actually designed to inspire young adults to learn computer science by providing them tangible and also physical representation of their code. So, in this four-week program, (I just went and observed one session, but they had this going on for four weeks), the library staff would work with teens—I think most of them there were teens, maybe upper tweens—and they introduced them to Finch Robots. And then they programmed their Finch Robots to do some stuff. So, one that they explained to me is they attached pens perpendicular to Finch Robot’s tail, and then they put paper on their ground, and then they programmed the robot to create different drawings. Because the robot was attached to a pen, right, so they programmed it to move on the ground to create drawings and shapes.

But the one that I observed is the one on the right side that you see here on the picture. This is, they programmed the Finch Robot to go through a maze, and the maze was created using boxes. And then the Finch Robot was going through the maze. So, this is a Connected Learning program, really, a Connected Learning program. Why? Remember these three spheres that I shared with you earlier. So, let’s analyze it using those three lenses. Right? So it’s interest-powered, because one of the things that the library staff told us there was a lot of interest among the teens there to work in the space there, but also working in the space as well as dealing with gadgets, and at that time this group of teams were pretty fascinated with remote control things, right? So, when they found the Finch Robot, that was an opportunity for them to leverage this interest. Second: the relationship piece, this was supported by peers and adult mentors. So, the teens worked in teams to figure out how to move the Finch Robot in the maze, but with the help of the library staff. So the relationship is in place. And it’s an opportunity-rich environment, so they had the interest, they had the relationship, but it’ also teaching them how to code and program by providing tangible representation of their codes, all of which we can connect to academic achievement. We can connect it to academic opportunities, right? So, this is one example of a Connected Learning program. This was in a public library.

All right, so next example. This is a fascinating one that I observed, and I really wanted to participate in this program as I was seeing it. So, a lot of people think Connected Learning needs to be tech-based, right? So, I just showed you the merry wheel example, really not tech-based, but it was Connected Learning. This one is also not tech-based. So, I would say that if an interest in the youth part that we are leveraging has something to do with tech, then go for it. Then use tech, right? but it doesn’t have to be tech; it can be completely tech-free. So, my team observed the Nordstrom visual merchandising team at the Providence Place Mall in Providence, Rhode Island, working with teens to design eye-catching window presentations. About two or three years ago, I observed this. So, the session that I actually observed is where teens met with their Nordstrom visual merchandising team to work together to create these mannequin displays that you see on this screen. Um, and so we started from the library. We walked from the library to the mall. It’s very close. And then once we got there, the virtual visual merchandising team met with us, and then, you know, they talked to the teens, that they want to dress the mannequins in spring fashion. And then the teens pulled, you know, started, you know going, walking around with the visual merchandising experts and sometimes were walking around the store by themselves. They chose the items. They chose all the accessories as well. Like the handbag, the hat that you see, the sunglasses, everything. And then they brought it back to the virtual merchandising team for feedback.

This is Connected Learning. Yes. Tell me how this is Connected Learning. Looking back to the interests, the relationships, and the academic achievement. So, this time, I’m not going to tell you, you have to tell me. How is this Connected Learning? Yes, so the kids were interested in fashion. So, young people’s interest in fashion was definitely leveraged. What about the relationships? What were the relationships? What type of mentorship did they get? And you’re welcome to put this in chat as well. Correct. So, they were able to work with their virtual merchandising team, who are experts in creating this right? So, they did get mentorship from this. This is where, you know, the librarian does not have the expertise, but you can leverage the mentorship that you get from community partners such as this. And, of course, the opportunity piece is that they learn marketing, they learn merchandising, they learn advertising, all towards the development of economic and academic opportunities. Thank you for that.

So, my last example, my final example that I'm going to provide you is at a school district. It is also quite large-scale. This is a school district in Pennsylvania, Governor Mifflin School District. So, they engaged in a project to allow students, elementary school students, to observe the feeding habits of birds that remain in Pennsylvania during the winter. So, the outcome for the program is so that they can be citizen scientists. They can know how to collect data, and they also learn the name of the birds that remain in Pennsylvania during the winter. So, they did get a grant to do this. I think it was one of the Google grants, where they were able to purchase six bird feeders that they placed in four elementary schools. And what happened is that the students who were in grades 7 to 12 took students who are in grades 1 through 4 under their wings to research about local birds and collect data about their winter-feeding habits. So, the older kids were tasked to create the technology that is needed for the younger kids to be able to be successful citizen scientists.

So, here you can see, on the righthand side, is the middle schooler, I think, who’s talking to the elementary school kids. I actually even have a very cute video of this interview, but we don’t really have time for that. It was fabulous to hear what these young kids wanted to observe and how they wanted to observe it, for example, during this interview. They learned that the young kids want to observe it, observe the birds, but they don’t want to go outside to look at the feeders. They want to be inside, because it’s cold. They wanted to be inside, and they wanted the high schoolers to figure that out. How can they observe that from inside? How can they observe that? The other thing that the high schoolers found out is the kids don’t know what birds that they are observing. So, if they see the bird, they don’t really know the name of the bird. So, two things that they found out.

So, long story short: what happened is that the older kids created the technology where they attached a motion-sensor camera to the bird feeders. The moment a bird lands, the camera will take a picture and send it to an iPad that’s placed in the kids’ elementary school classroom. So, you know, these pictures would be sent, and even when the kids go home, the pictures will continue the next morning. They can see it, right? So, that’s what they did, and then they also built like a website for them, kind of curated a site where all the names of the birds that are in Pennsylvania, come to Pennsylvania, are there. So, they can look at the picture and match it with the bird’s name, right? So, I want you to think a little bit about, how is this interest-driven for the elementary school kids? Yeah, so high schoolers working with elementary kids is a brilliant idea, and the mentorship is definitely taken care of. So, the relationship piece is already there. So, Betha already gave the answer for the relationship piece. The interest-driven piece is what, for the elementary school?

All right. Thank you for engaging in that activity. You can, I’ll get back to the spreadsheet in a minute, but I want to, now that you’ve listed what you want to learn and what you already know and what you want to learn, I want to share with you, with a few minutes that I have, a place where you can actually learn more on the aspects that you have listed there: how to design, develop, implement, and evaluate Connected Learning and including pieces of Connected Learning.

So, I want you to check out this toolkit that we have built. The URL will be dropped in the next slide. This is a toolkit that we developed for public library staff, but we have learned that school librarians have been using it as well. And this is intended for any library staff with any level of experience in Connected Learning to create Connected Learning programs. So, it’s called ConnectedLib Toolkit. It supports librarians in their effort to incorporate digital media as well as no media. You know, we talked earlier about Connected Learning being done without any technology. But primarily we want to, we work through very simple modules in this toolkit, where you can learn how to do things with incorporating different types of Technology tools, different types of media, different types of interests, weaving it so that we can promote connections across different learning contexts for young adults.

This was done in partnership with three public library systems. So, it’s not something that we developed on our own. We co-designed this toolkit with Providence Public Library, Seattle Public Library, and also Kitsap Regional Library, who serve a variety of traditionally understood youth population. So, we worked with Seattle Public Library, that serves a lot of immigrant populations; Providence Public Library, which serves a lot of low-income youth, and also Kitsap Regional Library, which is in Washington, but they do serve a lot of rural youth.

So, let me go to the next slide. So, if someone can drop the toolkit link in the chat, thank you. So, when you go to the link, you will see this is our modules, right, for the ConnectedLib and there is no sequence to the module. Of course, you can start with an introduction to Connected Learning if you like, but we don’t really sequence it. You can go with what you don’t know yet and you know, learn more about it. If you look through these modules, they’re very simple. They’re short. We really sort of made it in a way that it’s not too time-consuming to learn this, as well as to actually implement it. Again, they are all self-paced. You can do this on your own.

Okay, and then if you want to learn a little bit more about how libraries have done Connected Learning to see where we are at, this was published about four years ago. So, it’s a little bit old in the case of Connected Learning, per se, but to the point in 2016, we captured different types of programs that included hanging out, messing around, and geeking out, so you can read this white paper that we have produced as well. I also wanted to tell you that we got another three-year grant, thank you to IMLS, to continue to update the ConnectedLib modules, now with the perspective of small and rural libraries, which we just started. So, the content that you will see in this toolkit is very dynamic. We have been, or we have already started working on it with small and rural libraries now, and we are hoping that we will be able to insert more examples. I would also be delighted at the end of your grant or whenever you are ready, if you want to share your examples with us, which we can put in this toolkit. Please reach out to me and you know, I will be happy to work with my team to get the examples that you will be producing into this toolkit because that’s how we learn. Right? We look at other people’s examples, and it’s easier when we have examples that are very diverse, coming from different youth communities that we work with. I want to thank all of you for engaging with me today.

*\*Small edits have been made for clarity.*