



To: LUTE STEM Participants

From: Niki Fayne

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On January 7, 2020 Julia Freeland Fisher, director of education research at the Clayton Christensen Institute, in a blog post entitled “[The Next Decade of Disruption in Education](#),” shared her thoughts about how existing and evolving technologies will change how we think about what it means to connect with our students and with one another:

Online connections can't compete on traditional measures of performance like enduring and strong relationships, which students all need for healthy development. At first blush, the connections forged through these tools may seem underwhelming to schools. Interactions between experts and entire classrooms may be one-to-many unlike traditional one-to-one mentoring programs; the virtual interface of online guidance and mentoring can potentially hinder the depth of connection and empathy that face-to-face interactions afford; and some online interactions between students and adults last no longer than a single session. But these connections, as cursory as they may sound, are the seeds of disruption.

These seemingly rudimentary connections could prove far more valuable than meets the eye on a different dimension of performance. New technologies are diversifying less intimate connections in students' lives. Although they may not deliver caring mentors, these tools stand to offer the distinct advantage of what sociologists call the “strength of weak ties”—that is, even relationships with less intimacy, trust, and familiarity can provide crucial, plentiful sources of new information and opportunities otherwise inaccessible through our immediate networks.

In the past decade, we've seen how learning technologies have begun generating tectonic shifts in how the education sector now thinks about school as we know it. But the emergence of new networking tools suggests that in the next decade the disruptive potential of the edtech market is no longer confined to breakthroughs in online coursework, productivity tools, or adaptive software programs. Looking ahead, schools can begin to use edtech to connect; disrupting, over time, not just historical limits of how and when students learn, but also whom they know.

I very much doubt that Ms. Fisher was anticipating the seismic changes that were about to take place because of a global pandemic. However, as schools locally, nationally, and internationally pivoted to remote learning, we have seen some very interesting and creative ways to redefine community and to establish relationships with many individuals who we have never met in person.

I am going to discuss two LUTE STEM examples of relationship building in the virtual space. The first is a community of practice focused on liberatory design thinking that is currently underway with eight host teacher participants and two Lehman faculty. These teachers come from four of our five partner schools and work with pre-kindergarten through 12th grade students. Suffice it to say that they all bring the wisdom of practice to the deep and rich conversations that are held online every two weeks. They are educators who are in the process of establishing relationships virtually with one another in order to effect change in their own classrooms and schools. I applaud their dedication and look forward to hearing more about their individual design projects as they take shape across the semester.

The second is the rapport developing within our co-teaching pairs. Many of our residents have never met their host teacher in person, let alone the students in the classrooms to which they have been assigned, yet they are eager to jump in and make a difference. Leslie Tenorio-Lara's reflections at the end of a co-teaching assignment captures this sentiment:

This lesson took place when all the students were remote. We were all trying to get used to what it meant to be remote teaching. My host teacher provided me with some opportunities to build a relationship with students and to have my voice heard as a teacher. It was really helpful that Bryan kept the chat on; it allowed me to speak to students without interrupting him as he taught the lesson. Moving forward I look forward to more opportunities to assist him. In our one-on-one meetings we have discussed helping students individually in a break out room and having me be the host for the zoom calls. This way Bryan can focus on teaching and I can pay attention to the chat.



Leslie Tenorio-Lara, Resident at Samara Community School with Bryan Anderson, Host Teacher

The COVID era has heralded in a great deal of disruption, much of it quite negative. However, through the haze, I do see clearly that we have been able to find new ways to move forward. There is much activity within the LUTE STEM family to be proud of. At the center of our work is the notion that relationships matter.