A Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age

Preamble

Work on this Bill of Rights & Principles began in Palo Alto, California, on December 14, 2012. We convened a group of people passionate about learning, about serving today's students, and about using every tool we could imagine to respond better to the needs of students in a global, interactive, digitally connected world.

The Internet has made it possible for anyone on the planet to be a student, a teacher, and a creative collaborator at virtually no cost. Novel technologies that can catalyze learning are bubbling up in less time than it takes to read this sentence. Some have emerged from universities, some from the private sector, some from individuals and digital communities. In the past year, Massive Online Open Courseware, or MOOCs, have become the darling of the moment--lauded by the media, embraced by millions--so new, so promising in possibility, and yet so ripe for exploitation.

We believe that online learning represents a powerful and potentially awe-inspiring opportunity to make new forms of learning available to all students worldwide, whether young or old, learning for credit, self-improvement, employment, or just pleasure. We believe that online courses can create "meaningful" as well as "massive" learning opportunities.

We are aware of how much we don't know: that we have yet to explore the full pedagogical potential of learning online, of how it can change the ways we teach, the ways we learn, and the ways we connect.

And we worry that this moment is fragile, that history frequently and painfully repeats itself. Think of television in the 1950s or even correspondence courses in the 1920s. As we begin to experiment with how novel technologies might change learning and teaching, powerful forces threaten to neuter or constrain technology, propping up outdated educational practices rather than unfolding transformative ones.

All too often, during such wrenching transitions, the voice of the learner gets muffled.

For that reason, we feel compelled to articulate the opportunities for students in this brave electronic world, to assert their needs and--we dare say--rights.

We also recognize some broader hopes and aspirations for the best online learning. We include those principles as an integral addendum to the Bill of Rights below.

Our broad goal is to inspire an open, learner-centered dialogue around the rights, responsibilities, and possibilities for education in the globally-connected world of the present and beyond.

I. Bill of Rights

We believe that our culture is increasingly one in which learning, unlearning and relearning are as fundamental to our survival and prosperity as breathing. To that end, we believe that all students have inalienable rights which transfer to new and emerging digital environments. They include:

The right to access
Everyone should have the right to learn: traditional students, non-traditional students, adults, children, and teachers, independent of age, gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, economic status, national origin, bodily ability, and environment anywhere and everywhere in the world. To ensure the right to access, learning should be affordable and available, offered in myriad formats, to students located in a specific place and students working remotely, adapting itself to people's different lifestyles, mobility needs, and schedules. Online learning has the potential to ensure that this right is a reality for a greater percentage of the world's population than has ever been realizable before.

The right to privacy
Student privacy is an inalienable right regardless of whether learning takes place in a brick-and-mortar institution or online. Students have a right to know how data collected about their participation in the online system will be used by the organization and made available to others. The provider should offer clear explanations of the privacy implications of students' choices.

The right to create public knowledge
Learners within a global, digital commons have the right to work, network, and contribute to knowledge in public; to share their ideas and their learning in visible and connected ways if they so choose. Courses should encourage open participation and meaningful engagement with real audiences where possible, including peers and the broader public.

The right to own one's personal data and intellectual property
Students also have the right to create and own intellectual property and data associated with their participation in online courses. Online programs should encourage openness and sharing, while working to educate students about the various ways they can protect and license their data and creative work. Any changes in terms of service should be clearly communicated by the provider, and they should never erode the original terms of privacy or the intellectual property rights to which the student agreed.

The right to financial transparency

Students have a right to know how their participation supports the financial health of the online system in which they are participating. They have a right to fairness, honesty, and transparent financial accounting. This is also true of courses that are "free." The provider should offer clear explanations of the financial implications of students' choices.

The right to pedagogical transparency
Students have the right to understand the intended outcomes--educational, vocational, even philosophical--of an online program or initiative. If a credential or badge or certification is promised by the provider, its authenticity, meaning, and intended or historical recognition by others (such as employers or academic institutions) should be clearly established and explained.

The right to quality and care
Students have the right to care, diligence, commitment, honesty and innovation. They are not being sold a product--nor are they the product being sold. They are not just consumers. Education is also about trust. Learning--not corporate profit--is the principal purpose of all education.

The right to have great teachers
All students need thoughtful teachers, facilitators, mentors and partners in learning, and learning environments that are attentive to their specific learning goals and needs. While some of us favor peer learning communities, all of us recognize that, in formal educational settings, students should expect--indeed demand--that the people arranging, mentoring and facilitating their learning online be financially, intellectually and pedagogically valued and supported by institutions of higher learning and by society. Teachers' know-how and working conditions are students' learning conditions.

The right to be teachers
In an online environment, teachers no longer need to be sole authority figures but instead should share responsibility with learners at almost every turn. Students can participate and shape one another's learning through peer interaction, new content, enhancement of learning materials and by forming virtual and real-world networks. Students have the right to engaged participation in the construction of their own learning. Students are makers, doers, thinkers, contributors, not just passive recipients of someone else's lecture notes or methods. They are critical contributors to their disciplines, fields, and to the larger enterprise of education.

II. Principles

The following are principles to which the best online learning should aspire. We believe the merit of specific courses, programs, or initiatives can be judged on the strength of their adherence to these principles and encourage students and

professors to seek out and create digital learning environments that follow and embody them.

Global contribution
Online learning should originate from everywhere on the globe, not just from the U.S. and other technologically advantaged countries. The best courses will be global in design and contribution, offering multiple and multinational perspectives. They should maximize opportunities for students from different countries to collaborate with one another, to contribute local knowledge and histories and to learn one another's methods, assumptions, values, knowledge and points of view.

Value
The function of learning is to allow students to equip themselves to address the challenges and requirements of life and work. Online learning can serve as a vehicle for skills development, retraining, marketable expertise. It can also support self-improvement, community engagement, intellectual challenge, or play. All of these functions are valid. The best programs and initiatives should clearly state the potential contexts in which they offer value.

Flexibility
Students should have many options for online learning, not simply a digitized replication of the majors, minors, requirements, courses, schedules and institutional arrangements of conventional universities. The best online learning programs will not simply mirror existing forms of university teaching but offer students a range of flexible learning opportunities that take advantage of new digital tools and pedagogies to widen these traditional horizons, thereby better addressing 21st-century learner interests, styles and lifelong learning needs. Ideally, they will also suggest and support new forms of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary inquiry that are independent of old gatekeepers such as academic institutions or disciplines, certification agencies, time-to-degree measurements, etc.

Hybrid learning
Freed from time and place, online learning should nonetheless be connected back to multiple locations around the world and not tethered exclusively to the digital realm. This can happen by building in apprenticeships, internships and real-world applications of online problem sets. Problem sets might be rooted in real-world dilemmas or comparative historical and cultural perspectives. (Examples might include: "Organizing Disaster Response and Relief for Hurricane Sandy" or "Women's Rights, Rape, and Culture" or "Designing and Implementing Gun Control: A Global Perspective.")

Persistence
Learning is emergent, a lifelong pursuit, not relegated to the brick walls of an institution or to a narrow window of time during life; it has no specific end point.

The artificial divisions of work, play and education cease to be relevant in the 21st century. Learning begins on a playground and continues perpetually in other playgrounds, individual and shared workspaces, communities and more. Learning can be assessed but doesn't aim itself exclusively toward assessment.

Innovation
Both technical and pedagogical innovation should be hallmarks of the best learning environments. A wide variety of pedagogical approaches, learning tools, methods and practices should support students' diverse learning modes. Online learning should be flexible, dynamic, and individualized rather than canned or standardized. One size or approach does not fit all.

Formative assessment
Students should have the opportunity to revise and relearn until they achieve the level of mastery they desire in a subject or a skill. Online learning programs or initiatives should strive to transform assessment into a rich, learner-oriented feedback system where students are constantly receiving information aimed at guiding their learning paths. In pedagogical terms, this means emphasizing individualized and timely (formative) rather than end-of-learning (summative) assessment. Similarly, instructors should use such feedback to improve their teaching practices. Assessment is only useful insofar as it helps to foster a culture of success and enjoyment in learning.

Experimentation
Experimentation should be an acknowledged affordance and benefit of online learning. Students should be able to try a course and drop it without incurring derogatory labels such as failure (for either the student or the institution offering the course). Through open discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of programs, the industry should develop crowd-sourced evaluative guides to help learners choose the online learning that best fits their needs.

Civility
Courses should encourage interaction and collaboration between students wherever it enhances the learning experience. Such programs should encourage student contributions of content, perspectives, methods, reflecting their own cultural and individual perspectives. Online learning programs or initiatives have a responsibility to share those contributions in an atmosphere of integrity and respect. Students have the right and responsibility to promote and participate in generous, kind, constructive communication within their learning environment.

Play
Open online education should inspire the unexpected, experimentation, and questioning--in other words, encourage play. Play allows us to make new things familiar, to perfect new skills, to experiment with moves and crucially to embrace change--a key disposition for succeeding in the 21st century. We must cultivate

the imagination and the dispositions of questing, tinkering and connecting. We must remember that the best learning, above all, imparts the gift of curiosity, the wonder of accomplishment, and the passion to know and learn even more.

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SIGNATURES:

John Seely Brown, University of Southern California and Deloitte Center for the Edge
Betsy Corcoran, Co-founder, CEO, EdSurge (edsurge.com)
Cathy N. Davidson, Distinguished Professor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies, Co-Director PhD Lab in Digital Knowledge, Duke University, and cofounder Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (hastac.org)
Petra Dierkes-Thrun, Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Stanford University; blogs about literature and digital pedagogy at literatureilluminations.org
Todd Edebohls, CEO of careers and education service Inside Jobs (insidejobs.com)
Mark J. Gierl, Professor of Educational Psychology, Canada Research Chair in Educational Measurement, and Director, Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation, University of Alberta, Canada
Sean Michael Morris, Educational Outreach for Hybrid Pedagogy (hybridpedagogy.com) and Part-time Faculty in the English and Digital Humanities Program at Marylhurst University in Portland, OR
(Jan) Philipp Schmidt, Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU, p2pu.org) and MIT Media Lab Director's Fellow
Bonnie Stewart, Ph.D candidate and Sessional Lecturer, Faculty of Education, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada
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Sebastian Thrun, CEO of Udacity (udacity.com), Google Fellow and Research Professor in Computer Science, Stanford University
Audrey Watters, Writer, Hack Education (hackeducation.com)

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Invitation:

To join the discussion, visit one of the many platforms where this Bill of Rights and Principles is being published and blogged about (each of us, and each of the platforms, will likely create a different sort of engagement). We invite further discussion, hacking, and forking of this document. On Twitter, please use the

hashtag **#learnersrights** when you share your versions and responses. Finally, and most importantly, this document can't be complete (can never be complete) without continuous and dynamic contributions and revising by students. We invite students everywhere to read this beginning, to talk about it, to add to it.

Additional resources: We have not included reading resources here but invite you to add the ones most meaningful to you in the [public, crowd-sourced version](#) of the Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age. Collective contribution is the principle we espouse in this document. We look forward to your participation.