

<http://www.connectivism.ca/?p=104>

## Collective or Connective Intelligence?

Earlier this week, I posted a [short blurb](#) on elearnspace about the importance of connective versus collective intelligence. Several others commented on or reacted to the post, including [Chris Lott](#) and [Stephen Downes](#). A fair bit of discussion attended each of these postings. The distinctions between collective and connective are important, so I'll take a stab at summarizing the conversation and concerns expressed so far. Discussion initially arose from the [Horizon 2008 report](#) (.pdf), which explores future trends in learning and technology. The discussion on collective intelligence (p.23), while important, is a bit frustrating – data, information, and knowledge are used somewhat indiscriminately. Collective intelligence is initially defined as “a term for the knowledge embedded within societies or large groups of individuals”. According to this definition, it is essentially knowledge. A few paragraphs later, it is defined as “knowledge that can be uncovered by combing these open data stores”. Implicit collective intelligence is then introduced as a means to “mine datasets of information from huge numbers of human actions”. The somewhat random use of data, information, knowledge, and intelligence present a challenge in trying to interact with the broader concept of collective intelligence. Is collective intelligence a product of interaction (such as information)? Is it a process (such as creating wikipedia)? Is intelligence a state of knowing? Capacity to comprehend? A property of our minds? Clearly, if we are going to have a meaningful discussion, we need to come to some sort of agreement on what these terms mean. Let's start by providing working definitions of these terms:

**Collective intelligence:** “is a form of intelligence that emerges from the collaboration and competition of many individuals”. According to this definition, intelligence is not a product such as information or knowledge, but rather a capacity to come function together to achieve a particular task or intention. I don't have concerns with the *process* of collective intelligence as presented here, but I am concerned with the **identity-less product** which is the consummation of individual work and what is often presented as the work of the collective.

**Connective intelligence:** individual creation of information, ideas, and concepts which are then shared with others, connected, and re-created and extended based on the interaction.

Simply, collective means blending together. Connective means connecting while retaining the original (though others may build on it in their own spaces).

I'm not arguing against groups or collaboratives. A substantial part of my learning over the last decade has come through interaction and dialogue with others. But the starting point for that learning has not been the collective. The starting point has been based on my own interests and habits. I decided which groups to join, who to read, when to join, and to what degree to be involved. The outcome? I've watched very tightly knit groups – such as [the three amigos](#) and Twitter sub communities – form and I've also seen others (I'll put myself in this camp) stay a bit more on the outside. But the choice for how to participate rested with each individual because the starting point is a network (or connective) view of how we participate. An analogy that stretches credibility (but only slightly 😊) is the formation of a democracy. Gardner Campbell wisely invoked the [federalist papers](#) as an example of how individuals and states create a model of relationship that permits personal freedom and responsibility to the state and its objectives. The tension between Sparta and Athens provides another example. Opinions of an individual's or a state's responsibility creates very different societies.

A few other comments:  
*Why can't I have both? Does it have to be one way or the other (collective or connective)*

Subjects as complex as knowledge and collective and connective intelligence aren't black and white. While I live in a democratic country, not all of my activities are purely individualistic. I belong to organizations where I accept (non-democratic) direction from others. I participate in groups that requires subjugation of my identity and acceptance of the will of others. However, I am not compelled to join any group. I start with personal freedom to be involved in any group...and to leave that group when I desire. Similarly, in order for me to accept the value of collective intelligence, I must first have assurance that I as an individual, have connective intelligence – the choice to contribute or belong.

*Does group membership require an over-writing of individuality?*

A few of the terms in the discussion have become somewhat muddled. Individuals are equated with networks and connective intelligence. Groups are equated with collective intelligence. And then we throw in the concept of intelligence. It's a pretty convoluted mess. Chris Lott mentions this in a comment on elearnspace when he states that the discussion of connective intelligence is largely reflected in his view of collective intelligence. Wittgenstein is [ever the pest here](#). If connective intelligence is a part of Chris' interpretation of collective intelligence, I don't think it's the majority view. Yes, Levy and others provide a clearer conception of the role of individuals in collective intelligence, but common use (wikipedia, Google PageRank, ebay ratings) creates a combined work of the efforts of many, blurring individual roles. The collective is the priority. The product produced by the collective (rating system, recommendations, wiki pages) is the point of value.

*Does theory matter?*

Alan Levine adds an important voice (and does so, as he states, in the spirit of receiving feedback on the Horizon Report). Most people are not overly concerned with theory. Practical and useful application are factors of importance. If we're not able to cast the importance of the collective vs. connective (or groups vs. network) discussion in a manner that captures the interest of others who are more practically minded, then we have failed. However, even if most people are not interested in the theory behind how we organize ourselves online, it is important to highlight that theory has an amplifying effect over time. At a starting point, different organizations of government and society might not appear dramatically different. After a period of time – once the theories are expressed in systems, procedures, obligations, and expectations – a very different image emerges. The discussion of theory is important as a means of anticipating and possibly eliminating future negative effects. How does this discussion differ from groups vs. networks? In Stephen's exploration of this subject, he has focused on tracing the impact on individuals of certain types of organization. I'm seeing the discussion as focused on defining the building blocks for knowledge and intelligence. Put another way, Stephen says the issue is one of control and personal autonomy. I see the issue as one of creating the foundations for functioning in an information abundant world and finding optimal ways to learn and function together. Obviously, the group vs. network and collective vs. connective discussions are related. Finally, why is this discussion important? It's important because of how the outcome influences how we design software, organizational process, and even organizations themselves. Consider Wikipedia – the poster child of collective intelligence. Wikipedia over writes individuality. Yes, yes, I know you can check the history of changes, but the final product is largely a blending of all contributions and if my own browsing habits are an indication, the history tab is not overly used. When books are written collaboratively, the individual is again overwritten (at least in the final product). The collective permits contributions of individuals during the process...but overwrites the individual at the stage of creating the product. What types of examples exist where individuals retain their ideas and concepts? Blogs. YouTube. Podcasts. These approaches produce an outcome that begins with the individual node. What is produced is emergent. Not constrained by the final product of the collective (i.e. the wiki or the collaborative book or the final report). Essentially, as defined by common use (not the definitions provided above), **the collective presents a "melting pot" of ideas. The connective represents a "mosaic" of ideas.** Our software and our organizations should be designed in such a manner that permits individuals greatest choice and freedom. We can tie this concept to basic human rights. But a practical component exists as well. Connective intelligence is more lively, more dynamic, more diverse. I don't read blogs. I read Chris Lott. Stephen Downes. Gardner

Campbell. Alan Levine. I read people. Individuals. Collective intelligence suggests I read wiki pages, skim tag clouds, and interact with patterns based on collective activities.

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