

Where Tradition and Innovation Ignite

by Kristin Bair O’Keeffe

On November 14, Head of School John Palfrey and Tom Rubin ’79—chief intellectual property strategy counsel for Microsoft—hunkered down in the Trustees Room in GW Hall with 16 PA students for an informal discussion about intellectual property, *non sibi*, and the social responsibilities of big corporations.

An hour later, Palfrey, along with PA photography instructor Peg Harrigan and another eight students, engaged in a conference call with Hive Learning Network coordinators about the possibility of PA students participating in the newly launched Hive Fashion program. Supported by the MacArthur Foundation, the program is designed to give high school students “the transformative learning experience that comes from bringing personally meaningful ideas to life through creative design and production.”

During the Hive call, Palfrey was mostly quiet. Instead of driving the conversation, he let students make their way—encouraging them to ask questions, express what was on their minds, and talk directly with Hive coordinators about various ways a partnership might be configured. While there was no mistaking that he and Harrigan were guiding and overseeing, this quite

obviously was a peer-driven, interest-driven inquiry—a connected learning experience. If the Hive program comes to fruition, PA students will work virtually with students and fashion industry professionals in Chicago and New York, as well as with one another.

Attendance was not required at either event, no one was going to be tested on what Tom Rubin had to say about China and social responsibility, nor was there a definitive outcome of the Hive conversation. Yet students nearly floated out of each event, visibly inspired and motivated. “It was such a privilege to talk to [Rubin] and understand why he thought *non*

Connected Learning



sibi was still relevant at such a high corporate level,” says Janine Ko ’14. “The message so many of us get is that we have to choose between finding a lucrative career path and finding a *good* career path. The conversation with Rubin assured me that I might not have to make that choice, that many companies are both socially conscious and financially viable.”

It’s exactly *that* kind of intellectual, emotional, and real-world takeaway that connected learning leaders and initiators know will help today’s students thrive in a world that is rapidly and radically being altered by globalization and technology. As these two mighty influencers gain even more traction and lead the world down even more exciting paths, Palfrey knows that PA must lead in the movement to keep students academically engaged and to prepare them for meaningful participation in an information-driven economy. He’s adamant that PA must continue in the educational leadership role it has served for well over two centuries, and says, “Connected learning is a reasoned and balanced approach to honoring tradition in building for the future.”

But What Is Connected Learning?

For many people new to the concept, *connected learning* is a slippery term that implies (a) all teaching will be done using technology, (b) teachers will disappear from classrooms, and (c) traditional literacy skills (reading, writing, critical thinking, etc.) will no longer be relevant.

Of course, nothing could be further from reality. As is often the case with slippery things, there’s a smidge of truth in each implication and a good bit of ballyhoo.

In essence, connected learning is a research-based model of learning that maintains successful traditional standards and introduces new ways of doing things that tap into the potential created by globalization and technology. MacArthur Foundation Director of Education for U.S. Programs Connie Yowell elaborates:

“Connected learning harnesses the powerful new connection to ideas, knowledge, expertise, culture, friends, peers, and mentors we have through the Internet, digital media, and social networking. It’s dedicated to helping kids pursue knowledge and expertise in subjects they care deeply about, and doing it in a way in which they are supported by peers, friends, and caring adults working in educational institutions. Connected learning is designed to address the new political and economic realities faced by schools in America, because it calls for a new way of thinking about learning that is geared to the promises of our new knowledge society and sees schooling as only one pathway for learning.”¹

So...is it all about technology?

No, but technology does introduce new possibilities for learning, and children today will need to be well versed in those possibilities by the time they graduate from high school. Even so, it’s comforting to know that the *benefits of quiet, focused class time are not lost on the tech-driven, über-connected students of the new millennium*. As Gabbi Fisher ’13 says, “...I prefer to keep those [techie] tools as supplements instead of substitutes for real class time. I love class time without technology because it allows me to concentrate on my teacher and peers in real life, and nothing beats the connections made and revelations encountered in a physical classroom.”

Will teachers disappear from classrooms?

As classrooms become less teacher-centered and more inquiry-driven, the *roles teachers play as guides will become even more important*. Instead of being the primary dispensers of information, teachers will facilitate research and application, help students turn information into knowledge, and then help them apply that knowledge to real-world situations. Figuring out how to make these classroom shifts is a big part of why Palfrey chose connected learning as this

year's professional development theme and why it is resonating with PA faculty. Referencing connected learning guru Mimi Ito's workshop in September—which launched the theme—PA journalism instructor Nina Scott says, "I was excited by the workshop because of John Palfrey's energy and his devotion to diving into the future with gusto, grappling and wrestling with questions we've had for years—that all educators have had for years—about not only how to use technology in education but how to keep up with the kids who are fully embedded in that world."

And what about those reading, writing, and critical thinking skills?

In a world in which journalist Nick Kristof live-Tweets his Bahrain visa crisis, *Newsweek* transitions to an all-digital format, photographs of the devastating effects of the earthquake in Haiti can be shared instantly, and social media is recognized as a tool for political change, reading, writing, and critical thinking skills are more crucial than ever. Of course, *they will be paired with skills that are more important today than they were 10 or 20 years ago*, such as collaboration, cultural literacy, information analysis, and advanced problem-solving, but even so, their importance remains intact.

Connected Learning in Action

While surely the shift to a connected learning paradigm will bring groundbreaking changes to Andover classrooms, connected learning is already an integral part of many PA classes.

Close to home. Some of the strongest examples of connected learning already in place at PA are grounded at the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and the Addison Gallery of American Art. "Having the Peabody involved in [50] courses," Palfrey says, "whether it's a tiny modular thing or something more extensive, that's absolutely connected learning. Having students look at the maps that Sidney Knafel '48 has just given us in the Addison when they're doing history with Emma Frey, that's absolutely connected learning. I don't care if it's hard copy or digital. The format doesn't matter. It's the connection, the connective tissue we draw upon."

¹Connie Yowell, "Connected Learning: Reimagining the Experience of Education in the Information Age," *HuffPost Education*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/connie-yowell/connected-learning-reimag_b_1316100.html (March 3, 2012).

Alums. While Palfrey acknowledges that the core work of learning a discipline like math is going to happen in a master teacher's classroom, he's excited by the myriad opportunities for learning from PA's rich network of alums who have expertise in everything from innovative surgical techniques to chicken farming. "Some of the best teaching I've ever done," he says, "has been with a guy named David Hornik, who happens to be the dad of Noah Hornik '15. He was a graduate of Harvard Law School (HLS), and he and I taught a course on venture capital at HLS, which he volunteered to do. He came to Harvard for three weeks. We co-taught the class...The students loved it, we got great reviews, but we also, I really think, taught a lot. And the point was he was an alum who just wanted to give back."

Technology with pedagogy as a goal. One of the many benefits of technology in the classroom is that it enables teachers to provide prompt and more efficient feedback to students on their work. In Vic Svec's nearly paperless Russian classes, students do the majority of their work on iPads. They submit homework electronically; Svec marks it up and sends it back electronically, often within an hour of receiving it; students correct their mistakes and send their work back to Svec... electronically. Each and every piece of homework goes back and forth between teacher and student until it's right and until

each student understands why. Students even submit audio files of their oral homework. Sure, Svec used to do this same thing when students turned in paper homework, but the exchanges took days and weeks, not hours. To those who argue that technology makes more work for teachers, Palfrey says, "The technology is not making more work; the desire to give feedback to kids is what's making the work." Svec echoes that and adds, "If you do it right, it makes a lot more work. But it also makes the work better."

These are, by no means, the only examples of connected learning already happening at PA. In Nick Kip's Greek and Latin classes, students do grammar drills using interactive Excel sheets that Kip first created more than a decade ago. Nina Scott's journalism students blog about hot topics in the news. During the recent presidential election, Sue Greenberg's new media students blogged and Tweeted in response to real-time results. Archivist Paige Roberts is building bridges between libraries, museums, and archives to create educational programming that makes the best use of PA's cultural heritage collections. And in teaching fellow Patrick Rielly's English courses, students engage in nightly class discussions about their reading assignments on Twitter. Like many English teachers, Rielly, in the past, had his students keep reading journals or write one-page reading responses, but he's found that

having real-time discussions with students on Twitter allows him to provide immediate feedback.

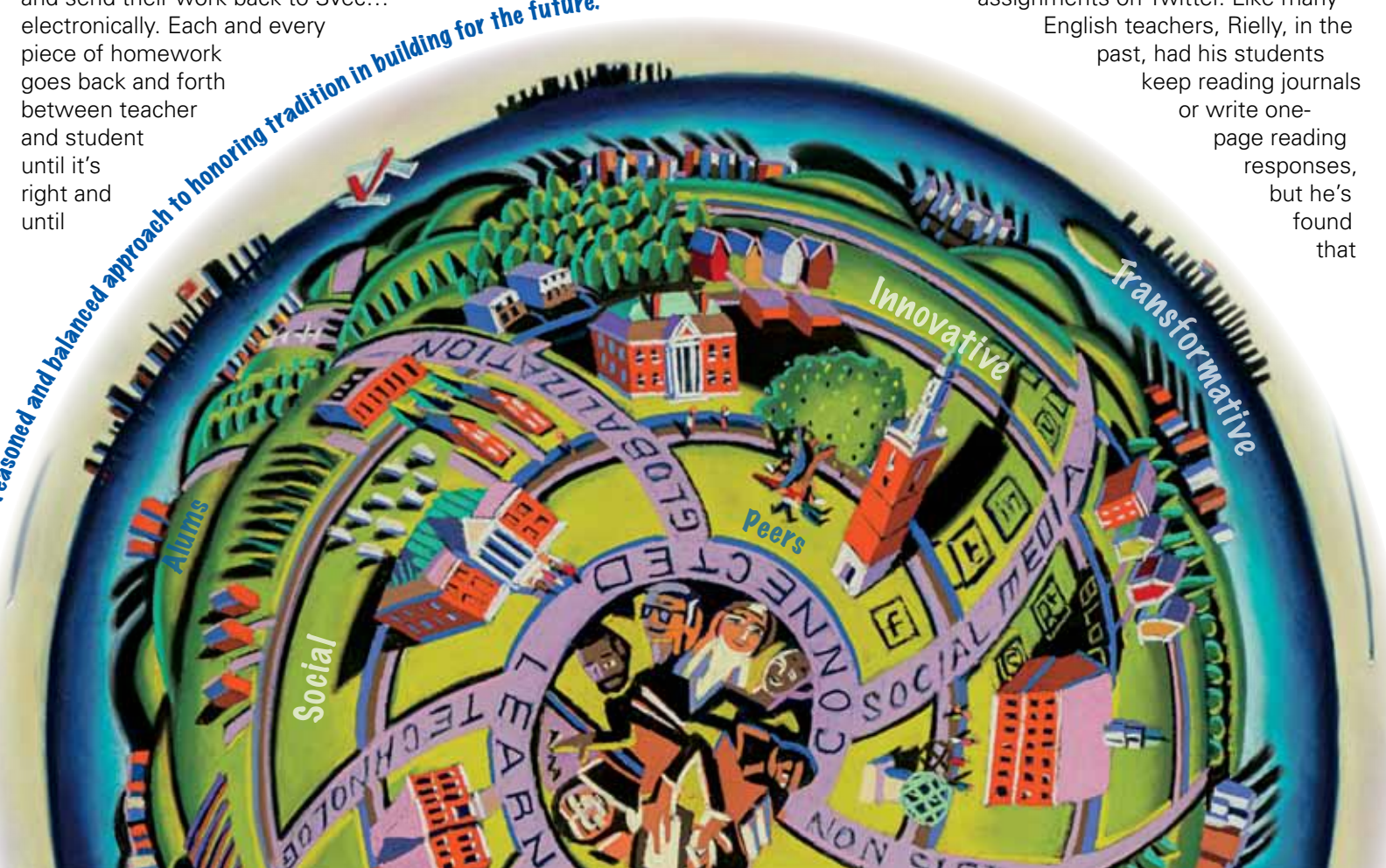
And What If...

Beyond what is already happening in Andover classrooms, Palfrey proposes a range of models that will make the most of students' time at PA by connecting it to blended or hybrid versions of online education. "What if," he says, "we extend what our classrooms are and [extend them] out to the teaching that's happening elsewhere?" Sometimes, he explains, that might mean offering Andover content to others. Sometimes that might mean teaming up with another school. And sometimes that might mean PA students taking classes elsewhere via the Internet. Looking forward, he recognizes that the virtual opportunities of connected learning are far greater than those possible in a traditional brick-and-mortar institution.

So...

- What if Vic Svec isn't just sending feedback to PA students who are taking his Russian classes, but also to three students in Illinois, two in India, and four in the U.K., whose schools don't offer Russian? And what if these nine students participate in Svec's classes either live via Skype, if time differences allow, or via downloaded video recordings?
- What if, when PA's budget does not provide for an Arabic teacher, PA teams up with four or five schools whose students also want to study Arabic, and the schools collectively hire a teacher for a virtual class?
- What if students in 10 literature courses around the world who are all reading the same book take part in Rielly's nightly Twitter discussions? What enlightenment could readers in India shed on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*? What enlightenment could PA readers shed on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*? And what could these students teach one another about culture, community, and collaboration?
- What if PA faculty members develop teaching materials (which is already happening in many subjects) and share them more broadly with the world in ways that are well thought-out and sensible?

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Relatively soon, Palfrey hopes to implement a summer program in which, say, 100 beds are designated for non-PA kids who come back every summer and who, during the rest of the year, do PA coursework remotely. "Let's imagine," he says, "that four of the classes that [these students] get at home are fabulous, but they don't have enough science. It just doesn't exist. They would take the online science course with 10 other PA students."

Or, he says, "You could even slice it more thinly. You could say kids come for one week during the summer. There's week by week by week, and we have five cohorts of kids come. You could do it with Exeter and you could do it with Harvard, and you could split

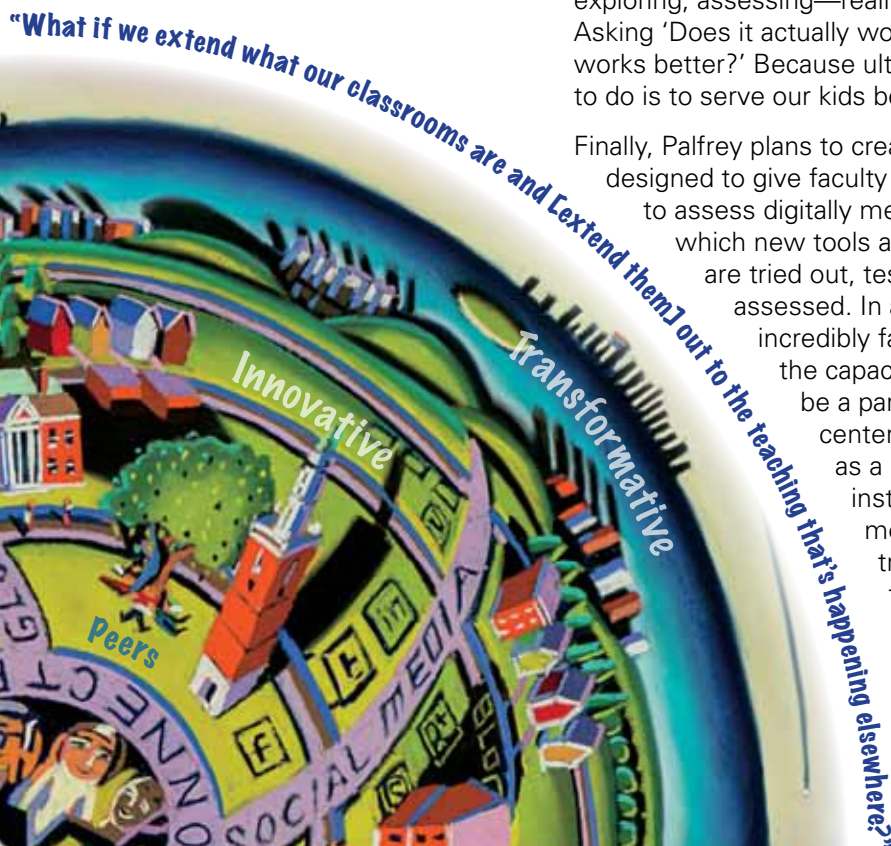
it up so they could come for one summer here, one summer there. I think there are lots of versions of this that we should open up. And it might mean that youth from more quarters end up coming to Andover. I feel like *we already sort of do that with (MS)²*. We have a version of that. So I think we've got a whole bunch of neat experimental models that we can work from."

As the list of *what-ifs* clearly demonstrates, Palfrey is putting all of his experience, know-how, and energy into figuring out how connected learning at PA will look in a year or two, but he's very much looking forward to hearing more ideas from faculty. "Connected learning is a set of possibilities," he says. "And what I want most is for our faculty here to be engaged in this inquiry, and to be engaged in testing, exploring, assessing—really carefully assessing. Asking 'Does it actually work? What works? What works better?' Because ultimately, what we're trying to do is to serve our kids better, right?"

Finally, Palfrey plans to create an institute at PA designed to give faculty and students a place to assess digitally mediated learning, a lab in which new tools and teaching techniques are tried out, tested, tossed around, and assessed. In a world that is changing incredibly fast, he wants PA to have the capacity to be able to act quickly, be a part of those changes, be a center of excellence that serves as a model for other educational institutions, and lead the movement in educational transformation. "Let's get in front of the mob and call it a parade," he says.

Read more about connected learning at www.andover.edu/magazine.

Kristin Bair O'Keeffe is an author, speaker, and writing teacher with 18 years of teaching experience in both traditional and virtual classrooms. She also is Andover magazine's class notes editor.



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