CITYCONNEX

CityConneX: Connecting Vancouver's CityStudio

CityConneX Network Venture | Penner
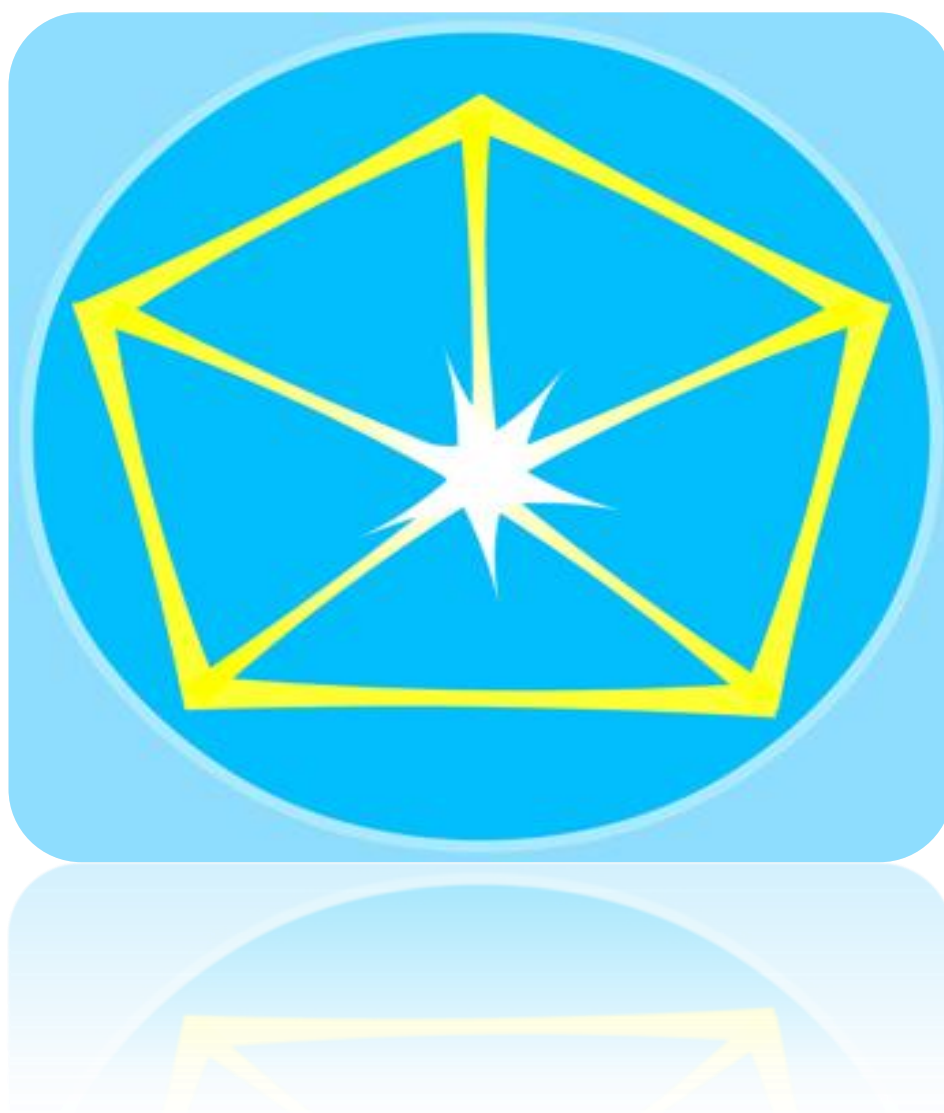
CityConneX

Objective:

CityConneX is a CMS (content management system) that would act as a database, collaborative space, course manager and a resource for those involved in the Vancouver CityStudio project. The system would help centralize projects, learning and ideas brought forth by students and faculty of the core course, participating institutions, businesses and community - all groups the CityStudio project aims to engage. CityConneX will maximize the potential by providing a space for collaboration and resource sharing to occur between participants and stakeholders outside the core CityStudio course.

The narrow market focus begins with CityStudio (and thus local city government), participating institutions and businesses. CityConneX's success would see market expansion into businesses and institutions that become interested in joining CityStudio and choose to take advantage of this network's opportunities.

Market Background:

In October 2009, Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson put forth a plan consisting of 10 targets for the city to meet and strive to become the greenest city in the world by 2020. January 2011 saw the adoption of the targets as Council policy with the addition of one more target into the action plan in July 2011, now referred to as the Greenest City Action Plan (referred to as GCAP from here forward) (City of Vancouver, 2011). CityStudio was an idea that came shortly after the initial plan in 2009 and was presented to the city in the fall of 2010 by co-founders Janet Moore and Duane Elverum (CityStudio, 2011). The idea was that if the city was to meet the goals set out in the plan, "greening" the city would require engagement of multiple stakeholders (CityStudio coordinator, 2011). The vision of CityStudio is summarized on their website as:

> To become the most innovative inter-institutional campus/city collaboration in the world towards
> learning and implementation of urban sustainability strategies.
>
> Over the next 9 years we aim to become leaders in four critical areas of urban sustainability:
>   1. Learning around inter-institutional and collaborative partnerships
>   2. Community engagement, dialogue and multi stakeholder processes
>   3. Learning how to live on one planet and implementation of GC strategies
>   4. Transferability and learning exchange between campuses and cities
>
> (CityStudio, 2011).

The project began in the fall of 2011 with the first year set out as the course's design year (CityStudio, 2011) including 1 core course and 11 partner courses from six public post-secondary institutions – BCIT, VCC, Langara, UBC, SFU and Emily Carr. The push by the city to expand student engagement through

partner and network courses (co-coordinator, CityStudio) aims at "…help[ing] create the most innovative campus-city collaboration in the world towards learning and implementation of Vancouver's urban sustainability strategies" (CityStudio, 2011) focusing projects around the goals and targets of GCAP. "The project aims to establish a unique, innovative inter-institutional and collaborative relationship between the six post-secondary institutions and the City of Vancouver, emphasizing sustainability leadership, social enterprise, education of new change managers and the development of green business" (CityStudio, 2011).

Centralization through CityConneX

What the CityStudio is attempting to do is create a vast network and cross barriers that are currently separating various spheres; formal education, community, business (private) and government (local level) allowing for these groups to work collaboratively.


(Source: CityStudio, 2011)

Various stakeholders aim to share information, knowledge in order for it to be focused on a very specific goal: GCAP. However partner course instructors and students often feel disconnected and collaborative efforts are not as successful as their potential. CityConneX aims to resolve many of the current issues as well as offer great future potential; a) exposure, recognition, resource sharing, time and therefore cost-cutting potentials and course content management for faculties and their institutions; b) access to new knowledge, ideas and proposals from multiples institutions across multiple disciplines and students as

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resources for businesses; c) engage community members, groups and organizations that may be resource-strapped, and give a voice for citizens and communities in project development and planning d) provide a database and online location for all participants to access this vast network of information including local government (planners, etc.) who do not have time to search on their own.

A CityConneX would also move coordination efforts, discussions, information and resources into a space that becomes accessible in a mobile context.

Why Centralization?

Collaboration in CityStudio on a macro-scale has been less successful to date for two main reasons: lack of time and a lack of network. Although many groups are currently on board as stakeholders the level of decentralization is hindering network potentials. CityConneX is not proposing that all these groups centralize to create one massive institution for this is impossible and unreasonable. Rather it would create a central online space where groups connect while still allowing participating sectors and groups to maintain their independence.
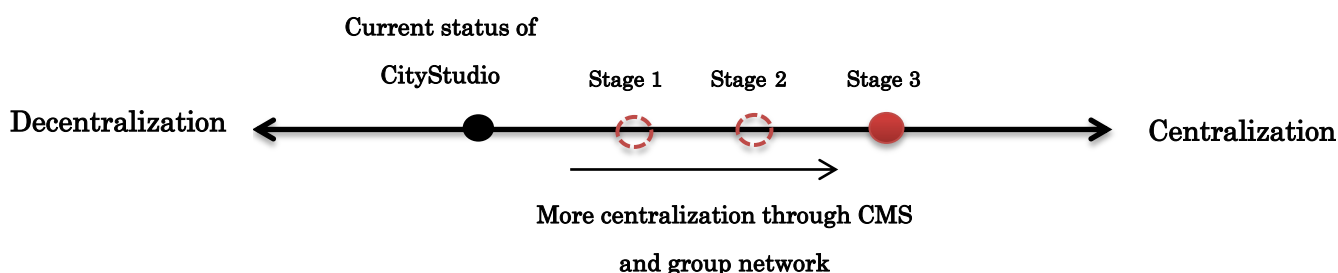

Currently CityStudio owns a physical space at 1800 Spyglass place, Vancouver, BC which is used as a "…collaborative workspace [that] will host public dialogues and community engagement events for up to 60 people related to project work" (CityStudio, 2011). Faculty administration, business staff, city planners already operate in busy schedules and to coordinate a time for these various people to get together (in person) is nearly impossible. There was only one pre-term workshop in which faculty staff (participating professors and administration staff) and 3-proposed mini-conferences (CityStudio, 2011).

Stages of Implementation and investment

Implementation of this network would be carried out in three stages with each stage seeing the addition of an investing stakeholder group. There would be 3 stages of investment as the joining stakeholder invests upon entry. Investment and funding would also come from government. Since CityStudio is a public project and funded partially by the City of Vancouver they become an investor in the start-up phase and may be seen as a funder, investing indirectly through CityStudio with possibilities existing for direct funding upon council approval as funding provided for GCAP.

The stages of stakeholder participation and new investment are as follows:

- **Stage 1** – The beginning would see investment from the CityStudio core course and participating departments of post-secondary institutions.
- **Stage 2** – Once smooth operation is ensured and any technical or other issues have been sorted out businesses will be approached-both those who are already engaged through partner courses and those that are not.
- **Stage 3** – The last stage would see the addition of community organizations. Since this group is likely less able to invest as heavily as stage 1 & 2 participants, they would be approached last after overall start-up or other costs level out and investment would grant organizations access with a surplus going towards operation and maintenance costs.

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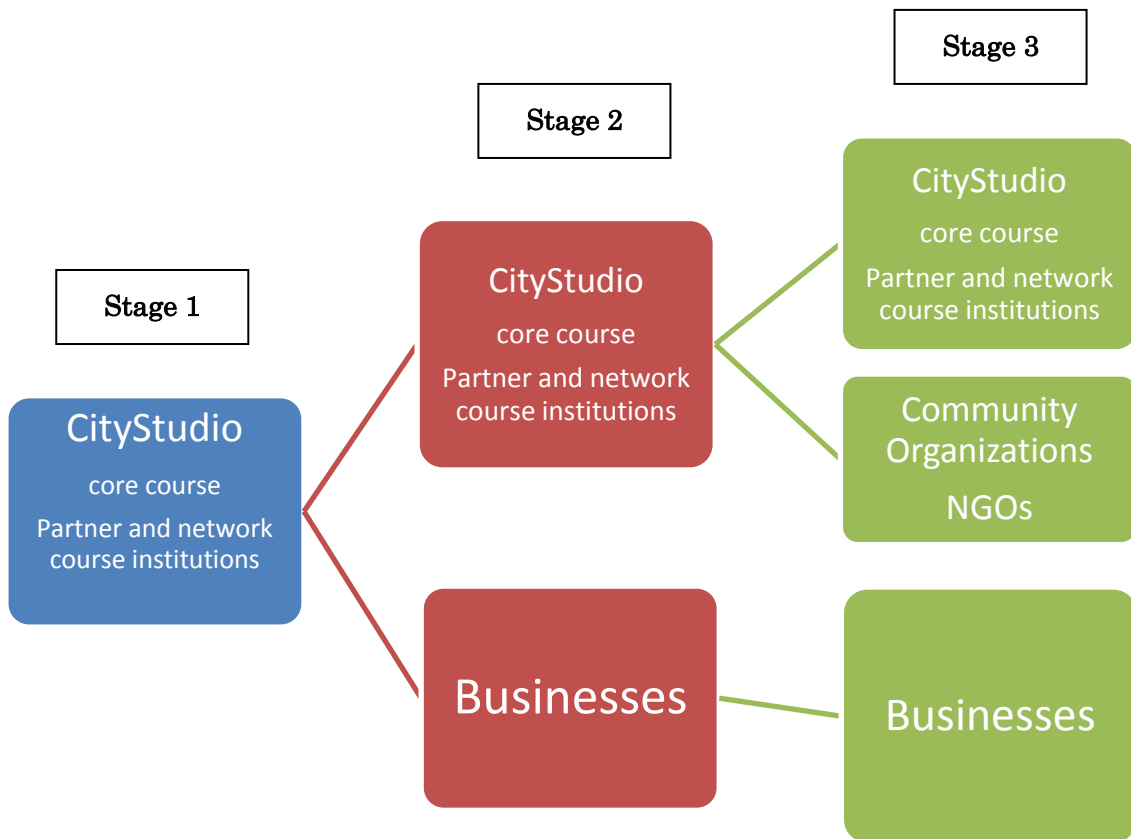
Investing Stakeholders: What are the benefits?

Benefits will vary across stakeholder groups and depend on level of engagement. Investors will not see direct financial benefits but initial and continuing investment will generate social and institutional value for post-secondary institutions and organizations. Businesses will see both short term benefits from exposure (advertising) and long-term benefits through implementation of cost-saving project ideas and plans generated by students. This is already the case with businesses that are working with the students of a BCIT where students are developing, planning and proposing sustainable business plans and working in collaboration with businesses to implement these plans (partner course instructor, 2011).

Citystudio core course

Local government involvement in CityStudio divides this investing stakeholder group into two interconnected groups; the core course and the local government. Government benefits through more student learning project ideas and resources directed at meeting strategies of GCAP and a database that catalogues all those involved providing easier access to information. At the core course level students, instructors and coordinators and other CityStudio team members benefit through increased coordination and access to learning occurring at partner courses that is incorporated into core course projects. CityConnex would provide a solid support to the CityStudio coordinator creating more effective means of communication between partner course instructors and city staff. A transdisciplinary approach becomes more feasible with increased access to experts in a variety of fields.

Faculties of participating courses

Currently faculties have agreed to have partner courses "pointed" in the direction of CityStudio (CityStudio, 2011). CityConneX would provide an online platform to run courses for those that choose a blended or online learning approach. Participating faculties will benefit from exposure and recognition of projects that are implemented or in models that businesses show an interest. Students of these faculties would have a direct link to potential employers and this becomes an attractable feature to increasing student enrollment and in turn revenue through tuition or outside funding or grants to encourage research. Instructors benefit from knowledge and experience sharing and CityConneX becomes an informal professional development tool. Transfer of knowledge and successes between Instructors and staff that otherwise may not have occurred, is then carried into respective classrooms becoming a direct benefit for students.

CityStudio could also consider the possibility of having students engaged in the development, planning maintenance and technical aspects of CityConneX. This would not only significantly decrease start-up and operations costs, but present a co-op opportunity to students working in the areas of communication, IT, computer programming and development – bringing in yet another discipline into CityStudio.

Post-secondary institutions

At an institutional level CityConneX becomes a space for recognition of individual institutions and innovations. Vancouver post-secondary institutions will gain even more exposure in the global education market as the CityStudio project gains momentum on an international scale. The Green Economy contributed CAD $15.3 billion to the British Columbia provincial GDP and is quickly becoming vast global market estimated at US $5.2 trillion (Globe Foundation, 2010). As the popularity and success of the CityStudio project grows, it will attract significant attention in North American and international cities that see it as a successful model for engaging various spheres to work on a common goal of sustainability. The branding of participating post-secondary institutions as "green" and recognition for their involvement in the CityStudio and Greenest City project will increase interest of perspective students and contribute to international student enrollment and thus a significant increase in revenue since international students pay higher tuition fees than domestic students. CityConneX will provide a space for universities to showcase their involvement, courses and their contributing projects and captivate the inter-institutional collaborate will still maintaining competition among these institutions.

Businesses

New regulations to enforce sustainable business practices will be implemented by the city in the next few years. By 2015 the government plans to ban all compostables from commercial garbage(City of Vancouver, 2011), all construction and demolition wood wastes from disposal (City of Vancouver, 2011; Moore, 2011) and Metro Vancouver moving to keep 70% of commercial wastes out of landfills (BC Ministry of Environment, 2011; Metro Vancouver, 2011; Moore, 2011). For many businesses making this shift will be time consuming and costly (initially). Businesses who buy into CityConneX will have access to the minds, knowledge, ideas and experience of students and instructors across a variety of disciplines and other businesses who have successfully implemented plans towards sustainability. Furthermore students could be recruited for co-ops with businesses, minimizing costs for businesses as students become the planners working with businesses.

Community organizations

Community organizations would benefit in ways similar to businesses. Joining the network would enable them to engage students through projects that involve greening communities around the city. Also this space would become another place for these organizations to have a voice and collaborate in projects that they often feel include businesses and government but leave out citizens and communities.

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CityConneX network: What would it look like?

Logistically this network would look other collaborative learning system used in higher education. CityConneX would however become much more than a space for online courses. The network would be separated into sections of membership; i) CityStudio core course; ii) partner courses; iii) network courses; iv) business; v) community; vi) city (local government)

For the core course this would mean relocating the current blog (http://citystudiovancouver.blogspot.com/; CityStudio, 2011,) into this network and expanding. Partner course would be added and a platform for those that wish to run online sections of the class. Instructors would have the option of making online work viewable to network members but would be encouraged to make project ideas work available to maximize learning across the system. Network courses would be granted access but not have an option to run courses through this system. Forums for students, and instructors would encourage both inter and intra-group dialogue and learning.

The section for businesses would be developed in collaboration with them to meet their needs and include their opinions. It could include sections to update current projects and at the very least consist of a forum to encourage student-business links to workshop ideas and build new or continue existing partnerships.

A formalized network mailing system will make contacts more readily available at all levels cutting out the need to cross various levels of bureaucracy. As an example if a partner-course instructor at UBC wanted information from a network course at Emily Carr they would have a direct communications system rather than passing through faculty or department administration. While this is not always the case, it is time consuming and a CityConneX system would develop more efficient coordination on all levels.

The future: Continuance

On the eve of the city elections Robertson confirmed his party's commitment to making Vancouver the world's greenest city   (Roberston, 2011) and re-election of the Vision Vancouver party, Mayor Gregor Roberston, and election of all seven members into council guarantees another three years of a politically-backed push towards sustainability through Greenest City Action Plan goals. This has significant impact on CityStudio and CityConneX in present and future. Investors may worry that such a venture may be too heavily political and risky because of its connections to the local government and GCAP which could be dismantled should a different party come into power. Starting CityConneX now would allow it to gain momentum, investment and grow over the next three years. By this time participants will hold considerable stake in the project and investment from post-secondary institutions, businesses and community with investment and success of the project would be great enough to avoid politicization attempts or dismantling CityStudio (and in turn this venture).

Investors may also worry about the politicization of projects and that centralization means more government involvement in institutions and businesses that value their independence or private economies. CityConneX is not about disrupting this independence. We will create more effective communication, knowledge sharing, coordination and collaboration to work on resolving issues that are important and bring benefits to both private and public domains and independence will be maintained. Although institutions and businesses will work together in some aspects but competition and independence are not at risk and this should of minimal concern to investors. The heterogeneity of groups involved and interests, disciplines and expertise brought together by this project will strengthen the venture and be a regulating mechanism against favoritism to any one group's interests/agenda.

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Appendices:

Figure 3: Simplified model of CityStudio and spheres of engagement.
The proposed CMS network would aim to eventually engage participants from all spheres with CityStudio at the core.
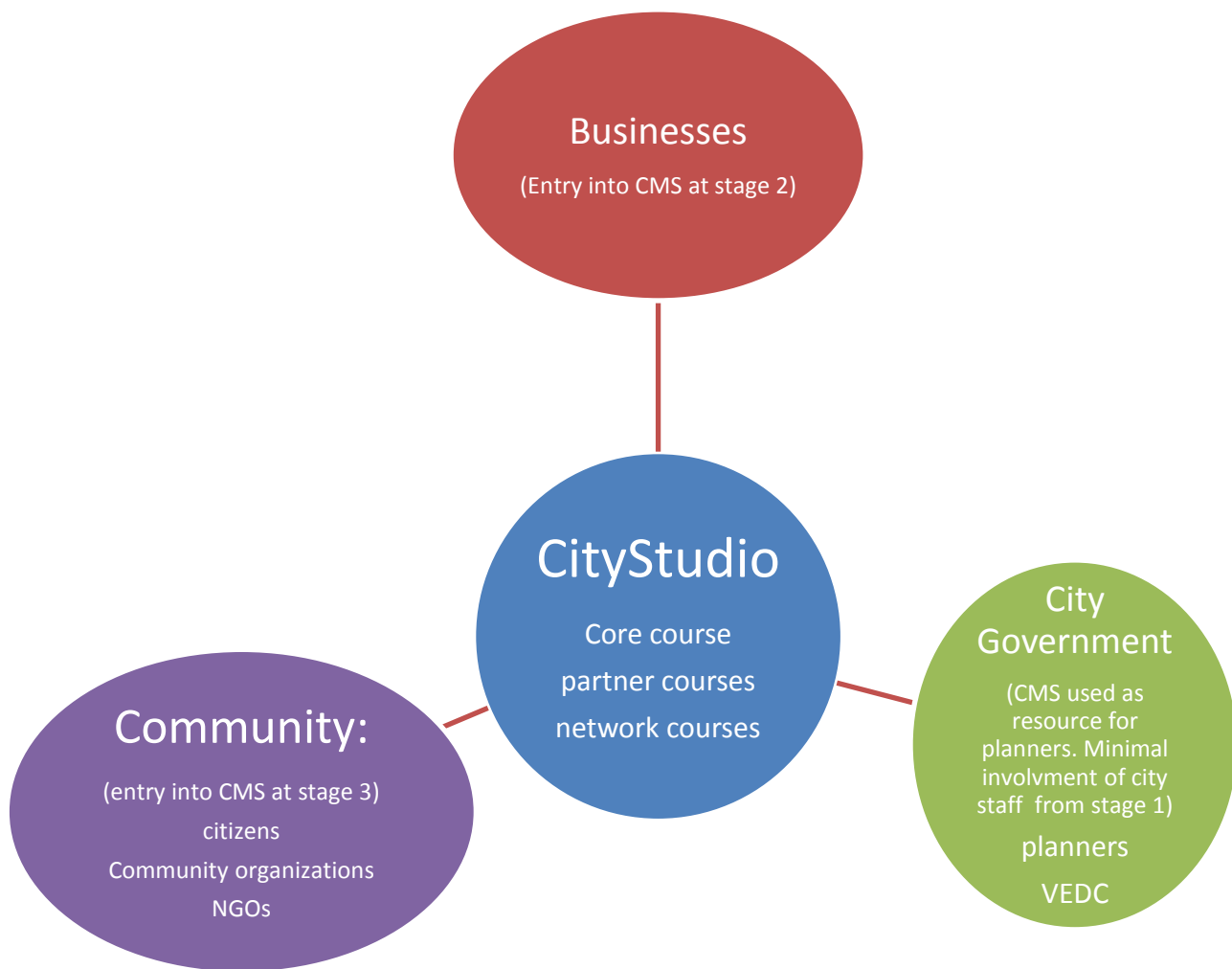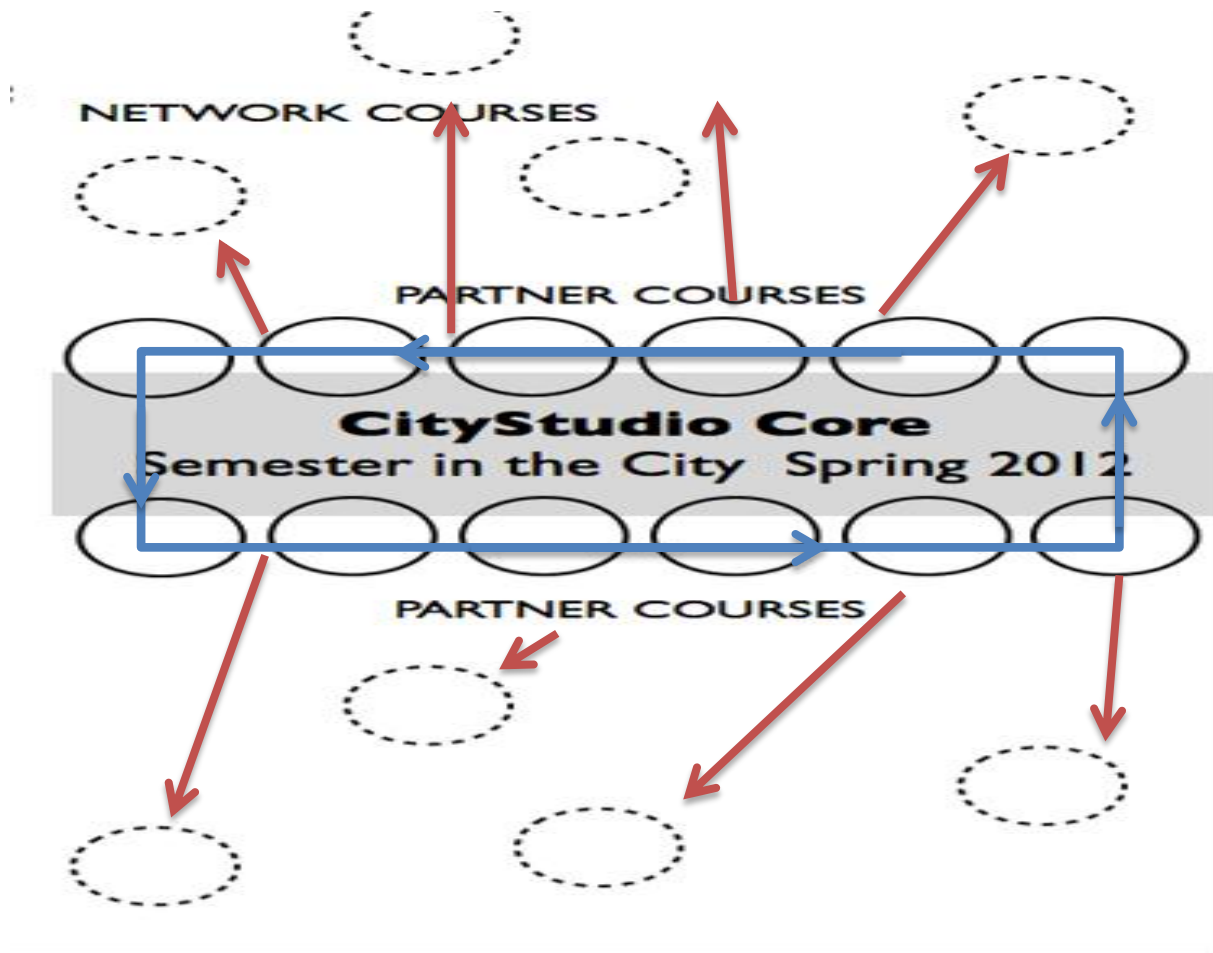
Figure 2 – Levels of engagement of students and faculty

This would be the first year of a project-wide implemented CMS. At this stage there would be no business or political involvement.

NOTE: The text "Semester in the City of Spring 2012" appears on the original image and does not suggest implementation of this venture by this date.

(Source of original image (without arrows): CityStudio, 2011).

The red arrows represent the flow of information out to courses that opt to become network courses. These courses would still be able to access to the system but access would be limit in that information uploaded by partner and core courses would be visible but network courses would be unable to interact with the information (respond on posting boards or download files).

The blue arrow highlights the connection between partner courses. As a partner course member, students, and instructors would have full access to the system and be able to connect with all other partner courses involved during that term as well as those involved at the core course level.

Figure 3 – Level of engagement of students, faculty and businesses

At the second stage of the project with the addition of another level of engagement with businesses.

Businesses

NETWORK COURSES

PARTNER COURSES

CityStudio Core
Semester in the City Spring 2012

PARTNER COURSES
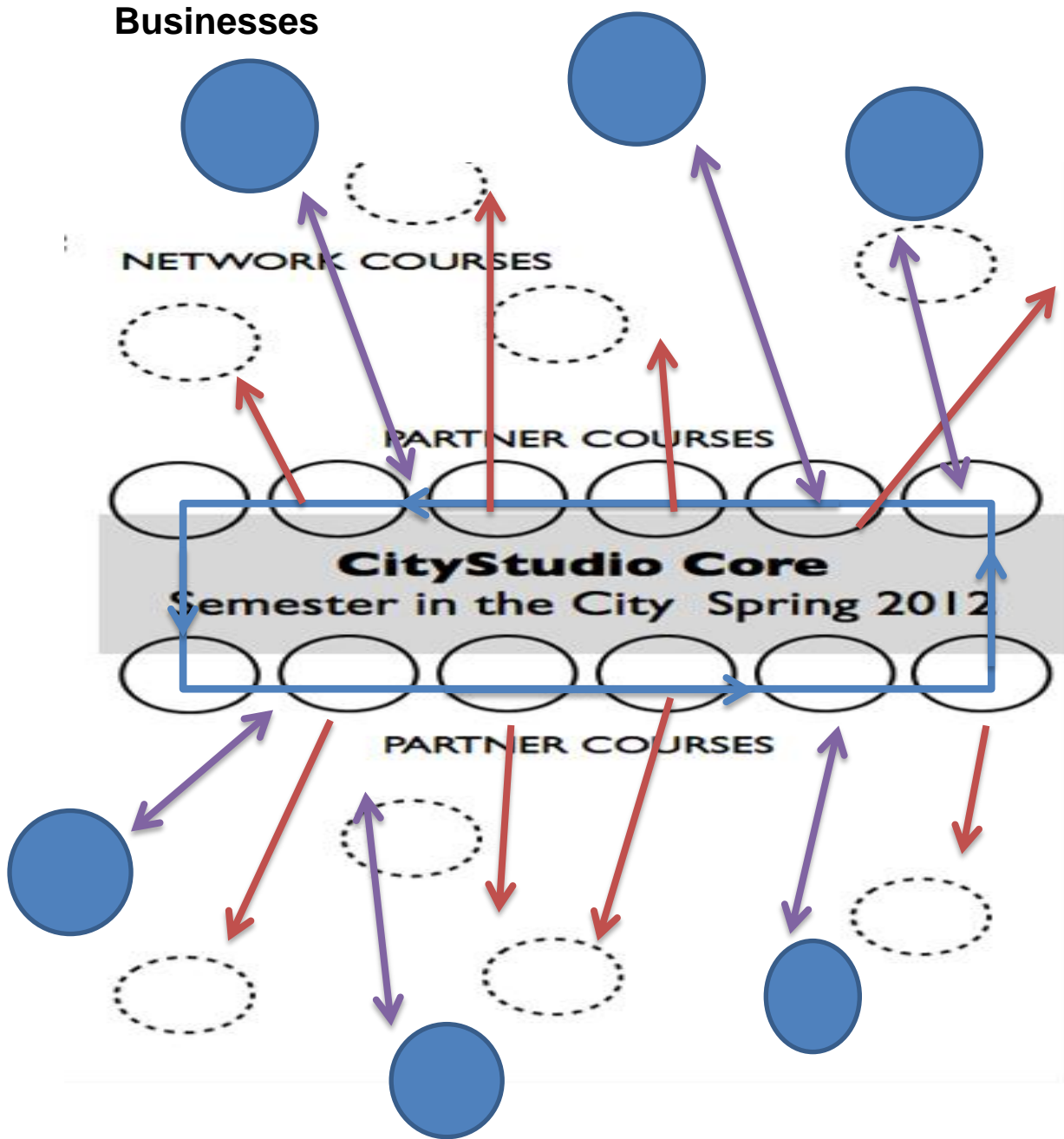
The purple arrows represent the addition of businesses to the project adding yet another level of information with businesses becoming resources, platforms for student projects and proposals. Also students become resources for businesses that may not have time or financial resources to plan or workshop ideas. This model would evolve yet again with the addition of community organizations and non-governmental organizations in stage three.

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