Title: Investigating projective identity trajectories for 21st century learning
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In this article, the authors discuss the importance of studying identity in the context of 21st century learning. Identity is an evolving trajectory that is always in-flux or changing. In a fast changing 21st century, educators are recognizing the significance of identity work, in particular projective identity, as individuals participate in multiple roles. The purpose of this article is to formulate key tenets for the study of projective identity in the form of role-play(s) as youth-participants navigate different social and spatial affinity spaces, and to describe why it is important to 21st century learning.

Introduction

Learning in the 21st century is complex and challenging. Prominent proponents of such a perspective include renowned scholars such as John Seely Brown. In his recent visits to Singapore and to the National Institute of Education, Brown has stressed that the Singapore school system can lead the way internationally for how 21st century learning can be facilitated. Regarding new media in education, he
described cases of pre-adolescents engaged in virtual trades within the World of Warcraft (WoW) environment that can be characterized as sophisticated competencies, even when held up against the rigorous standards of real-world financial sectors. In these worlds, players and residents develop leadership and identities by social recognition and through role- enactments. Within these worlds, men, women, and children of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds co-construct meanings mediated by their role-performances (manifested through their avatars). When people play these “virtual” roles, we regard them as being involved in enacting their projective identity. Through their projective identity enactments, players co-construct and co-evolve these very identities as they navigate, test, and extend the boundaries of the cultural and political spaces that at once entrap and liberate them.

The phenomenon and emergence of many such online communities have been startling. Such development implies an urgent need to understand the kinds of phenomena occurring in these so-called futuristic (relative to current school practices) learning spaces and to consider the implications to present settings.

The future is indeed breaking into the present; what then can schools learn from these online spaces? We hypothesize that youths who are actively engaging in these affinity spaces have to face, understand, and manage tensions in identity as they traverse between these digital spaces and current schooling milieu. This is consistent with the notion of the self as constantly “shape-shifting portfolio people” (Gee, 2008, p. 105), a key requisite of the 21st century.

Recognizing that K–12 schools are unique communities of practice in their own rights (Hung & Chen, 2006), we suggest that schools should presently not be reformed or re-designed based on new media environments, but rather that it may be more prudent to conceive learning as interplays between formal and the so called informal settings afforded by new media, where learners can navigate between and across the two affinity spaces. Recent work in online ethnography and the anthropology of modern cultural flows (Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000; Markham, 2003; Taylor, 2006) has begun to document how offline and online spaces, and practices, are co-constituted, and more critically, inter-projected one upon the other.

In other words: (a) how can we capitalize on both schooling and new media for learners to navigate their learning trajectories across these multiple affinity spaces; and (b) what can we learn from new media environments which many youths find so engaging, and that can inform us on pedagogy related to formal learning?

This kind of study is relevant to the learning sciences. It maintains a strong focus on a relational investigation into formal and informal learning environments, while foregrounding central issues of identity and becoming (which will be discussed in the later sections) that are core to new media and new literacies. These issues are investigated in the informal learning space of online affinitive communities, the findings of which are meant to inform design principles that will contribute to strongly coupled formal and informal contexts of learning. The knowledge contribution to the learning sciences pertains to the what’s and how’s of traversing various boundaries and affinity spaces, and the implications such traversals have on participants’ learning. Learning, in this context, is characterized by authorship and personal agency, which is in contrast to formal educational settings, where youth are far more often asked to internalize and accept information rather than create and challenge ways of knowing. This difference in experiences of personal agency, pleasure, and efficacy inherent to with-in and with-out school contexts has the unfortunate effect of rendering school-based learning unengaging, or even worse, irrelevant (Prensky, 2005).

This presents a challenge for education institutions in that they will require new institutional practices and ways of engaging digitally-savvy youth in learning activities that will not only be seen as relevant to their out-of-school practices but will also better serve them as digital 21st century citizens beyond their schooling years.

Within these new conditions of increasing mobility, wherein youth traverse multiple social and spatial configurations, the experience of living and learning may be conceptualized as an “open journey in which the very act of movement across spatial boundaries unlocks the fixity of meanings and identities and, hence, problematizes the spatial logic of bounded learning places” (Kostogriz, 2006, p. 177). In these configurations, a sense of agency comes largely from freedom of movement (Carr, 2003) both spatially and socially (McBirney, 2004; Turkle, 1995).

**Situated Cognition and Knowing the Self**

Human knowledge and interaction cannot be divorced from the world…. One cannot look at just the situation, or just the environment, or just the person: To do so is to destroy the very phenomenon of interest. After all, it is the mutual accommodation of people and the environment that matters…. ” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 4)

Following from such a situated cognition stance, learning emphasizes dialogue and social meaning constructions as a means of appropriating multiple perspectives. Such multiplicity of perspectives for fostering learning is consistent with 21st century goals. When considering a narrower social construction of
meanings focus, identity is the social construction of self-understanding. Identity work in this context plays out in terms of self-understanding as bound to particular contexts or practices or environments. Identity from this point of view is not definitive in that an individual possesses only one identity, but that identity is multiple and situatively constructed.

The socio-spatial dimensions of context have an intertwining relationship with identity development referred to as a becoming trajectory in this article. A present-continuous tense of "becoming" is used as an important construct to connote that identity is always undergoing change and in transition. Ricoeur (2002) stresses that every moment, however slightly, changes an identity. Moreover, Ricoeur's conceptions posit identity as a social construct as defined by the contextual relative-to-other.

**Projective Identity as a Becoming Trajectory**

Earlier conceptions of identity and the nature of self as a stable construct have been challenged by new approaches to the relational understanding between language, narrative, and the impact of cultural tools on the development of the human person (Bruner, 1990; Valsiner, 1998). Within this perspective, the concept of identity has been variously described as 'multiple' (Rosenberg, 1979) and 'narrated' (Sarbin, 1986) and the self as 'dialogical' (Hermans, 1996, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this regard, identities are always in a process of becoming (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987). Such views are broadly termed as Discourse Identity. Adapting Bakhtin's (1929/1973) theory of dialogism, it may be argued that the self consists of multiple 'I' positions in constant dialogue with one another (e.g., Sméagol in *The Lord of the Rings*) and with social other selves.

Within this framework, individuals often fantasize about other persons. Just as teens want to identify with certain role models or icons, we fantasize about other persons, real and imaginary, as a means for experimentation. We are constantly creating models of persons and modifying and enriching our models in an effort to gain ever more confident conceptions. Narratives, movies, games, and other artifacts facilitate this imaginative process of identity and who one wishes to be. When engaged in role-playing by means of "putting on" the identity of others, individuals tinker in these roles, and refine or deepen their understanding.

Fictional worlds, such as 3-D games, function as contexts and models whereby learners explore the possibilities of understanding and living in these worlds. Without a familiar or given sense of what the world is like, we cannot imagine new possibilities in fiction or in reality, but without the ability to imagine new possibilities we could not expand our understanding or use it creatively. Therefore, narrative plays a major role within the context of such online games. Through stories players tell and through the various ways they tell them, we are able to make sense of how players make meaning of their gaming experience, including identity construction and/or reconstruction processes.

**Projective Identity, Fictional Worlds, and MMPOGs**

As mentioned above, projective identity occurs within fictional worlds and in social situations where individuals perform actions and roles which can be observed by others. In literature relating to communities of practice, legitimate peripheral participants lurk at the boundaries of a community and observe so-called senior members of the community in action. These members are likened to role models which others desire to be (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Learners have a sense of a goal which is projective from an identity framing lens.

In Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMPOGs), participants engage in role-playing situations where they perform certain projective identities (in the form of their avatars) towards the objectives of the game and project their beliefs, values, and their own personality onto the characters (Gee, 2004). The "mentors" are their peers and collaborators within that environment.

This projective identity is consistent with Vygotsky's emphasis that pedagogy should be oriented towards the potential of the child's development rather than his/her present abilities (1987). This process can be scaffolded by the social community within stipulated zones of proximal development oriented towards identities as a social construction.

The phenomena in MMPOGs are consistent with situated cognition, where human knowledge and interaction cannot be divorced from the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this case, the bounded context of MMPOGs represents the affinity space for knowledge and interactions to be co-determined. Projective identity or the social construction of self-knowledge towards a designated identity cannot be learned without the coupling to the contextual-community.

This notion of coupling can be further expanded to include the personal interests engaging many participants in MMPOGs. This interest and passion drives the motivational aspects of learners experimenting with particular projective identities. This coupling to personal passion is elaborated by Vygotsky's emphasis that involving the child in any kind of activity begins with building the child's interest and making sure that the child is ready for this activity (Vygotsky, 1987).
The reasons why we recognize MMPOGs to facilitate projective identities (in contrast to schooling) as a powerful framing for learning (Gee, 2004) are as follows:

- Objective is focused.
- Role playing supporting projective identity is targeted.
- Reward system is very clear with opportunities to experiment (successes and failures).
- Culture is contained within that world.
- Assessment is peer recognition arising from performance—authentic as in real-world interactions.

In Wenger’s deep understanding of situated cognition, identity, learning, and context are all integrated and cannot be divorced. Every act is a learning process and involves changes in identity. Both CoPs and MMPOGs have the characteristics of bounded/focused contextuality, where members engage in embodied experiences, and these create meaning-making opportunities mediated through language and genres particular to that practice. These communities involve a great deal of sociability and relationships where members develop mutual histories and interdependencies because of joint efforts and goals. The essence of projective identities occurs in communities and is a powerful and motivational way of membership renewals in communities.

Hence, in summary:

- Identity cannot be studied in individual isolation, but rather in a social-community context.
- Identity needs to be traced in the context of its evolving trajectory as a social construct.
- This trace is in the form of actions and through dialogue. Actions (performative action) include the decisions made in the process. By dialogue we also mean reifications such as narratives.
- We observe agency through actions and decisions.
- Agency is to us a critical dimension for projective identity.
- Projective identity is centrally linked to learning.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary youth culture, such as active engagement in new-media activities, compels the development and expression of human lives (Levinson, 1998), broadly engaging the multiple ‘I’s that are in dialogue with other selves and the cultural world. Not only are today’s youth fluent and playful with digital technologies, but also they are developing alternative, sophisticated, reflective literacies amidst new cultural norms and social practices (Hsi, 2006).

The socio-spatial dimensions of affinity spaces that underpin the development of youth’s meaning-making experiences create interrelated dynamics and actions that not only afford youth the agency for explorative opportunities but also bear upon their identity trajectories.

To conclude, drawing on the conceptual heritage of cognitive, socio-cultural, and cultural perspectives, research that engages in projective identity and affinity spaces should seek to ask the following questions:

- What are the participatory frameworks (activities, tasks, relations) across socio-spatial dimensions—schools and new media affinity spaces—and how are they manifested on an evolutionary basis?
- What are the possible developmental trajectories of youth’s construction of projective identities, and how can we characterize their ongoing process of identity change or *becoming*?
- How can we define and describe *becoming* in projective identity within social and spatial affinity spaces as a key notion for 21st century learning?
- What are the salient characteristics and design principles underlying the co-evolutionary social and spatial contexts within immersive affinity spaces?
- How may this be leveraged into other (e.g., formal, including trans-contextual) learning contexts such as schools?

In our view, learning in the 21st century should not be primarily conceived as trying to acquire a set of skills and competencies, but rather should focus on the dynamic process of how the learner engages with his or her changing and evolving context in adaptive and innovative ways. Such a context is increasingly populated by sociality and spatiality affordances, and learners need to navigate the messy inter-relationships between persons, spaces, and cultural norms. Identity is the individual’s self-knowledge in role-performance(s) when regulating and managing oneself in relation to others in these affinity spaces. Learning about one’s identity as a social-individual dialectical construct is in itself a 21st century learning disposition.

While metacognition is thinking about one’s own thinking, the ‘meta-identity’ is discourse about one’s own discourse identity (which is always in relation to the contextual social other). Because identity is an evolving, becoming process that is changing and adapting, it inherently implies that meta-identity is a necessary disposition whenever participants negotiate tensions within their fragmented selves especially evident in the postmodern era of the 21st century.

Projective identity is consistent with this special issue’s notion of understanding learning (or science of learning) according to the process philosophy of “becoming.” Projective identity is a continuous process of self understanding played out in the context of social others and dialogically constructed with...
Another (Ricoeur, 2002). At the philosophical level (see first article in this issue), projective identity does not assume a stable end-state of an identity to be attained, although it assumes role models in a community as ‘models’ which learners may desire to model after.

However, we are clear to connote that these are not projective models in the objectivist sense but rather that each construction of the self is an emergent and creative reconstruction (not reproduction). At the methodological level (see first article), projective identity advocates an evolutionary discourse oriented approach, which does not connote learning to be any stable product to be acquired, but rather a process which mitigates and understands the very nature of the process itself.

When context matters, any attempt of generalization becomes less and less meaningful. The real strength of context-sensitive studies lies in their efficacy in unpacking the process and the ‘how it occurs,’ aiming to establish a plausible theory that tells a convincing story of the becoming process. The theory can then be subsequently used as a lens for studies in other contexts as a point of departure (from the original study).

Hence, we hope that the articles in this special issue have exposed readers to this recent reorientation in understanding learning. We believe that this orientation in ‘becoming’ as a process philosophy has much to offer to the learning sciences community.

References


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