Dimensions of identity and the student experience of networked learning

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the conceptualisation of the student identity standard and its potential to impact on the way in which, and the extent to which, non-traditional students engage with learning architectures, particularly those of networked learning communities. It makes a case that often unseen, unperceived, and therefore invisible dimensions of identity, both within and outside the learning community impact on the way that non-traditional students engage with roles within the community and the opportunities afforded through such engagement. The paper briefly introduces the strategic drivers that emphasised the need for increased adoption of technology enhanced learning within higher education and the associated political backdrop as the widening participation agenda was promoted by the Department for Education and Science. It reports the political promotion of flexible learning and the way in which higher education has adapted to an increasing breadth of student backgrounds and life-experiences without necessarily querying the nature of the student role identity. The paper then moves to consider the way in which student identity is of relevance to the learning experience, drawing attention to the concept of role identity (Stryker, 2002) and the individual construction of identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009). The paper then considers the way in which differing concepts of identity have been explored and addressed in the literature that surrounds networked learning. The paper introduces Cantwell's conceptualisation of dimensions of student identity (2007). It proceeds to ask the reader to reflect upon on such dimensions of the individually constructed student role identity that are often imperceptible to tutors, peers, and sometimes to the student themselves, and the impact of these dimensions on the networked learning experiences of non-traditional undergraduates. The paper then suggests consideration of the way in which the dynamic and temporal nature of role identities is associated with the concept of affordance and implications for the development and facilitation of learning communities.

Keywords

Identity, self, role identity, identity standard, networked learning, learning experiences, affordance

Introduction

The political emphasis on widening participation in higher education through increased progression and access to higher education, as articulated in *The Future of Higher Education* (DFES, 2003*),* lent considerable strategic impetus to the growing adoption of the use of technology to support learning within higher education. Whilst the targeted increase in participation was articulated as being predominantly through the establishment and recruitment to growth in the number of Foundation Degrees, the paper also acknowledged the insufficiency of opportunity for part-time and flexible study.

> Our system is not good enough at offering students real choice about how they learn. Higher education should be a choice open to everyone with the potential to benefit – including older people in the workforce who want to update their skills. There are not enough choices for flexible study – including part-time courses, sandwich courses, distance learning, and e-learning
>
> [DFES, 2003 p.21]

This position underpinned the HEFCE E-learning strategy of 2005 and was, and remains, reflected in the Foundation Degree benchmark statement (QAA, 2010).

Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Networked Learning 2014, Edited by: Bayne S, Jones C, de Laat M, Ryberg T & Sinclair C.

ISBN 978-1-86220-304-4

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Writing during the same period, McConnell (2005) was able to report pedagogic developments in networked learning activity across the university sector. However, he described networked learning, at that time, as a 'new and evolving arena in higher education' (p.25). McConnell's report focused on the perceptions and actions of students working in collaborative networked learning. It emphasised, in particular, the need to reconsider the understanding of group dynamics as the concepts are revisited within the virtual context, one emergent category from the grounded research being reported as 'group identity and self-identity' (p.34). McConnell's research was undertaken with post-graduate cohorts. The issue of identity becomes increasingly important where networked learning communities exist to support non-traditional students, and yet the use of technology to support more flexible learning, particularly for those in the non-traditional undergraduate sector is based upon a homogenised or generalised conceptualisation of student identity (Jones & Healing, 2010), within an increasingly stratified university sector (Davis, 2013).

Issues of identity for non-traditional students, engaging in networked learning, emerged as a category from empirical research informed by grounded theory and undertaken in the domain of college based higher education (Davis 2013). This paper extends the discussion concerning the impact of dimensions of identity on the student experience to suggest a broader relevance for those engaged in the support and/or facilitation of networked learning communities.

Considering identity

It is important to consider the meaning or meanings behind the use of the term identity. Identity is an expression that requires separation from that of self. The use of the first person 'I' refers to the subjective self while the reflexive use of 'myself' makes an objective reference to aspects of self as embraced within an identity pertinent to or within a situation at a specific point in time (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011).

> Persons are both objects and subjects to themselves ...The world is in the person and the person is in the world ...the person, the world, the situation, and self-consciousness interact, interpenetrate, and plunge through one another in a synthesis of being, action, meaning and consciousness.
>
> [Lindesmith et al., 1999 p.13]

In this context identity is supporting identification with or differentiation from aspects of the community, event or situation and thus resulting in a particularly framed performance (Goffman, 1959). Since every individual encounters multiple situations with varied expectations in terms of identification and /or differentiation (Buckingham, 2007; James, 1890), it is necessary to consider the role identities (Stryker, 2008; 2002) adopted in each circumstance and the psychic influence that each role may have on the other.

For each role, Burke and Stets (2009) purport that an individual will have constructed, through biographically and socially engaged meaning-making, an identity standard which establishes the boundaries, perceptions, actions and performances identified by that individual for that role. Burke and Stets (2009) further propose that within any given situation where the role is adopted, the individual will seek to verify or adapt the identity standard to more closely align with their perceptions of the nature of that role.

Stryker (2002) considers the issue of identity salience, thus naming the levels of precedence accorded any one of an individual's adopted role identities within a situation. Stryker (2002, p.61) writes, 'If different identities are called up, they may or may not carry conflicting or contradictory expectations. If they do, their relative location in the identity salience hierarchy becomes a potentially important predictor of subsequent behaviour'. This description might lead to the inference that within a learning situation, the most salient role adopted by an individual would be the student identity. However, at any given point in time the psychic influences within the life space (Lewin, 1997) of an individual will result in the precedence of a particular adopted identity, even if that is not the usual role adopted within the social context in which the individual finds themselves (Davis, 2013). An example of this might be the rapid change in role of the working parent who moves swiftly from their identity as a business professional to that of a concerned mother/father on hearing of their child's accident at school.

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ISBN 978-1-86220-304-4

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The research-based conceptualisation of identity construction within networked learning environments more generally suggests that the learning community and its artefacts have a strong influence on the construction of the student identity (Koole, 2010). I assert that an individual's biographically and contextually influenced preconceptions of the role of a student result in the psychosocial construction of a student identity standard that is unique to their own perceptual situation. I would further propose that it is also necessary to consider the invisible influences beyond the learning community that may encourage or prevent any moderation of the student identity standard as conceptualised when the student joins the networked learning community.

Identity and the networked learning literature

The literature on the student experience of networked learning and/or the development of the networked learning community largely foregrounds an emphasis on the formation or construction of on-line or digital identity, and its place in the establishment of community membership. Thus published research tends towards the construction afresh of an identity that relates to the specific engagement with the networked learning community rather than considering the dimensions of student role identity that influence behaviours and perceptions therein.

For example, (Alevizou et al., 2010 pp.79-80) write of learning design components that 'facilitate the building of identity and self-actualisation' within the networked learning community, moving on to discuss performative aspects of 'positioning of the self' (p92) again within that community. Koole (2010, p.241) considers 'self and belonging in online social settings as well as the factors that may affect this relationship', Kruger (2006) picks up the issues in networked learning that inhibit or 'disinhibit' engagement, whilst Ferreday et al. (2006) raise the importance of social presence:

> Garrison (1997), for example, uses the term social presence to describe the degree to which individuals project themselves through the medium. Similarly, Spears and Lea (1992) describe social identity as the presentation of self in a group. More recently, Yoo et al. (2002) have explored social presence in online communities and Jones (2005) has examined social presence as an interactional accomplishment in 3D virtual worlds...This increased recognition of the importance of social presence and identity has tended to focus on the individual and how the individual either projects or presents his/herself within CMC environments ... We need to pay close attention to the specific processes through which identity is constructed between and with those within the environment/ learning community.
>
> [Ferreday et al., 2006 pp.225-226]

This emphasis on identity construction and social presence is picked up in the work of Guldberg and Pilkington (2006) who focus on issues of identification within the community. They report placing the emphasis of their research activity on the mechanisms within the community that will support the development of membership:

> Through collaborative learning discussions with fellow practitioners, the aim of the course reported here is to create a community of learners who will identify with, and be central to, shaping not only the networked learning community itself but other practitioner (workplace) communities to which they belong ... ... within the main body of the discussion [textual evidence] there is clear evidence of students working to establish identity through exchange of information concerning membership of geographical locations, relationships and communities outside the learning community.
>
> [Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006 pp.161-164]

Guldberg and Pilkington (2006) promulgate the importance of promoting socialisation through wider information exchange, encouraging disclosure of personal information not directly impacting on the learning situation. However, the information exchange evidenced within the research is limited to that perceived by the student as being relevant facts; at the induction stage of the programme there has been little development of trust (Smith, 2008). Students are establishing the role they wish to portray within the community, in this instance that of a parent with an autistic child or of a practitioner in the field. in this example the community supports the

development of the role identity within the community through the strengthening of the identity standard as parent or carer. Trust develops over time and enables development of shared values:

> Analysis of these discussions confirmed a developing sense of identity in the group, a 'staged process' in which students approach constructive production through first developing a sense of identity in the community by exploring sources of similarity and difference between their experiences. Once this identity is established and a safe interaction space achieved, more challenging questions can emerge.

> [Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006 p.169]

Koole(2010) also asserts that socialisation is a key element in the process of community formation, in terms of sharing purpose, history, artefacts, belonging and continuity and yet, as Gulberg and Pilkington illustrate, for non-traditional students this will occur only if they are content to have a social presence in that on-line community. For many mature or part-time students, their non-student lives are fraught with working or family responsibilities. In this circumstance the student identity is likely to have variable levels of salience and the student identity standard may have less recognition of the need for social engagement; the student may perceive the formal bounds of the networked community as a learning tool. This apparent lack of engagement with the learning may become problematic for tutors and for those peers with a difference set of expectations. Indeed, Kruger (2006, p.4) suggests, 'In order to succeed in e-learning, participants need to build trust and maintain motivation, and must develop a strong sense of identity within the group and a strong need to participate as a strong member.'

The apparency of student disengagement with community learning processes may be exacerbated by the research methods adopted. For example, analysis of identity construction within networked learning communities is frequently based on dialogic analysis, a form of research activity that relies less heavily on the physical access to the participants. Koole (2010, p.242) focuses on relational dialogues within an on-line community, 'Relational dialogue is one of the most significant factors in online networks. Textual interaction, in some online environments, may be the only means of forming impressions of self and others. In this respect, words are action.' However, this interaction leaves to the imagination the social forces impacting on the individual in their student role when outside the learning environment and the psychic influence that this may have on student perceptions and actions (Davis, 2013).

The imperative for textual analysis may be somewhat diminished when the learning community is partially, rather than wholly, supported by computer-mediated technology, as is often the case within college based higher education. Thus where communication also exists in a physical learning environment, students may project an image supported by their personally constructed student identity standard within the class environment, which is then maintained within the formal on-line community. In considering such issues of identification, Koole (2010) argues:

> Online, harmony and discord in identification with others occurs through processes similar to those of offline identity. Online interaction is often equally real and may be strongly reflective of an individual's offline life (Chayko, 2008; Christensen, 2003). Technological mediation merely influences how impressions are accessed (time, place, manner, and meaning) and managed (Goffman, 1959).
> [Koole, 2010 p.242]

I suggest that this consideration becomes problematic when it is reviewed with the understanding that whilst the primary role adopted within any learning community, virtual or otherwise, will be that of the student identity standard, 'an individual's offline life', or that experience outside the learning situation, may engage with role identities that are not apparent to tutors or peers, or which have very low salience, within the formal bounds of the networked community. Even the conceptualisation of the student identity standard is far from simplistic. Cantwell (2007, p.4) explains:

> Since students' identities are comprised of meanings for the self as a student, students will act to verify their student identity through acting in ways that have consistent meanings with their standard. As will be discussed, students have different student identities and therefore will act in different ways from others as they verify that identity.

The Student Identity Standard: Dimensions of identity

Burke and Stets (2009) report the empirical research undertaken by Burke and Reitzes (1981) and the resultant theory that 'identities influence behavior [sic] only to the extent that the meanings of the behavior and the meanings in the identity standard are the same' (p82). Their research activity sought the views of students as to their understandings of what it meant to be in the student role, the findings leading to the definition of four categories or dimensions of meaning that had relevance to all participants. These categories were named as: academic responsibility; intellectualism; sociability; and personal assertiveness.

Cantwell (2007) considers the impact of each of the conceptualised dimensions of Burke and Reitzes (1991) on student behaviour. She proposes:

> Academic responsibility reflects an academic orientation that characterizes students as studious, responsible, independent, and individualistic ...Intellectual curiosity characterizes a student that is competitive, open-minded, creative, studious, and idealistic. This type of student seems to be interested in pursuing knowledge but may not be as strictly academic in their orientation as those characterized as academically responsible... Sociability describes a student that is more care-free and less academically oriented. This student is described as pressured, social, non-studious, open-minded, and responsible, most often predicting more social activity ... personal assertiveness describes a student that is non-studious, ambitious, aggressive, involved, and motivated.
>
> [Cantwell, 2007 p.4]

Each dimension is presented, first by Burke and Reitzes(1991) and then by Cantwell (2007) as interactional continua; each student will engage with each dimension to an extent according to their own psychosocial construction of meaning that results in their student identity standard. Since the dimensions reflect constructions of meaning, the combination of positionalities along the dimensions will influence behaviours such as socialisation, disclosure and motivation within the networked learning community.

In developing the hypothesis presented by Benson and Mekolichick (2007) who propose, 'The more the use of digital technologies is compatible with a role identity, the higher the use of such technologies' (p.501), I would propose that the nature of a student's engagement with technology for learning be developed as a further dimension of the student identity standard, paying particular attention to the concept of the Digital Visitor/Digital Resident Continuum (White & Le Cornu, 2011). Davis (2013) explains:

> White and Le Cornu (2011) adopt 'metaphors of tool, place and space' to articulate the potential experiences, perceptions and actions of computer users. The Digital Visitor/Resident continuum thus provides a range of user positionalities, extending from users of technology as a tool through to virtual occupancy of one of more digital identities within 'social media spaces', or a combination thereof.
>
> [Davis, 2013 pp.229-230]

At its most simple, this would infer that where a student predominantly uses technology as a tool (behaving as a visitor), they are more likely to have a transient experience of the virtual environment developed to support the community; where a student enjoys existing in virtual space(s), they are more likely to develop a social presence within the environment. However, a more complex dynamic becomes apparent when considering the nature of each dimension as both a continuum in its own right and as a psychic influence on the positioning on the other dimensions as reflected in the student identity standard. Thus, to provide some examples for consideration: a strong degree of intellectual curiosity and a high degree of sociability may support a greater degree of digital residency. Conversely, a high degree of academic responsibility and personal assertiveness combined with low levels of sociability might reflect the student identity standard of a strongly goal oriented student who has external responsibilities, a digital visitor within the networked learning community.

The Student Identity Standard and the affordances of the networked learning community

The variable nature of the student identity standard and its impact on the perceptions and actions of members of a networked learning community, particularly when engaging non-traditional students, requires the consideration of those who would design and facilitate such an environment.

Jenkins (2008, p.36) suggests, 'Affordances are apprehended by the individual organism, yet are conceived as features associated with the environment whether or not an individual organism apprehends them'. Oliver (2005), in considering Gibson's original framing or the expression suggests:

> It may be more productive ... to focus not upon the 'offered' possibilities but upon what a person imagines might be possible – and also upon what they can imagine doing to achieve the same end with some other object. If an object does not allow us to undertake an action, we can find an alternative or make a new tool that does.
>
> [Oliver, 2005 p.412]

If the perceptions and actions of an individual are dependent on their individually constructed role identity within a given situation, and the salience of that role at that point in time, then it becomes logical to suggest that the affordances of a particular space or learning opportunity are also subject to variation. The facilitator within a networked learning community who understands that there will be fluctuations in the affordances for learning of a given situation or space for a particular individual during any micro-slice of time will be better placed to enable and develop the learning experiences of and within the community.

It is thus time to further problematise the understandings of the expression 'student', the induction of members into the learning community and the subsequent nature of engagement (at the individual level) within networked learning environments developed with a generalised perspective as to the necessary affordances for community development. The degree to which students are dependent upon, or required to pursue, engagement with technology-supported aspects of the learning community, and the variable nature of the higher education provision particularly for non-traditional students, adds to the complexity of the debate.

Conclusion

The student experience of networked learning varies according to the holistic or partial nature of their community engagement, the student identity standard each has constructed and the salience of the student role for that individual at any one point in time.

Institutional adherence to national policy and associated strategic development leads practitioners towards engagement with a homogenised understanding of the nature of studenthood and the student experience; it leads to the establishment of learning architectures designed to support identity construction within the learning community and a potential for misperception of student expectations, perceptions and actions that are influenced by their own construction of the student identity standard.

The dimensions of the student identity standard have the potential to influence the positioning of the individual community participant on the digital visitor/resident continuum, with participants variably adopting community membership as a transient tool or establishing social presence through construction of a digital identity.

The affordances of a networked learning community, its members, places and spaces will vary for each member of the community according to each student identity standard and their identity salience at that time, and thus their temporally constructed relationship with the learning place. It is for practitioners to consider how networked learning communities can embrace the constant dynamic flux of identification, seek to understand the invisible psychic nature of the student role and put aside preconceptions as to community membership.

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Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Networked Learning 2014, Edited by: Bayne S, Jones C, de Laat M, Ryberg T & Sinclair C.

ISBN 978-1-86220-304-4

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