Towards Better Understanding of Self-Representation in Online Learning
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Abstract: This paper is concerned about how individuals’ different identities affect their online learning practices. We argue that online learning literature needs more nuanced and contextualized understanding of identity if it is to better address the relationship between the concept of identity and learning. While the study is grounded in socio-cultural learning theories, we employ Critical Discourse Analysis to deconstruct and analyze the effects of social and cultural practices on self-representations and thus on learning. Our results show that identities manifest themselves and play an important role in individuals’ online learning practices.

Introduction

Socio-cultural learning theories suggest that learning is tied to the social and cultural context in which it occurs and that learning is not only a cognitive process but a social and cultural process as well (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nasir & Cooks, 2009). According to these perspectives, learning is as about participation, practices, and activities within their social and cultural context (Lave & Wenger 1991). Many scholars have noted that identities are central for participating to social and cultural practices (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Gee, 2001). Analyzing the relationship among practice, identity, and learning, Lave and Wenger (1991), and later Wenger (1998), suggested that learning is an aspect of practice-based identity and that identity is a result of learning in practice. Such an understanding is particularly important since it “reconceptualizes learning from an in-the-head phenomenon to a matter of engagement, participation, and membership in a community” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009 p. 42). Fundamental to this perspective is the idea that identity is simultaneously an individual, social, and cultural phenomenon and that identity is constructed at the intersection of these phenomena.

Unfortunately, the online learning literature tends to oversimplify human experience. Much online learning research has considered identity as reflecting the inherent characteristics of different cultural groups. Thus, it has generalized about the members of a particular group by assimilating individuals into a singular identity. Building upon this essentialist perspective, much research has classified individuals and suggested what reactions are likely to occur given one’s identity. For instance, when a research argues that “online courses benefit a wide variety of students, but perhaps none more dramatically than nontraditional female students” (Sullivan, 2001 p. 817), it implicitly suggests that there are enough commonalities among “female students” that allow particular kinds of analyses to be made. Thus, the underlying theoretical assumption is that the category of gender is meaningful enough by itself to explain certain online learning practices. Similarly, when researchers suggest that African American students have a significantly weak sense of community compared to their White American peers in an online course (Roivai & Ponton, 2005), it implies that the category of race itself is meaningful enough to understand the different societal factors that might contribute a sense of belonging. Since it would be a mistake to suggest White Americans to be more friendly or open for communication than African Americans, we cannot use race by itself to
understand this finding. Similar online learning studies include but not limited to: a cross-cultural study of social interaction behaviors among Korean, American, and Finnish students (e.g., Kim & Bong, 2002); a quantitative comparison of online learning experience between US and non-US students (e.g., Bentley & Tinney, 2003); an examination of online success depending on individuals’ cultural background (e.g., Mills, Eyre, & Harvey, 2005); and an investigation of pedagogical differences between Chinese and Western students (e.g., Ku, Pan, Tsai, Tao, & Cornell, 2004).

These studies demonstrate that when the concept of identity is considered, much online learning research simply tries to understand certain groups or individuals depending on one of their identity traits. Employing simplified cultural markers to explain humans, much online education research stereotypes humans into a singular, static, predefined, and isolated entity. Thus, it disregards that people have multiple dimensions to their identities (Buckingham, 2008). However, it would be erroneous to ignore all social, cultural, and human capitals that individuals have but just focus on one aspect of their identity as though that particular aspect has a free floating and predefined meaning (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). Indeed, socio-culturally informed scholars (e.g., Holland et al, 1998; Jenkins, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991) have long argued that identity categories should be analyzed in relation to other identity categories if we are to better understand the relation of identity to learning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Rather than providing a definitive articulation of identity traits as predefined phenomena, productive inquiries should provide a richer understanding of how different identity traits come into play in different online learning contexts and practices. Nevertheless, we still know very little about how individuals manifest their different identity traits in different learning practices. This paper, therefore, analyzes how individuals self represent themselves in different contexts and practices as they engage with their peers in online learning environments. Such analysis would provide better understanding about the relationship between identity, self-representation, and learning in online learning.

Identity and Self-Representation

The definition of identity is as diverse as the bodies of literature that have impinged on the concept (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Indeed, fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, humanities, and philosophy all offer discipline-specific conceptualizations and definitions of identity. While other approaches exist, educational research has been mostly influenced by psychological or sociological conceptualizations (Buckingham, 2008). Psychological perspectives are fundamentally built upon Erikson’s (1968) conceptualization that identity is a single state that one achieves over time and development. According to this perspective, individuals have coherent and relatively stable identities and that identity is internally consistent and inevitable. Sociologists have moved from this normative perspective and have suggested that it is a complex and continuously shifting phenomenon. In this article, we employ sociological perspectives.

According to this perspective, identity is typically thought as a cultural practice that includes the flow of activities within specific social situations (Holland et al., 1998). These practices are conceptualized as figured worlds, which provide sets of norms that constrain or enable individuals. These sets of norms provide meanings “of” and “for” identities and those meanings are always being appropriated by people to guide, authorize, legitimate, and encourage their own and others’ behavior in cultural context (Holland et al., 1998). “Within these figured worlds, identity is constructed as individuals both act with agency in authoring themselves and are acted upon by social others as they are positioned …” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009 p. 41). Identity, in this sense, has individual, relational, and social aspects that are closely related to each other. Drawing on this approach, scholars have argued that identity is not a singular, fixed, or static entity; rather, it is a dynamic sets of practices in particular contexts under particular circumstances (e.g., Gee, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). And, it is almost impossible to talk about one aspect without considering the others (Jenkins, 2008), since they mutually exist. Fundamental to this perspective is the idea that identity is simultaneously an individual, social, and cultural phenomenon and that identity is constructed at the intersection of these locations.
One productive way to address one’s identity as an individual, social, and cultural phenomenon is to analyze self-representation (Hall, 1997). Self-representation is an essential process to create an identity, which is continuously re-constructed through set of discourses (Giddens, 1984). According to this perspective, self-representation is a cultural product whose meanings are negotiated through practices. Through examining self-representation, therefore, one can work within analytical frameworks that actively address identity (Rybas & Gajala, 2007) while examining the implicit consequences of identity in learning practices (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Nasir & Cooks, 2009).

Data Source

We collected data from a fully online graduate education course in a large Canadian research university. The course comprised twelve modules, each corresponding to one week, in which students engaged with each other as they discussed instructor-assigned readings. Typically, these graduate level courses have students from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, different geographical locations, as well as various ages and professions, which make such courses a very rich and diverse space. In order to examine self representation and understand its effects on learning practices, we focused on three types of student experiences: students’ biographies, learning journals, and asynchronous discussions.

Biography pages (profile pages) allow students to represent themselves and create their existence online. In biography pages, students introduce themselves as they basically write about their individual traits, with an option to upload a picture or an avatar of their choice for visual representation. Another data gathering site is online learning journals, where individuals articulate their learning experiences as they summarize what they have learned about subject matter and how they have learned it in that particular week. Students use these entries as a way to connect with others interested in similar ideas, and to think about their ideas in relation to their own academic development and identity. The data excavation includes typical asynchronous threaded discussions. These discussions provide individuals an opportunity to reflect on their insights while reacting to and engaging with each other as they exchange their ideas, values, and perspectives about subject matter (Anderson, 2008). Since asynchronous discussions fulfill a truth about human understanding and knowledge (Carusi, 2006 p. 6), they are not simply means for arriving at decisions but they are also social and cultural artifacts. Thus, asynchronous discussions are the excellent places for examining how self-representation play a role in one’s engagements.

Data Gathering

This study explores a phenomenon through multiple cases within its context; therefore, the approach used in this work is the multiple case study (Creswell, 2006). Since case study approach is based upon a constructivist paradigm (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) and thus built upon the premise of a social construction of reality (Searle, 1995), we qualitatively examined two cases for understanding how self-representation play a role in online learning. Drawing on the data available at biography pages and learning journals, we created an online persona for each case study and explored how these personas manifested themselves at asynchronous online discussions while individuals engage with each other. Particularly, we deconstructed how self-representation plays a role in individuals’ learning experience as they make sense of themselves, of their peers, and of the subject matter.

We believe that critical discourse analysis offers productive means for understanding pedagogical implications of self-representation. Critical discourse analysis is an analytical research approach that primarily studies how social and cultural discourses are reproduced in any given context (van Dijk, 2001). Thus, it is a particularly adequate tool to formulate how self-representation is constructed, how it is regulated through social experience, and how it embodies particular views of the world (Fairclough, 2001). In this research, therefore, we employ critical discourse analysis to deconstruct how individuals enact different identity traits and analyze how these different identities play a role in their online learning practices.

Findings
Each online persona is presented here as a case study. These case studies illustrate different learning experiences in relation to self-representation. While we acknowledge that the relationship between self-representation and learning can be examined in various ways, here we specifically limit our analysis with what is presented at biography pages. All names and other identifying details are changed.

Meet Emily and Xiaomei. Emily is a White-Canadian. She is in her mid 40’s and has a daughter. She is a part-time PhD student and she resides in China, where she works as an English lecturer in a university just outside of Beijing. Since Emily lives out of Canada for a number of years, she has been taking online courses, and this is her ninth course. She defines herself as an activist - this is why she lives out of the Western World - and hopes to employ critical pedagogy in her dissertation though not sure about her topic yet. Emily is our first case. Xiaomei is Chinese but she currently lives in Canada. She is in her early 30’s and she is a full-time PhD student at a Canadian university, where is also working as a teaching assistant. Before coming to Canada, Xiaomei lived in England for several years, where she got her master’s degree and thought English as a Second Language courses. Her research interest is about teaching English with digital media. Xiaomei is our second case.

Case 1

Emily is among the most active participants. She engages with almost anyone, though some of her notes have social messages rather than cognitive purposes. In line with her persona, Emily’s multiple identities manifest themselves in her engagements with her online peers. As an activist, Emily usually draws her ideas from radical perspectives and reflect these perspectives as she raises some questions about the subject-matter. For instance, while the main discussion was about the pedagogical potential of wiki’s and other web 2.0 applications, Emily’s perspective offered a critical deconstruction of new media. More specifically, in a module about the history of Computer Mediated Communication, Emily articulated her growing concerns about the potential tyranny of social media and invited her peers to think the motives behind who produced the knowledge and for what purposes. In response to Emily, Michael and others built upon her ideas and suggested considering the importance of social institutions (i.e. Government, Military, or News Corporations) in producing knowledge. Following this post, Emily further analyzed how a mainstream newspaper - Gotham City Times - influences public opinion and thus affects public policies. As this instance demonstrates, Emily is an activist and her identity as an activist manifested itself when she created a thread in which she articulated and discussed her understanding of social software. Although this thread was a just small part of the weekly discussion, Emily acted and accepted as an activist in her discussions.

Another example of identity manifestation evident in our data is Emily’s China experience and her Chinese perspective. In a module about communication types, Emily suggested that synchronous communication suits her best when she communicates with her colleagues because of the fast culture that exists in big cities China. One of her classmate responded that because Emily is in China, she is now a part of Chinese culture and thus she might have similar habits with her Chines colleagues. Similarly in an another module about CMC environments, Emily argued that her Chinese students are shy; however, online courses are quite well suited for her students as they have no problem with expressing their thoughts and opinions. Emily posits that unlike what weekly readings suggests (that since Chinese students are shy, they do no prefer participating in discussions; thus, they underachieve compared to their Western counterparts), her Chinese students are successful and she is even surprised by what her students can do in online courses.

Yet another identity trait that manifested itself in Emily’s learning experience is being a teacher. One example can be found in a module about emerging educational technologies, in which Emily drew from weekly readings and analyzed how she can alter her teaching practices to better address her students’ needs. One of her classmates responded and suggested that Emily might consider using a wiki based web application since it sounds more appropriate for her course objectives. At the end of the module, Emily reconsidered her thoughts, experiences, and weekly readings and articulated how a wiki-based web application might help her as a teacher:

My students have to find their own online article about a topic and then all members of their group have to read it. But classmates who are not in their group never get to see what articles other
students have chosen. I realized that this was a problem, and thought that the next time I taught this course I might use the Moodle database to store their articles. Students can comment and grade the articles selected by their classmates. But a wiki might be a nice option to consider as well. I like it that a wiki is a document that could be exported for further use, rather than a database that would simply form part of the OLE. As this example can typify, Emily articulates her experience, analyzes weekly readings, thinks about her teaching practices, and thus acts as a teacher while she is also being responded as a teacher in this module.

The last identity manifestation we analyze is Emily’s identity as a mother. Even though such an identity was not salient in many context, being a mother was one of the various identity treats that was shaping Emily’s online learning experience. In a module about teaching and learning, one of Emily’s classmates, Alex, started a thread about his experience with his students’ parents. Referring to the weekly readings, Alex argued that while he agrees with readings (that learning involves a collaboration between parents and teachers), his experience was very different from this idealized perspective and that he had very little opportunity to work collaboratively with his students’ parents. Responding to this note, Emily articulated her experience as a mother while she constantly made connections to readings and affirmed Alex that the weekly readings are built upon idealized perspectives rather than representing reality. She finished her note by indicating that she can sometimes become Parent X; however, “most of us have the best of intentions as teachers and parents, but as you put it so well, life... happens!”. As it is evident from this instance, Emily is a mother - along with her other identities - and her experience as a mother has an impact on her understanding of the weekly readings and on her engagements with her peers. As a mother, Emily shapes the discourse while suggesting a different perspective from weekly readings.

**Case 2**

Xiaomei is an average participant even though she frequently visits the online environment. She logs in many times in a week and reads all the notes but responds to some of them. While Xiaomei tends to limit her engagement with academic purposes, she is highly responsive and is open for social interactions.

As an ESL teacher, Xiaomei draws from her teaching experience as she makes sense of the weekly readings. For instance, in a module about teaching and learning, Xiaomei disagreed with the weekly readings (that cell phone use should be restricted for K12 students) and suggested a new perspective building upon her experience with her post-secondary students. As a teacher, Xiaomei articulated that she tries to use technology for teaching ESL writing and allows her students to use a dictionary application on their cell phones; thus, she suggested that cell phones or tablet PCs can be useful in class. When a classmate responded to her note and discussed the pedagogical use of such devices, Xiaomei was addressed as a teacher. In her response to this note, Xiaomei further indicated that although there are always a few students who surf on the internet instead of studying, her experience suggests that mobile phones have a pedagogical value. She posited that “as teachers, we need to be not only innovative but also motivate our students to use technology for teaching and learning”. As this example typifies, Xiaomei makes sense of this module from a teacher’s perspective since she thinks, acts, and accepted by her peers as a teacher. Thus, her identity as a teacher comes into a play and affects her learning experience.

Another identity manifestation can be found in Xiaomei’s learning experience is being a Chinese person in England and Canada. Such an example can be found in a module about emerging educational technologies, in which Xiaomei uses her prior experience to explain why she both agrees and disagrees with the weekly readings. One thread in this module is about how students perceive editing someone else’s work in a wiki-based application. Xiaomei indicated that she finds the notion of changing someone else’s work without their permission intimidating since she believes that “it is like saying that you think that what you have to say is more important or more valid than what someone else has to say”. Xiaomei posited that in her Chinese experience, no one edited nobody’s work in order to preserve relationships and keep group in harmony; thus, her collaborative wiki experience with her Chinese peers had no pedagogical use. Therefore, based on her experience in China, Xiaomei supported the perspective in the weekly readings. However, as she continued explaining her experience in England, Xiaomei partially disagreed with the readings since she was able to work productively with her English peers even though she mostly felt
uncomfortable editing someone else’s work. She further noted that she has developed herself as she gained more experience and now feels relatively more comfortable working collaboratively with her peers. As this instance shows, Xiaomei draws from her previous experiences in China and England while she shapes the discourse by analyzing what collaboration meant for her. Thus, she makes sense of the subject matter depending on who she is and has been.

Yet another identity that manifest itself in Xiaomei’s learning experience is being a student. While we acknowledge that being a student is not exclusive to Xiaomei, she draws from her previous experiences and compares China with Canada; thus, we believe that her student identity is a unique case. For instance, in a module about social and cultural issues in CMC, she affirmed the weekly readings and argued that authentic learning materials for foreign language learners has always been an important issue. Summarizing her learning experience in China, Xiaomei articulated that when her English teacher was using a Canadian newspaper - Humidity Star - as a course material, she felt disconnected because the material was not engaging enough since it was not authentic:

Some language teachers may think that some materials from real world can be authentic.

However, it is tricky to judge because if you take away "authentic texts/materials” from the context and bring to the classroom, it might not be authentic any more.

Building upon her own experience, Xiaomei further analyzed her current learning experience in Canada and suggested that it is not any different from China in terms of authenticity. According to Xiaomei, authenticity is not about the material itself nor is it about where learning is situated geographically but it is more about individuals themselves. Xiaomei makes sense of the weekly readings while she analyzes her experience and provides further suggestions. Therefore, her identity as a student - in relation to being Chinese and living in Canada - manifested itself and affected her understanding.

**Conclusion**

This paper is built upon the premise that the concept of identity is important for learning practices (Nasir & Cooks, 2009) and argues that conceiving identity as a dynamic self-representation would provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between identity and learning practices (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). We analyzed the discourse data from an online graduate course and unpacked how two individuals, Emily and Xiaomei, used their different identities to make sense of their learning experiences. Our research has demonstrated that individuals do not experience online learning depending on one identity but they combine their different identities and use them continuously and simultaneously as they navigate through the course. Indeed, Emily and Xiaomei are not just females but they are also a student, a lecturer, an activist, or a mother at the same time. Thus, they have different learning experiences and outcomes since learning is as about participation, practices, and activities within their social and cultural context (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Current perspectives in online learning suggest that Emily and Xiaomei have enough commonalities since they both are females and that they have somewhat similar experiences depending on this commonality. However, as this research has showed, Emily and Xiaomei have very different learning experiences. Depending on the context they enact or the situations they are in, Emily and Xiaomei choose to use different identities (Holland et al., 1998), through which they analyze their previous experiences while they make sense of the subject matter. This was evident when they used different identities in the same module. For instance, when Emily used her mother identity in a module about teaching and learning, Xiaomei used her teacher identity. Thus, their learning experiences and outcomes was different since the analysis of their experiences was based upon different perspectives. Furthermore, when Emily or Xiaomei use one of their identity, they use their other identities as well, even though these identities are less salient (Gee, 2001; Holland et al., 1998). For instance, when Emily is an activist, she is not only an activist but also a Canadian, a mother, and a teacher.

Individuals might have enough commonalities. Indeed, their identities or experiences might intersect at many times in many different ways; however, they are still different individuals and thus their learning experiences cannot be downgraded to a single identity.
References


