Online Social Networking and Learning:
What Are the Interesting Research Questions?

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a youth-initiated practice: online social networking that is transforming our society in important ways and has vast implications for research concerning online behavior, the social and psychological aspects of online learning and the institution of education. In this paper, the author introduces the socio-technical features that characterize social networking systems and outlines results from preliminary research that suggests the informal social and intellectual practices in which participants naturally engage and how these relate to the competencies increasingly valued in formal education. The paper outlines four overlapping categories for research such as activities and outcomes, tool, place, and medium, identity and communication, and network analytics and methods. Within these categories the author outlines interesting research questions to pursue in documenting and interpreting the complexity of 'learning' within these spaces. Goals are to catalyze inquiry that bridges informal and formal learning and stimulate interdisciplinary conversation about where such agendas fit within and advance learning research.

Keywords: Learning, Online Behavior, Research, Social Media, Social Network Sites

INTRODUCTION

For over two decades, researchers from education, psychology, cognitive science, anthropology and other disciplines have been working to further scientific understanding of learning as it occurs in everyday situations and to facilitate learning in designed environments, such as in-school or online "cyber spaces" that span the physical confines of classroom, home, and neighborhood, and complement, extend or supplement learning in classrooms. Such work continues today, motivated by widespread concerns about inequities among young people in whether they are developing the literacies, technological fluencies, and content knowledge that can promote their development and readiness for high-demand fields (National Research Council, 1999) as educational institutions continue to differ widely in the kinds of learning resources and opportunities they offer (Warschauer & Matuchiank, in press).

Recent conference proceedings, journal articles and the development of an informal

learning focus within the National Science Foundation, signal keen interest in understanding from students' everyday in-and-out-of-school socio-technical practices about how to develop better theory and design of technology-mediated contexts for learning (Barron, 2006; Forte & Bruckman, 2008; Gardner & Kolodner, 2007; Halverson, 2007; Miyake et al., 2007; Peppler & Kafai, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2007; Yardi & Perkel, 2007; Zheng & Khoo, in press). While much of the *informal learning* research (Sefton-Green, 2004) has focused on students' understanding of science and math, especially in or around museums or afterschool clubs (Crowley & Jacobs, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2002; Palmquist & Crowley, 2007), research has extended of late to consider *learning* from a range of disciplinary perspectives within virtual worlds that dominate popular culture. One example of this is Steinkuehler's study of cognition and literacy within online game-playing "in the wild" (Hutchins, 1995, p. xiii) a goal of which is to inform the design of intentioned learning environments in school and after-school contexts (Steinkuehler, 2007). Investigating cognition and literacy practices within massively multiplayer online games, Steinkuehler (2007) documented how these games are spaces for authoring identities, rich meaning-making, and construction of coherent and creative discourses valued in fields outside the game. Similarly, Forte and Bruckman (2008) examined authorship and editorial processes in Wikipedia to generate new methods for assessing user-generated content in classrooms. Peppler and Kafai (2007) investigated youth's creative media production after-school with Scratch online design software to suggest new directions for media learning and media literacy education, and Zheng and Khoo (in press) investigated the cognitive, psychological, and social factors perceived by Singaporean adolescents as critical to their online social communication. Such research benefits those who seek to develop optimal online environments for similar adolescents.

In this vein, I introduce another youth-initiated, Internet-enabled practice: *online social networking* that is transforming our society in important ways and has vast implications for learning research and pedagogy. In this paper, I introduce the social and technical features that characterize such systems. Next, I outline results from emerging research that suggest the social and intellectual practices in which participants naturally engage and how these relate to the competencies increasingly valued in formal education. Finally, I outline what I believe are the interesting research questions to pursue in documenting and interpreting the complexity of 'learning' within these spaces. The overall purpose of this research agenda is to create a bridge between informal and formal learning such that the each complements, extends or supplements the other. Moreover, I seek to inform other researchers interested in pursuing similar projects and to stimulate interdisciplinary conversation about where such agendas fit within and advance the work of learning scientists, teachers, counselors, youth workers and online designers.

Social Networking Sites (SNS): A Definition

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007) an online *social network site* is a:

web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 1).

Other terms used to characterize such services are *social digital technologies* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), *participatory media* (Bull et al., 2008) and *social media* (Barnes, 2006). Whereas this term "social network" site seems to reflect the fact that these sites represent existing social bonds, another term commonly used, "social networking" implies that people use these websites in order to forge new networks. For instance, LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a social networking site tailored to business people

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