Chapter 2

Marguerite L. Koole
Athabasca University, Canada

Gale Parchoma
University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT
This chapter examines how learners develop a sense of self and belonging in networked learning environments. The authors propose that individuals create and negotiate their identities through an iterative process of dialogic and symbolic exchange with other individuals. The process is always in flux as individuals constantly readjust their understanding and actions within a given context. Individuals strive to reach comfortable levels of cognitive resonance in which they integrate experiences and beliefs of the external world into their personal narratives. To explain this process, the authors provide the Web of Identity (WoI) model. Based on the work of Goffman (1959) and Foucault (1988), this model is composed of five dramaturgical strategies: technology, power, social structure, cultural, and personal agency. These strategies both guide and enable the enactment of behaviour. For researchers, exploring identity and affiliation through the WoI lens raises a series of thought-provoking questions worthy of further investigation.

INTRODUCTION
The growing popularity of social networking technologies, such as Moodle, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Ning are prompting researchers to examine the potential of online community and collaborative space for students and faculty. In this chapter, we examine the reflexive relationship between social interaction and understanding of self in networked learning environments. Networked learning theory focuses "on the connections between learners, learners and tutors and between

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1915-9.ch002
The Web of Identity

learners and the resources they make use of in their learning” (Jones, Ferreday, & Hodson, 2006, p. 1). Networked learning theory and practice are rooted in the constructionist tradition, where knowledge and identities are perceived as being ‘constructed through discourses’ (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2004, p. 82). In keeping with the tenets of constructionism that define networked learning environments, we acknowledge the significance of social interaction in both learning and identity formation. It is through identification with and differentiation from others that individuals are able to establish their sense of self. This sense of self is a reflection of the learner’s experiences and relationships. The emphasis on constructionism and relationship development, suggests that one’s sense of self is inherently connected to one’s sense of belonging within community. Individuals may also develop multiple identities which they enact strategically depending on their goals and the context. The primary aim of this chapter is to introduce a theoretical framework for outlining the processes affecting the development of digital identities: the Web of Identity (WoI) model. This model describes how individuals acquire and express their sense of self within various social contexts and how they use strategies to express their identities. The WoI strategies complement current theories of networking such as Actor Network Theory (ANT) and relational sociology by informing how the dynamics of action and interpretation influence individual identity and network affiliation. The WoI model has interesting implications arising from the use of identity formation strategies in networked learning environments suggesting multiple avenues for further research.

BACKGROUND

Networked learning, technology enhanced learning, and e-learning researchers have all grappled with theories of identity formation, but to-date none have adequately identified the processes involved at the level of the individual. Both Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory focus on the relationship between already-established roles or groups on identity (Desrochers, Andreassi, & Thompson, 2002). Similarly, Burke’s Differentiated Model of Role Identity Acquisition focuses on the alignment of behaviour to roles within a given reference group, but fails to explain how “standard” reference groups or communities initially form (Collier, 2001). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) outline seven elements necessary for cultivating communities of practice (CoPs); (1) allowance for evolution, (2) dialogue of perspectives, (3) varying levels of participation, (4) public and private community spaces, (5) value added, (6) familiarity and excitement, and (7) rhythm of interaction. This and many other studies of online community mention personal identity only in passing, focussing instead on community identity or social presence in general (Handley, Sturdy, & Fincham, 2006; Rovai, 2002; Schwier, 2007; Schwier & Daniel, 2007). But, how do individuals come to identify with and distinguish themselves from their communities? And, how does online technology affect these processes?

Networked learning researchers suggest that individuals socially create and negotiate an understanding of who they are with relation to shared knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours (Ferreday, Jones, & Hodgson, 2006). Macfayden (2008) posits “establishment of learner identities allows the development of a learning community” (p. 560). Goodyear and Zenios (2007) highlight the significance of self and community in the learning process:

A strong element of this socio-cultural view of learning is that participation in authentic knowledge-creation activities, coupled with a growing sense of oneself as a legitimate and valued member of a knowledge-building community, is essential to the development of an effective knowledge-worker. Action and identity are key. (p. 355-356)