Chapter 15

A Sociocultural Perspective on Negotiating Digital Identities in a Community of Learners

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ABSTRACT

Three dimensional virtual world environments are becoming an increasingly regular feature of the education landscape, providing the opportunity for richly graphical augmented and immersive learning activities. Those who participate in these experiences must mediate through an avatar; negotiating and managing the complexities of this new variation of digital identity alongside their more familiar identity as learner and/or teacher/facilitator. This chapter describes some key moments in the construction of digital identities as a lecturer and a student in the Open University’s community in Second Life®. The authors explore experiences in relation to the impact of trust and consistency from a sociocultural perspective, privileging the role of social interaction and context where meaning is socially produced and situationally interpreted, concluding that social interaction is pivotal to any meaningful identity development that takes place. The chapter ends with thoughts for future issues surrounding digital identity in relation to lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter will use a sociocultural framework to scaffold two accounts of negotiated digital identity within The Open University (OU) community in the virtual world Second Life (SL); one as a tutor and the other as a student.

After setting out our theoretical position, we seek to define the context for our experience of developing digital identities as tutor and student in Second Life. This context will provide a brief background to virtual worlds and to the range and scope of their increasing use for education, as well as OU activities and the nature of our own posi-
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tions within the history of this community. We then present individual accounts that highlight features of our identity development in Second Life.

We assert that our digital identities in the environment are socially grounded—that we construct identities by and through social interaction—and begin a dialogue to address the following questions:

- What does it mean to develop a digital identity in a virtual world?
- What roles do trust and authenticity play in the development of digital identity within an education community?

The chapter concludes by drawing on evidence from the personal accounts to support the assertion that social interaction is pivotal to the development of a digital identity as a member of a community of learners in a virtual world, and by considering near future issues of digital identity in relation to lifelong learning, with suggestions for further research in the area.

Perspective

As noted by Baumesiter and Muraven (1996), ‘The relationship between individual identity and society is one of the classic chicken-and-egg problems. […] Is society the sum or product of identities, or is it the source of them?’ Identity can be argued to be assembled from organizing perspectives that come from both our own self-images and those that others hold of us, bringing together aspects of both individual and social cognition (Smith and MacGregor, 1992).

Sociocultural theories draw on the work of Vygotsky (1962), who proposed that the ability to construct meaning through systematic organization of information is culturally developed or imposed initially, but transfers structural organization into personal meaning by a process that emanates from an understanding of everyday concepts mediated by previous social and cultural development. Cognitive development therefore comes from a dialectical process of shared problem-solving as the individual passes through the Vygotskian zone of proximinal development—a state of transition from needing help (scaffolding) to becoming independent in a task—assimilating the externally imposed or scientific concepts into the experiential or spontaneous.

Sociocultural theories propose that experience within our shared cultural perspectives provides us with the tools to make sense of information, both to ourselves and to others. We have a limited range of understanding about what drives our actions on a local basis, and little understanding of the impact of the greater contexts of our individual and shared cultural experiences, so a sociocultural research perspective seeks to enable researchers to make more sense of this impact.

Socioculturalists contend that learning is mediated (by cultural artifacts), distributed (by participation in a mediated activity) and situated (dependent on the culturally mediating artifacts). There is a shared assumption with Vygotsky that interaction and learning is made possible by a complex milieu of shared social, cultural and historical practice, for example our experience in family, school, community and university, but within this assumption there are a range of alternative methodological approaches proposed by more recent theoreticians, for example situated action (Suchman 1987), activity theory (Engeström 1987), mediated action (Wertsch 1991), distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995) and cultural psychology (Cole 1996).

Sociocultural theorists often exert that learning and/or development should be researched in authentic contexts, referring to the notion that learning does not exist in isolation but is closely linked to the culture and society in which it takes place. Thus, when learning takes place, the practical and sociocultural context in which it happens should be described.
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