Chapter 5
Digital Identity Built on a Cooperative Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Digital identity may be classified as weak or strong. The weak digital identity is limited to virtual characters, avatars, or fakes, which play digital roles with no significant impact on the subjects’ lives. The strong digital identity is constructed when subjects use digital technologies as a support to convey meanings that extend into the subjects’ lives, and reach beyond a virtual concept. The cooperative relationship within a Virtual Environment may be an important method to build a strong digital identity. When the parties involved are genuinely interested, the cooperative relationship may lead to joint constructions of meanings and changes in the sociocultural context. In this chapter, the authors examine the conditions under which cooperative relationships may contribute to the construction of a strong digital identity in digitally excluded subjects. To this end, they present practices in the TelEduc Virtual Environment conducted together with community health agents, who used to be excluded from the information technology universe. The chapter discusses elements that may encourage the construction of a strong digital identity and how the process, which the authors refer to as spiral of transformation, reaches beyond the virtual environment.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is based on activities involving digitally excluded adults (Maia, 2004), but part of the investigation was conducted by the “Culture, Society and Media” Research Group from the Arts Institute of the State University of Campinas - UNICAMP, located in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. The objective of the group is to develop research and studies on the use of Digital Information and Communication Technology (DICT) for the teaching-learning process and the impact of such technology on society and on identity building, especially in a population regarded as excluded.

As a foundation for this study, we adopted the meaning of knowledge, as defined by Freire (1975), as an act of awareness, which involves cooperation with the world, considering both nature and culture. Knowledge encompasses an active practice, a constant search for wanting to be more, of acting and reflecting upon the world in order to transform it. This idea is related to the concept of Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, White, Smith, 2009), which is defined as a group of subjects who share interests and who gather together to exchange ideas that will result in a practice related to the topic in question. Therefore, in a Community of Practice, there must be a topic that fosters discussion, a relationship involving the members around the topic and the adoption of a practice. In this concept, subjects develop a cooperative relationship to learn together and find practical solutions to a given challenge. Wenger (1998) expands the social configurations when it comes to identity building. He suggests that the practices adopted by communities may portray the identities. Similarly, he proposes that non-participation is also a key aspect in building identities. Exclusion or marginalization could carry implications as far as identity is concerned. On the other hand, when subjects start participating in the world, they may also construct new meanings for the identity based on the fact that interactions and acquisition of new experiences may take place. Buckingham (2008) also proposes a concept of relational identity. For him, identity is the relationship established with the other. It is an identification we have with others that somehow is similar and significant to us. He further argues that in order to understand the role of digital media in identity development there is the need for “an approach that is clear sighted, unsentimental, and constructively critical” (p.19).

In order to thoroughly understand identity, we adopt the concept proposed by Castells (2000), who regards identity as “the process by which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or set of attributes to the exclusion of a broader reference to other social structures” (p.22). We therefore regard identity as a set of meanings built through sociocultural relationships established between the subject and the world. The idea of digital identity, as it is used in this paper, relies on information technology as a support for the construction of meanings through the practices adopted by the community, of relationships with the others and based on the sociocultural contexts of the stakeholders.

Instead of a simple representation of a subject’s identity through an avatar in social networks or in Virtual Environments with shy or non-autonomous participation, we regard strong digital identity as a complex set of meanings which have been acquired and internalized by means of learning activities and interactions developed on digital platforms which are able to bring about changes in the participants’ realities. Such changes may take place through complex or simple activities in the virtual environment, provided that the subjects are able to contextualize them in their own lives.

As to the cooperative relationship, Piaget (1973) argues that cooperating in action is sharing the operation, that is, adjusting, by means of new operations of correspondence, reciprocity or complementary initiatives, the actions performed by each one of the parties (p.105). Cooperation arises in the relationships established between