Exploring Intersections Between
Online and Offline Affinity Space Participation

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Abstract: In order to examine the literacies involved with the digital media practices and affinity space involvement of a group of adolescent boys, multiple methods for data collection and analysis were adopted to supplement traditional case study methods. Longitudinal research crossing multiple sites from individual and group perspectives was essential to track development of literacies over time, and to mark the intersection of trajectories of interest-driven expertise development sparked by affinity space involvement individually and collectively.

Introduction

"New capitalism" (Gee, Hull &Lankshear, 1996) has caused many education-based tensions as workers at lower levels of the organization are being called upon for increasingly complex levels of critical thinking, decision making and higher levels of literacy skills, identified broadly as 21st century literacies. Today, unskilled positions have nearly disappeared and the modern workplace requires all students graduate from high school college ready, as the preponderance of jobs in the future will require at least some level of post secondary education incorporating broad based 21st century literacies, including traditional literacy areas (Wagner, 2008). Curtailing the trend of allowing boys, especially those from low income, minority and working class backgrounds, to opt out of literacy related activities has never been more urgent.

Research into boys' out of school literacies presents an optimistic picture of the kinds of literacy related activities they engage in using digital media. Affinity space involvement in conjunction with digital media offers a potentially rich area for the development of these productive practices. As Gee (2004) indicates, an affinity group is a space people congregate to share and forward a particular interest with participation ranging from *hanging out* to publishing artifacts, sharing knowledge or furthering the collective knowledge of the space. Participating in affinity spaces associated with massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) has been shown to host a veritable "constellation" of literacy practices (Steinkuehler, 2007), while also providing affiliation around interest driven learning (Hayes & King, 2009) immersed in popular culture. Supporting the development of broader 21st century literacies, other studies have highlighted the productivity of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992), and affinity spaces associated with participating in online forums (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009) as well as writing and publishing fan fiction (Black, 2005) and taking part in "challenges" associated with The Sims games (Gee & Hayes, in-print).

Description of the Problem

While these studies have been useful in illuminating the kinds of affinity group practices "in the wild," (Hutchins, 1995), they focus on *visible* contributions published online. Unpublished practices of literacies shared between peers both online and offline have largely gone undetected. Therefore there is currently a somewhat limited picture of the kinds of literacy practices afforded by online participation, which omits discussion of the intersection between online and offline affinity group affiliation. This appears to be a relevant area to pursue especially concerning the literacy practices of males which, as research suggests is sparked by peer participation and shared as a social practice among the peer group (Newkirk, 2002).

Description and Discussion of the Research

My research is based on a longitudinal study (three years) of a racially mixed friendship group of eight teenage males from predominately working class backgrounds. Research was conducted in multiple locations in naturalistic face to face environments such as hanging out with friends, sleep overs and home settings, and online in settings such as in-game and hanging out on social networking sites. This was supplemented by activities in the *quasi-naturalistic* setting of the University of Wisconsin-Madison GLS Casual Learning Lab (see Steinkuehler & King, 2009 for program description). Data collection methods integrated participation in collaborative and parallel play, numerous interviews with participants and their parents, field notes from observations of individual and group play, survey administration and the collection of artifacts documenting literacy practices and digital media involvement.

Case study methodology (Stake, 1995) was effective for providing a basic framework for data collection and analysis however borrowing from other methodologies was essential (Steinkuehler, Black & Clinton, 2005). Incorporating methods associated with connective ethnography (Leander & McKim, 2003) to trace participation along trajectories of affinity space involvement and tease out cultural practices stemming from different affinity spaces ported into the

friendship group provided necessary contextual underpinnings for understanding situated practices (Gee, 2004). Data analysis provided equally complex challenges and involved multiple perspectives as well. Being able to shift the lens of analysis from the individual to the group, as well as from specific incidents to group-enacted practice was essential. This was supported by a learning ecologies (Barron, 2006) framework to further explore trajectories of online involvement to illuminate patterns of affinity space involvement that seeded practices that were subsequently taken up or rejected by the friendship group. Adopting a phenomenological perspective to tease out how the boys learned to "be" experts in their game worlds (Thomas and Brown, 2009) and affinity spaces was also necessary in order to unpack how literacy practices impacted their online and offline identity. Adopting an orientation toward identifying and studying the development of individual areas of expertise, similar to Squire, DeVane & Durga (2008) as a way of identifying and tracking the dissemination of practices across the group was also beneficial.

Conclusion

The process of developing and adopting literacy practices across the group was a slow process marked by unanticipated activities, therefore a longitudinal study was essential to mark the dissemination of practices and knowledge over time. In addition, data collected from multiple settings, contexts and from both group and individual perspectives, online *and* offline appeared to provide a more complete picture of the breadth of literacy practices these boys engage in during the range of their affinity space involvement. Key challenges involved the continually evolving nature of the boys' gameplay as well as the complexities associated with collecting data from collective and parallel gaming practices both triggering the need for data analysis drawing upon multiple methods.

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