

# **Vulnerability and Socially Networked Learning**

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## Introduction

Within discussion of digital education, socially networked learning is a ubiquitous concept (Edwards, 2014, p. 526) which frequently carries with it notions of heightened democratic participation, freedom, cosmopolitanism and openness (Edwards, Tracy & Jordan, 2011). Dominant discourse suggests these are naturally liberating and inherent properties of networked learning; attention is less widely given to the vulnerabilities and insecurities that networked learning can involve. Yet, “establishing oneself as a node in a broad network of distributed creativity”, which Joichi Ito (2011) suggests is the new process of education, can be a daunting experience for students. Indeed, even within a closed network some students report “strong feelings of exposure and inhibition” (Kruger, 2006, p. 3) and can struggle with a perceived abundance of information, ideas and resources within the network (Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012, p. 152). Thus, through this paper I seek to explore the factors which contribute to feelings of vulnerability when learning within networked publics, “publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people” (boyd, 2010, p. 41). This framing is deliberately broad, so as to include learning which utilises a range of social software, including social network sites (SNSs), which boyd & Ellison define as “web-based services that allow 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” (2007, p. 211), as well as knowledge building sites such as wikis and blogs, whether group or individual. In such blogs, one writes “oneself into being” in the same way that one does through profile generation (boyd, 2006; boyd 2010).

Through a review of literature, I briefly examine drivers that encourage socially networked learning, before turning to the risks which may be derived from such learning. Next, I look more closely at the identity role of ‘student’, the individual construction of identity standards (Burke and Stets, 2009; Davis, 2014) and ways in which socially networked learning may require a shift in what have traditionally been successful role identities for the student. Finally, I present some tentative ideas about the implications for teaching.

## Why networked learning?

Much early educational work with the Internet was driven by content. In part, the shift towards socially networked learning is because the dominant educational paradigm supports social constructivist assumptions about the cognitive processes involved in learning (Mayes & de Freitas, 2007). It is related to a longer tradition of cooperative and collaborative learning, for example, Vygotsky (1978) and Lave and Wenger (1991), which grew out of the cultural-turn that reoriented the social sciences to a “focus on social and cultural factors rather than the individual and their psychology, or on the biological bases of learning” (Jones, 2007, p. 170). Within the paradigm, all learning is social, as proponent Tressie McMillan Cottom recently highlighted in interview: “learning is inherently social. It relies on context and stories and negotiation of self and history and selves. We can come to know alone, but to learn we have to be social” (Weber, 2016).

However, the affordances of technology also clearly play a part. While notions of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 1992, as cited in Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016) existed before Web 2.0 technology, both in practices such as fandom and in theory such as Lave & Wenger’s Community of Practice (1991), the digital domain enables participation in a way which print does not. “With digital culture, more people are making media and sharing what they made with each other” (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016, p. 8). This affordance has been embraced not just by individuals and educators, but, as boyd notes, also by corporations capitalising on people’s practices (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016, p. 9). These commercial interests in networked publics also influence socially networked learning.

Another driver of socially networked learning is perceived student needs in their future working lives. In a recent presentation (ePortfolios in Ireland: What Now, Where Next? 2016), Helen Beetham observed that there are 1.4 million ‘micro’ firms, with less than 10 employees, in the UK alone. Owing to the trend towards employment in these firms, or within self-started companies, Beetham suggests that future graduates will be reliant on their digital identities to gain work (2016). Using a theory of strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, as cited in Pearson, 2009), which Erika Pearson explains can be used to “explain how information, ideas, and social energy or capital circulate between individuals, and within and between networks, particularly in mediated networks” (Haythornwaite, 2002; Genoni, *etal.*, 2005; both as cited in Pearson, 2009), it follows that future graduates will benefit from building these digital identities, and developing digital networking practices, through socially networked learning.

Preparing students for future lives can also be viewed from the perspective of producing competent, employable graduates to meet the needs of the economy, a task which has long been imposed on higher education by governments (Yorke, 2004). There is ample policy pressure to produce graduates with the communication and identity management skills which participation in socially networked learning may help to develop. For example:

*All universities should be expected to demonstrate how their institution prepares its students for employment, including through training in modern workplace skills such as team working, business awareness, and communication skills.*

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2009, p. 8

Similarly, policy demands more flexible learning opportunities which can be completed from within the workplace and home (BIS, 2009, p. 6). Against a historical backdrop of student feelings of isolation and alienation within distance education (Galusha, 1997, as cited in Veletsiano & Navarrete, 2012), socially networked learning seems a logical progression.

### **The risks of - and resistance to - learning in networked publics**

Guy Merchant describes a discourse of identity threat which speaks of the anxiety and mistrust which surrounds identity performance online. Fear exists around being deceived, facing identity theft and being surveilled (Merchant, 2006). While these are no doubt genuine risks that learners, and especially younger or less digitally experienced learners need to be taught to evade, the prevalence of the discourse's associated 'scare stories' speaks to an angst which may be a barrier to student engagement with socially networked learning. It additionally raises questions about what teachers can legitimately ask students to do in unbounded public spaces. However, the widespread nature of these fears is also a call to aid students in moving past their fears, with requisite online safety skills, so that they can build diverse online social networks and avoid what Sheehan (2015) terms "the spiral of silence". This theory and associated research suggests that more diverse social networks, with weak ties (Granvetter, 1973, as cited in Sheehan, 2015) between people of different backgrounds, enable people to better read the opinion climate, and makes them more likely to voice their opinions that they perceive to be in the minority. In this sense, helping students to build diverse online networks through socially networked learning could add value for society, as well as individuals (Sheehan, 2015).

A further political dimension to the vulnerability that we can expose students to when asking them to learn in unbounded networks and through SNSs is that of generating “quantifiable, marketable” communications. Such communication acts can, according to Bassett (2013), be viewed as “data donations” that are commoditised by being captured in code and added to databases. Bassett (2015) contends that rather than contributing to community solidarity and social justice, our communication is being used instrumentally by corporations. Where we ask students to learn becomes important from this perspective, as they should be able to choose whether they give such data to corporate organisations without it affecting educational opportunities.

For danah boyd (2006; 2010), the interplay of the affordances and dynamics of networked publics raises further concern. She observes that because communications within SNSs are persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable, and broadcast to an invisible audience, participants face a blurring of public and private domains, and potential context collapse when messages intended for one audience are received by another (boyd, 2006; 2010). Madrigal (2011) provides evidence of such context collapse in the context of recruitment, with 95% of hiring managers acknowledging checking applicants’ SNS activity, and 69% admitting to not hiring a candidate based on information found therein. When asking students to work in semi-public and public spaces, teachers need to be aware of the digital footprint which students necessarily leave through participation. Students are vulnerable to context collapse not just because of the multiplicity of identity but also due to the tension between information persistence and developing identities (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014).

### **The student identity role**

Within identity theory (e.g. Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980 as cited in Benson & Mekolichick, 2007), which is in the tradition of symbolic interaction theory, the definitions attached to the roles one performs and the groups one is part of influence one’s conception of self, or, one’s identity. Individuals perform multiple roles, but those roles which are most salient to the individual are those which are most tightly linked to one’s conception of self (Benson & Mekolichick, 2007, p. 500). According to Burke and Stets (2009, p. 63), individuals create an identity standard for each role which establishes the boundaries of what it means for that individual to be that role within their culture. They further “propose that within any given situation where the role is adopted, the individual will seek to verify or adapt the identity standard to more closely align with their perceptions of the nature of that role” (Davis, 2014, p. 399).

Burke & Stets suggest that “student identity is comprised of multiple meanings including being academically responsible, intellectually curious, sociable, and personally assertive” (2009, p. 50). The

meanings which are dominant for each individual will govern their behaviour when claiming student identity. Traditionally, the most academically successful students were those whose dominant meanings were those of being academically responsible and/or intellectually curious. In contrast, strong sociable and personally assertive dimensions may have indicated less serious student orientations (Cantwell, 2007, as cited in Davis, 2014, p. 402). However, it has been observed within socially networked learning that success is in part dependent on the ability to build trust and maintain a strong sense of identity within the group (Krüger, 2006, p. 4), which could be assisted by a strong sociable dimension. Indeed, Davis (2014, p. 402), using White & Le Cornu's (2011) Visitors and Residents Framework, suggests that "a strong degree of intellectual curiosity and a high degree of sociability may support a greater degree of digital residency", meaning that individuals with these student identity meanings are more likely to be present with others when online, and thus build stronger learning communities.

Within socially networked learning, it would seem that a different arrangement of dominant meanings leads to success in the student role than in more traditional learning scenarios. When reporting research on the uptake of digital technology by those in the academic role, Benson & Mekolichick (2007, p. 508) suggested that those individuals who were more likely to adopt digital technology as it became part of the behaviours associated with the academic role were those for whom the role was most salient. While their research is concerned with use of digital technologies in general rather than engagement with socially networked learning per se, it suggests that the meanings within identity roles are, to a degree, malleable to the changing demands of context over time. Indeed, in Krüger's study, those participants who were most successful were those who were able to "negotiate and re-negotiate their identity" (2006, p. 4).

### **Tentative conclusions and the implications for teaching**

In this paper, I have identified pedagogical, technological, commercial and political drivers of socially networked learning. There is a risk amid such broad encouragement that educators cease to question the ideological motivations of moves towards learning in networked publics. However, as I have highlighted, there are legitimate reasons for learners to resist and to feel vulnerable within socially networked learning scenarios. Teachers need to be cognisant of the commercial exposure inherent within SNSs in particular, and in unbounded spaces. Voicing political agency by choosing not to donate data to commercial enterprises should not limit learning opportunities; educators need to be conscious of the choices they are offering students, and also to help learners to become more aware of the ramifications of their choices.

Context collapse can be a very real concern, particularly due to the affordance of information persistence (boyd, 2006; 2010) combined with the necessarily developing nature of identity (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014). As such, identity work that includes an examination of digital footprints seems to be a necessary companion to socially networked learning. In addition, learners need safe spaces to try on emergent identities. This could involve a progression from more closed to more open presentations of identity, such as that in the MSc in Digital Education (Edinburgh), which begins with a personal blog with one reader, but later provides options for semi-public group blogging in Digital Education in Global Context and public blogging within open courses such as Education and Digital Cultures or The Digital Student Experience (Sinclair, 2016).

Examination of the student identity through an identity theory lens suggests an identity role which is itself in a state of flux. Within this movement, what it means to be successful in the student role appears to be changing. Combined with emergent identities within the field of study, as students *become* through learning, uncertainty about the role identity can contribute to feelings of precariousness. A supporting discourse may be one which embraces the not finalised, sometimes messy and contingent nature of learning and identity, and makes space for such contingencies amid the present climate of outcomes, efficiency and measurability which exists within education.

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