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Published: 06/09/2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Proposal Information of Contribution 606

ID: 606 / 06 SES 09 A: 2
06. Open Learning: Media, Environments and Cultures
Paper
Alternative EERA Network: 13. Philosophy of Education
Keywords: identity, videogame, gamer, learner, identity-based motivation theory, life history, biography

Learning Selves in Chinese and Scottish Contexts: How Digital Game Playing Shapes University Students’ Learner Identity

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In our lives, learners conceive of many kinds or modalities of learning, which are useful and meaningful, even though these learnings are not validated by formal education (Setfon-Green & Erstad, 2012). In both China and the UK videogame play is of increasing cultural importance. China is the largest video game market in the world in 2017, and UK is the 5th (McDonald, 2017; Ukie, 2018). Some players spend significant time game playing, and through this accumulating many skills and experiences. Furthermore, there are many differences in the learning and play culture between East and West (Li, 2012). Thus, these learners’ different kinds of learning experiences are worthy of study. Of particular interest is understanding how their motivation in game playing relates to motivation to learn in other contexts, including formal education in both countries.

To explore this topic, we employed Identity-based motivation theory. Individuals tend to make identity-congruent decisions and conduct identity-congruent behaviour. Oyserman (2009) proposed the Identity-based motivation theory (IBM) which emphasize the dynamic and flexible characteristic of identity. IBM highlights three components, which are the dynamic construction of identity, the interpretation of experience, and the action-readiness respectively. To be specific, individual's will evaluate their goals with their identity and interpret the goal's difficulty. If identity and goals are congruent (“for people like me”), they will regard the difficulty as meaningful and worthwhile, however, if it is incongruent (“not for people like me”), they will conceive the difficulty as impossible and worthless, and will use this thinking to “move on” or “give up”. Furthermore, according to Burke and Slets (2009), when individuals’ perceptions of the situation are not consistent with their identity standards, they will try to change their behaviour to conform with their perceptions to try to make them consistent.

Kearney (2003) indicated that identity is connected to the motivation problem in learning and is the crucial factor to secure meaningful learning. Research found that school-focused possible identities have positive relationship with academic grades at school (Horowitz, Oyserman, Dehghani, & Sorensen, 2020). The possible interactions between learner identity and gamer identity are important to explore. Technologies are constructing new kinds of identities and human subjects that did not exist before (Loveless and Williamson, 2013). Videogames as a new kind of technology, offer gamers a simulation world to explore their identities (Shaffer, 2006). As Gadamcr (1989) indicated play is not solely representation of something, but a self-representation of gamers (cited in de Mul, 2015, p. 257), and play can provide a third place where players can explore the media's meanings related to their own identities (Willett, 2009). Almost all games are about identity (Gee, 2007) but in very different ways, with different implications for application to a player’s learning identity in other contexts, such as formal education. In the research of Silseth and Arnseth (2011, p. 77), they applied the concept of learning selves to figure out the transfer/issue between different settings, and indicated that “a learning person is very much agentically engaged in negotiation of learning selves in the different learning situations he or she traverses.” Furthermore, Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green, and Vasbø (2009) use Learning lives to describe the coherence of identity, learning and agency in the learning trajectories over the life course.

1. Do they achieve identity verification, experience interpretation in their videogame play and school-learning experiences?
2. How do they apply their identity verification, interpretation of experience in gaming and school learning?
3. How can they connect their game related identities to their learning selves?
4. Are there any differences between Western and Chinese context, what can these differences tell us about implications for education?

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used
A qualitative approach was taken to exploring these questions. Participants were recruited from a game society of one Chinese university and one Scottish university respectively. 5 participants for each context to make the comparison. The recruitment standard was having rich experience both in academic learning and game playing. We chose to focus on a sample of learners successful in both experiences as this provided the best opportunity for learning about successful interplay of learning between them.

In order to investigate individual’s identity and learning selves in games, the learner cannot be taken for granted as a predominant and already given term, it should be taken as constructed in our discourse (Sinha, 1999). Narratives and stories are useful strategies to investigate students’ learning identity in different contexts because individuals will identity themselves as specific kind of learners by telling stories through that connect their past to present and construct their learning selves and identities (Arnseth & Silseth, 2013; Bruner, 2003).

Life story is a set of stories that individual tells his/her life through. They encapsulate individual's whole life experiences within meaningful stories (Atkinson, 1998; White, Uzzell, Ráthzel, & Gatersleben, 2010). Life stories afford us explanations to know how individuals construct themselves (McAdams, 2001). The research of Buchanan (2014) indicated that life story work is a positive method to help youth make sense of themselves. Attention to students’ life experiences may lead to new insights into their learning experiences they never thought before, which may enable them and researchers to gain more details about their learning stories. Through their story telling meanings and experiences sketch out identity choices and commitments and the motivations for them. To elicit such kinds of stories, BNIM (Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method) was applied to analyse biographical narratives. There are three sub-sessions interview in BNIM, first, is the single question aimed at eliciting
their life narrative (SQUIN) (Wengraf, 2001). Second, asks probing questions regarding narratives in the former session. Finally, focussed interview questions on those aspects from former 2 sessions that seem to relate most closely to the research questions.

Furthermore, the life grid method was used as a supplementary tool. Life grid is a tool to represent participants’ lives visually, and is composed of rows that represents research aspects of participants’ lives and columns progressive stages of their life. This method improved the recall accuracy and allowed participants to do the internal checking for some errors (Bell, 2005), which improved life history’s reliability.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings
What we observed through the stories is that games played a recuperative role in contrast to learning contexts. They gave participants an opportunity to seek refuge from negative experiences in real life. The open world in games offer gamers a place to explore their identities freely. Young people found comfort and respite in games, which is not common in formal education environment. This suggests learners appreciated the distinction between the two spaces which complicates efforts to draw gaming experiences and identity work into the arena of formal education.

Participants narratives also opened up question about what constitutes meaningful learning. Though participants practice some new identities freely in the game world which are not applied in real life, these identities may nevertheless still motivate meaningful learning. Rather than classrooms being privileged as the locus of meaningful learning, game space with its wider range of identities and possible motivations employed within them may be cites of more meaningful learning.

Different cultural context provides different affordances and limitations and thus there are differing possibilities for transferring opportunities from the game to educational contexts. Whilst some participants in both contexts played the same games when they were young because the animations related to those games were popular in both countries, differing culture, family expectations and views about the effects of gaming gave rise to differing experiences in the two countries. Whilst participants expressed similar intensity about their passion to pursue the game achievement or explore the game, they experienced different pressures to succeed in formal learning contexts with differing measurements of success at different age thresholds.

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