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'Figured Worlds' And The Construction Of Positive Learner Identities Through Digital Technologies Outside Of School

Heather Brown

Abstract

Young adolescents are highly engaged in literacy practices involving the use of digital technologies, both inside and outside of school. This study examines how the out-of-school use of digital technologies creates spaces in which young adolescents construct and negotiate positive learner identities. Through vignettes of four young adolescents, this research uses the conceptual framework of 'figured worlds' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998), to develop an understanding of the construction of learner identities through out-of-school use of digital technologies. The discussions of the participants reveal 'figured worlds' of friendship, homework and soccer that transcend the traditional boundaries of the real and the virtual, revealing a connected and dynamic concept of space. Within these worlds, the young adolescents move in and out of learner and teacher roles when necessary to learn or advance their skills, and in doing this, are developing self-understandings and conveying these understandings as performances within a figured world. This study argues that the learner identities are constructed and negotiated by the young adolescents are strong, positive and to varying extents self-crafted.

Keywords: Figured worlds, identity, affinity spaces, young adolescents, digital technologies, mobile technology

Australian adolescents are eager users and consumers of digital technologies and outside of the classroom they are gaming, communicating, consuming and producing texts (ACMA, 2016). Smartphones, internet access and social media sites have become woven into the daily fabric of their lives, both in and out of the classroom (Morgan, 2014). Digital technologies have helped to challenge and broaden the definition of literacy to better reflect social literacy practices and the multimodality of modern texts. In this article, I aim to explore the identity work that occurs in literacy practices mediated by digital technologies. I draw on the theoretical framework of 'figured worlds' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998) to unpack the merging of on- and offline spaces and conceptualize identity work. Empirical data is presented in the form of purposeful conversations with four young adolescents that illuminate the figured worlds they inhabit and present them as spaces where positive learner identities are created.

Identity and Figured Worlds

As literacy is recognized as a social practice, theorists have also become increasingly curious about how peoples' identities mediate and are mediated by the digital literacy practices they are involved in (Moje and Luke, 2009). In this article, I define identity as dynamic self-perceptions or understandings. Identity work is a cultural phenomenon whereby people make sense of themselves and convey these meanings to others (Urrieta, 2007b). The self-understandings of identity are ever changing and evolving building up through overlapping life experiences. 'People produce identities through participation on cultural activities that allow them to engage conceptual and procedural identity production.' (Urrieta, 20017b, p. 119). Drawing on the work of Holland et al (1998) and also Urrieta (2007b), Identity is understood as being in a constant state of flux and thus is about becoming, not being. Self-understandings of identity are reflected in cultural activities as performances and improvisations.

The work of Holland et al (1998), in their theories of 'figured worlds', self and identity, provides a useful framework to understand identity work in literacy practices. Figured worlds are

spaces where people 'figure' who through the roles, activities, and relationships that are performed in these worlds. The figured world is the loci of where identity work occurs, where people produce and perform self-understandings within cultural activities. Urrieta (2007) draws on the work of Holland et al (1998) to define identity as 'how people come to understand themselves, how they come to figure who they are, through the 'worlds' that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds' (p. 107). Figured worlds are conceptualized according to four broad points:

1. Figured worlds are a cultural phenomenon to which people are recruited, or into which people enter, and that develop through the work of their participants.
2. Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter. Activities relevant to these worlds take meaning from them and are situated in particular times and places.
3. Figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced, which means that in them people are sorted and learn to relate to each other in different ways.
4. Figured worlds distribute people by relating them to landscapes of action; thus activities related to the worlds are populated by familiar social types and host to individual senses of self (Urrieta 2007, p. 108).

The work of Holland et al (1998) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the identity work of young adolescents' digital technology practices both in and outside of school. In a similar study, Lewis Ellison (2014) also uses the theory of figured worlds to help unpack the identity work of two young adolescents playing *The Sims 2* video game. The figured world can be a site of possibility where individuals have agency and choice in the roles they act out. Contradictory to this, the figured world is also a site of constrained social reality that is situated within and mediated by relations of power, meaning that sometimes individuals act out the script given to them. The work of Holland and colleagues (1998) allows us to understand how the on- and offline worlds are weaved, merged and connected as sites of identity work for young adolescents. Material and immaterial objects and places combine to create 'joint imaginary spaces', or figured worlds where literacy practices take place (Kervin, Verenikina and Rivera 2015). It also allows us to understand how choice, agency and participation are central to an individual's concept of self within a particular discourse or 'world'.

As adolescents negotiate these worlds, they learn skills and ways of being. In this article, I use the term 'learner identity' to refer a particular aspect of identity, highlighting particular aspects of identity work concerned with understanding the self as a learner. Learner identity can be understood as both how we position, or craft, ourselves as learners, and how we are positioned as learners by others. Learner identity can be produced through or by learning, and also be a context necessary for a particular kind of learning (Sinha, 1999). In contemporary research of adult education and lifelong learning, learner identities are often expressed as epiphanies, turning points or learning moments along a biographic life course (Sefton-Green and Erstad 2013). The expression of learner identity can, therefore, be seen as both or either 'identity as position' and/or 'identity as narrative'. Both approaches 'open up ways of putting people in the messy materiality of their lives at the centre of educational research and seeing learning as part of a wide range of social processes' (Sefton-Green and Erstad, 2013, p. 3).

Informal and Out-of-School Learning

I have used the work of Rogoff, Callanan, Gutierrez and Erickson, (2016) to provide a useful description of informal learning. They define informal learning as having the following

characteristics: ‘It is nondidactic; is embedded in meaningful activity; builds on the learner’s initiative, interest, or choice (rather than resulting from external demands or requirements); and does not involve assessment external to the activity.’ (Rogoff et al, 2016, p. 358). The recent saturation of digital technologies in the lives of young adolescents has implications for learning, literacies and identity work. The greater opportunities for students to move across ‘sites of learning’, both online and offline, in-school and out-of-school, raises questions of how these contexts relate to each other in the 21st Century. Sefton-Green and Erstad (2013) describe the ‘digital disconnect’ between the digital learner and the school as a significant disjuncture. They argue the importance of a greater understanding of ‘informal learning’ and, rather than seeing it as oppositional to traditional in-school learning, looking at how informal and formal learning can work together in a complementary fashion.

Social groups, networks and connections are a defining feature of much of the digital technologies used by young adolescents outside of the classroom. (Morgan, 2014). To further understand the social interactions within figured worlds, it is useful to apply the concept affinity space, from the work of Gee (2004) on situated language and learning. The affinity space is a place of informal learning, often online, where people come together to share and participate in a common activity or interest. Gee builds on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who first described the idea of the ‘community of practice’ where students apprentice themselves to be part of a community through which they learn from others (2004, p. 68). The affinity space puts the emphasis on the ‘space’ rather than the group of people, therefore departing from the problematic use of the word community (Gee, 2004, p. 68-69).

Participation in an affinity space is a social literacy practice which creates a space for the identity work of young adolescents. Parallels can be drawn between affinity spaces and figured worlds, in that individuals are actors playing out, or forging roles in social landscapes of action. Both concepts flesh out the spaces in which the individual constructs and negotiates their identities. Gee’s affinity space provides us with a lens for examining the figured worlds of informal, out-of-school learning. This model allows us to unpack the identity work of young adolescents engaged with digital technologies.

The Study

Thanks for letting us do this. It’s nice to come out and talk about it. No one has ever asked us these questions before. – Rana, participant

This study involved four participants, all year 6 or 7 students from the school where I work part time as a literacy coach. I became aware that there were several students in the class with a high level of interest and involvement in using digital technologies outside of school. Students had chatted with me in class about their gaming and use of social media and I became interested in the students’ identity work and informal learning within online spaces. These digital literacies and practices outside of school warranted further research. I conducted a small-scale qualitative inquiry to explore further. The simple and telling quote from Rana (expressed at the conclusion of the interviews), indicated her willingness to discuss her daily literacy practices with me.

The Participants

Four participants, two boys and two girls, were involved in the study. Their interests and use of digital technologies outside of school is detailed in the table below.

Name (All pseudonyms)	Rana	Brooke	Jake	Kai
Sex	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	13	13	12	12
Interests in digital technologies	Instagram, Instant Messaging (IM) and Facebook	YouTube, Instagram, IM and Facebook	Gaming, Facebook and YouTube	Gaming and YouTube

Given that we already knew each other, the data collection process involved engaging in purposeful conversations (Burgess, 1982, 1988) with each of the students. Each participant was involved in two rounds of purposeful conversations and then paired up in a focus group conversation. The aim of the purposeful conversations was to create a dialogic, open and natural exchange where the participant could potentially take lead of change direction. Each conversation was approximately thirty minutes in duration and included preplanned questions and periods of more natural and flexible conversation. All conversations were transcribed and analysed to locate and follow trends in the dialogue. I present many excerpts verbatim from the transcriptions to foreground the voices of the four student participants. I work to weave their words with literature, and my own thoughts, to present a rich portrayal of their complex literate practices.

The participants provided deep and revealing insights into their use of digital technologies providing a sense of the opportunity for identity work it afforded. I was impressed with the ways they articulated their practices and thoughts about learning outside of school. Essential to the discussion of this study is an understanding of the identity and positioning of the researcher. Before this study I had a familiar relationship with all four participants. As a literacy coach at the school where the students attend, I had spoken to them casually at various times around the school and on yard duty. I had also worked as a mentor for the classroom teacher of the participants and was in their classroom one lesson a week, either teaching, team teaching or observing the classroom teacher. Although my relationship with the students would not have been as close and familiar as a regular classroom teacher, it still assumed a relationship of teacher/student and the discourses of power and positioning that this is situated in. I am aware that my position as ‘teacher’ for these participants, may have limited or sometimes tainted the conversations. It needs to be understood that the four stories I tell in this research are the four stories that four young adolescents chose to tell a teacher, researcher, adult, female, mother.

Findings

Sites of informal learning, particularly those embedded in digital technologies are rich and complex spaces where young adolescents can construct and negotiate positive learner identities. This identity work occurs within figured worlds where people are constantly developing and acting out self-understandings. The following conversation excerpts from the participants, along with my discussion, describes and fleshes out the identity work that occurs within these figured worlds. After my conversations with the participants, I identified three clear figured worlds that were important in the lives of the participants. These three figured worlds: friendship, homework and soccer all transcend online / offline, as well as in-school and out-of-school spaces.

The Figured World of Friendship

My conversations with both Brooke and Rana would often emphasize the importance of their friendship groups both on- and offline. The figured world of friendship is a loci for the girls to understand themselves, particularly in relation to others.

Brooke

- B *I've got a lot of friends. I don't know the exact number. Most of them are my friends and I have a few family members but I don't have anyone I don't know on there.*
- H *So it's mainly your friends at school?*
- B *Yeab and like netball. .*
- H *Ok and friends of friends and stuff. So if someone randomly asked to be your friend?*
- B *Yeab I would just deny their request.*

Rana and Brooke

- H *How do you think that Facebook changes your friendships? Does it change them?*
- R *I think it makes them stronger, like I'm going to a different high school next year and all my friends are going to Spring High (pseudonym). So I can still keep in touch with all of my friends over Facebook and if I didn't have that I probably wouldn't see them or keep in touch with them. It's harder to organise something if you can't just message them.*
- H *Does that make you feel better about going to a school that no one else from here is going to?*
- R *Yeab, because I can still communicate and keep in touch with them and I don't want to just lose my friends.*
- B *It's really good for just organising stuff. Like the other night, R and I were talking and we were saying we should go over to each others' houses or whatever, like you are just in a conversation and it turns into something else.*
- R *Yeab, it develops into something to see each other and if we didn't have that it probably wouldn't happen.*

Rana

- H *So how many friends have you got on Facebook?*
- R *Well, I don't know exactly, but there is a fair few, but I don't accept anyone that I'm not close to. Like even if I know them, I went to school with them for a little while, I still probably won't accept them, like not that I don't care what they're doing, but I don't need to see what they like or anything because I don't have a close relationship with them.*
- H *So you don't use Facebook as a way to make friends but you use it to keep in touch with your Friends that you do have so what kind of things do put on Facebook then?*
- R *Well I use it to talk like with the Messenger part and yeab just look at videos or what my friends have posted like what they've been doing.*

Here, Rana and Brooke talk about the role of social media in their friendship circle. It enhances existing friendships and relieves anxiety about going to a new school without friends. Social media strengthens friendships as it allows for easy access to communication with people you do not see regularly. This finding is consistent with those of Hoff (2016), Lewis and Fabos (2005) and Mallan, Ashford and Singh (2010), who found that the participants existing offline relationships were strengthened, rather than the formation of new friendships, through the use of social media. Friendship and trust are transitive between off- and online spaces and without trust, young adolescents are less likely to engage in social media (Hoff, 2016). Both Rana and Brooke also discussed at length how they do not accept friend requests from people they don't know on any form of social media. While they both enjoy looking at celebrity YouTube channels and Instagram accounts, they have no desire to make new friends with people who are not in their 'real' life friendship circle.

‘While as a cultural artefact, the Internet is often constructed as creating new

relationships, including new forms of identity, cultural border crossing not otherwise possible, illicit romances that break up families, etc., in practice it is likely that the Internet is more often one tool and social space among many that people use to extend themselves and their relationships.' (Leander and McKim, 2003 , pp. 220).

As Leander and McKim (2003) suggest, the Internet is one more social space that makes up the figured world of friendship for Rana and Brooke. The online social space strengthens and extends friendships, exhibiting similar dynamics usually attributed to young adolescent relationships, such as peer pressure and anxiety about exclusion, as shown in the conversation below.

Rana and Brooke

- R *Some people might have peer pressure to do it as well because it might be the thing that your group of friends is doing.*
- H *Have you ever felt that pressure?*
- R *Sometimes, like I was the last one to get Facebook, like fairly the last one to get Facebook out of all my friends so I sort of felt that they all have it so I should have it too.*
- H *So to be with your friends still you needed to have that technology too.*
- B *And everyone would be "do you have Facebook?"*
- R *And everyone would be like, "Uh, you don't have Facebook. Oh man, you're a weirdo." So I would say "Yeab, I have Facebook."*

The girls, who think of themselves as very sociable and friendly at school, see the use of social media as an extension of this identity, thus building up layers of their identity. In my conversations with Rana, she spoke of feeling the pressure being the last one in her friendship group to get a Facebook and Instagram account. She felt it was important not to be left out of this activity in her friendship circle. This demonstrates how vitally important the virtual space has become in Rana's real life friendship group and her identity within this group. She describes how the virtual space created by digital technologies is part of, not separate to the real friendship group she is part of day to day and in and out of school.

The figured world of friendship is a dynamic and complex space, crossing over on- and offline sites and weaving school and out-of-school lives together. For Rana and Brooke, it is within this world that they construct an identity for themselves and convey it back through performances in the figured world. Crucial to this identity work is that identity is relational and is always constructed as what one is not (Urrieta, 2007b). Rana clearly expresses her desire to be part of the collective that make use of social media, as opposed to the 'other', people who do not have Facebook.

The Figured World of Homework

In the lives of the two girls in this study, digital technologies extend, enhance and develop aspects of their day to day lives. Homework is another figured world where young adolescents engage in social space both on- and offline, and both at school and at home. While the homework set for the participants is largely individual and traditional in nature, and not necessarily requiring digital technologies to complete, the participants have chosen to create a social world using digital technologies around the nightly practice of doing homework.

Brooke

- H *What about homework, do you have your phone out?*
- B *Yeab I actually think it's really useful. Just say you're doing maths and my phone has a calculator on it and I could just ask Siri a question, just say, like a dictionary meaning for blab blab blab and she would tell me. It's a quicker, easier way to do it.*
- H *And do you ever sneaky check Facebook*
- B *Yeab maybe ha ha.*
- H *Do you ever get in touch with your friends about homework, like your friends from school?*
- B *Yeab like Kate and Emma (not their real names), like I will message them about to see what they are doing and if they are doing homework then I will FaceTime them or Skype, video call or whatever and we double check answers with each other and just talk about it. It's a better way to do homework cos its funner.*
- H *And why else is it better?*
- B *Cos I can talk to them and double check your answers and it's better than just sitting in a room and focusing on one thing. It's like they're there and its funner doing things with friends.*
- H *Do you feel more confident with them there?*
- B *Yeab, and if you don't really get it you can just say how do you do this and they'll tell you and it does make you feel more confident in your answers.*
- H *So do you think you do a better job?*
- B *Yeab, and I don't stress as much about it, it's more easy going.*
- H *That's interesting. If you had to do it by yourself, would you stress about it sometimes?*
- B *Yeab, a little bit like I'm not sure if I'm doing it right. and it's sort of like, well in reading groups we are doing a book cover and we are doing a fantasy one. It's like she was showing me her book cover and it gives me ideas.*

Brooke discusses the important role digital technologies play in completing homework for school. She naturally turns to Siri and uses Facetime and Messenger to collaborate with her peers to seek feedback and generally relieve anxiety over homework by feeling like she is not alone. Brooke's use of social media here provides a space that fosters support, feedback and compliments, which are easier to give and receive within the security of the online space (Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence, 2016). We see here what Ringrose and Renold (2015) refer to as a 'circulation of affective solidarities', central to the building of the friendship group of the girls and also contributing to the construction of their positive learner identities. They feel confident and capable in a more collaborative environment and approach the tasks with a sense of fun. In my discussions with the girls about homework, they made sense of their experiences across the spaces of on- and offline. These spaces mesh together to form the figured world of homework.

The figured world of homework for the participants was an interesting space to explore. Essentially, Brooke and her friends have taken a traditional and routine aspect of school learning and, by choosing to incorporate the use of digital technologies, have developed a space where they engage in further understanding themselves as learners. Brooke expresses her positive learning identity here, performing confidence and seeking dialogue and feedback to push her standard of homework.

The Figured World of Soccer

The majority of conversations I had with Jake were about soccer. It was an important part of his life, identity work and his literate practices outside of school. Jake plays soccer in the virtual sense on his Xbox and in the physical sense at club level and at school. For Jake, the figured world of soccer is a social space that encompasses school and home, and on- and offline domains.

Jake

- H *So you said you play the FIFA soccer game a lot, do you play real soccer?*
- J *Yeab, I play indoor soccer once a week at the YMCA and every chance I get I play soccer, at lunch or at recess and on the weekend.*
- H *You play with the boys out here on the hard-court don't you?*
- J *[Nods]*
- H *So that's something you're interested in life but you like playing it on the computer as well. If you had your choice which one do you prefer?*
- J *Probably the online experience cos you don't really get tired.[Both laugh]*

Jake

- J *Yeab Sean (pseudonym) and I play FIFA and with his brother, we play online through Xbox because we both love soccer so we both play on the Xbox.*

In the example above, Jake discusses his favourite Xbox game, FIFA. This MMOG involves playing soccer against other online opponents, and in some cases (FIFA Ultimate Team) becoming a team manager and creating a team to play against other opponents. Jake describes this game as a reflection and extension of his 'real' life passion, playing soccer. Much of his online involvement in soccer is also deeply entrenched in his close friendship group from school. They play FIFA online together, sometimes in the same physical house, and at other times, online. They also watch and share YouTube clips about FIFA and are working together on a YouTube channel around this game.

Jake's involvement in FIFA gaming is rich in the use of what Apperley and Walsh refer to as paratexts where 'The term paratext is mobilised to describe the print and multimodal texts used and often developed by game players that circulate in the complex nexus of literacy practices that make up digital gaming cultures' (Apperley and Walsh, 2012, p. 116). Jake discussed with me the types of paratexts he reads or views in order to fully participate in FIFA gaming. These include watching soccer games on TV and on the internet, reading online newspaper articles such as *Football Daily*, Reading soccer articles in the local paper *The Advertiser*, Visiting soccer website *Foothead*, Liking and following various football teams and players on Facebook, and endless conversations with friends, both on- and offline. Jake confidently researches, synthesises and applies this information in the hope to create a successful soccer team to play in FIFA. When successful in the game he can then capture these sequences to upload on his own YouTube channel. He locates and weaves together both modern multimodal and more traditional print-based texts in skilful literacy practices that shape and enhance his figured world of soccer.

Understanding the paratexts that are involved in Jake's gaming world forces us to consider how much this 'virtual' world is meshed with Jake's 'real' world, and also with the more traditional texts accepted and commonly used in formal schooling. For Jake, the act of playing a soccer computer game is, in fact, a complex practice of text consumption and production that weaves in and out of virtual and real spaces. It is not the time spent playing computer games, the time spent playing soccer, or the time spent reading soccer related texts alone that wholly define Jake's identity. Rather it is the flow between these activities and spaces that build and laminate as identity construction.

Soccer is a popular sport at Jake's school and is played by groups of students (mostly boys) at each break time. As Swain (2000) found, soccer (referred to as football in Australia) is part of the dominant practices of acting out masculinities and establishing oneself as a 'real' boy at school. Jake's online FIFA gaming together with his knowledge of the sport allow him greater access to participate in these hegemonic constructions of what it means to be a boy at his school. The online layers of Jake's figured world of soccer contribute to his identity as a footballer and offer

status and inclusion in a social group that may not otherwise be available to him. Using the lens of figured worlds, we see how Jake masterfully uses the cultural artifacts available to him to participate in this world and construct a strong identity of soccer player. Within this landscape of action, Jake understands and conveys himself through a variety of performances and improvisations.

Noobs and Masters

Within the figured worlds that the participants inhabit both on- and offline, there is a blurring of roles between learner and teacher. The situations described by the participants display characteristics of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), where people are drawn together by a common endeavour, and support each other to achieve a common goal. Gee's (2007) work on video games and learning describes gaming culture as often supportive and sharing, rather than competitive. In the conversations below, Kai talks about his experiences playing MMOGs and how he slips between the roles of learner and teacher when necessary. This process happens organically, without structure and formality.

Kai and Jake

- K *Like teaching someone new, another label that some people call them is a 'noob'...*
- H *A noob?*
- K *A noob, they don't really know much stuff, it's a label that some people call them. I don't really use that label but I've heard it before.*
- H *So how do you know when people are noobs?*
- K *If they've never played the game before and they are really bad.*
- H *Do they come out and say it, or do you just pick it up?*
- K *Yeab, you can see that they are struggling.*
- H *So what do you do then when the kids are struggling?*
- K *Most of the time I just help them, or just teach them. If they are at your actual house playing with you then you can help them, like actually help them. But if you are playing online you can stick around them and help them that way, so they kind of learn from you because you are always with them and helping them.*
- H *Do you do that often?*
- J *Yeab*
- K *There could be someone way better at the game than you and they might teach you. But yet the people that are better at the game than you, they still might not know some things so you can help them as well. So even if they are better at the game than you, you can still teach them things. Like I still teach my mum things because you keep on learning new things.*

In the extract above, Jake and Kai discuss how they slip between roles of novice and expert in a constant organic cycle of teaching and learning. Whilst in an MMOG environment, players will look out for each other and support each other's acquisition of skills. 'Noobs', short for newbies, are picked out by their lack of skill or understanding of the game. Support for noobs is offered by direct instruction or through modelling by a more experienced or skilful player. This is a characteristic of an affinity space where newbies and masters all share the same space. 'The whole continuum of people from new to experienced, from unskilled to highly skilled, from minorly interested to the addicted, and everything in between, is accommodated in the same space' (Gee, 2004, p. 77). This unsegregated mingling contributes to the identity work and learning of the players.

Jake and Kai use the term noob and discuss the regular occurrence of finding and supporting noobs within a game. As also discussed in Sjoblom and Aronsson (2014) game players use labels such as noobs or experts to position others in terms of skill ranking or experience and ascribing

to them specific learner identities (p. 194). Although this positioning is evident in my discussions with the boys, they also clearly describe how these roles or positions are slippery and changing depending on the circumstance. They explain how even inexperienced players can become 'teachers' and support more experienced players. The boys recognise that sometimes they are noobs and sometimes they are masters, even in the one space. There are many different routes to participation and to achieving status. You may be technically good at playing the game, or you might be good at supporting others, or you might be good and capturing and uploading content about the game.

Kai

- K *Most of the time if I can't figure something out when I'm playing on my own. I'll just do something else on the game so I'll kind of abandon it for a while and then I'll wait until some friends come over to my place one day and then we can play it together and see if they know and see if we can get through it there but if they don't know I'll wait a bit longer until other friends come over. So basically it's just kind of leaving it until someone knows how to do it.*
- H *Do people come to you for help as well?*
- K *Yeab sometimes I go over to their place and if they're stuck and I can go oh you do this and then this and then this and we will play it together to get through. And sometimes it's the simplest things and we go why didn't we do that?*
- H *It's always easier to figure things out when you have people to bounce off. So you don't really have a teacher for that kind of stuff do you?*
- K *Well, we are all kind of all teaching each other really.*
- H *Yeab*
- K *Technically everyone's the teacher and everyone is the student cos you are all teaching and learning.*

In the above excerpt, Kai explains the importance of others in his world of gaming for his learning. If feeling stuck in a game, he knows that often the best strategy is to wait until he has his gaming friends around to learn from each other. He has access to his friends in both his real world, when they come over to his house and in his virtual world when he chats to them online. Haugsbakken and Langseth (2014) argue that the connections and self-organisation afforded by digital technologies are crucial and positive elements of learning in the digital age. Kai's description of what he does when stuck in a problem show both a high level of self-organisation, but also highlight how important connections are in his learning. Within his figured world of gaming, he connects to people in real life and virtually to solve problems and progress further. Similarly, Lewis Ellison (2014) found an affinity space between cousins playing video games together and creating a symbiotic relationship of teaching and learning.

These snapshots of learning challenge the traditional oppositional relationship of teacher and student to offer a view where 'everyone's the teacher and everyone is the student.' Kai's discussion here captures how knowledge is distributed across the network within an affinity space. Connecting with others within the space builds capacity and knowledge across the network as a whole. 'Such knowledge allows people to know and do more than they could on their own' (Gee, 2004, pp 78). Rogoff et al's (2016) definition of informal learning describes the learning process as nondidactic. While the idea of noobs and masters can be didactic, the ability to take on either role is open and ever-changing. Jake and Kai feel comfortable with performing either of these roles within the figured worlds of gaming.

Participation and Agency

Central to the figured worlds described above is the theme of participation and agency. From choosing who to follow or block on social media, to creating online content and running a

YouTube channel. The participants spoke positively about their ability to participate on different levels when using digital technologies.

Brooke

- B *Well, I just thought about starting my own YouTube channel. I was going to start on an iPad and I talked to mum about it and everything but then I forgot it. I didn't start it up, but mum and my step dad were happy for me to do it.*
- H *And what were your ideas?*
- B *Well I watch a lot of videos about room decor and DIY. There is some really cool cheap easy things you can do and it makes your room look really nice so I reckon I would just show people how to, like inspire them to do their rooms and stuff and cute stuff to do.*
- H *So you talked last time about possibly having your own YouTube channel. Do you think you would have to learn things for that? How would you go about that?*
- B *Like things to put on my channel or ways to set it up?*
- H *Yeab both.*
- B *Yeab I think I would have to have a look at things to talk about and I was saying I want to do room decor like DIY.*
- H *Yeab that's right.*
- B *So I would have to get ideas and have a look at how to do it and then I could explain it.*
- H *And you feel confident that if you had to learn stuff like that you would know what to do?*
- B *Yep and I have got my sister and her friend Lucy has a YouTube channel, and I haven't really watched many of her clips but I could ask her to help me.*

Jake

- J *Well I just basically think about what I enjoy doing and what others would enjoy throughout. Like on my schedule at the moment I only have two channels but I'm thinking about making a third. One channel would be about soccer and the second channel would be about gaming in general and the third channel is spread between me and my friends.*
- H *Like just a social thing for fun?*
- J *Yeab the videos that we do together.*

Brooke's discussion around her use of YouTube is an example of the many routes to participation and status using digital technologies. Whilst Brooke enjoys watching comedy on YouTube as downtime activity and substitute for TV we see it has a power greater than that. The content Brooke watches is 'user generated', seemingly regular day-to-day people, often teenagers who have created their own channels and uploaded self-made content. Both Jake and Brooke found this characteristic of YouTube interesting and enticing to be an active, rather than passive, participant. Jake, with a group of friends, has made content about gaming for the last few years and is attempting to get back into it with content about the game FIFA. Brooke has entertained the idea of creating and uploading YouTube videos and feels confident that she has both the technology and the skills to be able to do it. Here we see evidence of the participatory media culture described by Jenkins (2009) and expanded in Lange and Ito (2009) and Lange (2014).

Jake

- H *So you really enjoy it?*
- J *Yeab cos a lot of my time is spend gaming and watching YouTube which is what you would do when you make a YouTube channel. And you can expand throughout the community, not just in the game but now*

- in a different community.*
- H *What do you mean a different community?*
- J *Well you can expand through an amount of YouTube communities, fans or people who want to work with you.*
- J *...it's more about what we enjoy and how we want to spread throughout the community just making videos with each other because we like playing games with each other.*
- H *So how would you describe yourself as a learner then?*
- J *Well what I have tried doing in the past week has gone pretty far so far. I did upload my first video. I already knew how to do that from when I did it a few years so it was taking what I learned before and what I've learned now and put it together to make what I enjoy.*

Brooke

- B *Yeah well Miranda Sings, she just started off by doing funny videos and now she is famous and has so many subscribers.*
- H *And is that something you would like to do?*
- B *Yeah.*
- H *So do you have to put a lot of thought into what you post?*
- B *I think so but I think it would be better if you were a bit of a goof ball too. Like fold the right-hand corner [said in serious robot voice]. It won't be serious.*
- H *Is that just you?*
- B *Yeah.*

For the boys involved in various games, Brooke watching YouTube, and for Rana looking at Instagram, leaders and role models are porous. Content creators are often teenagers or young adults and seen more as 'everyday' people than traditional leaders or famous 'stars'. Along with the blurring of lines between teacher and student is also a blurring between the leader and the follower. 'We have seen the boundary between leader and follower is vague and porous, since players can generate content for the game or the site.' (Gee 2004, p. 79). Role models are those who create successful texts and attract audiences and all participants of an affinity space, regardless of experience level, can generate content. Operating in an affinity space, both consuming and producing texts, involves high levels of literacy in understanding the semiotic domains of the space (Gee 2007).

All four young adolescents in this study discussed a real desire and level of agency in their participation using digital technologies. They understand how they can network, create content and participate on different levels, and feel that they have some control over this. Figured worlds 'provide the loci in which people fashion senses of self—that is develop identities.' (Holland et al, 1998, p. 60). The permeation of digital technology into these loci opens opportunities with new players and new improvisations within figured worlds. The identity work that occurs reflects a view of identity that is about becoming, rather than being. The participants express their identities in terms of what was possible and what they could become. The use of digital technologies played an important role in this as it opens opportunities to participate in cultural spaces, or figured worlds, that contained figures at all various levels of achievement. Therefore, within figured worlds embedded with digital technologies, people are sorted and organised in interesting ways and this impacts on the ways people learn to relate to one another.

Conclusion

In the figured worlds inhabited by the participants in this study, the traditional construction of binary opposites between on- and offline worlds, real and virtual are challenged. Identity work happens horizontally across these sites, forcing us to conceptualise the idea of site as social and

dynamic, rather than fixed or physical (Tsolidis, 2008). We shift from understanding these sites as things, to an understanding of the productive process and flow that occurs across sites. The theoretical framework of the figured world, encapsulates such a space, and allows us to explore the way people, as figures within these worlds, understand themselves and convey these understandings through performances. Each participant in this study plays out actions and improvisations on a daily basis, constantly developing and redeveloping their self-understandings in relation to others in the collective.

For Jake, the figured world of soccer shifts dynamically across the real and the virtual worlds. Similarly, for Rana and Brooke, the figured world of friendship encompasses both on- and offline domains of the girls' lives. Even the traditional practice of routine homework occurs in both their on- and offline worlds. 'The significance of figured worlds is that they are recreated by work, often contentious work, with others; thus, the importance of activity, not just in a restricted number of figured worlds, but across landscapes of action.' (Urrieta, 2007, p. 109). The participants use the term 'in real life', sometimes shortened to 'IRL' online, to differentiate events that happen on- or offline. The conversations with the participants of this research, however, reveals how inseparable on- and offline worlds are, and how the online space is very much 'in real life'.

In the stories of the four adolescents in this study, we can see what Holland and Leander (2004) define as 'lamination'. The metaphor of lamination works to describe how identity is built up and thickened with layers of memories, experiences and artifacts. While each layer retains its original distinctiveness, it bonds together to form a new configuration. The flow between worlds creates layers of identity for the young adolescents. As Jake plays soccer at lunch time, goes home to play FIFA on the Xbox and then watches soccer moves on YouTube, he is constructing his identity as both soccer player and fan. Jake's stories of soccer express his learner identity through his desire to improve, to learn from others and a commitment to participate across various sites, both real and virtual.

This research focused on the construction and negotiation of learner identity in the out-of-school use of digital technologies, which I found to be complex and positive. While the figured worlds of the participants, the soccer games, the friendship groups and the homework, crosses over into school life, I have not compared or understood the complexities of the identity work that occurs in the literacy practices in the classroom. Literacy classrooms are full of labels and identities used to categorise and sort our students: the good reader, the struggling reader, the reluctant reader and the illiterate. How does the young adolescent identify themselves in the literacy classroom and how does this impact on the identity work that occurs outside of school? Is there reconciliation, transfer and connection between the identity work of young adolescents in- and out-of-school. The identity theories of Holland et al (1998) particularly the process of lamination, or sedimentation of identity layers would be a useful conceptual tool for unpacking some of these tensions and relationships.

The stories of Brooke, Rana, Kai and Jake create a sense of possibility and positivity. They create an interesting, candid and intimate narrative of the identity work in the figured worlds they participate in. On- and offline spaces are merged and equally as real, as equally important, and as equally routine (Leander and McKim 2003; Leander 2014). The online space is not always an exotic or sinister fantasy where young adolescents escape, it can be, rather, an extension of their existing friendship groups, learning and interests. The connectedness and multimodality of the online dimension of their existing figured worlds often provides a rich and dynamic space for literacy practices and identity work. The inclusion of digital technologies in the figured worlds of the participants allows for different players, different relationships and different opportunities for self-understandings, than in spaces devoid of digital technologies. Within these worlds, the model of learning adopted resembles an affinity space, disrupting the traditional roles of teacher and student and building a dialogic network based on sharing knowledge, rather than hierarchal

knowledge (Gee, 2004). In the figured worlds explored in this article, digital technologies add a dimension that encourages positive learner identities.

The figured worlds of friendship, homework and soccer in this study, like all spaces of social reality, are mediated by relationships of power (Holland et al, 1998). There is a sense in the conversations with the participants that digital technologies can assist in allowing them to become or discover who they want to be by allowing them to easily produce texts, create, play and connect with others. The participants felt great control and choice over what they play, what they watch and who they talk to. The world of possibilities opens and experts and leaders become accessible. In the realm of informal learning outside of school, the participants have some agency over the construction and negotiation of their own learner identities. Identity construction is reflected as a process of becoming, rather than being.

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