Collaboration and Learning in Online Communities: Summary of Research

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Introduction

This extended abstract describes my research starting with dissertation research moving through to current research focusing on learning and collaboration in online communities.

Dissertation Research

My dissertation, entitled *Information Literacy in Interest-Driven Learning Communities: Navigating the Sea of Information of an Online Affinity Space*, comprised a mixed methods approach to understanding information literacy practices in naturalistic contexts of game communities, particularly in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Information literacy is a 21st century literacy as described by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and is broadly defined as the ability to find, evaluate, and use information to solve a given information need. This study used methods of information horizon maps as well as a priori coding, and quantifying qualitative codes, and used the framework of learning ecologies as a lens in which to view the online community. Information horizon maps was a method that comes from information science which was adapted for studying information and identity as it relates to learning. The findings of this study paint a broad picture of people's use and development of information literacy practices taking into consideration the collaborative nature and collective intelligence of massively multiplayer online game spaces. The communication and collaboration between members of the community is essential for the success of the community members solving information needs related to their game play. Participants for my data set included the *WoW* community at large and a group of 22 youth males who were members of an afterschool lab, which served struggling and disengaged students mainly from working class, rural and urban environments, youth whose practices are sometimes overlooked in traditional school settings. This study created a descriptive model for information literacy practices in use in digital communities in people's daily lives, re-theorizing information literacy as increases in communal knowledge, and examined the effect of collective intelligence and collaborative activities on people as they move from novices to more advanced and more knowledgeable participants.

Current Research

My current research focuses on two main projects. The first project is the development of a body of research that examines the relationship between collaboration, literacy, and information practices in the online communities for *Team Fortress 2, Elder Scrolls: Skyrim,* WWE*,* and Hunger Games. This project examines connected learning in the communities as well as the transformation of users to collaborators and contributors. This work uses a mixed methods approach combining community observations, interviews, coding, information literacy analysis, and quantifying qualitative codes.

The second and larger project I am engaged in is conducting research on connected learning practices in the community surrounding professional wrestling fan culture and fantasy wrestling, especially WWE fans. Connected learning explores how people connect learning and activities from one part of their life to the rest of their life, for example do they use skills they learn in school in their WWE space and vice versa. It also emphasizes the importance of mentorship when using skills across contexts including developing skills from interest that can feed into a career track. This work focuses on youth learning practices in these spaces. I use

ethnographic methods including long term community observation as well as interviews with community participants plus a community gate keeper, in this case the forums founder and main administrator. The interviews and field notes from observations are coded using an a priori coding scheme based on the connected learning principles.

My research aims to identify and evaluate learning practices including those of information literacy and to make models of those practices, which connects the skills people use in various environments to help them more effectively communicate and use information. Connecting the practices that people use in their leisure spaces to academic situations is necessary for the democratization of information and creating a more informed citizenry. My research pushes the boundary of digital media, information science and education connecting the disciplines to strengthen learning and information practices which are crucial to being successful in 21st century learning. The mixed methods approach used allows me to conduct thorough qualitative research, firmly based in the theoretical framework of learning ecologies.