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**Negotiating Identities through Peripheral Participation
By**

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Abstract: The purpose of this brief is to provide research support for the exploration of core and peripheral identities and patterns of engagement in online gaming communities from a situated cognitive perspective. The following brief provides a review of existing literature on peripheral participation, and tentatively suggests a methodological approach for a study examining this issue.

Research problem: core and peripheral participation

There is a need for elucidation and recognition of the unique identities and patterns of engagement among individuals who regularly or habitually engage in online game spaces, particularly so that peripheral versus core participation may be explored, validated, and more precisely defined. Lave and Wenger (1991) described legitimate peripheral participation as learning through the process of engaging on the margins of a community of practice. Core participants, in contrast, are knowledgeable “experts” as defined by members for their alignment with central tenets of practice in the community. From a social network analysis (SNA) perspective, peripheral members of a community are distinguished from core members as receiving less of whatever resources are a) explored in research, b) validated within the community space, and c) defined as distinct and accepted patterns of engagement, as compared to core members (Kadushin, 2012).

Consideration is warranted for the identities of peripheral participation in communities of practice. The issue of learner identity and peripheral participation is twofold: one of marginalization and limited representation, whereby a) some individuals in a community may self-orientate or situate others as peripheral members despite behavior and identity characteristics that suggest core membership, and b) peripheral participants (as defined by SNA) demonstrate patterns of engagement and identity conceptualizations that receive limited recognition within the community or greater society as legitimate.

Marginalization: Examining socially constructed identities

The role of identity research in education has proliferated in recent years, as an increasingly important aspect of learners’ development in an ever more globalized and technologically connected society (Kaplan, Sinai, & Flum, 2014). Leander (2002) describes how identity can be conceptualized as “big I,” or the way individuals self-identify and identify each other as members of a community through acting, interacting, feeling, believing, and valuing as a group. Identity can also be conceptualized as “little i”: individual cognitive and developmental shifts in one’s sense of self, or one’s psychological, physiological, and emotional development.

Both big Identities and small identities may conflict or align in game spaces, though conflicts between these identities tend to amass for marginalized groups. For example, Shaw (2011) identified how the “gamer” identity may not be inclusive to some players on the basis of gender, race, and sexuality. Interviews with members of such marginalized groups in Shaw’s work indicated different trajectories of identity and

gaming, wherein players identify as gamers or non-gamers consistently and at different points, yet ultimately found that this issue “misses the point” by failing to acknowledge the self-affirmed (or self-labeled) identities of such players. While examples exist in research that explored, validated, and defined some identities of marginalized participants in gaming communities, limited research connects identity and membership (either big I or small i) to SNA-mapped core or periphery alignment.

Representation: Exploring peripheral participation

Peripheral participation may be explored, defined, and validated by examining identities and patterns of engagement enacted by those situated on the margins of a community. Situated learning theorists conceptualize peripheral participation as apprenticeship to eventual core participation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) or a subordinate part of the path to active engagement in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Work on peripheral identities in educational gaming research has instead sought to emphasize legitimate peripheral participation as an active, dynamic and independent pathway to learning and engagement with games. Gee’s (2005) critique of research on communities of practice suggests, for example, that peripheral engagement in these spaces may be both re-occurring and habitual as meets the learner’s needs, and may not occur with the specific goal of transitioning to active participation in mind. A developed understanding of the affordances of peripheral participation for learning is key to the representation of those on the periphery as “legitimate,” and the design of learning environments to meet their needs. Despite the potential benefits of exploring learning on the periphery, existing research on identities and patterns of engagement that occur among peripheral participants remains limited in scope and detail.

Proposed methodology and implications

Constructing a social network analysis of an online gaming space could elucidate core versus peripheral membership based on community resources such as communication with peers, use of multiplayer options, the number of game elements accessed by players, or other context-specific factors. Selection of participants for interviews and ethnographic data collection could then occur through purposive sampling based on analysis results.

The exploration and validation of core and peripheral identities and engagement patterns might encourage more inclusive core definitions, while further clarifying and legitimizing peripheral participation. Ultimately, new conceptualizations of core and peripheral participation have significant implications for educators using online collaborative spaces for learning in terms of curricular design, implementation, and assessment. While gaming communities serve as unique and powerful settings for the examination of peripheral and core participation, future iterations of this dissertation work could expand on this context to explore core and peripheral participation in other online learning spaces.

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Author biography

Amanda Barany is a graduate student in the Educational Leadership and Learning Technologies program. Her research interests focus on identity, representation, and marginalization in online communities of practice. The aim of her work is to support the development and implementation of games as learning tools for engagement, interest, valuing, and identity development around STEM careers. She is a member of the Games and Learning in Interactive Digital Environments (GLIDE) Lab at Drexel University.