Hey! That’s Me: Fostering a Culture that Supports Positive Identity Development among Children using immersive online 3D Environments in an After-school Setting

(a 20 minute presentation of my dissertation in progress)

Presenter:

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This presentation will be a 20 minute discussion of my dissertation work in progress. Currently I am working on my dissertation proposal and would like to present my idea for my study and discuss it with my colleagues. I am working on a qualitative study of children using the Quest Atlantis program at the Bloomington Boys & Girls Club. This program, spearheaded by Sasha Barab sbarab@indiana.edu, is a technology rich educational intervention with cultural implications. I am interested in how children engage activities in Quest Atlantis that may support identity development and how this intervention may support a cultural change at the Boys & Girls Club to support positive identity development.
Presentation Outline:

Presentation of my ongoing research (10 minutes)
Questions and Discussion (10 minutes)

Possible Discussion Questions

1. What research methodologies are appropriate for this study?
2. Is the scope of the study appropriate for a dissertation?
3. What are other studies that have been done that may inform this one?
4. What future research agenda may emerge from this study?
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Abstract

This qualitative study will examine the design, implementation, and effects of a technology-rich educational initiative at an after school program for children at the Bloomington Boys and Girls club. Of particular interest is fostering systemic cultural change in this after-school program by way of a technology-rich enrichment program. Fostering an academic identity development among disadvantaged children by way of the Quest Atlantis initiative will be examined using the narratives of children.

The After-School Hours

The time is just about 3 o’clock in the afternoon on any given workday. The country hums with the toil of every type of task performed by people of every sort. At the very same time, children across the country excitedly spill out of school while working parents nurse anxiety and guilt knowing that they will not be home to greet their children as they return from school. The time between the final school bell and the end of the workday for parents has given rise to a situation that may be called problematic at least and tragic at worst. It has been estimated that some 15 million children are left without any adult guidance in the after-school hours every day (US DoE, 2000-21st century community learning centers pg. 5). Furthermore, the number and proportion of single mothers increased by 7.2% in the decade of the 1990s (Simmons & O’Neill, 2000). More than a third of all American 12 year olds are left in this situation every school day. Nearly half of all 3rd graders spend part of their day unsupervised. The juvenile population is expected to grow by 21% in the years 1995-2030. The rate of population increase in this age group among African American youth is expected to be more that twice that of non-Hispanic whites (Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report). This projection serves as a warning that the problem of serving children in the after-school hours is one that will only become more pressing in the years to come. How children spend their time in the bell to bed hours will broadly impact the rearing of an entire generation. This suggests that the need for supervision of children in the after-school hours will likely increase as well.
The time is just about 3 o’clock in the afternoon on any given workday. The rates of serious violent crimes, aggravated assaults and sexual assaults committed by children under the age of 18 peak with startling acuity. Sadly, children leaving school are at a higher risk of being victims of serious violent crime than at any other time (OJJDP, 1999).

The danger to children in the after-school hours does not end with the peril of criminality. “Latch-key” children who spend their time unsupervised in the after-school hours are at greater risk of academic difficulties. One Harris poll that states that more than half of teachers polled cited a lack of supervision after school as being a primary explanation for academic difficulties among children (Chung, 2000 pg. 5). Indeed, these children have been shown to face risks of innumerable difficulties. Children and teens who are left unsupervised in the bell to bed hours are at substantially higher risk of:

- Higher absenteeism from school – (Safe and Smart summary, 1998, pg. 4; Hours of Risk, pg. 2)
- Poor homework quality
- Poor academic performance
- Low standardized test scores
- Behavioral problems in school
- Dropping of school altogether
- Playing violent videogames (associated with violent behavior)
- Watching excessive amounts of television
- Engaging in premature and often abusive sexual activity
- Consuming alcohol- “latch-key” children are 1.7 times more likely to use alcohol (Newman, Fox, Flynn & Christeson, 2000)
- Smoking – “latch-key” children are 1.6 times more likely to smoke cigarettes (Newman, Fox, Flynn & Christeson, 2000)
- Using illegal drugs
- Being injured in household accidents
- Being injured or killed in an automobile accident
- Causing or being involved in a fatal automobile accident (16 and 17 year olds)
- Gang related activity
- Social ineptitude
- Poor self concept and confidence
- Psychological difficulties (fear, stress, loneliness, boredom, depression, nightmares)
Cognizant of at least some dimension of the problem, public support for quality after-school programs is strong. In a June 2000 after-school survey, 92% of voters stated that they believe that there is a need for “some type of organized activity or place where children can go after-school everyday that provides opportunities to learn. 75% of that majority strongly believe” (After-school Alert No.3). Two thirds of the voters stated that children would be better off taking part in a comprehensive after-school program than going home after school. More than one third of voters believe that the single most important problem facing children today is that they are alone and unsupervised. 86% of voters believe that after-school programs are a necessity (After-school Alert, Jan. 2000). 94% of Democrats, 89% of Republicans and 93% of Independents state that they support organized after-school activities.

Despite both the need and the support for quality after-school programs, there is a bad shortage of these programs and many children go un-served due to this lack of availability. About 25% of principals state that they have to turn away students seeking participation school-based after-school programs because of insufficient space or resources (Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2001).

Clearly, making the hours after-school work to help children is therefore of paramount importance in helping children to make decisions that will help them develop into responsible, empathetic adults and citizens. Indeed this issue may be one of the most critical our society faces.

**Quest Atlantis**

In response to this burgeoning need in our community, an exciting and innovative technology-based educational initiative called “Quest Atlantis” (QA) was initiated at the Boys & Girls Club in Bloomington, Indiana. This club currently serves approximately 265 children between the ages of 5 and 18. Inspired by the Fifth Dimension activity of Michael Cole (Cole 1996), QA is a program targeting six key areas of children’s development. These areas are agency and empowerment, diversity affirmation, identity development, community building, academic engagement, and local/global responsibility. This is accomplished as children proceed though a series of “quests” that are themselves grounded in the myth and metaphor of Atlantis in a manner akin to adventure gaming. [http://inkido.indiana.edu/atlantis](http://inkido.indiana.edu/atlantis)
Active Worlds

A recent innovation and welcome addition to the world wide web is the development of online 3D environments in which participants may interact online in real-time with an environment that may be constructed by participants themselves. In the near future, the world wide web will likely become largely a 3D environment that more closely approximates the "real world" yet allows for human interaction on a scale that is difficult to now imagine.

The Active Worlds Universe is a 3D "Virtual Reality Chat and Design Tool" that allows for this type of online environment. Active Worlds is an accessible manifestation of a virtual reality environment of the type referred to by McLellan (1996) as a "through the window" virtual reality. The Active Worlds Universe (AWU) is home to thousands of users and makes use of millions of square kilometers of virtual territory. The Active Worlds browser utilizes two major interface windows through which users communicate. The first window displays the 3D space in which users are personified by “avatars.” The second window displays 2D web pages in the same manner as popular web browsers. As a user "walks" through the 3D virtual world, different web pages in the 2D window may be displayed at different times. In this way, a user can see not only the 3D environment but annotations of this environment by way of the 2D window on the Active Worlds web browser. In addition to these two windows, the Active Worlds browser also includes a chat function so that users may "speak" to one another while they move through the 3D virtual world. The beauty of Active Worlds is that it allows authorized users to design and build in the 3D environment. Access can also be limited to specific users which is of particular concern with users who are children. Furthermore, the environment can support file sharing and automated "intelligent" functions.

Identity development

The self is not a static entity but rather is perpetually engaged in the act of becoming (Dewey, 1932). Many researchers have stressed the importance of identity development among children. Identity development is a central tenant in many student development theories (Chickering &
Reiser, 1993; Chickering & Thomas, 1984; Chickering & Havinghurst, 1981, Erickson, 1968; Renn, 1998). Stephan (1992) stated, “identities are meaning that the self acquires through social interaction, and as such are crucial to an understanding of an individual’s sense of himself or herself” (p.51). Several researchers have pointed out that positive identity development is an essential factor in academic success (cite – this is why identity development is important).

Erikson, often cited as the preeminent researcher in the field of identity development (1950; 1959; 1968; 1980), proposed eight stages of psychosocial development. According to Erikson, adolescence is the time when we make decisions about what kinds of people we want to be (Collins, 2001). Erikson (1968) proposed that healthy identity was linked to positive racial identity. Turkle (1995) applied Erikson’s work on identity development to MUDs, one type of computer mediated communicative tool.

Eisenhart suggests “Individuals fashion meaningful ways of being in the world (identities) from the various material and symbolic resources that are available to them in different settings, with diverse people, and for different purposes” (p. 20). About this, Dorinne Kondo writes: “[People] forge their lives in the midst of ambivalences and contradictions, using the idioms at their disposal” (1990, p. 302); Ann Davidson describes it as a situation in which “identity is constantly recreated, coming forward or retreating to the background in response to the politics and relations that characterize changing social situations” (1996, p. 4). Through the production of cultural forms, created within the structural constraints of sites such as schools, subjectivities [identities] forma and agency develops” Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 14). John Ogbu was one of the first to underscore the role of identity development in academic performance (Ogbu, 1991; Oyserman et al., 1995).

The challenge of the adolescent years is identity versus identity confusion, when individuals face the task of defining themselves in relation to their environments. Establishing identity involves a synthesis of childhood self-images with present self-evaluation and future ideals (Widick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1978). Relationships to the external world are also an integral part of this process. Erikson (1959/1980) asserted that identity “connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (p. 109).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) developed a model which individuals interact with ever more complex “spheres of development.” Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) described four “systems” in which an individual interacts and develops. These four systems are microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. A microsystem would be the immediate environment of the individual. A mesosystem would be the home or school or peer group or the
family. An exosystem is one that exerts some influence over the individual without the individual being a direct participant. A macrosystem represents the greater sociocultural context of the individual.

King & DaCosta (1996) developed a four strata model of race development which also moved from inner to outer manifestations:
1. One “does” race in an interaction with the self
2. The racial self is created in interactions with other individuals
3. The interactions between and among groups. Race is “done” collectively.
Racial groups are both relational and hierarchical Atkinson, Morten & Sue (1979), Cross (1991), Helms (1990) and Phinney (1990) Developed strata theory models of racial identity development.

**Ethnic Identity**
Phinney (1996) describes an ethnic group as one whose members “share a common history, physical features, and culture, and it is through interaction with reference group members that people identify themselves as members of a given group and incorporate an ethnic identity (Niemann et.al. 1999). Tajfel and Turner (1986) developed a social identity theory which “conceptualizes social identities as those based on groups that are a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement, and achieve some social consensus about the evaluation of their group” (Niemann et. al. 1999). Ogbu (1990) and Keefe (1992) developed theories that emphasize perceptions of the group from both within and without the group. However for Ogbu and Keefe, it is ultimately the
group’s members themselves who must define the parameters or characteristics that define the group. Erikson (1968) proposed that healthy identity was linked to positive racial identity.

**Models of self-identity**

Hall, Cross and Freedle (1972) categorize identity transformation among African-Americans as falling into two categories: (a) non-process and (b) process. In this model, non-process identity transformation models focus on the differences between militant and non-militant attitudes and behaviors. Process transformation models seek to describe stages of development undergone by a subject in the process of identity transformation. These process models reflect a similar perspective to those developed by other researchers. However, models developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s are very much colored by the ethnic militancy of the time. Thomas (1971), for example, developed a theory that postulated that African Americans must first “withdraw inward before renegotiating relationships with other racial and ethnic groups. (Hall, Cross and Freedle 1972).” In synthesizing this model, Thomas (1971) considered that African-Americans must undergo a process in which “negromachy” is overcome. “Negromachy” describes the pre-black consciousness condition in which “negroes” derived self-concept and self-worth from the dominant white racist society.

Erikson (1968) proposed that healthy identity was linked to positive racial identity. Other researchers have gone about researching issues of self-identity by having members of a particular group themselves determine the factors that contribute to the groups uniqueness. Niemann et.al. (1999) in an investigation of Mexican-American self-identity found that Mexican Americans identify themselves on the basis of 14 separate constructs.

Racial identity seems to develop socially. This is in harmony with the proposition that race only has social meaning and that biological classifications of race are inherently flawed. Vygotsky (1962, 1978), considered meaning to be a cultural construct.

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<tr>
<th>Atkinson, Morten &amp; Sue (1979)</th>
<th>Conformity</th>
<th>Dissonance</th>
<th>Resistance/Immersion</th>
<th>Introspection</th>
<th>Synergetic articulation and awareness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td>Pre-encounter</td>
<td>Dissonance</td>
<td>Immersion/ Internalization</td>
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(Renn, 1998 p. 32)

Narratives in identity development

The notion that the self itself is constructed by way of narrative. It is through storytelling or “storying” that we not only project and convey who and what we are but construct, in a very real sense, our identities. This constructing is continual throughout life.

Possible Research Questions

- How can a culture of empowerment be fostered and sustained?
- How can computer-mediated 3-D technologies be used to connect learners and engage them in educational activities in an after-school program?
- How can computer-mediated 3-D technologies support positive identity development?
- What are the socio-technical factors that underlie creating and sustaining technologically-rich, collaborative?
- How do children of differing ethnicities interact with technology differently? What social patterns emerge related to their use?
- How and in what ways might a culture of empowerment support the six areas: agency and empowerment, diversity affirmation, identity development, community building, knowing and learning, and local/global responsibility?
- Are participants learning meaningful content? What are the understandings that emerge during face-to-face and online interactions, and how can we best support the evolution and diffusion of these understandings while still engaging children?
- How might growth in the six areas be observed?
• What are some of the effective uses of narrative to foster identity construction in an after-school environment
• How might activities involving narrative be used effectively within a 3D technology-rich environment in an after school setting to foster the construction of positive identities.
• To what extent do activities involving narrative contribute to the appeal, effectiveness and sustainability of this technology rich intervention.
• Kids and sense of self through narrative. Is QA like Zora ICE? How do our findings account for Bers’ (Bers, 2001) findings?

Methodology

Naturalistic inquiry will be used to build data-driven (grounded) responses to the above research questions, as well as to identify other issues arising from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because my emphasis is on capturing how Quest Atlantis is used in situ, data collection efforts will focus on capturing data as it occurs in the environment. (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Three case studies of children participating in QA will be undertaken to develop a general understanding of the research questions (Stake 1995). Interviews, “talking diaries,” field observations, reflexive debriefing, personal documentaries, and artifact analysis will be methods used to illuminate any growth with respect to identity development among the children that is fostered by the culture that the children themselves create.

References


