The Interdependence of Identity, Belonging, and Learning: Emerging

Evidence from an Out-of-School Arts Life-Course Study

Daniela Kruel DiGiacomo, University of Kentucky, daniela.digiacomo@uky.edu
Phebe Chew & Kylie Peppler, University of California, Irvine, pfchew@uci.edu, kpeppler@uci.edu
Pariece Nelligan, Deakin University, pariece.nelligan@deakin.edu.au
Sam Mejias, Parson's New School, mejiass@newschool.edu

Abstract: This article extends long standing work in the learning sciences that evidences the interdependence of identity, belonging, and learning. Informed by a grounded theory analysis of 19 interviews conducted within the geographic areas of Central Kentucky and Appalachia, with alumni from five community-based youth arts organizations, this analysis draws on subset of data from a large-scale, multi-sited and international study into the enduring effects of participating in out-of-school arts programming. By analyzing the existence of long-term effects through the narratological accounts of people at least ten years beyond program participation, this study further develops the field's understanding of the way learning, belonging and identity are deeply intertwined.

Introduction

This study builds upon and extends long standing work in the learning sciences that evidences the interdependence of identity, belonging, and learning. While learning sciences has evolved with the times from its early design- based studies in classrooms to its contemporary emphasis on learning in digitally mediated environments, what has remained constant is a persistent acknowledgement of the centrality of the constructs of identity and belonging to the phenomenon of learning. To date, however, most studies within the field that have centered their inquiries on examining learning, belonging, and identity have been *in-context* and *short-term*. Well known examples include, for instance, the development of identity within science journalism and history (e.g., Polman, 2006), the making of productive STEM identities in afterschool spaces (e.g., Tan et al., 2013), and the demonstration of math competence in basketball and track and field settings (e.g., Nasir 2012).

Less is known, however, about the relationship between learning, belonging, and identity from a long-term, longitudinal, or life-course perspective. Of note, too, recent learning sciences scholarship has tended to focus less on studies of learning squarely within the arts genre. Pursuing inquiry within this noted area of wanting is important for a few fundamental reasons. Firstly, because learning is a life-wide, life-deep, and life-long phenomenon (Bell & Banks, 2012), a retrospective/life-course methodological approach is well merited, with potential to yield novel insights into the shape and texture of learning over time. Secondly, the 'arts', broadly conceived, occupies a substantive part of afterschool programming in the United States, and as learning scientists not only do we have a long history and are well trained to study informal/non-formal/not-school settings (e.g., Cole, 1995; Sefton-Green, 2012), but the arts are "central to our understanding of learning and knowing and therefore of crucial importance to the learning sciences" (Halverson & Sawyer, 2022, p. 1). Thirdly, the first- person, narratological analysis made possible by the reflective construction of the experience of learning solicited by life-course interview questions enables opportunities for both past and present identity formation work to become highly visible and therefore able to be examined for themes and patterns. The present study, then, presents an analysis of a subset of data from a large-scale, multi-sited and international study into the enduring effects of participating in out-of-school arts programming for young people, with a particular focus on how people describe identity formation and a sense of belonging within the context of out-of-school arts learning contexts.

Theoretical perspective: Centering identity within the learning sciences

This study's conceptual framework brings together theoretical heuristics that have emerged from qualitative studies into the relationship between identity and learning. Initially pioneered by psychologists like Vygotsky (1934/1978) and Bateson (1972) and ushered into prominence by everyday cognition researchers such as Lave (1993) and Wenger (1998), the notion that a young person's identity is central to their learning experience is well documented within the field of learning and development. All situated within the camp of what is commonly called a sociocultural approach, the definitions of the three constructs brought together to constitute this theoretical perspective are as follows: *learning* as shifting participation in meaningful sociocultural activity (e.g. Rogoff, 2011); *identity* as a construction of self profoundly influenced by the multiple settings that youth negotiate daily and that emerge historically, local, and interactionally (Nasir, 2012; Wortham, 2004); and *belonging* as the sense that youths' social selves are accepted and valued and that there is room for youth to personally contribute to the activity/practice (Nasir, 2011; 2012). Indeed, these neo-Vygotskian scholars have shown, both in and outside of

the classroom, how interwoven the processes of social identification and learning are—and the implications this has for how contemporary designers of learning environments should consider how, for example, to ensure the presence of 'necessary social conditions for learning'—including room for repair, the availability of multiple roles, space to personally contribute to the practice, and a sense of social belonging (Nasir, 2012). When these are present, according to this ontological model of learning, the ability for the mutual constitution of social identification and learning to take place through "the intertwining of local cognitive models and models of identity" (Wortham, 2004, p. 53) becomes possible. Put simply, this study proceeds with the guiding assumption that learning flourishes when young people feel as if their identit(ies) and ways of sense-making and being are valued in the context of the learning environments in which they are embedded.

Data and methods

This analysis focuses on 19 interviews conducted within the state of Kentucky (including the geographic areas of Central Kentucky and Appalachia) with alumni from five Kentucky-based community-based arts organizations, all of whom focused their provision of services on low to middle income youth, and whose genres ranged from music and dance to creative writing and theater. These 19 interviews are part of a larger corpus of interview and survey data with similar program participants located across five US urban locations in California, Kentucky and New York, and two large international cities in Australia and the United Kingdom. While the Kentucky participants in this sample were predominantly white, participants from the other locations were predominantly people of color.

The findings presented below emerged from moving fluidly between inductive coding attuned to low-inferential thematic chunking of prose, and theoretically informed deductive coding, focused on the constructs of identity and belonging (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ultimately, parent level codes included central theoretical constructs like "identity" (with child level codes such as "participant description of self-formation/shift in self" and "participant identification with a genre/type/formal role") and "belonging" (with child level codes such as "participant expression of a sense of feeling accepted for who they are" and "participant expression of a sense of being valued/mattering in the space/place"). While all 19 interviews were coded using the qualitative software Dedoose to surface broader level patterns and frequencies, the following presentation of analysis highlights two cases of alumni that serve as illustrative examples of the broader phenomenon of the interdependence of identity, belonging, and learning that emerged as participants reflected on their participation from at least one decade ago.

The interdependence of identity, belonging and learning: Insights from two case studies

As the following two illustrative cases show, the entanglement of the constructs of identity, belonging, and learning emerged simultaneously and with great frequency from the data. Consider Aster, a 25-year- old biracial policy analyst from Appalachia who participated in a community-based theatre program as a teenager and now teaches circus arts in her non-working time. In the following response, Aster is talking to the first author, about midway through the interview, about her formal schooling experiences:

> "Elementary school was rough…And you know, middle school is where I got involved with [theater program] and made yeah, you know, some stronger friendships through there. So, I do think that the program kind of helped me, not, I don't think stand up for myself is the right word, but **just to be okay with who I am** and try to not worry about what other people were saying or thinking. Yeah. Yeah. Um, and then I kind of kept that mentality going into high school and still, still understanding that like I loved doing that program and **I want to continue finding ways to get that same feeling** or those same friendships. And I ended up, um, **joining the dance team** for my high school career" (**emphasis** mine).

As Aster reflects on her formal schooling experiences, she articulates them as "rough", alongside noting the contrary in the type of environment the OST program provided, in that its conditions enabled her to claim to be "be okay with who [she] is" (coded: *identity formation*) in ways that prompted her to continue to be involved in/and find new spaces that allowed her to experience *belonging* (code applied to final two sentences of above except). In addition to this, the program provided her with a context within which to "be" - to become a learner - to not only be okay with who she is but to become who she wants to be - a narrative device used to communicate the way she becomes more confident and content with herself as both a learner and community member. It helped, as Aster recounts, , her make sense of what it means to learn as part of a collective, which helps her to be okay with who she is but also serves to concretize her identity as both a critical member of a school community and consequently a member of a much

larger arts world. Of note, Aster's use of an active verb tense and future-oriented claim about wanting to "continue finding ways" provide evidence of the *in-situ* identity formation work in which she is still actively engaged, and which, we conjecture, were facilitated early on by her participation in a program that made such vulnerability around identity experimentation and formation visible.

Later in the interview, when Aster is asked to reflect on if and how the program influenced her approach to how she lives her life, she recounts the following:

> **"And honestly like all the way from joining, like in my first [program experience] in 2008 to now, like it has really, it's really given me a love for teaching**. Yeah. Cause I would not be the person I am today. If someone wouldn't have said, okay, Aster, this is how you sing a song in a group. Yeah. Or, okay. Aster, when this person goes upstage, then you have to go this way. Yeah. Yeah. Um, it's just, **it's just really fulfilling for me to be able to say I'm a part of the arts**; that I perform and I teach" (**emphasis** mine).

Aster allows herself to be acted on, to become a type of apprentice, all the while developing an ambition to pass on what she has learned to others. She develops a vocation to both teach and perform - to impart knowledge and to shape the learning experiences of others but to also continue her own personal journey as a performing artist in her own right. This suggests an identity duality that is anchored in affect - affecting others through learning and teaching as well as affecting others through performance. In the above excerpt, then, the reflective construction of the experience of learning—while not named as such by Aster in either of these life-story narrative excerpts—evidences her shifting participation within an activity setting through the "intertwining of a local cognitive model and a model of identity" (Wortham, 2004, p. 53) that occurred as she moved from the periphery of the arts community (as a newcomer and novice) toward the center (as someone who "performs" and "teaches" the arts). Furthermore, this excerpt also illustrates the interdependent relationships between identity, learning *and* belonging. Aster articulates the ways in which participating in the program and experiencing a sense of belonging therein has both shaped the development of an identity (e.g., "I'm part of the arts") that is ongoing at the time of the interviews and facilitated a life-long learning that is also ongoing.

The second illustrative case is of Vance, a 65-year-old white retired grocer who was born, raised, and still lives in a rural area of central Kentucky. For three years during his adolescence, Vance participated in a youth orchestra program as a bassoon player. For his career, Vance followed in the footsteps of his family and took over the family business of owning and operating a mom-and-pop style grocery/eatery. At the time of the interview, he had been retired for about seven years. While the arts didn't become his career, his passion for and practice of the arts greatly shaped his experience of the world and his place within it. In fact, after retiring, returned to college to complete his bachelor's degree, switching from what he initially started as a teenager (Business/Management) to attaining a BA in Music. In the following excerpt, Vance responds, with a smile and a chuckle, to the question of how he lives his life and/or sees the world: "Well I have frequently told people that I'm a musician who happens to be in a grocery store." By identifying first as a musician, as making that identification known through recounting it verbally to others as well in the interview process, Vance reveals the primacy of the arts to his life's trajectory as well as his own agency to craft that narrative through a small, albeit strong, discursive identity performance.

Extending upon the influence that participating in the arts had on him, Vance went on to say, later in the interview, that he

> "...**can't imagine a life without music**. Yeah. I just can't. I, I don't know, it's just, I don't know. It's fun. Yeah. It, uh, and the friends, the, the, the **relationships that you can build**....You know, and one of the things that with age and experience is that you, your ear becomes more sophisticated and, and you can really begin to appreciate just how extraordinary, uh, some of the, uh, some, the people that you hear play and, and you can really appreciate it more. Yeah. And it, and inspires you to, you know, to continue to, uh, improve. And, um, I want, **I want to keep going as long as I can play, as long as I can**..." (**emphasis** mine).

Vance's case demonstrates the ways his sustained participation in music is intertwined with his sense of belonging as fostered through relationships, and identity as a musician. In recounting the influence of the arts on his life, Vance reflects on the centrality of the social bonds and friendship that have allowed him not only a vibrant social life as a result of the arts (which he mentioned throughout this interview),

but also contribute to a sense of belonging that enriches his own artistic appreciation and inspires him to continue learning and "improve"—thereby shifting his participation in music—for as long as he physically can. As he says, quite directly, he "can't imagine a life without music," suggesting again his own understanding and functioning of the interdependence between his identity as a musician, his sense of belonging to the music community, and his own life-long learning pursuits. Vance's notable articulation of his more experienced ear connotes a profound effect that is only made apparent and consequential to him through retrospective life course analysis. Of interest, he couches a justification of his age in a narrative of appreciation and expertise—two strong elements of his musical identity and his sense of self as a learner.

Discussion and conclusion

Analysis of life-course interview data from people who participated in out-of-school arts programming in their adolescence cement and extend what is already known within the field of the learning sciences about the interdependence of identity, belonging, and learning. The various aspects of what it means to form an identity, to belong and to learn are informed by both context and time. By analyzing the existence of long-term effects through the narratives of people at least ten years beyond program participation, we further develop an understanding of the way learning, belonging and identity are deeply intertwined. People articulate versions of themselves– versions that are informed by their learning experiences and consequential understandings of who they are and who they have become. Retrospective life course analysis is therefore a methodology that may help the learning sciences field further ground such theoretical insights. Whilst the study extends empirical evidence on how learning, belonging and identity are interdependent, it also sheds light on the how people experience learning over the long-term, and how learning and structured arts opportunity shapes people's lives and the stories they tell about themselves.

To be clear, the present line of inquiry is still in progress, as triangulation of these data within the extensive corpus of data from which they are situated is ongoing. What is clear, however, is the need within our design science field to further examine, problematize, and tear down the obstacles that lie in the way of actualizing the design principles for identity development and social belonging that are evidenced to consequentially and meaningfully shape the learning experiences of young people, especially those whose identities are historically and contemporarily marginalized and/or minoritized. It is toward discussion and reflection on this continually pressing problem of theory and practice that this short paper presentation is offered.

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