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Implications of Identity Negotiation Research for the Design of the TRAILER e-Portfolio

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Introduction

E-portfolios come in many forms and serve a range of functions and purposes (Chi-ChengChang, Kuo-HungTseng, Hsiu-PingYueh, & Wei-ChienLin, 2011; van Tartwijk & Driessen, 2009). For the argumentation followed in this paper it suffices to distinguish three general functions, related to the learning process, to assessment, and to presentation (Abrami & Barrett, 2005). Clearly, the three functions are interrelated and even suggest a chronological order: assessment follows learning and precedes presentation of evidence (assessed achievements). However, presentations might also precede assessment, as becomes evident when we consider the role of e-portfolios in documenting and demonstrating informal learning. Presenting evidence for informally acquired competences through a showcase portfolio (presentation) is likely to prompt some level of assessment on the part of the audience: how convincing a ‘piece of evidence’ is this?

From the above it is clear that one way of looking at e-portfolios is to view them as a means to document personal development in view of communicating one’s competences, interests, ambitions, networks, etc., that is as a means for identity negotiation. Identity negotiation refers to “*the processes whereby relationship partners reach agreement regarding “who is who.”*” (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). The notion of identity negotiation in combination with an e-portfolio’s function of showcasing competences gained through both formal and informal learning reveals an interesting paradox: whereas it is relatively easy to demonstrate competence attained through formal learning, they are at the same time less ‘telling’ of a person, exactly because they are formal, i.e. ‘standard’. However, face validity of showcased competences attained through informal learning is much lower, as it relies on two processes, which both suffer from serious flaws: self-assessment (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004) and selection of appropriate evidence to showcase a particular competence (Miao, Sloep, Hummel, & Koper, 2009). Thus showcasing competences attained through informal learning to some extent relies on establishing a sense of trust/trustworthiness which in turn requires a certain level of identity negotiation (Rusman, Van Bruggen, Sloep, Valcke, & Koper, 2012).

The TRAILER project (Tagging, Recognition and Acknowledgment of Informal Learning Experiences) aims to facilitate the identification of episodes and evidences of informal learning by the learner in any of the different spaces in which she learns, with the further aim to facilitate the recognition of this learning, e.g. by a tutor, employer, educational institution, in dialogue with the learner. It aims to do so by means of an *Informal Learning Collector*, which interoperates with an existing open source portfolio.

This paper focuses on the question how to design an e-portfolio so that it optimally enables learners to gain credit (either literally or figuratively speaking) for competences attained through informal learning starting from the premise that this process can be considered an identity negotiation process. It provides a review of research findings in the area of identity negotiation and online identities in light of the implications they hold for the design of an e-portfolio that is meant to facilitate identity negotiation.

Online identity and identity negotiation

We all have an image of who we are and what we are capable of and we want others to perceive us in line with the image we have of ourselves. Our identity, our image of ourselves is closely linked up with our competences:

“The process of maturation is marked by the acquisition of new competencies and the loss of established ones. Whether one gains or loses an ability, the associated identity needs to be updated. This may explain why people’s identities are especially turbulent early and late in life.” (Swann & Bosson, 2010)

Theories on identity negotiation distinguish between a ‘target’ (the person whose identity is ‘at stake’) and ‘perceivers’ (the people who have or develop behavioural expectancies towards the target) (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). Perceivers are not necessarily individuals, but can also be a larger organisation (e.g. an educational institution, employer organisation). Whereas perceivers strive to validate their expectancies, targets seek to verify their self-views. Target and perceiver interact in symmetric or asymmetric relationships. These theoretical notions seamlessly apply to processes like accreditation of prior learning (APL) and job interviews or performance evaluations: situations in which we engage in a dialogue about what we have achieved, how this relates to what is expected from us and what it tells us about ourselves and our place in society.

Initial studies regarding identity negotiations focused on behavioural confirmation, i.e. the way perceivers influence the behaviour of targets to comply with perceivers’ expectancies. However, the focus has gradually shifted to the way targets play an active role in the identity negotiation process. In this process the desire for self-verification (i.e. stabilising one’s self view) tends to ‘prevail’ over the desire for self-enhancement (i.e. seeing oneself in the best possible light) (Kwang & Swann, 2010). This might explain why most people’s online and off-line identities appear highly consistent (Farquhar, 2009; Hardey, 2002; Moinian, 2006), although there is also evidence of the contrary: people struggling to integrate multiple identities (Turkle, 1995). To illustrate the notion of identity as ‘multiple yet coherent’, Turkle refers to homepages on the web, which she likens to a home consisting of separate rooms, yet forming an integrated whole. Considering identity as multiple yet coherent fosters self-knowledge: *“A more fluid sense of self “makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others’) inconsistent personae – perhaps with humor, perhaps with irony. We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit.”* (p.261 -262).

Whereas Turkle’s study involves explorations of online, virtual personae and how they can be used to enhance self-knowledge and thus enrich the real, the issue addressed in this paper involves a movement in the opposite direction, i.e. from the real to the virtual: how to start from self-knowledge and real life experience, and present them online in ways that support processes of self-negotiation and self-verification. In this context too, the notion of multiple identities is relevant, which becomes clear for instance, in considering audiences for a showcase portfolio and the fact that this determines which particular competences and identities we want to highlight.

Ting-Toomey (1999) distinguishes primary and situational identities, the former being more stable and including for instance ethnic identity, gender identity and personal identity. Situational identities include for instance role identity and relational identity. Clearly, these identities are interrelated. In fact, processes of identity negotiation may involve negotiating identity conflicts stemming from the necessity to balance opposing needs. According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) a person’s self-concept is influenced both by a need to be an individual (i.e. differentiation) and the need to belong to social groups (i.e. assimilation). The role these opposing needs play in identity negotiation processes is nicely illustrated by an interesting exploratory study investigating the role of identity negotiation in decisions regarding attainment and removal of tattoos (Shelton & Peters, 2008). Motivations for attaining and removing tattoos may be driven by either a desire to express a sense of belonging with a particular group or person or a desire to ‘stand out and be different’. The findings of this study are consistent with the notion underlying optimal distinctiveness theory, that a person’s self-

concept consists of three components: the individual-self (“the self as it contrasted with / considered to stand out from others”), the relational-self (‘the self as it performs specific roles / relates to and assimilates with significant others), and the collective-self (‘the self as defined through memberships of larger social groups) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For example: “I wrote a paper” (individual self). “I wrote the paper together with my colleagues Adriana Berlanga and Peter Sloep” (relational self). “I am working at the Open Universiteit Nederland” (collective self). “*Optimal distinctiveness theory suggests that an individual is constantly negotiating the need to individuate the self from others and integrate the self within relational and collective social groups as she searches for and defines her identity over time.*” (Shelton & Peters, 2008).

Though these opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation strongly affect the identity negotiation process, it is most strongly motivated by the aforementioned desire for self-verification (Kwang & Swann, 2010). The need for self-verification is satisfied by seeking out self-confirmatory environments. Independent of the question whether ones self-view is positive or negative, self-verification fosters feelings of connection and positively affects creative task performance in groups (Swann, Milton, & Polzer, 2000). Before addressing the question how identity negotiation is going to be facilitated within the TRAILER project, we want to point out some differences between off-line and online identity negotiation.

Offline and online identity negotiation

The process of negotiating one’s identity is different online than offline; one of the more obvious differences being that multiple identities, though equally present in both situations, become more apparent in online situation where they tend to be more ‘compartmentalised’ (cf. Turkle’s metaphor of the home with separate rooms). In other words, negotiation constraints vary for online and offline situations (Berlanga & Sloep, 2011), and in the case of online identity negotiation they can be expected to further vary depending on the type of online environment at hand, e.g. a homepage, social network sites, a forum, an e-portfolio, etcetera. These environments vary for instance regarding interaction style and the level of awareness of a specific audience (i.e. perceivers addressed). In a homepage, for instance, one generally addresses a single, general (hence broad) audience which could work either way, i.e. make the owner feel more or less restricted than would be the case in addressing specific audiences through various e-portfolio showcases, e.g. peers, parents, team members, tutors, an educational institution, potential employer, line-manager, general public, etc.

Though undeniably the boundaries between social networking and e-portfolio tend to get increasingly blurred, still a major difference seems to be the underlying motivation, i.e. intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation (Barrett, 2011). This distinction brings along differences in communication as is illustrated by the following quote: “*The world of check-ins, instant-messaging, texting, emoticons, and rapid response does not make self-reflection impossible, but does little to cultivate it.*” (Turkle, 2008). In contrast to this e-portfolios require reflection on many levels: which evidence to store, where to store it, as evidence of what, for which purpose and which audience, etc.

Another important distinction is that in using an e-portfolio target and perceiver roles are more clearly separated than in social networking sites, where everyone is both target and perceiver. This situation is clearly illustrated by a rather peculiar finding in an investigation of identity negotiation on Facebook: “(..) Facebookers were quick to point out that their own profiles were not complete or entirely accurate representations of themselves and yet most felt they could get a pretty good understanding of other persons based solely on viewing their profiles.” (Farquhar, 2009, p. 211). Of course this raises questions regarding the completeness and accuracy of profiles in various online environments and how this affects identity negotiation. It also brings us back to the issue of trust in online identity negotiation. A recent study on the impact of personal profiles on initial trust formation in online teams (Rusman et al., 2012) provides detailed information on the relative importance of specific information elements. The study investigated profile information elements that are typically included in a variety of online environments. These elements were rated on their importance for impression formation by a group of 226 bachelor students, most of whom were experienced in collaborating in virtual teams. Of all the elements generally considered important, those considered most important were not so much the information elements providing ‘factual’ information like prior work experience, educational

background, personality traits, etc. but rather the elements related to motivation and preferences: personal motivation for the project, ideas for the project, expectations of the project, and preference regarding specific types of situations to work in. This suggests that the motivation for learning might be an important aspect to address when documenting informal learning, next to providing evidence for learning achievement..

Identity negotiation in the TRAILER portfolio

The TRAILER project aims to facilitate documentation of informal learning with the further aim to support acknowledgement of informal learning. One of the tools to be developed in this project is an Informal Learning Collector (ILC) that will allow a learner to identify and collect instances of informal *online* learning, and permits the identification of instances or groups of instances that indicate the acquisition or development of skills and competences. The collection of instances of learning is performed in the users personal learning network, that is to say, the set of informal and formal tools, resources, and contacts that learners use to learn. The instances of learning collected via the ILC are tagged and/or linked to competences provided in a competence catalogue, possibly annotated and subsequently stored in the learner's e-portfolio. If she so wishes, the learner may then further edit the instance and the information added.

Instances of informal learning may be tangible outcomes (e.g. a result from a test or game, one or more forum posts, a design, a picture gallery, a review etc.) or less tangible 'activities' (e.g. an article that was read, a video watched, a search process, a comparison made etc.). For each instance, the learner will have to point out why it should be seen as an instance of informal learning. The less tangible instances will likely require a more elaborate argumentation or motivation of how these activities demonstrate a particular competence as will the tangible ones. We see a parallel here with the relative importance of the profile information elements involving motivation and preferences: the fact that one has read particular articles and the merely linking them to a particular competence, i.e. stating "These articles have made me knowledgeable in field X" would not sufficiently demonstrate competence; however "Reading these articles has made me aware of the fact that, within the field of X, ... etc." would. This example serves to illustrate that the ILC is no more and no less than a tool to facilitate identification and archiving of (online) informal learning. In that capacity it is a welcome addition to standard e-portfolios, which are mostly ignorant of informal learning instances. However making the inclusion of informal learning instances easier may well bring along a drawback: the risk of users being little selective as to what goes into their e-portfolio, leaving further selection to a later stage. Doing so would actually render selections for the purpose of showcasing more cumbersome.

The TRAILER e-portfolio will ensure that the user can create multiple showcases and thus negotiate various identities depending on the audience she is addressing. To create a showcase the user can include various elements from her profile (which provides very basic information like an introduction, demographic details, and contact details), from her résumé, from her social networks and all kinds of content constituting evidence of formal and informal learning.

This means effectively, that the user in her capacity of target in an identity negotiation creates a single overall profile, and a single résumé, from which she can subsequently select and combine elements. Perceivers may provide feedback on the entire showcase as well as on each of its components.

Conclusion and discussion

To try and gain recognition of competences acquired through informal learning means to engage in a process of identity negotiation, i.e. a process of seeking verification of our self-view.

Social networking pervades our society, learning included (Sloep & Berlanga, 2011). Although e-portfolios meanwhile have an uncontested use in formal learning, we argue that they also are very useful in networked, informal learning, even though one may think for a moment that their role can be taken over by the social networks themselves. There are obvious advantages for informal learning,

more so even than for formal learning. E-portfolios support informal learning and acknowledgement of informal learning because they: a.) are likely to foster reflection as they are connected to intrinsic motivation; b.) compel users to strike a balance between the need for independence and the need for assimilation as they enhance awareness of the audiences/perceivers addressed through the showcases, which c.) are so flexible that they facilitate both elaboration and integration of multiple identities.

In our view, the fact that the creation of a showcase heightens awareness of an audience/ audiences, combined with the need to generate trust by elaborating on motivations, make e-portfolios particularly suitable for identity negotiation.

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