

Educational, Psychological, and Behavioral Considerations in Niche Online Communities

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Chapter 10

Citizenship @ the Edge of Two Worlds: The Connection between Theories of Citizenship Education and the Study of Niche Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the possibilities for understanding participation in niche online communities through the theories and concepts found in the field of citizenship education. The authors note that there are a number of themes found in theories of citizenship education that help one understand the nature of participation in niche online communities. At the same time, there are a number of contrasting goals—such as the role of virtues in online contexts and who as a right to participate—that demonstrate tensions between the two fields. The authors argue, however, that these tensions are not insurmountable: they suggest that the fruitfulness of the connection between the two fields is the way in which theories of citizenship education highlight the informally learned roles of participating in online communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the field of citizenship education does not have an extensive history, it has, however, been a major paradigm in educational literature to illuminate the pedagogical project of citizenship in its most informal sense. That is to say, citizenship education has provided an important lens to understand how new modes of social interaction can create qualities of participation. In this way, practices such as social interaction mediated through technological advancements have been queried for their educational perspective by attempting to understand how this participation develops, or educates, new modes of citizenship. Currently, citizens' use of interactive technologies such as social media has begun to impact the nature of social interactions, which in turn, is creating points of rupture within existing social paradigms. Ruptures of social paradigms, such as those provided by citizens' participation in niche online communities, is changing both the characteristics and practice of citizenship within many twenty-first century post-industrial democracies (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009).

Considering these ruptures, this chapter highlights both the potentials and pitfalls of citizens' abilities to write themselves into public online spaces. By highlighting the potential agency and empowerment that such practices afford, it offers an overview of citizens' use of social network sites for processes of identity development. This chapter equally explores the powers and potentials of theorizing the connections between citizenship education theories and the changing role of social interaction in niche online communities. Such a discussion challenges our understanding of contemporary theoretical conceptualizations of citizenship and citizen identity and seeks to question the strengths and weaknesses of the existing field of citizenship education as it comes to explaining the changing phenomenon of participation in niche online communities.

To accomplish this, this chapter has been organized into four main sections. First, we provide a critical review of the literature relating to niche online communities and identity development, and to citizenship education. Our aim is to illuminate the history, practices, and theoretical trajectories that underpin both phenomena. Second, we offer a discussion that highlights particular tensions and articulates necessary points of emphases for understanding, fostering, and engaging with niche online communities from a perspective of citizenship education. Third, we forward a set of recommendations for how citizenship educators can best support citizens in developing an understanding of themselves, their roles as citizens, and their relationship to others within increasingly complex and converging real and virtual worlds. Finally, we reflect on the connections between the study of niche online communities and theories behind citizenship education.

CONTEXT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Niche Online Communities and Citizen Identities

Philosophers of technology have offered the trope that technologies are both socially shaped and socially shaping (Buckingham, 2008; *cf.*, Heidegger, 1977). Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship, Darin Barney (2007) asserts that the "Internet *makes* people what they are, as opposed to merely being *used* by them (p. 38, emphasis in original). However, as Markham (2004) maintains, the ways in which individuals conceptualize the Internet ultimately inform the ways in which they interact with and within it. She suggests that there are individuals who view it as a tool, those who view it as a place, and those who experience it as a way of being in the world. For those who experience the Internet along arguably more ontological dimensions, it becomes a context in which citizens can construct new kinds

of communities, along with their resistant identities (Hands, 2007). Moreover, it can provide those who have access to it with an “important set of tools to build social and personal identity and to create the on- and offline environments” in which to spend time (Bennett, 2008, p. 8).

Howard Rheingold (1993) was one of the earliest scholars to highlight the potential of the Internet for social construction. He defines the communities created in online environments as *virtual communities* and stipulates that these collectives are “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 3). Within many post-industrial societies where Internet penetration rates and usage are nearly ubiquitous, individuals are using Internet-based communication platforms in order to sustain increased connectivity over time and across borders (Merryfield & Duty, 2008). With the advent and use of such technological platforms as social network sites, citizens are now able to form identifications across cultural and national boundaries, thus causing fragmentation and uncertainty about traditional identity markers (Bennett, 2008; Buckingham, 2008). As Bennett (2008) explains, one major consequence of greater opportunities to form global connections is that the broad social influence of particular social and political groups has diminished. As a result,

... individuals have become more responsible for the production and management of their own social and political identities. Contemporary young people enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their self-identities in contrast with earlier generations’ experiences with stronger groups (denominational church, labor, class, party) that essentially assigned broad social identities to their members. (p. 13)

As such, in an era of globalization, traditional identity markers are losing their currency as national boundaries and traditional social structures weaken.

Owing to the contemporary availability of arguably unmediated and heterogeneous online social spaces that support asynchronous communication, individuals are presented with “more opportunities to engage in strategic control over information and self-presentation than [in] face-to-face exchanges” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 69). Internet users can choose to engage creatively with different textual forms (e.g., written, audio, and visual texts) in order to explore identity flexibility and to effectively “write themselves” into existence (Daley, 2012). For example, Perkel (2008) describes the process of writing an online social network profile as a complicated exercise in self-representation and outward identity formation; Greenhow and Robelia (2009) maintain that individuals “use online authorship to work out their personal beliefs, challenge cultural assumptions, and navigate complex relationships” (p. 124). As such, online identity creation/representation holds a performative aspect in which the user (citizen) becomes what they type (Slater, 2002).

One way in which citizens have begun to produce/perform their own identities is through their affiliation with and participation in niche online communities; communities that are often located within social network sites. Within Canada, 80% of citizens, aged 16 and older use the Internet and of them, 58% report using social network sites regularly (Statistics Canada, 2011). Social network sites are described as a form of participatory social media that:

... allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211)

These sites, which place the individual at the center of their community, hold the potential of enabling individuals to form identifications and to build communities around particular (niche) interests, traits, and affiliations, thereby supporting citizens in both freely creating an identity for themselves and actualizing elements of their identities that go beyond traditional identity markers.

Concurrent with the rise in usage of social network sites, there has been a rise in concern with whether or not the types of identities that are displayed therein are honest, authentic, and representative of offline identities (Venkatesh, Shaikh et al., 2012). Scholars believe that the anonymous social interactions supported by the Internet afford individuals the opportunity to “speak more freely without restraints brought about by social norms, mores, and conventions” (Markham, 2004, p. 102). This may mean that the discourse present within online environments more accurately reflects individuals’ actual identities (Kozinets, 2010). The other side of this argument is that it can be difficult to authenticate the veracity of online identities and to assess whether or not they accurately reflect offline identities. We contend that while still advanced by some, the latter argument is untenable for two reasons. First, it presupposes that there is in fact, some real conception of reality that is awaiting to reveal itself and that this is done most suitably through an individual’s physical presence (Markham, 2004). Second, it negates the fact that discourse, in and of itself, holds meaning regardless of the beliefs held by the individual by whom it was communicated (for a similar discussion, see Venkatesh, Podoshen, Perri, & Urbaniak, this volume). For the latter reason in particular, we contend that the question of import is not whether or not online environments afford a space in which social posturing or honest social disclosure is taking place. Rather, we argue that if particular online platforms afford individuals with spaces in which to form particular identifications and to articulate particular versions

of themselves – as is the case within *niche* online communities – then much can be learned from the behaviours and discourses therein.

Citizenship Education

As a concept, citizenship education has a number of different aspects that offer potential for illuminating the phenomenon of participation in niche online communities. These avenues include possible explanations for the increased agency developed – or, at the very least, the *belief* that agency is developed – by participating in these communities.

In the UK, the influential Crick Report (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998) on the teaching of citizenship increased public attention, as well as academic research (*cf.*, Kiwan, 2008; Olssen, 2004), on citizenship education. While the term *education* connotes formal systems of schooling, citizenship education also attempts to grasp elements of social participation in what Bruce Spencer (1998) and others (*cf.*, Coombs, 1976; Fordham, 1993; Heimlich, 1993; LaBelle, 1982; Schugurensky, 2000; UNESCO, 1972, 1996) describe as the Formal, Non-formal, and Informal educational contexts of our lives. Spencer explains that “formal education carries credentials, has a set curriculum, and is usually provided by an educational institution” (p. 23), non-formal is “usually non-credential” or “non-credit” (p. 23), and finally, informal education represents the learned experiences that happen through our everyday activities. As the examples of participation in niche online communities often fall outside of educational organizational structures, in this chapter we focus on the latter of the three concepts: informal learning. This, we would suggest, is a strength in coming to grip with the broad cultural learning which happens as participants in these communities navigate new roles of a community. Because of the emphasis on informal learning within the body of literature

on citizenship education, the term has also been popular in the field of Lifelong Learning.

The emphasis on the informal learning component of citizenship education (CE) is, as we have mentioned, one of the first strengths of understanding the participation in niche online communities. Unlike traditions which emphasize the formalized aspects of learning, the informal pedagogical practice of learning the structure and rules of a specific online community are often done – although not always – in unguided and unstructured environments. In this way, the lens of CE does provide a conceptual tradition that acknowledges the powerful acts of learning, which can transpire as participants in niche communities learn their ways into new roles and responsibilities outside of formal curricula.

The aspect of *niche* communities also highlights an intriguing aspect to the discussion. Not only is the informal learning of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; see also Das, this volume; Davidson & Durocher, this volume; Heijnen, this volume; Jackson, Robinson, & Simon, this volume; Urbaniak, this volume) developing in these situations, but it is also a community of practice that is demarcated, by definition, by specialized or refined interests and knowledge. As such, the bounds of specific online communities are developed in the tensions of these interests. What is important to note in addition to the development of rules and participation in niche communities, is that the materiality of our participation in online discursive practices, such as our participation in forums, is often underrepresented. That is to say, while participation in online communities is often mistakenly believed to be a cost free activity, there are important material and historical patterns that mediate this participation.

The field of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) offers interesting and lucrative approaches to drawing our attention to how these material and historical patterns may enable or constrain how online participation relates to citizenship. For example, while many niche com-

munities do not have a direct cost associated to joining the discussions or groups, the technology needed to do so does have a cost. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978), authors such as Roth and Lee (2007), and Yamagata-Lynch (2007) have attempted to draw out the ways in which phenomenon that can have aspects which beguile our understanding of the material connection to them – such as online forums – actually rely heavily on traditional dynamics of resource and power distribution. As such, CHAT theorists would point out that any connection to developing properties of citizenry online are mediated by questions of the means available to participants (who has access to the material technology) (see Tzemopoulos, this volume), rules of the community (who has the right to participate) (see Shane, this volume; Venkatesh, Podoshen, Perri, & Urbaniak, this volume), the community itself, and the division of labour (who is deemed a legitimate participant) (see Wershler, Salervo, & Tien, this volume).

Returning to the informal pedagogical focus on citizenship education, Schugurensky (2006) posits that citizenship education focuses on four key conceptual areas: “status, identity, civic virtues, and agency” (p. 68). Elsewhere, McGray (2012) has argued that these four areas have demarcated a broad spectrum of the field that has emphasized various social roles and responsibilities. These four categories, as Schugurensky notes, are not unproblematic. Before problematizing the concept and limitations for understanding connections to online communities, we will briefly review Schugurensky’s four conceptual areas of citizenship education.

First, status, in Schugurensky’s taxonomy of CE, signifies the complex rights of passage that are often bound by the formal recognition of citizens. While the status of a citizen can be demarcated in many ways, we often recognize it in the legal artifacts provided by the nation state, such as a passport. Second, identity, as a category of CE, has some of the most immediate connections to understanding niche online communities. It is the

concept of identity which Schugurensky uses to understand how the development of roles, and subsequent acts of recognition of these burgeoning roles, drives a powerful psychoanalytical process. The connections between identity development detailed in the previous section and participation in niche online communities speak to one of the obvious connections between the two fields: people develop citizenship through a wide variety of identity building processes. The third category of civic virtues is, perhaps, one of the categories that has the least consensus about its meaning. The debates, as one might imagine, revolve around what characteristics of a citizen are considered virtuous and desirable for a community. Broadly speaking, this draws on a long history of emphasis on character education, open mindedness (Hare, 2003), and education for public participation (Sears & Hughes, 1996). We will return to this aspect in the next section to trouble the use of this concept to understand niche online communities in light of the differences between large public democracies and distinctive online groups. Finally, Schugurensky highlights that a central aspect of CE revolves around agency. The final concept refers to the capacity of actors to intentionally assert actions on the world and have them act as generative mechanisms for other events.

As one might surmise, these aspects of CE do not come without complication. For example, learning that is aimed at the recognition of identity is not necessarily always a positive venture. One does not have to look very far – especially online – to find examples of identity formation and recognition patterns that revolve around racist or violent identities. We will return to these complications later in this chapter.

One of the possibilities, though, for analyzing participation in niche online communities may come from Schugurensky's (2006) emphasis on the democratic aspect of citizenry. It is his argument that citizenship and democracy are connected to the "issues of equality, participation, and self-governance" (p. 76). These issues, however, are not

always achieved by addressing *any* machination or venture addressing status, identity, civic virtues, and agency. Instead, the connection is fostered through particular attention to these issues. It is in the next section that we turn our attention to how these concepts of CE relate to understanding participation in niche online communities.

DISCUSSION: POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS OF THE CONNECTION

In the previous section, we reviewed the literature pertaining to identity formation in niche online communities and citizenship education. Already, we have started to tease out some of the strengths and weaknesses of juxtaposing the two fields. For example, we have seen that social identity processes have become integral to notions of citizenship within the twenty-first century (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009) and that currently, the use of certain social media platforms enables the creation/performance of new kinds of identities. Given that identity is as much about what distinguishes us from other people as it is about what ties us to broader collective or social groups (Buckingham, 2008), it follows that the creation of these identities lends itself to the proliferation and perpetuation of niche online communities that are increasingly formed around traits and affiliations that go beyond citizens' ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities. Further, the establishment of these niche online communities promotes new forms of social interactions, which then result in the production of new kinds of identities. But what are the implications of the cyclical relationship between identity formation → niche online community creation → new social interactions → identity formation for notions of citizenship and citizenship education?

One consequence is that currently, an increasing number of citizens worldwide simultaneously identify with diverse identities, many of which may or may not closely resemble their character

in real life (Venkatesh, Shaikh et al., 2012). This leads to citizens possessing higher levels of *social identity complexity* (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). As social identity complexity theory explains, multiple group membership positively influences individuals' intergroup attitudes and behaviours. Intergroup attitudes and behaviours are attributes that are routinely championed within citizenship education as characteristics that are important as citizens learn to live together (Ross, 2008). Moreover, citizens with higher levels of identity complexity demonstrate a higher level of acceptance of diversity (Miller, Brewer, & Arbuckle, 2009), which is arguably beneficial for any pluralist society seeking to promote and integrate diversity.

A second consequence is that as citizens participate in online environments such as niche online communities, they are able to be more self-actualizing and personally expressive (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). These communities afford citizens with the opportunity to engage with issues connected to lifestyle values and to partake in social action that is both personally meaningful and socially relevant, which has positive social implications (Dahlgren, 2007; see also Das, this volume; Pente, this volume). On the other hand, apprehension exists pertaining to the negative impact of participation in niche online communities and to the types of personal expression that can ensue. In particular, concerns relating to the proliferation of narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) and hatred (Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003; Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002; see also Venkatesh, Podoshen, Perri, & Urbaniak, this volume) in online spaces are pressing issues to consider. Similarly, citizens' participation in homogeneous communities where interactions between like-minded individuals center on confirmatory discourse is viewed as problematic both from an educational, as well as an individual and societal standpoint (see Castro, this volume; Netherton, this volume).

A third consequence is that increasingly, we are living in a world of mobile and multiple

identities. Citizens' identification with and around niche online communities supports the notion that "identity is a fluid, contingent matter – it is something we accomplish practically through our ongoing interactions and negotiations with other people" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 6). As such, we are now required to alter the ways in which we define and teach about citizenship, and to acknowledge that more than one compelling version of citizen identity exists (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). Recently, attempts have been made to examine the relevancy of popular citizenship paradigms (e.g., Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) when attempting to explain the nature of social interactions supported by online environments (see Thomas, Fournier-Sylvester, & Venkatesh, this volume). This research provides an empirical account of the fact that citizen identity is not unitary, nor static; rather, it is dynamic, as citizens demonstrate both changes in citizenship paradigm membership over time, as well as membership to multiple paradigms at once. This aligns with the belief that citizen identities encompass (at least) two fundamental dimensions: a generalized civic identity (shared commitment to democratic norms) and a specialized civic identity (special socio-political interests) (Dahlgren, 2007).

A fourth and final consequence is that notions of civil society are being redefined as a result of the proliferation of niche online communities and the types of identities and social relations that are produced therein. As Dahlgren (2006) explains, civil society is "the societal terrain between the state and the economy, the realm of free association where citizens can interact to pursue their shared interests" (p. 271). He suggests that such "interaction helps individuals to develop socially, to shape their identities, to foster values suitable for democracy and to learn to deal with conflict in productive ways" (p. 272). In this way, niche online communities hold the potential to act as a space where citizens who have traditionally been excluded from so-called mainstream notions of civil society may in fact participate in the new

version(s) of civil society in meaningful ways. This is by no means an unproblematic notion (as our discussion in the next section reveals), but it does allude to the fruitfulness of the connection between theories of citizenship (education) and the outcomes of participation in niche online communities.

Tensions

There are, however, a number of existing tensions that arise with the use of citizenship education paradigms to understand participation in niche online communities. The first tension is the connection to material practices in the participation of online communication. As we have detailed in the review on citizenship education there are important theories that attempt to illuminate the ways in which materiality affects online communities. Here we are referring to the previously described research on CHAT.

The second, and related, tension is the comprehension of the relationship between discursive practices and citizenship education. To posit this second tension in another way, we ask: how can a lens of citizenship education – with an emphasis on the praxis of daily lives – illuminate our understanding of the participation in niche online communities which often play out as interactions which privilege discursive practice? In this way, we highlight a concern relevant to theorists attempting to understand the connection between technology and materiality.

The third tension is the schism between the nature and function of an emphasis on civic virtues as a major focus of citizenship education. While there are intriguing aspects to the functioning of policing and moderating behaviours in online communities, it is obvious that they are not identical to the way behaviours are policed or moderated in civil society. This is not to say there are not similarities in the functioning of shame, logic, and charisma in deciding what constitutes a virtuous behaviour on and off-line, but the mechanisms

of power and history are non-identical in the different contexts. We are hesitant to overstate this tension, however, as one of the recommendations we would also suggest for the consideration of the two fields is that citizenship education, with a focus on informal learning, can draw our attention to the fact that online participation is not a wholly other activity from public life, but a facet of our public and social selves which we express through a different medium.

The fourth tension that we would highlight revolves around who has the right to participate. In CE, it is argued that there is a fundamental right to be a citizen – as such it becomes problematic, as Schugurensky (2006) notes, when we are faced with the realization that there are international migrants who are unable to have claims of citizenry recognized. Participation in niche online communities, however, does not have the same moral impetus to include everyone as a right. In this way, a major tension of using CE to understand niche online communities can appear over the belief in the right to participate: the field of CE leverages the argument that it is often a right for participation as a citizen (for the debates over the rights discourse, *cf.*, Lukes, 2003; Žižek, 2005); understanding of participation in niche online communities generally does not. We have already attempted to highlight how CHAT would suggest that participation in niche online communities is already effected by who is privileged to have the means to be digital citizens. Further to this, it can be problematic when we consider that citizenship education and niche online communities hold different commitments to the scope and nature of participation.

Finally – and further to the fourth tension – we must query if it is possible for the literature on citizenship education to accurately describe new emerging forms of citizenship that transpire through participation in niche online communities. The field of CE has, until recently, been dominated by relationships of the citizen by the nation-state, or collections of nation-states. For

example, the project of CE has been, to a large extent, orientated to understanding the rights – or, perhaps as Schugurensky (2006) posits, an understanding of civic virtues and status – in relation to these state formations. In the murky world of trans-national, and sometimes immediate, international communication, we must be attentive to the possibility that the concepts traditionally related to the oeuvre are challenged by the participation in communities described in this book. The aspect of niche communities, in itself, poses challenges to CE. Whereby the traditional models of citizenship in CE suppose larger democratic public participation – think of the aspect of Global Citizenship Education – the participation in niche communities, while certainly global, often takes a more intimate approach to understanding communities of practice. Also, a related question is if the current dominant theories of CE can accurately describe the full affects of participation in niche online communities. This last tension acts as a platform for our final section on recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the potentials for juxtaposing the two fields is, as we have previously detailed, the emphasis on the informally learned roles required to participate in niche online communities. In this way, the role of learning helps to understand how participation in niche online communities is developed through broad social and cultural patterns of learned activities. With these aspects of participation, we can develop robust understandings of how the online activities articulate with the lived experiences of users. Learning is then situated as an important factor in understanding how people connect (or disconnect) different aspects of complex lives. In this way, our attention is drawn to the ways in which public lives and online participation are mediated through powerful but often underrepresented acts of learning.

We have highlighted in the last section, the fact that the fields of study of citizenship education and niche online communities have, in general, various commitments to the right to participation. We would also suggest, however, that this is not antithetical to the theoretical pairing, or for the use of CE models to study niche online communities. In the 1990's, there was a significant push in the fields concerned with human learning to introduce the concept of *community* as a consideration in the ways in which humans develop the ability to negotiate the conditions of their lives. Specifically, the nature in which Etienne Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice is described may help to think about the linkages between niche online communities and broad conceptions of public citizenship education. Wenger, in describing the role of communities in the learning process notes that the ways in which we learn and practice identities "is... always an interplay between the local and the global" (p. 162). This claim is underpinned by his explanation that our identities are, in part, "a nexus," that "combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice" (p. 163), but, as well, a "local-global interplay" (p. 163). Wenger's articulation of learned identities helps to explain how the connection might be made between the conceptions of niche online communities and CE. Consider this: the identities forged in tightly bound discursive communities do not simply become partitioned off into a particular aspect of the Internet, but they also constitute part of a public identity for the participants. In addition, the local-global aspect of Wenger's work should not only be read as a connection between the worlds of niche online communities and CE, but can also be used to conceptualize the nature of participation within forums which have both local (in terms of users) and global (in terms of scope and accessibility) dynamics.

FINAL REFLECTION

In this chapter, we have attempted to trace some of the connections between the study of niche online communities and theories that underpin citizenship education. While it is clear that there is a learned element in forming new online networks, we have attempted to detail some of the possibilities and pitfalls for understanding the learned component through a popular education lens – citizenship education. How do, for example, the differences in highlighting virtues in online communities differ from that of the virtues of a larger public society? Does consideration of these differences form irreconcilable obstacles in using a concept such as citizenship education to understand niche online communities? We would suggest not, but with a caveat of some important considerations. First, we suggest that the informal aspect of learning identities in participation within niche online communities draws important attention to how people develop and mold their lives as citizens – digital or otherwise. Second, we have highlighted that the scales that the two fields traditionally focus on should not be overstated as a tension. Following the work of Wenger (1998), we have attempted to articulate how the levels of participation – from interactions between agents, to broad social participation – can actually be read as a way to understand how these various contexts allow us to learn identity roles.

Dahlgren (2007) maintains that the “key role of the Internet ... is not so much the forums of deliberation that it offers, but rather its opportunities for building networks around issues” (p. 69). One such potential for the exploration of niche online communities and CE is, in fact, the opportunity to glimpse into a contemporary mechanism for the learning of identities.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

CHAT: Initiated by a group of Russian psychologists in the 1920s and 1930s, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is an approach to understanding and transforming human life that suggests that the relationship between a human and her/his environment is mediated by cultural means, tools, and signs.

Citizenship Education: An area of study within formal education that pays attention to the development of particular skills and dispositions related to effective citizenship.

Identity: The relation that each thing bears to itself and to others. The term identity is used equally to describe that which makes a person/thing unique, as much as that which makes a person/thing the same as others.

Informal Learning: Learning that results surreptitiously from participation in daily activities and through contact with family, friends, and associates.

Niche Online Communities: A group of individuals who assemble online in order to share a common interest, pursuit, or passion.