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The fragmented educator 2.0: Social networking sites, acceptable identity fragments, and the identity constellation

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) have been used to support educational and professional endeavors. However, little research has been done to understand the relationship between educator identity and participation in SNS or to examine the implications that institutional regulation of such media may have upon educator identity. Using grounded theory, in this study we developed a framework for understanding how a group of teacher education students viewed their developing identities within social networking sites as they began the life transition to becoming educators. The theory that emerged from this study proposes that educator identity consists of a constellation of interconnected acceptable identity fragments, which are each intentional, authentic, transitional, necessarily incomplete, and socially-constructed and -responsive. This view of educator identity contrasts sharply with previous views of identity by highlighting the complicated, negotiated, and recursive relationship that exists between educator participation in SNS and educator identity. Additionally, this perspective suggests that educator participation in SNS is neither fully representative of authentic identity (as prominent SNS models imply) nor dramaturgical. These findings yield important implications for educators, researchers, educational institutions, lawmakers, and SNS developers alike, because they lead to a more sophisticated understanding of identity and online participation that is essential for developing mechanisms to support moral and legal judgments, professionalism, and social interactions relative to SNS.

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1. Introduction

With the recent explosion of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, many researchers, educators, and students have come to use SNS regularly for a variety of purposes (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Stutzman, 2006; Veletsianos, 2011). As educators who believe that learning is a social enterprise (Vygotsky, 1978) use such technologies, it seems natural for them to take a keen interest in SNS to support learning in both formal (Cho, Gay, Davidson, & Ingraffea, 2007; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013) and informal settings (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Selwyn, 2009). Such interest has led many educators and policymakers to attempt to regulate and leverage such technologies. However, empirical literature focusing on the personal consequences of institutional influences on SNS and identity are lacking, even though the scholarly community has recognized some challenges that educators face when adopting social media for professional purposes (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012a). Specifically, if we consider social participation and literacies within social spaces to be connected with identity in a meaningful way (cf. Gee, 2009; Ivanič, 1998), then we need to understand how educators' participation interfaces with their sense of self and recognize that institutional regulation or leveraging of SNS for professional or educational purposes may yield problematic outcomes for the socially-connected lives of educators. To examine these issues, we pose the following question: *What is the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity?* We divide our paper into the following five sections: review of relevant literature, methods, findings, implications, and conclusion.

In short, it is important to investigate the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity because there are direct links between offline and online identities (boyd, 2008; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), and the existing literature does not explain how educator participation in SNS interfaces with their sense of who they are personally and professionally. We suspect that there are powerful forces that shape educators' participation in SNS thereby impacting their sense of identity (i.e. their sense of "who they are"), and this study was designed to investigate these issues.

Social networking sites (SNS) have been defined as "web-based services 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, 2007, p. 211). It has recently been reported that nearly three out of four teens and adult internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use an SNS (Lenhart et al., 2008), and Facebook alone boasts over 800 million active users (Facebook, 2011), more than twice the population of the United States. Researchers propose that SNS have the potential to improve learning experiences in a variety of ways, including improving communicative efficiency (Towner & Muñoz, 2011), providing positive social transformations (Gallon, 2010; Levickaitė, 2010), facilitating openness (Roblyer et al., 2010), and fostering learner participation, community building, and social presence (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Minocha, 2009). Despite such promising possibilities, scant empirical evidence on the applications of SNS in educational contexts exists (Greenhow, 2011; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), which prevents researchers from being able to advocate for educational SNS use from a position of empirical certainty. Similarly, even though educators believe that SNS may have great value in educational settings (Greenhow, 2011; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), many remain timid in their willingness to use SNS for learning (Aijan & Hartshorne, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2010) or attempt to use SNS in ways that functionally align with how traditional teacher-centered technologies are used in instruction (Veletsianos, Kimmons, & French, 2013).

This timidity likely stems from a variety of factors, including recent examples in which students and educators developed unethical or illegal relationships via such media (e.g., Chilcott, 2011; Kimble, 2011; Sun, 2009) and the high level of scrutiny that communities regularly exert upon educators (e.g., Armstrong & Hollan, 1985; Fleming, Harmon-Cooley, & McFadden-Wade, 2009). Recent policy determinations and court rulings forcing educators to alter their participation in SNS suggest that there are cultural fears associated with students and educators interacting via SNS (Cunningham, 2011; Hinze, 2011; Preston, 2011; Schrock & boyd, 2011), but in such cases, little attention has been given to understanding the variety of reasons why educators might be interested in using SNS in their personal lives and how such participation relates to their sense of identity and social well-being. Further, when considering this relationship, we should recognize that educators' identities have many facets or components (personal, professional, social, etc.) that interact with one another in complicated ways.

The Facebook model of participation, which reflects the norm for most popular SNS, assumes that 1) participants have a unitary, authentic identity and 2) their authentic identities are expressed via the medium as evidenced in the use of real-world names, the replication of real-world relationships, the revelation of identifying information, the deletion of fake accounts, the memorialization of deceased members' accounts, and the use of the medium to influence real-world outcomes. Yet, as participants develop necessary literacies to use these spaces, it seems that they must begin to think of themselves and their relationships with others in new and negotiated ways, like redefining the word "friend" (Beer, 2008) or thinking of themselves as "micro-celebrities" (Marwick & boyd, 2010), and such spaces may even be used as testing grounds to develop identity through exploration (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

The Communities of Practice model (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) also discusses notions of identity. In particular, according to the CoP view, identity is shaped by both individual participation and non-participation in the community, and community action and inaction shape identity development. This view of identity was developed pre-SNS times, but since then, authors have argued that identity formation is also taking place in digital habitats like SNS (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009), and SNS become useful insofar as they provide tools for optimal configuration of a community (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2010). Given the complexity of SNS participation, and perspectives of SNS as "sites of contestation" (Lemke & Van Helden, 2009) in which personal and professional contexts often collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010), identity negotiation in SNS seems to be more complex than the perspective taken by a CoP view in which SNS only serve to support and enhance community development/processes.

To understand identity within SNS, Pearson (2009) has argued that SNS participation may be best understood in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical sense: identity or the self is a dramatic effect based upon how we "act" (in the theatrical sense) in various contexts to achieve social benefit. However, this interpretation has not been empirically supported and relies on a non-unitary, fluid view of identity, which does not align with the authentic identity models that prominent SNS are designed around. Similarly, Turkle's (1995) explanation of the self as a multiplicity or "having a sense of self without being *one* self" (p. 258, emphasis added) does not align well with current practices and views related to online participation. When Turkle was exploring online identity in the Web 1.0 world, internet communities were inhabited primarily by early adopters who used sites like MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and discussion boards as mechanisms for exploring and sustaining multiple personae. Though such sites remain highly active, and millions of internet users create new avatars and personae for the purpose of identity exploration on a daily basis, the ability to do this relies upon a user's ability to separate the legion of one's virtual, exploratory selves from the real life or traditionally viewed unitary self. In the Web 2.0 world, however, one's ability to do this diminishes as anonymity declines, real-life connections are replicated in the virtual medium, web resources are used for surveillance, and sites like Facebook and LinkedIn seek to present "authentic," unitary selves that are similar to the selves expressed in real life. Thus, though Turkle's findings on identity as fluid multiplicity and fragmentation may reflect participation in the early internet and in some remaining corners of the medium, dominant internet usage no longer seems to fit this narrative.

Little research has been done to understand the emerging relationship between identity, literacy, and social participation in SNS that rely upon a unitary view of identity (Kimmons, 2014), however, as daily internet use has fundamentally shifted from the "Wild West" of anonymous participation to public or semi-public extensions of daily life. It seems important to understand this relationship, though, because negotiations and acquiescence of identity may be taking place within these spaces that are not well understood. Furthermore, as institutions (e.g., educational, governmental) seek to regulate SNS participation, there may be unintended and undesirable outcomes on educator identity.

To empirically explore and generate a theory on the relationship between identity and educator participation in SNS, in this paper we consider the unique perspective that teacher education students have to offer, because they find themselves in a unique transitional phase – seeking to negotiate a shift between the private life of a student and the more public life of a professional educator. Since most current teacher education students will have begun using SNS prior to their entry to their professional programs, they stand to serve as valuable informants for understanding tensions regarding private/public lives, professionalism, and identity within SNS, and they may provide us