Collaborative Personal Home Pages: 
Supporting Identity Construction to Enable 
Learning as Becoming and Belonging

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Introduction

Previous efforts in the learning sciences have been primarily focused on theories of learning that relate to acquiring and practicing cognitive skills (Collins et al., 1989; Schank et al., 1994). These cognitive skills will later be useful in life as people engage in practices that require these skills. Recently, communities of practice has emerged as a useful framework to go beyond the cognitive view of learning to incorporate the social (or situated) aspects of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Seen through a communities of practice conceptual framework, the previous work addresses two important aspects of learning: learning as doing (engaging in meaningful practice) and learning as experience (understanding meaning) (Wenger, 1998). However, it largely fails to address the other two important aspects of learning: learning as becoming (identity) and learning as belonging (community). Mostly, this is because most of this research has been done in the context of schools, rather than directly addressing learning in a community of practice (Barab and Duffy, 2000). Yet, these are two critical components for a community of practice to sustain and reinvent itself (Wenger, 1998). Newcomers must be able to integrate themselves into the community. This work will address how identity construction tools can support learning as becoming and belonging.

Learning as becoming focuses on how a person learns who they are in the context of the community (Wenger, 1998). A carpenter is not just someone who has carpentry skills, but someone who views themselves as being a carpenter. No matter what they do, they are a carpenter, because that is part of their identity. Learning as belonging focuses on the individual’s role in the community of practice. To belong to the community, the participation of the individual must be legitimate (in-line with the practices of the community) and visible to the other members of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In a sense, learning as becoming and learning as belonging are two sides of the same coin looked at from different perspectives. In the former, the focus is on the individual’s view of themselves. In the latter, the focus is on the community’s view of the individual. It is both the individual and the social sides of things that are being addressed by these two concepts. Both are almost necessarily developed jointly as an individual joins a community of practice. When a person belongs to a community of
practice, they become someone who shares the individual character traits that go along with that community. On the other side, when a person becomes someone with the traits of the community, they will belong to that community of practice.

In the academic community of practice (academia), in which this work is situated, personal home pages serve as one foundation of how people express themselves and present themselves to others (Dillon and Gushrowski, 2000; Groth, 1998; Erickson, 1996). Home pages provide their owners with a forum to reflect on their own thoughts through composition and a way to publish those thoughts in a meaningful manner to others. Composing thoughts into writing has been shown to be a particularly useful process for people to reflect on their understanding and change that understanding by doing so (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). In addition, constructing an artifact for a real audience can be motivating (Papert, 1991). Thus, increasing the visibility by publishing to an actual audience should increase motivation for the composition and provide a concrete audience to address. Thus, from a learning as becoming perspective, home pages provide a meaningful setting for individuals to work on their identity. On the other side, publishing information, even informally, is a legitimate way to engage the academic community (Smith, 1999). Sharing your ideas with others through publication are core practices of academia. As such, from a learning as belonging perspective, personal home pages provide a way for people to participate in core practices of the field in a way that is visible to the community.

While personal home pages have the potential to support a community of practice by enabling learning as becoming and belonging, ordinary personal home pages fail to serve this function for the vast majority of users. There are several possible reasons for this. Some of these reasons are purely technological—the y are based on the features of current tools rather than the underlying concepts.

- First, most home page creation tools do not scaffold content creation. Users are left with a large open canvas that can be so overwhelming that users never get beyond creating the looks of their site to focus on generating useful content.

- Second, for most home page systems, the publication cycle is long and awkward. In order for a person to make changes to their home page, they need to call up special home page creation software, like Microsoft FrontPage™. Next, they need to find the file that needs changing. Then, change it and save. If the user is not on a machine that has direct access to the source files, two extra steps of downloading the original source file and uploading it back to the original server are required. All of this can be a large barrier to quick changes and keeping a home page up to date.

- Third, most home page tools do not facilitate interaction with others. This has a dual negative consequences. First, it limits functionality as collaboration is not even an option. For example, if I was scheduling a time for my thesis proposal, my home page might be a great place for the committee to coordinate their schedules. With ordinary home pages, this functionality is not even an option. Second, it limits the feedback that a user gets about their home page. Since awareness of an audience is a critical part to both the composition process and provides a motivation to compose, limiting that awareness hampers the composition process.
To better understand the possibilities for learning as becoming and belonging through personal home pages, we created AniAniWeb to make up for these technological shortcomings. We took into account what has been learned from standard home pages, wikis (Leuf and Cunningham, 2001) and other collaborative web-sites (Guzdial et al., 2000), and weblogs (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). As such, we believe that the possibilities for learning as becoming and belonging will emerge for a larger group of users with AniAniWeb than standard home pages. In addition, the importance of audience awareness and collaboration to learning as becoming and belonging will be easier to address through this platform. To emphasize that these home pages are different from ordinary home pages, we term them collaborative personal home pages. They are personal, because they are owned by a specific person. They are collaborative, because others can contribute to them in meaningful ways.

**Thesis Statement**

Collaborative personal home pages, as identity construction and publication tools, can support learning as becoming and belonging in academia.

By closely examining how collaborative personal home pages can contribute to learning as becoming and belonging in the specific setting of academia (more specifically, in the College of Computing at Georgia Tech), we hope to shed light on the role of identity construction and publication tools in supporting a community of practice.

**References**


