Constructing Identities in Informal Study Groups: An Account of Socialisation into an Affinity Group of Learners

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This paper demonstrates how members of a first-year university informal study group construct positive university student identities. A focus group interview with six students is analysed on the theoretical premise that identity is an interactional achievement that changes as the interaction proceeds. The analysis shows how, at various times during the interview, the members of the study group display aspects of four types of identities: nature identity, institution identity, discourse identity, and affinity identity (Gee, 2000/1). Methodologically, these identities are located through discourse analysis that shows how the speakers build up their identities through the linguistic and paralinguistic features of their talk and that these identities contribute to the students' perceptions and practices of their success at university. A deeper understanding of how student identities are constituted through informal study groups has the potential to maintain and extend formal learning that takes place during lectures and tutorials.

Background
Identity is becoming an increasingly viable means of accessing and understanding educational phenomena. Recent studies have covered a range of topics and research methodologies, for example, from becoming a teacher (Gratch, 2000; Roberts, 2000), employing autobiographical qualitative methods and phenomenological hermeneutic explorations respectively, to being a professional teacher (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000), using a combination of statistical and thematic analysis, through to workplace language education using a poststructural/critical discourse perspective (Farrell, 2000). Other research has explored identity construction in relation to study groups/peer networks, for example Datnow and Cooper (1997) on peer networks and racial identity, and Tindle and Lincoln (2000) on study group and mature age student identity. Although these studies engage with the topic of identity construction through different analytic methodologies, they share a common goal that is to make visible the ways in which participants' identities are represented and shaped through their talk and actions. Generally, education phenomena are exhibited and become open to observation in two domains: in naturally occurring events, for example, students' and teachers' interactions in classrooms (Paoletti, 2000), or occasions where participants account for past naturally occurring events, for example an interview with a group of students talking to a researcher about their informal study group meetings, as is the instance examined in this
paper. In either discursive domain, identity is understood as an interactional achievement, rather than a biologically or culturally imposed state of being. In the first domain, identity is constructed through an examination of talk and action in naturally occurring situations. Alternatively, in the second domain, identity is constructed through an examination of participants' discursive accounts of their actions in an informal study group. An early entrance into the notion of accounts is explored by Scott and Lyman (1968). They explain that accounts differ from explanations in their relationship to toward and untoward action. Explanations are talk about events, actions and phenomena that are considered ordinary. In contrast, accounts are constituted through talk about events, actions and phenomena about what is considered extraordinary and therefore require "excuses and justifications" (p. 47).

This paper demonstrates how students who are newcomers to the university construct positive student identities through the process of compiling an account about the formation and conduct of a study group outside formal lecture and tutorial times. The students are called upon by an interviewer to account for their specific practices as members of a study group. Through their responses and comments they display different kinds of student identities that are consequential to their socialisation as an affinity group of learners.

**A description of the study**

This paper reports on one facet of an on-going project that has as its general aim, the enhancement of student retention, satisfaction and achievement in a Faculty of Education. Other aspects of the project have been reported elsewhere, namely: student readiness for university (Watson, Johnson, & Billett, 2002); relatedness to field of study (Watson, Johnson, & Austin, 2004); and the gap between university affordances and student uptake of them (Watson & Johnson, 2003). The analytic approach taken in these papers could be described as "macro" in that general characteristics of the student population were examined through a variety of techniques including statistics, content analysis, and identification of categories of behaviour. Further papers relating to this project apply "micro" analytical techniques to explore the production of first-year identity (Johnson & Watson, 2004), and the formation and functionality of study groups (Watson & Johnson, 2004).

The participants in this aspect of the project self-selected in response to a general request in one of their first semester first year courses for students who had formed study groups to discuss their experiences in focus group interviews for the ongoing faculty project. The interviews were conducted by an experienced senior research assistant who had no academic or social connection to the students. The interviewer prompted discussion through a few introductory questions about the formation of the study groups, then about the effectiveness of the groups and the members' expectations for the operation of the study group beyond this course and this semester. Apart from these general prompts, the focus group interviews were largely unstructured, allowing the participants to give their own accounts and to place their own emphases on aspects important to their group's experiences.
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An analysis of the interview account

The data reported on here are selected from a series of focus group sessions with first year students who are taking English courses in order to pursue a career in teaching English in secondary schools. This particular interview is selected as it demonstrates clearly how Gee's (2000/1) theory of identity construction is working through the group's account. The analysis of the interview with the study group is generated from Gee's multi-theoretical perspective on identity formation. From this viewpoint, Gee is concerned with the unstable nature of identity: "The 'kind of person' one is recognised as 'being,' at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable" (p. 99). Subsequently, Gee argues that a person's identity can shift across their "internal states" and through "their performances in society" (p. 99). He describes four ways to view what it means to be a certain kind of person. Persons can identify through their Natural state termed by Gee as an N-Identity (e.g., stage of life, place in the family, state of health), their Institutional affiliations or I-Identity (e.g., academic, student), their reciprocated way of talking and interacting with other people, a Discourse or D-Identity (e.g., friendly, reserved) and their ways of showing "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (p. 105, italics in original) an Affinity or A-Identity (e.g., member of a group with shared interests and practices such as car enthusiasts, gardeners, quilters). An important consideration is that the four perspectives are generally inter-related so that the shifts that occur in who a person is at any one time are related to the multiple combinations and permutations that are possible for any person. Initially, it is the manner in which the "cross-postings" occur in the account that is of analytic interest here. In the analysis section we take an in-depth look at selected sections of the group interview and show ultimately that, although four perspectives of identity (Gee, 2000/1) are cross related, the fourth perspective, the affinity/ A-Identity derived from inclusive membership in the informal study group, is dominant and this contributes powerfully to the students' perceptions and practices of collaborative success as learners.

Methodologically, identity is treated as an interactional achievement where speakers build up their identities through the linguistic and paralinguistic features of their accounts given during the interview, for example their use of overlapping talk that signals agreement; their use of plural pronouns to mark solidarity and inclusivity. The discourse analysis is primarily concerned with how the features of the talk assist the speakers to orient towards a justification of the success of their study group and in doing so they produce different kinds of student identities. A close examination of these language features, using discourse analysis methods, provides a systematic basis for drawing conclusions about the kind of person the participants are recognisable as at any given time in the interview. The overall purpose of the analysis is not to tag the multiple identity combinations and permutations per se. Rather, the naming of multiple identities is instrumental in showing how the study group is socialised into becoming a community of learners, characterised by the socio-cultural view of learning espoused by Renshaw (2002).

The interview begins with a response to the interviewer-initiated question, can somebody tell me how it (the study group) got started? Although the interviewer is not requesting
an excuse or justification of abnormal student behaviour she is at this stage eliciting an account that orients the students to the possibility that their action in forming a study group is somewhat unusual or extraordinary among their peers. University students do not ordinarily form study groups, outside formal lecture and tutorial times, as a matter of course. One student’s response begins with an N-identity expressed as a stage of life identity: *a very large majority of us were mature age students*: an identity topic that keeps reoccurring throughout the interview through the talk of different participants. In all segments the interviewer’s talk is labelled "I" and a student is allocated another letter, for example "M" for the purpose of maintaining the agreed-to confidentiality.

I: ok you’ve said that this six of you is the biggest this study group gets can somebody tell me how it started

M: um I think the major factor being that a large major-oh a very large majority of us were mature age students and

**An overlap between an N-Identity, and an I-Identity**

The next segment of the talk elaborates on how the mature-age men and women were inducted into studenthood through an attachment to institutional I-Identity. As a group of mature-age entrants to the university they accounted for how they heeded the university’s advice that they might get together and form study groups. One recalls that during orientation week um we sort of there were three of us who sort of just ran into each other and we worked out that we were doing a large percentage of classes together and then when it came to ah our first ab what subject’s this one (is called) literature for children and young adults the first lecture it was Greer (lecturer) who mentioned study groups and Katia was sitting there with us and we just said well this sounds like the way to go let’s form a study group and get it formed now

**A further overlap between an N-Identity, an I-Identity and an A-Identity**

This section of the account displays the tripartite overlapping of the mature-age, N-Identity and the institutional, I-identity with the overarching A-Identity through the affinity they are building with each other as new students. Once the men and women had engaged with the institution through attending their first lectures together they then began to consider acting according to further institutionally sanctioned advice: form a study group and get it formed now.

I: so it formed in week 1 week 2

G: ah week 2 yeah

Y: yeah we actually we were all sitting in the same row and we all looked at each other and we sort of just ran into each other and we worked out that we were doing a large percentage of classes together and then when it came to ab our first ab what subject’s this one (is called) literature for children and young adults the first lecture it was Greer (lecturer) who mentioned study groups and Katia was sitting there with us and we just said well this sounds like the way to go let’s form a study group and get it formed now

Gee (2000/1) explains further that "for members of an affinity group, their allegiance is primarily to a set of common endeavors or practices and secondarily to other people in terms of shared culture or traits" (p. 105, emphasis in original). The account shows how the group continues to construct an affinity A-Identity through agreeing to plans about
when to meet, so as to put institutional advice--to form a study group--into practice. From here it produces more depth to the A-Identity through a focus on the "distinctive social practices that create and sustain group affiliations" (Gee, 2000/1, p. 105). Two members of the group explain in overlapping repetitious talk that during the study group meetings they focus on discussing one particular course, because of its complexity.

yeah but I actually we tend to [focus mainly on this one (literature for children and young adults) because it is so out there and extraordinarily complex or it was at the beginning it's starting to make some sense now yeah at the beginning it was just like ooohh

[mainly focus on this one]

The group's A-Identity is then consolidated further through the use of plural pronouns. Gee (1999) outlines the function of pronouns in communication as signalling "that their referents have been previously mentioned, or are readily identifiable in the context of the communication or on the basis of the speaker's and hearer's mutual knowledge" (p. 101). Pronouns can act as a cohesive devise in the making the account "hang together" or cohere (p. 159).

G: it's fresh in our mind because we go straight from here we have half an hour we break at 12.30 we go and have a bit of lunch or a snack and then straight off to the lecture so actually we've mainly covered points

Y: and I find too a lot of things that we discuss and read about in our tute go ahh we were on the right track or no we weren't

G: you see our little row just go mmm (heh)

The use of plural pronouns constructs an A-Identity that is characterised by a sense of shared participation and practices, shown in later talk about their choosing to sit together in lectures.

I: where do you sit in the lecture theatre

G: about 5 rows 4 or 5 rows up on the left hand side

: left hand side

I: on Greer's side

: on Greer's side yeah

G: sorry no Greer's right if she's facing us it's her right

K: yeah

I: ok

An overlap between a D-Identity and an A-Identity

The production of the A-Identity is built up even further through the account of their participation and practices inside the study group: constructing a Discourse-Identity through telling about how the study group members talk and interact with each other during their weekly meetings. A similar approach has been taken by Tracy and Naughton (1994) in their attention to intellectual discussion as "a central forum in which scholarly identities are shaped" (p. 281). The following segment demonstrates an overlap between a discourse D-Identity and an A-Identity in response to the interviewer's query about leadership within the group how it operates.
Educating: Weaving Research into Practice

Z: I don't think there is one (leader) no
G: we don't really have one I mean certain people talk more than others
Z: we're not all here at the same time anyway
Y: if you've something valid to say everyone stops and listens and then
Z: it probably on depends who's done the most work for that week
: yeah that's true
K: who's got the right idea
G: and also that's right and we have arguments we actually sit here and you know say no I disagree with you and say right ok why so I think because of our maturity level we can do that we can sit here and go right I think you're wrong but
: but then you justify it you see that your point of view is valid
G: however I see it in a different way and then we go to the lecture and wait and see who was right
Y: I think though too because we do this we're all the more confident to ask questions … in the lecture … I've been known to go in with a list
G: yeah we didn't understand this and then you find we put little question marks what does this mean I've got one there look what da you know one sentence that just seems to go way over the head like and you go huh so you know then we go right well what do you think that means
Z: and that's the good thing about the study group is that if you haven't been able to do the reading you can come here and get a quick
G: update
Z: quick touch up on it and go off to the lecture

Although the account displays a very strong affinity group A-Identity it also offers a display of a Discourse D-Identity that is clearly concerned about what not to talk about. The members explain their participation and practices about not talking too specifically about or helping each other with assessment tasks.
S: … if we've got an assessment in this subject we might talk
K: mull it over
S: loosely around that but you had to be careful with the last assessment because we were doing one of two books so had to keep it fairly general but there were still
G: we were warned actually in st-as study groups not to discuss the assignment
S: specifics of
G: specifics of because otherwise it constituted plagiarism so we had to be very careful but I think we were

Linking all four identities

Toward the end of the interview, in summing up what the study group has meant for her, Gloria takes the lead in linking all four kinds of identity.
G: I've got to say to be honest um part of it was obviously gaining um better knowledge of the course but mine was um because I'm a mature age I was frightened stupid about
even coming to university and just the thought of actually forming a group with like minded people who were able to because I tell you what by week 3 or 4 I don't know about the other guys but I was thinking of dropping out I was absolutely stressed pointless and so by talking to these guys even if it was only a comment or two I realized that they were the same

I: mmhmm
G: and it was
S: we weren't G we just said that
: yeah we (heh) to make you feel better
: (heh)
: yeah we were
G: so by airing our worries I spose that was my thing was actually that you know
I: so it was a moral support as well then
: yeah
K: yeah it's a moral support
Z: and a social
G: social network I mean we all get on I mean even though you know I mean even with K I mean she's obviously at least 10 years younger than the rest of us but we all blend we all seem to blend really well and I don't think K feels out of place being in a grannies room

This segment shows how the members of the study group choreograph their talk to display their overlapping identities. Once again the N-Identity is central in that in the main the group is populated by mature-age students. One of their points of reference is their ability to provide moral support for each other. When the going gets tough they can talk about it and remember with good humour. The humour signals the depths of the affinity that the group has established: the relationships are strong enough to take a joke at one's expense. The N-Identity is clearly intertwined with the D-Identity. The need for moral support is not just social. It is institutionally framed and this institutional aim, to succeed at university, is the glue that constructs the A-Identity, that is, the durable study group.

**Concluding comments**

Renshaw (2002) has called for a sociocultural community perspective to learning inside classrooms. This paper has shown that the student participants in this community of learners have indeed taken on new identities in accordance with such a perspective, outside formal classrooms. The learning community they have established is inclusive, collaborative and shows signs of being maintained over time. Gee's (2000/1) four-part theory on identity formation provides an innovative tool for understanding the establishment and everyday practices of study groups. The discourse analysis of the interview transcript, treated as a members' account, demonstrates how the members of the study group construct their strong affinity as a study group through a consolidated focus on their mature-age (N-Identity), their institutional affiliations with the university course/s (I-Identity) and their reciprocated way of talking and interacting with the lecturer and fellow students in the study group on a weekly basis (D-Identity). It is the
manner in which the identities are cross-posted during the account that is of initial
analytic interest in this paper. However, the ultimate aim has been to show how the
cross-posted identities are instrumental in socialising this particular study group into a
community of learners. The specific methodology presents ways of understanding the
formation and establishment of further study groups. A deeper understanding of how
student identities are constituted through informal study groups has the potential also to
maintain and extend formal learning that takes place during lectures and tutorials. The
learning support created through such a linkage could impact positively on university
student retention.

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